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The tradition of autobiography in music

Pizà, Antoni, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1994

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THE TRADITION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN MUSIC

by

Antoni Pizà

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

1994

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

The Tradition of Autobiography in Music

by

Antoni Pizà

Adviser: Professor Leo Treitler

A survey of autobiographical writings by composers from the fourteenth century to the present focusing on the question of how composers create a self. Although, the *Autobiography* of Thomas Whythorne (1528-96) can be considered the earliest autobiography by a composer, the genre also stems from lexicographical practices in eighteenth-century Germany (scholars such as Walther and Mattheson requested autobiographies from composers with the intention to included them in biographical dictionaries of music). In the nineteenth century, Wagner's autobiographies show the composer's concern with providing a solid image of himself through writing. Stravinsky's *Autobiography* demonstrates the composer's preoccupation for giving an exegesis of his musical compositions. John Cage's diverse autobiographical are examined in the light of Derrida's "metaphysics of presence." Cage privileges noise and silence over organized sound because he considers the former as being closer to human interiority than the later. The possibility of autobiographical music is examined by exploring examples of autobiographical music by Virgil Thomson and Smetana. Schoenberg's painted self-portraits are introduced as a case of a composer creating a self through the visual arts. In conclusion, the study shows that composers use autobiography to control the reception and meaning of their musical works.

To Troi

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INTRODUCTION

The great artist, the great writer lives, in a sense, for his autobiography.--Georges Gusdorf

Overview

In recent times, autobiography has become the focus of study in many disciplines beside literature: on the one hand, women's autobiography and African-American autobiography have emerged as avenues that serve to claim collective identity; on the other, the autobiographies of artists, politicians, celebrities, and even "common people" present the reader with an ideal focal point of inquiry about the nature of aesthetics, politics, social habits, and culture at large. Although many composers whose works form the larger part of the standard repertoire wrote autobiographies, there is no systematic study dealing with that corpus of writings as a whole. Yet these autobiographies, by their mere existence, pose a fundamental question: "what is the significance and the effect of transforming life, or a life, into a text?"¹ The present study, "The Tradition of Autobiography in Music," aims at contributing some responses to this question by presenting the first systematic study of the practice of writing autobiography among composers.

In order to describe the practice of autobiography in

¹James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) p. 6.

music, I have selected a number of composers from different periods. I begin by surveying the earliest autobiographical essays, those provided by several medieval and Renaissance composers such as Machaut, Oswald von Wolkenstein, Dufay, and Guerrero. These composers have one thing in common: they created in writing a persona, reflecting themselves as composers, poets, and courtiers. Until now, most research has centered on the veracity of their autobiographical statements; from my point of view, though, the accuracy of their reports is less interesting than the fact that they began a new practice among composers--that of autobiography.

Composers such as Machaut and Dufay show an emerging self that barely dares to say its name; and their embryonic autobiographies manifest themselves within the limits of their own musical works, not as independent narratives. In *Le voir-dit*, Machaut reminisces about an earlier love affair in the form of an exchange of letters in verse. In the song-motet *Juvenis qui puellam*, Dufay (who was a canon of the church) recollects his service with the papal chapel and the court of Savoy by parodying in verse a lawsuit against a young man (himself) who married two women (his patrons). In contrast to Machaut's and Dufay's autobiographical timidity, Wolkenstein's poetry oozes personal experience, presenting as a result a more daring personality. His songs display an idealized version of his adventurous youth: he ran away from home, suffered all kinds of hardship, held odd jobs, and spent time

in jail. Finally, Guerrero's case is particularly interesting. A trip to Jerusalem is the excuse to project a self full of experiences, opinions, feelings, and religious faith. Thus, early music autobiography presents itself in the form of poetry, epistles, parody of legalese, songs, and travel books.

The Elizabethan composer and poet Thomas Whythorne went one step further than the preceding composers. In order to gain recognition and probably secure himself employment, he undertook the task of compiling some of his poems for publication. He accompanied these with the story of his life, the circumstances of how the poems came to be created, and an exegesis of their meaning. The result is what some scholars regard as the first autobiography in English; in any case, Whythorne's account is the earliest example of a full-fledged autobiography written by a composer.

What one might call the categorizing spirit of the Enlightenment had conspicuous effects on our subject. Eighteenth-century German scholars began collecting biographies of composers, which resulted in a number of biographical dictionaries of musicians. The most important of these writers was Mattheson, who edited an eighteenth-century version of the ancient Parnassus (or of our modern Honor Roll or Hall of Fame)--his *Ehrenpforte* of musicians. Mattheson began his career as a composer and diplomat, but as his deafness increased he embarked on the business of writing

about music. As the editor of the *Ehrenpforte*, he requested biographies from the composers themselves, which he then published unedited. In effect, Mattheson's biographies are the first instance of a widespread practice of autobiography among composers. Of special note is Marianna Martines's autobiography, one of the few autobiographical records of the time written by a woman. It originated as a biographical letter written at the request of Padre Martini, the Italian composer and scholar who collected painted portraits of musicians and their biographies. Thus the stage is set for the beginnings of the practice of autobiography in music, which, from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries (roughly speaking) coincides with the composer surfacing in history, and reflects how musicians went from anonymity to being known and having their lives recorded in dictionaries and lexicons.

In chapter II, I examine Wagner's autobiographical writings. It is a commonplace that Wagner possessed a megalomaniacal personality. With this in mind, my research has centered not on corroborating this thesis, although a survey of his autobiographies certainly provides ample documentation for it, but rather on identifying the rhetorical strategies he uses to manipulate his self-portrayal. Whythorne began a certain pattern in autobiographical writing consisting of enumerating his works, explaining the circumstances under which they were composed, and providing an

exegesis of their meaning. Wagner's numerous autobiographical writings do exactly that--he meticulously details both the moment and the process of inspiration, and then provides an exegesis of the work. I call these quasi-revelatory moments *epiphanies*. I show that Wagner's epiphanies are characterized by three elements: *Ersatz* (meaning that the artist compensates for his suffering by creating art), teleology (which for Wagner means that when he reminisces about his early artistic endeavors, he sees them as premonitions striving toward the music drama), and, finally, the intentional mystification of the sources of his inspiration (the less we know, the easier for him to allocate meanings to his works).

Furthermore, for Wagner the concept of autobiography has such an important place in his aesthetics that it extends to his characters. Thus, in the music dramas, we often encounter characters afflicted with identity crises, heroes who frequently ask themselves: where do I come from? who am I? who were my parents? where is my homeland? The autobiographies of Wagner's heroes are worth scrutinizing because they show Wagner's fixation with the problem of self and identity, a key concept to understanding the nature of autobiography. These autobiographical narratives also perform a very important task in the music drama: they review past events from different points of view and they refresh the audience's memory. Finally, one further point: as is the

case with most works of art, the music dramas reflect the composer's life. Thus Wagner's operatic output is a sort of autobiographical text. In conclusion, autobiography is a notion permeating all aspects of Wagner's life and works--he is deeply entangled in the web of autobiography.

Chapter III is a monograph on Stravinsky's *Autobiography*. My premise is that Stravinsky used his autobiographical writings as a way to control the meaning and reception of his musical works. In order to show this, I delineate Stravinsky's alleged formalism: Stravinsky held that a musical work possesses no meaning beyond itself. Consequently, Stravinsky's *Autobiography* serves as a vehicle through which he allocates meaning to an a-semantic entity. In order to dissect his formalism, however, I first survey different conceptions of the musical work. Stravinsky held that the musical work was an autonomous entity, independent of all contingency--even of the listener's possible input. I conclude that Stravinsky's aesthetics are determined by the "authority principle," which contends that the composer is the only individual with a right to interpret and allocate meaning to the musical work. Since the musical work possesses no meaning and is an autonomous entity, performers, critics, scholars, and audience have no right to assign signification to it--only the author is entitled to do so. And Stravinsky, as a musical author, does so through the means available to him: his writings in general and his autobiographies in

particular.

Chapter IV is a close-up look at John Cage's autobiographies. After describing those of Cage's texts that can be considered autobiographical, my study focuses on two specific aspects of them. First, I consider three highlights of his autobiographies: his description of his family background, his musical and artistic mentors, and his final success as one of the most talked-about artists of the twentieth century. I show that in describing his family, Cage idealized his father and played down the role of his mother. In terms of his mentors, although Cage took lessons with Schoenberg, I show that it was Duchamp who taught him how to be a composer, how to adopt the right pose, so to speak.

The second aspect on which I focus is what I call, following Derrida's well-known term, Cage's "metaphysics of presence." As Derrida argues, Western philosophy relies on a dualist system in which one element is privileged over the other; for example, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Husserl privileged speech over writing because the former is supposedly closer to interiority, while the latter is just a transcription of speech. Cage's aesthetics as seen through his autobiographies fall into a similar dualist system. Cage privileges noise over organized sound because he thinks, as I show, that noise is a "purer" phenomenon, closer to humanness than accultured, organized sound (music, in plain English). Furthermore, Cage also sees "chance" music as closer to nature

(and therefore as purer) than "composed" music, a kind of music controlled by a composer. Finally, Cage shows his dualist thinking again in his writings, especially the "Diaries," a set of texts that intentionally avoid syntax or any other convention of expository writing. For Cage, syntax is a constraining force; to free writing from syntax means to get closer to human feeling. Thus, in the set of oppositions noise/sound, chance/control, and feeling/syntax, Cage always privileges the first over the second because he regards the first as being intimately close to an ideal referent (nature) and the second as only a trace of the first.

Through chapter IV, I considered only composers' self-representations as they appear in a written, verbal form. Although written autobiographies are by and large the most usual way for composers to present their personae, they have also adopted other media, such as painting and music itself. Virgil Thomson, besides writing an autobiography, composed musical portraits and self-portraits, and presents a specific case of self-representation through music. I show that Thomson, inspired by Gertrude Stein, began composing musical portraits in order to reverse the relationship between referent and signifier: whereas Gertrude Stein wrote some incomprehensible texts (thus obscuring the texts' referent), Thomson assigned precise, specific meaning to an allegedly asemantic medium, music, thus creating a clear referent for an unclear signifier.

Using the cases of Smetana and Shostakovich, I tackle the following two-fold question: how can biographical information be encoded in a musical work; and, how can listeners decode it? After surveying some relevant critical literature on the matter, I conclude that many music critics tacitly assume that the musical work is a text with "central" and "peripheral" elements. The central components of the musical work--those understood to be intrinsic--are the "notes," whereas the remaining elements--those that accompany the dissemination of the work--are peripheral or marginal. These peripheral elements in Western music include, first and foremost, the "stories" that necessarily circulate with a composition. But are these elements peripheral? Ethnomusicologists would not even think of studying the singing of the Suyu, for example, without putting the actual notes of the singing in a broader context: dance, ritual, mythology, etc. And following the example of ethnomusicologists, I propose a definition of the musical work that includes the stories that circulate with the notes as central, intrinsic elements of the work.

Finally, I examine Schoenberg's painted self-portraits. According to Kandinsky, Schoenberg painted when he was trying to find a new path in his music. Schoenberg did not consider himself either an amateur or a professional painter; he thought he was an artist who needed to express an Idea and that the medium through which this Idea materialized did not really matter. For Schoenberg, then, both painting and music

were equally valid means of expressing this Idea. John Russell described Schoenberg's self-portraits as an "alphabet of self-scrutiny." Indeed Schoenberg's paintings are a sort of intimate journal of his soul--he surveys his inner being through painting. The most important icon of the self-portraits are the representation of the eyes. For Schoenberg the image of the eyes summoned a whole spectrum of feelings and ideas: eyes equal understanding and inner vision. This reveals his "aesthetic theology," to quote Dahlhaus, for he thought that the artist is that special being who can see and make others see--a kind of a secular prophet.

My general hypothesis, then, which is confirmed in my "Theory of Autobiography in Music," is that autobiography in music forms a tradition--the texts I examine are related to one another. In my view, the underlying rationale of autobiography in music is that composers use autobiography as a way to control the reception and meaning of their musical works. Autobiography is an act of authorship: by writing an autobiography, composers tell us who they are, but even more importantly they assert their rights over their musical works by providing an exegesis of the meaning of their works.

The genre of autobiography: Some general remarks

Literary critics still debate whether or not autobiography is a genre. In a paper originally published in 1979, Paul de Man stated that "empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm...."² On the other hand, Linda H. Peterson demonstrates in her book on Victorian autobiography that the writers she studied were conscious of participating in a particular literary tradition--that of autobiography--and that their texts, therefore, were generated according to certain practices.³

Since autobiography is neither fiction nor history, it has been called the "trashcan of history."⁴ Indeed, all the following literary genres and subgenres overlap: autobiographies, memoirs, travel books, poems, intimate journals, and correspondence. The real problem of defining a genre is (as Lejeune points out) that "the inductive step, releasing the common elements of a 'corpus,' is confused with the deductive step, since the corpus itself has been built

²Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) p. 68.

³Linda H. Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁴Paul John Eakin, Foreword to Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) p. xix.

upon the definition. The operation is circular...."⁵ Or to put it in another way: the premise becomes the conclusion and vice-versa.

One of the most important issues of autobiography is the balance between what Goethe, in the title of his autobiography, called *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, poetry and truth, fiction and fact, falsehood and veracity. Readers of autobiographies oscillate between two different poles: on the one hand, they know that they are reading a factual account; on the other, they are aware of the narrator's possible distortions (intentional or unintentional). Readers of autobiographies are therefore continuously engaged in a negotiation with the text, trying to define their own position between these two possible poles (fact and fiction). This challenging negotiation must, in part, account for the allure of autobiography.

The ontology of autobiography includes three basic elements that are displayed in the name itself: auto-bio-graphy. An autobiography is the life (bio) of someone written (graphy) by himself or herself (auto). Early in the history of the genre, it was the "bios" part that was considered the fundamental element of autobiography. Librarians, for

⁵Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 149.

example, classify autobiography as a subcategory of biography (which, in turn, is understood to be part of history). Thus for many readers, including librarians and early scholars, autobiography was a trace of history: it was assumed that an autobiography was a more or less accurate (or totally inaccurate) report of a life.

Later, critics such as Georges Gusdorf put the accent on the "autos" part, or as Olney puts it, "how the act of autobiography is at once a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self."⁶ Olney, Gusdorf, and others argue that "the autos has its reasons and its truth (which in terms of historical fact, may well be false)."⁷ This focus on the "I" who is writing instead of the life that is being told (the "bios") leads to a new set of questions more philosophical and psychological than historical.

Finally, there seems to have been a third turn in autobiographical research, one that focuses on the "graphos" part of autobiography. Poststructuralist thought has brought a new perspective to questions of fact versus fiction in autobiography. Some readers assume that an autobiographical text is a reflection (whether true or false) of its author, that is to say: an autobiography is the trace of a referent, which is the author. But for many critics, the source of the self in an autobiography is the text itself rather than the

⁶Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 19

⁷Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 21.

author. According to some poststructuralist critics, notions such as self and author do not have an existence prior to the text; on the contrary, it is the writing that creates them. James Olney points out that it is through the act of writing that

the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors.... The text takes a life of its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing author. The self, then, is a fiction and so is the life, and behind the text of an autobiography lies the text of an "autobiography": all that is left are characters on a page, and they too can be "deconstructed" to demonstrate the shadowiness of even their existence.⁸

This means that the one-to-one identification between the self rendered in a text and its physical author is impossible. After reading Rousseau's *Confessions*, no reader can claim that he or she "knows" Rousseau (even if the text is factual). The act of writing fabricates ideal selves that have no correspondence with a real person. Along the same lines, Lejeune remarks, "what an illusion to believe that we can tell the truth, and to believe that each of us has an individual and autonomous existence! How can we think that in autobiography it is the life that produces the text, when it is the text that produces the life!"⁹ Writing can never transcribe a life into writing; although it can give this

⁸Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 22.

⁹Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 131.

illusion, it can only create a new being that does not correspond exactly to its author.

Thus, the fact-versus-fiction problem in autobiographical writing is insoluble--all autobiographies are fictional to a great degree since they are entangled on the net of writing. For the same reason that there is no pure fiction (all writers to a certain extent draw on reality), there are no purely factual autobiographical narratives. Lejeune quotes Roland Barthes in saying that "in the field of the subject, there is no referent." Then he adds: "We *indeed know* all this; we are not so dumb, but, once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject--it is a fantasy."¹⁰ Besides, as Gusdorf observes, autobiography "shows us not the objective stages of a career--to discern these is the task of the historian--but... reveals instead the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale."¹¹

But why do people write their life stories? The motivations can be numerous. Among them, we can distinguish between (1) a "rational" purpose--autobiographers feel compelled to give

¹⁰Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 131.

¹¹Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in Olney, p.48.

their testimony of a time, as well as providing an apologia for their actions--and (2) an "emotional" motive--autobiographers wish to tell their story in an attempt to purge their emotional distress. Autobiographers may perceive that their lives lack continuity and coherence; and thus, in order to master the anxiety of being confronted with a disjointed self, they take up the task of giving their lives cohesion through writing. "The task of the autobiography," Gusdorf has remarked, "is first of all a task of personal salvation."¹² He has also observed that the "sin" of autobiography is caused by this "logical coherence and rationalization,"¹³ which means that writing produces coherence and continuity where there was only fragmentation.

The autobiographical narrative is generally structured according to a chronological succession of events, which can cover either the whole life of the autobiographer or only a part of it. To see all past events from a present point of view may cause involuntary distortions because a recollection is always determined by the present circumstances of the narrator. Thus the autobiography of an individual written when he or she was 19, 46, and 70 would not only differ in the sense that the latest would encompass a larger number of events, but also in the sense that each utterance would include the present moment when it is written. Gusdorf

¹²Gusdorf, "Conditions," p. 39.

¹³Gusdorf, "Conditions," p. 41.

observes:

Any autobiography is a moment of a life that it recounts; it struggles to draw the meaning from that life, but it is in itself a meaning in the life. One part of the whole claims to reflect the whole, but it adds something to this whole of which it constitutes a moment.¹⁴

Gusdorf argues that if today I reminisce about an event in my childhood (my early school experiences, for example), the information I provide will be filtered by my present experience (for instance, that I am writing a Ph.D. dissertation that marks the end of my long schooling). If I hark back to those same events in twenty years the information will be tinged with other nuances that will change the meaning of my story.

To recapitulate, before considering autobiography in music, we should take into account several factors. First, the notion of a closed genre of autobiography should only be used for its heuristic value: certain texts are doubtless autobiographies, but it is impossible to give a precise, closed definition of the genre. Second, research on autobiography should not only focus on the veracity of the life story being told (the "bios"), but must also include problems emerging from a person writing about himself or herself (the "autos"), and especially the questions spurred by the textuality of self-representation (the "graphos" part). Finally, the motivations of autobiographers when writing their lives are various: some may want to leave a historical

¹⁴Gusdorf, "Conditions," p. 43.

record, while others undertake a "task of personal salvation."
With this theoretical background in mind, let us now examine
the phenomenon of autobiography in music.

CHAPTER I

The Beginnings of Autobiography in Music

1.1 In search of a tradition

This study is based on the assumption that there is a tradition of autobiographies by Western art-music composers. One cannot carry this working hypothesis any further without first saying a word about the notion of "tradition" and the import of a study dedicated to showing a tradition. One can only speak of a "tradition of autobiographies" if one understands the term not so much as a synonym of heritage or legacy, but as having the same meaning as convention, practice, and custom.¹ This study attempts to be an "archaeology" of autobiography, to use Foucault's term: it surveys a practice without creating a closed canon of texts validated by a scholarly study.²

The problem of tracing traditions as heritages and legacies is that the researcher, by assembling a lineage of independent elements in a "tradition," is not so much compiling existing elements as he or she is inventing this tradition. For example, the editors of the multi-volume set

¹For an examination of the meaning of "tradition" in the humanities, see Ruth Finnegan, "Tradition, But What Tradition and for Whom?" *Oral Tradition* VI/1 (1991) 104-24.

²See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

*Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst*³ have not limited their task--whatever they may think--to gathering the "monuments of German music." Their job has also been to create a musical heritage that participates in the construction of German culture and a German nationalism. Consequently, it is not the aim of this study to attempt to trace a lineage of autobiographies, because the process of fabricating a canon means using the power to decide who gets in and who does not, and indeed one can always find a reason to include one name and one work and not to include another.

Traditions understood as canons have in fact much in common with autobiographical practices. A study concerned with establishing a tradition is an attempt to create an identity, whether of a nation, a literary genre, a musical form, or a ritual. Thus one speaks of the "American tradition," "the autobiographical tradition," "the sonata tradition," "the Memorial Day tradition," etc. A tradition is nothing but a collective autobiography. Autobiographies are also concerned with identity, though not at the national or cultural level, but at a personal one. Autobiographies fabricate lives as traditions fabricate heritages. It is not a simple coincidence that volume 28 of the *Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst* includes Telemann's autobiography. To be sure, the editors were aware that both the life and the work of the

³*Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1957-).

composer belonged to their nation (and not only, say, to Europe, or to Telemann's hometown). It is by tracing these heritages or traditions that the sense of "nation," "culture" or "individual" is assembled.

One must, therefore, discard the notion of tracing a linear history (or tradition) of music autobiography because it is epistemologically incorrect, since the researcher can never "trace" anything but only invent, fabricate, and forge by assembling independent parts. This has a special bearing on autobiography because, as will be shown, autobiographers when disclosing their lives fabricate their own story according to their needs by assembling the facts about their lives in one particular design and not another.

The title of this study, accordingly, should be taken only for its heuristic value. The reader must pretend that there is positively a tradition of autobiographies, all the while knowing that the researcher is deeply involved in creating this lineage, and that therefore some authors could have been excluded while others were included. On the other hand, although the real existence of a tradition understood as "lineage" or "heritage" is improbable, it is certain that there has been and still is a true tradition if this is understood as a "practice" or "custom" among composers of writing their own lives. Such a practice is what this study aims to investigate.

1.2 Autobiography in its historical context

The practice of autobiography must be put in context, for it is not a phenomenon independent of culture and society. Autobiography is generally understood as a branch of biography, and biography has a long history: it has been practiced for centuries, its earliest examples being obituary statements and inscriptions praising the life of the deceased. The case of Diogenes Laertius, who in the third century B.C. attempted to compile a set of biographies of famous philosophers, deserves particular comment. His endeavor resulted in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, a work including the biographies of Socrates, Xenophon, Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and others.⁴ Despite the charge that the *Lives* is more a literary piece than a work of scholarship, it is reliable in its facts, and modern histories of philosophy still depend on it for details about the lives of the classical thinkers. It is important to point out that Diogenes--establishing a practice at the heart of modern research--names his sources.

Another example of biographical writing in early historiography is the *Natural History* by Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79).⁵ This work is a set of 37 *libri* covering a myriad of

⁴Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1925). All citations will be noted throughout the study in their most available English translation when not originally in English.

⁵Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, 10 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

topics ranging from astronomy to art. Pliny's book can be considered the first encyclopedia. The first book is both a table of contents of the following 36 books and a summary of the topics. He also made it a practice always to name his sources.

It is significant that Pliny decided to include art as one of his topics. To be sure, he had a high regard for art and he even complained about the high prices paid for sculptures and paintings. More remarkable is his belief that in order to understand art one must learn about the lives of the artists. Accordingly, he included the biographies of Greek and Roman artists such as Pheidias, Praxiteles, and Polycleitus, among others. For Pliny, then, the life of the artist has a direct influence on the artwork, the inference being that a work of art depends on its context, whether cultural, social or biographical. Other classical writers to take up biography include Plutarch, who wrote the lives of prominent Greek and Roman men; Suetonius, who wrote the lives of the Caesars; and Tacitus, who included in his *Annals* a biography of the Emperor Tiberius. Thus one sees that biographical writing is a practice well-rooted in early times.

In the history of biography, no work has had the importance of the *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574).⁶

⁶Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, 10 vols. (London: Macmillan & The Medici Society, 1912-14);

Vasari's book includes the lives of artists from Giotto to Michelangelo. He considers medieval art unsophisticated, and, according to him, Giotto is the first true master of modern times, a period culminating in Michelangelo. Vasari is one of the first exponents of the evolutionist paradigm in art ("art progresses for the better") and Michelangelo is described with admiration and God-like respect because he represents the highest point in art's evolution. Vasari also includes a catalogue of each artist's work, inventing in a certain way the "life-and-works" pattern for biographies. Incidentally, Vasari--who was also an artist--painted his own portrait and included his autobiography in his *Lives*.

Hagiography, a branch of historical study dedicated to the lives of saints, martyrs, saintly monks, bishops, aristocrats, and virgins, is another mode of biographical writing. Early hagiographers include Eusebius of Caesarea (fourth century), Gregory I the Great (sixth century), and the Venerable Bede (eighth century). Nonetheless, it was Jean Bolland or Johannes Bollandus (1596-1665) who compiled the most extensive collection of saints' lives in his *Acta sanctorum*, which includes the life of a saint for each day of the year. Although Bolland's work contains some factual errors, he used standard principles of historical criticism for his compilation.

reprint (New
York: AMS Press, 1976).



Francisco Guerrero: portrait in F. Pacheco's 'Libro de descripción de verdaderos retratos' (1599)

1.3 Early autobiographical statements in music

Although autobiography has a long history, Georges Gusdorf may be right when he states that it "has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere."⁷ Georg Misch has traced the history of autobiography as far back as the tomb inscriptions of the Egyptians.⁸ Misch finds the first autobiographical narratives in prose in ancient Oriental tales. Then he outlines the further development of the genre through classical Greek and Roman literature up to Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (354-430).⁹

AUGUSTINE AND BOETHIUS

Most studies dealing with autobiography consider Saint Augustine's work a canonic work. For methodological reasons, a study concerned with a literary genre must find an archetypal work that can be used as a paradigm against which the rest of the examples can be compared, and the *Confessions* is such a work. In addition, Saint Augustine was in a sense a musician and therefore deserves double attention in the present investigation.

⁷Gusdorf, "Conditions," pp. 28-29.

⁸George Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. E. W. Dicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951).

⁹Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961).

Although the *Confessions* do not deal directly with music, the book is filled with remarks concerning music. A child's sing-song was the occasion of his conversion: "I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain 'Take it and read, take it and read.'"¹⁰ Because the sing-song voice helped convert him, Augustine became aware of the powers of music and theater; he worried, for instance, that they could cause excessive enjoyment.¹¹ He gave preference to the words over the music and expressed the need for a simple type of tune that allowed the words to be understood without effort.

Augustine is concerned with music as it pertains to the classical liberal arts. As is well known, he wrote a treatise, *De musica*,¹² which he intended to be part of a series dedicated to the liberal arts. He asserted that he had plans for books on grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, and philosophy. Unfortunately none of these books survives, if they were ever written. Music, defined in the treatise as "the art of measuring well," caught his attention more than any other subject. *De musica* contains six books

¹⁰Augustine, p. 177.

¹¹Augustine, p. 55

¹²R. C. Taliaferro, ed. and trans., "On Music: *De musica*," in *The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation: Writings of Saint Augustine*, II (New York: The Fathers of the Church, 1947).

solely about rhythm, and Augustine intended write another six concerning melody. Therefore, *De musica* remains incomplete.

Boethius (ca.480-ca.524) presents a case similar to that of Augustine. His works on music are very valuable because it was through them that Greek theory was known in the Middle Ages, although he was not the only theorist to pass on the tradition. In addition, he brought his own insight to many philosophical and theoretical aspects of music. As Augustine, Boethius believed that music could influence human behavior and, consequently, it had a special bearing on morality.

Boethius is relevant to the history of autobiography because of his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*.¹³ He wrote the work during his confinement in jail for treason. The *Consolation*, written in verse and in prose, is a general reflection on spiritual matters. Philosophy is the "consolation" of the narrator's soul; self-scrutiny is a path towards emotional relief and spiritual comfort. The *Consolation* belongs to a select lineage of Greek and Roman works written under the strains of unfavorable political circumstances. Socrates, Zeno, and Seneca suffered similar shifts of fortune, and their feelings of rejection--perhaps the main psychological reason for autobiography--enabled them to produce outstanding literary works. The *Consolation* is a philosophical reflection that tells the story of Boethius's

¹³Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Green (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1962).

persecution and indictment. Boethius's work, as most autobiographies, is a search for meaning. "Boethius himself tries to raise his philosophical convictions, Stoic and Neoplatonic, into clear consciousness, in order to find consolation in his suffering, and strength to bear it. So he makes Philosophy exhort him to 'know himself': his despair, she tells him, is a sign of weakness due to the fact that he does not know what he himself is."¹⁴ Hence Boethius's *Consolation* is a fundamental work in the history of spiritual autobiography.

Augustine's *Confessions* and Boethius's *Consolation* should therefore be considered among the earliest autobiographies. Although they reserved their ideas about music theory for their treatises proper, both men granted a special place to music in their introspective writings by reckoning it a soul-shaping experience. Thus, music and autobiography seem to share a common principle--they appease the soul in troubling times, though music, to be sure, can also excite the spirit.

MACHAUT

The poet and musician Guillaume de Machaut (ca.1300-1377) allegedly rendered aspects of his life in *Le livre du voir-*

¹⁴Misch, p. 691.

dit.¹⁵ This "True Tale" (as it is sometimes translated) relates a love episode between a famous old poet and a young lady. The story is written in verse and prose, including the correspondence of both lovers. Some of the parts are also set to music. According to Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, in the *Voir-dit*

we seem to take a guided tour of Machaut's emotional and professional life over his old age.... The story it tells of Machaut's literary and emotional affair with a young girl, Peronne, has been read at times as autobiography, at times as fiction; and the incidental comments on composition, performance and copying have been interpreted in studies ranging far beyond *Le voir Dit* as evidence of fourteenth-century professional practice.¹⁶

Thus the *Voir-dit* is not only a tale of a love affair, but also a narration about the process of writing. "The composition of poetry and the craft of writing (including the making of the codex and the business of patronage) here become thematized and linked to the portrayal of love as experience and as poetic inspiration."¹⁷ In the beginning, the narrator explains that he has been asked by his lover, often referred to as Toute-Belle, to tell the story of their love. The

¹⁵Paulin Paris, ed., *Le livre du voir-dit de Guillaume de Machaut* (Paris: Société des Bibliophiles français, 1875).

¹⁶Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "Le Voir Dit and La Messe de Nostre Dame: Aspects of Genre and Style in Late Works of Machaut," *Plain-song & Medieval Music* II/1 (1993) p. 43. The second part of this paper is "Le Voir Dit: A Reconstruction and a Guide for Musicians," *Plain-song & Medieval Music* II/2 (1993) 103-40.

¹⁷Kevin Brownlee, *Guillaume de Machaut* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) p. 94.

narrator accedes by beginning his story. As the narration progresses the events approach the time of writing. Literary critics consider this technique ingenious and highly influential on later literary developments.¹⁸ The *Voir-dit* was probably written in 1363 and has survived in several sources, although only one contains the whole work with music.¹⁹

Before examining the *Voir-dit* any further, a summary of the plot can be illuminating:

Toute-Belle sends a *rondeau* to the Narrator, in which she says that she offers him her heart. The Narrator replies in kind. Soon the aging poet and his youthful admirer are involved in an amorous correspondence. He visits her several times, and they indulge in physical intimacies. After the Narrator returns home, he dreams that *Toute-Belle's* sentiments toward him have changed. The lovers continue to write to each other. However, a harsh winter, the plague, fear of highwaymen, and *losengiers'* reports against *Toute-Belle* cause the Narrator to postpone further meetings. Finally *Toute-Belle* convinces him of her good will, and the book ends as they swear eternal love and plan once more a reunion.²⁰

Scholarship on the *Voir-dit* has focused chiefly on the autobiographical dimension of the book. The basic question seems to be: is the *Voir-dit* a factual account of a part of Machaut's life? This question has prompted many replies, but

¹⁸See Jean-Pierre Beaumarcheis et al., eds., "Guillaume de Machaut," *Dictionnaire des littératures de langue française* (Paris: Bordas, 1987).

¹⁹Ms. Paris B.N. franc 9221. The musical part has been recorded by Les Menestrels, *Mirror music*, Vienna 1979. See also Leo Schrade, *The Works of Guillaume de Machaut, Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century, III* (Monaco: Éditions de l'Oiseau-lyre, 1956).

²⁰William Calin, *A Poet at the Fountain: Essays on the Narrative Verse of Guillaume de Machaut* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1974) p. 167.

the two extreme positions are exemplified by Georg Hanf,²¹ who argues that *Le voir-dit* is a work of fiction, and Walter Eichelberg,²² who contends that the story is basically true. The problem may be ultimately insoluble and any further discussion is fruitless if one does not first define one's notion of fact and fiction.

To begin with, there is indeed an identification of the narrator with the protagonist (the poet), who may or may not be identified with Machaut. The theme of the wise old man falling in love with a beautiful young person is a rather conventional one, almost a mythological narrative pattern. But who can say that Machaut did not fall in love with a young woman? Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin are inclined to believe in the fictional nature of the characters in the *Voir-dit* and they state, "these letters represent an excellent example of the rather stilted and artificial perpetuation of the traditions and rhetoric of courtly love that characterizes so much of the poetry and song of the Ars Nova period."²³

It has been shown that the letters signed by Tote-Belle are almost certainly by Machaut. "Their letters are constructed identically and written in the same style. They

²¹Georg Hanf, "Ueber Guillaume de Machauts *Voir Dit*," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* XXII (1898) 145-96.

²²Walter Eihhelberg, *Dichtung und Wahrheit in Machauts "Voir Dit"* (Frankfurt am Main: Duren, 1935).

²³Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984).

- both contain motifs such as: I have received your letter; I am in good health; I will not forget you; I hope you will not forget me; I desire so much to see you. So too, the lyrics ascribed to Toute-Belle employ identical rhyme, meter, imagery, and diction as the Narrator's."²⁴

There have been efforts to identify Toute-Belle, but there seems to be no agreement about whether she was Agnès d'Evreux, sister to King Charles II of Navarre, or Peronne or Peronnelle d'Unchair, Dame of Armentieres.²⁵ The chronology of events in the narration has also been examined and there are many errors which may be taken to impair the truthfulness of the story. The narrator, however, vows the truth of the story he is going to relate from the very beginning of the tale:

Le Voir-dit vueil-je qu'on appelle
Ce traictié que je fais pour elle
Pour ce que j'à n'i mentiray²⁶

The *Voir-dit* is probably a work of fiction inspired by real facts. From a literary point of view Machaut "invented the *roman vécu* or *mémoires intimes* and... a Romantic avant la lettre, he anticipates Rousseau, Goethe, Chateaubriand, and Stendhal."²⁷ Anyway, the information provided in the tale is not often consistent and is peripheral to Machaut's biography.

²⁴Calin, p. 170.

²⁵Calin, p. 168.

²⁶Paris, *Le livre*, p. 17.

²⁷Calin, p. 169.

Le voir-dit is a "true tale" in the sense that so many autobiographies are--they explore and create an identity which is as powerful as the "factual" person.

Literary critic Philippe Lejeune asserts that an autobiography is defined by an "autobiographical pact" in which the author vows his or her intentions of accuracy to real events.²⁸ Thus Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is not an autobiography, although it includes many real events from Proust's life. On the contrary, *Mein Leben*, Wagner's autobiography is a true autobiography, although it is full of inaccuracies and distortions of events. The difference is that in Proust's case there is no "autobiographical pact" because Proust does not vow to relate his life with accuracy; whereas Wagner, in the title *Mein Leben*, binds himself to a contract of truthfulness by informing the reader that this is going to be a factual account. Applying this criterion to Machaut, the *Voir-dit* is an autobiography because the author-narrator attests to the truthfulness of the story he is going to tell and thus he signs an "autobiographical pact" with the reader.

Thus, if for nothing else, the *Voir-dit* is interesting because of the type of scholarly discourse it has excited. In autobiographical studies one question is ever-present: is the author describing accurate events and facts? Readers of autobiographies engage in a continuous negotiation between, on

²⁸Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 14.

the one hand, the truthfulness vowed in the title of an autobiography (and Machaut affirms in the above quote "...I will not lie"), and on the other, the awareness that facts and events are shaped (not reflected) by the web of writing. This ceaseless unsettling negotiation accounts for the allure of autobiography.

WOLKENSTEIN

We must now turn our attention to the poet and musician Oswald von Wolkenstein (ca.1377-1445). His songs present an almost full account of his eventful life. He was born into a wealthy family, but because he was the second son he was in a position of disadvantage. He got involved in political activities; he visited most European countries and acquainted himself with rulers and potentates. A dispute over his inheritance rights and his involvement in local politics led to his imprisonment.

Early scholarship on Oswald's songs took his accounts at face value and therefore as historical documents.²⁹ A later generation of scholars questioned the historical veracity of Oswald's autobiographical songs and poems. Norbert Mayr disputed Oswald's accounts of his travels as being reliable

²⁹See for example W. Marold, "Kommentar zu den Liedern Oswalds von Wolkenstein," Ph.D. diss. University of Göttingen, 1926.

historical sources.³⁰ Mayr contended that Oswald did not run away from home as he related in the preceding poem; as was the case with many young aspiring knights, he probably took an educational trip with an experienced knight as preparation for his adult life. Mayr challenged Oswald's assertion concerning his staying away from home for a decade; Mayr believed that the poet probably returned home in between this time. Besides questioning these points, Mayr maintained that overall Oswald's accounts were based on real facts, although the poet might have changed some details for his personal convenience or for poetical reasons.

Ulrich Müller undertook the task of questioning Oswald's veracity to a higher degree.³¹ According to Müller, the narrator's "I" in Oswald's poems had nothing to do with the historical Oswald. Müller pointed out that, although the poet adopted the pronoun "I," he used it according to the literary conventions of the late Middle Ages, not as a personal reference. However, Georges F. Jones maintained that despite small inaccuracies Oswald's texts are reliable sources of information concerning the poet's life and his times. Jones presents evidence that Oswald's journey were geographically feasible; his acquaintances with monarchs are also reliable

³⁰Norbert Mayr, *Die Reiselieder und Reisen Oswalds von Wolkenstein* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1961).

³¹Ulrich Müller, "'Lügende Dichter?' Ovid, Jaufre Rudel, Oswald von Wolkenstein" in *Oswald von Wolkenstein*, ed. Ulrich Müller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980) pp. 218-40. The article was originally published in 1968.

because "he sang his songs before close friends, who would have immediately become suspicious if he had named any lands or persons he could not have known at first hand. We should remember that, in the case of the only event he describes without having witnessed, to wit, the fracas at Ronciglione, he begins by admitting that his account is based on hearsay."³² Jones acknowledges that Oswald could have "embroidered" his stories to make them more interesting for his listeners, but the core of the stories is reliable.

Oswald's instinct for autobiography is seen in the zeal he took in compiling the written version of his songs and poems. Jones asserts that "his songs were written during his lifetime, at his command, and probably under his supervision, we know that we have his words and melodies as he wished them and that we need not fear that time and transmission have corrupted them."³³ If Oswald indeed carefully supervised the compilation of his works, this would mean that he had a strong sense of authorship over his works. However, Oswald wanted to leave not only a fixed version of his works, but in addition he wished to present a solid image of himself--a likeness provided by his autobiographical poems. Consider the following description of his early life:

When I was ten years old, it happened that I wished to see what the world was like. With misery and poverty, I dwelled in many hot and cold corners among Christians,

³²Jones, p. 127.

³³Jones, p. 125.

Greeks, and heathens. Three pennies in my purse and a crust of bread, that was my sustenance when I ran away from home in hardship. Since then I have left many a red drop among strangers and kinsmen, until I thought I would perish. I journeyed on foot with great penance for fully fourteen years until my father died. I never acquired a horse, except for a fallow one I seized, or half stole, and immediately lost again with great sorrow. To be sure, I was a courier, cook, stable boy and also pulled heavy oar in Candia and elsewhere and back again. Often a smock was my best garment.³⁴

This brief excerpt gives us a glimpse of Oswald's autobiographical skill. The narrator describes his wish to see the world--a typical calling for adventure common to all heroes. Adventure is not easy and the hero must earn his fate; Oswald describes the prize he pays as "misery," "poverty," and "hardship." His adventures include "half" stealing a horse and working in all type of odd jobs ("cook, stable boy..."). Oswald's narratives, dispersed throughout all his poems, signal a drastic shift in autobiographical writing among composers. Oswald styles himself as a typical hero of medieval epic poetry; the hero's individual will and differentiated personality contrast with medieval uniformity. Love is the primary expression of individualism: the hero does not conform to pre-established social roles, but rather follows his instincts for love and adventure. Crime and transgression of social norms are condoned because they are affirmation of the hero's individual will--and in this sense, Oswald connects with modern writers such as Genet. In brief,

³⁴Translated in Georges F. Jones, *Oswald von Wolkenstein* (New York: Twayne, 1973) p. 21.

Oswald displays a modern (though not postmodern) notion of the autonomous subject independent of all social conditions.

DUFAY

According to Ernest Trumble, Dufay's song-motet *Juvenis qui puellam* presents many autobiographical traits.³⁵ The composer describes himself as "Decretalis Guillermus Dufay," a canon lawyer in charge of writing decrees. The poem is in fact about canon law and recapitulates some important aspects of Dufay's career: his law studies, his benefices, his affiliation to the church, his alliance with the conciliar movements. In addition, Dufay wrote the piece as a retrospective work, not only in terms of the text (he recalls his past), but also musically, since he quotes his own compositions.

Imitating legal jargon, Dufay presents a narrator, a judge, and two lawyers who argue the case of a young man who gets married to a girl not yet seven years old. Because this marriage is illegal, he later gets married to her cousin; finally, he returns to the first wife. Trumble interprets *Juvenis qui puellam* as dealing with Dufay's "divided loyalties" to the papal chapel (where he worked for almost seven years) and the Court of Savoy (the "cousin"). The

³⁵Ernest Trumble, "Autobiographical Implications in Dufay's Song-Motet *Juvenis qui puellam*," *Revue Belge de Musicologie* XLII (1988) 31-82.

narrative begins as follows:

A young man who married a girl not yet seven years old (although it was alien to her age) attempted that which he was not able to consummate.³⁶

After this introduction in which the protagonist is charged with getting married to a child, the hearings begin, the protagonist must leave the first wife, marry another woman, but finally is asked to return to the first wife. At this point, the judge intervenes and asserts:

We order that you separate from him the girl's cousin on her mother's side whom he afterward married.³⁷

Most of the times, it is extremely hard to figure out the plot of *Juvenis qui puellam*. To begin with, there is no complete edition of the work, the extant copies are fragmentary, and many verses are missing. Moreover, the narrative is tortuous and full of legal terms. Finally, as mentioned above, the account is allegorical (women stand for Dufay's patrons and marriage represents contracts and alliances), which makes the narrative still more difficult to decipher.

Dufay, nonetheless, sketches a significant portrait of himself and his profession, the most remarkable aspect of which is a blend of autobiography, allegory, and music. It is important to notice that the category of autobiography was not

³⁶Trumble, p. 79.

³⁷Trumble, p. 79.

available to Dufay. If I wish to relate my life, I may shape my narrative according to thousands of models--the texts of Augustine, Rousseau, and Berlioz (to name only a few), are some of the available paragons that, even without having read them, may inform my narrative. Dufay did not have this framework and had to approach self-depiction through the available means--allegory and music. Through allegory he fictionalizes reality making it acceptable for dissemination--he tells his story with detachment and diplomacy, thus avoiding a maudlin story. The fact that this autobiography is a composition (a song-motet) has to do with circulation too--Dufay the composer does not want to intrude into frameworks alien to his world, but rather chooses to use those available to him, stretching their possibilities as far as autobiographical representation.

GUERRERO³⁸

³⁸Among Renaissance composers and theorists, Johannes Tinctoris (ca.1435-ca.1511) was one of the first to speak about himself. In his treatise *De inventione et usu musicae*, Tinctoris relates that he taught music to the choirboys of the Chartres Cathedral. In several other treatises he gives autobiographical information, most of the time focusing on his professional life, the appointments he obtained, and his titles. Rudolf Schäfke alludes to a possible autobiographical letter by Tinctoris which is now lost. The letter is mentioned by Joannes Trithemius (1462-1516), a scholar who collected writings by clerics. During the Renaissance there are not many composers who speak about themselves, especially compared to painters and sculptors. Although many composers at this time sign their works and the concept of authorship had already emerged, composers left few traces of their

Francisco Guerrero (1528-99) provided an account of his life in the Prólogo of his *El viage de Hierusalem* (A Trip to Jerusalem) published for the first time in Seville in 1592 and reprinted many times during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Prólogo is a five-page long autobiography covering Guerrero's life until his trip to the Holy Land.³⁹ The account of the trip itself is another retrospective narrative but it only covers the months of the journey. In *El viage*, Guerrero focuses on the uplifting experience of seeing the Holy Land, but he also makes general observations about the places he visited and the people he met.

In 1588, Guerrero went to Venice with the intention of printing a collection of music, his *Villanescas* and *espirituales*. He reports that once in Venice,

the first thing I did was to make arrangements for the printing of two books of music. And because the publisher told me that it would take more than five months, I said to a friend of mine that during this period, I would have time to realize my trip to Jerusalem: He told me, you came at the right time, there is a good, new vessel going to Tripoli in Syria [now Lebanon].... I paid five *escudos* for the journey, and seven *escudos* more every

personality. Tinctoris's autobiographical fragments are therefore precious relics that cannot be neglected, despite their scanty character, because they represent an emerging tendency of composers towards self-awareness and self-portrayal.

³⁹Another contemporary source of information on Guerrero's life Francisco Pacheco's biography in his *Libro de descripción de verdaderos retratos de ilustres y memorables varones* (Seville, 1599) pp. 94-97. The book provides a biography accompanied by a portrait of Guerrero. Pacheco draws most of the information from Guerrero's autobiographical account.

month to be able to eat with the Captain.⁴⁰

In the Prólogo, Guerrero says that in his childhood he felt "inclined to see these beautiful things [the Holy Land]"⁴¹. As a child, his brother Pedro Guerrero taught him music and, then, "always wanting to improve myself," he studied with Cristóbal de Morales.⁴² He spent three years at the Jaén cathedral and later he worked in Seville serving as a Cantor with a "generous salary." He obtained a new position in Málaga, but he was not allowed to leave Seville. When the Seville chapelmaster, Pedro Fernández, retired, Guerrero got half of his salary, plus the Cantor's salary. His obligations included to "teach and feed fourteen boy-singers." As part of his obligations, he also had to compose *Chançonetas* and *Villancicos* to praise the Lord. During this period, he confesses, every time he heard the name of Bethlehem, he felt the urge to visit the Holy Land. He finally realized his dream "neither fearing the ocean, nor the enemy nations because the delight I had on this day of the trip made everything easy and smooth."⁴³

Calcraft observes that the text of the *Viage* was probably

⁴⁰Francisco Guerrero, *El viage a Hierusalem*, ed. R.P. Calcraft (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1984) p. 12. The translation is mine.

⁴¹Guerrero, p. 9.

⁴²Pedro Guerrero's life and works are surveyed by Robert Stevenson, *Spanish Cathedral Music in the Golden Age* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961).

⁴³Guerrero, p. 13.

written during the trip or just after it. He points out its oral quality and speculates whether it was written down by Guerrero himself or his companion and *discípulo* Francisco Sánchez. Guerrero describes his adventure with candid simplicity. As Calcraft observes, Guerrero sees a tree that he takes for the one under which the Virgin rested; later, he observes a river bed where David picked up the stones for his sling; and he delights in fish from the Sea of Galilee, since Jesus ate from the same. Calcraft also notices that the narrative is well-organized, reaching two climaxes that correspond to the composer's emotional reaction when he saw Jesus' birthplace and two confrontations with French corsairs.

In the context of this study, the interest of Guerrero's *Viage* is that he was able to portray himself and, to a certain extent, the world around him. He created his own character (the composer dedicated to the Church and his music) and he left a record not only of his life achievements, his appointments in the church, and his duties as a musician, but in addition he revealed his emotions and ambitions--a flaring inner life that impregnated his experiences and that needed an expression in writing. The *Viage* is a trip not to only to Jerusalem, but a spiritual adventure. Once the fundamental facts about his life are related in the *Prólogo*, the description of the trip becomes another spiritual autobiography in which religious faith mixes with observations, and both are punctuated by the autobiographer's

recollections.

1.4 Whythorne's Autobiography as a professional narrative

The autobiography of Thomas Whythorne (1528-96) is often considered the "first sustained autobiography, in the modern sense, in English literature."⁴⁴ This obviously would make it the first autobiography by a composer; but such a statement, ranking canonic literary works according to seniority, is always liable to controversy. The judgment of which text is the true "first" autobiography depends of course on the definition of autobiography. Some literary reference works continue to attribute this precedent to Whythorne's account,⁴⁵ but *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* asserts:

Speaking generally, then, it can be said that autobiography begins with the Renaissance in the 15th century; and surprisingly enough, the first example was written not in Italy but in England by a woman entirely untouched by the "new learning" or literature. In her old age Margery Kempe, the sobbing mystic, or hysteric, of Lynn in Norfolk, dictated an account of her bustling, far-faring life, which however concerned with religious experience, rarely reveals her somewhat abrasive personality and the impact she made upon her fellows. This is done in a series of scenes, mainly developed by dialogue. Though calling herself, in abject humility, "the creature," Margery knew, and has effectively transmitted the proof, that she was a remarkable person.⁴⁶

The *Britannica* article, although informative, is not entirely impartial because, as its name indicates, the

⁴⁴James M. Osborn, ed., *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) p. xiii.

⁴⁵Marion Wynne-Davis, ed., "Autobiography," *Prentice Hall Guide to English Literature* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1990).

⁴⁶"Literature, The Art of," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 23, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1985).

Britannica is committed to "British" culture (though it is published in Chicago). It is inexcusable, for example, that its outline of the genre of autobiography does not even mention the autobiography of the Castilian Teresa of Avila, another "sobbing mystic" author of a genuine autobiography.⁴⁷ In any case, the question of the "first" autobiography is as difficult to solve as it is inconsequential, because, as mentioned above, it depends on the understanding of what is an autobiography and where one sets the genre boundaries. Such considerations fall outside the realm of this study.

Thomas Whythorne was an English poet, lutenist, and composer. He was not considered important until 1955 when his autobiography was discovered. In the text, he recounts his life (including a trip to Italy) and comments on his poetical and musical works. The *Autobiography* is interesting from many points of view:

For social historians it provides evidence of the manners and customs in great houses, both above and below stairs. For literary historians, it proves a mine of proverbs and of phonological evidence, since Whythorne attempted with Hart's "new orthography" to record "words as they be sounded in speech."⁴⁸

Because Whythorne thought English should be written as it sounded, he invented a complicated system of representing

⁴⁷Teresa de Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila* (Garden City: Image Books, 1960).

⁴⁸James M. Osborn, "Whythorne, Thomas," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed Stanley Sadie, XX (London: McMillan, 1980).

phonemes, at least as he thought they sounded. He created a whole system in order to reduce speech to a simpler graphic representation, but he had to involve in his system many graphic signs, such as dots on top of letters, in order to convey certain subtleties of pronunciation. Perhaps it was the intricacy of his unusually complicated spelling that caused the failure of Whythorne's system.⁴⁹

Whythorne's interest in poetry, music, and orthography reveals him to be a true Renaissance man. He made a living as a tutor in upper-middle-class and aristocratic houses, teaching music to children and writing sentimental, somewhat inane poetry and songs for the adults of the house. Reading the *Autobiography*--the only one by an Elizabethan composer--we learn that his family background was modest, but his artistic talent pushed him up the social ladder. He studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, and could play the lute and the virginals.

Whythorne's autobiographical endeavor is truly remarkable. To begin with, Whythorne did not have any models of autobiography, which in the modern sense had not yet been invented as a genre. The original title of Whythorne's work, put into modern spelling reads:

⁴⁹For a thorough description of Whythorne's orthography, see Rupert E. Palmer, *Thomas Whythorne's Speech: The Phonology of a Sixteenth-Century Native of Somerset in London* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1969).

A book of songs and sonnets,
 with long discourses set with
 them, of the child's life, and
 entering into the old man's life.
 Devised and written with
 a new orthography
 by Thomas Whythorne, gent.

Whythorne's autobiography is a "book of songs and sonnets" with long glosses relating the circumstances under which a particular poem was written and adding a thorough exegesis of that poem. Let us consider one example of this process of Whythorne's autobiographical contextualization and exegesis of a poem.

The restless race the young man runs
 Is strange to know in each degree:
 Now heaps he joys and cares he shuns,
 By and by his mirth away doth flee.

This foresaid sonnet I thus wrote because I meant...at what time I meant also to let her understand that... Also, in the foresaid sonnet I touched the uncertain estate of a young man because....⁵⁰

The blend of previously written poems with an autobiographical account of how the poems came to be written has incited some critics to believe that Whythorne's intentions were not primarily to relate his life. Andrew Mousley believes that Whythorne's *Autobiography* is a "professional narrative,"⁵¹ an account to present himself as

⁵⁰Osborn, *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, p. 37. Also quoted in David R. Shore, "Whythorne's *Autobiography* and the genesis of Gascoigne's *Master F. J.*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* XII/2 (1982) 163.

⁵¹Andrew Mousley, "Renaissance Selves and Life Writing: The *Autobiography* of Thomas Whythorne," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* XXVI/3 (1990) 222-30; and "The Making of the Self: Life Writing in the English Renaissance," Ph.D. diss.,

a professional poet, musician, tutor, and even orthographer. The *Autobiography* is not so much an attempt to reveal his personal life as it is a presentation of his artistic and professional credentials, or to put it briefly: for Whythorne, autobiography is a channel to promote his literary and musical works. As David Shore puts it, "that the primary concern of Whythorne's manuscript is with the poetic achievement rather than the autobiographical record seems to me apparent both from his opening remarks and from his pervasive concern throughout the work to establish the occasions on which his poems were written."⁵²

The text of Whythorne's *Autobiography* contains three types of sources. The first is Whythorne's "songs and sonnets," most of them previously written and published. The second is a collection of proverbs and sayings drawn from the Bible or classical literature. Whythorne uses these to make a point or to support an opinion. Finally, there is the life story of the protagonist, the writer of the poems and the authority on biblical and classical texts--Whythorne himself. These three types are incorporated into the fabric of the *Autobiography*, each performing a specific task: the poems stand at the center of the text, the life story explains the genesis of the poems, and the proverbs and sayings give an

University of Kent at Canterbury, 1990.

⁵²David R. Shore, "The *Autobiography* of Thomas Whythorne: An Early Elizabethan Context for Poetry," *Renaissance and Reformation* XVII/2 (1982) 72-86.

authoritative voice to the narrator and his opinions.

It has been said that Whythorne's poetry is mediocre. David R. Shore describes it as "very conventional"⁵³ and adds, "Thomas Whythorne himself is not in my opinion much of a poet--it is difficult to say more in his favor than that he is prolific, conscientious, and occasionally charmingly naive."⁵⁴ Poetry was not in any case Whythorne's main interest. Music seems to have been more important to him, although in the sixteenth century music and poetry were not necessarily two different activities. Whythorne considered poetry as "a means of imposing order on a state of mental and emotional turmoil."⁵⁵ Whythorne himself confesses, "in these days I would wreak mine anger altogether with pen and ink upon paper, because that the timorousness that then was in me, which was bred by the melancholy left as a relic of my age, and the weakness of my young courage, would not stir nor provoke me to do otherwise.... In the which agony I wrote thus: [a poem follows]."⁵⁶

Whythorne had written an earlier autobiography in verse when he was 20 years old. The habit of calming his spiritual being by writing down poems must have had an influence on

⁵³Shore, "The Autobiography," p. 81.

⁵⁴Shore, "The Autobiography," p. 84.

⁵⁵Shore, "The Autobiography," p. 74.

⁵⁶Quoted in Osborne, *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, p. 27.

Whythorne's attraction towards autobiography, because autobiography is nothing but an attempt to make sense of a chaotic and fragmented self (the narrator's) by creating coherence and order in the act of writing down. It has been said that, "the task of autobiography is first of all a task of personal salvation."⁵⁷ Thus, among the motivations for Whythorne to write an account of his life one must consider his awareness of the therapeutic uses of the act of writing.

When one examines the early reception of Whythorne's music, some aspects of the *Autobiography* become clearer. Charles Burney, who admired Italian opera above all, considered Whythorne and, as a matter of fact, all Elizabethan madrigalists "barbarous."⁵⁸ This view prevailed until relatively recent times, when Philip Heseltine praised him as "a composer of real genius."⁵⁹ Other music historians such as E. H. Fellowes and, more recently, Joseph Kerman regard him as one the most important composers of his time.⁶⁰ Morrison C. Boyd asserts that early criticism "ignored or vilified" Whythorne's part-songs, although they "show considerable

⁵⁷Gusdorf, "Conditions," p. 39.

⁵⁸Osborn, *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, p. x.

⁵⁹Osborn, p. x. See also Peter Warlock [pseudonym of Philip Heseltine], *Thomas Whythorne, an Unknown Elizabethan Composer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925) pp. 4-6.

⁶⁰Edmund H. Fellowes, *The English Madrigal Composers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948); Joseph Kerman, *The Elizabethan Madrigal* (New York: American Musicological Society, 1962).

contrapuntal skill, while their melodies are often fluent and their harmony is satisfactory from a modern standpoint."⁶¹

In a certain way, while Whythorne's music has been relatively well accepted, his poetry is still regarded as merely average. Whythorne's *Autobiography* is nevertheless a milestone in the development of the genre. To be sure, Whythorne was not aware that he was a pioneer in a new literary genre that eventually would have a strong grip on later composers. However, the *Autobiography* presents some conventional traits which hint that Whythorne was working within an autobiographical tradition that he himself was unaware of, for the word "autobiography" dates only from the nineteenth century, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.⁶²

Could it be that Whythorne knew Augustine's *Confessions* and similarly "spiritual," introspective books? Although that is possible, Whythorne, as stated above, did not intend to make a spiritual confession such as that of Margery Kempe or Teresa of Avila, but only to present his poems within the context in which they were created. Whythorne describes his conviction that publishing his poems would make him famous and, indeed, his struggles to achieve a stable professional

⁶¹Morrison Comegys Boyd, *Elizabethan Music and Musical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, orig. 1940) p. 100.

⁶²J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, eds., *Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

life are constantly narrated in detail. Moreover, in the *Autobiography* one finds many instances when the narrator complains about not having job security and economic stability.⁶³

The most original aspect of Whythorne's tale is that his account is a "professional" autobiography, whereas Augustine's *Confessions* is a "spiritual" search and Machaut's *Voir dit* is a love story (to name only two of the previously examined autobiographies). Yet they all share certain affinities in presenting a progression of events from youth to maturity, from folly to wisdom, and from instability (economic and emotional) to security. In addition, the overall structure of the narrative takes the form of a personal address: Augustine speaks to God, while Machaut's narrator corresponds with his lover. Whythorne solves this issue by addressing his life story to a "good friend," a female to be sure, for he makes vows of chastity for her and repudiates the foolishness of his past. There has been speculation about whether this friend was a real person, but it seems more reasonable to believe that it was merely a literary convention.⁶⁴ Machaut and Whythorne also have in common an awareness of the process of creating, specifically the act of writing poetry, and an interest in general aesthetic issues.

Whythorne's *Autobiography* is in any case a remarkable

⁶³Mousley, "Renaissance Selves," p. 228.

⁶⁴Shore, "The *Autobiography*," p. 81.

effort (one of the first, to be sure) by an artist to give a full account of his or her production and to provide an exegesis of this same oeuvre in order to avoid misinterpretations. Whythorne's account is important because the author is explicit about promoting his work and keeping control over it by providing an interpretation that eliminates all other possible interpretations.

1.5 Autobiographies in collective music dictionaries: Walther, Mattheson, Marpurg, Martini

The ideas of the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment spurred a general interest in musical knowledge. Many musicians and scholars undertook the task of compiling dictionaries of music and musicians. Because at the time the lexicographical sources were limited, in order to obtain information the editors had to depend on the composers directly. Very often, composers responded with autobiographical letters providing details about their lives, music, and in very few instances (unfortunately) their opinions. Let us now examine some of these early dictionaries including composers' autobiographies.⁶⁵

WALTHER

In 1732 Johann Gottfried Walther (1684-1748), a composer, theorist, and one of the earliest music lexicographers, published his *Musikalisches Lexikon*,⁶⁶ a work that includes more than 200 biographies of contemporary composers--many of

⁶⁵In this section I follow the already classical study by Hans Lenneberg, *Witnesses and Scholars: Studies in Musical Biography* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988).

⁶⁶Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musikalisches Lexikon* (Leipzig: W. Deer, 1732); reprinted in *Documenta musicologica* 1.Reihe, v.3 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1953). In this section, whenever possible, citations of primary sources will be given both in their original edition and a in modern, accessible reprint.

them written by the composers themselves--and around 3,000 definitions of musical terms. Walther's *Lexikon* signals the awakening of historical consciousness in music. Besides his own contemporaries, Walther includes early composers such as Lassus, the Gabriellis, Dufay, Josquin, Palestrina, and Victoria. Nevertheless, in all probability eighteenth-century audiences were mostly interested in the music of their own time, and if Walther looked a few centuries back into music history, it was only to satisfy his scholarly interests. There is no evidence that Walther heard or saw the music of these early composers.

Walther's sources were the numerous books, scores, correspondence, and his own experience gathered during many years of traveling around Europe, meeting composers, performers, and theorists. He certainly knew Brossard's musical dictionary, for he duplicates some information.⁶⁷ Mattheson's influence is not clear; while some scholars state that Walther drew information from Mattheson's *Grundlage*, others believe that both books were compiled independently and were meant to be used as complementary reference works.⁶⁸

Although, as mentioned above, many biographical entries

⁶⁷Sébastien Brossard, *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris: G. Ballard, 1703).

⁶⁸George J. Buelow attests Mattheson's influence on Walther in "Walther, Johann Gottfried," *The New Grove*, vol. XX, pp. 191-93. On the other hand, Lenneberg presumes that the works were complementary. See Lenneberg, *Witnesses*, pp. 20-21.

are autobiographies, it is almost impossible to decide which are written by the composers and which are written by Walther. To begin with, he is not explicit about his sources, which could be composers' letters, records from libraries and personal collections, and his own research. Furthermore, he edited all the materials depending on his publishing needs; these included personal records and letters by composers. Walther's own autobiography was published by Mattheson in his *Grundlage*, a work that shall be considered next.



Johann Mattheson's Ehrenpforte

MATTHESON

Shortly after Walther's *Lexikon*, Johann Mattheson (1681-1764) published his *Grundlage einer Ehrenpforte* (1740),⁶⁹ another dictionary to include composers' autobiographies. Mattheson is a typical Enlightenment writer; his solid education, which included the usual liberal arts curriculum, allowed him to adopt a broad perspective in treating musical subjects. He shows a passion for codifying musical knowledge, and this conspicuously included musicians' biographies and autobiographies. Although Mattheson was also a composer, performer, teacher, and theorist as well as a diplomat, his work as a lexicographer is his main contribution to music. He traveled widely and corresponded with the most important musicians of his time and his writings chronicle eighteenth-century musical life like no other writer except, perhaps, Burney. An example of his passion for chronicling music is his 1725 *Critica musica*, which began as a journal but was later collected in two volumes.⁷⁰ The book was intended to correct some factual mistakes in Brossard's *Dictionnaire*. In order to provide direct information on the state of music during his time, the journal incorporates fragments of the

⁶⁹Johann Mattheson, *Grundlage einer Ehrenpforte, woran der tüchtigsten Capellmeister, Componisten, Musikgelehrten, Tonkünstler, etc. erscheinen sollen* (Hamburg: Author, 1740); reprints, Max Schneider, ed. (Berlin: Liepmannssohn, 1910) and (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1969).

⁷⁰Johann Mattheson, *Critica musica* (Amsterdam: Frits Knuf, 1964); originally published in by the author, Hamburg 1722-25.

correspondence of some of the most important musicians of the time, such as Telemann, Handel, and Kuhnau.

In the *Ehrenpforte*, Mattheson assembles biographies and autobiographies of musicians--at the time biographies and autobiographies were not yet differentiated--with the intention of giving musicians what he considered a well-deserved social status. It is important here to emphasize that, while artists in the visual arts had for centuries enjoyed prestige and money (think of the artists' lives by Pliny and Vasari), musicians in eighteenth-century Germany were still regarded as high-ranking servants (and perhaps for this reason performers even today dress like waiters). Accordingly, the *Ehrenpforte* is, as its name indicates, a "portal of honor" for accomplished musicians. This accounts for Mattheson's moralizing tone; in the preface, for example, he states that he will "include the best and most virtuous music-masters, those who in the name of God arouse to piety and worship, and tame the naturally undisciplined flesh and its instincts."⁷¹ That the members of this hall of fame are all men cannot be disregarded. In the eighteenth century, there were many women musicians, and other music scholars regarded them without prejudice; the most singular case is Marianna Martines's autobiography in Padre Martini's collection of letters, which will be considered later.

⁷¹See Mattheson, "Vorbereit," p. viiif. Quoted and translated in Lenneberg, *Witnesses and Scholars*, p. 23.

Nevertheless, Mattheson limited his "portal of honor" to men.

Mattheson's sources are not always named but it is safe to say that, as a scholar who traveled and corresponded with the leading composers of his time, he obtained his primary information mainly from direct communication with the musicians, who, in most cases, submitted autobiographies proper or autobiographical letters. In contrast to Walther, Mattheson did not edit these entries, and they were included in the *Ehrenpforte* exactly as they were submitted, mistakes and all. Other possible sources for Mattheson's work were the other reference works that circulated at his time. Mattheson, however, does not repeat or paraphrase Walther's *Lexikon*, which can, perhaps, be interpreted as supporting Lenneberg's hypothesis that the books (Walther's and Mattheson's) were used complementarily.

Mattheson's editorial standards are a matter of debate. Take for instance J.S. Bach. According to Lenneberg there is evidence that Bach was a highly admired composer despite the Romantic anecdotes about his being an unappreciated musician. Johann Francisci and Johann Balthasar Reimann, for example, express their admiration for Bach right on the pages of the *Ehrenpforte*. Francisci asserts: "I had the fortune to get to know the famous Kapellmeister Bach...."⁷² Reimann declares that he went to Leipzig "to hear the famous Johann Sebastian

⁷²Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, p. 79.

play."⁷³ So, how does one account for his exclusion? In all probability, Mattheson, whose main interest was scholarly, decided not to include him because he considered him sufficiently well-known.

Surprisingly, Mattheson included only two English composers, William Heather and Henry Symonds, although he was an openly declared Anglophile, working for the English government in Hamburg. On the other hand, Mattheson included Purcell but considered him to be French. Theorists are also excluded from the *Ehrenpforte*, but the exclusion is excusable on grounds that theorists had been included in *Critica musica*.

The *Ehrenpforte* mixes biographical entries with articles about musical terms. Thus the article on de Lalande is a discussion about the difference between *maître de la chapelle-musique* and *maître de musique de la chapelle*.⁷⁴ Gossip is well represented in the *Ehrenpforte*; he tells, for example, an anecdote about Lully being brought to France from Italy because a niece of Louis XIV asked a courtier to "bring her back a nice Italian boy he deemed good for something."⁷⁵

Although Mattheson's biographical entries are autobiographies proper (even those written in third person), modern readers might be disappointed if they compare them to the large heroic epics of the nineteenth century, such as

⁷³Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, p. 292.

⁷⁴Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, pp. 165-67.

⁷⁵Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, pp. 174-183.

Berlioz's *Memoirs* or Wagner's *My Life*. The autobiographies included in Mattheson's *Ehrenpforte* are what Alfred Einstein called *Berufsbiographien*.⁷⁶ Willi Kahl refers to these texts as *Lebensläufe* or professional "résumés."⁷⁷ Generally speaking, these early autobiographies (or résumés) give objective, factual information and they can safely be designated as impersonal. Most autobiographies included in the *Ehrenpforte* are written in the first person, but a few use the third person; such is the case in Mattheson's autobiography, which, parenthetically, is the longest in his compilation.⁷⁸ Although here all autobiographies are marked by an impersonal tone, all of them introduce a narrative convention, namely that the composer felt from a young age an uncanny, compelling force to compose music.

In Mattheson, as well as in Walther, it is not easy to distinguish between true autobiographies and plain biographies. Some autobiographies, for example, are written in the third person (Mattheson's, for instance). Mattheson

⁷⁶Alfred Einstein, "Die deutscher Musiker-Autobiographie," *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters für 1921* (Leipzig: Peters, 1922) 57-65.

⁷⁷Willi Kahl, *Selbstbiographien deutscher Musiker des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne: Staufien Verlag, 1948); reprint (Amsterdam: Frits Knuf, 1972).

⁷⁸Mattheson's autobiography has been edited separately. See, Hans Joachim Marx, ed., *Johann Mattheson (1681-1764): Lebensbeschreibung des Hamburger Musiker, Schriftstellers und Diplomaten, nach der Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte und den handschriftlichen Nachtragen des Verfassers* (Hamburg: K.D. Wagner, 1982).

often indicates his source with an *ex ms.* (from manuscript), *ex oper.* (from a preface of music), *ex libr.* (from a book), *ex notit.* (from a notice, e.g. an obituary), *ex lit.* (from a letter), and *ex autogr.* (from an autograph). Adopting a rather conservative criterion would require that only the entries using composers' letters and autographs as sources should be considered true autobiographies.⁷⁹

DU TILLET

As an appendix to Mattheson's lexicographical ventures, we must now turn to another early biographical source, du Tillet's *Le Parnasse françois* (1732).⁸⁰ This biographical dictionary includes musicians, poets, philosophers, artists, and all the "great" Frenchmen; *Le Parnasse* is an excellent example of a biographical dictionary compiled in order to create a sense of national pride. From a lexicographical point of view, *Le Parnasse* is more consistent than Matheson's works in terms of spelling, organization, and structure. Nevertheless, it only includes French musicians from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The general tone is laudatory, offering no type of criticism or evaluation of the

⁷⁹Lenneberg has sorted out the autobiographies included in Mattheson, Marpurg, and Sainsbury. See Lenneberg, *Witnesses*, pp. 64-65.

⁸⁰Evrard Titon du Tillet, *Le Parnasse françois* (Paris: J. B. Coignard, 1732); supplements, 1743 and 1755.

music and the musicians. In contrast to Mattheson's anecdotal narrative style, there is no small talk here. One must take into account that while du Tillet is writing from a lexicographer's point of view, Mattheson is a musician writing on his own subject, so that a deeper degree of involvement is justified. Du Tillet's work does not include any autobiography, but his task as compiler of biographies is worth examining because it presents a non-German perspective which often contrasts with Mattheson's premises. It is remarkable, for instance, that, while Mattheson intended with his biographies to dignify the musician's profession, du Tillet seems to take for granted the social status of the musician and makes no apology for his presumed virtue or lack of it. Musicians in du Tillet's work sit in the hall of fame next to the other "great" French philosophers and artists.

MARPURG

Marpurg's attempt at codifying knowledge about music and musicians materialized in a journal addressed to the amateur bourgeois musician, the *Historisch-Critische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik*.⁸¹ The journal, which was later published as a book in five volumes, was to include new music, selections from new books, translations of foreign

⁸¹Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Historisch-Critische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik*, 5 vols. (Berlin: Lange, 1754-78).

publications, and basically all features that up to our time are considered to make up a scholarly publication. In the early issues biographies and autobiographies are a regular feature, whereas in the later issues biographical information is not included.

Marpurg's *Briefe*⁸² also contribute to the history of biography and autobiography by presenting many entries on the lives of composers. As an eighteenth-century scholar, Marpurg was aware of the available biographical literature of his time, and while it is possible that he used du Tillet's and Lacombe's works⁸³ as sources, he contributed new biographical materials provided by the composers themselves. He also took the time to correct Walther's occasional inaccuracies.⁸⁴

GERBER

Gerber's *Historisch-biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler*⁸⁵ is an important musical lexicographical work because it uses a standardized editorial style, as for instance in the spelling

⁸²Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Critische Briefe über die Tonkunst*, 3 vols. (Berlin: F. W. Birnstiel, 1760-64).

⁸³Jacques Lacombe, *Dictionnaire portatif des beaux-arts*. (Paris: La Veure Estienne, 1752).

⁸⁴Lenneberg, *Witnesses*, p. 27.

⁸⁵Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Historisch-biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler* (Leipzig, 1790-92); new edition by Othmar Wessely (Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1966-77).

of names. In addition, Gerber used only materials he could document. His sources included his own vast library, which was begun by his father, the composer Heinrich Nikolaus Gerber, Walther's library (donated to him), and numerous contributions by his acquaintances in the music world. He intended at first merely to supplement Walther's *Musikalisches Lexikon*, but eventually Gerber's contribution was so significant as to make the *Lexikon* his own.

Gerber's *Neues historisch-biographisches Lexikon*⁸⁶ includes his own autobiography, which mentions only his musical vocation, not his legal studies and tasks in the service of the Prince of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen. He praises Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, who are called "geniuses." Besides this, Gerber, like Padre Martini, collected and studied portraits of musicians, which shows his interest in the lives of artists. In Carl Maria von Weber's autobiography, he thanks his teacher Michael Haydn for writing a sympathetic biography about him in Gerber's dictionary.⁸⁷

It seems that one of Gerber's sources was Burney's

' Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Neues historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Tonkünstler* (Leipzig, 1812-13). New edition by Othmar Wessely (Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1966-77).

⁸⁷Carl Maria von Weber, "Autobiographische Skizze," in *Von Schütz bis Schönberg: Autobiographische Skizzen europäischer Musiker*, ed. Reinhard Ermen (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1988) pp. 89-93. The original source was first published in *Carl Maria von Weber: Kunstansichten* (Wilhelmsichten: Heinrichschofen, 1978).

writings.⁸⁸ Gerber's entry dealing with Burney states that he (Burney) was the first scholar to write about art, not artists. This is an important change in aesthetic attitude. Throughout history the life of the artist is alternately considered essential or not for the understanding of the artist's work. Of these alternating trends, one centers on the artwork *per se*, and another is based on contextualizing the art work with social and biographical information. Burney, who wrote an autobiography himself,⁸⁹ worked at the end of the Enlightenment and thus took advantage of a developing scholarly tradition, thus giving his historical research greater accuracy. But his shift of emphasis from life to work, from creator to creation, signals an important turning point in the history of aesthetics: the early signs of Modernism.

As one reads Burney, it is remarkable to detect, for instance, his firm faith in "progress," whether social, artistic, or intrinsically musical, in his view of music history as a gradual flowering of harmony and a waning of

⁸⁸Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Provinces* (London: Burney, 1775); included in *An Eighteenth-Century Musical Tour in Central Europe and the Netherlands*, ed. Percy Scholes (London: Oxford University Press, 1947).

⁸⁹Slava Klima et al., eds., *Memoirs of Dr. Charles Burney 1726-1769* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988). This text reconstructs the original fragments left by the author and cancels the bowdlerized 1832 edition by Burney's daughter, Fanny Burney, *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*.

counterpoint, which he considers *passé*. (It should be remembered that the notion of progress was already present in the fine arts with Vasari's appreciation of Michaelangelo as aesthetically "better" than earlier artists.) The idea of *progress* seems to be a constant in most biographical dictionaries of the time; they pervasively assert the improvement of modern music over that of the past. Jean Benjamin de la Borde's *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*⁹⁰ remarks on Corelli's "genius," a word which now has entered the vocabulary of music writers in association with the "progress of the arts."⁹¹

HILLER

Though Johann Adam Hiller's *Lebensbeschreibungen berühmter Musikgelehrten und Tonkünstler neuerer Zeit* (1784)⁹² included only seventeen composers, Hiller asserted that he would be willing to include more if they sent him their autobiographies. Hiller's criteria indicate a change in

⁹⁰Jean Benjamin de la Borde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* (Paris: P. D. Pierres, 1780).

⁹¹Lowinsky traced the term "genius" to the Renaissance. See Edward Lowinsky, "Musical Genius--Evolution and Origins of a Concept," *The Musical Quarterly* L/3-4 (1964) 321ff and 476ff. The word is missing in Mattheson's vocabulary and only later becomes usual; see Lenneberg, *Witnesses*, p. 24 and p. 33.

⁹²Johann Adam Hiller, *Lebensbeschreibungen berühmter Musikgelehrten und Tonkünstler neuerer Zeit* (Leipzig: Dykische Buchhandlung, 1784).

attitude in musical lexicography. If Mattheson was, on the one hand, as comprehensive as he could be, while, on the other, he neglected those composers too well known, Hiller felt an obligation to include in his compilation only the "most esteemed" composers, those who can qualify as "geniuses." The student of the historiography of this period can observe a transition from what one could call the Enlightenment to Romanticism. During the Enlightenment (e.g. Mattheson), gathering knowledge was the lexicographer's main objective, but during Romanticism "greatness," "genius," and talent became the criteria for inclusion. Romanticism, accordingly, marks "the beginning of an aristocracy of talent and intellect clearly foreshadowing a new class to which one could belong only by virtue of outstanding ability."⁹³

SAINSBURY

John Sainsbury's musical dictionary includes many composers' autobiographies.⁹⁴ From an examination of Sainsbury's correspondence, it becomes evident that Sainsbury, following the eighteenth-century practice of Walther and Mattheson, requested autobiographies from the most important European composers of his time. The contributors were to subscribe to

⁹³Lenneberg, *Witnesses*, p. 37.

⁹⁴John Sainsbury, *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Sainsbury, 1825).

the dictionary if they wanted their name to be included. The letters he received were in different languages, and it seems that Sainsbury made very few editorial interventions besides the translations, which accounts for the somewhat awkward style. In fact, it remains to be established whether Sainsbury was only the publisher of the dictionary or both the editor and publisher.

Sainsbury's agenda included, besides making money and contributing to musical knowledge, an explicit claim for English music. This is seen, for instance, in his treatment of English composers, who are lavishly handled, though without underestimating the usual "great" Germans such as J.S. Bach and Beethoven. This practice can still be seen today in *The New Grove*. Although most of Sainsbury's sources were autobiographical letters, he borrowed openly from Gerber, Choron, Fayolle, and music journals of the time. It is again difficult to distinguish which biographical entries are truly autobiographical.⁹⁵

It is interesting to note that Sainsbury published a dictionary of "music and musicians" and not merely of "musicians," a wording retained even by *The New Grove*. According to Gerber, Burney had initiated the tradition of writing a history of art, rather than of artists; Sainsbury is

⁹⁵Sainsbury's original correspondence is kept at the Euing Music Collection at the Library of the University of Glasgow. Hans Lenneberg has examined this correspondence in detail and estimates that approximately 160 biographical entries are autobiographies. Lenneberg, *Witnesses*, p. 78.

within this tradition, since he places the general subject (music) before its individual subjects (the musicians). Again, this is indicative of a certain aesthetic attitude, namely a work-oriented aesthetics, which was very much in tune with the general intellectual atmosphere of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on efficiency and progress.

MARTINI

Padre Giovanni Battista Martini (1706-84), Italian composer, teacher, and musical writer, still represents the spirit of the Enlightenment at its best. He dedicated his life to compiling an enormous collection of materials concerning music, including books (more than 17,000 according to Burney), musicians' portraits, music scores, and especially his extensive collection of letters from and to the musicians of his time. (His library eventually became the Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale Bologna.) Moreover, he was the teacher of such acclaimed composers as W.A. Mozart, J.C. Bach, and A.E.M. Grétry. He wrote several scholarly works, among them a music history in five volumes (although only three were completed) and a counterpoint tutor.⁹⁶

Of special relevance is his correspondence, which

⁹⁶Padre Giovanni Battista Martini, *Storia della musica* (Bologna: 1774-75); *Esemplare ossia saggio fondamentale pratico di contrapunto* (Bologna: 1761-81).

includes more than 6,000 letters.⁹⁷ This correspondence consists mainly of letters by Padre Martini requesting music, biographical information, and painted portraits of the composers. Martini's correspondents reply by providing him with his requests and often turning in an autobiographical letter, as well. This is the case, for example, of Marianna Martines or Martinez (1744-1812), an accomplished composer and performer born in Italy of Spanish descent, who made a career as a composer in Vienna and whose music is today mostly lost. Martines was an aristocratic lady and as such her social rank did not allow her to be a "professional" composer such as, for example, Haydn, Mozart, or Salieri. It is known that her catalogue of works was conspicuous and the meager extant music shows talent.

Martines corresponded with Padre Martini over a long period. When he requested a painted portrait of her, she sent it, and when he asked for her biography she dispatched an autobiographical letter on 16 december 1773. It is worth considering this letter in some detail because it is the first instance of an autobiographical statement by a woman composer and thus the first step towards the construction of a paradigm of women composers in Western music.

The letter begins with a standard opening: Martines regrets not having answered Padre Martini's letter earlier and

⁹⁷Anne Schnoebelen, ed. *Padre Martini's Collection of Letters in the Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale in Bologna* (New York: Pendragon, 1979).

hopes his health improves. Then she expresses her satisfaction at Padre Martini's approval of her *Salmo Miserere*. She continues by asserting her surprise at Padre Martini's request for biographical information, for she has no merits worth telling and wonders why she should relate her life. She gives a brief sketch of her father's life. She states that she felt naturally inclined towards music and studied with Haydn, among other teachers. She admires Handel, Lotti, and Caldara among the early masters, and Hasse, Jommelli, and Galuppi among the moderns. She speaks German, Italian, French, and English (a fact corroborated by Burney). She also remarks that all her studies have been supervised by Metastasio.⁹⁸

Marianna Martines was not the only famous woman musician in the Vienna of her time. There was also, for instance, Marianna von Auenbrugger, Josefa Barbara von Aur(e)nhammer, Maria Theresia Paradis, and Magdalena von Kurzböck. Nevertheless, Martines was the most accomplished of them and her music has received some attention by modern scholars.⁹⁹ Yet her role in music history is usually seen as a peripheral

⁹⁸For a transcription without translation of this letter see A. Peter Brown, "Marianna Martines' Autobiography as a New Source for Haydn's Biography During the 1750's," *Haydn-Studien* VI/1 (1986) 68-70.

⁹⁹See Robert Stevenson, "Marianna Martines=Martinez (1744-1812) Pupil of Haydn and Friend of Mozart," *Inter-American Music Review* XI/1 (1990) 25-44; and Karen L. Fremar, "The Life and Selected Works of Marianna Martines (1744-1812)," Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1983.

one. Her autobiography, for instance, is considered by A. Peter Brown as a source of information on Haydn's life, while Robert Stevenson sanctions his study on Martines by linking her to the mainstream as "pupil of Haydn and friend of Mozart."

What matters here is that Martines wrote her autobiography as did so many other eighteenth-century composers, and that Padre Martini considered her of importance in documenting the musical scene of the time. Her letter presents all the traits of eighteenth-century autobiography: it is an impartial résumé, points out a "natural" slant towards music, and expresses the narrator's modesty and alleged lack of merits. Although Brown asserts that Martines wrote her autobiography as a "probable result of her election to membership in the Accademia Filarmonica of Bologna,"¹⁰⁰ it is interesting to note that Martines seems startled by Padre Martini's requests for her biography and expresses her surprise at such a petition "without telling me for what purpose."¹⁰¹ From other evidence, it is clear that autobiographical writing in this part of the eighteenth century is often connected with professional affairs, such as applications for posts, promotions, and honorifics as might be so in Martines' case.

¹⁰⁰Brown, "Marianna Martines," p. 68.

¹⁰¹"Senza dirmi a quale oggetto." Brown, p. 69.

RECAPTITULATION

From the autobiographies compiled by Walther, Mattheson, du Tillet, Marpurg, Gerber, Sainsbury, and Martini one can imagine the life of many eighteenth-century European composers. Most composers were self-taught, and mainly from middle-class backgrounds, though some came from working-class origins (Dreyer's father was a shoemaker).¹⁰² Some attended university, normally to pursue legal studies; Anton Englert (1674-c.1739) mentions (in his third-person autobiography) that he studied theology at the University of Leipzig. Some composers wrote learned books. Some, such as C.P.E Bach, came from musical families. Some traveled throughout Europe, while some remained at home for their entire life. Generally, they began their studies between the age of eight and twelve and secured their first appointments around eighteen or twenty years of age. Otherwise, the autobiographies offer few comments on music aesthetics, people, feelings, cities, or landscapes.

By reading these autobiographies one realizes that publishing was not a fundamental part of the composer's professional life. In general, composers do not mention whether their works are published or not. Georg Gebel the Elder (1685-ca.1750) asserts that he has not published his works because it is hard to please everyone. Valentin

¹⁰²Johann Conrad Dreyer (1672-1742) in Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, pp. 52-57.

Bartholomäus Hausmann (b.1678) lists the books in his personal library, which, though they do not particularly illuminate any special aspect of his music, provide good information about the average level of education of the upper-middle-class musician.

Composers often voice their complaints, which in general reveal a petty-bourgeois mentality. Johann Francisci (1691-1758)¹⁰³ takes advantage of his entry in Mattheson to criticize a position he took and later gave up in Pressburg (now Bratislava). Francisci complains about the cost of living, an observation shared incidentally by many other composers. J.S. Bach, for instance, reveals himself in his writings to have a petty mentality, very different from the heroic one projected in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography.¹⁰⁴ Francisci also expresses his doubts concerning his responsibilities whether as a director, cantor or organist, which raises interesting questions: what was the function of each one of these musicians and were their jobs interchangeable? It seems safe to say that the cantor wrote

¹⁰³Mattheson, *Ehrenpforte*, pp. 76-86 and Lenneberg, *Witnesses*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁴Willi Kahl, *Selbstbiographien*, "Brief an Georg Erdmann," pp. 24-26. A translation of Bach's letter is included in Gertrude Norman and Miriam Lubell Shrifte, eds., *Letters of Composers: An Anthology, 1603-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946) pp. 25-26. In the letter Bach states, "This town is very expensive to live in....The air is very healthful here and the past year, for example, the ordinary burial-fees were more than 100 taler less than usual" (his income depended on funeral fees).

music, while the organists and choir masters usually did not. It is not clear in the autobiographies whether one could be promoted from one job to the other. Johann Friedrich Fasch's (1688-1748) autobiography published by Marpurg in his *Historisch-Kritische Beyträge* relates the process of selecting a cantor. He also reveals his salary.

Jakob Adlung (1699-1762) expresses the dichotomy between a composer and a scholar. Although he was an accomplished organist, his autobiography deals more with scholarship than with music. He declares that he did not become a minister because he did not feel inclined to preach, and although he had the necessary qualifications to teach school, he became an organist instead because the salary was better. Later he intended to become a professor, but he encountered some opposition because it was thought that a musician could not be a good scholar, which says a lot about the role of the musician among intellectuals, notwithstanding Mattheson's efforts to encourage professional respect for musicians.

Quantz's autobiography¹⁰⁵ is an exception to the eighteenth-century scene. He recounts experiences, characters, opinions, and feelings. He advocates for modern music and criticizes composers who write in the old style (counterpoint) because they cannot meet the challenges of the new musical styles. He traveled throughout Italy and England, which allowed him to be in touch with many composers and their

¹⁰⁵Marpurg, *Historisch-Kritische Beyträge*, pp. 197-250.

music. Quantz's autobiographical account is no longer a *Berufsbiographie* or a simple résumé; it is an opinionated narrative of a composer and his time. His emphasis on personal opinion and his faith in "new" music and progress set him closer in some respects to the nineteenth-century musical life than to the objective mind of the mid-eighteenth century.

The early music autobiographies, therefore, are found in the domain of general biography. There is no doubt that when Walther, Mattheson, and other lexicographers asked composers to give a written account of their own life, the only objective they had in mind was to promote and preserve a part of their cultural history. In eighteenth-century Europe, autobiography, letters, and biography are basically indistinguishable from each other. Moreover, neither the scholars who requested biographical accounts from composers nor the composers themselves seem to have been aware of initiating a literary genre which would eventually become such an important part of Western art music and culture. Here follows an outline of the texts discussed above:

Collective music dictionaries including autobiographies

Walther	<i>Musikalisches Lexikon</i>	1732
du Tillet	<i>Le Parnasse françois</i>	1732
Mattheson	<i>Grundlage einer Ehrenpforte</i>	1740
Marpurg	<i>Historisch-Critische Beyträge</i>	1754
Hiller	<i>Lebensbeschreibungen berühmter...</i>	1784
Gerber	<i>Historisch-biographisches Lexicon</i>	1790
Gerber	<i>Neues historisch-biographisches Lexikon</i>	1812
Sainsbury	<i>A Dictionary of Music and Musicians</i>	1825

1.6. Early studies on autobiography in music: Einstein, Kahl, Unger, and others

Although autobiography in all its forms and variants has been a common practice among composers since the fourteenth century, there have been very few studies dealing with it from a scholarly point of view. One would think that autobiography (even if it were a mere act of self-glorification with no historico-cultural interest) would have attracted the interest of scholars since the large amount of extant texts. Unfortunately, the studies focusing on composers' autobiographies are scarce; let us now survey some of these few studies.

EINSTEIN

One of these rare studies is Alfred Einstein's 1922 article cited in the preceding section, "Die deutsche Musiker-Autobiographie." As its title indicates, the essay is a survey of autobiographies written by German composers. Einstein observes that the practice of autobiography among composers is as old as the profession of musician itself: composers let their persona come forward through letters, dedications, and all sort of records. He nevertheless complains that these statements have never been used as sources for cultural history. H. Kretzschmar, for example, criticized Lodovico Zacconi's autobiography because it was not

interesting as a historical source. Einstein promptly protests by saying that this is precisely the point: Zacconi's account is the biographical characterization of a universal human being who engages in the interpretation of his destiny through the act of autobiography.

Autobiographies, as personal confessions, are always suspect of being self-glorifying accounts and as such they could be the focus of study of psychologists rather than musicologists. Einstein's claim that autobiographies can be used as sources for cultural history seems today perhaps more relevant than fifty years ago because musicology (influenced by new trends in cultural criticism) is once again trying to formulate its goals. After several decades of studies centered on the autonomy of the musical work--a paradigm that justified philological and analytical approaches--music as culture has regained acceptance among scholars. Thus, autobiographies as "biographies of universal beings who interpret their destiny," to paraphrase Einstein, are becoming again a legitimate source of study.

Einstein's article consists of an outline of composers who wrote autobiographies; until this day, most of the materials he surveyed remain practically unexplored in detail. Einstein points out that in Germany there are no early autobiographies that can be compared with Cellini's autobiography or Dürer's diaries. He explains that the collapse of professional guilds in seventeenth-century Germany

resulted in the lexicographical efforts of Walther, Mattheson, and Marpurg. To compile biographies and autobiographies of musicians was an effort designed to give composers social respectability. For his survey Einstein scans only the autobiographies compiled by these scholars.¹⁰⁶ He complains that George Motz met Bach, but he did not write much about him. Telemann's autobiography deserves his praise because despite its Philistinism (*Philistrosität*) it carries the mark of civility (*Bonhomie*) and elegance. Mattheson's account, on the other hand, is dismissed as inadequate and servile. Einstein regrets that Handel and Bach did not write autobiographies as so many of their contemporaries did; he considers Bach's letter to Erdmann a valid self-portrait depicting a great composer with a narrow, down-to-earth, and petty-bourgeois mentality.

Einstein views the autobiographies of Christian David Graff, Carl Höckh, and Johann Peter Kellner as dry, factual accounts, which he calls *Berufsbiographies*, and wishes they had been more personal and introspective. Quantz's autobiography is praised for its clarity, honesty, and vividness. Einstein also commends Quantz for his sharp portraits of singers and castrati of his time and the description of his travels through Italy, France, and England. For Einstein, Quantz's autobiography signals a turn in the

¹⁰⁶All the texts cited in Einstein's survey were originally printed in Walther, Mattheson, and Marpurg.

consciousness of musicians--now they are aware of their individuality.

For Einstein, Johann Wilhelm Hässler's autobiography is singular because the composer writes his own life at the same time that he reflects on the art of writing one's life. Hässler believes that the autobiographer has a special relationship with his audience: he says either too little or too much--too little if it does not show positive role models; too much if he pretends to pass futilities as facts. Hässler vows that he will only relate facts.

Einstein groups together a circle of composers from "southern Germany" (Austria and part of Switzerland). He thinks that these texts are far less interesting than the "north German and Saxon" autobiographies. He argues that the autobiography of the Viennese Ignaz Holzbauer differs from the northern examples in its "tone and insecurity,"¹⁰⁷ although the description of his deafness is interesting. C.F. Daniel Schubart's autobiography is sentimental and pompous. Samuel Gotlob Auberlen is only interesting as a source for the music history of Switzerland. Einstein puts in the same cluster the autobiographies of Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, Aldalbert Gyrowetz, and Johann Schenk. The three composers are nineteenth-century Viennese composers and they provide a dependable source of information for the musical life of the Austrian city and the lives of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven.

¹⁰⁷Einstein, p. 62.

Einstein's survey still operates within the limits of the progress paradigm, which implies that all forms develop toward their betterment. Thus, he considers that autobiography in music reaches its "classicism" (and this is the term he uses) in Berlin with the texts written by Johann A.P. Schulz and Johann F. Reichardt. The former is a keen psychologist, Einstein says; his description of his wife's death is an emotional piece of prose. Reichardt's account describes his youth; his tone is unfettered and much preferable than the manner of his later diaries. Carl F. Zelter's autobiography is defined as a masterpiece which renders descriptions of tender and yet sharp eroticism.

Einstein points out that during the romantic period there are very few autobiographies in Germany. Carl M. von Weber left us an 1818 autobiographical sketch which Einstein considers dry. Louis Spohr's autobiography is considered too factual, while Carl Loewe's narrative is regarded as the mere account of a conceited virtuoso. Einstein's survey finishes with Wagner's *My Life* with the usual remarks about the composer's presumptuousness.

Einstein's survey connects for the first time under the label of autobiography a body of texts that had not been thought of as belonging together. His interest in these texts lies not in their potential as sources for music history (although they may be used as such), but rather as portraits of individual personalities with universal traits. His

approach is always psychological: many texts are dismissed as being too factual and dry, while those characterizing emotions and interpreting events and facts are considered worthier. In brief, Einstein's contribution is first that he identifies an area of study (autobiography in music) and second that he puts the accent on the psychological aspects of those texts, not on their historical factuality.

KAHL

In spite of Einstein's seminal--though small--contribution, very few scholars furthered the study of autobiography in music. In 1948, Willi Kahl published a facsimile edition of most autobiographies enumerated by Einstein whose original source was Walther, Mattheson, and Marpurg.¹⁰⁸ Kahl's effort made available a good number of texts that were otherwise dispersed in many different sources and that were not even thought of as belonging together. What is remarkable here is a growing sense that personal statements by composers not only belong to the monographs dealing with the composers' lives and the music history of their country, but that in addition these texts form a history of their own--they relate to each other as a symphony may relate to other symphonies.

¹⁰⁸Willi Kahl, *Selbstbiographien deutscher Musiker des 18. Jahrhunderts*.

UNGER

A few years earlier than Kahl's study, Max Unger published another short essay dealing with German music autobiography, "Die Musikerselbstbiographie der Hochklassik," which confirms the growing awareness that music autobiography conforms to a history of its own, and that, as such, it can be studied in relative isolation from general music history.¹⁰⁹ For Unger--as well as for Einstein and Kahl--autobiographies present the reader not only with facts about the life of a composer, but also with his personal introspection and with a record of cultural history. Unger complains that few composers wrote autobiographies and even fewer spoke about aesthetic issues pertaining to their art. He follows Einstein in considering that, although the Middle Ages produced some personal records in the form of letters and travel books, autobiography proper is the result of the Enlightenment and, more specifically, of the lexicographical efforts of Walther, Mattheson, and Gerber all of whom requested biographies from their contemporary composers.

He repeats Einstein's idea that these early autobiographies are factual, dry accounts. He speculates that this is so because they were meant for biographical dictionaries, not as literary endeavors. He adds that, with few exceptions, these autobiographies lack all "literary

¹⁰⁹Max Unger, "Die Musikerselbstbiographie der Hochklassik," *Die Musik* XXXV (1942) 9-12.

fantasy"¹¹⁰ and are stiff narratives. This could be explained, he argues, by the lack of general education among many musicians of the time. He concludes that despite all their defects, these autobiographies deserve to be read. He hopes that his contribution will encourage music lovers to read the original texts.

ERMEN AND OTHERS

Kahl's edition mentioned above is a scholarly book, and as such even educated readers can feel alienated by the facsimile reproductions (most of them in Gothic characters) and the profusion of bibliographical and archival references in the endnotes. As a result, a more accessible edition was prepared by Reinhard Ermen.¹¹¹ The scope of this compilation is broader than the previous studies, including European (not only German) composers from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. One of the texts included in Ermen's edition is Christoph Graupner's *Autobiographische Skizze*, which in its turn was the subject of an illuminating essay by Carl Dahlhaus.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Unger, p. 10.

¹¹¹Reinhard Ermen, ed., *Von Schütz bis Schönberg: Autobiographische Skizzen europäischer Musiker*.

¹¹²Carl Dahlhaus, "Cristoph Graupner und das Formprinzip der Autobiographie," *Bachiana et alia musicologica* (Festschrift Alfred Dürr zum 65. Geburtstag am 3. März 1983) ed. Wolfgang Rehm (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1983) pp. 58-61.

Dahlhaus argues that, contrary to popular belief, autobiography is a controversial topic. Autobiography as an individual's recollection of events assumes certain premises that are debatable. Dahlhaus examines presuppositions such as the concept of biographical fact, the use of documents to reconstruct history (indeed the possibility of historical reconstruction at all), and the use of chronological order as an organizing principle. Dahlhaus shows that autobiography is not a passive agent (e.g., it does not reflect or distort reality), but rather an implicated textual source that creates a reality of its own.

In English, one must consider Lenneberg's *Witness and Scholars*. The focus of Lenneberg's study is biography, not autobiography; but, as we saw in the preceding sections, many early autobiographies originated as contributions to biographical dictionaries and therefore Lenneberg's research is fundamental to an understanding of early forms of autobiographical writings. Finally, John L. Adams's *Musicians' Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings Available in English 1800 to 1980* is, as its name indicates, only a bibliography, but is a dependable source of information.¹¹³

Besides the sources cited above, autobiography in music

¹¹³In English, besides Lenneberg's *Witness and Scholars*, one of the few existing studies is an annotated bibliography. See John L. Adams, *Musicians' Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings Available in English 1800 to 1980* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc. Publishers, 1982).

has not been studied as it deserves. Studies of individual composers sometimes deal with their personal writings, but there is not yet a study that considers music autobiography as a whole, despite the fact that composers have practiced the art of self-representation for many centuries and under many circumstances. Thus, my study is an attempt to continue the work of the preceding scholars by considering autobiography in music as a tradition shaped by a body of texts implicitly connected among themselves.

CHAPTER II

Wagner in the Web of Autobiography

To my horror I find only myself
in everything I have created.--
Wotan (*Die Walküre*, act II,
scene 2)

2.1 Introduction: The formation of a myth

It might seem that "more has been written about Wagner than about any other human being except Jesus Christ and Napoleon."¹ By now, that statement is not only something of a commonplace; it is also inaccurate: a quick glance at any music index or at the catalogues of the major American and European libraries challenges the assertion, since just in the field of music, the names of Bach and Mozart are represented more often than those of any other composer. That such a story about Wagner circulated, however, suggests a greater truth about its protagonist: Wagner, from the time that he gained fame, has been appropriated, rejected, defended, and attacked--has, in a word, become controversial--as no other composer. Doubtless, his gargantuan corpus of writings took an active role in the controversial status of his persona and, indeed, in the formation of his myth. Wagner plotted in a highly calculated way to scatter stories, anecdotes, accounts, and narratives about himself to style himself as a hero. His

¹Quoted in Barry Millington, ed., *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992) p. 132.

character of the story.

Some psychological accounts of Wagner coincide in pointing out the megalomaniac nature of his personality.² Wagner envisaged for himself a grandiose image, partially an artist-creator (and therefore a God-like figure), and partially a hero who lives against all odds and overcomes many ordeals. For Wagner, each day was a chance to stage his own life as if it were one of his music dramas. Certainly, he modeled his life after his art: he always describes in grandiloquent terms the simplest event in his daily life. With little effort one can imagine a stage, with actors and props, at the center of which stands the protagonist; in the dimness of the theater, a silent audience listens to his words and observes his movements and actions. The protagonist is Wagner, and the attentive audience, the readers of Wagner's autobiographical writings.

In 1970 Martin Geck showed that Wagner used his painted portraits and sculptures to promote both himself and his art.³ Geck demonstrated convincingly that Wagner took advantage of the then new methods of mechanical reproduction such as lithography, steel and wood engraving, and photography to advance himself and his work. He would usually distribute the

²Isolde Vetter, "Wagner in the History of Psychology" in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. and ed. John Deathridge (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); see especially pp. 125 and 129.

³Martin Geck, *Die Bildnisse Richard Wagners* (Munich: Prestel, 1970).

reproductions of his semblance among his friends, admirers, patrons, and benefactors. In one instance, Wagner noticed in several railroad stations plaster reproductions of his own bust. Bothered with their quality, he wrote the artist Gustav Adolph Kietz stating:

I keep seeing despicable little busts of me; I have told the landlords that they make me cross, at which they explain that they would gladly have something better if they knew how, whereupon I then--instinctively--said to them that I would take care of it. Now my wife has drawn my attention--quite rightly--to the scandal our magnificent press could bring upon me if it were to become known (from bragging), that I had installed my own busts there. On the other hand I would like to clear up the difficulty there. So how would it be if you were to write to these 3 landlords that you had been irritated by these poor busts, offering them for that reason your bust of me, for which you could perhaps charge as little as possible, since I just want the busts replaced; I, however, will pay you the full price that you charge for casts. Simply so that people imagine, and can boast accordingly, that they have acquired the busts themselves.⁴

The letter reveals with great clarity Wagner's manipulative strategies. First he dislikes his busts and he decides to intervene, offering the landlords of the railroad restaurants and public areas an image of himself that corresponds with his wishes. Suddenly, he realizes that self-promotion, if it is to be effective, must not be so evident, and accordingly he plans to have the artist publicize the new busts. In order to insure the sale of the effigies, Wagner proposes that the artist mark down the price and subsequently commits himself to paying the difference. The scheme could

⁴Geck, *Die Bildnisse*, p. 47. Quoted and translated in Müller and Wapnewski, *Wagner Handbook*, p. 371.

not be better.

Though Wagner was deeply concerned about his likeness as transmitted by means of painting and sculpture, in writing--a medium he could perfectly control--it obsessed him. As early as 1895, Max Nordau described him as suffering from graphomania;⁵ indeed, most full-time, professional writers never accomplish in terms of quantity what Wagner achieved in his literary output alone. Of all the hyperboles concerning him, one bears special significance: "No musician has read or written more."⁶ Wagner's abundant writings are a clear strategy to give the public an image that fits his wishes. Specifically, his autobiographical writings are an astute design to fashion himself as an artist/hero according to the paradigm of the romantic period.

By writing about himself all the time, Wagner accomplished several goals. Contrary to the incident with the plaster busts, with his autobiographies he gave his followers a solid portrait created, controlled, and--what is most important--provided by himself. Moreover, this portrait served to rationalize his artistic choices and provide an exegesis of the meaning of his musical works. He used it, above all, to secure a place of privilege for his own interpretative views, excluding all other interpretations.

⁵Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: H. Fertig, 1895).

⁶Millington, p. 55.

2.2 Wagner's autobiographical writings⁷

Wagner's literary output has been a subject of scholarly study since its author's own time. With so large an oeuvre, the first problem for scholars was the edition of the complete prose works; Wagner undertook the supervision of this task,⁸ and William Ashton Ellis translated it into English.⁹ Nevertheless, these editions were unreliable by modern scholarly standards, and in 1970 John Deathridge and the late Carl Dahlhaus initiated a new "complete" and "authentic" edition, but it is still unfinished.¹⁰ There have been many editions and translations of individual writings by Wagner, as for instance his letters or his large-scale autobiography *Mein Leben*, but until scholars bring to light a definitive edition (or *quasi* definitive, one should say, in these times of philological uncertainty) of the whole output, Wagner studies will be deficient.

A very important part of Wagner's prose writings belongs

⁷There is a list of Wagner's autobiographical writings at the end of this section.

⁸Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 10 vols. (Leipzig: E.W. Fritzsch, 1871-83).

⁹William Ashton Ellis, ed., *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1892-99); reprint (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966). Despite its archaic, stilted English, this translation will be used throughout this chapter for two reasons: it is the only one available for many lesser known texts and it is a historical document in itself (it was published shortly after the original German).

¹⁰Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus, John Deathridge, et al. (Mainz: B. Schotts Söhne, 1970).

to the category of autobiographical texts. As pointed out in the previous section, Wagner's constant preoccupation with projecting himself as a hero and fashioning his life as an epic induced him to write many autobiographies, diaries, personal narratives, and all other possible forms of autobiography. Wagner's first autobiographical attempt was an 1835 series of notes for a projected autobiography proper; he was at the time in his early twenties! Stewart Spencer has suggested that Wagner felt "at a low ebb--penniless, artistically uncreative, unhappy in love and believing himself abandoned by his friends--and the decision to take stock of his life and keep a record of its outward events may well have answered a psychological need."¹¹

Spencer and other critics, as will be seen, account for Wagner's autobiographical texts as the result of the composer's unhappiness. Wagner turned to autobiographical writing, asserts Spencer, because of his despair. The comment is revealing because in his autobiographies Wagner also tends to explain his creativity as the result of his unsatisfactory life.

The *Rote Briefftasche* (or the *Red Pocketbook*, as it is generally known in English, although a more accurate translation would be the *Red Briefcase*) are early

¹¹Stewart Spencer, "Sources," in Millington, p. 182.

autobiographical annotations.¹² *Mein Leben* includes in a different form part of the materials from the *Red Pocketbook*; some sections are lost, but the preserved first four pages contain information covering the period 1813-1839. Interestingly enough, as Deathridge and Dahlhaus have noticed, these annotations read like the "start of an article in a dictionary of music."¹³ Wagner was probably unaware that music autobiography had begun in 18th-century Germany as music dictionaries (see Chapter I). Anyhow, whether consciously or unconsciously, Wagner attached himself to this tradition even with his earliest autobiographical endeavors.

Besides the *Red Pocketbook*, one must consider *Das Braune Buch* (or the *Brown Book*), a journal covering the period 1865-82.¹⁴ Wagner named this notebook himself because it was bound with a brown leather cover. It was a gift to him from Cosima, so that the composer could write messages to her during their periods of separation. When in 1868 the couple lived together, the *Brown Book* served as a journal in which Wagner wrote down events, thoughts, sketches, and some poems. "It also becomes apparent," the editor has written, "that Wagner

¹²For a modern edition of these fragments see G. Strobel and W. Wolf, "Die Rote Briefftasche" *Sämtliche Briefe*, vol. I (Leipzig: Deutsche Verlag für Musik UEB, 1967) pp. 79-92.

¹³John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, "Wagner, Richard," *The New Grove*, XX, p. 114.

¹⁴Joachim Bergfeld, ed., *The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865-1882: The Brown Book*, trans. George Bird (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

had recourse to the *Brown Book* when deeply moved inwardly, when affected by grief, irritation or even anger, and desirous of dissipating the mood or letting off steam,"¹⁵ which shows again the tendency to explain autobiography as the result of psychological circumstances. The tone of the text is

of overwhelming gloom, despair at life's suffering tempered only by the solace of refuge in his art. Later, the Schopenhauerian element acquires a more positive aspect, as emerges from his belief in the self-authenticating beauty of art and from his conviction that all human behavior might be reduced to musical terms.¹⁶

A large part of the *Brown Book* includes the so-called "Annals," a collection of telegraphic entries covering the period 1846-68. If Wagner used the entries of the *Red Pocketbook* as a source for *Mein Leben*, "the Annals for the period 5 May 1864 to the end of 1868 are important in that they provide the sole authentic continuation of *My Life* which ends at 4 May 1864."¹⁷ This shows that Wagner was concerned with continuously projecting his persona by keeping an uninterrupted record of his activities. The "Annals" are nonetheless difficult for a modern reader in the available diplomatic edition. A sample of the text will suffice to show this:

1846

¹⁵Bergfeld, *The Diary*, p. 19.

¹⁶Spencer, "Sources," in Millington, p. 187.

¹⁷Bergfeld, *The Diary*, p. 93.

Easter.--Petition to King of Saxony.--sponsored by Lüttichau. Advance from Theatre Pension Fund (5000 thalers) at 4% against life insurance.¹⁸

Before Eva Wagner donated the manuscript to the Town of Bayreuth in 1931, she purged several fragments of the *Brown Book*. According to Bergfeld, she destroyed seven folios (fourteen pages), pasted over five sides so that no one could read them, and inked over many pencil entries.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Bayreuth Festival programs had already published most of the contents of the *Brown Book*, and thus a complete edition became possible.

Wagner kept a journal of his 1840 Parisian sojourn, but unfortunately most of it is lost. Only the entries corresponding to 23, 29, and 30 June 1840 are preserved and available in a modern edition.²⁰ They deal mostly with the composer's hardships during the summer he spent in the French capital.

The so-called "Venice Diary" was kept from 21 August 1858 until 4 April 1859.²¹ It reflects Wagner's determination to reconcile himself to the end of his relationship with Mathilde

¹⁸Bergfeld, *The Diary*, p. 93.

¹⁹Bergfeld, *The Diary*, pp. 15 and 16.

²⁰Wagner, "Ein Tagebuch aus Paris," in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, vol. XVI (Leipzig: E.W. Fritzsch, 1911-16) pp. 4-6.

²¹For a modern edition including the correspondence and the diary, see *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck*, ed. and trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Vienna House, 1905, reprint 1972).

Wesendonck.²² As usual in difficult times, Wagner appeals to his writing in order to overcome his despair. Cosima destroyed the original after its publication.

Another collection of diary entries is the journal that Wagner kept between 14 and 27 September 1865. This journal focuses on Ludwig II's role in Germany's new culture, and Wagner wrote it especially for the monarch. The *Bayreuther Blätter* of 1878 published fragments, but only the edition of the Wagner-Ludwig correspondence included the complete version.²³

Cosima's diaries are sources for Wagner's autobiography because both Wagner and Cosima were clear about their purpose, namely to chronicle Wagner's life. In any case, with the exception of some editing marks by Wagner, Cosima was the real and only writer.²⁴ In a letter dated 21/22 July 1865, Wagner wrote to King Ludwig: "We have decided to continue the dictation [of *Mein Leben*] up to the time of my association with you, my dear and glorious King: from then on Cosima shall continue the biography on her own and, I hope, will one day complete it."²⁵ The diaries were meant therefore to keep

²²Millington, p. 186.

²³Otto Strobel, ed., *König Ludwig II. und Richard Wagner: Briefwechsel*, 5 vols. (Karlsruhe: G. Braun, 1936-9).

²⁴Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, eds., *The Diaries of Cosima Wagner*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978).

²⁵Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, eds. and trans., *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons

a record of the daily events of Wagner's life for a future biography. Obviously, the fact that it was Cosima who physically wrote down the entries complicates the matter. Cosima records conversations and plans explicitly voiced by Wagner. The composer's inner thought, though, remains unexplored. For example, at the time of writing, Wagner conducted extramarital affairs that Cosima did not record for obvious reasons.

Cosima's diaries are nevertheless a prolific source of information. Thanks to them one can follow the last fourteen years of Wagner's life with accuracy. They provide the reader with a window, so to speak, that allows one to look into the habits of Germany's upper-middle class. Cosima depicts herself almost as a victim having to bear Wagner's peculiar personality, which she nevertheless adored. She also engages in much self-justification to alleviate her guilt feelings about her treatment of Hans von Bülow, whom she left for Wagner.

Wagner published *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* (A Communication to My Friends) in 1851 as a preface to the librettos of *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*.²⁶ It consists of an autobiographical essay explaining the genesis of the three operas and presenting an

Ltd., 1987) p. 650.

²⁶For an English version see, Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 267-392.

exegesis of their content. Wagner "adopts what might be called a behaviorist stance, seeking to see his works as the product of an environment which he had now outgrown."²⁷ As a result, the composer's life and works are presented as a twofold unity. Wagner presents himself as a misinterpreted artist in conflict with society and his audience. He also attempts to show that his early "romantic" operas contained premonitions of his later development as a composer and, especially, of the music drama. *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* is especially relevant in the context of this study because it creates a connection between the life and works of an author, first by relating the origins of a work and then providing an interpretation for this work. The reader should remember the autobiographical pattern established by Whythorne (see Chapter I), for Wagner unconsciously follows it. This pattern involves naming the composer's works, explaining how they came to exist, and providing an exegesis of their content and meaning.

In 1843 the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* published the *Autobiographische Skizze*²⁸ with the intention of introducing the new, fashionable composer who had just had a notorious success with his opera *Rienzi*. This "autobiographical sketch" covers Wagner's life from his birth until his return to

²⁷Spencer, "Sources," in Millington, p. 183.

²⁸For an English edition see, Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, pp. 1-19.

Germany in 1842. Wagner portrays himself with all the stereotypes of the nineteenth-century artist with natural talents for music (though he acknowledges he is not very good at the keyboard). He exposes his attitudes and tastes clearly, as for instance his reverence for Beethoven and his dislike of French and Italian opera.

Without a doubt, Wagner's large scale autobiography, *My Life*, is his most interesting autobiographical text.²⁹ It is here that Wagner's hidden or not so hidden agendas are more evident, often with distortions and falsehoods. The general scheme of *My Life* is as simple as Whythorne's: the author enumerates his works, explains the circumstances regarding their conception, and then provides an interpretation of their meaning. He always describes the source or origin of the artwork as the result of an uncanny event (I will discuss this aspect in the next section).

My Life is also a typical autobiography in the sense that it describes a hero overcoming his own modest origins and realizing his ambitions. The narrator, accordingly, places himself in a temporal present from which he looks back at his past. This involves considering all past events as premonitions and causes of the present state of affairs. Wagner writes a true *Bildungsroman* in which he is the protagonist. The German editor of *My Life* points out:

²⁹Richard Wagner, *My Life*, ed. Martin-Gregor-Dellin, trans. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992).

The autobiography also bears witness to the consistency--or better, the unthinking, reckless instinct and courage--with which this musician of the nineteenth century, the patchily educated scion of a large, and not rich, middle-class family, overcame all obstacles and, ignoring what was feasible in his time, realized his artistic ambitions. For all the monstrousness that is an essential ingredient in this wide-ranging and discursive life, provoked though the reader may be by the solipsism and insufferableness of the author--Wagner's autobiography is the record of a battle for self-realization in which the original ideal was never abandoned, and as a "drama" it is not the least considerable of his works.³⁰

The origins of *My Life* are relevant for a thorough understanding of the work and its author. On 28 May 1865, Ludwig II wrote to Wagner requesting an account of his life:

You would cause me inexpressible happiness if you were to give me an exhaustive description of your intellectual and spiritual development and of the external events of your life as well! May I nurture the hope of seeing this wish of mine fulfilled one day?³¹

Wagner had previously written several autobiographical accounts and, in fact, he used one of them, *The Red Pocketbook*, as the basis of *My Life*. Ludwig was surely aware of the early autobiographies by Wagner, which poses the question: why did he want another? One possible explanation might be that he wanted *My Life* to be "his" Wagner autobiography; in other words, Ludwig wanted to be the sponsor of this project. On the other hand, given Wagner's worship of his own ego, it is plausible to think that he had been planning this full-fledged autobiography for some time, but

³⁰Martin Gregor-Dellin, Afterword to Wagner's *My Life*, p. 746.

³¹Gregor-Dellin, Afterword to Wagner's *My Life*, p. 741.

because of his feigned sense of decency and decorum (as shown in the anecdote about the busts) he was expecting an outward invitation to carry on his project.

Anyhow, on 17 July 1865 Wagner began to dictate of *My Life* to Cosima. Though in principle *My Life* had to be only for King Ludwig, it seems that Wagner soon changed his mind and decided to have it printed in a very small edition of only fifteen copies for his close friends. In a letter to his family doctor, Anton Pusinelli, Wagner states:

To protect such a manuscript [*My Life*] against loss, I am now in the process of having a very small number of copies of it printed at my own expense. These shall in part be left to my family; but even during my lifetime I should like to give a copy each to you and perhaps two other younger and entirely trustworthy friends, in return, of course, for the most faithful pledge never to let it out of their sight, nor to publish it after my death.³²

In the same letter, Wagner points out the need for such an autobiography so that he can "refute all the distortions & calumnies which circulate about me... and contradict false statements that may be made concerning my life." Wagner is here showing his sense of false decorum again. He asserts that he wants to correct some "distortions & calumnies" about his life, but he also vows modesty by limiting the edition to very few copies.

Wagner's commitment to truth is more than dubious because of two circumstances. Since *My Life* was dictated to Cosima,

³²Spencer and Millington, eds., *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, p. 763.

Wagner does not mention several of his romantic affairs. In addition, since Ludwig was the official recipient of the text, Wagner gives only a veiled account of his involvement in the Dresden uprising of May 1849.

Besides including many factual distortions, *My Life* presents several more sophisticated deceptions. Wagner takes advantage of every opportunity to present himself as the heir of Beethoven's tradition, the quintessential genius in Romantic eyes. In addition, he provides a detailed description of each individual instance in which he felt compelled to create one of his works, thereby resulting in a mystification of the process of composition. (These autobiographical strategies will also be discussed in the next section.)

The story of *My Life* would be incomplete without mentioning Cosima's tendency to edit and censor all of Wagner's papers. Her role in suppressing *My Life* is remarkable: Cosima reclaimed all the printed copies of *My Life* from their recipients in order to destroy them, but the printer had run an extra copy, of which Cosima was unaware, and this became the only complete source of the book, which was first published in its entirety in a commercial edition in 1911.

The following list includes Wagner's autobiographical writings. Two important features stand out: first, Wagner wrote about himself throughout his life, and second, his

autobiographical writings cover his entire life. (I do not examine the pseudo-autobiographical account, originally published in English, *The Work and Mission of My Life* because Wagner did not write it--though he seems to have been aware of it--and he distanced himself from its content when the German translation appeared.³³ Neither do I consider Wagner's essays, though some of them are quasi-autobiographical.)

³³See Jürgen Kühnel, "The Prose Writings," in Müller and Wapnewski, p. 638.

Wagner's autobiographical writings

TITLE COVERED	DATE of WRITING	P E R I O D
<i>Die rote Briefftasche</i>	1835-66	1813-66
"Paris Diary"	1840	1840
<i>Autobiographische Skizze</i>	1842	1813-42
"Annals"	1846	1846-68
<i>Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde</i>	1851	1837-43
"Venice Diary"	1858-59	1858-59
<i>Das braune Buch</i>	1864	1864-82
<i>Mein Leben</i>	1865-80	1813-64
"Ludwig's Diary"	1865	1865
<i>Cosima Wagner: Die Tagebücher</i>	1868-83	1868-83

2.3 The uses of autobiography: Beethoven's spiritual legatee

In a short section in *My Life*, Wagner reports that his early contact with Beethoven's music impressed him to the point of influencing and determining his own music. Scholars have demonstrated the falsehood of Wagner's recollections, a fact that poses the question: why would Wagner lie? Composers use autobiography for a variety of purposes and the alleged link between Beethoven and Wagner shows a common use of the genre: by claiming Beethoven as his forebear, Wagner legitimates his own musical output, as in classical literature a Latin writer validates his statements by invoking a Greek authority. There is a further point: by creating this link, Wagner canonized Beethoven and shaped our ideas about him. Let us now consider these points.

Wagner was fond of narrating in detail the exact moment when inspiration fell upon him and he conceived his works. He used these narrations to construct his own legend as an artist and creator. Wagner staged his inspirational scenes as though they were music dramas--the protagonist (himself) at the center of the stage feels a magic moment of illumination that results in the composition of a work. Consider his account of the genesis of the *Faust Overture*.

While this inner change of direction had been gradually prepared by the painful experiences of the past few years, it was nevertheless the inexpressible effect of the Ninth Symphony, in a performance I had previously not dreamed possible, which revived my former spirit and gave it new life and strength. I can thus compare this event in my life with the similarly decisive impression which, as a youth of sixteen, I gained from the *Fidelio* of

Schröder-Devrient.³⁴

The excerpt presents one of Wagner's favorite themes, namely to consider himself Beethoven's successor by claiming direct, undeliberate influence from him. According to this passage, the *Faust Overture* is the result of the impression made on Wagner by a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Documentary evidence, however, shows that Wagner heard this performance in the early months of 1840. He sketched his overture in December 1839 and completed it on 12 January 1840.³⁵ Taking these facts into account, the alleged Beethoven influence is more than dubious. Instead, evidence suggests that Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* was the work that directly influenced Wagner's overture. By the time he wrote *My Life*, though, Wagner's admiration for Berlioz had almost vanished and acknowledging his indebtedness to the Frenchman would have ruined his plan of presenting himself as Beethoven's legatee. Wagner attended either the 24 November 1839 premiere of *Roméo et Juliette* or the performance on 1 December and we know that the performance impressed him.³⁶

The same excerpt also recalls another "decisive impression" of a performance of a work by Beethoven. Wagner is referring to a production of *Fidelio* that he saw in Leipzig with Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient in the role of Leonore.

³⁴Wagner, *My Life*, p. 175.

³⁵Millington, p. 133.

³⁶Millington, p. 134.

"When I look back across my entire life I find no event to place beside this in the impression it produced on me,"³⁷ remembers Wagner. There is no evidence, however, that such a performance took place in Leipzig in 1829. The famous soprano, though, sang Romeo in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* at the time and place to which Wagner assigns the Beethoven performance.³⁸

One of the earlier biographers of Wagner reported another instance of Wagner concocting a link with Beethoven. According to Carl Friedrich Glasenapp, Wagner said that he composed his C-Major Symphony (and these are Wagner's own words) "under the overwhelming influence of Beethoven's music, insofar as a man of twenty is capable of understanding and knowing it."³⁹ Glasenapp's report shows that, even from the beginning of Wagner scholarship, music scholars perceived the composer as Beethoven's inheritor--just as he wished.

In his *Autobiographical Sketch* Wagner proclaimed that Weber and Beethoven had been his models for *Die Feen*.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he rounded out his Beethoven mythology in his short story "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven."⁴¹ He describes the

³⁷Wagner, *My Life*, p. 37.

³⁸Millington, p. 133.

³⁹Müller and Wapnewski, p. 401.

⁴⁰Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 8.

⁴¹Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. VII, pp. 21-45.

trip of a Beethoven devotee to the master's home, and undoubtedly the enthusiastic hero might as well have been Wagner himself. Anyhow, for modern readers the identification of the hero with Wagner is unconscious, a fact that contributes to image Wagner as Beethoven's successor.

The examples just examined show that Wagner aspired to the position of Beethoven's legatee. They also illustrate how Wagner erases from his memory certain events (the Berlioz and Bellini performances) and, instead, recreates other incidents that with all probability never took place (the Beethoven performances). Wagner's wish to be perceived as Beethoven's musical heir accounts for his deliberately weak memory. Wagner uses autobiography to present the image of himself that fits his ambitions. Because he wants to be seen as Beethoven's scion, he describes in his recollections how Beethoven's music influenced him.

From another point of view, it could also be argued that Wagner helped create the stereotype of Beethoven as a secular humanist and modern saint⁴²--an artist accomplishing a mission thanks to his understanding of human nature, moral depth, and his empathy for human suffering. Wagner would very much have liked his audience to see him as such a "secular humanist," and, precisely because of this desire, he helped create in his

⁴²Ruth Solie, "Beethoven as a Secular Humanist: Ideology and the Ninth Symphony in Nineteenth-Century Criticism," *Explorations in Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, ed. Eugene Narmour and Ruth Solie, pp. 1-42.

writings an image of Beethoven that suited his own ideal image. In brief, he portrayed Beethoven as he himself wished his followers to perceive him. It is not surprising that he claimed to be Beethoven's inheritor, since he saw in Beethoven so much of himself.

The question of whether Beethoven's influence on Wagner is only Wagner's invention or whether it has some sort of bearing on Wagner's music is worth exploring. Given Wagner's megalomaniac personality, one could explain the problem as a typical case of "anxiety of influence," to use Harold Bloom's famous phrase.⁴³ According to this view, Wagner could have suffered from the anxiety caused by Beethoven's genius and the fear of never achieving his greatness. Bloom argues that poets (and artists) overcome this anxiety by attempting to write (or compose) works that may displace the predecessor's work. Wagner's recollections in *My Life* show that he translated the aesthetics of instrumental "absolute" music (best represented by Beethoven's symphonies) into opera, a genre that until Wagner had not achieved "aesthetic" status, because intellectuals relegated it to mere "entertainment."

Carl Dahlhaus points out that "a Wagnerian music drama, like a Beethoven symphony, is a work of art, an inviolable text to be taken at its word and conveyed to the understanding of an audience capable of aesthetic contemplation by means of

⁴³Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

staged interpretation that serves the work."⁴⁴ By claiming Beethoven as his predecessor, Wagner demands that his works be granted the status of Art (as opposed to the category of entertainment represented by Italian opera). Wagner's claim to Beethoven and his symphonic style (both in technical and aesthetic terms) aims at conferring upon opera (or rather the music drama) the qualities of a unique artwork in its own right.

Wagner's ambition was to create an Artwork, a token of the Sublime, an aesthetic category already available since Kant. If opera (especially Italian opera) was a flexible succession of tunes arranged according to a loose literary plot, Wagner aspired to an inviolable text conveyed to the public by a faithful execution. In Wagner's music dramas, unity begins with auctorial homogeneity (the author controls the music, the text, and the stage directions) and reaches the musical elements proper (harmony, motifs, etc.). The text is the untouchable vehicle of this coherent, indivisible work.

⁴⁴Carl Dahlhaus, "Wagner's Place in the History of Music," in Müller and Wapnewski, p. 101.

2.4 Wagner's epiphanies

In literature, an epiphany is an unexpected revelation of a verity about somebody or something. The word has its roots in the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning the manifestation before mortal eyes of the gods' divine nature. It was James Joyce who, in the short stories included in *Dubliners* (1914), applied the term for the first time to some special moments of insight.⁴⁵ I will call epiphanies the descriptions that Wagner provided concerning the creation of the music dramas.

Composers establish their autobiographies according to the "life-and-works" pattern: they list their compositions, and subsequently they explain the works' genesis. Wagner follows this pattern and, accordingly, his epiphanies--the exact moments in which he created his music--are central axes around which he shapes his autobiographical texts. In this section I examine in detail several epiphanies provided by Wagner in his autobiographies. In order to show how a composer can manipulate his recollections for his own benefit, I unveil Wagner's rhetorical strategies and aesthetic notions.

Wagner's epiphanies present many points in common. In order to explain his creativity, Wagner frequently appeals to the *Ersatz* paradigm. Briefly put, the *Ersatz* theory considers the artist as a defective being (crazy, ill, impaired) who

⁴⁵James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Modern Library, 1926); for a critical assessment of Joyce's "epiphanies," see Peter Garret, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Dubliners: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968).

compensates for his flaws with artistic creation. According to this paradigm, an artist must give up something (health, happiness, or worldly enjoyments) in order to be able to create. Wagner's narratives appealing to the *Ersatz* theory are all similar: first, he describes an atmosphere of psychological gloom and physical ailment; second, something unpredicted (a book, a visitor, a landscape) reverses the course of events and the composer--after resisting a bit--feels compelled to create; third, as a *dénouement*, he begins composing.

Another important trait of these epiphanies is that they are accounts in retrospect that attempt to present past events as premonitions necessarily leading to the present state of affairs. Wagner adopts here a teleological perspective, because he considers many past events as premonitions leading inexorably to his life achievement, the music drama. The implication of this strategy is that he tries to present his whole output as having a coherent, organic development.

Wagner also uses his epiphanies to hide the real sources of his music dramas and reveal more dubious ones. The epiphanies serve Wagner in his most immediate needs and he does not hesitate, for example, to emphasize, blur, or even make up autobiographical links between his life and his musical works. This process of mystification allows Wagner to administer the meaning of his works.

ERSATZ

In *My Life*, Wagner reports the genesis of *Rienzi* as follows. During the summer of 1837, Wagner's wife, Minna, abandoned the composer and ran away with a businessman. Wagner attempted to gain back Minna's love, but she rejected him and left him even without saying goodbye. "In my boundless suffering," writes Wagner, "I turned for solace to my sister Ottilie and her excellent husband."⁴⁶ His family helped Wagner overcome Minna's rejection; he also found "solace" in his work: "During the miserable days of my last stay with Minna in Balsewitz I had read Bulwer's novel⁴⁷ about Cola Rienzi; while I was recuperating in the bosom of my sympathetic family, I worked out a plan for a grand opera to which this subject had inspired me."⁴⁸

Wagner is here creating a "natural" link between life and work, between personal emotional state and artistic emotion. Minna's escape prompted Wagner to fall into a period of introspection and low self-esteem. In Wagner's mind, it is clear that this event caused him to feel unhappy--and even depressed--and compelled him to create. This is the first time that the composer appeals to the *Ersatz* theory to account for an epiphany, but eventually it will become Wagner's

⁴⁶Wagner, *My Life*, p. 142.

⁴⁷Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-73), *Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes*.

⁴⁸Wagner, *My Life*, p. 142.

standard rationale to explain inspiration.

The epiphany pertaining to *Lohengrin* shows another instance of Wagner using the *Ersatz* theory. In *My Life*, Wagner offers an intense and passionate account of the genesis of *Lohengrin*:

Once again I found myself on the volcanic soil of this singular, and for me, always stimulating country of Bohemia; a marvelous, almost overly hot summer served to heighten my spirits still further. I intended to abandon myself to a life of the utmost leisure, as is in any case essential when undergoing the exhausting regime of a cure.... But soon the longing to create something of my own from what I found here became so strong that, although I had been warned against any stimulus of this kind while taking the waters of Marienbad, I had difficulty fighting off the impulse. This soon put me into a highly overwrought state of mind: *Lohengrin*, the first conception of which dates from the latter part of my time in Paris, stood suddenly revealed before me in full armor at the center of a comprehensive dramatic adaptation of the whole material.⁴⁹

Wagner goes on to describe how he had to pay attention to the doctor's warnings concerning his health. His sojourn at the Bohemian spa was both a vacation and a cure--pretty much the type of retreat an upper-middle class family would take for many reasons, social prestige being not the least. In his narration, Wagner reports that in order to spare himself the emotional stimulus and psychological instability of conceiving a new musical work he turned to *Die Meistersinger*, a work he had already begun. Soon he confesses:

But I was fooling myself: no sooner had I stepped into my noonday bath than I was seized by such desire to write *Lohengrin* that, incapable of lingering in the bath for the prescribed hour, I leapt out after only a few

⁴⁹Wagner, *My Life*, p. 302-03.

minutes, scarcely took the time to clothe myself properly, and ran like a madman to my quarters to put what was obsessing me on paper. This went on for several days, until the entire dramatic plan for *Lohengrin* had been set down in full detail.⁵⁰

Wagner's description of *Lohengrin*'s inception emphasizes several important aspects of a typical epiphany. As usual in Wagner's creation stories, the setting is the best of all possible settings. In this case it is Bohemia, a land that, as Wagner himself acknowledges, has a very special import for him. He calls it "stimulating." Of course the description is subsequent to the actual composition of the opera, and therefore the narrator knows already what was going to be the result of the land's stimulus, namely *Lohengrin*.

Wagner delineates the psychological state of the creator in detail. He depicts himself as an sick man seeking a break from daily pressures. The fact that he can afford--or in fact that he can even think of--a vacation resort with spa facilities indicates his social status. Wagner also conveys this idea by describing his own attire as "proper." Inspiration strikes in the guise of "the longing to create something of my own." This unforeseen event is not welcome because the doctor warned Wagner against any straining activity. Like the heroes in mythical stories, Wagner at first rejects his calling, "fighting off the impulse" to create. In fact, he distracts himself with less stressful tasks. Nevertheless the "impulse" is so strong that the

⁵⁰Wagner, *My Life*, p. 303.

composer finally gives in: the hero accepts his mission.

Wagner's choice of words makes clear that the inception of the artwork is the result of mental instability. He describes himself as a "madman" with an "obsession." Moreover, he asserts that *Lohengrin* was revealed to him ("stood suddenly revealed before me") as opposed to being created after arduous work. Briefly put, Wagner's account attempts to present the inception of *Lohengrin* as both the result of supernatural forces and the outcome of the creator's mental instability.

Interestingly enough, in the narration, Wagner makes a connection between inspiration, psychology, and sickness--an aspect of Wagner's aesthetic that did not go unnoticed by the receptive French Symbolist poets. According to Isolde Vetter, Wagner has in fact been a very important subject of study in the history of psychology.⁵¹ The type of biography that emphasizes the creator's personality must necessarily deal with the concept of genius. A common explanation for the genius since the classical Greek and Roman writers is the *Ersatz* theory, which, as we saw, claims that the genius has to provide compensation for his gift (incidentally, geniuses are almost always men). As we saw, Wagner overtly subscribed to this notion for the first time in his epiphany of *Rienzi*, where he accounts for his inspiration as the effect of Minna's

⁵¹For a survey of the studies dealing with Wagner's psychology and the relationship between Wagner and the field of psychology, see, Vetter, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-55.

rejection. The idea that the true artist must feel rejection and unhappiness is corroborated in a letter to Theodor Uhlig⁵² dated 12 January 1852. Wagner affirms:

My dear friend! I am often now beset by strange thoughts on "art," and on the whole I cannot help finding that, if we had life, we should have no need of art. Art begins at precisely the point where life breaks off: where nothing more is present, we call out in art, "I wish." I simply do not understand how a *truly happy* individual could ever hit upon the idea of producing "art."⁵³

Wagner's statement involves two key concepts in his aesthetics: first, the notion of *Ersatz* and second, resulting from the first, the idea of renunciation, a belief borrowed from Schopenhauer's philosophy. Both ideas are present in most music dramas by Wagner. Not only does Wagner explain the creation of his operas as the result of (or as compensation for) personal disappointments or diseases, but in addition, his characters often have to renounce one thing in order to accomplish something else. The *Ring* is a case in point, because the storyline is directed and redirected according to actions the characters choose to do or renounce.

The *Ersatz* theory also appears in the *Ring*'s epiphany. With his usual intense, mystifying style Wagner offers the following yarn concerning the inception of the *Ring*.

September arrived at last, which everybody had told me was the best month for visiting Italy.... I believed an

⁵²Theodor Uhlig (1822-53), German violinist, theorist, critic, and composer. He was Wagner's correspondent and confidant during the composer's Swiss exile.

⁵³Spencer and Millington, eds., *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, p. 246.

excursion to Spezia would be appropriate, and after a week I proceeded there by steamship. Even this voyage, which lasted only one night, turned into arduous adventure as a result of violent head-winds. My dysentery was supplemented by seasickness, and by the time I reached Spezia I could hardly take a single step and went to the best hotel, which to my dismay was situated in a narrow and noisy alley. After a sleepless and feverish night, I forced myself to undertake a long walk the following day among the pine-covered hills of the surroundings. Everything seemed to me to be bleak and bare, and I asked myself why I had come. Returning that afternoon, I stretched out dead-tired on a hard couch, awaiting the long-desired onset of sleep. It did not come; instead, I sank into a kind of somnambulistic state, in which I suddenly had the feeling of being immersed in rapidly flowing water. Its rushing soon resolved itself for me into the musical sound of the chord of E flat major, resounding in persistent broken chords; these in turn transformed themselves into melodic figurations of increasing motion, yet the E flat major triad never changed, and seemed by its continuance to impart infinite significance to the element in which I was sinking. I awoke in sudden terror from this trance, feeling as though the waves were crashing high above my head. I recognized at once that the orchestral prelude to *Das Rheingold*, long dormant within me but up to that moment inchoate, had at last been revealed; and I saw immediately precisely how it was with me: the vital flood would come from within me, and not from without.⁵⁴

The narrative structure of the segment is very similar to the previously examined texts. The setting is September (though Martin Gregor-Dellin, the editor of *My Life*, notices in an endnote that it was in fact 24 August), the "best" month to visit Italy. Wagner arrives in Genoa and becomes sick "as a consequence of over-indulgence in ice-cream."⁵⁵ The composer feels an extreme "loneliness" and inadequacy. Then he decides to go to La Spezia, but the trip turns out to be a torment.

⁵⁴Wagner, *My Life*, p. 499.

⁵⁵Wagner, *My Life*, p. 498.

The composer's illnesses include: dysentery, seasickness, insomnia, and a "somnambulistic state." Everything seems to be working against Wagner until inspiration becomes perceptible: the vision of "rapidly flowing water" that eventually would become the orchestral prelude of *Das Rheingold*.

Wagner describes the revelation of the "flowing water" in the end, as a sort of dénouement of the narration. The paragraph works as an almost independent story within the larger storyline of *My Life*, and indeed has a mini narrative structure with a preparation (summer vacation in Italy), conflict (illnesses), and dénouement (inspiration). As usual, there is an intentional link between illness and inspiration, and Wagner formulates musical creation as the result of negative psychological and physical circumstances such as personal mood and ill health. In general terms, Wagner was a healthy man, and his enormous musical and literary output are in fact evidence of such physical strength. He lived an agitated life, filled with travels, love affairs, and revolutions--his detailed descriptions of illnesses seem to be more of an intentional coloring of his creational epiphanies than real facts of life.

My Life provides two seminal accounts concerning the inception of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. The first reports on an 1845 summer vacation at Marienbad; the composer is working on *Lohengrin*'s dramatic plan and reads Gervinus's

History of German Literature.⁵⁶ Wagner describes his encounter with the *Meistersinger's* theme as follows:

Among all the many strands in the complex of myths that I was studying at this time, it was the legend of the Knight of the Swan, occupying such a significant position in their midst, which now stimulated my fantasy inordinately. Mindful of the doctors' warnings, I struggled manfully against the temptation to put the plan down on paper and resorted to a most curious and strenuous means to that end. From a few remarks in Gervinus' *History of German Literature*, I had formed a particularly vivid picture of Hans Sachs and the mastersingers of Nuremberg.... I conceived during a walk a comic scene.... And suddenly my whole mastersingers comedy stood before me so vividly that, on the grounds that it was an especially merry subject, I felt justified in putting it on paper despite the doctors' instructions. This was done, and I hoped to have freed myself thereby from my preoccupation with *Lohengrin*.⁵⁷

The type of description Wagner dispenses fits the design of his other creation anecdotes. There is a trip, a cure, a book fueling the composer's mind, a walk, and then inspiration strikes. In this case Wagner refers only to the text of the *Meistersinger*. For the music, he renders another inception tale. Wagner recalls traveling to Venice in November 1861 in order to meet with the Wesendoncks. He says that the couple was enthusiastic about the city's wealth of art and hoped that Wagner would enjoy it too. Wagner remarks with a bit of contempt that Otto Wesendonck "was always armed with huge opera glasses, ready to inspect works of art."⁵⁸ He

⁵⁶Georg Gottfried Gervinus (1805-71), the original title of the book is *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (1835-42).

⁵⁷Wagner, *My Life*, p. 303.

⁵⁸Wagner, *My Life*, p. 667.

acknowledges that he is suffering a period of low self-esteem and depression. Then he confesses, "I increasingly found that most of my friends had tacitly abandoned hopes for my future success."⁵⁹ In this atmosphere, the composer decides to go to the Palace of the Doges:

... a building which I had known only from the outside on my former visit to Venice. I have to admit that despite all my apathy Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* in the great hall of the Doges made a most exalting impression upon me, so that by this inspiration I found my old creative powers awakening within me with almost their original primordial power. I decided to write *Die Meistersinger*.⁶⁰

The narrative pattern is similar to all previous instances: the creator feels blue, but something (the *Assumption*, in this case) compels him to create.

The recurrence of this narrative pattern brings up some relevant questions. Could one argue that language contains such imbedded narrative patterns and that they are therefore unavoidable? Because most histories are structured according to a chronological order and a cause-and-effect pattern, Wagner's accounts are always "staged," so to speak, with a protagonist (an author), a work to be composed, and a link between the two (a flash of inspiration overcoming the somber atmosphere of the pre-creation moment). In Wagner this narrative pattern seems compulsory.

Writing presumes a reduction of experience. Wagner

⁵⁹Wagner, *My Life*, p. 667.

⁶⁰Wagner, *My Life*, p. 667.

records only a few facts, but he could have related thousands. The narrator-writer, moreover, always asks the same questions because of grammatical requirements: "who," "what," "how," "when," and "where." Consequently, the result is always similar: "I, Wagner, composed the *Meistersinger*, to overcome my despair." Considering only the grammatical limitations, Wagner's inspirational tales are already limited and confined to a small number of possibilities. But, how does one explain that the psychological mood, for instance, tends to be in general "somber" as opposed to "light-hearted"? In this case, not only grammatical liabilities determine the narrator's possibilities (there has to be a mood in order to comprise a full sentence), but there is in addition a story-telling tradition determining the further development of the story--a tradition according to which the hero (the composer, in this case) doubts and rejects his calling to adventure, action, or artistic creation. Wagner confines his stories to a limited number of possibilities. The restrictions are determined by grammar and by traditional narrative patterns. Whether Titian's Madonna was really the source of inspiration for the *Meistersinger* becomes rather irrelevant once one is aware of the limits of all narrative. One cannot tell the story one wishes to tell, but only the one language allows.

TELEOLOGY

Wagner described his moments of inspiration even for his early operas. He related the epiphany of *Die Feen*, his first operatic venture, in an 1833 letter to his sister Rosalie:

Your letter--how shall I put it-- your letter has worked miracles, freeing me from many disquieting worries, while, at the same time, causing me renewed unrest--for, once having read it, I was unable to work for a number of days.--I intended answering at once,--but-- --I was still missing the last-act finale of my opera;--two days ago!--I completed it--and with it the whole opera;--it was just midday--12 o'clock, and bells were ringing in all the church towers as I wrote *finis* at the foot of the very last page;-- --what pleasure it gave me to do so!⁶¹

The young Wagner sets an uplifting stage, and all incidents of the environment seem to participate in the composer's joy (12 o'clock, church bells ringing, etc.). The style also reveals enthusiasm: profusion of dashes, exclamation marks, rhetorical questions, and sudden interruptions of the discourse. Wagner's rhetoric imitates a colloquial style, but it reveals itself as carefully studied because of its exaggerated emphatic eloquence. Wagner's verbosity aims at building up tension and reaching a climax. The rhetorical climax is also the climax of the whole event: the composer has written *finis* on his score, it is midday, and the bells ring.

In his 1851 autobiographical text, *A Communication to My Friends*, Wagner provides a plot outline for *Die Feen*⁶² and

⁶¹Spencer and Millington, eds., *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, p. 17.

⁶²Another summary of the plot is furnished in *My Life*, pp. 71-72.

asserts that he discovered in the opera the seeds of an important element in his artistic production. He uses the word "seeds," claiming for the first time organic development for one of his works. By doing so, the opera is legitimized, because it appeals to a higher level of order--nature. Here, Wagner adopts a teleological point of view: he sees all the elements of his musical output as leading to the music drama. *Die Feen* is a genuine artwork, he is saying, because it already contains elements found in his later music dramas (what he thought of as the culmination of his career).

Now, Wagner's appeal to organicism exposes his fallacious thinking. By the time of this statement in *A Communication* (eighteen years after the completion of *Die Feen*), he has already written many operas including *Lohengrin* and full sections of the *Ring*. The narrator, therefore, has an advantaged point of view: he sees what he is (or what he aspires to be, anyhow) and where he comes from. Wagner spoils the process of discovering "seeds" because he just sees the "seeds" that he developed, say, in *Lohengrin*, but not those that he might have developed, but never did.

However, there are identifiable "seeds" in *Die Feen* and Wagner has a right to claim them as such. The themes of redemption through love, incestuous love, crazed love, and the forbidden question are already present in the opera. In terms of the music, *Die Feen* belongs to the tradition of German romantic opera best represented by Weber. *Die Feen* is still

a number opera, with arias and duets, but both acts II and III present an amalgam of recitative, arioso, and aria, a technique that clearly anticipates the later through-composed music dramas.

Wagner's appeal to organicism is a constant claim in many of his autobiographical writings. Concerning the *Dutchman*, Wagner states in *A Communication to My Friends* that the whole opera germinated from the "thematic seed" planted in the Ballad.⁶³ If one considers that *A Communication* was written in 1851, more than ten years after the *Dutchman*, the assertion reveals Wagner's intentions to present the opera in retrospect not only as an omen of a through-composed music drama, but as one of them.

The Ballad in question introduces elements that do reappear throughout the opera, as for instance the Dutchman's monologue, Erik's dream, and the duet of Senta and the Dutchman. Nevertheless these occurrences are far from the really through-composed macrostructure of the *Ring*. The *Dutchman* is neither a through-composed music drama nor a number opera, but stands as a transitional work between the two styles.

In conclusion, Wagner's teleology and claim of organicism reveals the traps of autobiographical writing. In autobiographical texts the narrator tells the past from the

⁶³Wagner's exegesis of the *Dutchman* is found in Ellis, *A Communication to My Friends*, in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, pp. 304-13.

vantage point of the present; this results in finding "seeds" that affected the present. In reality, one could argue that the process is quite different. When Wagner wrote *My Life* and *A Communication*, he had a clear idea of what a through-composed music drama was and therefore, in recalling his early operatic endeavors, he tried to present them as precursors of his later developments to justify a continuity in his life and work. Although an artist has a right to see in his earlier works "seeds" of his later ones, Wagner's stories are a calculated effort to create a cohesion within his output that is not always self-evident. Wagner points out the "seeds" of his works to emphasize continuity, but he also conceals differences and inconsistencies.

MYSTIFICATION

Wagner's account of the inception of *Der fliegende Holländer* is perhaps one of the most colorful he ever wrote. In July 1839 Wagner and his wife Minna were going from Pillau to London on their way to Paris aboard the vessel *Thetis*. A storm forced the ship to take refuge in a small fishing town called Sandviken, on the island of Boröya (Norway). Wagner narrates the arrival of the ship as follows:

A feeling of indescribable well-being came over me as the granite walls of the cliff echoed the chantings of the crew as they cast anchor and furled the sails. The sharp rhythm of their call stuck with me as an omen of good fortune and soon resolved itself into the theme of the sailors' chorus in my *Der fliegende Holländer*, the idea

of which I already carried within me at the time and which now, under the impressions I had just gained, took on its own characteristic musico-poetic coloring.⁶⁴

This account is one of the most famous inventions of Wagner's imagination and, because it has been shown to be false, many other epiphanies are suspected of being fictitious as well.⁶⁵ First of all, in its first versions the setting of the opera was not Norway but Scotland, following the original work by Heine. Wagner changed the names of some characters from one version to another; for instance Georg and Donald became Erik and Daland respectively, and in the libretto's prose sketch Senta was Anna. All this evidence indicates that Wagner attempted to strengthen the autobiographical elements in the *Dutchman* in order to make the opera more genuine.

As we saw, *My Life* is a retrospective rationalization of events that took place twenty or more years before. It is certainly so with the reminiscences of the *Dutchman*. In writing (or rather in dictating) his recollections Wagner projects his present being into the past events. This applies to small, specific details and to larger strategies aimed at depicting himself according to his wishes. Anyone is susceptible to memory slips or to inventing colorful minutia, but Wagner indulges in more seriously misleading strategies, as for instance tailoring the past to his present needs in order to reinforce the identification of the Dutchman with

⁶⁴Wagner, *My Life*, p. 162.

⁶⁵Millington, p. 134.

himself. The reasons why a composer would want to identify himself with his own fictitious characters are complex and I will examine them in section 2.5.

Another inaccurate report concerns the versions of the *Dutchman*. Wagner asserts that he conceived the work in one act for aesthetic imperatives: "I shaped the material into a single act, primarily because the subject itself called for it, for in this way I could render the straightforward dramatic action between the principal figures without any of the operatic accessories I had come to loathe so much."⁶⁶ In fact he thought that the Paris Opéra would more easily accept a one-act opera than a larger one, but upon learning the Opéra had rejected it anyway, he wrote it in three acts.⁶⁷ In this case Wagner is avowing his author's rights in order to comply with the ideology of freedom of artistic expression, which is one of the fundamental premises of nineteenth-century aesthetics. But in reality what determines his artistic choices is the probability of his work being accepted for performance. The result is that Wagner tries to live up to the stereotype of a nineteenth-century Romantic artist.

Wagner describes the origins of *Tannhäuser* as follows. He had been trying to work out a "vast five-act dramatic poem, which was intended also to be ideally suited for musical

⁶⁶Wagner, *My Life*, p. 183.

⁶⁷Millington, p. 279.

composition."⁶⁸ After some attempts the composer realized he was not succeeding.

I couldn't bring myself to get started seriously in working it out; on the contrary, I was suddenly gripped by a quite different subject. This came to me quite by chance through a folk book about the Venusberg. All I regarded as inherently German had attracted me with ever-increasing force and impelled me to look for its deepest meaning with enthusiastic longing, and here I suddenly found it in the simple re-telling of the legend, based on the ancient, well-known ballad of Tannhäuser.⁶⁹

Wagner goes on by recounting how he became acquainted with the legend. He mentions several sources but he "forgets" to allude to Heine, his actual original source for the story.⁷⁰ Wagner was already indebted to Heine for the *Dutchman's* libretto, and a written acknowledgment of this second debt would not have been in accordance with Wagner's sense of dignity. Moreover, Wagner constantly refers to a "folk book" as one of his sources, but such a book neither did nor does exist.⁷¹ Wagner is conspicuously misleading his readers by keeping quiet about the actual sources for his ideas, but he seems to have no problem about describing the origins of his inspiration with elaborate narrations, which are not always demonstrable.

Wagner composed his last music drama, *Parsifal*, between

⁶⁸Wagner, *My Life*, p. 210.

⁶⁹Wagner, *My Life*, p. 212.

⁷⁰Peter Wapnewski, "The Operas as Literary Works," in Müller and Wapnewski, p. 22.

⁷¹Wapnewski, p. 23, and Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 311.

1877 and 1882. There are not too many stories relating the composition in the large-scale autobiographical writings by Wagner. Wagner's recollections concerning the making of some sketches for *Parsifal* read as follows:

Beautiful spring weather now set in; on Good Friday I awoke to find the sun shining brightly into this house for the first time: the garden was blooming, and the birds singing, and at last I could sit out on the parapeted terrace of the little dwelling and enjoy the longed-for tranquillity that seemed so fraught with promise. Filled with this sentiment, I suddenly said to myself that this was Good Friday and recalled how meaningful this has seemed to me in Wolfram's *Parzival*. Ever since that stay in Marienbad, where I had conceived *Die Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*, I had not taken another look at the poem; now its ideality came to me in overwhelming form, and from the idea of Good Friday I quickly sketched out an entire drama in three acts.⁷²

First of all, Martin Gregor-Dellin points out, Wagner dramatizes his life by setting these events on Good Friday. Now, in 1857 Good Friday fell on 10 April and the Wagners did not move to their country haven until 28 April. Wagner concocts a link between his life and work by asserting that he felt the inspiration for *Parsifal* on Good Friday, the holiday in the opening section of the opera. This link makes the opera more legitimate and credible.

By Wagner's declaring that the opera was written on a holiday that is at the same time a significant date in the opera, he renders the opera's spiritual message more authentic, more genuine, more powerful. Moreover, because common, human logic cannot account for an opera dealing with

⁷²Wagner, *My Life*, p. 547.

the mystery of Good Friday, its genesis makes the work and its creator more deserving of reverence. Connecting the theme of the opera and its day of inspiration entails, to put it briefly, a mystification of the artwork and its creator. This mystification conspicuously works for the benefit of the composer, by conveying the idea that he is the only authority on the work.

Notwithstanding Wagner's muddled reports, this narration has a different tone from other inception accounts--less dramatic and more reflective. Sickness and grimness are in this case replaced by natural beauty (e.g., "the garden was blooming") and determination. The composer feels uplifted by the "beautiful spring," the Good Friday holiday, and the country retreat. He is moved when he remembers his reading of Wolfram's *Parzival*; moreover, he recalls Marienbad and the conception of two other works. Then Wolfram's poem appears in "overwhelming form," and he feels compelled to sketch the drama.

As usual, the whole statement presents the events by building up tension and finally reaching a climax progressing from the beauty of nature to the overwhelming force compelling him to write. The anecdote includes remembering a remembrance: Wagner (in the present) remembers the episode in which he remembered the impression Wolfram's poem made on him. What the reader reads is a recollection of remembered events that Wagner filtered twice through the act of remembering.

The process, as complicated as it is, implies that the real event becomes more distant and the writer can more easily accommodate the past to his present needs.

RECAPITULATION

Why does Wagner appeal to the *Ersatz* theory in such a compulsive way? Why does he adopt a teleological point of view that considers all events in the past as premonitions relentlessly leading to the music drama? Why does he reveal, hide, or make up the sources of his works? In his epiphanies Wagner intends to portray the act of creation as a metaphysical phenomenon; his epiphanies are stories aimed at mystifying the artist and the artwork in order to make them uncanny for the public. The result is that Wagner uses autobiographical narratives as channels through which he filters the genesis, content, and meaning of his works. This allows the composer to influence the reception of his works by supervising the transmission of the stories attached to them.

2.5 The autobiographies of Wagner's characters

A fascinating aspect of Wagner's operas is that the main characters routinely engage in autobiographical monologues, descending to the depths of the self to find an identity. For most of them, their life on stage becomes a process of self-awareness that, once reached, will change the course of events in their lives as well as the storyline of the opera. Let us now examine several examples of this feature.

Tannhäuser is the first opera to present a character's autobiographical account. The turning point in the plot--what really provokes the dénouement of the drama--is Tannhäuser's narration of his trip to Rome in act III.⁷³ Wagner could have staged Tannhäuser's journey, but instead he has the protagonist tell his own story in a reflexive mode, very much like autobiographical accounts. Because the narrator knows the result of the story, a teleological sense presides over the whole narrative, and this results in a certain moralistic tone, facilitating the identification of the account as an autobiography.

Lohengrin's story is another case in point. As is well known, the opera tells the story of a godlike hero of unknown identity, who becomes engaged to Elsa under the condition that

⁷³Tannhäuser relates his journey to Rome where he went to find redemption for his lust. He explains how someone told him that he could no more gain forgiveness than the Pope's staff could sprout green leaves. At this point Tannhäuser, discouraged by the admonition given to him, decides to go back to Venusberg.

she must never ask who he is, where he comes from, and what his origins are. Elsa, at the instigation of an evil woman--and here one could make the case that Wagner's women are generally irresponsible--asks the forbidden question (Lohengrin's identity). The result is that Lohengrin is committed to divulge his actual autobiography, resulting in his departure. Lohengrin's anonymity is the central issue in the plot of *Lohengrin*, because the whole story is articulated around the fact that the hero's origins are unknown and their unveiling will redirect the opera's storyline.

The theme of anonymity was already present in the *Dutchman*, but *Lohengrin* presents it fully developed. In both operas, women fall in love and give themselves up to men they do not really know.⁷⁴ As the plot proceeds, the disclosure of the protagonists' origins becomes the crux in the story line and leads to the tragic dénouement of the operas. Both the *Dutchman* and *Lohengrin* are individuals explicitly searching for an identity through an autobiographical tale, but the awareness of their identity always has negative consequences (they have to relinquish their beloveds or die).

⁷⁴Senta, the female protagonist in the *Dutchman*, falls in love with a man she has never seen; she only knows him from hearsay. When the *Dutchman* accidentally reaches Senta's land, she recognizes in him the person about whom she had dreamt. They become engaged despite knowing that he cannot reveal his autobiographical story. In *Lohengrin*, Elsa also wants to marry a man she does not know; but Ortrud, an archetype of the sorceress and evil woman, compels Elsa to ask the "forbidden question"--Lohengrin's identity. Lohengrin gives in, tells his life story, and, as a result, is bound to depart from her.

In the *Ring* the identity issue becomes even more relevant. One of the central features in the *Ring* is the profusion of autobiographical voices in the whole structure of the opera. Identity crises often affect characters such as Siegmund, Wotan, and Siegfried. They repeatedly affirm that they do not know who they are and their lives are a search for this unknown identity. A progress toward self-awareness determines their fates and the storyline of the music drama. The first instance of this search for identity is in act I of *Walküre*.⁷⁵ Siegmund's tale elucidates the characters' past and determines their future--an autobiographical account causes to change the course of events in the story (Siegmund and Sieglinde must now flee from Hunding).

Perhaps the most interesting autobiographical narration in Wagner's operas is Wotan's monologue in act II of *Walküre*. The monologue happens to relate events already known from *Rheingold*. In the tetralogy, such redundant narrations are abundant and, in most instances, they take the form of an autobiographical confession. One can speculate about the reasons for such redundant stories. In many cases, such accounts allow the librettist (in this case Wagner himself) to give the antecedents of the story without actually having to

⁷⁵Hunding asks Siegmund about his identity. Siegmund asserts that his name is Woeful and relates how strangers burnt down his home and abducted his sister. Siegmund's story reverberates in his listeners' memories: Hunding recognizes a former enemy, and Sieglinde a brother and (eventually) a lover.

enact it on the stage. In terms of dramatic technique, an on-stage narration requires the composer and librettist to reduce the dramatic action: they do not need to enact on the stage the story a character tells because the audience becomes aware of that story through the character's account. But what happens when this story is redundant, that is to say, when a given character recalls already known and enacted events? Can that be considered a mistake in Wagner's dramatic technique?

In the *Ring*, redundancy serves as a reminder of what is going on. The music drama is so long that the audience may either lose the storyline or miss one of the four parts. But that is not all. A redundant narration provides an already known story with a different point of view--a personal one to be sure. The composer, in addition, can make use of different musical nuances, enhancing this or that part of the story, thus providing a different interpretation of the already known facts. During Wotan's narration, for instance, Wagner recalls in the score different musical motifs as Wotan tells his version of the story.

Wotan's narration summarizes the plot up to the present and also clarifies his own role in the tetralogy.⁷⁶ Wotan

⁷⁶He explains how he began lusting for power after his love appetites dwindled. He became the master of the world but at the cost of many obligations that now constrict him. Soon he craved love again. He stole the magic ring from Alberich, so that he could return it to the Rhinemaidens and thus regain freedom and love, but instead he paid the giants for the construction of his solid castle. Wotan continues retelling the whole story of *Rheingold* and avows his unhappiness. He knows annihilation will doom the gods; he

concludes his autobiography by relating how he sacrificed one eye, which represents a crucial point in the story because, first, it illustrates the theme of compensation (*Ersatz*) in which Wagner was a strong believer (one must sacrifice one thing to realize another); and secondly, "inner vision" means introspection and the re-affirmation of what one is or is not--in a word, autobiography.

William E. Macdonald points out that, in the beginning of his narration, Wotan only half knows his story and only through autobiographical reflection does he comprehend the intricacies of his character.⁷⁷ In the monologue, Wotan reflects on his ambitions and the liabilities that they have brought to him. Through autobiography Wotan gradually reaches a higher level of moral understanding: he understands that he has lost his power and his chance to love again. It is relevant that Wotan does not report what he knows, but he knows because he reports--the telling of his story gives him consciousness of his identity.

Another instance of self-referential narration of redundant information is Brünnhilde's story in *Walküre*, act III. Wotan intends to punish his favorite daughter, Brünnhilde, for an act of disobedience. Brünnhilde then

himself already had to sacrifice an eye in order to achieve inner vision.

⁷⁷William E. Macdonald, "What Does Wotan Know? Autobiography and Moral Vision in Wagner's *Ring*," *19th-Century Music* XV/1 (1991) 36-51.

explains the reasons for her disobedience; she hopes that through her narration will spare her castigation. Brünnhilde's story is somehow singular in the sense that it is explicitly behaviorist, as all autobiographical accounts are; this means that she attempts to justify her actions as the result not of her own will, but of the environment and circumstances in her life. She explains that she disobeyed her father because she knew that, deep inside, Wotan did not want Siegmund to die; she further adds that Siegmund's devotion to Sieglinde moved her. Her reasons justify her act of disobedience. Wotan, in spite of her pledges, decides to punish her.

In *Siegfried*, act II, the protagonist, Siegfried--a child of nature, strong and naive, unaware of the world and of himself, and ignorant of "fear"--confronts a definitive identity crisis, which he overcomes only through autobiography. Siegfried's drama is his not knowing who he is. "What did my father look like...? What did my mother look like?" asks Siegfried in act II. Brought up by the dwarf Mime, he knows he cannot be the child of such a freakish creature. He learns about his identity when he kills the giant Fafner who, in order to guard his treasure, has taken the shape of a dragon. Siegfried thus becomes enlightened: as he involuntarily tastes the dragon's blood, he instantly understands the song of a woodbird and consequently his kismet. Enlightenment has come to Siegfried only through

self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-awareness.

In *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried's awareness of his identity has terminal consequences. The hero, who in the last section of the antecedent opera had gone through a path toward self-awareness that changed his life, drinks a drugged beverage and loses memory of his past and origins--he is forced to return to his previous state of obliviousness. He even forgets his engagement to Brünnhilde and commits himself to another woman. Siegfried's unawareness of his real character allows the Gibichungs to realize their dreams of power and wealth. This plan is hindered when they ask Siegfried to relate his life. He sketches his upbringing at the home of the dwarf Mime. He forged the sword Nothung at the dwarf's workshop; he killed the dragon; he became enlightened at the taste of the dragon's blood.... Here he seems to lose track of the subsequent events. Hagen gives him a beverage to help him remember more. Siegfried then recalls his falling in love with Brünnhilde. At this point, the Gibichungs murder him. Once again, Siegfried's recovery of his memory through autobiography has these consequences: the Gibichungs, who are responsible for Siegfried's ill fate, do not fulfill their grandiose dreams of world domination and the ring is returned to the Rhinemaidens.

Parsifal is Wagner's essential opera summarizing and recapitulating all the themes presented in the earlier works. Parsifal is an innocent being who must learn (and earn) his way to knowledge. But even before that, he must learn who he

is. In act I Gurnemanz narrates how Klingsor castrated himself to quell his sexual passions. Parsifal innocently kills a swan (a symbol of purity), and when they bring him in front of Gunermanz he asks him about his identity. Parsifal can hardly answer: he knows only that his mother's name was Herzeleide (Heart's Sorrow).

Parsifal relates to the rest of Wagner's identity-less characters because of his lack of self-knowledge. In order to achieve self-awareness, Parsifal must experience passion and compassion; in addition, he must be perseverant and strong. Parsifal is modeled after the typical hero of an *Bildungsroman*, though the distance created by the Grail story and the whole atmosphere of religiosity points toward the antithesis of the conventional down-to-earth nineteenth-century novel. Parsifal's pattern of progressing toward self-awareness, a road leading to knowledge, and identity is also typical of the *Bildungsroman* and the standard autobiography.

Not only does Parsifal have an ambiguous identity, but so also does Kundry, an archetype of the sorceress. She has two identities: one, in the realm of the knights of the Grail, as a "wild woman" and sinner; two, as Klingsor's assistant in his evil schemes (including Parsifal's seduction). Kundry once mocked Christ and she must now wander around the world. She relates her autobiographical story in act II, when the steadfast Parsifal rejects her caresses and becomes suddenly enlightened. Now Parsifal can return to the knights' kingdom

and become the Savior.

Thus, to recapitulate: the operas of Wagner incorporate the autobiographies of the Dutchman, *Tanhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Siegmond*, *Wotan*, *Brünnhilde*, *Siegfried*, and *Parsifal*. Generally speaking, an autobiographical monologue signals a shift in the opera's plot because, as soon as the characters discover their identity, they are bound to inescapable commitments. In Wagner, finding identity through autobiography translates from his life (he was a compulsive autobiographer) to his fictional characters. There are two corollaries to all this.

The theme of incestuous love (frequent in Wagner's music dramas) is close in nature to autobiography since essentially both are aspects of narcissism. As Otto Rank has convincingly argued, a narcissistic individual seeks in his reflection the perfected image of himself.⁷⁸ In his autobiographies, Wagner mirrors himself in a perfected way, and his characters, when engaging in autobiographical accounts, also reflect their own perfected image.

The incestuous individual copulates with a perfected image of himself--a member of his family. In the *Ring*, *Siegmond* sees *Sieglinde* as a "better replica" of himself as well as guarantee of fulfillment. When *Siegmond* and *Sieglinde* fall in love and later find out about their blood tie, they

⁷⁸Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971); see especially the chapter "Narcissism and the Double."

recognize no barrier in the consummation of their love; on the contrary, they see in their sameness not a social taboo, with all its consequences, but a return to one's self, an affirmation of their own being in the reflection, so to speak, of the other. The fact that they share common origins is not a hindrance for their happiness, but rather a guarantee of bliss and ecstasy.⁷⁹

Therefore, autobiography and incest are an aspect of narcissism understood as "sameness," and this leads us to the second corollary. Sameness has serious if not tragic consequences in Wagner--namely, racism. Wagner's anti-semitism is well-known. He grounded his racist convictions--as they usually are--in a conception of identity, sameness, and purity. His convictions of sameness whether racial (Arians vs. Jews) or genealogical (incest) reinforce his strong awareness of himself as a distinct individual. The fact that Wagner set to music the Nibelungs's epic as opposed to sagas of Mediterranean or other background indicates Wagner's explicit agenda: to affirm his own people's story (or what he believed to be his people's story) as opposed to recreating the other people's story (Jews, Greeks, etc.).

⁷⁹In *Siegfried* (last part of act III), the theme of incest reappears. Siegfried finds Brünnhilde and immediately falls in love with her. He suspects that she is his mother, which makes him even happier because this would mean the end of his identity trauma. Brünnhilde is actually his aunt, but the libretto does not indicate so, which shows that Wagner does not problematize incest.

Storytelling, especially when it refers to one's identity, is an act of affirmation, a way of casting out doubts about identity and self. A book of memoirs operates at the individual level; a saga such as the *Ring* functions as a collective affirmation of national identity. The *Ring* can be seen as an epic of sameness, whether personal (characters' autobiographies), incestuous, or nationalistic in nature.

2.6 The music dramas as autobiographies

Wagner was a man determined to leave a vivid written picture of his life; he accomplished it by chronicling his life day by day, month by month, and year by year with numerous diaries and books of recollections. The content of his autobiographical works explains the origins and meaning of his music dramas--how they came to be and what they stood for. But in addition, his music dramas present many autobiographical traces.⁸⁰

Throughout his career as a composer, Wagner dealt with the same themes in an almost obsessive way. He presented these themes less clearly in his early works, but he forged them into definitive ideas, concepts, and paradigms as his style matured. Wagner drew these themes from his own life experience, as do many artists, but in addition he emphasized those autobiographical elements in his musical works with the intention of making them more authentic.

The most pervasive themes throughout Wagner's career include: the prototype of the hero as a savior, a defense of natural (especially sexual) desires, and his revolutionary outlook. Wagner's concern with these themes arose from his

⁸⁰This is Verdi's case too. For autobiographical traces in *Rigoletto* see, Jean-François Labie, "La voix du remords," *Avant-scène opéra* 112-13 (Sept-Oct 1988) 127-33. See also, Leo Karl Gerhartz, "Versuch über *Falstaff*: Zu autobiographischen Aspekten von Verdis letzter Oper" in *Musik, Deutung, Bedeutung: Festschrift für Harry Goldschmidt zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans-Werner Heister et al. (Dortmund: Pläne, 1986) 21-29.

own life experience. A case in point is his numerous love affairs, a theme that had its operatic translation in many of his works and which was fueled by Wagner's reading of the *Junges Deutschland* writers.

Not only did his life experience inform his musical output, but also, ironically, Wagner enacted in his own life ideas contained in his music dramas. We have examined this aspect in part in the discussion above about the genesis of the *Dutchman*. Wagner reported in *My Life* that autobiographical events inspired the opera, but research shows that Wagner changed the reported events so that they would enhance the autobiographical aspects of the opera. Whether art imitates life or vice versa, Wagner solidly intertwines his life and works. Sometimes an opera presents ideas and events directly traceable to Wagner's life, but often it is the composer's life that has a source in the conundrum of art.

Let us now examine three aspects of Wagner's life that find a translation in his music dramas. First, I will show how Wagner's heroes include their creator's persona. Second, I will examine how Wagner's ideas about sexual freedom are based on his own life experience. Finally, I will trace Wagner's political views as seen especially in the *Ring*.

SELF-PORTRAITS

Most of Wagner's heroes are extensions of the composer's persona. Although this is probably true for most composers, Wagner's strategies for transferring his persona to his characters are extremely peculiar. Wagner believed he was a man with a mission and his heroes are frequently individuals with similar characteristics. *Rienzi's* leading character is a man of modest origins but with a strong sense of mission; he becomes a tribune, but ends up tragically. Hitler, after seeing a 1906 performance of the opera, declared that he identified himself with the hero of the story. *Rienzi*, Hitler said, made him understand that he too had a mission and that one day he "would succeed in uniting the German Reich and making it great."⁸¹ *Rienzi* is the first character in the Wagner saga of great individual saviors of society and redeemers of the world. His followers will be the Dutchman, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Siegfried, and Parsifal. Obviously, Wagner saw himself in the great tragic heroes he had created.

One of these heroes showing traces of his creator is the Dutchman. In *A Communication*, Wagner provides an exegesis of the *Dutchman* and presents him as the archetype of the Wanderer. He distinguishes different embodiments of this myth throughout history, for example: Ulysses, the Wandering Jew, and the explorer in the beginnings of modern history (perhaps Columbus). He could have added the artist. According to Wagner, the character of the Dutchman represents a universal

⁸¹Müller and Wapnewski, p. 13.

trait, which consists of "the longing after home, house, hearth and wife...."⁸² The Dutchman, according to Wagner, is a hero in search of a spiritual and a material haven. A woman, he says, incarnates this recess at its best. This Woman is more of an ideal type than an actual female; she is "the quintessence of womankind; and yet the still unmanifest, the longed-for, the dreamt-of, the infinitely womanly Woman,-- let me out with it in one word: *the woman of the future*."⁸³

Wagner's exegesis of the *Dutchman* in *A Communication* functions as a track to convey some core notions in Wagnerian aesthetics (there must be some truth to this in order for Bayreuth to consider the *Dutchman* as Wagner's first "authentic" music drama). Wagner equates the Dutchman with the archetype of the Wanderer, and this Wanderer is equated with the prototype of the nineteenth-century artist and, consequently, with Wagner himself. The Wanderer seeks his spiritual haven in the "woman of the future," while Wagner does so in the "art of the future." Wagner's music drama is thus legitimated as the artist's only valid aesthetic aperture.

The *Dutchman*, as construed in *A Communication*, is both Wagner's self-portrait and the ideal cast of the modern artist. The nineteenth-century hero par excellence is the artist: the unsatisfied man always searching for "something"

⁸²Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 307.

⁸³Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 308.

in a self-imposed imperative of originality and distinction from the crowd. In spite of this desperate search for recess and peace, the artist (the Dutchman and Wagner, too) never finds the serenity he longs for. The artist, consequently, must pursue his task (his art) in solitude, because he feels alienated from life and the common people.

The French Symbolist poets emphasized this idea of the artist as a loner fulfilling his task independently from the world. It was in fact a review by Baudelaire that prompted Wagnerism in France.⁸⁴ What fascinated the Symbolists was not so much Wagner's music, which was practically unknown to them, but the ideology behind this music: Wagner's notion of art as sublime and the artist as a redeemer. Another point in common between Wagner and the Symbolist poets is their view of the artist as a flawed being and art as the overcoming of this flaw.

In *Tannhäuser*, Wagner also delineated his self-portrait. Here, Wagner conveys the opposition between the artist and society. Critics frequently interpret Wagner's music dramas as works about the artist's life.⁸⁵ In fact, *Tannhäuser* and *Meistersinger* are operas about musicians in conflict with

⁸⁴Charles Baudelaire, "Richard Wagner et *Tannhaeuser* à Paris," *Revue européenne* (1 April 1861). English edition trans. P.E. Charvet, *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp. 325-57.

⁸⁵See for example, Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

society--an antagonism Wagner felt in his own life. In the exegesis of *Tannhäuser* provided in *A Communication*, Wagner elaborates on the irreconcilability between the artist and society (and himself and his audience):

My earliest experiences...had not left me in the dark as to the real nature of our entire public art....My repugnance to any concernment with it, farther than what was absolutely called-for by the production of my operas, had already developed to a considerable pitch. It had been brought plainly before my eyes that it was not Art such as I had learnt to know it, but a completely set of interests, which only cloaked themselves with an artistic semblance, that was ministered-to in the daily traffic of our public art-affairs.⁸⁶

Tannhäuser turns out to be an idealized portrait of his creator: an artist in conflict with society. The fact that *Tannhäuser* is a musician makes the point even more relevant. By presenting a hero-musician the audience identifies the protagonist with its creator.

Die Meistersinger is also an opera about musicians--songwriters, to be more precise. In an opera about music and musicians, one question emerges: what is the role of on-stage music in an opera?

The example of film can furnish some relevant insight into this problem. All films include "background" music--music that emphasizes the emotional content of the storyline, but that is not part of the narrative. Only the spectators hear this music; the characters in the story do not hear this music. Say that a character, following the instructions of

⁸⁶Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. I, pp. 317-18.

the script, plays a tape with music: then not only the spectators, but also the characters in the film hear this music. Film studies recognize the distinction between "diegetic" and "nondiegetic" music. Diegetic refers to the elements of the film (including music) that are part of the narrative; nondiegetic are those elements external to the narrative of the film. Background music is nondiegetic music, while a film showing a character playing a tape with music that both the audience and the characters hear is diegetic music.

Edward Cone has also considered the role of on-stage music in opera.⁸⁷ He distinguishes between "realistic" and "symbolic" music. Realistic music is on-stage music--tunes and songs that are part of the narrative (Walther singing a tune, for example). Symbolic music is background music--the music only the audience hears. Realistic music is diegetic because it is part of the narrative; symbolic music is nondiegetic because it not an event in the opera's plot, but rather the opera *per se*.

In opera, with rare exceptions, music is nondiegetic; to put it simply, Tristan does not hear the so-called Tristan chord. In Wagner's music dramas there are some exceptions to this rule, the most obvious being *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger*. Since both operas are about music and

⁸⁷Edward Cone, "The World of Opera and its Inhabitants," in *Music: A View from Delft* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989) pp. 125-38, especially p. 126.

musicians, it is almost essential that the libretto include a scene with music. In *Tannhäuser* Wagner uses this resource only when Tannhäuser enters a singing contest. In *Die Meistersinger*, however, the use of diegetic music as part of the narrative is more conspicuous. Most characters in the opera are singers, they play instruments, they enter a singing contest, debate the worth of their art, discuss rules of composing, and are jealous of other musicians' success. In sum: *Die Meistersinger* is an opera about music and for this reason it is the most autobiographical work of its composer. If Wagner's personality and actual life, as shown before, permeated all his music dramas creating a solid link between his life and works, *Die Meistersinger*, above all, is a personal reflection about his profession--music.

At the surface level, *Die Meistersinger* is (as usual) a love story. A deeper level of interpretation offers an opera with several sets of oppositions, the most relevant of which is "old" versus "new" art, singing styles, society, laws, and generations. Walther, the protagonist, is a foreigner, a young man who competes for the hand of his beloved Eva in a singing contest. Dramatic conflict arises when Beckmesser, who is also in love with Eva, enters the contest too. Walther is the archetype of natural artistic talent; Beckmesser knows the mastersingers' rules by heart but lacks any real talent. Beckmesser, as is well known, is an unambiguous caricature of Eduard Hanslick; could Walther then be an idealization of

Wagner himself? Wagner, though possessing evident musical talent, was not at all a "natural," but rather an "educated" talent. Interestingly enough, both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche thought of Wagner as more of an intellectual than a musician. Schopenhauer thought that Wagner should give up music to write poetry and Nietzsche went further by asserting that Wagner was a "bad artist."⁸⁸ Of course Wagner himself was the first to advertise his intellectualism by stating that he had come to music through literature. The fact that he composed *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot* very early in his career, in fact before he wrote his major writings, contradicts Wagner's own assertion.

The Walther/Beckmesser archetypes represent, on the one hand, the opposite aesthetics Wagner saw epitomized by himself (new art, natural talent) and by Hanslick (old art, learned talent). From a different point of view, the two opposing credos also represent Wagner's aspirations to be seen as a natural talent and the part in himself that he abhorred--and that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche so eloquently reproved--the learned talent, the intellectual.

Beckmesser and the rest of the mastersingers are paradigms of what Wagner thought of as "old" art representing a feudal society. Walther (who incidentally shares the trait of naturalness with Siegfried among other Wagner heroes) does

⁸⁸See Harmut Reinhardt, "Wagner and Schopenhauer," p. 288 and "Wagner and Nietzsche," p. 336, both in Müller and Wapnewski.

not subject himself to the rules of the guilds, and yet his music is more moving than the obsolete, learned style of the mastersingers. Walther stands for the "new" art--the art of the future that Wagner had been proclaiming.⁸⁹ Walther emerges thus as an idealized portrait of his creator.

In the *Ring*, one could interpret Mime, Alberich's brother, as the stereotype of a Jew, but Adorno's shrewd reading of Wagner's operas indicates that Mime (ugly, avaricious, and shallow) is in fact a caricature of Wagner himself.⁹⁰ Could Wagner be anti-semitic and at the same time portray himself as a stereotyped Jew? The answer is affirmative because Mime represents what Wagner thought were his worst personality traits: his modest lineage, his yearning for money, and his craving for social ascent. A single term defines the "bad" side in Wagner's personality, the one he abhorred and the one he caricatured in Mime: petty-bourgeois.

On the other hand, Siegfried represents the "good" side of Wagner's personality (at least the one he wished to portray). This hero and Wagner have in common not only the fact that they live with the perennial question of who they are (as shown in section 2.5), but also that Siegfried is the

⁸⁹*The Artists of the Future and The Art-work of the Future*, in Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. VIII, pp. 343-61 and vol. I, pp. 69-213.

⁹⁰Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, R. Livingstone, trans., (London: N.L.B., 1981) pp. 20-21.

hero among all Wagner's heroes. Siegfried's character encompasses components from the Dutchman, Lohengrin, Tannhäuser, and Parsifal. Wagner had been striving to present certain ideas in the form of credible operatic characters: the Wanderer, the man in need of redemption, and the Savior of humankind (the latter ultimately unsuccessful). Wagner identified with all these traits and Siegfried is the most elaborate character representing them. To know Siegfried is to understand that one becomes enlightened through one's experience and especially through a process of self-awareness.

SEXUAL FREEDOM

The literary movement *Junges Deutschland* informed Wagner's ideas concerning sexual freedom. Initiated by writers such as Heinrich Laube, Wilhem Heinse, Heinrich Heine, and others, the *Junges Deutschland* proclaimed political and personal liberation, sexual freedom, opposition to Romanticism and the Church, and a dislike for all "backwards" morality. Wagner's early operas--*Das Liebesverbot*, for instance--had dealt with these subjects. The composer himself had engaged in political revolutions and at the same time had lived an unconventional life.

Das Liebesverbot's plot presents an early exposition of these ideas. There is, for instance, a critique of laws against the "natural" sexual impulses, and the theme of

political revolutions--issues, incidentally, very close to Wagner's own life. The opera is the story of a German tyrant, the Regent Friedrich, during a revolutionary period in Sicily. He proscribes all licentious behavior (sex, especially), but he is set up and falls prey to his own constraining laws (he agrees to a rendezvous with a woman who happens to be his own wife).

Tannhäuser also deals with the sublimation of sexual desires, a subject that would concern Wagner throughout his life. The opera is structured according to different sets of oppositions, the most important of which is the dichotomy between the world of the senses (especially sex) and the spiritual world. Baudelaire, in his review of the Paris performance of the opera, stated, "*Tannhäuser* presents the struggle of the two principles which have selected the human heart as their chief arena, i.e. the struggle of the flesh with the spirit, of hell with heaven and of Satan with God."⁹¹ The character of *Tannhäuser* exemplifies the man whose sexual passions controlled his life, but who now attempts the redemption of his soul.

Wagner presents *Tannhäuser* as a man enduring severe crises because of his lust, a quandary Wagner could relate to with no difficulty. Cosima's diaries provide some practical insight into this issue; in fact, they show that Wagner made actual autobiographical connections between himself and his

⁹¹Müller and Wapnewski, p. 27.

character. In 1852 Wagner met Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of a wealthy businessman who had assisted the composer in several difficult instances. Wagner and Mathilde began an affair that had to be interrupted in 1858 because of social decorum. At the time, Wagner was married to Minna, who learned about the affair and intercepted the lovers' correspondence. As a result of the whole situation Wagner departed for Venice, where he confided his feelings to the "Venice Diary."

On 15 March 1881, Cosima--who was aware of Wagner's early affairs through watered-down versions by Wagner himself, but nevertheless ignored more recent ones--wrote in her diary: "R. tells me that during the rehearsals in Paris [Otto] Wesendonck said to him, 'What utterly voluptuous sounds these are!' 'I suppose he was afraid that I had been dancing something like that in front of his wife,' R. says. And then he calls the passage with the Three Graces 'the bit Wesendonck likes.'"⁹²

The Paris rehearsals took place in the early 1860's, when Wagner was feeling at its peak the dilemma between Minna and Mathilde. Otto Wesendonck, as reported by Cosima, describes *Tannhäuser's* music as "utterly voluptuous," and Wagner makes a connection between the Three Graces passage (which incidentally was only included in the Paris version) and his affair with Mathilde. The diary entry shows how Wagner is

⁹²Gregor-Dellin and Mack, *The Diaries of Cosima Wagner*.

creating a link between his life and his work by relating his affair with Mathilde with the lust theme in the opera. Wagner indirectly identifies Tannhäuser with himself.

Whereas the character Tannhäuser is the outcome of the doctrine furnished by the *Jünges Deutschland* proclaiming free rein for sexual impulses, Tannhäuser, the opera as a whole, takes a more moderate stand, just as Wagner did in his actual life. In the opera, Tannhäuser renounces Elisabeth as in actuality Wagner relinquished Mathilde. Wagner habitually found resolution of his personal conflicts (especially his sensuality) by re-directing his energies toward artistic creation; his operas in general, but Tannhäuser in particular, "are towering monuments to a personal conflict translated into art. Through art, Wagner achieved things he could not achieve in life."⁹³

One sees another aspect of Wagner's radical politics in his outlook on social institutions, especially marriage. Remembering Wagner's numerous extra-marital affairs, it is not surprising that in Wagner's dramas couples sanctioned by marriage are always unsuccessful, whereas those men and women who follow the drives of their hearts achieve love's fulfillment (for example, Sieglinde gives up Hunding and follows Siegmund). Wagner's revolutionary ideology entails a critique of social contracts, and the primary contract he questions is marriage.

⁹³Müller and Wapnewski, p. 28.

Although *Tristan* is one of Wagner's major artistic realizations, the composer does not provide any explicit account of the opera's genesis. Wagner must have been aware of his accomplishment with *Tristan* and it is therefore striking that he provides no exegesis and no epiphany for the opera. His deliberate silence about his most original musical work is undoubtedly significant. Peter Wapnewski suggests:

Wagner was fond of apocryphal tales about inspiration and enjoyed contributing to them, not without a certain ironic detachment. But no such tale attaches to his most personal work, for which he wrote a text that in terms of expression outstripped all his others, and in which he extended the boundaries of his music to an extreme point. Indeed, his source and inspiration were never more obvious.⁹⁴

Wapnewski remarks that certain events in Wagner's life pushed him to write *Tristan*, the most relevant among them being Wagner's affair with Mathilde Wesendonck. Wagner enacted *Tristan's* story in his passionate affair with Mathilde. Here one can speak of life imitating art. A question remains unanswered: why does Wagner invent dubious stories of inspiration and veil other, almost certain sources? One possibility is that Wagner always wanted to be in control of how his works were received and consequently he purposely invented, enhanced, or distorted the autobiographical sources of his operas. In *Tristan*, Wagner's life and work parallel each other. Wapnewski remarks that Wagner purposely hid his sources because they were directly drawn from events in his

⁹⁴Müller and Wapnewski, p. 68.

life.⁹⁵ He points out three "obvious" sources of inspiration for *Tristan*. First of all, there is the philosophy of Schopenhauer, whose idea that renunciation brought contentment had influenced Wagner since early in his career, but whose *Die Welt as Wille und Vorstellung* (The World as Will and Representation) he read only in 1854. He then reported in *My Life* that he saw in the book many of his own ideas instinctively apprehended:

The very things that I now found so unpalatable in the theory were already long familiar to me in my own poetic conception. Only now did I understand my own Wotan myself, and greatly shaken, I went on to a closer study of Schopenhauer's book. ...It was no doubt in part the earnest frame of mind produced by Schopenhauer, now demanding some rapturous expression of its fundamental traits, which gave me the idea for *Tristan und Isolde*.⁹⁶

Wagner therefore openly acknowledges Schopenhauer's influence and inspiration for his *Tristan*.

The second source was Wagner's love affair with Mathilde Wesendonck. As noticed above, Cosima's diary makes a passing reference to the Paris rehearsals of the "utterly voluptuous" music of *Tannhäuser*, a time when when Wagner and Mathilde were having their affair. Nevertheless, there is no explicit report of this affair in *My Life* or in any other autobiographical text by Wagner. The reason, as mentioned earlier, is that Cosima wrote down *My Life* under Wagner's dictation and then supervised the composer's legacy with not

⁹⁵Müller and Wapnewski, pp. 68-69.

⁹⁶Wagner, *My Life*, p. 510.

a little interference and even censorship. Cosima destroyed the so-called "Venice Diary" (see section 2.2), but the text was published anyway in the Wesendonck correspondence. However, Minna Wagner's testimony is a prove of the direct influence of the Wesendonck affair on *Tristan*:

I want nothing to do with the success of this opera which I can't stand anyway, *as I know what caused it* [my emphasis]. The text is appalling: the passion in it is almost indecent.⁹⁷

There is a third reason: money. Evidence indicates that, at the time of composition of this work, Wagner was in need of financial support, a fact not surprising for anyone familiar with Wagner's life. Wagner planned to dedicate an Italian version of *Tristan* to the Emperor of Brazil and before writing a single note he was discussing the details of the opera staging for a possible performance in Germany.⁹⁸

Therefore, although Wagner did not make any explicit connection between the opera and his own life, the link does exist. In Wagner's oeuvre, life and work always go hand by hand. With Wagner, the reader never knows whether his art tries to imitate his life or vice versa. But if one is to trust the "Venice Diary," the passionate love depicted in *Tristan* has its real-life parallel in the Wagner-Wesendonck affair.

In *Parsifal*, the composer seemed to be aware that the

⁹⁷Müller and Wapnewski, p. 70.

⁹⁸Müller and Wapnewski, p. 71.

opera was going to be his last large-scale operatic endeavor. Accordingly, the opera's dramatic themes take on the appearance of the composer's testament and present a clearer embodiment of Wagner's archetypes and themes, which bear heavy autobiographical components, as previously discussed. As a result, many aspects of *Parsifal* are outgrowths of previous operas, as for instance the themes of sexual impulses, self-awareness, and redemption.

The fact that the virtuous Parsifal, who after a process of achieving self-awareness becomes the Savior, grows enlightened is remarkable because Wagner at the time of composing *Parsifal* was having his own chastity problems. Wagner wrote *Parsifal*'s text during a passionate affair with 30-year old Judith Gautier, the daughter of the writer Théophile Gautier. The lovers interrupted the liaison when Cosima found out about it. In an 1877 letter Wagner wrote (in French) to Judith: "Je me sens aimé, et j'aime. Enfin, je fais la musique du Parsifal."⁹⁹ Wagner was "making" or composing the music of *Parsifal*, but at the same time his life was imitating his art with a passionate love affair with Judith. What remains clear is that Wagner was writing a drama about sublimation in the face of the all-pervading sexual urges and, at the same time, he needed some resignation for his own unattainable impulses.

⁹⁹Müller and Wapnewski, p. 92.

POLITICAL REVOLUTION

Wagner's political visionary outlook has its translation in the *Ring*. The moral of the opera seems to be a sort of nineteenth-century Socialism with a sprinkling of anarchism. *My Life* supports this attitude:

During my walks, which I now utterly took alone, I relieved my spirits by working out in my head, in ever more elaborate detail, my conception of a state of human society, for which the boldest wishes and goals of the socialists and communists, then so actively constructing their systems, offered me a mere foundation. Their efforts would assume significance and value for me only when they had completed their political upheavals and reforms, for it was only at that point that I could begin to realize my new ideal of art.¹⁰⁰

The passage indicates Wagner's twofold revolutionary perspective: on the one hand, the political revolutionary and on the other, the artistic innovator. Wagner says that, for the full understanding of his art, a political revolution was first needed. The ideas and the friendship of Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist who met Wagner in Dresden in 1849, informed this view. In addition, the French writer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon also influenced his view about social institutions such as marriage.¹⁰¹

The last part of the *Ring*, *Götterdämmerung*, accommodates many revolutionary aspirations. We can interpret the twilight of the gods as the dawn of human society, now free from the

¹⁰⁰Wagner, *My Life*, p. 376.

¹⁰¹See Rüdiger Krohn, "The Revolutionary of 1848-49," in Müller and Wapnewski, pp. 156-165. According to Krohn, Wagner was acquainted with Proudhon's 1840 essay *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*.

restraints of the previous era. Thus the tetralogy is a sort of prologue for what, according to Wagner, modern times should bring: atheism (the gods are finished), communism (society has banished gold from everyday life), personal freedom (love knows no institutional coercions), and human self-fulfillment (with the help of a little renunciation).

Wagner's radical revolutionary spirit is nonetheless the vision of a middle-class offspring. Wagner's social origins were modest, but the bourgeoisie's revolutions around 1848 fostered hopes not only to improve their place in society, but also to change this society radically. The *Ring* is an allegory of these hopes for change: Alberich, the dwarf, steals an all-powerful ring in order to dominate the world; the ambition for this ring will eventually cause the annihilation of the gods.

The new society envisioned by Wagner entails, at least in theory, a quasi-socialist state and total sexual freedom. Notice that Walther (like the rest of Wagner's heroes and Wagner himself) is subjected to laws that do not really take into account the heart's and the body's impulses. Wagner's socialism, though, is more theoretical than real. Wagner had a petty-bourgeois mentality; he was a notorious parvenu and socialism represented possibilities to achieve the aspirations of an ambitious young man. In actuality, Wagner stood by nineteenth-century ideals and bourgeois convictions.

Thomas Mann asserted that Wagner was the epitome of the

nineteenth century. As a corollary, one could add that he is also the epitome of the bourgeois artist and art. Wagner's involvement in the 1848 revolutions was not only a way to materialize his political ideas, but also a chance to see "old" (medieval, aristocratic) art replaced by his "new," bourgeois art. In the nineteenth century, art was the logical way to empower the middle class, as nowadays especially in the United States (though not only here) the so-called mass culture confers on the lower-middle class a priority status. Wagner's middle-class origins and his own artistic ambition led him to dream of a "new" society with its own logical art--Wagner's. For Wagner, political revolution was a way to advance his own "new" art.

The web of autobiography presides over Wagner's life. In the preceding sections, we saw how Wagner wrote numerous autobiographical texts and how he used them. We examined how his main characters involved themselves in autobiographical monologues; finally, how his music dramas present many self-portraits of Wagner and how the themes of sexual freedom and political revolution are directly inspired in the composer's life. Autobiography is thus an inescapable reference for understanding Wagner; as we saw, Wagner stressed or blurred the autobiographical connections between his life and works.

What is undeniable is that autobiography is a key concept to unravel Wagner's art and its cultural repercussions.

2.7 Conclusion: A middle-class hero

Very few artists have influenced public opinion as Wagner has; as a result, his devotees have frequently appropriated Wagner's works for their own purposes. From Nazis and extreme right-wing activists to Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, Wagner's message seems to be able to captivate practically everyone, as though his work were malleable in an infinite number of interpretations, including many contradictory ones. Anselm Kiefer, one of Germany's most prominent contemporary painters, has presented his own version of what one could call the Wagner phenomenon. Many of his paintings are a critique of Germany's megalomania. Kiefer's works dealing with Wagner include *Parsifal*, *Nothung*, *Brünnhilde's Death*, and *Nuremberg and the Mastersingers*. In some of these works, perhaps to stir memories of devastation, the artist often uses materials such as charcoal, chalk, brown paint, and burnt wood. His gigantic painting *Deutschlands Geisteshelden* (Germany's Spiritual's Heroes) depicts a Valhalla in flames with names of philosophers, writers, politicians, and other famous German men. The name of Wagner is the largest of all the names, representing as it does the epitome of the mythology of modern Germany--a name appropriated and set apart by everyone for his or her individual purposes.

Kiefer has also earned a reputation as a reclusive artist. In very few instances, he has allowed photographers

to take his picture and, on even fewer occasions, he has agreed to discuss his work in interviews. In one of these rare exceptions he stated:

You know, I don't allow myself to be photographed because that kind of genius behavior really is 19th century. It was then that the bourgeoisie needed heroes. The Industrial Revolution meant that ordinary people could do everything, that they could be omnipotent, so they invented geniuses. I don't think I am so important.¹⁰²

Kiefer must be aware that his reclusiveness is fueling his own mythology, since the media tend to be more interested in "reclusive" artists than in those who make themselves more available. The statement clearly says what it overtly denies: Kiefer is perpetuating the myth of the nineteenth-century artist at the same time that he repudiates such an archetype. He challenges the myth of the nineteenth-century artist/genius, but he nonetheless lives according to it. This example shows how Wagner--the epitome of nineteenth-century artist--still shapes the thinking of even those who reject his values.

The autobiographical writings of Wagner constitute an immense canvas--to use a visual analogy--depicting the epic of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. Wagner, a middle-class individual, had to overcome the anxiety of being a "no-one," of not having a self. By chronicling and staging even the minimal incidents in his life and by creating his own epic,

¹⁰²Interview with Paul Taylor in *The New York Times*, quoted in *World Artists 1980-1990*, Claude Marks, ed. (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1991) p. 207.

Wagner assumed his social elevation. As Kiefer puts it, "the Industrial Revolution meant that ordinary people could do everything, that they could be omnipotent."

Narrating his life allowed Wagner not only to advance and promote his music dramas, his ideas, and his social position, it also afforded the possibility of living up to the middle-class aspirations and hopes fostered by the Industrial Revolution. The type of redemption Wagner presents in his music dramas turns out to be a materialist one: redemption from being merely middle class, progression toward self-knowledge, and overcoming one's limits. This could account for the continuing appropriation of Wagner's work because this is still a valid message with a general appeal.

In a study such as this in which we survey an autobiographical tradition, one question is ever-present: who gets to tell his or her story? Early in history, the ruler, the aristocrat, and the saint were the only individuals who had a right to leave traces of their existence. As seen in Chapter I, Diogenes thought that philosophers' biographies were worth knowing, preserving, and transmitting. Pliny had an even wider criteria and he included painters and sculptors. To be sure, Vasari, several centuries later, would consider artists of first importance. With few exceptions (Whythorne) the character of the self-conscious musician came into history relatively late, when German scholars codified their lives in biographical dictionaries. With Wagner, in the late

nineteenth century, it is the middle-class musician and self-appointed hero of his own epic, who not only gets to tell his life, but also chronicles his feats in a compulsive manner day by day, thus creating a big epic of minimal events. From that point on, the middle class has a place in the canvas of history.

Consequently, Wagner's autobiographies perform a double function: on the one hand, they ensure the middle-class artist a privileged position in history; on the other hand (and this confirms the hypothesis of this study), they are the composer's strategy to oversee his musical works. As musical author, Wagner had to overcome the anxiety of seeing his works take on a life of their own. Like many other composers, Wagner used autobiography as a way of mastering this anxiety and coming to terms with the fact that the artwork, right after its inception, no longer belongs to its creator. Autobiography helps recreate an already lost bond between author and work; it also allows the author to influence the reception of his or her works; in the end, autobiography creates the fantasy that the artwork still belongs to its author.

CHAPTER III

Stravinsky's *Autobiography* and Stravinsky's Authority**3.1 Introduction: Authoritative autobiographies**

Stravinsky's relationship to his musical output is mediated and determined by his writings--a collection of texts aimed at providing his musical works with an interpretation and hence limiting the possibilities of further interpretations. It is especially in his autobiographical endeavors that Stravinsky styles himself as a musical author; this implies that he not only defines himself as the "maker" of his compositions, but also as the "authority" over them. An authority by definition is both the person entitled to exert command over something and also an accepted source of information about something. Stravinsky complies with both meanings of authority, because in his writings, he first defines the boundaries of his musical output (his work) and then provides an exegesis of it.

It has become a commonplace to associate Stravinsky with musical formalism, an aesthetic that denies the musical work any intrinsic meaning.¹ Stravinsky's *Autobiography* is the literary work that functions as a mirror in which the meaning of his musical work is made visible and accessible. His formalism is based on the idea of music's lack of meaning; accordingly, Stravinsky writes in order to make himself

¹The references to Stravinsky's "formalism" are legion; see, for example, F.E. Sparshott, "Aesthetics of Music," *The New Grove*, I, p. 128.

these grounds, a written work is justified because it parallels and explains the (allegedly) a-semantic composition. While Stravinsky proclaimed the a-semanticity of music, he produced a literary corpus of writings to provide meaning for this music. This is precisely the main purpose of Stravinsky's writings: to provide his music with meaning.

An aesthetics based on the a-semanticity of the musical work requires first a solid definition of the concept of a musical work itself. Is the musical work a sequence of sounds more or less organized or a tightly closed entity? For a formalist such as Stravinsky, a musical work cannot be an open set of formal relationships; it must be a unified, closed structure. This entails that Stravinsky's notion of a musical work determines his formalism.

Following these introductory remarks, the premises of musical formalism will be discussed primarily with regard to the *Autobiography*. After surveying the origins and evolution of the concept of a musical work, I will examine the impact of such a notion on Stravinsky's formalism and his general aesthetic stance. In addition, I will demonstrate how the notion of author (whether literary or musical) has contradictory consequences for Stravinsky. Finally, since Stravinsky elaborated most of his ideas in written texts (one should keep in mind that his music is a-semantic), one fundamental question must be elucidated in order to carry on this inquiry: are Stravinsky writings reliable?

3.2 Authenticity problems in Stravinsky's writings

The inventory of Stravinsky's writings is rather hard to circumscribe.² For obvious reasons, this inquiry cannot be advanced without first examining some textual and source problems presented by this corpus. Here follows the catalogue of Stravinsky's writings³:

1. *Chroniques de ma vie* (Paris, 1935-36)

Chronicle of my Life (London, 1936)

An Autobiography (New York, 1936)

The three items contain the same work; it was originally published in French, co-authored by Walter Nouvel. The American version mentions neither the translator's name nor Walter Nouvel's collaboration.

2. *Leben und Werk* (Zurich, 1957)

Avec Stravinsky (Monaco, 1958)

Conversations with Igor Stravinsky (Garden City, 1959)

Written with Robert Craft. The Zurich version includes *Chroniques de ma vie* and *Poétique musicale*, plus interviews with Robert Craft, most of them previously published in English with heavy editorial intervention by Craft. The

²Stravinsky's "Complete Works" have already been the target of some poignant sarcasms; see for instance, Ian Frazier, "Igor Stravinsky: The Selected Phone Calls," *The New Yorker* LIX (June 1983) 30-31.

³This list provides the original work, its English translation (when not originally in English), and the consecutive printed editions.

University of California Press has reprinted the whole Stravinsky/Craft series.

3. *Memories and Commentaries* (Garden City, 1960; London, 1960)

Written with Robert Craft.

4. *Expositions and Developments* (Garden City, 1962; London 1962)

Written with Robert Craft. Differences between the British and American editions.

5. *Stravinsky in Conversation with Robert Craft* (Harmondsworth, 1962)

British reprint of 1 and 2 in a single volume.

6. *Dialogues and a Diary* (Garden City, 1963; London, 1968)

Written with Robert Craft. Interviews and Craft's diary of a trip to Russia in 1962.

7. *Themes and Episodes* (New York, 1966)

Written with Robert Craft. Interviews, articles, letters, and essays published between 1962 through 1965. Includes excerpts from Craft's diary from the years 1949-66.

8. *Retrospectives and Conclusions* (New York, 1969)

Written with Robert Craft. Interviews and miscellaneous writings. Excerpts from Craft's diaries, 1948-68.

9. *Themes and Conclusions* (London, 1972; Berkeley, 1972)

New edition of 7 and 8 without Craft's diaries and some

new materials.⁴

10. *Poétique musicale* (Cambridge, Mass., 1942)

Poetics of Music (Cambridge, Mass., 1970)

With Roland-Manuel and others. Six lectures delivered in French at the Charles Eliot Norton series (Harvard University). The 1970 version offers a bilingual text on facing pages, but is not the first or the only English version.

These publications can be classified in three categories: 1) *An Autobiography* and its various versions; 2) interviews and miscellaneous writings with Robert Craft and subsequent versions; and 3) the *Poetics of Music*. There is no indication whatsoever that Stravinsky wrote any of these texts, but all of them were *authored* by him. This means that, although Stravinsky did not physically write down the texts that eventually were published under his name, he is nevertheless responsible for the ideas expressed in them, since he allowed their publication under his name. It would seem plausible to accept *An Autobiography* as Stravinsky's autobiography, but the interviews with Craft are in fact as much autobiographical as the *Autobiography*, and the composer so recognizes them.⁵ Moreover, the interviews include subtitles such as:

⁴Craft's diaries are edited as a whole in Robert Craft, *Stravinsky: A Chronicle of a Friendship* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

⁵See, for example, Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) p. 134.

"Autobiographical" and "Myself 1886," among many others. The *Poetics of Music* will be discussed here only for the type of authenticity problems it presents, because these reveal, perhaps in an extreme manner, Stravinsky's equivocal role as a literary author.

THE POETICS OF MUSIC

Stravinsky was never clear about the process of writing the texts he authored. In *Memories and Commentaries* Stravinsky asserts:

Valéry was a deep source of intellectual and moral support to me on two important occasions in my life. One of these concerned the Harvard lectures, *The Poetics of Music*, as I call them. I had asked him to read and criticize my manuscript. I was anxious to have his comments on its literary style, especially since I had written the lectures not in my own language, but in French [my emphasis]; I was not quite confident with some of the "writing." Accordingly, I read my manuscript to him in a country house near Paris, sometime in the late summer of 1939. He suggested various changes in the phrasing and order of words, but to my great relief endorsed the style of the lectures without reservation.⁶

The excerpt unambiguously asserts that Stravinsky wrote down the lectures in French and that Valéry helped him edit the style, wording, and grammar. In the preface to the lectures of the bilingual edition published by Harvard University Press--which, because of its scholarly character

⁶Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (Berkeley,: University of California Press, 1981) p. 74.

and respectable publisher, are considered authoritative and reliable--George Sefaris, probably misled by Stravinsky's deceptive remarks quoted above, unsuspectingly states, "Stravinsky tells us how grateful he was, French not being his native language, that he could check the draft of his text with his friend Paul Valéry."⁷

It is only in the last series of interviews with Craft that Stravinsky recalls: "Having agreed to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in the winter of 1939-40, I sought the assistance of Suvchinsky to help draft my texts in Russian, and of Roland-Manuel to revise and polish the French."⁸ Stravinsky makes this admission in passing, without dwelling on it or elaborating. As will be seen, this is the declaration of one who knows that he is neither telling the whole truth, nor lying.

To know more about the subject, modern readers had to wait until 1983 when Robert Craft, more than ten years after the death of the composer, revealed that "Stravinsky wrote approximately 1,500 words for the *Poetics of Music*, but in verbal note-form: not a single sentence by him actually appears in the book of which he is the author."⁹ Craft

⁷George Seferis, "Preface to a New Edition of the *Poetics of Music*," in Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970) p. vi.

⁸Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Conclusions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) p. 49.

⁹Robert Craft, "Roland-Manuel and the 'Poetics of Music,'" *Perspectives of New Music* XXI (1983) 487.

acknowledges that Stravinsky gave an outline to Roland-Manuel [the pseudonym of Alexis Manuel Levy (1891-1966)]. Roland-Manuel was a composer and writer whose first language was French. For the lecture on Russian music, Stravinsky used Pierre Suvchinsky. According to Craft, Stravinsky did not write the lectures himself because he was too busy composing the second movement of his Symphony in C. He agreed to give the lectures anyway, because he got paid \$10,000.

Nonetheless, Stravinsky considered the *Poetics* his own, although the outlines he provided are very scanty. In 1947 Stravinsky wrote to a Czech publisher and asserted, "The translation ought to be entrusted to a person thoroughly versed in French...because [of] the highly subtle, idiomatic language I used...."¹⁰ This zeal is also confirmed by Lillian Libman, Stravinsky's manager, who asserts that the composer always referred to the Stravinsky/Craft books as "our books."¹¹

Craft's article includes a transcription of Stravinsky's outlines, which certainly cannot even be called a synopsis or abstract--they are only ideas to be developed.¹² Nevertheless, since Stravinsky assumed the authorship of the lectures, the

¹⁰Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 504.

¹¹Lillian Libman, *And the Music at the Close: Stravinsky's Last Years* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971) p. 241.

¹²See the Craft article in order to see the 1,500-word outline that Stravinsky provided his collaborators. The Harvard edition has 187 pages--quite a long book for such a short outline.

ideas discussed in them should be considered his. In 1985 the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* published an editorial entitled "Poétique passée," and included a paper by Heinz Werner Zimmermann presenting a skeptical view about Stravinsky's writings.¹³ The paper repeated the information provided by Craft and warned against Stravinsky's misleading revelations when it comes to "his" writings.

Stravinsky seems to be a master at presenting an utterance and then retreating from it. The first time he explicitly admits the co-authorship of both his *Autobiography* and the *Poetics of Music* is in a footnote (in passing) thirty years after their publication, in the third of the Stravinsky/Craft series. He says:

[Diaghilev and Nijinsky visited me] in Lausanne, not in Clarens as stated in my autobiography. The chronology of the latter volume is not always reliable, I regret to say, which is one reason for the current tetralogy of my "talk." (Another reason is my wish to speak directly on a number of subjects, and to jump from one to another, without losing time from composition to write a "book." My autobiography and *Poetics of Music*, both written through other people, incidentally--Walter Nouvel and Roland-Manuel, respectively--are much less like me, in all my faults, than my "conversations"; or so I think.¹⁴

Now, to recapitulate briefly: Stravinsky intentionally made readers believe that he wrote down the *Poetics* and that Valéry helped him edit the manuscript's grammar and style (1939). This prevarication went unnoticed in the

¹³Heinz Werner Zimmermann, "Igor Strawinsky--Verfasser seiner ,Musikalischen Poetik'?" Zur Entstehung seiner Schriften," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* CXLVI/7-8 (1985) 17-25.

¹⁴Stravinsky, *Expositions*, p. 134.

authoritative edition by Harvard University Press (1970). In a conversation with Craft (1972) the composer admitted that he had "collaborators" (Suvchinsky and Roland-Manuel). In 1983 Craft revealed that Stravinsky only wrote a 1,500-word outline. Despite all these troubling considerations, the *Poetics* continues to be used as Stravinsky's aesthetics handbook.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Stravinsky's *Autobiography* also presents serious authenticity problems. The book (or books, depending on the edition and language) is sometimes questioned as an autobiographical source. Lillian Libman states that Stravinsky's *Autobiography* is not at all the composer's autobiography.¹⁵ Unfortunately, she is not explicit about what she really means, but she offers some hints. Her wording implies that the editor, Walter Nouvel, was more than a transcriber or even a co-author. Later on in her book, Libman asserts that the Craft interviews often contradict the *Autobiography*, something corroborated by Stravinsky himself (see the quote above). As an example of contradictory remarks, she mentions that several visits to the Savoy opera became one in Stravinsky's memory

¹⁵Libman, *And Music at the Close*, p. 54: "[The *Autobiography*] is not 'auto' at all."

when he told the story years later.¹⁶

Libman thinks that the general tone in the *Autobiography* is too gentle to be Stravinsky's own:

The *Autobiography* is unique in that almost everyone in it emerges enveloped in the aroma of a rose garden, and while Stravinsky may indeed have felt charitable (as the text indicates) in certain instances, it is hardly likely that the articulation of his sentiments would have taken on such a honeysweet tone in any language. In fact, Mrs. Stravinsky has told me that the *Autobiography* was written because Stravinsky was in need of money, and he was advised at the time that the book would be a revenue-producing item.¹⁷

Stravinsky seems always to have been concerned with money. As already noted, Craft asserts that he gave the Harvard lectures mainly for money. Libman also offers some interesting insight into this. She says that Stravinsky was very interested not in the reviews of his books, but basically in their promotion. "One memorandum I have from the 1959 period instructs me to advise the publishers (Doubleday) that he thought it would be an excellent idea if they contributed to one of the New York concert programs 'a large advertisement' announcing the forthcoming appearance of *Memories and Commentaries*."¹⁸

Incidentally, Arthur Rubinstein, a money-eager gentleman himself, boasts of having been the one to advise Stravinsky to appear in concert as a performer, so that the audiences would

¹⁶Libman, p. 241.

¹⁷Libman, p. 240.

¹⁸Libman, p. 241.

more eagerly attend his concerts to see the "legendary" composer. Rubinstein says that Stravinsky eagerly took his advice.¹⁹ That Stravinsky rewrote many of his works should be seen not only as a sign of artistic insecurity (or flexibility), but also as a practical way to renew his copyrights and thereby increase his revenues. This is not to suggest by any means that his works should be taken less seriously; the notion that artists should not be concerned with money is an idea largely inherited from medieval hagiographical tradition, which encourages the public to see the artist as a modern saint and ascetic. To be sure, biographical and autobiographical writings have fostered this idea of the artist as an ascetic of modern times.

When it comes to a discussion of the authenticity of Stravinsky's writings, the language barrier is often brought up. Rubinstein, who also dictated his memoirs, remarks that Robert Craft, "published a few volumes of his conversations with Igor, quoting here and there his sayings, opinions, and paradoxes, written in a very fine but unauthentic English. Igor spoke French beautifully, but his English was far from Craft's interpretation of it."²⁰ Perhaps Rubinstein's charge is motivated by his own uneasiness with his memoirs' authenticity, also written or dictated by a non-native-English

¹⁹Arthur Rubinstein, *My Many Years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) pp. 150-51.

²⁰Rubinstein, p. 561.

speaker.

Stravinsky expresses his views on the subject as follows:
 "Friends sometimes complain that I sound like an etymologist, with my habit of comparing languages, but I beg to pardon myself by reminding them that problems of language have beset me all my life; after all, I once composed a cantata entitled *Babel*. Even now, a half-century since I left the Russian-speaking world, I still think in Russian and speak other languages in translation."²¹

Stravinsky's linguistic competence seems to be a general concern, although not all the evaluations coincide. Libman declares:

For the most part, Robert acted as proxy [in the interviews books]. He also had the very important role of editor. Stravinsky's English was certainly pregnant enough to be quoted directly, and in the first two volumes much of its flavor is preserved, but his exact phrasing of an answer or his more lengthy expositions on a topic always sounded better and more literary in languages over whose idiom he had a more complete command than over English. Robert, therefore, created a style that he felt conveyed the quality of Stravinsky's exact expressions. But, being a writer himself, it was bound after a while to become much more his own style. This explains in part why critics have concluded in some instances that since these may not be Stravinsky's exact words--not sounding like his English--they cannot represent his exact views.²²

RECAPITULATION

²¹Stravinsky, *Expositions*, pp. 17-18.

²²Libman, p. 240.

The pertinent question after all these considerations is: what can be considered authentic in Stravinsky's writings? From a restrictive point of view, none of the books that appeared under Stravinsky's name is really his because of the manipulation of texts by editors and collaborators (and that the collaborators' role is never made clear must necessarily put the reader in a state of alert). Contrary to this stance, an open-minded view contends that all writings published under his name are really his, despite his "collaborators" and linguistic inadequacy. This latter stance is probably the most sensible. Granted that Stravinsky did not physically write his books; that he intended them to produce money rather than to discuss his music; that he had serious problems of expression, especially in English: nevertheless, his books are his views, because he sanctioned them with his name as an author, and therefore they are subject to examination and interpretation.

Stravinsky's aesthetics can be described as an aesthetics of change. His writings express changing attitudes throughout his life, and his music is a mosaic of styles. It has been said that "the successive revisions of his language are indicative, if not of unease or discomfort, then at least of his rejection of total and unconditional self-approval."²³ The same writer remarked that Stravinsky was very open to all

²³Célestine Deliège, "Stravinsky: Ideology and Language," *Perspectives of New Music* XXVI/1 (1988) 82-83.

types of influences. Stravinsky himself complained about listeners who demanded that he linger in the *Sacre's* style. He states, in the name of artistic freedom, his right to move from one musical style to another, and complains that the audience "cannot and will not follow me in the progress of my musical thought."²⁴ This same attitude is found in his writings. When he says that his "talks" with Craft are more like him than his previous works, such as the *Autobiography* and the *Poetics*, he is basically canceling whatever was published before under his name. Stravinsky's attitude was a noncommittal attitude, whether in his music or his writings. In the *Autobiography*, for example, after exposing his opinions and ideas about his life, work, and friends, he asserts that the book should not be taken as an aesthetic doctrine--obviously, he is reserving the right to reverse his thought at any time.²⁵

In terms of his *Autobiography* and autobiographical texts in the conversations with Craft, it is important to remark that an autobiography does not require the actual writer to be the author (the person who signs the book).²⁶ It is important, under generally established standards, that the collaborators be mentioned in the publication; Stravinsky does not always do

²⁴Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1962) p. 175.

²⁵Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 174.

²⁶See Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," in *On Autobiography*, pp. 185-215.

that. *An Autobiography*, the most commonly distributed edition of Stravinsky's formal autobiography, does not mention the names of the ghostwriter, Walter Nouvel, the translator, or the editor.

As a result, the student of Stravinsky's writings must confront a whole set of authenticity problems. Stravinsky did not write his texts, but he signed them and therefore he assumed authorship responsibilities. He was an author originally published in French, English, and German, without genuinely knowing any of these languages. Against all editorial standards and fairness to the reader, his writings rarely provide the names of the "collaborators," editors, and translators. Besides, each new edition of a work changes, adds, or eliminates parts of the preceding editions. Moreover, it is known that he intended his writings as a money-making endeavor and that he reserved the right to change his mind on any of the expressed views. In brief, Stravinsky's writings could not be more distant from the scholar's ideal corpus of writings with internal coherence and authorial unity. Those attempting to examine this corpus must come to terms, first, with the fragmentary and contradictory character of this corpus and, second, with its ideological content.²⁷

²⁷The authenticity of Stravinsky's correspondence has also been questioned in a paper presented at the meeting of the American Musicological Society, Pittsburgh 1992. See Charles M. Joseph, "Ellipses, Exclusions, Expurgations: What Do Stravinsky's Letters Really Say?" The paper shows how Robert

3.3 Stravinsky's Formalism

In his *Autobiography*, Stravinsky is still working within the tradition begun by Whythorne. The *Autobiography* is an account of the context in which the composer's musical works were created. For example, he spends very little time talking about his childhood, wife, and children, unless it is of first importance for the development of his career as a composer. The main narrative of the *Autobiography* is a list of works he composed and the circumstances within which they came to be. Parallel to this account are glosses on some general aesthetic points of views. One of the most pervasive themes in the *Autobiography* is the exposition of the aesthetic stance that critics call formalism. Let us now examine Stravinsky's formalism.

TYPES OF FORMALISM

The term formalism is quite controversial and, depending on the context, can mean different things. In literary studies, the so-called Russian formalism is a critical methodology--largely based on Saussure's ideas--of analyzing texts; this methodology presupposes the assumptions put forth by the Symbolist poets concerning the autonomy of the text (or the artwork) and the disengagement between literary language and

Craft's editing of Stravinsky's letters resulted in manipulation.

everyday language. Russian formalists asserted that what makes a text "literary" is its estrangement from common language. For example, if a modern reader approaches a medieval sermon and finds it "literary" (beautiful, evocative, moving), it is because the sermon's language is strange to the reader's everyday language; this strangeness (its "antique" quality) is the source of "literariness."

Musical formalism has a long tradition, but its main proponent in the nineteenth century was Eduard Hanslick. Hanslick's well-known book, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, proposes a new understanding of the problem of meaning and expression in music. Hanslick's position is normally referred to as formalist, but a close reading of his work shows that the formalist category does not accurately describe his thought and is extremely reductive. Peter Kivy has pointed out that, for some time, we have been misinterpreting Hanslick and that a rereading of his classic text is due.²⁸

Hanslick's thesis, as interpreted by Kivy, contains two parts: the "negative" thesis and the "positive" thesis. The negative thesis holds that the expression of emotions is not the fundamental purpose of music. The positive thesis asserts that "the content of music is tonally moving forms."²⁹

²⁸Peter Kivy, "What Was Hanslick Denying," *The Journal of Musicology* VIII/1 (1990) 3-18.

²⁹Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986) p. 29.

The negative thesis presents some problems: for example, what does "expression" mean? Kivy argues that by "expression," one means at least two things: first, that music contains emotions; and second, that music arouses emotions. Other categories could also be added here: for instance, that music is a vehicle of *self-expression* for the composer's emotions, and also that music represents feelings.

A close reading of Hanslick's book reveals that he was not a formalist in the sense that he totally denied music's ability to arouse emotions.³⁰ Hanslick reacted against the popular assumption that music always refers to extramusical events, and his thought must be seen as a rejection of the mimetic aesthetics that prevailed throughout the nineteenth century. He also denies that the foremost function of music is to arouse emotions (although it can certainly do so). But above all, he is not saying that music has no meaning, as his commentators have so often alleged. As Leo Treitler points out, for Hanslick, music does have meaning, "music is (...) a language, a discourse, a kind of thinking. It has meaning, but that is intrinsic and strictly musical."³¹

In the current literature about Hanslick, one issue is missing most of the time. Because Hanslick was a university

³⁰Geoffrey Payzant, one of Hanslick's translators into English, also shares this view. See the Preface to his translation, *op. cit.*, pp. 3ff.

³¹Leo Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 213.

professor--in fact, the first music professor in any university--in *On the Musically Beautiful*, he undertakes to give musical aesthetics the status of a science. He envisions musical aesthetics as a sister of biology or archaeology, and not the realm of amateurish speculation: this was his real program, not the denial of music's powers to move the soul. About this, Hanslick was very explicit:

The striving for as objective as possible a scientific knowledge of things, of which the effects are being felt in all areas of knowledge in our time, must necessarily also have an impact upon the investigation of beauty. This investigation can proceed satisfactorily only by breaking away from a method which takes subjective feeling as its starting point and then returns to it after going on a poetical excursion around the outskirts of the topic. If it is not to be wholly illusory, this investigation will have to approach the method of the natural sciences, at least to the point of attempting to get alongside the thing itself and seeking whatever among our thousandfold flickering impressions and feelings may be enduring and objective.³²

This point of view has some important epistemological and ontological consequences--epistemological because he believes that music can be studied with objectivity and consequently that musical expressiveness (as subjective quality) has no place in scientific aesthetics; ontological because music turns out to be (according to Hanslick) only "tonally moving forms" and nothing else, thus separating what is music and what is not. Hanslick is here defining the musical work as the text (score) that represents it, because in order to study a phenomenon scientifically, one needs first to define the

³²Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 1.

object to be studied; this object must be something concrete with a material dimension. In music this "thing" susceptible of being studied scientifically is the musical work as represented in the notated text.

These same remarks about Hanslick's alleged formalism would also apply to Stravinsky. The formalist tag, which too often is attached to the composer's aesthetics, is rather imprecise. Stravinsky, as well as Hanslick, grants meaning to music; what they reject, though--throughout their careers--is the commonsensical mimetic aesthetics that is part of most of the popular writing about music during the nineteenth century.

The term "formalism" in music is often confused with other similar terms concerned with meaning in music. Leonard B. Meyer distinguishes among absolutism, referentialism, formalism, and expressionism. What these four positions have in common is that they grant that "music has meaning and that this meaning is somehow communicated to both participants and listeners."³³ The four views disagree on the source of this meaning and how it is communicated. Here follows a definition of the four views according to Meyer:

ABSOLUTISM: "Musical meaning lies exclusively within the context of the work itself, in the perception of the relationships set forth within the musical work of art" (p.

³³Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956) p. 1.

1).

REFERENTIALISM: "In addition to these abstract intellectual meanings, music also communicates meanings which in some way refer to the extramusical world of concepts, actions, emotional states, and character" (p. 1).

FORMALISM: "The meaning of music lies in the perception and understanding of the musical relationships set forth in the work of art and that meaning is primarily intellectual" (p. 3).

EXPRESSIONISM: "These same relationships are in some sense capable of exciting feelings and emotions in the listener" (p. 3).

Meyer refines his categories even more and elaborates two new subcategories:

ABSOLUTE EXPRESSIONISM: "Expressive emotional meanings arise in response to music and these exist without reference to the extramusical world of concepts, actions, and human states" (p. 3).

REFERENTIAL EXPRESSIONISM: "Emotional expression is dependent upon understanding the referential content of music" (p. 3).

The distinction among these views is very important for an understanding of Stravinsky's points of view. Meyer points out, "thus when formalists, such as Hanslick or Stravinsky, reacting against what they feel to be an overemphasis upon referential meaning, have denied the possibility or relevance of any emotional response to music, they have adopted an

untenable position partly because they have confused expressionism and referentialism."³⁴

When one considers the problem of meaning in music one must make the distinction between whether one speaks from the work's point of view or rather the listener's point of view. According to Meyer's categories, absolutism and referentialism are responses to the question of whether there is something within the musical work and whether this something comprises only intervals and rhythmic patterns or rather something extramusical (a reference to a thing or an emotion). The dichotomy of formalism and expressionism calls into question music's capacity to transmit meaning and the listener's ability to grasp it.

As is well known, the basic communication scheme involves a sender, a message, and a receiver. In music this could translate into composer, work, and listener. The categories of absolutism and referentialism ask if the work has any content, and if so, what kind of content. On the other hand, the categories of formalism and expressionism ask whether the receiver or listener apprehends any meaning from the message or work, regardless of whether the work has an inherent or added content and whether the source of meaning is inherent or referential.

³⁴Meyer, *Emotion*, p. 3.

A DECLARED FORMALIST

The instances in Stravinsky's *Autobiography* in which his alleged formalism is declared are numerous but the following quotation summarizes his position very well:

For I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc....*Expression* has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence. If, as is nearly always the case, music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality. It is simply an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, a convention--in short, an aspect unconsciously or by force of habit, we have come to confuse with its essential being.³⁵

Stravinsky's statement contains three important remarks that should be considered individually:

1. "Music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all." In this context *expressing* seems to be a synonym for "communicating." Stravinsky is not saying that the musical work has no content, but rather that if there is such content the listener will never grasp it, because music is not capable of conveying (expressing, communicating) anything.

2. "*Expression* has never been an inherent property of music." This time Stravinsky's point of view becomes more precise and definite. Stravinsky seems to acknowledge that under some special circumstances music can express something, but this expression is not dependent on the musical work, because

³⁵Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, pp. 53-54.

expression is not an "inherent property" of music. "Inherent" means inborn, intrinsic, natural. Therefore, when expression in music occurs, this is not grounded in the musical work, but in the listener's contribution.

3. "It [expression] is an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it as a label, a convention." This third statement confirms the second one: it is the listener who attributes expression to music.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez examines the same type of phenomenon in his *Music and Discourse*.³⁶ Nattiez argues that the basic model of communication, as mentioned above, involves:

producer⇒message⇒receiver

The problem with this model (for Nattiez) is its unidirectionality: the producer produces a message that is passed on to the receiver. Nattiez proposes a model that reflects the listener's active participation in the whole process:

producer⇒message⇐receiver

This version, with the reversed arrow going from the receiver to the message, attempts to represent the active participation of the listener in the process of decoding a musical work.

³⁶Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

According to Nattiez, the term "receiver" is somewhat misleading because in any communication process the receiver does not really receive anything, but rather constructs a message.

Stravinsky would certainly agree with this. If a listener says that certain music is sad or expresses sadness, it is not the inherent qualities of music that are sad or that have the capacity to express sadness, but the active involvement of the listener in the reception of the musical work. The listener brings to the listening experience his or her presuppositions (e.g., major keys are happy, minor keys are sad). Thus the musical work does not contain, therefore, any extramusical content; it is the listener who attributes it to the work.

When a musical work is transmitted with the accompaniment of some sort of extramusical content, Stravinsky thinks that the listener should try to concentrate on the music itself and neglect the extramusical additions. "What does it matter whether the *Third Symphony* was inspired by the figure of Bonaparte the Republican or Napoleon the Emperor?" asks Stravinsky. "It is only the music that matters," he responds, and goes on to say, "it is in the quality of his [Beethoven's] musical material and not in the nature of his ideas that his true greatness lies."³⁷

Furthermore, Stravinsky disputes any value to literary programs appended to music ("How misleading are all literary

³⁷Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 117.

descriptions of musical form"³⁸). But he never considered the possibility of music's "narrativity"; that is to say, although music does not contain a literary story, it follows narrative patterns similar to those of a story. In recent times the possibility of music's narrativity has been one of the most relevant issues in musicology. Some critics, such as Leo Treitler and Susan McClary, contend that a composition's theme functions as a sort of protagonist in a novel: it is presented in a very defined way, and taken through numerous incidents and ventures until a conclusive episode befalls it.³⁹

At least in certain musicological circles, the question of narrativity is quickly becoming one of the favorite battlefields because it provides an old question (namely, meaning in music) with new insight without succumbing to the pitfalls of the dichotomies between content/form and formalism/referentialism. There are three differentiated positions with respect to musical narratology. The first is best represented by Anthony Newcomb, who focuses his studies on identifying sequences of events in the musical discourse.⁴⁰

³⁸Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) p. 20.

³⁹See, for example, Leo Treitler, "Mozart and the Idea of Absolute Music," *Music and the Historical Imagination*, pp. 176-214; and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) pp. 3-79.

⁴⁰See, for instance, Anthony Newcomb, "Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies," *19th-Century Music* XI (1987) 164-74; and "Once More 'Between Absolute and Program

The second, illustrated by Susan McClary's work, attempts to single out hidden agendas in musical narrative patterns as vehicles of acculturation; for example, the main theme of a musical work parallels the male protagonist of the bourgeois novel in search of his self.⁴¹ Finally, the third focus of musical narratology is enunciation, that is to say, who is doing the narrating.⁴²

Stravinsky's personal dispute against "literary descriptions" and referential meaning was caught in between the dichotomies mentioned above. Musical narrativity shows how the problem is suffused with nuances: the question is not whether instrumental music can tell a story, but what type of story--sequences of events (Newcomb) or ideological agendas (McClary)--and who gets to tell the story (Kramer, Cone). Had all these nuances of musical meaning been available to Stravinsky, his views on "literary descriptions" might have been different.

Stravinsky insists that his music, and specifically *The Rite of Spring* (a composition with actual "literary descriptions"), "is not meant to 'please' an audience or to

Music': Schumann's Second Symphony," *19th-Century Music* VII (1984) 233-50.

⁴¹McClary, *Feminine Endings*.

⁴²See Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and the Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

rouse its passions,"⁴³ although the listener is free to attribute emotional or referential content to a musical work. That is to say, the composer, according to Stravinsky, neither wants to express or communicate extramusical meanings, nor intends to express himself or his feelings through his music.

The ideal composer, according to Stravinsky, is one who handles musical creation as an artisan. Stravinsky openly declares his admiration for Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazounov because of their "workmanship,"⁴⁴ a talent he wants to imitate. He also quotes from a letter by Tchaikovsky: "Since I began to compose I have made it my object to be, in my craft, what the most illustrious masters were in theirs; that is to say, I wanted to be like them, an artisan, just as a shoemaker is....(They) composed their immortal works exactly as a shoemaker makes shoes."⁴⁵ The quote reveals two important attitudes: first, the composer must be a craftsman, and knowing his job is more important than "expressing himself" through his works; second, there is a clear, romantic idealization of the "artisan" with all its associations of peasantry, quiet life and, to put it briefly, a whole world that by the early part of the twentieth century was already lost. This nostalgic side of Stravinsky may be somewhat of a revelation, since he seems to be the archetype of musical

⁴³Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 95.

⁴⁴Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 11.

⁴⁵Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 171.

modernism, but it matches the nostalgic descriptions, which will be considered later, of his rural youth in Russia.

Moreover, the composer, according to Stravinsky, must not give reign to his or her own free will. A composer must not be free to create whatever he or she considers appropriate. A composer needs restriction. "The need for restriction," writes Stravinsky, "for deliberately submitting to a style, has its source in the very depths of our nature, and is found not only in matters of art, but in every conscious manifestation of human activity. It is the need for order without which nothing can be achieved, and upon the disappearance of which everything disintegrates. Now all order demands restraint."⁴⁶ Self-restriction on the composer's side results in order, form, and style, concludes Stravinsky.

Stravinsky considers the ideal listener one who does not abandon himself or herself to emotional reveries. He says that he was hoping that *The Rite of Spring*, "would appeal to those in whom a purely musical receptivity outweighed the desire to satisfy emotional cravings."⁴⁷ Stravinsky seems to indicate here that there is a correct and an incorrect way to listen to music, and particularly to his music. The listener who associates the musical event with extramusical elements--such as an emotion, a landscape, a person, and so forth--is clearly doing something wrong because, as he stated before,

⁴⁶Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, pp. 131-32.

⁴⁷Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 95.

these extramusical images are neither inherent in the musical work, nor did the composer intend to depict them. The correct way to listen to music, according to Stravinsky, is something close to what music theorists call "structural listening," although Stravinsky does not use this terminology.

The notion of structural listening has in recent times been under attack,⁴⁸ although it is still one of the most widely used methods to teach theory and form in many schools and universities. The idea that a passive listener can follow step by step practically all musical events in a composition may, at first, seem plausible; but in fact it presents many problems. Structural listening presupposes that the listener perceives the musical work without any active participation; in structural listening the listener is nothing but a passive element. In addition, structural listening--and this is what Stravinsky liked about it--eliminates any emotional involvement by the composer or the listener. Rose Rosengard Subotnik has celebrated the end of structural listening as an event in which "emotion and meaning are coming out of the musicological closet."⁴⁹

Subotnik's work has been described as

⁴⁸Rose Rosengard Subotnik, "Toward a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno, and Stravinsky," in *Explorations in Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Essays in Honor of Leonard B. Meyer*, ed. Eugene Narmour and Ruth A. Solie (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1988) pp. 87-122.

⁴⁹Subotnik, "Toward a Deconstruction," p. 88.

a full frontal assault on the basic principles upon which psychological positivism is constructed. Her immediate target is the kind of musical listening that Schoenberg demanded of his listeners...: a listening that is oriented towards syntactical relationships, coherence, unity. This kind of listening received its basic formulation in Hanslick's *The Beautiful in Music*, where it is assumed to be valid for all music independent of the time or place of origin; rejecting programmatic or symbolic associations as distractions, it directs attention to the music and the music alone. Or to put it in another way, it aims to recreate the music within the listener's head.⁵⁰

It was not only Schoenberg who demanded this type of listening from listeners, but also Stravinsky when he claims that *The Rite of Spring* appeals to those interested only in "pure musical receptivity." Moreover, Stravinsky rejects "programmatic or symbolic associations" and demands of his listeners that they focus on "the music and the music alone." Stravinsky is a scion in the lineage of advocates of structural listening as established by Hanslick.

In sum: Stravinsky's aesthetic stances can be represented according to the communication scheme (sender - message - receiver; or composer - work - listener):

COMPOSERS: They intend to express neither their own feelings nor those of others.

WORK: It does not contain any meaning other than its structural relationships.

LISTENERS: They can attribute "feeling," "expression," or "content" to the musical work and its creator (despite

⁵⁰Nicholas Cook, a review of *Explorations in Music*, ed. Narmour and Solie, in *The Journal of Musicological Research* (Supplementary book review issue) XII (1992) 162-63.

intentions). The ideal listener, though, disregards all these features.

EMPTY WORDS

Stravinsky makes his case for pure musical listening, devoid of extramusical associations, by reference to texts with no apparent semantic meaning. Stravinsky remembers that his first memories of sound concern a dumb peasant who would "sing" to the children. He recalls, "this song was composed of two syllables, the only ones he could pronounce. They were devoid of any meaning, but he made them alternate with incredible dexterity in a very rapid tempo....I set myself with zeal to imitate this music."⁵¹

Stravinsky's major work with language devoid of explicit meaning was *Oedipus rex*. Jean Cocteau, inspired by Sophocles's play, wrote the words in French and then Jean Daniélou translated them into Latin. Stravinsky worked with the Latin text. He remembers:

What a joy it is to compose music to a language of convention, almost of ritual, the very nature of which imposes a lofty dignity! One no longer feels dominated by the phrase, the literal meaning of the words. Cast in an immutable mold which adequately expresses their value, they do not require any further commentary. The text thus becomes purely phonetical material for the composer. He can dissect it at will and concentrate all his attention on its primary constituent element--that is to say, on the syllable. Was not this method of treating the text that of the old masters of austere style? This,

⁵¹Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, pp. 3-4.

too, has for centuries been the Church's attitude towards music, and has prevented it from falling into sentimentalism, and consequently into individualism.⁵²

Stravinsky's remarks on early chant are erroneous. The notion that medieval musicians treated texts with no regard for the meaning of the word has been identified as a modern formalist attitude, but it does not coincide with the practice of medieval musicians. The very concept of "austere style" betrays this attitude.⁵³ Stravinsky projects his own ideas into the music of the past: he wants his music to be free of language and semantic meaning, and validates his view by claiming the authority of the medieval Church composers. The problem is that he is mistaken.

Daniel Albright has called Stravinsky's settings an "assault on language."⁵⁴ Albright argues that Stravinsky's use of a puppet as the star of *Petrushka*, the quasi-imitation of machinery in *The Rite of Spring*, and the use of a pianola in *Etude for Pianola* can be interpreted as an attempt to depersonalize and dehumanize his music. It is, in short, an assault on nature. But Stravinsky goes further and attempts

⁵²Stravinsky, *An Autobiography*, p. 128.

⁵³See Leo Treitler and Ritva Jonsson, "Medieval Music and Language: A Reconsideration of the Relationship" in *Music and Language*, eds. Ellen S. Beebe et al. (New York: Broude Brothers, 1983) pp. 1-23.

⁵⁴Daniel Albright, "Stravinsky's Assault on Language," *Journal of Musicological Research* VIII (1989) 259-79.

an assault on the main trait of humanness, language itself. *Les noces* mixes nonsense syllables (like the dumb peasant of Stravinsky's childhood) with fragments of text with no apparent connection.

As Albright puts it, "Stravinsky wanted words for color, for quantitative value, for impulse, for alogical pattern."⁵⁵ The meaning of a word, its referent, was a secondary matter for Stravinsky, if not an annoyance. Stravinsky wanted language to conform to his ideal of music: pure intrinsic structure with no external referent. Moreover, Stravinsky occasionally set to music "the peripheral elements of texts--such as (in *Threni*, 1958) titles and chapter-numbers--as part of a strategy of depersonifying music."⁵⁶ This technique, incidentally, was also used by Virgil Thomson in his opera with libretto by Gertrude Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts* and in some settings of Renaissance Lamentations.

Certainly these "depersonalizing" strategies make of Stravinsky a prototype of the modernist artist. There are many studies relating Stravinsky's music and aesthetic stance to great figures of modernism such as Picasso and T. S. Eliot.⁵⁷ W. Bronzwaer has pointed out:

⁵⁵Albright, p. 263.

⁵⁶Albright, p. 267.

⁵⁷See for example, F.F. Adkins, "The 'Dove Descending' Tradition in Eliot and Stravinsky," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* XXXIX/4 (1987) 470-83; T. Gordon, "The Cubist Metaphor, Picasso in Stravinsky Criticism," *Current Musicology* XL (1985) 22-33.

There are certain parallels between Eliot's and Stravinsky's careers that justify treating these two artists together with Picasso as the central figures of Modernism....A comparison of Stravinsky and Eliot makes clear that the modernist concept of autonomous form carries ethical overtones, especially because it breaks away from opposed ethics...implied in the Romantic conception of subjective, expressive art.⁵⁸

Although a definition of modernism is not easy, all modernists have something in common--their belief in the autonomy of the artwork. Stravinsky's formalism is the theoretical foundation that supports the notion that the artwork is independent, autonomous, and, in a certain way, has a life of its own once it is created. Stravinsky was a composer very much aware of the aesthetic attitudes of the artists of his time. His formalism is not a separate phenomenon from that in literature or the visual arts; on the contrary, it is well rooted in the larger artistic movement that critics have come to call modernism.

The fact that Stravinsky was totally immersed in the cultural milieu of his time proves Adorno's analysis of early twentieth-century music partially wrong. Adorno's *The Philosophy of Modern Music*,⁵⁹ following Hegel's dialectical model, examines twentieth-century music as the concurrence of two opposite trends, one represented by Schoenberg and the

⁵⁸W. Bronzwaer, "Igor Stravinsky and T. S. Eliot: A Comparison of Their Modernist Poetics," *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook* IV (1982) 169-91.

⁵⁹Theodor Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomsters (New York: Seabury, 1973).

other by Stravinsky. Adorno shows his sympathy for Schoenberg's style and disapproves of Stravinsky's music. Adorno rejects Stravinsky's music because it "remains on the level of appearance rather than essence, the shocking, forceful surface rather than the deep structure of both the musical materials and society."⁶⁰

Schoenberg's style was the path to the music of the future, according to Adorno, because of its authenticity and depth. Since Schoenberg remains the preserve of professional musicians and scholars, it is safe to say that Adorno was wrong. Subotnik has pertinently remarked that, "Adorno might perhaps have linked Stravinsky more aptly to post-modern culture."⁶¹ Evidently, Stravinsky's changes of style, his embracing of popular genres, his interdisciplinary activities, and his fondness for pastiche entitle him to be designated as a postmodern composer, more likely than Schoenberg or any other avant-garde composer of the early twentieth century.

SOCIAL DISTINCTION AND FORMALISM

The cultural atmosphere of the early twentieth century is in part responsible for Stravinsky's aesthetic premises, be they called formalism, modernism, or nascent postmodernism. At the

⁶⁰James L. Marsh, "Adorno's Critique of Stravinsky," *New German Critique* XXVIII (1983) 153.

⁶¹Subotnik, "Toward a Deconstruction," p. 113, note.

personal level, nonetheless, Stravinsky's formalism can be linked with his upbringing and the social issues surrounding his life. Stravinsky belonged to the nineteenth-century tradition according to which artists are the true aristocrats--a club to which one is admitted solely by the merits of his or her own talent. This idea was certainly fueled in Stravinsky's character not only because of his musical talent (which developed rather late), but also by the social class to which he belonged. Stravinsky's family provided a liberal, cultured, upper middle-class environment. There is no doubt that beliefs such as social and artistic progress, faith in education and self-betterment, and the very cornerstone of liberalism, individualism, were all part of Stravinsky's upbringing. The *Autobiography* sketches this environment clearly enough.

Stravinsky's formalism must be understood as the result of his own social elitism and his bourgeois upbringing. Subotnik points out that for Stravinsky "music succeeds by attaining an appearance of elegance, moderation, and 'cool' non-expressiveness....This condition...appeals not to the rational faculties, at least as Kant defined them, but simply to what in elitist circles in the modern West--and the *Poetics* is unabashed in its elitism--is considered good taste."⁶² For Stravinsky "form" becomes a social need, as is the "good form" one needs to dine in society or attend a ball.

⁶²Subotnik, "Toward a Deconstruction," pp. 94-95.

Class issues are mentioned throughout the *Autobiography*. Often, when Stravinsky expands on his family and early life, he speaks about class: "It was in the country, where my parents, like most people of their class, spent the summer with their children."⁶³ The narration of events refers quite often to country estates in Russia and houses in Switzerland, Nice, and Biarritz, resorts frequented by Europe's aristocrats and famous artists. He also alludes to the "servants' rooms"⁶⁴ he and Diaghilev unfortunately had to occupy during a trip to Bayreuth. Nonetheless Stravinsky's family was not extremely wealthy, and his parents' bourgeois mentality determined that their son should study law:

My parents, like the majority of their class, therefore, thought above all of giving me the education necessary to enable me to obtain a post, administrative or otherwise, which would assure me a livelihood. That is why, as soon as I had matriculated, they considered it advisable that I should study law at the University of St. Petersburg.⁶⁵

Stravinsky's friends during his university years are described as "painters, young scientists, scholars, enlightened amateurs of the most advanced views."⁶⁶ Stravinsky was no stranger to such select circles; in another instance he describes an uncle and his clique:

My uncle belonged to the class of society then predominating in St. Petersburg, which was composed of

⁶³Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 3.

⁶⁴Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 38.

⁶⁵Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 13.

⁶⁶Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 17.

well-to-do landowners, officials of the higher ranks, magistrates, barristers, and the like. They all prided themselves on their liberalism, extolled progress, and considered it the thing to profess so-called "advanced" opinions in politics, art, and all branches of social life.⁶⁷

Then he spells out their "advanced" ideas: atheism, "the Rights of Man," faith in science, and opposition to totalitarianism. In music their taste was not that sophisticated; they loved Mussorgsky and music with a folklorist slant, which rather scandalized the aspiring "serious" composer. Eventually the group also discovered Wagner, Brahms, and Bruckner, a discovery that merits Stravinsky's praise.

Despite his upper-middle class upbringing, Stravinsky went through rather dire economic circumstances in 1917. Because of the Communist Revolution, he lost the income he had been receiving from Russia. He recalls, "The Communist Revolution, which had just triumphed in Russia, deprived me of the last resources which had still from time to time been reaching me from my country, and I found myself, so to speak, face to face with nothing, in a foreign land and right in the middle of the war."⁶⁸ This indicates that, although he had premiered many successful works, including the three ballets with Diaghilev, at thirty-five years of age Stravinsky still had difficulties making a living from his music. In fact, the

⁶⁷Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, pp. 8-9.

⁶⁸Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 70.

first publications of his music were supported by a group of friends.⁶⁹ Furthermore, *L'Histoire d'un Soldat* was meant chiefly to provide ready income for Stravinsky during 1918.⁷⁰

A further remark concerning Stravinsky's social milieu and education must be made. As shown above, Stravinsky frequently speaks about the composer's need for "restriction,"⁷¹ "discipline"⁷² and other such terms. Stravinsky seems to be afraid of freedom, disinterested enjoyment, and, generally speaking, anything having to do with a nonchalant attitude. His frame of mind seems to be always predisposed toward restraint, temperance, and self-control. The case could be made that his positivistic education taught him to distrust chance and concentrate only on the controllable aspects of experience. It was Stravinsky's bourgeois upbringing, with its focus of positive science, individualism, personal effort and growth, and faith in work (to name a few of the bourgeois values *par excellence*), that determined his rejection of pleasure as a valid endeavor.

Stravinsky confirmed that he found no interest in the

⁶⁹"Some of my friends at that time offered to bear the cost of publishing several of my compositions." Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 65.

⁷⁰One must keep in mind that the *Autobiography*, the *Poetics*, the *Craft* books, the concert tours featuring Stravinsky as a pianist or conductor, and the successive versions of the Diaghilev ballets were all meant to provide the income most of Stravinsky's music would not bring in.

⁷¹Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 36.

⁷²Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 101.

harmony lessons he took at the conservatory, because they provided no "pleasure" to him.⁷³ This seems to contradict his austere qualities, but it should be remarked that most European conservatories were created during the early nineteenth century, a period that also saw the establishment of jails, mental hospitals, and all kinds of "restrictive" institutions aimed at sorting out the already well-established industrial society. That an institution such as the conservatory neglected pleasure and that this was noticed by Stravinsky confirms that bourgeois mentality emphasized "restriction" as a way to control an event or phenomenon. "Restriction" was the most solid value inherited by Stravinsky from the bourgeois frame of mind fueled by his upbringing. This restriction would eventually lead him to formalism. Hence, Stravinsky's bourgeois upbringing must be counted among the elements of his formalism.

STRAVINSKY'S OWN THEORY

Notwithstanding all his alleged formalism, whether based on his social elitism or something else, Stravinsky--like Hanslick--is not contending that music means nothing, but rather that what it means is purely musical and that it cannot find an adequate analogy in common language. Music means and expresses something, but this something can only be perceived

⁷³Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 14.

through music itself. Stravinsky attempts to put forward his own definition of music based on his formalist views. He believes that music is basically time:

Music is the sole domain in which man realizes the present. By the imperfection of his nature, man is doomed to submit to the passage of time--to its categories of past and future--without ever being able to give substance, and therefore stability, to the category of the present. The phenomenon of music is given to us with the sole purpose of establishing an order in things, including, and particularly, the coordination between *man* and *time*....It is precisely this construction, this achieved order, which produces in us a unique emotion having nothing in common with our ordinary sensations and our responses to the impressions of daily life.⁷⁴

Stravinsky reconciles these declarations with the notions of form and emotion. A similar view has been proposed by Susanne Langer in her book, *Philosophy in a New Key*.⁷⁵ Langer asserts that humans use symbolic transformation in order to understand the world. This means that one understands an event, a phenomenon, or an object by creating an analogy to it, a symbol which stands for it or supplants it. Langer points out that musical form can convey feeling because its principles are the same as those of human feeling; that is to say that musical form is a simile of feeling. Musical form creates patterns that stand as a symbol for human feeling, and therefore this form conveys through time feeling and emotion.

Although Stravinsky does not refine his ideas about time and music, he seems to be trying to say that there is evidence

⁷⁴Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 54.

⁷⁵Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

indicating that time, as the basic element of form, is the source of emotional content in music. This content is not inherently referential, although it can arouse references in the listener. Moreover, the composer does not have direct input into this content, and therefore the composer's self-expression is out of the question. Time thus remains as the basic principle for music and it is indirectly responsible for conveying meaning.

3.4 Stravinsky's concept of work

From the preceding examination of Stravinsky's ideas one can infer that formalism as an aesthetic stance in twentieth-century art, literature, and music presupposes the existence of an autonomous artwork: that is to say, that the artwork's autonomy is the source of the legitimation of formalism. One cannot believe that meaning in music is only grounded in pure musical structure, as Stravinsky did, if one does not believe first that there is a well-defined musical work that houses this musical structure. Therefore, in order to understand better Stravinsky's formalism one must attempt to disclose Stravinsky's notion of a musical work, and a historical outline of the concept of work itself can be useful.

Stravinsky as a man determined by his historical circumstances inherited certain aesthetic premises, though he might not have been aware of them. Historicizing Stravinsky entails examining the cultural setting within which his work was created and exposing the ideologies of which Stravinsky's output is a result or to which it is a reaction. The notion of work itself is the result of a confluence of historical ideological currents.

In his *Esthetics of Music*, Carl Dahlhaus outlines two models of musical work that have prevailed throughout history: 1) musical work as "process" and 2) musical work as "opus." According to Dahlhaus, Johann Gottfried von Herder defined

music as an *energetische Kunst*, or energetic art.⁷⁶ By "energetic art" Herder meant a process--a continuous flow of sound and an immaterial phenomenon as opposed to the physical qualities of a painting or a sculpture. On the other hand, Nicolaus Listenius, in his 1537 treatise *Musica*, distinguished between *musica practica* (the actual performance of music) and *musica poetica*, the creation of musical works; once brought into the world, they would survive their author's death and would commence an independent existence of their own. Listenius designates this type of musical work an "*opus perfectum et absolutum*."⁷⁷ Herder and Listenius thus represent the two chief opposing views about what a musical work is.

In Western art music the musical work as *opus* seems to have endured, while the idea of music as process is generally relegated to non-Western music, popular genres in Western music, or pre-Renaissance Western music. Nevertheless, music considered as process has had its proponents. According to Dahlhaus,⁷⁸ Hegel's aesthetic theory⁷⁹ ignores music because of its ephemeral quality. That is to say, it is impossible for music to become an objective entity with physical qualities

⁷⁶Carl Dahlhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, trans. William Austin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 10.

⁷⁷Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p.10.

⁷⁸Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 11.

⁷⁹Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

that would allow a prolonged examination of the work. Hegel objects to the feasibility of music as "opus" in Listenius's sense.

Hegel considers that music does not have a spatial, stable, motionless dimension that allows objective contemplation. For Hegel, music is a *meditatio mortis* or a meditation on death, as Adam of Fulda put it in 1490,⁸⁰ indicating that the listener does not apprehend the essence of a musical work until the moment when it is finished. For example, the theme of a classical symphony acquires meaning only when the symphony is concluded, when the listener reassembles and considers all the musical events at the conclusion.

This view about music is still shared (although with reservations) by theorists working within the framework of Gestalt psychology. Leonard B. Meyer, whose ideas have already been in part examined, still represents this view; he believes that musical meaning is the result of the fulfillment or frustration of the expectations created by musical patterns. The listener thus only apprehends musical meaning after a musical passage is finished, when he relates what just happened to previous musical events.

The concept of "Western art music" was developed in the

⁸⁰Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 11.

nineteenth century⁸¹ with the emergence of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy concerned with the beautiful and art. The notion of an artwork, and therefore of a musical work, is central to the conception of aesthetics, which in turn depends upon this construction as a concept. According to Dahlhaus, Heine called this period "the age of art-religion,"⁸² because it was during this time that positive science challenged established religion and art took the task of cultivating the spiritual life of the middle classes, disenchanted with institutionalized religion. But more important, it was also the "age of art-religion," because art became sacred, "something complete and perfect in itself."⁸³

This view about art requires an autonomous artwork divorced from its context, an artwork as opus (not process) which, as Listenius demanded, survives the death of its author and takes up a life of its own. Dahlhaus remarks that Walter Benjamin, with his fine insight into nineteenth-century bourgeois art, wrote that, "the supreme reality of art is isolated, self-contained work."⁸⁴ According to Dahlhaus, Kant complained about the lack of motionlessness and stability of

⁸¹The concept stems from Raphael Georg Kiesewetter, *History of the Modern Music of Western Europe* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973); originally published as *Geschichte der europäish-abendlandischen oder unser heutigen Musik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1846).

⁸²Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 13.

⁸³Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 13.

⁸⁴Quoted in Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 13.

music and thought that music lacked "urbanity because it obtrudes itself."⁸⁵ Kant is the major proponent of art for art's sake, and he thinks that beauty, and therefore art, must be "purposive without purpose."⁸⁶

To this autonomous, independent artwork, Schelling ascribed metaphysical value.⁸⁷ In the same hermeneutical tradition, Heidegger thought that the artwork (although it is independent in Listenius's sense) refers to something bigger and metaphysical. For example, Van Gogh's *Shoes of the Peasant* refers, according to Heidegger, to the whole experience of peasantry.⁸⁸ Therefore, the fact that an artwork is autonomous does not mean that it cannot refer to something outside itself, especially when this referent is an abstraction or a metaphysical reality.

There are nonetheless advocates of the totally autonomous artwork--an *opus perfectum et absolutum* as Listenius called it. In the late nineteenth century the Symbolist poets and especially Stéphane Mallarmé defended the idea of an art totally divorced from reality. Mallarmé's thought has been summarized as follows:

L'oeuvre de Mallarmé représente l'apogée d'une certaine

⁸⁵Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 11.

⁸⁶Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 15.

⁸⁷Dahlhaus, *Esthetics*, p. 13.

⁸⁸Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977) p. 173.

évolution des principes et des formes littéraires du XIX^e siècle: celle qui, commençant en plein romantisme avec le Hugo des années 1830, continue avec la tendance surnaturaliste et l'imagination chez Baudelaire, pour aboutir à la rupture mallarméenne entre l'existence littéraire et le social, entre l'écriture poétique et le monde référentiel.⁸⁹

Mallarmé denied any relationship between the literary work and the real world. A verse in a poem has no referent outside itself. He was obsessed about creating a literary output totally disengaged from the everyday world. He called his incomplete project his *Grand Oeuvre*; sometimes he referred to it simply as *Le Livre*.

A musical work, therefore, can be understood as a process or as an opus, as flowing energy or motionless artifact. In music the opus is sometimes confused with the text, but they are not totally identical. The silent reading of a novel can be equated with the novel as an artwork, because the reader can apprehend the intended full meaning of the novel with his or her silent reading. The silent reading of a score, on the other hand, is not the totality of the musical composition because, although the text can indeed reveal aspects of the music that are not audible, the musical work come alive as it was intended only when it exists in sound. As a corollary one could say that the text of a novel is the novel, but the text (the score) of a composition is not the composition--it is only a partial representation of it. The difference between

⁸⁹Beaumarche et al., eds., "Mallarmé," *Dictionnaire*, III, pp. 1469.

text and opus is that the text is the trace of an opus. An opus is an intentional entity, while a text is only a fragment of this opus. An example will clarify these differences.

A forty-five minute piano improvisation by Keith Jarrett presents a musical work understood as process. A Beethoven symphony is a musical work understood as opus: it is an "*opus perfectum et absolutum*" (Listenius), an "isolated, self-contained work" (Benjamin). The score of this symphony is the text. One more additional remark must be made: if Jarrett records his improvisation, the recording will be the text (even if there is no score), but the musical work will remain a process, not an opus. Beethoven's symphony, on the other hand, includes rubatos that are not detailed in the text. The opus has rubatos, while the text does not. The opus includes the text plus the alleged intentions of a composer.

To return to Stravinsky, one can see that he identifies the concept of musical work with opus, a self-contained entity, an autonomous object of aesthetic contemplation. He regards as almost the same the text and the opus, which implies that he basically conceived the score as a faithful medium for the composer's intentions. His concept of a musical work could not be more distant from the notion of it as process. There is nothing open in his compositions, and his contempt for interpreters who take the ambiguities of the score as opportunities to develop their own creativity is well-known. The strong conviction that the musical work is an

opus, a closed entity, is therefore the basis of his formalism.

Stravinsky identifies the musical work with its text and considers a musical work to be an opus, a closed and autonomous entity independent from any context. The performer, when reading a musical text, can fall into interpretation, which for Stravinsky means a betrayal of the musical work and its author's intentions. As a result, Stravinsky first attempted to keep control over the executions of his works by censoring interpreters, and later, when technology made it possible, he attempted to eliminate altogether the executant, thus ensuring an authentic transmission of his opus.

3.5 Conclusion: Stravinsky and the "Authority Principle"

One of the most relevant aspects of Stravinsky's thought is his ideas regarding the mediative role of the performer. Stravinsky acknowledged that music "must have an intermediary, an executant."⁹⁰ But the intervention of "executants" was for Stravinsky a hindrance: "Composers may well envy the lot of painters, sculptors, and writers, who communicate directly with their public without having recourse to intermediaries."⁹¹ In fact, Stravinsky blamed the lack of success of some of his works on the incompetence of his performers.

THE IDEAL PERFORMER

The ideal performer, according to Stravinsky, is not an interpreter, but an executant. In the *Poetics*, a whole lecture is dedicated to explaining the inconveniences caused by interpreters and the need for performers to become only executants.⁹² Stravinsky believes that the musical score is sufficiently explicit and precise to express the composer's intentions. Hence a good executant is one who follows the score or text literally. This attitude reveals that Stravinsky thought that his works, understood as closed opera,

⁹⁰Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 72.

⁹¹Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 143.

⁹²Stravinsky, "The Performance of Music," in *Poetics*, pp. 161-87.

were identical with their texts.

Stravinsky recalls Pierre Monteux's performance of *The Rite of Spring*:

Thus he was able to achieve a very clean and finished execution of my score. I ask no more of a conductor, for any other attitude on his part immediately turns into *interpretation*, a thing I have a horror of. The *interpreter* of necessity can think of nothing but *interpretation*, and then takes on the garb of a translator, *traduttore-traditore*; this is an absurdity in music, and for the interpreter it is a source of vanity inevitably leading to the most ridiculous megalomania.⁹³

Instinctively, Stravinsky reacts adversely to the performer's stardom, which presents a disadvantage for the composer. One should remember that Stravinsky had to obtain the larger part of his income as a performer. Furthermore, while the composer works mainly for future glory and his possible admission to the Olympus of great creators, according to the romantic tradition, especially fostered by anecdotes about Mozart and Beethoven, the performer enjoys earthly fame and money.⁹⁴ Stravinsky, who manifestly saw the composer in a higher notch than the performer in music's hierarchy, had reason to be upset at the performer's "megalomania."

What is really at stake in the previous statement, however, is the notion of authorship. Stravinsky is actually asking, "who is the author and therefore who has rights to a

⁹³Stravinsky, *Poetics*, p. 34.

⁹⁴Stravinsky would be happy to know that his semblance was proposed for a United States postal stamp, but he would certainly be enraged to know that Elvis actually got one. See Gabriel Kosakoff, "...And don't forget Stravinsky and Satchmo," *Music Educators Journal* LX/5 (1974) 56-57.

work?" The author is obviously entitled to cash in the revenues or the prestige generated by a work. In fact, the notion of author is closely related to the development of mercantile societies, and even today, bills, accounts, and statements of payment or debt are the most commonly used records for the attribution of authorship. Stravinsky is only claiming the rights that a capitalist society, based on liberal values, ensures for its subjects. Stravinsky fails to understand, though, that authorship is a consequence of Western mercantile society.

Stravinsky tends to praise the executants of his works by pointing out their faithfulness to the author's intentions. The compliment, incidentally, often coincides with a successful work. When some of his works fail to gain the audience's applause, then Stravinsky attributes the failure to a bad performance. This allows the composer's creativity to remain invulnerable.

Stravinsky's lack of sympathy for performers--and not only musical performers, but any kind--is best seen in his depiction of Nijinsky. The famous Russian dancer is described with mixed feelings: on the one hand, Nijinsky's excellence as a dancer is indisputably acknowledged; on the other, he is portrayed as an idiot:

I then had the opportunity of observing Nijinsky at close quarters. He spoke little, and, when he did speak, gave the impression of being a very backward youth, whose intelligence was very underdeveloped for his age. But, whenever this occurred, Diaghileff, who was always beside him, would intervene and correct him so tactfully that no

one noticed his embarrassing defects.⁹⁵

Although there is not enough factual information about the Stravinsky-Nijinsky relationship, one might speculate that such denigrating comments were sparked by an instance of disappointment. One should keep in mind that the *Autobiography* is an exceptionally kind account, and flattering compliments and appraisals are more common than derogatory statements. Nijinsky was Diaghilev's main dancer and later became one of his choreographers. Stravinsky's fame began with Diaghilev's ballets and for a long time depended on them. It is plausible to think that Nijinsky, as Diaghilev's star, had a certain influence on him (Diaghilev) and on the repertory they performed. The logical inference is that Stravinsky's productions partially depended on Nijinsky's opinions, and therefore the composer had to submit to a secondary role.

When Nijinsky choreographed one of the subsequent performances of *The Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky declared: "The idea of working with Nijinsky filled me with misgiving, notwithstanding our friendliness and my great admiration for his talent as a dancer and mime. His ignorance of the most elementary notions of music was flagrant. The poor boy knew nothing of music."⁹⁶ Notice that Stravinsky speaks about "friendliness," not friendship. He also regrets that Nijinsky

⁹⁵Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 28.

⁹⁶Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 40.

cannot read music or play an instrument, whereas Diaghilev played piano duets with him.

Stravinsky's onslaught on Nijinsky becomes especially suspicious when the composer excuses himself for his attack: "In writing all this I have not the least desire to cast any slur on the fame of this magnificent artist."⁹⁷ One does not need to be a very shrewd reader to realize that he *does* want to cast a slur on the dancer's fame; and regarding the attribute of "magnificent," one can always be generous with words. Stravinsky reveals his full intentions when he asserts, "I should be false to history if, in assessing his worth as an artist, I perpetuated the confusion which has arisen between his work as interpreter and as creator."⁹⁸

Stravinsky is annoyed that Nijinsky would even be considered a creator. Nijinsky is an interpreter, an excellent one, says Stravinsky, but his work as a choreographer is worthless. Interpreters, therefore, should remain interpreters and should not step into the realm of creators. Nijinsky thus becomes a caricature of performers at large.

ELIMINATING THE PERFORMER

Given Stravinsky's discontent with performers, it was logical

⁹⁷Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 42.

⁹⁸Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 42.

that he tried to eliminate these intermediaries who could cause him so much "harm." Accordingly, Stravinsky received with enthusiasm the idea of fixing his music in piano player-rolls. The composer describes his experience as follows:

In order to prevent the distortion of my compositions by future interpreters, I had always been anxious to find a means of imposing some restriction on the notorious liberty, especially widespread today, which prevents the public from obtaining a correct idea of the author's intentions. This possibility was now afforded by the rolls of the mechanical piano, and a little later, by gramophone records.... But these transcriptions nevertheless enabled me to create a lasting document which should be of service to those executants who would rather know and follow my intentions than stray into irresponsible interpretations of my musical text.⁹⁹

In 1929, according to the *Autobiography*, Stravinsky signed a contract with the Columbia Gramophone Company to record all his output as a conductor and pianist. The composer was finally seeing his dream come true: now he could transmit exactly how he wanted to have his music performed. To a certain extent this frozen music, so to speak, was the dream of high modernism: a perfect work that transcended its author and took on a life of its own, a *Grand oeuvre* (in Mallarmé's sense), an *opus perfectum et absolutum* (in Listenius's sense).

In any case, Stravinsky has mixed feelings about recording technology.¹⁰⁰ On the one hand, the audience could have access to the musical work without unscrupulous

⁹⁹Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁰Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, pp. 152-54.

performers, and the author could therefore supervise his or her work with total control. The disappointing side of mechanical sound recording was, according to Stravinsky, that the gramophone and the radio create passive listeners. He argues that during Bach's time, one had to walk ten miles to hear Buxtehude play his works. Nowadays, continues Stravinsky, one has access to all types of music without leaving home. Music is therefore becoming an easily obtained commodity, no longer a precious rarity to be enjoyed in depth. The availability of music brings forth a consequent passivity on the part of the listener, who progressively loses his or her capability to discriminate between good and bad music. As a result, the critical faculties of people are seriously hindered. Stravinsky's argument is very much in tune with Adorno's ideas about popular music, and in a time of conspicuous consumption of "art" (whether popular or learned), Stravinsky's comments have a very special significance.

KEEPING CONTROL OVER THE WORK

What seems especially relevant in Stravinsky's relationship to performance and recording technology is his resolution to keep control over his work; following Dahlhaus, one could call this determination Stravinsky's "Authority Principle."¹⁰¹ At stake

¹⁰¹Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J.B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp. 158-61.

here is the question: is the composer the only one entitled to interpret his work? Stravinsky showed a strong attachment to this authority principle throughout his career; for him the only valid interpretation of a work is provided by its author.

A composer can reveal his intentions through many means. When Stravinsky had only scores to convey his intentions he demonstrated an absolute faith in the score. When later piano-player rolls were made available to him, he turned to them in order to pass on a more faithful rendering of his music (even though full orchestra pieces became keyboard arrangements). Finally, when records could transmit an almost exact performance of a work, Stravinsky took up the task of recording all his music. The purpose was always the same: to deprive music of its quality of "process" and make it more of an ideal "opus." Stravinsky, as did Hegel and Kant, abhorred music's flowing quality and aspired to the stability and motionlessness of literature and painting.¹⁰²

Another instance in which Stravinsky's authority was challenged was the first publication of *Expositions and Developments*. In his conversations with Craft, Stravinsky advanced his views on music criticism and critics. The attack was aimed at both critics in general and "some" New York

¹⁰²Of course, it is only a supposition that painting and literature are "closed" artworks. Umberto Eco, among others, proposes that literature is an "open" work and that it is only with the intervention of the reader that a literary piece becomes complete. See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

critics in particular: though his name was not spelled out, it was Paul Henry Lang. The eminent critic and musicologist took advantage of his column in the *Herald Tribune* to refute Stravinsky's reproaches. Days later, Earle Brown sent a letter to the editor berating Lang's defense of his critical stances and criticism at large.

On March 11th, 1962, the *Herald Tribune* prefaced Lang's article with the following's remarks:

Is the composer the only one capable of judging a work of music? This is the question raised by Paul Henry Lang in answering an attack on him made by Igor Stravinsky in the third volume of the eminent composer's musical musings.

Lang had been an advocate of Stravinsky's music for a long time, but became disenchanted with Stravinsky's latest (1960s) works and especially with the composer's collaboration with Craft. Lang ridiculed Craft throughout the article and rightly wondered whether the composer's opinions are more the fabrication of his "collaborator" than Stravinsky's own. Lang argued that, "unfortunately, his relentless examiner [Craft] means business, the business of reconciling the sharp discrepancies between the composer's earlier musical creeds and the severe discipline to which he is subject today." Lang also asserted, with irony, that the Stravinsky/Craft association should be called "A Division of Craft Products, Inc."

Stravinsky and Craft called Lang "totally tone deaf, ignorant, stupid, primitive, reptilian, a demagogue." Moreover, according to Stravinsky/Craft, Lang's critiques are

written, "so atrociously that the reader is able to follow him at all only because he is certain in advance of the malicious intent."

Lang defended himself by saying that, "the independent critic can no more be abolished in America than the jury. This is a country that will never tolerate what Mr. Stravinsky really wants, namely that the critic should exist only by sufferance of the composer. The distinguished musician repeats the old canard that no one but a composer is able to criticize another composer, assuming that through some pre-established harmony the composer's interests would thus automatically be secured." Stravinsky had indeed argued that the best criticism of a composition is another (better) composition.¹⁰³ In any case, a composer's criticism of another composer would eventually be a rather pugnacious affair, to judge by Stravinsky's own opinions of his colleagues.

Lang blames Craft for Stravinsky's hostile attitude towards critics. Lang recalls that he used to consider Stravinsky a "*Musicus Maximus*" before he surrendered his personality to "inquisitor-laureate Craft." Craft is also called "the ventriloquist of God...[who] makes Mr. Stravinsky concern himself with matters a great composer should leave for his accountants."

On March 25th, 1962, Earle Brown restates the

¹⁰³"I believe, with Auden, that the only critical exercise of value must take place in, and by means of, art." Stravinsky, *Expositions*, p. 109.

"incompetence and primitiveness of critics." Lang is "not only 'tone deaf' but just plain deaf." In addition, Lang's sensitivity is remote from the "creative music culture of his (our) time."

Considered at what is now a considerable remove, this controversy seems rather ludicrous. The issues at stake are nevertheless extremely relevant to understanding Stravinsky's thought. First of all, Stravinsky not only dislikes listeners' and performers' free interpretations (ideological or in actual execution), but in addition he despises the critics, whose interpretation, in print or other media, can have severe consequences for the composer.

The issue of whose opinions are expressed in the Stravinsky/Craft series is open to question. We saw elsewhere that Stravinsky's writings have an arguable authorship. Not only did he not physically write his own books, but as soon as they were presented to the public, the opinions expressed in them were canceled by further autobiographies, recollections, editions of correspondence, interviews, etc.

Stravinsky, to put it rather crudely, hated being an author, a fixed category attached to a product. Throughout his professional life he always maintained a changing attitude towards his music. His music changed according to his own whims and frequently against his own previous stances, as for instance in his twelve-tone period. One of his convictions, though, remained unchanged throughout his career, namely the

belief that music conveys only musical meanings. This premise made him succumb to the temptation to write (or have others write) about his music, because the writings could thus supply the content that the music allegedly lacks. Ironically, though he hated being an author (a fixed category), he claimed his authority over his work by reasserting his authorship, trying to prevent "wrong" interpretations of his music.

The Authority Principle, for Stravinsky, means that the author is the only authority over his or her work. This explains Stravinsky's attacks on performers who take interpretive liberties. First, Stravinsky still believes that the score can faithfully transmit the composer's intentions and musical thought. Later on, he admits the shortcomings of the score and concentrates on mechanical reproduction of sound because it can (partially) eliminate the mediation of the performer.

Neither the listeners nor the critics have a right to freely elaborate on (think, interpret, and criticize) the composer's work. Thus Stravinsky attaches himself to the Authority Principle, implying that the only valid interpretation of a work of music is the one provided by its author. A critic's interpretation is not acceptable either. Only a composer's critique can be of some use to another composer. In any case, the best of all possible criticisms would be another artwork that showed the weaknesses of the preceding ones.

Stravinsky assumes all the rights of authorship (such as, for instance, control over his work), but surprisingly enough he does not accept any authorial responsibility towards the audience, the performers, and the critics. His whimsical changes of musical style, his continuous change of aesthetic stances, and especially his emphasis on the right of the artist or writer to modify his or her position and even to cancel the views expressed elsewhere make of him a challenging object of study.

CHAPTER IV

John Cage's Autobiographies

Strictly musical questions are
no longer serious questions.--
John Cage

4.1 Introduction: Explaining music

This chapter examines how John Cage uses autobiography and how he transforms and recasts the genre's conventions. In addition, in order to delineate some fundamental concepts in his aesthetics, it explores a number of philosophical aspects introduced in his autobiographies. My premise is that autobiography is the ideal framework within which a composer can best present his world-view. By integrating his life and works--his biological being with his professional and social one--in a coherent, integral narrative, a composer necessarily reflects on the nature of the artwork. Cage has asserted that he began writing to explain his music. He relates that he intended to become a writer, but he eventually began painting and composing. In the "Autobiography," he reports that, in the thirties, people found his music "unusual." He says that people always "had questions about it, so my writings actually began as responses to people's questions in an attempt to let people know what it was that I was doing."¹

¹Richard Kostelanetz, ed., "Autobiography" in *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988) p. 25. The "Autobiography" will always be identified as Kostelanetz, followed by the page number.

been calling "the tradition of autobiography in music": composers narrating their life with the intention of explaining their music. The act of explaining, however, involves claiming authorship over the music and administering the work's reception. Thus, composers' explanations become ways of narrowing the composition's possibilities of meaning. A further point, which is in fact a corollary of the first, could be made. In the statement quoted above, Cage legitimates the use of autobiography as a way to penetrate a composer's aesthetics: if composers use autobiography to explain their music, autobiography is the right path for the critic to take in order to understand a composer's aesthetics. In fact, it could be argued that autobiographical texts are preferable to treatises or systematic expositions of ideas. A treatise is subject to the composer's direct ideological manipulation, whereas in an autobiography the composer may manipulate the life events, but ideas, because of their marginal status in the narrative, remain less susceptible to manipulation.

As in the preceding chapter, I am interested in how composers--John Cage in this case--see themselves, and, above that, how they want to be seen. This latter goal entails an examination of the rhetorical strategies used by composers to portray themselves. In the next sections, I will first describe John Cage's "Autobiography," the "Autobiographical Statement," and the "Diaries.". Then I will examine Richard

Kostelanetz's *Autobiographies*. Kostelanetz has been Cage's editor for many years; he is responsible for Cage's "Autobiography," and an analysis of his own *Autobiographies* offers much insight into both the nature of autobiography as a genre and, more specifically, the import of the "Autobiography." The next section focuses on three fundamental aspects in Cage's life: his immediate family, his vocation (including his mentors), and his professional success. Then, I contemplate Cage's thought from the perspective of Derrida's "metaphysics of presence." I show that Cage's thought, despite his alleged breakthrough, still partakes in the dualist system of Western thought. In my conclusion I propose that, in spite of the elusive, "immaterial" quality of Cage's work informed by chance and silence, his abundant writings--and especially his autobiographies--yield a systematic aesthetic outlook. As Jonathan Brent points out, Cage's work "does possess coherent aesthetic principles derived from specific choices about the nature of reality and art."²

²Jonathan Brent, Preface" *A John Cage Reader in Celebration of his 70th Birthday*, ed. Peter Gena and Jonathan Brent (New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1982) p. x.

4.2 Cage's autobiographies: A description

John Cage published three conventional autobiographical texts: "A Composer's Confessions," the "Autobiography" and the "Autobiographical Statement." In addition, he published segments of his "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will only Make Matters Worse)." However, all his books include recollections, reminiscences, anecdotes, and stories that would certainly qualify as autobiographical. To be sure, although only the "Composer's Confessions," the "Autobiography," the "Autobiographical Statement," and the "Diaries" are autobiographies proper, Cage's written output as a whole can be seen as a body of texts thoroughly determined by an autobiographical mode.

Cage gave "A Composer's Confessions" as a lecture at Vassar College in 1948, and its interest lies more in its forecasting qualities than in its retrospective look.³ Cage introduces the themes that eventually will be developed in subsequent autobiographical texts: his early music lessons, college, a year in Paris, his beginnings as a composer under the tutelage of Adolph Weiss, Henry Cowell, and Schoenberg, and his interest in "Christian philosophy and Mysticism." He describes his early experiments with "new technological means" which resulted in his *Imaginary Landscapes*--a group of compositions employing "records of constant and variable

³Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage Writer: Previously Uncollected Pieces* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1993) pp. 27-44.

frequencies on turntables, the speed of which could be varied. Durations were controlled by lowering or raising the pick-up."⁴ The account finishes by stating some of the composer's immediate projects: "first, to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be 3 or 4 1/2 minutes long--those being the standard lengths of 'canned' music--and its title will be *Silent Prayer*.... And, second, to compose and have performed a composition using as instruments nothing but twelve radios. It will be my *Imaginary Landscapes No.4*."⁵ Thus, in 1948 Cage anticipated these two projects that eventually became his trademark.

The "Autobiography" (included in the volume *Conversing with Cage*)⁶ consists of a compilation of interviews with Cage edited by his long-time friend, advocate, and editor, Richard Kostelanetz. The source of the selected statements from the interviews is varied. All of the interviews were previously published from the 60's to the 80's in miscellaneous journals and magazines.

The editor's task involved the selection of the interviews, of the fragments to be newly published, and the chronological arrangement of the fragments according to the composer's life. Kostelanetz identifies the interviewer of

⁴Cage, "A Composer's Confessions," in Kostelanetz, *John Cage Writer*, p. 33.

⁵Cage, "A Composer's Confessions," in Kostelanetz, *John Cage Writer*, p. 43.

⁶See note 1 for full bibliographical citation.

each segment and the year it was originally published. Moreover, there is a profuse bibliography at the end of the book. Cage supervised the final version of the text and he added the brief glosses given between brackets.

It is apparent that Kostelanetz's method is unorthodox. The resulting *Autobiography* certainly complies with standard editorial policies, such as giving individual credit to each interviewer. However, how legitimate is an autobiography assembled with bits and pieces from disparate interviews? Is the genre of autobiography being expanded or is this a totally new genre? Who is responsible for such a collage of stories and opinions chronologically arranged, the author or the editor? What are the specific roles of the narrator (Cage), the editor (Kostelanetz), and the journalists that took the interviews?

Readers often expect the authors of autobiographies to write down their own texts. Actually, this is not the case for many autobiographies: neither Wagner, nor Stravinsky--to name two cases examined here--wrote down their autobiographies, and this was more a rule than an exception. Moreover, it is well known that, for market reasons, publishers force upon their published writers an army of editors. Invoking rationales such as "good prose," "ethical reasons," and "accuracy," they impose editorial policies on writers. As a result, authors are never one hundred percent responsible for the final published text.

As literary critic Philippe Lejeune has remarked, even if the author and the actual writer do not coincide, a text can still be an autobiography.⁷ The principal precept of autobiography is that the subject of the narrative (the main character) and the author (the person whose name appears on the title page) coincide--Mattheson's third-person autobiography is still an autobiography despite the pronoun "he." The role of editors, ghost-writers, collaborators, secretaries, etc. must be taken into account, but their intervention is not enough reason to dismiss an autobiographical text as unauthentic. The fact that Cage did not write the opinions, ideas, and anecdotes expressed in the "Autobiography" does not disqualify the text. In fact, the contrary could be argued: precisely because of its unorthodox editorial method, the "Autobiography" is a superb example of the manifold forms of autobiographical writing.

Lejeune remarks that collaboration between a ghostwriter or editor and an author "blurs in a disturbing way the question of responsibility..."⁸ because the reader of an autobiography has certain assumptions about the text he reads. Lejeune explains these presumptions as follows:

The interest in autobiographical texts results from the belief in a discourse coming directly from the interested party, reflecting at the same time his vision of the

⁷See Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write" in *On Autobiography*, pp. 185-214.

⁸Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," in *On Autobiography*, p. 192.

world and his manner of expressing himself. Even when the reader becomes aware of the existence of a *writing*, this work, coming from the "author" himself, takes nothing away from the authenticity of the message, even adds some value to it. The device of the autobiographical contract results in facilitating a confusion between the author, the narrator, and the "model" and in neutralizing the perception of the writing, in rendering it transparent. This fusion takes place in the autobiographical signature,⁹ at the level of the name on the title page of the book.

As mentioned above, Kostelanetz has put together Cage's autobiography by selecting more than one hundred statements and assembling them in chronological order. Kostelanetz's method is in a sense similar to that of a typical biographer: he compiles biographical data on his subject, and then organizes this data chronologically. What then is the difference between a standard biography and a text such as the "Autobiography," since in both cases the subject (Cage) has had almost no intervention in the process of assemblage? The difference is only rhetorical, although it has significant consequences. In a biography, the writer uses the indirect style ("Cage believed that..."), whereas in an "edited" autobiography the text is written in direct style ("I [Cage] believed..."). The result is that in the edited autobiography the author's name appearing on the cover of the book and the narrative voice ("I" [Cage]) coincide. The "I" reinforces the text's legitimacy because even the shrewdest reader may be carried away by the narrative power of the "I" and forget that

⁹Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," in *On Autobiography*, p. 187.

this "I" is not merely Cage's voice only, but also the combined utterance of at least Cage, Kostelanetz, and the journalists.

Beyond these rhetorical subtleties, the "Autobiography" is a conventional autobiography. The first sentence reads: "I was born in Los Angeles in 1912."¹⁰ The text that follows is so well constructed that the reader would never know the real and disparate sources of these statements unless the editor disclosed them. The text also complies with standard autobiographies in the sense that the narrative relates the life of a person, putting the accent on his ideas. Kostelanetz's selection of texts falls into two areas: first, recollections and anecdotes, and second, ideas and opinions that help the reader understand Cage's aesthetics.

In order to gain insight into Kostelanetz's editorial methods let us now consider his own *Autobiographies*.¹¹ His autobiography is entitled *Autobiographies* for many good reasons. Since Kostelanetz is an artist in the broadest sense of the word as well as a critic, he is not only concerned with literary experimentation, but also with rationalizing and

¹⁰Kostelanetz, p. 1.

¹¹Richard Kostelanetz, *Autobiographies* (New York: Mudborn Press and Future Press, 1981).

explaining it to the general reader. The *Autobiographies*, surprisingly enough, present not only an experimental autobiography, but also plenty of explanations about the process of writing an unorthodox autobiography. Kostelanetz, not content with experimenting with the genre of autobiography, attempts to find a rationale for every unorthodox step he takes.

The first important detail to notice is the plural of the title (*Autobiographies*) because it is precisely plurality, diversity of angles, and multiple perspectives that Kostelanetz wants to offer the reader. Kostelanetz explains his point as follows: "My experimental hypothesis, which the reader is invited to test, is that the autobiography of a several-sided person would be even more various in its approaches."¹² Kostelanetz defines his book as a "cubist history" because the *Autobiographies* attempt to break the chronological pattern that traditionally structure most autobiographies and because "1980 is not in the nineteenth century."¹³ He points out that a nineteenth-century autobiography, such as Chateaubriand's, is nowadays inconceivable. Kostelanetz's two main goals are to avoid strict chronological narration and to avert the nineteenth-century pretense that there is a coherent, monolithic self. He points out:

¹²Kostelanetz, *Autobiographies*, p. 14.

¹³Kostelanetz, *Autobiographies*, p. 14.

Ever since I graduated school I have been interested in the possibilities of alternative forms of historiography. I remember making some notes on varieties of approaches for my M.A. advisor in 1963. Three years later I was knocked over by Harold Innis's incredible 1947 Presidential address to the Royal Society of Canada, "The Owl of Minerva," which was posthumously reprinted in his book *The Bias of Communication* (1951); for he treated initially chronological materials--the stuff of history--in a spatial way. Historian friends who knew me then will no doubt remember my talking about Innis and his influence upon Marshall McLuhan, whose *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) is also a spatially structured work of cultural history. In general, ideas that stay in my mind for a long time have a way of popping up in my work.¹⁴

Kostelanetz opposes the concept of linear history to his "spatial" or "Cubist history." Besides a break from the chronological narrative pattern, his Cubism involves the inclusion of as many narrative angles as possible. He attains this by incorporating the following procedures: reproducing autobiographical texts written at different times throughout his life; involving different writers (his mother and his best friends, among others); simulating different narrative voices (using the third person pronoun, for example); including non-literary texts (his test scores); and assembling diverse modes of self-representation, such as samples of his signature. In brief, Kostelanetz's *Autobiographies* is an attempt not only to give an account of his life from his own point of view, but also to study and even stretch the definition of autobiography. He admits:

As both a practitioner and critic of experimental writing, I have always been particularly interested in discovering how structure determines content--better yet,

¹⁴Kostelanetz, *Autobiographies*, p. 233.

in discovering how alternative structures can redetermine content.... Besides, since much of my creative life has been devoted to exploring unusual forms, the structure of this book is finally also a reflection of myself.¹⁵

In my opinion, the *Autobiographies* are ultimately unsuccessful because the "Cubist," multi-perspective narrative ends up conveying the same old monolithic, compact, coherent--and therefore unreal--self. The good side of the *Autobiographies* is that the book indirectly tells us how an autobiographical self gets constructed through the fabric of language. Kostelanetz's overt agenda is to write an autobiography that is unorthodox. Thus he takes each basic component of the autobiographical text and inverts it. By dismantling each structural element of the text, he reveals its inner workings. Kostelanetz wants to present an autobiography that goes against the conventions of the genre and by doing so, he exposes these same conventions: chronological order, authorial homogeneity, unity of narrative voices, standard literary prose, conventional syntax and punctuation, and homogeneous typefaces.

This is an interesting result: Kostelanetz does not reach his explicit goal of presenting a "several-sided" self, for this is an impossible aim; he does achieve, however, the job of baring those essential elements of autobiography. Thus the *Autobiographies* turn out to be a useful exercise helping the reader to understand what an autobiography is. In any

¹⁵Kostelanetz, *Autobiographies*, p. 15.

case, Kostelanetz's "experiment" is more a network of strategies aiming at veiling his personality than a way to disclose his "multi-sided" character.

"An Autobiographical Statement"¹⁶ is a lecture first delivered by Cage in Japan (November 1989) and subsequently at Southern Methodist University (April 1990). A footnote to the published version warns that the lecture "is a work in progress," though there is no indication of what this might mean. Although both texts provide an outline of the major events of Cage's life, there are some differences. In terms of form, the main contrast between the "Autobiography" and the "Statement" is that the latter does not involve the explicit intervention of an editor. In other words, Cage wrote the "Statement" himself (or at least there is no overt acknowledgement of someone else's intervention).

While the "Autobiography" was published in 1987, the "Statement" dates from 1991. The logical inference is that the organization of the earlier "Autobiography" influenced the "Statement." In other words, in the "Statement" Cage told the story that Kostelanetz had formerly designed for the

¹⁶John Cage, "An Autobiographical Statement," *Southwest Review* LXXVI (1991) 59-76. Reprinted in *John Cage Writer*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz *op. cit.*, pp. 237-48.

"Autobiography." This is proven by the fact that the content and structure of both texts are parallel. Cage asserted with frankness that in the latter period of his career he was so busy delivering lectures and addresses that he often repeated the talks, while in the beginning of his career he often wrote individual texts for each new invitation to speak.¹⁷ With all probability, when Cage put together the later "Statement" his reference point was the "Autobiography."

Cage's "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) 1965" shows Cage expanding the possibilities of a conventional genre, the diary.¹⁸ Cage justifies the diary's subtitle ("How to Improve the World...") as the result of R. Buckminster Fuller's influence: "I began the *Diary* optimistically in 1965 to celebrate the work of R. Buckminster Fuller, his concern for human needs and world resources, his comprehensive scientific designs for making life on earth an unequivocal success, his insistence that the problem solving be continuously regenerative."¹⁹

¹⁷Kostelanetz, p. 24.

¹⁸John Cage, "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will only Make Matters Worse) 1965" in *A Year From Monday* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967). The "Diary" is scattered throughout the book, see p. 3ff.

¹⁹John Cage, "Foreword" to *M* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) p. xi. The volume includes the

He describes the "Diary" as follows:

It is a mosaic of ideas, statements, words, and stories. It is also a diary. For each day, I determined by chance operations how many parts of the mosaic I would write and how many words there would be in each. The number of words per day was to equal, or, by the last statement written, to exceed one hundred words....I used twelve different type faces, letting chance operations determine which face would be used for which statement. So, too, the left marginations were determined, the right marginations being the result of not hyphenating words and at the same time keeping the number of characters per line to forty-three or less.²⁰

Cage neither treats the genre as a receptacle for his psychological distress, nor uses it to record his daily events. Cage's "Diary" is a notebook suitable for all types of ideas and anecdotes not necessarily connected among themselves. On the surface, Cage's thought is a-systematic, erratic, and unpredictable. A conventional philosophical treatise or book of essays would not be able to accommodate the diversity of his insights because these are not intended as a systematic exposition of a thesis and the subsequent argument that supports it.

Like Nietzsche and Thoreau, Cage frequently expressed his wisdom in the form of aphorisms and short narratives. The diary is the perfect form to convey these types of insights because it allows the writer to neglect the shortcomings of large narratives where one must connect an assertion to what precedes it and to what follows it. In a diary the writer can

continuation of the "Diary."

²⁰John Cage, *A Year From Monday*, p. 3.

jot down a thought with no concern for what he or she wrote two or ten days earlier.

Another aspect to take into account is Cage's advocacy of "chance" or "indeterminacy." A systematic thinker writes systematically because he or she believes that the world is a systematic and coherent entity. If one believes, as Cage did, that reality is the result of accident or chance, a systematic exposition of ideas would betray one's premise. A diary allows a place for "accidental," non-intentional thoughts. A diary is a chance game: writers jot down certain ideas because they happen to have the notebook handy. Had the phone rung or a visitor arrived, diarists would not have written what they wrote, or at least they would have written it in a different form. In a diary, most of what gets written down might never have been written and what was never transcribed might have been recorded had the circumstances been different. Cage understood that at the heart of a diary there is always a chance principle.

In conclusion, although the "Autobiography," the "Statement," and the "Diaries" constitute Cage's autobiographies proper, most of his writings show hints of self-depiction. The three autobiographical accounts stretch the possibilities of the genre: the "Autobiography" is an assemblage of assorted interviews; the "Statement" reiterates most of the information provided in the earlier text hinting at the possibility that Cage told the story that Kostelanetz

had previously drawn in the "Autobiography"; finally, in the "Diaries," Cage takes advantage of the fortuitous nature of diary writing to develop in a text his chance ventures. Though Cage's autobiographies are perhaps unorthodox, they nevertheless provide a path to understanding not only the arbitrariness of genre boundaries, but also to discerning the basic elements of Cage's thought.

4.3 Three aspects of the autobiographies: Family, mentors, and success

Although the facts and events writers describe in their autobiographies can be debatable, what is unquestionably true is that this is the particular way a writer wished to be portrayed and remembered. In the "Statement," when confronted with the challenge of summarizing his life in a few pages, Cage must admit that everything has influenced him. He asserts:

When I wish as now to tell of critical incidents, persons, and events that have influenced my life and work, the true answer is all of the incidents were critical, all of the people influenced me, everything that happened and that is still happening influences me.²¹

Perhaps "everything" influenced and continued to influence Cage until his death, but the fact is that in his writings and also in his conversations, according to those who knew him, Cage tended to tell the same stories over and over. Some of the accounts narrated in the autobiographies are summaries of events told elsewhere. Two examples of this are the text "How the Piano Came to be Prepared,"²² explaining the origins of his famous "prepared piano," and the story relating how he won a mushroom contest on Italian TV.²³

Some stories, though, were never told. There is evidence

²¹Cage, "Statement," p. 59.

²²John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979) pp. 7-9.

²³Cage, *A Year from Monday*, p. 20.

that certain areas of his memory--areas that now are being unearthed by students and scholars--remained buried practically throughout his life. The fact that Cage told certain stories persistently might mean that these stories related events that were undoubtedly more important or influential than others. However, one could construe this reiteration as revealing not what really influenced Cage, but rather what he wanted to pass as influential, as well as a way to block other memories.

As noted above, the "Autobiography" and the "Statement" are similar; I have even suggested that in the "Statement" Cage told the story Kostelanetz had assembled some years earlier in the "Autobiography." The inference here is simple: the "Autobiography" and the "Statement" present the narrative of how John Cage wished to be perceived and remembered. Although "everything" could have marked Cage's life, three aspects nonetheless seem more consequential than others. Let us now focus on these issues as brought up in the autobiographies--his family, his mentors, and his professional success. This will show how autobiographical writing is a game involving remembrance and forgetfulness. Unfortunately, what really influenced Cage will be hard to elucidate.

FAMILY: FATHER AND MOTHER

The beginning of the "Autobiography" is entirely conventional

and rather formulaic ("I was born in Los Angeles in 1912"). Following a customary pattern in autobiographical writing, the narrator supplies an outline of his family background. Cage traces his lineage to a John Cage "who helped Washington in the surveying of Virginia."²⁴ His grandfather was an "itinerant Methodist Episcopal minister."²⁵ His mother married twice before she married his father, and could not remember the name of her first husband. The father was an inventor, but most of his inventions (including a submarine) were a failure.

In the "Statement" the same theme is expanded. When speaking about his family, Cage adopts a somewhat more confessional tone than in the "Autobiography." Again, he describes his father as an inventor more visionary than successful. The mother is characterized as having "a sense of society," though "she was never happy."²⁶ He reports that she once declared to him: "Now, John, you know perfectly well I've never enjoyed having a good time."²⁷ Cage presents his mother as a temperamental woman in contrast with the more balanced and evenhanded father: Cage recalls that his father told him that his mother was always right even when she was wrong. Cage remembers that, opposing his father's generosity,

²⁴Kostelanetz, p. 1.

²⁵Kostelanetz, p. 1.

²⁶Cage, "Statement," p. 59.

²⁷Cage, "Statement," p. 59.

his mother would frequently threaten to abandon them and that in fact she often would leave the house. "Don't worry," Cage's father would say as a rejoinder, "she will be back in a little while."²⁸

Except for the preceding remarks, in both the "Autobiography" and the "Statement," Cage provides a very scanty picture of his parents. It is nonetheless a vibrant one--father and mother are presented as opposite archetypal figures. The father is characterized as a creative, unconventional person; he has not been successful in life, but he still keeps a positive attitude. The mother, on the contrary, is presented as forgetful (she does not remember her first husband's name!), unhappy (she openly says so), and temperamental (she threatens to forsake father and children). While the father has idealistic goals (he is an inventor), the mother pursues more pedestrian activities (she founded a women's club and was an editor for the *Los Angeles Times*).

Autobiographical writing often betrays authorial intentions more than any other type of writing. In these family recollections, despite their succinctness, Cage reveals many of the unfortunate stereotypes about the way we perceive fathers and mothers according to pre-established role models. Cage's mother is an archetypal woman seen from a patriarchal point of view, while the father is an ideal type of what all men should be (or at least of those qualities that Cage

²⁸Cage, "Statement," p. 30.

admired about men). A clear-cut set of dichotomies arises: the father is presented as possessing high ideals, a lofty mind, an even temperament, vision, and creativity, whereas the mother is realistic, prosaic, impulsive, and emotionally unbalanced.

The interesting aspect of describing other people--especially those close to the narrator through family ties--is that the process of describing the other becomes a mechanism of self-description. This means that the narrator selects--chooses to remember, in autobiography--those traits in other people that he identifies as his own characteristics. By sketching a sympathetic illustration of his father and presenting the mother as an unhappy person, Cage is strengthening his link with his father, while he is playing down and even denying his mother's possible influence.

Maynard Solomon has successfully demonstrated that Charles Ives attempted to present his father as a direct influence on his development as a composer, though this influence is actually dubious.²⁹ Solomon has examined Ives's autobiographical writings and has come to the conclusion that Ives idealized his father as a role model and as a real

²⁹Maynard Solomon, "Some Questions of Veracity," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* XL/3 (1987) 443-70. Solomon's opinions have become controversial and there are at least two responses to his arguments: J. Philip Lambert in the following issue of *JAMS* and Stuart Feder's appendix "On the Veracity of Ives's Dating of His Music" in *Charles Ives: "My Father's Song": A Psychoanalytic Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 351-57.

musical influence on him. Ives also credited him with anticipating many techniques in twentieth-century musical modernism. At the same time that he idealized his father, Ives concealed other influences and predated many early compositions in order to present himself as an initiator of Modernism.

Moreover, Solomon documents Ives's homophobia. He often referred to homosexuals as "pansys," "lilypads," "old-ladies," and "pussy-boys."³⁰ However, he described his music as "strong" and "masculine."³¹ Evidently, Ives wished to underscore the masculine element in his life and music, whereas he was determined to eradicate all types of "feminization" of his art. He removed the feminine element in his life and work by idealizing his father as the prototype of manhood, playing down the role of women in his life, and by loathing homosexuals, since they could be a challenge to clear-cut gender conventions and also a threat to his own masculinity.

Why composers emphasize only one side of their family tree while playing down the other is a rather unanswerable question (besides the explanations provide above), and each case must be considered individually. Cage manifestly favors his father to the detriment of his mother. Autobiographies are accounts in retrospect, and therefore the narrator, when

³⁰Solomon, "Some Questions," p. 466.

³¹Solomon, "Some Questions," p. 466.

collecting his memories, always has the advantage of the present. In 1987 and 1991, the years of publication of both autobiographical texts, Cage was more than seventy years old and had under his belt a distinguished (albeit controversial) career as a composer, visual artist, writer, lecturer, and performer. He was aware of his role as an iconoclast and dissenter--an acknowledged unorthodox artist against all conventional practices. It seems logical, then, that if a role model had to be found, this would more likely be his father (the iconoclast inventor of a submarine) than his mother (the unhappy, prosaic housewife).

In the "Autobiography," Cage relates an anecdote that he recounted many times. It shows the composer's elation at being linked to his father by a third person. Cage recalls that Schoenberg was once asked if he had any remarkable American students:

Schoenberg's first reply was to say there were no interesting pupils, but then he smiled and said, "There was one," and he named me. Then he said, "Of course he's not a composer, but he's an inventor--of genius."³²

The anecdote, which may or may not be true, illustrates two significant points. Evidently, Cage takes Schoenberg's comment as a compliment: Cage is proud of being an "inventor" and not a conventional composer. In addition, Schoenberg's comment implies that even an impartial third person can perceive Cage's direct link with his father.

³²Kostelanetz, p. 6.

The process of linking oneself to a predecessor is not inductive, but deductive. Cage does not search for the source of his character and find it in his father, but rather he wants to find a legitimation for his personality and creates a "father" that provides it. Cage sees himself as an iconoclast and an inventor and subsequently talks about the traits in his father that would confirm his make-up. Furthermore, in Cage's case, this search for the father goes beyond his immediate parents and creates a typical Freudian "family romance." He finds his origins in the forefathers of the United States, asserting that a John Cage joined Washington in the surveying of Virginia.

Cage's emphasis on his father and on the masculine side of his family is revealing. He links himself to his father (an inventor), to his grandfather (a preacher), and to an early settler (an explorer). There can be no doubt about this: in spite of his flagrant unorthodoxies, Cage is portraying himself as a conventional male artist-hero. In an unpublished paper titled "John Cage at Mary Carr Moore's: Theorizing a Feminist Avant-Garde," Catherine Parsons Smith has put forward the idea that Cage systematically "discarded the role of the feminine from his aesthetic story." She argues that modernism was essentially a misogynous movement and Cage, as the quintessential modernist artist, systematically excluded "the feminine" from his life and music.

As a rule, Cage presents women as suffering from hysteria or infantilism. When Cage portrays women he delineates an ideal "other" aimed at asserting the being with whom he does not want to be confused: an unbalanced and childish being. We already examined the uncharitable portrait of his mother as an unbalanced, "unhappy" woman. In addition, he ridicules his first music teacher, Aunt Phoebe, depicting her as a puerile being as well as an archetypal maiden.³³ We know, though, that in her lessons she encouraged improvisation ("chance," if you will) and other experimental uses of sound that would eventually become Cage's trademark. Although Cage does not credit her with any influence on him, it would be plausible to think that the Cage of the chance and silent pieces would never have existed without Aunt Phoebe's encouragement.

Also in the "Autobiography" he relates with sarcasm that, after he returned from Paris, he lectured about modern art to an audience of "housewives":

Meanwhile I had gone from house to house in Santa Monica selling lectures on modern music and modern painting. I sold ten lectures for \$2.50 and I had an audience of something like 30 or 40 housewives once a week.³⁴

Smith confirms that during the 1930's, Cage circumscribed himself to middle- and upper-middle-class women who were interested in modern art and music in the Los Angeles area. Others have maintained that it is very difficult to discern

³³Kostelanetz, p. 2.

³⁴Kostelanetz, p. 4.

actual facts from that period of Cage's life. Robert Stevenson has pointed out that there are numerous "errors" concerning Cage's early years in Los Angeles,³⁵ while Michael Hicks has remarked that Cage's chronologies are based frequently on wrong accounts by the composer himself.³⁶ Both the "Autobiography" and the "Statement" offer very few details concerning this "feminine" milieu. Clearly, when Cage evokes those "feminine" years, he tends either to "forget" them or to treat the recollections with sarcasm and adamant aloofness. Succinctly put, he attempted to erase women and their influence from his life and work.

According to Smith, Cage shows his forgetfulness of women in an incident concerning Mary Carr Moore. Cage and Moore met in Los Angeles, where both lived at the time, around 1933. They participated in musical evenings at the Manuscript Club, Verna Avery's artistic salon. One evening Cage performed without success, and Moore tried "to shoo him away." Cage left the Club, never to return. Interviewed about the incident, he asserted that he had no recollection of those events. Smith concludes:

One is led to wonder about the relative influence of the spoken and the unacknowledged in Cage's accounts of his life in those years. By his selective forgetting about all this, I suspect that Cage was symbolically killing

³⁵Robert Stevenson, "John Cage on His 70th Birthday: West Coast Background," *Inter-American Music Review* V/1 (1982) 3-17.

³⁶Michael Hicks, "John Cage's Studies with Schoenberg," *American Music* VIII/2 (1990) 125-140.

the female and the culturally feminine in his musical background, in order to become a modernist, even an avantgarde, composer. The fact that in this period he was also struggling with his sexual orientation, and that part of what he later suppressed was his relationship with Don Sample, complicates but seems to strengthen rather than weaken my point.

In his recollections, Cage described his relationship with his former wife, Xenia, with detachment. Cage relates that he met Xenia Andreyevna Kashevaroff when he was working at his mother's arts-and-crafts store. She came in, and he fell in love; he also says that he was convinced that they were going to marry. At first, Xenia paid no attention to him and left the store. She returned some weeks later and that evening they had dinner together.³⁷ After they married, Xenia became interested in bookbinding and studied with Hazel Dreis, who is described as "a very fine bookbinder. I mean a real bookbinder--not a casemaker, but a bookbinder."³⁸ Cage's descriptions indicate that the school, located in Santa Monica, was a kind of community of artists living together. He points out that, at the time, he was writing percussion music and in the evening the bookbinders would perform his music.

Cage's portrait of Xenia is short, albeit respectful, and it somehow contrasts with the paternalistic tone of other portraits of women. In both the "Autobiography" and the "Statement," his characterization of Merce Cunningham, Cage's

³⁷Kostelanetz, p. 7.

³⁸Kostelanetz, p. 9.

long-time companion, is basically non-existent. Several times, Cage mentions his name as an artistic collaborator, but only once does he reveal a personal angle, and it turns out to be quite irrelevant: Cage says that, whereas in his leisure time Cunningham enjoys TV, he keeps on working because he does not separate work from leisure.³⁹

VOCATION AND MENTORS: DUCHAMP AND SCHOENBERG

According to the "Autobiography," Cage came into contact with music for the first time through the piano. His aunt Phoebe, whom we have already met, and several "neighborhood piano teachers" introduced Cage to a kind of piano repertoire that Cage calls with sarcasm *Piano Music the Whole World Loves to Play*. Aunt Phoebe thought (always according to the "Autobiography") that Bach and Beethoven could never interest Cage; he admits that at the time he enjoyed Grieg. Cage confesses that he played scales and exercises with discipline, but he became more interested in sight-reading. Then he avers, "being a virtuoso didn't interest me at all."⁴⁰ Another influence on Cage's early musical life was the church. A relative, Aunt Marge, sang at church every Sunday, and he describes her as having a "beautiful contralto voice."⁴¹ It

³⁹Kostelanetz, p. 31.

⁴⁰Kostelanetz, p. 2.

⁴¹Kostelanetz, p. 3.

was only when he began studying at Pomona College that Cage came to know the Beethoven string quartets because a Japanese student at the same institution introduced them to him.

In spite of his exposure to music, Cage thought at the time that he wanted to be a writer. In fact, he became one, to judge by the influence of his writings; furthermore, Cage's personality without his writings is not very interesting. He relates how in college he noticed how everyone had to read the same books, a fact that deeply disappointed him. He thought that a trip to Europe would be more worthwhile for his education and apprenticeship as a writer than to stick to a fixed canon of books. To an educational system based on a closed canon of texts, Cage opposed and advocated a "chance" method, thus anticipating his aleatory music. In the "Statement," Cage asserts that instead of reading the required books, he "went into the stacks and read the first book written by an author whose name began with Z."⁴² He also remarks that, as a result, he got the highest grade in his class. If the story were not true--and there is no way to know--this would be a typical case of teleology: Cage sees all past events as purposely leading to the present realizations--chance music.

After his Paris sojourn, which lasted a year and a half, Cage returned to California and began painting and composing. He decided to become a composer because he got more

⁴²Cage, "Statement," p. 60.

compliments for his music than his art. At the time he met Richard Buhlig who, according to Cage, was the first pianist to play Schoenberg's op. 11 and who taught him composition. Later on, his teachers included Henry Cowell, Adolph Weiss, and Schoenberg.

Cage speaks of Schoenberg with a mixture of sarcasm and respect; the reader is never sure which view prevails in Cage's mind. He points out that when he began his career, composers needed to vow their alliance to either Schoenberg or Stravinsky. Cage asserts:

In the '30s we didn't take Bartók seriously. We took Stravinsky and Schoenberg seriously as the two directions that one could legitimately take. I chose Schoenberg, and I think it was right, because toward the end of his life Stravinsky also turned to twelve-tone music.⁴³

Cage admits that he was "extremely partisan" in the dispute between Schoenberg and Stravinsky. He became enraged at an impresario who advertised a concert in Los Angeles with music by Stravinsky as "Music of the World's Greatest Living Composer." Cage felt "indignant and marched straight into the impresario's office and told him that he should think twice before he made such advertisements in a city where Schoenberg was living."⁴⁴

Schoenberg agreed to take Cage as a student free of charge, although he did not think much of Cage's music. Schoenberg discouraged his career, saying that Cage had no

⁴³Kostelanetz, p. 5.

⁴⁴Kostelanetz, p. 8.

feeling for harmony. He also ridiculed Cage's opinions in public. Cage invited him to attend several performances of his music, but Schoenberg always declined.⁴⁵ Cage confesses that despite all these humiliations, he "worshipped him like a god."⁴⁶

Cage's description of Schoenberg's physical appearance is not generous, although it seems accurate when compared with Schoenberg's painted self-portraits:

He wasn't tall, and he had very poor taste in clothes. He was almost bald and he looked as though he was haunted. As far as I was concerned, he was not an ordinary human being. I literally worshipped him.⁴⁷

The self-portraits indeed convey the "poor taste" in clothes and his baldness. As for his "haunted" countenance, one needs only read his 1923 diary. Perhaps this proves Cage's perceptivity and sagacious observations.⁴⁸

Cage says that the more hostile Schoenberg became toward his music, the more determined he became as a composer. He confesses that he "believed in what he had to say and teach,"⁴⁹ but a gap separated them--harmony. According to Cage, Schoenberg's notion of music was based on harmony, which for

⁴⁵Cage, "Statement," p. 61.

⁴⁶Kostelanetz, p. 5.

⁴⁷Kostelanetz, p. 5.

⁴⁸Schoenberg's painted self-portraits and diaries are discussed in the next chapter.

⁴⁹Kostelanetz, p. 6.

him "was not just coloristic; it was structural."⁵⁰ Cage acknowledges that he did not take harmony seriously, thinking of it only as a "coloristic" element of music. He also reveals here that what is really important for him is noise. Moreover, after he became acquainted with Zen Buddhism he found more reasons for not paying attention to harmony. Cage does not elaborate on this, but his reasons are easy to imagine: functional harmony implies reaching goals, whereas Zen and Cage's own chance music strive for a non-activity and non-intentionality.

Also in the "Autobiography," Cage observes with irony that Schoenberg was self-conscious about his role in Western music and that he felt part of a musical family whose ancestors were the three big B's. He states: "He [Schoenberg] would take a particular group of four notes and he would say, 'Bach did this with these four notes, Beethoven did this, Brahms did this, Schoenberg did this!'"⁵¹

The fact is that Cage is also very self-conscious of his role as perennial iconoclast. Cage indirectly reveals his aspirations in American twentieth-century music when he relates the New York performance of Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat*. The producers decided that three American composers would take three different parts in the representation. Aaron Copland was assigned the narrator's part, Elliot Carter was

⁵⁰Cage, "Statement," p. 61.

⁵¹Kostelanetz, p. 9.

the soldier, and John Cage took--the devil's part!.⁵² The story shows that Cage was a self-conscious *enfant terrible* and he aspired to the role of the indisputable iconoclast of American music.

While Schoenberg represents the mentor from whom Cage learned what not to do (harmony, for example), he presents Duchamp as his real mentor--the one who prepared him to be a real *enfant terrible*. Duchamp did not teach Cage how to compose, but rather how to be a composer, how to assume the persona of a composer. In both the "Autobiography" and the "Statement," Cage depicts Duchamp as taking over the role left off by Cage's father, grandfather, and even the early John Cage--the idealist, iconoclast, imaginative inventor, spiritual preacher, and the enduring explorer. Moreover, Duchamp is the axis on which most aspects of Cage's thought concur and Cage constantly remarks their mutual affinities: their common interest in the irrational, mushrooms, chess, and their role as nonconformist individuals. Duchamp turns out to be Cage's only real cult figure in the "Autobiography" and the "Statement." As for "worshipping" Schoenberg, a close reading of both texts shows that Cage is either ironic or that Schoenberg is only a counter-hero who helps emphasize the portrayal of Cage's real hero--Marcel Duchamp.

Cage describes how he met Duchamp with an emotive anecdote. He had just come to New York City and found that

⁵²Kostelanetz, p. 9.

his work was better received (if not altogether successful) among visual artists than musicians--a fact, incidentally, that would remain the same for most of his career. Cage was supposed to give a concert at Peggy Guggenheim's art gallery under the title "The Art of this Century." However, being ambitious and not knowing the ways of the art world--especially the ways of perhaps the most resolved champion of twentieth-century art, Peggy Guggenheim--Cage arranged another concert at the MOMA. "When Peggy discovered that," relates Cage, "she canceled not only the concert but also her willingness to pay for the transport of the instruments."⁵³

When Peggy Guggenheim notified him of her decision, Cage felt so disappointed that he burst into tears. Coincidentally, Duchamp was in the same apartment and, when he heard him cry, he came into the room and asked him why was he weeping. Cage explained to him the whole story, including his plan for a double presentation at the MOMA and Guggenheim's gallery. Duchamp listened to the devastated Cage and "said virtually nothing, but his presence was such that I felt calmer.... He had calmness in the face of disaster."⁵⁴

After this first high-strung encounter, Cage pursued his friendship. He admits that he used chess as an excuse to be with Duchamp. He also confesses that he was not a good player and that Duchamp often scolded him for not trying to win hard

⁵³Kostelanetz, p. 11.

⁵⁴Kostelanetz, p. 11.

enough. He intended to become impregnated with Duchamp's views, without trying to pull these views out of him directly, but as they came naturally. One might as well describe Duchamp's teachings as "chance lessons." As Cage puts it:

That was my intention: to be with him as often as circumstances permitted and to let things happen rather than to make them happen. This is also an Oriental notion. Meister Eckhard says we are made perfect not by what we do, but by what happens to us. So we get to know Marcel not by asking him questions, but by being with him.⁵⁵

Although Cage wanted to have a "chance" relationship with his admired Duchamp, both knew that their chess hobby was precisely the opposite of chance, and the same could be said of Cage's passion for mushrooms. Cage recounts that Duchamp gave him his book on chess and wrote a dedication stating: "Dear John, Look out, still one more poisonous mushroom." Cage, interpreting Duchamp's remarks, contrasts mushrooms and chess with his chance experiments, "because both mushrooms and chess, you see, are the opposite of chance operations."⁵⁶ With mushrooms one cannot take chances because they are venomous; chess is a game based on controlling a network of possibilities and discriminating among those less conclusively leading to win the game. Duchamp, he says, taught him the basic rule for playing chess: "Don't just play your side of the game, play both sides."⁵⁷ Cage remarks that one should

⁵⁵Kostelanetz, p. 25.

⁵⁶Kostelanetz, p. 18

⁵⁷Kostelanetz, p. 11.

apply this precept to all aspects of experience.

In sum, Cage presents Schoenberg and Duchamp as his main artistic mentors. Schoenberg's image as provided by Cage is overtly laudatory, but if one reads between the lines, it is easy to distinguish a strong ironical tone. Duchamp, on the contrary, is Cage's ideal cult figure; in the narrative of his life, Duchamp takes on the role left off by Cage's father.

PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

When Cage and Xenia moved to New York City, they thought that he could make a living writing music for the radio and films, but what he calls his "fan mail" at CBS was so negative that no program producers would risk a commission. "We were penniless, absolutely penniless," says Cage dramatically.⁵⁸ Things got a little bit better when Martha Graham commissioned *Credo in Us*; the choreographer could not pay, but Joseph Campbell compensated Cage by letting him stay for free in his apartment throughout the summer. Cage recalls that, although he and Xenia felt thankful to Campbell because they had a place to stay, their situation was still desperate because they had no money for food. He recalls how one day he found out that he did not even have one cent. Then he took the drastic measure of writing letters to some friends and patrons requesting a subsidy. He got in the mail something like fifty

⁵⁸Kostelanetz, p. 11.

dollars.⁵⁹

Cage blames the unsuccessful beginnings of his career on many factors. He complains that his music was from the very beginning better received among visual artists than musicians. Furthermore, conventional concert audiences expected from him something he could not give, namely music as communication: "I had been taught in the schools that art was a question of communication. I observed that all of the composers were writing differently. If art was communication, we were using different languages. We were, therefore in a Tower of Babel situation where no one understood anyone else."⁶⁰ He also states: "I noticed that when I consciously wrote something sad, people and critics were often apt to laugh.... The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences."⁶¹ Cage learned this idea from an Indian female music student.⁶²

In addition, he considers that art is undervalued in the United States. In this country, he argues, art is institutionalized in universities and colleges that impose lists of books that everyone must read. Cage offers the following rationale to the crisis of art in the United States:

⁵⁹Kostelanetz, p. 12.

⁶⁰Cage, "Memoir" in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) p. 77.

⁶¹Cage, "Statement," p. 62.

⁶²Cage, "Memoir," p. 77.

The people in Europe who concern themselves with art are for the most part not students, who are busy studying in Europe, but are rather the people who have the leisure to pay attention to art. Therefore, Europe considers itself more cultivated than the U.S., which is considered by Europe to be a little far away from tradition and from culture, and to be a little bit barbarian. Well, what is happening in the U.S. is this: When you get a job in society and enter in the economic-political structure of capitalism, you no longer have any time for art. You are not interested in art any longer; only a few people are.⁶³

Cage admits that the first time he earned an important amount of money was not through his music or lecturing but through a television contest in Italy; the quiz was about mushrooms. It was only in the sixties that he began to earn money through his music. To his surprise, many universities offered him fellowships and the opportunity to give paid lectures. From 1960 on, Cage became professionally attached to institutions such as Wesleyan University, the University of Cincinnati (where he was made composer-in-residence), the University of Illinois, and the University of California at Davis. The money and the prestige of these fellowships was quite welcome:

And I needed the large income that all these fellowships and residencies gave me, because I became in their late life the sole support of my mother and father. So that I was obliged to make a great deal of money, whereas up to 1958, I never knew where the next dollar was coming from.⁶⁴

In 1956, Cage taught a composition class at the New School for Social Research. The title of the course was

⁶³Kostelanetz, p. 22.

⁶⁴Kostelanetz, pp. 18-19.

"Composition of Experimental Music." In the "Autobiography," Cage relates his approach to teaching composition. He would begin his course by giving the students a little background (often autobiographical) about his concerns and activities; he would also try to learn the same from his students. His function as a teacher was not to communicate to his students a certain body of knowledge, but rather "to stimulate them to change."⁶⁵ He describes the materials at the New School as inadequate, but nevertheless sufficient for some practical projects. They had "a closet full of percussion instruments, a broken-down piano and things that people brought with them."⁶⁶ He always emphasized to his students that they should not become involved in compositional projects that could not be produced. All the compositions created in his class had to be feasible. This meant that most pieces had to be subject to the available instruments.

Cage's method can be compared with his description of Schoenberg's lessons. As shown above, Cage depicts Schoenberg with ironic admiration. Although Cage considers Schoenberg "a magnificent teacher,"⁶⁷ he has his misgivings about him. He suggests that Schoenberg did not like his work and ridiculed him. It is interesting to see, therefore, that Cage's description of himself as a teacher is practically the

⁶⁵Kostelanetz, p. 20.

⁶⁶Kostelanetz, p. 20.

⁶⁷Kostelanetz, p. 5.

opposite of Schoenberg. Cage presents himself as an extremely free teacher, whereas Schoenberg is the prototype of Germanic strictness. According to Cage, Schoenberg scolded him sometimes because he broke too many rules in harmony. When the student followed the rules closely, Schoenberg would say, "Why don't you take a little more liberty?"⁶⁸ In one instance the inflexible Schoenberg told Cage: "My purpose in teaching you is to make it impossible for you to write music."⁶⁹ This idea sharply contrasts with Cage's precept of practicality and feasibility for his students.

Cage says that his major earnings came from what he calls the "paraphernalia" of music--lectures and concerts. Cage is not explicit about the benefits his published works produce, both music and writings. He admits, though, that "anything I do is used in this society,"⁷⁰ meaning that his graphic art, his writings, and his music sell out. He expresses his gratitude to Walter Hinrichsen of Peters because he signed him after other publishers, including Schirmers, had rejected him. Cage concedes that at Peters, "I can do anything I want. That was not my privilege until I was nearly fifty years old."⁷¹

⁶⁸Kostelanetz, p. 5.

⁶⁹Kostelanetz, p. 5.

⁷⁰Kostelanetz, p. 21.

⁷¹Kostelanetz, p. 21.

The "Autobiography" and the "Statement" introduce three fundamental aspects of Cage's life. I chose to gloss the way the composer sees his immediate family and mentors, his early vocation, and his final achievements. These elements are the backbone, so to speak, of an artist's autobiography, for he construes his life according to his works, and memories of family, teachers, and places are set against the backdrop of his art as a unifying principle. An artist's life makes sense because of his works.

4.4 Cage's metaphysics of presence

Donal Henahan once characterized John Cage's outlook on life and art as "a worshipping of wildness, a romanticizing of the savage."⁷² As is well known, Cage studied Zen Buddhism and his writings show its sway. Themes such as nature, spiritual quietude, the environment, and a balanced diet are prominent. Moreover, the idea that the past was closer to nature and that progress only generates decline is one of Cage's main ideas. Many texts suggest that in a past age, one encountered nature directly and harmoniously. This consonance between human beings and their environment became lost by acculturation: people modified their "natural" ways, shifting to a culture of rationality, categorization, classification, and subsequent control and hierarchical power.

In this section, I construe Cage's artistic endeavor as an attempt to return to "nature" (or what he thought nature was). I examine three characteristic features of Cage's output as seen in the autobiographies--noise, chance, and non-syntax--and I show that he thought that they could make possible this return. By appealing to Nature as represented by noise, chance, and non-syntax, Cage connects his thought with a long-rooted tradition in Western thought--what Derrida has called the "metaphysics of presence."

Derrida challenges a certain tradition in Western

⁷²Donal Henahan, *The New York Times*, October 22, 1976, section C, p. 7.

philosophy that underscores a system of dichotomies in which one element is privileged over the other.⁷³ For example, Derrida shows that many Western philosophers including Aristotle, Rousseau, and Husserl privilege speech over writing. They consider speech a "purer," "truer" mode of utterance, whereas writing is a mere transcription of speech. Aristotle, for instance, believed that the reality of the mind was represented by speech, and that, in turn, writing could represent speech. Thus, according to this idea, writing is two steps away from what is believed to be the "true" reality of the mind:

MIND $\Rightarrow$ SPEECH $\Rightarrow$ WRITING

According to Peggy Kamuf, one interpreter of Derrida:

speech is thought of as remaining closer to psychic interiority (that itself reflects things in the world by natural resemblance) than writing, which symbolizes interiority only at a second remove. And writing can be seen as deriving from speech because it is thought of as purely phonetic transcription. It mirrors speech but is less apt than speech to restore the "thing itself," the referent, idea, or signified which, in one way or another, occupies the place of a pure intelligibility that has never "fallen" into the sensible realm of the exterior sign or symbol, and that therefore always remains present to itself.⁷⁴

Derrida argues that privileging "pure" speech amounts to denying the trace by appealing to a "truer," "purer" referent

⁷³Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

⁷⁴Peggy Kamuf, ed., *A Derrida Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) p. 31.

that might or might not have a reality of its own, but in any case is not really accessible--except by conjecture--to the human mind. Derrida proposes to concentrate on the trace, dismissing the metaphysical referent. For example, his analyses of philosophical texts concentrate on the text as it is, not as the author might have intended it to be. Authorial intention has no place for Derrida because "intention" would then become another ideal referent with no material extension.

Cage's outlook would be susceptible to the same type of scrutiny. In his writings and music, he creates sets of dichotomies privileging one element over another. For Cage, noise is a purer, truer, form of sound than music, because it is closer to nature. Chance, in turn, is a more genuine way to put sounds together than organized sound, because it is not sullied by human mediation. Finally, Cage relinquishes syntax and conventional writing because these are forms of unauthentic experience. But before discussing in detail these three sets of oppositions, I want to focus on Cage's notion of Nature, since Cage appeals to it as a decisive, irrevocable metaphysical referent.

Cage subscribes to the idea that "true knowledge of the world was once known as musical knowledge."⁷⁵ This implies that music is an artistic experience that is closer to the soul than any other, just as speech, according to Aristotle,

⁷⁵M.C. Richards, "John Cage and the Way of the Ear" in *A John Cage Reader*, p. 48.

was closer to the mind than writing. Nevertheless, Cage stated that theater "resembles life more closely than any arts do, requiring for its appreciation the use of both eyes and ears, space and time."⁷⁶ So, theater resembles life, but music tells the arcane secrets of the soul.

Cage imagines an ideal reality which we no longer can experience because of a process of unremitting acculturation. Reality, as we experience it now, is nothing but a trace of an ideal, already lost, referent. Cage identifies this ideal referent in the general notion of nature, a category that Cage considers unproblematic, since he does not seem to take into account that "nature" is not natural at all; as Fredric Jameson has shown, "nature" is a cultural, social, and historical concept.⁷⁷ "Natural" food, though Cage discovered it only in the sixties, is not really "natural," but, quite the contrary, the result of a millennial culture (that of India, for example).

The "Autobiography" expresses some of Cage's idealized views on nature. It includes, for example, many references to the world's environmental problems, the importance of a balanced diet, and the role of non-Western medicine in the composer's health. Cage points out that nowadays it is difficult to find a place with the most basic natural elements

⁷⁶Cage, *A Year from Monday*, p. 32.

⁷⁷Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) p. 112.

for a human being--water and air. He remarks that Iceland has almost no industry and the water and the air there are very good, "I mean really good," he points out emphatically.⁷⁸ He also says that all the food we take is poisoned. He admits that he distills his water and follows a macrobiotic diet, both of which, he claims, have soundly improved his health.

The notion of nature and "naturalness" have a specific translation in Cage's works: noise and chance, for example, are for Cage ideal, "natural" referents that must be reclaimed because civilization has neglected them by favoring musical sound and authorial control. Thus, Cage's metaphysics of presence consists of privileging "natural" elements such as noise and chance over the acculturated ones, namely organized sound. Cage claims the need for a return to what he believes "natural"--non-organized sound. Cage's metaphysics of presence can be represented graphically as follows:

NATURAL ELEMENTS	ADULTERATED ELEMENTS
NOISE	SOUND
CHANCE	CONTROL
FEELING	SYNTAX
NATURAL FOOD	REGULAR DIET
MUSIC	LANGUAGE

Let us consider now three specific instances in which Cage creates a set of oppositions considering one the "ideal," "natural" referent, and the other its material, adulterated

⁷⁸Kostelanetz, p. 28.

trace.

NOISE/SOUND

In Cage's thought, humans have lost their innocence. "Innocence" must be understood here as integrity, uncorruptedness, and wholeness, not as stupidity. Following the teachings of Buddhism, Cage believes that a people must be what they are, not what is imposed upon them to be. An individual's "proper" (own) nature is his or her instincts and a greater assimilation with nature (ecology). In order to regain his true essence, a person must follow his instincts, which are never wrong because they respond to a higher level of logic.

Now, man has lost innocence through rational thinking. Syntax is the basis of rational thinking, and therefore the guilty party in man's loss of innocence. Art must be an agent in helping man to regain integrity. Western art, though, is frequently determined by rational thinking: writing depends on syntax, and music resorts to organized sound. Thus Cage appeals to noise as a way to break musical syntax and reason, and consequently makes possible a return to the natural. Cage justifies his choice of noise (as opposed to sound) because of its "lawlessness." He states:

In 1952, with Morton Feldman, Christian Wolf, Earle Brown, and David Tudor, I had taken steps to make a music that was just sounds, sounds free of judgements about whether they were "musical" or not, sounds free of memory

and taste (likes and dislikes), sounds free of fixed relations between two or more of them (musical syntax, or glue, as Henry Cowell called it when he introduced one of our concerts in the fifties at the New School).⁷⁹

Cage reports that when he was studying composition with Schoenberg harmony did not interest him. "The reason I couldn't be interested in harmony was that harmony didn't have anything to say about noise."⁸⁰ He incorporated noise--even city-like, industrial, and therefore "anti-natural" noise--in all the facets of his life. Visitors to his apartment on Sixth Avenue often noticed that it did not look like a "composer's apartment" (perhaps they expected to find a grand piano and music sheets scattered on the floor). He often defended his home by saying that what was really musical about his apartment was the street noise:

I wouldn't dream of getting double glass because I love all the sounds. The traffic never stops, night and day. Every now and then a horn, siren, screeching brakes,--extremely interesting and always unpredictable.... I don't need a piano. I have Sixth Avenue, the sounds.⁸¹

Cage remarked that the opposite of noise is silence, but silence is not the absence of sound. "From Rhode Island I went to Cambridge and in the anechoic chamber at Harvard University heard that silence was not the absence of sound but was the unintended operation of my nervous system and the

⁷⁹Cage, *M*, p. xii.

⁸⁰Kostelanetz, p. 9.

⁸¹Kostelanetz, p. 28.

circulation of my blood."⁸² This experience with silence led him to write his silent piece, 4'33".

Conventional composers and audiences privilege sound over noise. "If a sound is unfortunate enough to not have a letter [C, D, E, F...] or if it seems to be too complex, it is tossed out of the system on the grounds: it's a noise or unmusical."⁸³ Cage opposes this prejudice against noise, because noise is the real, truer sound in all its complexity. So-called musical sound (specific pitches) are just a reduction of the multifarious wealth of true, natural sound. To reclaim noise is to affirm nature with all its power. Cage relates that Oskar Fischinger, the film maker, told him that "everything in the world has its own spirit which can be released by setting it into vibration." Impressed by these remarks, he admitted:

I began hitting, rubbing everything, listening, and then writing percussion music, and playing it with friends. These compositions were made up of short motives expressed either as sound or as silence of the same length, motives that were arranged on the perimeter of a circle on which one could proceed forward or backward. I wrote without specifying the instruments, using our rehearsals to try out found or rented instruments. I didn't rent many because I had little money.⁸⁴

The whole passage exposes Cage's idea of returning to nature. There is, first of all, Fischinger's idea, that things possess a "spirit," an idea that anthropologists have

⁸²Cage, "Statement," p. 66.

⁸³Cage, "Juilliard Lecture" in *A Year from Monday*, p. 97.

⁸⁴Cage, "Statement," p. 61.

identified in many non-Western cultures. Cage is captivated by this notion; this enchantment is fueled by the belief that in the "unnatural," acculturated West most people do not subscribe to it. Cage feels that, by "hitting" and "rubbing," the spirit of things is released; this is what he does, and the result is "percussion music" performed with "found" objects/instruments.

CHANCE/CONTROL

John Cage's ideas about chance are also based on his familiarity with Zen Buddhism. He confesses that, although in the thirties he heard a lecture by Nancy Wilson Ross about Zen and Dada, it was a decade later that he became really interested in Zen and non-Western philosophies. After he was divorced from his wife Xenia, he felt the need for psychological support and instead of turning to psychoanalysis he "got involved in Oriental philosophy and that performed for me the function that psychoanalysis might have performed."⁸⁵

Zen Buddhism became a direct influence on Cage's music from 1946 on. He was Daisetz Suzuki's student at Columbia University for three years and he declares that Suzuki's teachings determined both what he was trying to say and the way he was attempting to convey it. He points out that "such Oriental notions as creation, preservation, destruction, and

⁸⁵Kostelanetz, p. 13.

quiescence" influenced his music.⁸⁶ He then began using charts to compose in "a spirit of acceptance, rather than a spirit of control."⁸⁷ Thus Zen induced Cage to begin using chance methods to compose music.

In his music as well as in his writings, Cage always attempts to convey the idea of "no-mindedness," a notion directly taken from Zen Buddhism. No-mindedness means that one relinquishes intent and control. Chance music--music with no apparent intervention of the composer--shows a possible path to reach this no-mindedness. Cage legitimates chance music by observing that the ego is an impediment to enlightenment and a "barrier to experience."⁸⁸ Cage proposes meditation as a way to free the ego and let it "flow with all of creation."⁸⁹ Life should be experienced without mediation; the composer as controller of the sounds one hears is a mediator between the listener and "natural" sound. His role, therefore, obstructs, a direct experience of sound. Chance music supposes a direct experience of life. Cage asserts that in his compositions *Atlas Eclipticalis* and *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* "the composer is not a governing agent."⁹⁰ A music project involving the recording of the plumbing sounds

⁸⁶Kostelanetz, p. 17.

⁸⁷Kostelanetz, p. 17.

⁸⁸Kostelanetz, p. 13.

⁸⁹Kostelanetz, p. 20.

⁹⁰Cage, "Statement," p. 75.

of his apartment is called "music of contingency, which means that you're necessary, but not in control."⁹¹

Cage defends the idea of non-intention by stating that a tourist visiting Paris and going only to the famous places will certainly end up knowing nothing at all about Paris. However, the tourist who tries to live in Paris like a Parisian--a tourist who unintentionally wanders around--will get to know Paris better than the other one. "The best way to learn about Paris would be to have no intention of learning anything and simply to live there as though you were a Frenchman. And no Frenchman would dream of going, say, to Notre Dame."⁹² Thus chance music is loftier than organized sound because it is accidental, non-intentional quality.

Composers do not need to control their music. Cage argues that there should not be any difference between composer, performer, and audience, for the same reason that art should not be different from life. To break these distinctions implies a "flow with all of creation." He asserts: "I'm out to blur the distinctions between art and life... and between teacher and student. And between performer and audience, etcetera."⁹³ In another instance he states: "For many years I've noticed that music--as an activity separated from the rest of life--doesn't enter my

⁹¹Kostelanetz, p. 27.

⁹²Kostelanetz, p. 24.

⁹³Kostelanetz, p. 23.

mind. Strictly musical questions are no longer serious questions."⁹⁴

He is quick to point out, though, that, contrary to what some might think, he uses chance as a discipline. Chance does not consist of giving up choices, but his choices "consist in choosing what questions to ask."⁹⁵ He turned to the *I Ching* to learn what questions one should ask. The *I Ching* became important to Cage, not only to compose, but to solve personal problems, although he admits that he no longer uses it for such purposes. The *I Ching*, says Cage, helped him compose, making his "responsibility that of asking questions instead of making choices."⁹⁶ Cage affirms that the *I Ching* help him create another idea of music. He says that he moved "from structure to process, from music as an object having parts, to music without beginning, middle, or end, music as weather."⁹⁷

Cage compares the passing quality of music to a mushroom. "It's a curious idea perhaps," he says, "but a mushroom grows for such a short time and if you happen to come across it when it's fresh it's like coming upon a sound which also lives a short time."⁹⁸ Cage became interested in mushrooms during a summer at a cooperative community in Stony Point in the early

⁹⁴Cage, "The Future of Music" in *Empty Words*, p. 177.

⁹⁵Kostelanetz, p. 17.

⁹⁶Cage, "Statement," p. 64.

⁹⁷Cage, "Statement," p. 66.

⁹⁸Kostelanetz, p. 5.

fifties. He says that when he was living in New York he was used to enjoying a good deal of privacy, but when he moved to Stony Point he had to share the house with the other members of the community. Then he would take long walks into the forest, and the variety of mushrooms he saw made him interest himself in the matter. Cage states that, since he was at the time involved in chance music, he thought he should do something on the side in which chance played no role. He knew that with mushrooms he "could not take chances,"⁹⁹ since mushrooms are edible or not. Cage eventually became an expert in mycology, taught the subject at the New York School of Social Research, and founded the New York Mycological Society.

FEELING/SYNTAX

In Cage's mind the first step to purge nature and the human being from acculturation is to eliminate syntax as well as other conventions of expository writing. All his writings, but especially the "Diaries" are examples of his confrontation with syntax. Cage describes his outlook on syntax as follows:

Syntax, according to Norman O. Brown, is the arrangement of the army. As we move away from it, we demilitarize language. This demilitarization of language is conducted in many ways: a single language is pulverized; the boundaries between two or more languages are crossed; elements not strictly linguistic (graphic, musical) are introduced; etc. Translation becomes, if not impossible, unnecessary. Nonsense and silence are produced, familiar to lovers. We begin to actually live together, and the

⁹⁹Kostelanetz, p. 15.

thought of separating doesn't enter our mind.¹⁰⁰

Here Cage appropriates the image of syntax as a military force and therefore as a constraining mechanism. The conspicuously unorthodox "Diaries" are an attempt to liberate writing from all these military-like constrictive forces. Some unconventional traits of the "Diaries" include: non-syntactical prose, non-conventional use of base fonts, typefaces, sizes, bold, italics, punctuation, and spacing between words. In one specific instance, Cage substitutes the words "quote" and "unquote" for the standard quotation marks (") in order to introduce a citation.

Cage points out that Chinese lacks syntax and this is reflected both in the way Chinese people think and, therefore, in their philosophy. When translating a Chinese poem into English, it is impossible to do it justice because of the translation from a non-syntactical system to a syntactical one. Two translations of the same poem end up being quite different. Cage relates how the non-syntactical aspect of Chinese affects philosophy:

Daisetz Suzuki often pointed out that Zen's nondualism arose in China as a result of problems encountered in translating India's Buddhist texts. Pali had syntax; Chinese did not. Indian concepts in opposition to one another did not exist in Chinese. *Fixity* became *mountain-mountain*; *flexibility* became *springweather-springweather*. Buddhism became Zen Buddhism. Looking for an Indian precedent, Chinese patriarchs chose the Flower Sermon of the Buddha, a sermon in which no word

¹⁰⁰Cage, M, *op.cit.*, p. x.

was spoken.¹⁰¹

Cage maintains that language, besides being a constrictive, military-like force, distorts human experience because it mediates between the individual and the thing itself. Natalie Crohn Schmitt has examined Cage's understanding of language and its organizational principle, syntax. She states:

We are not aware of many ways in which language has misled us about the nature of reality. Language has meaning and intention; reality does not. Insofar as language is objective ("There is a horse," rather than "I see a horse"), it is misleading.... Syntax is a system of subordination, which because we describe things in sentences, suggests an equivalent system of subordination in nature. Language presents things one at a time and sequentially; experience does not. Language analyzes events into static, clear, and discrete elements, whereas experience is continually flowing, dissolving, and reforming them; the word "horse" is misleading in its creation of a category. Our language is committed to three-dimensional space and the forward flow of time, whereas as we penetrate deeper into nature we find that the images and concepts of ordinary language have to be abandoned in order to understand it.¹⁰²

Cage disparages syntax as the fundamental logic of language and therefore as the ultimate reason responsible for the misrepresentation of human experience. To relinquish syntax and even language to a certain extent provides the opportunity to reach reality in its "true" bareness, without mediation. Cage's 1979 *Empty Words* has been defined as an effort to make language "saying nothing at all, a language

¹⁰¹Cage, *M*, p. xii.

¹⁰²Schmitt, "John Cage, Nature, and Theater" in Gena and Brent, eds., p. 28.

without sentences and not confined to any subject."¹⁰³ The ultimate reason to get rid of syntax is to have language approach music, which for Cage provides true harmony with reality. For M.C. Richards, *Empty Words*,

is meant to make a gradual transition from language to music, renouncing first of all sentences, then phrases, then words, then syllables, then letters. Part of the impulse is, surely, to turn our attention to living source, to become unabstract. No matter. Not to understand something is the least of our troubles, Cage implies, so long as we have an experience.¹⁰⁴

For Cage what really matters is the "experience" of a thing, reality, or the environment--an experience without the distorting mediation of language and its "armed force," syntax. Cage echoes Wittgenstein when he says that "the meaning of something is not in itself, but in its use."¹⁰⁵ Cage believes that Truth is not a fixed category, but only the result of a network of logical utterances that convey its truthfulness. Grammar makes possible this network of logical utterances, and consequently it is accountable for Truth. This is what Wittgenstein called language-games (*Sprachspiele*). In his *Philosophical Investigations*¹⁰⁶ he remarked that the meaning of a sentence depends not on the

¹⁰³Schmitt, p. 29.

¹⁰⁴M.C. Richards, "John Cage and the Way of the Ear" op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁰⁵John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) p. 191.

¹⁰⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958).

particular, independent sense of the words and its syntax, but on the position the sentence plays in a language-game. Thus a sentence has different meanings if placed in different contexts or language-games. This means that in order to understand what a sentence means one must contextualize it by filling in the framework within which it was uttered and discern the train of thought the sentence suggested.

As noted above, syntax does not allow us to experience reality directly because it is an active mediator between the self and experience. Syntax legitimates a network of preestablished assumptions (prejudices, preconceptions) that filter reality. Cage's work is an attempt to return to a direct experience of things, a fresh contact with reality without the mediation of rational thought. Grammar and especially syntax is a system of privileges that allows certain truths to be uttered, while subjugating others. To relinquish syntax presupposes to renounce the mediating agents of writing. Once these filtering agents are removed, one can experience reality directly.

When reading and writing a conventional text, one always assumes that words, sentences, punctuation, paragraphs, and any other element saturating the fabric of text are value-free agents carrying a message. That is to say that the "message" is not affected by these elements and that these elements are simple carriers of the message. By altering grammatical principles, Cage (and others such as Joyce and Derrida) shows

that these principles carry as much meaning as the "content" of the text proper. In fact the distinction between "form" and "content" is neutralized because an experimental text shows that the story is its form and vice-versa. Cage problematizes writing conventions: whereas in a conventional text grammar is taken as a passive, value-free agent delivering a message without intervention, Cage regards writing conventions as the true "content" of a text. As a result, grammar's alleged value-free characteristic is thrown into question.

To recapitulate, Cage's assault on syntax and other writing conventions aims at avoiding their distorting mediation between individuals and their experience. Cage problematizes writing conventions by remarking that they are not mere "carriers" of meaning, but that they are actually active, meaningful elements. Moreover, writing that relinquishes syntax approaches music and thus true human experience. And here is where one can identify Cage's metaphysics of presence--in this idealization of "natural" experience, unmediated by language and best represented by the least corrupted of all arts, music. Surprisingly, it is remarkable that despite all the idiosyncracies of the external aspect of Cage's text (syntax, punctuation, etc.) the message itself is very plain. Very often Cage tells a short anecdote, reports on the weather ("It's freezing."), introduces an aphorism, quotes a philosopher, or makes an observation. Many

anecdotes, especially those pertaining to his life, are repeated over and over. Nevertheless, many other texts in the "Diaries" remain impenetrable from a rational point of view.

4.5 Conclusion: Chance autobiographies, but definite ideas

Both the "Autobiography" and the "Diaries" are texts assembled according to chance principles. Although the biographical information provided in both texts deserves study, their chance form is even more interesting because it is consistent with Cage's aesthetics of indeterminacy. Interviews are "ethereal" as Cage's music was meant to be, but once they are transcribed, edited, and published, they become a fixed text susceptible to close analysis and scrutiny. By editing ("fixing") Cage's opinions, Kostelanetz solidifies the flowing, accidental nature of Cage's thought, and by creating a well-confined text, he restricts the profusion of meanings. The "Autobiography" thus turns out to contradict, at least in this aspect, Cage's *credo*. The same could be said of the "Diaries": the "accidental" jotting down of loose ideas becomes a well-structured text by the simple act of writing them down.

One of Cage's main contributions to contemporary culture is his challenge to the concepts of AUTHOR and WORK. Western art music is articulated around these two basic concepts: the concept of AUTHOR of musical works (the composer) and the concept of WORK (the composition). Cage's artistic production has been an intellectual and artistic effort to release art from these two notions. His aleatoric or chance music--music in which the composer's creative will has been replaced by absolute casualness--declares void the concept of composer as

creator and controller, since it is only chance that creates the composition. *Imaginary Landscape No.4* (1951) is one of his earliest works to explore aleatoric techniques. The composition is scored for twelve radios and twenty-four performers; one performer operates the station-selection dial, while a second works the volume control of each radio. The result is the sounds (music, noise, newscasts, commercials, etc.) broadcast on the radio organized by no other principle than chance and unintentionality. On the other hand, Cage's 4'33"--a "composition" made up of four minutes and thirty three-seconds of silence--rebuts the existence of the traditional musical work. By questioning the validity of this paradigm (author/work) in his music, texts, and visual art, Cage has opened definitive paths in twentieth-century culture.

Cage's contribution is not free of contradictions. One of the premises of my study is that Western art music is articulated around the concepts of work and author. On the one hand, Cage's musical output relinquishes the concept of work proposing instead "silence" and "noise," while on the other, he challenges the notion of author, replacing it with "chance." The autobiographies, however, dispute these ideas because, thanks to them, he creates his persona as an author and delineates the contour of his musical works. Thus, the most evident paradox is without a doubt that Cage, who denied himself the persona of the composer, is today a renowned composer, and he who abandoned the concept of the musical work

has nowadays a large catalogue of works which are published and performed with steady frequency. The biggest contradiction, though, is the fact that the supposed "flowing" character of his artistic endeavor is--thanks to his writings and especially his autobiographies--susceptible to analysis. Cage's chance, aleatoric, indeterminacy, and unintentional artistic attempts notwithstanding, the autobiographies suggest a solid, compact, understandable likeness of one of the most (self-acknowledged) iconoclastic composers of this century.

CHAPTER V

Non-written Autobiographies

5.1 Introduction: Depiction in music

Can composers create their autobiography in music? How can biographical information be encoded in a musical work and how can listeners decode this information? These questions, though legitimate ones, depend on a larger question: is music able to depict something or somebody at all?

In the following section I will survey several examples of autobiography in music. I will begin with Virgil Thomson's written *Autobiography* and his musical portraits and self-portraits. Thomson thought that depiction was a viable course for a composer (as admittedly it is for a painter and a writer), and his one hundred and forty portraits and self-portraits prove his convictions. Fortunately for us, his *Autobiography* offers all sorts of rationales for his autobiographical music. Following his friend and mentor Gertrude Stein, Thomson (he tells us) cultivated the "discipline of spontaneity," sketching his portraits as they came to mind in a totally unpremeditated manner. Thomson's portraits are undeliberate, uncalculated impressions of the sitter. Furthermore, a musical portrait, he says, is always a self-portrait, because it is impossible to avoid the author's presence in his work. Thomson argues that the portraits and self-portraits are so by virtue of their title

or elsewhere.

Two centuries earlier than Thomson, Couperin had already written many musical portraits and self-portraits. He portrayed society ladies in music as his fine-arts colleagues would paint them. Generally speaking, Couperin's portraits and self-portraits are intimate harpsichord pieces, and because of their descriptive character they have been called "pictures of life."¹ For the purpose of this study, the most relevant aspect of Couperin's harpsichord compositions is that they portray people in music. As would be the case centuries later with Thomson, most sitters were the composer's friends and patrons. Couperin's main focus was the depiction of the subject's mood, not his or her physical features; perhaps because of this, his most successful portraits are those concerned with a general character or type, as in, for instance, *La prude* and *La distraite*.

Composers of character pieces and musical portraits and self-portraits have often been considered "minor" masters. Couperin's case exemplifies this point: David Tunley's biography, for instance, aims at correcting the popular view of Couperin "as a composer of elegant trifles written for a sophisticated, yet frivolous, audience."² Tunley also quotes the early music historians Burney and Forkel as being little sympathetic to Couperin's musical "trifles." This attitude

¹David Tunley, *Couperin*, (London: BBC, 1982) p. 7.

²Tunley, *Couperin*, p. 7.

can only be interpreted as an anti-representative music aesthetic--an attitude that, incidentally, seems to continue up to the present. As Thomson remarked, "music in the long run tends for musicians to be just music."³

La Couperin is considered Couperin's self-portrait. In an essay in *The New Grove*, Edward Higginbottom sees a direct correspondence between the music and its subject, Couperin: "One may read in its spacious sequences, its firm linear quality and strong tonal architecture a high seriousness and dedication to music."⁴ The piece has also been said to be a portrait of Couperin's wife or daughter, but Wilfrid Mellers vows that it "must surely, in its fusion of gracious melancholy with irony and even wit, represent the composer himself in maturity."⁵ *La Couperinée* is said to represent the composer's young daughter, and *La Convalescence* portrays "Couperin himself, for he had been and still was ill. The music's strong pathos complements the elegiac nobility of *La Couperin*."⁶

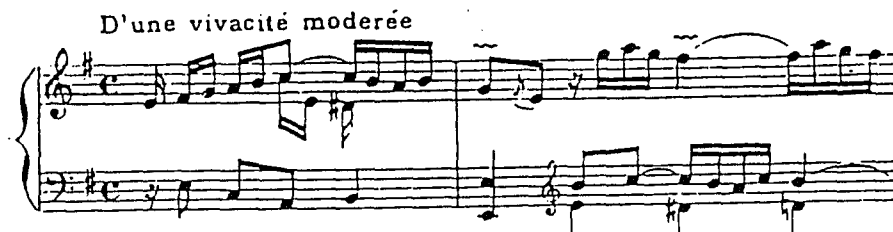
³Virgil Thomson in his Preface to Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson's Musical Portraits* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986) p. x.

⁴Edward Higginbottom, "Couperin, François," *The New Grove*, IV, p. 868.

⁵Wilfrid Mellers, *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) p. 428.

⁶Mellers, p. 434.

La Couperin.

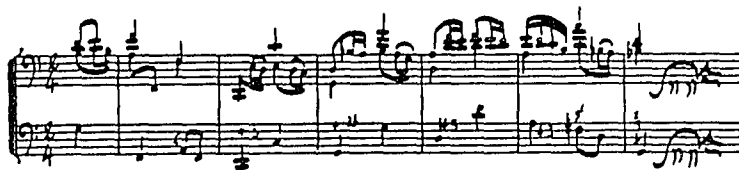


The self-portrait proper, *La Couperin*, is an allemande wholly articulated and structured on a single theme, a procedure that he had used before only seldom. Forqueray⁷ also portrayed his friend Couperin, and it is remarkable to notice the likeness between Forqueray's portrait of Couperin and the latter's self-portrait. Both "look" alike but in addition they are similarly composed: they are three-voice allemandes constructed on a single motif and a repetitive rhythmic pattern, very much in the manner of J.S. Bach. In the following musical examples, one can compare both pieces.⁸



⁷Antoine Forqueray (1672-1745) was a French composer and gamba player.

⁸This facsimile of the musical incipit of both pieces is reproduced in Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin*, trans. Alexandra Land (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1990) p. 322.



In all, these examples from the pre-history of the musical portrait show that biographical and autobiographical depiction in music have been practiced since the eighteenth century. After considering Thomson's works in detail, I will move on to the philosophical implications of autobiographical music. In order to present my thesis, I use a well-known case, Smetana's *From My Life*. I conclude that the stories that circulate with a composition are not marginal elements affixed to this composition, but *the composition itself*. In order to follow up my thesis on the ontology of the musical work, I examine Shostakovich's autobiography, *Testimony*, and his endeavors in musical autobiography.

Finally, my examination of Schoenberg's painted self-portraits show yet a new autobiographical dimension in music. Schoenberg used painting as a form of self-scrutiny and also a way to present his idea of the artist as a visionary and a prophet. I have also considered Schoenberg's scanty diaries in order to complete my analysis of Schoenberg as autobiographer. In conclusion, two important considerations emerge from this study: first, musical autobiography has been a viable mode of expression for composers; and second, my inquiry shows that a new definition of the concept of musical

work is needed if one is to accept musical autobiography.

5.2 Virgil Thomson's *Autobiography* and his musical portraits and self-portraits

Virgil Thomson's career is characterized by a definite bent towards autobiography in all its forms. As a composer, he portrayed his friends and patrons in more than one hundred musical portraits; in addition, he wrote two autobiographical compositions--his own musical self-portraits. As a writer, he authored a full-fledged autobiography⁹ and numerous critical articles and essays marked by his personality. In Virgil Thomson it is hard to separate life from works; like most composers drawn to autobiography (Schumann and Smetana, among others) his persona saturates his music and, of course, there would be no persona without the music.

Because Virgil Thomson was a musician as well as a music critic, he often tried, in his writings and interviews, to rationalize the process of portraying someone through music. He certainly presents an exemplary case study because, while as a composer he practiced portraiture and self-depiction through music, as a critic and writer he was able to theorize in an articulate manner about the drawbacks of such an undertaking. However, it should not be a surprise that most of his comments on the matter are paradoxical; in fact, most discussions about musical portraits go against all logic because of the apparent incongruity of attempting to convey a

⁹Virgil Thomson, *An Autobiography by Virgil Thomson* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985).

visual idea (a portrait) through a sound medium (a composition). No one would demand a painting "to sound" like a train, for example (although the image of a train can certainly evoke its sound), so why is it that the possibility of visual depiction has been and still is such a pervading theme in music aesthetics?¹⁰ Virgil Thomson's case will now be considered in order to gain some insight into this matter.

Anthony Tommasini has studied and classified Virgil Thomson's musical portraits and self-portraits.¹¹ The whole output includes 140 portraits and two compositions that Thomson considered his self-portraits.¹² The people portrayed by Thomson include his friends, patrons, and some of the most outstanding creative talents of the twentieth century, including Gertrude Stein and Picasso. Thomson's portraits employ a variety of instruments and ensembles; they include *Six Selected Portraits for Solo Piano* (the sitters include Aaron Copland and Anthony Tommasini), *Five Ladies for Violin and Piano* (Alice Toklas, among them); and *A Portrait of Two* for oboe, bassoon, and piano (the first two movements are two separate portraits of two individuals and the last movement is

¹⁰There is only one possible explanation: the sense of sight is always privileged over the other senses. However, this notion goes beyond the scope of this study.

¹¹Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson's Musical Portraits*. See also the CD *Virgil Thomson's Portraits and Self Portraits* performed by Tommasini and others, Northeastern Classical Arts 240-CD. The musical examples are from Tommasini's book.

¹²Tommasini, pp. 35-36.

a portrait of both of them sitting together).

In the *Autobiography* Thomson relates the first time he wrote a portrait as follows:

When I returned to Paris around the first of September after a two-month absence, I had been in Basque lands, Spain, in Brittany, in Normandy; and I had brought home a completed opera, a symphony finally finished and mostly orchestrated, and two essays in what was for me a new genre, that of the portrait in music.¹³

Then he goes on to explain that a young Spanish violin player asked him to write something for her, which he did by attempting to "depict" in music the way the violinist entered "the hotel's dining-arbor with assurance, her equally self-assured mother one step behind....All this plus some gesture (Spanish gesture) I endeavored to depict in music."¹⁴

Señorita Juanita de Medina accompanied by her mother



According to the *Autobiography* the composer was satisfied with his "new genre" and wrote Gertrude Stein that the idea of

¹³Thomson, p. 123.

¹⁴Thomson, p. 123.

the portraits "comes obviously out of you."¹⁵ He also recognized that he composed Gertrude Stein's portrait, among others, "all from memory,"¹⁶ although he admits not doing it often. Apparently, the portraits came easily because Virgil Thomson began to master the "discipline of spontaneity,"¹⁷ also inspired by Gertrude Stein's literary experiments. The point of making portraits for both artists was "an exercise...in avoiding the premeditated,"¹⁸ and letting intuition emerge freely.

In a 1982 interview with Tommasini, Virgil Thomson remarked again on the importance of the "discipline of spontaneity" and letting "your mind alone" when attempting a musical portrait.¹⁹ The role of the composer is then "to write down whatever comes to me in the sitter's presence."²⁰ Yet a musical portrait is not a matter of total improvisation; there are certain conditions (at least for Thomson) necessary in order to accomplish a good portrait. While, according to Thomson, the ideal distance between a painter and a sitter is approximately six to ten feet, he required his sitters to be

¹⁵Thomson, p. 123.

¹⁶Thomson, 123.

¹⁷Thomson, 124.

¹⁸Thomson, 124.

¹⁹Tommasini, 15-16.

²⁰Virgil Thomson, "Of Portraits and Operas," *Antaeus* XXI/XXII (1976) 209.

at a distance of "about four to six" feet.²¹ In order to accomplish a successful portrait, the sitter is not allowed to talk. Moreover, the composer's personal acquaintance with the subject has no influence in the final result. What is really important is that the sitter "gives" so that the composer can "receive."²² Through the sitter's physical presence a sort of psychic communication between him or her and the composer is established and this excites certain musical ideas in the composer's imagination. The musical portrait is the result of this apparently vague process.

According to Thomson, portraying in music is not a strict exercise similar to the process of composing a fugue or a sonata-allegro form. On the contrary, it is of first importance that the composer finds himself in a relaxed mood in which spontaneity, free associations, and psychic communication are possible. Musical portraits, in addition, present another feature, namely that they are "a picture of the depicor,"²³ leaving the logical inference that all portraits by Thomson are a particular kind of autobiographical self-representation. The communication between sitter and composer is a two-way street, so to speak: the sitter "gives" and the composer "receives," with the result that the portrait's subject is the sitter, but at the same time the

²¹Tommasini, 18.

²²Tommasini, pp. 18-19.

²³Tommasini, p. 18.

composer, almost compulsively, includes himself in the portrait.

The question of who is really being portrayed when a composer, a painter, and a writer depict a character in their respective media is a striking notion and it also has its sources in Gertrude Stein's literary experiments. In the *Autobiography* Virgil Thomson recounts how Gertrude Stein parodied Alice B. Toklas's way of telling a story in a narrative called *Ada*, which was later published in *Geography and Plays*.²⁴ Gertrude Stein went even further with this type of experiment, and in 1933 published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

This book, written down and signed by Gertrude Stein, was meant to mimic Alice's speech nuances and thought. The title and the narrator's voice indicate that it is Alice's life that is being narrated, but actually it is Gertrude's autobiography told as Gertrude thought Alice would relate it. The result is a whirling account in which the roles between narrator and subject, which in autobiography must always coincide, are here *fictionally* split, though remaining the same in actuality. The reader is thus perplexed, but engaged in a more active manner in his or her role as a reader.

Virgil Thomson remarked: "This book is in every way except actual authorship Alice Toklas's book; it reflects her mind, her language, her private view of Gertrude, also her

²⁴Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 176.

unique narrative powers."²⁵ Gertrude Stein's exercise is not only a virtuosic display of the art of literary portraiture, but also an investigation into the problem of identity: is Alice Toklas the one depicted in Gertrude's (pseudo) autobiography or the one depicted in Alice's own (real) autobiography?²⁶

As shown in the excerpts from the *Autobiography*, Virgil Thomson was very much aware of the problem of identity in depiction: the bottom line is that the portraitist reveals himself in his portraits of other subjects. Thomson relates how, years after their composition, he "found out" that two of his portraits were in fact self-portraits, though he had not intended them as such. In another interview with Tommasini, Virgil Thomson declares that his Violin Sonata (1930) was planned as a portrait of a young man in love, but when the composer explained it to a performer, he realized that the composition was "a kind of intense self-portrait."²⁷ He concedes, nevertheless, that instrumental music is always "to some degree... about one's private life."²⁸ Virgil Thomson also acknowledged thirty years after its composition that his Piano Sonata No. 2 was another self-portrait. He confessed

²⁵Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 176.

²⁶Alice Toklas's "real" autobiography is *What Is Remembered?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

²⁷Tommasini, p. 36.

²⁸Tommasini, p. 36.

that since it was not anyone else "it [had] to be me."²⁹

Virgil Thomson's portraits and self-portraits do not comply with logical laws similar to the organizing principles of counterpoint. As a result, to try to understand his musical depictions in terms of formal analysis would be to miss the point: the portraits and self-portraits are the result of some sort of intangible communication and empathy between two people, the composer and the sitter. If the listener wants to understand the logic behind these exercises in depiction, he or she is doomed to fail because the only logic that there is to be found is spontaneity and unpremeditation.

Not surprisingly, it was Picasso who offered the most believable rationale for Virgil Thomson's portraits. The story is related in Thomson's *Autobiography*.³⁰ Picasso and Thomson agreed to portray each other in painting and in music respectively. Picasso, though, showed some curiosity, if not skepticism, concerning Thomson's musical portraits; Picasso's doubts concerned the possibility of pure musical depiction. The composer explained to Picasso that he made his portraits just as Picasso did: "I took paper, looked at my sitter, then let my pencil move--not doodling, of course, but writing down as fast as possible what came to me."³¹ To Thomson's

²⁹Tommasini, p. 36.

³⁰Thomson, *Autobiography*, pp. 310-11.

³¹Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 310.

explanation, Picasso with plain logic stated: "'Ah yes... I understand. If you are in the room while I am working, whatever I do is automatically your portrait.'"³² Picasso had a point: whatever the composer considers a portrait is a portrait.

Virgil Thomson conceded that in his Picasso portrait as well as in his other portraits, he only intended to depict "the sitter's presence."³³ In order to demonstrate his point, he relates that he made another portrait of Dora Maar.³⁴ She went to have her portrait made with Picasso, who "came into the portrait" too.³⁵ The composer recalls that at the time of the sitting he "did not identify the intruder then, but only later came to realize that an assertive bass which makes its entry half way through the piece could only be Picasso, for Dora Maar was not like that."³⁶

³²Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 310.

³³Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 310.

³⁴Dora Maar, painter and photographer, Picasso's companion from 1936-45.

³⁵Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 311.

³⁶Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 311.

Virgil Thomson's explications and rationales for his portraits and self-portraits often defy common sense. In fact one could argue that the composer--once again, inspired by Gertrude Stein's literary methods--intended to challenge common sense and superficial logic in order to reveal a deeper logic and a higher level of truth. Thomson asserted in the *Autobiography* that, "the classic masters, in terms of logic and syntax, did not always quite make sense."³⁷ The fact that "classic masters" (and here it seems that he is referring mainly to writers) do not always make sense legitimated his endeavor and induced him to do something that apparently does not make much sense: to portray someone in music.

Since Thomson's musical portraits were inspired by Stein's literary explorations, a comparison between the two is justified. Stein's and Thomson's undertakings share at least one common underlying notion: they purposely reverse the apparent relationship between signifier and referent. Gertrude Stein's portraits use language--a medium capable of representation because of the intelligible associations brought up by words. Now, the point is that Stein's use of language is so experimental and consequently so obscure and intricate that the referent (the character depicted) is diffused in the virtuosity of the text and therefore becomes

³⁷Thomson, *Autobiography*, p. 124.

unidentifiable. By obscuring the relationship between the signifier and the referent (words and depicted character), Stein challenges the notion that written and spoken language are capable of depiction.

Thomson, on the other hand, takes on portraiture from a different medium, music--a mode of representation whose capability of depiction is sometimes called into question (think of Picasso's skepticism, for example). Common sense indicates that, in music, there is no unequivocal relationship between the signifier (sound) and its referent (an emotion, a landscape, a person); this relationship is vague, and it depends on the music's power to evoke something. But if this is what common logic shows, Thomson challenges this notion and asserts the possibility of musical portraits, a musical genre in which the relationship between signifier and referent is equivocal.

Thus Stein and Thomson undertake their tasks of portraying characters from two completely different perspectives: on one side, language, with its assumed capability for depiction; on the other, music, a self-referential discourse. Both artists, though, challenge the underlying assumptions of their media: Stein blurs the referential content of her texts until this referent disappears in its totality, while Thomson assigns a specific referent to a medium that is traditionally considered to be capable only of spurring vague associations.

Considering the time and place Stein and Thomson were writing their portraits (Paris, early 1920s), it makes sense to connect their output with the Modernist movement. Picasso and Braque in art, Joyce and Stein in literature, and Thomson in music, have one thing in common that is an important feature of the whole Modernist movement: they attempt a transgression of the apparently logical relationship between the signifier and the referent. Cubism can be understood as a way of representing as flat what in reality is three-dimensional, thus acknowledging the limitations of painting: reality is three-dimensional, but on a flat surface one can only paint flat objects. In literature, Joyce and Stein obscure their language to such a degree that the descriptive and narrative powers of writing are questioned. Thomson does precisely the opposite: he charges with meaning an a-semantic agent (music) and attempts to establish an unambiguous relationship between the signifier and the referent.

Thomson's portraits and self-portraits (and all portraits, according to him, include the portraitist) are exercises both in "avoiding the premeditated," and in the "discipline of spontaneity" as he described them. This means that the composer's role is not so much to recreate a semblance of the sitter as to beget a playful occasion that evokes the presence of the portrayed subject. Thomson achieves that by unsettling the assumed one-to-one relationship between the signifier and the referent. If

Gertrude Stein reversed the signifier/referent relationship by blurring her text to the point where the content is unidentifiable, Virgil Thomson imposes an unambiguous subject on a medium that is admittedly a-semantic.

5.3 Autobiography in music: Some theoretical questions and Smetana's example

The inventory of critical articles describing autobiographical traits in compositions is immense. For example, Hirsbrunner identifies autobiographical traits in Ravel's opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges*.³⁸ According to Roy Howat, Debussy's *Masques* and *L'isle joyeuse* are also works marked by autobiographical events, since they reflect the composer's elopement with Emma Bardac.³⁹ Clemens Höslinger remarks on the autobiographical content of Schubert's long song, *Einsamkeit*, set to poetry by Johann Mayrhofer.⁴⁰ In his edition of the score, Köhler asserts that Robert Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze*, op. 6 and Clara's *Soirées musicales*, op. 6 show autobiographical hints.⁴¹ Richard Taruskin has observed that Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* is an autobiographical work.⁴² Finally, Jeffrey Lynn Millerin argued that Robert Gerhard's *Libra* used the composer's horoscope sign to portray himself.⁴³

³⁸Theo Hirsbrunner, "Ravel und Colette," *Musik und Bildung*, XIX/12 (1987) 920-24.

³⁹Roy Howat, "Debussy, *Masques*, *L'isle joyeuse*, and a lost Sarabande," *Musicology Australia* X (1987) 16-30.

⁴⁰Clemens Höslinger, "Das Schubert-Lied *Einsamkeit* (D.620)," *Musikerziehung* XXVII/1 (1973) 10-12.

⁴¹Hans Joachim Köhler, ed. *Davidsbündlertänze* (Leipzig: Peters, 1975).

⁴²Richard Taruskin, *The New York Times*, Oct. 17 1993, section H, p. 31.

⁴³Jeffrey Lynn Miller, "An Analysis of Roberto Gerhard's *Libra*," Ph.D. diss. The City University of New York, 1987.

Vera Micznik's article "Is Mahler's Music Autobiographical?" is especially interesting because it discusses not only possible autobiographical traces in Mahler's music, but also the epistemological basis of autobiographical music.⁴⁴ Micznik's central question is: how can biographical information be encoded in a musical work? According to Micznik, there are two positions regarding this question. First, René Wellek and Austin Warren assert that "even when a work contains elements which can be surely identified as biographical, these elements will be so rearranged and transformed... that they lose all their specifically personal meaning, and become... integral elements of the work.... Whatever the importance of biography... it is dangerous to ascribe to it any specifically *critical* importance."⁴⁵ Opposing this view, Maynard Solomon contends that "to the extent that biographical data exists, it alters the state of awareness within which we can perceive art. And this in turn cannot fail to affect aesthetic and critical judgment."⁴⁶

Both positions (Wellek and Warren, on the one hand, and Solomon, on the other) admit that the events in the life of an

⁴⁴Vera Micznik, "Is Mahler's Music Autobiographical?," *Revue Mahler Review* I/1 (1987) 48-63.

⁴⁵Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1956) 66-68. Quoted in Micznik, p. 48.

⁴⁶Maynard Solomon, "Thoughts on Biography," *19th Century Music* V/3 (1982) 276. Quoted in Micznik, p. 48.

artist can color his or her art. Wellek and Warren do not say that biographical events do not affect the artwork. Rather, they express skepticism that such events are encoded in the artwork; and if they are, it is inconceivable that the listener (the reader or viewer) can decode them into actual biographical information. Solomon observes that if biographical data exists, it must affect our perception of the work. A more complicated matter which Solomon does not answer is, how can this biographical data affect our perception? Solomon is cautious and does not say that the listener can identify and decode biographical facts only by listening to music.

Micznik acknowledges that her agenda is to question, challenge, and finally prove wrong the "autobiographical myth." She states: "I censure the ease with which the autobiographical claim is made; its acceptance as undisputable dogma transmitted from one generation to another on the basis of so-called historical elements...."⁴⁷ She shows that criteria used to assign autobiographical stories to musical works are erroneous. Critics generally present as autobiographical evidence letters and other records in which the composer alleges that a specific composition was meant to reflect precise events in his life. For example, in a letter to the music historian Arthur Seidl, Mahler asserted that during Hans von Bülow's funeral he was so moved that he felt

⁴⁷Micznik, p. 48.

that he had to convey his emotions in music.⁴⁸

Many critics took Mahler's statement as a clear declaration of autobiographical meanings in his music. What they forgot to mention, Micznik maintains, is that Mahler made many more statements declaring the non-specificity of meanings in his music. For example, although Max Marschalk connected Mahler's First Symphony with the composer's love affair with Johanna Richter, Mahler stated that "the connection with the First Symphony is purely artistic...."⁴⁹

Micznik goes on in great detail to examine the alleged autobiographical content of *Das Lied von der Erde* and concludes that there is no musical evidence for such attributions. According to Micznik, autobiographical associations are too easily made based on external evidence (letters, etc.). In addition, she points out that critics often misunderstand this evidence because they fail to interpret it in the appropriate historical perspective. In the nineteenth century, this "historical perspective" presupposed an understanding of music as the expression of ambiguous and indefinite feelings, not specific facts and events. One further point: Micznik insists that she is not denying music's ability to convey meaning; she only objects that the "autobiographical myth" is not supported by musical evidence. Let us now attempt a critique of her argument.

⁴⁸Micznik, p. 50

⁴⁹Quoted in Micznik, p. 50.

First of all, Micznik confuses two different things: the question concerning whether events in the life of Mahler (or any artist, for that matter) informed his music, and the issue regarding whether Mahler attempted to depict himself in music. Micznik's definition of autobiography is not consistent with that of most critics. In a very broad sense, autobiography is self-representation, but the fact that Mahler claimed that von Bülow's funeral prompted him to find a musical expression for his feelings is not autobiography--it is only his source of inspiration. Mahler neither presented himself in a four-note motif or an ostinato rhythm, nor did he try any other form of self-depiction. Thus the fact that an artist feels inspired by the events of his or her life is not to be confused with a clear attempt at self-representation. Apparently, Micznik does not see this difference.

Micznik's discussion nonetheless raises a fundamental question in music aesthetics--that of the ontology of the musical work. Micznik's main contention is that the musical work does not support any autobiographical mark. But what does she mean by musical work? Micznik apparently identifies the composition with the "notes." At the risk of being controversial, I would like to introduce a broader definition of the musical work. Of course a musical work consists in the notes (the sound and their visual representation in a score), but it is more than that; a musical work is also *the stories that have been transmitted with the score.*

If one were to believe that a work is only the notes, a whole set of assumptions would first have to be proved true. We would have to prove that the score is an exact transcription of the composer's ideas; we would also have to prove that the listener is a *tabula rasa* and can, therefore, apprehend the score without mediation. Let us consider these two points independently.

Although the score might give the impression that the musical work is an inert, motionless, unchanging entity (an assumption taken for granted in most musical analyses), the fact that notation is flawed (it is only a visual layout of the sound) and that performance is variable indicates the contrary: the musical work is intangible and unapprehendable, and no form of notation can capture it in its all dimensions. On the other hand, it is a fiction to believe that a listener can have access to the notes clean of all prejudices. Even the strictest analyst has only replaced one system of metaphors ("autobiography," "happiness," "emotions," "a forest") with another ("dominant," "interval," "scale," "mode").⁵⁰ In fact, democratically speaking, there is probably more agreement on the first set of associations than on the second. The first is an internalized code with a long tradition; the second has to be learned in school.

⁵⁰It could be argued, in addition, that Schenkerian graphs summon the idea of complexity thanks to their visual dimension. The graphs convey an atmosphere similar to that of some modernist painters such as Miró. Their real "content" is their "form"--their visual impact.

In chapter III, we examined Nattiez's model of musical communication. Nattiez pointed out that the listener has an active role in the "construction" of the musical work; in fact, to a certain extent, the listener transforms the musical work. From a hermeneutical point of view, the interpreter of a sign always, without exception, carries presuppositions to the act of interpreting. Analysts pretend to get rid of their assumptions in order to approach the musical work as a *tabula rasa* and take only a part of the musical work (its score) as its whole.

Thus, the listener is not a *tabula rasa* (we all carry preconceptions), and the musical work is not an inert object. An examination of the musical work and of the act of listening must take into account these preceding considerations. If we look for autobiographical signs in a musical work, we should not look for them only in the score, but also take into account the fact that the composition has a history. The composer's letters, the title page, perhaps even an oral tradition that has had an active role in the composition's dissemination are all part of the history of a composition; and because they are part of its history, they are part of the composition--together with the score, they constitute the composition itself.

If one accepts that a musical work is not only the notes but also the stories that necessarily circulate with it, the "autobiographical myth" in music takes an interesting turn.

For Micznik, as well as for most musicologists, the final, conclusive argument in deciding whether or not a composition is autobiographical lies in the notes. In her argument, she creates a mental construct divided between what is considered the center of the musical work (the notes) and the periphery (the writings, for example). Micznik's vocabulary exposes this concealed ideology: what she calls "music's own internal meaning" is directly identified with the notes, while what she refers to as "external information" is equated with letters, titles, personal writings, friends' statements, etc. What I am proposing amounts to acknowledging this center/periphery dichotomy in most musicological writings and granting the so-called "external information" a central position in the ontology of the musical work. To put it bluntly: a descriptive title (*From My Life*) determines our perception of a composition as much as the ups and downs of the intervals, their melodic turns, and their cadences.⁵¹

The preceding discussion can be summarized as follows. Concerning the question of autobiography in music, there are two main positions: 1) those who believe that the notes can encode an autobiographical message, and 2) those who believe that the notes cannot encode any autobiographical message (if

⁵¹Yet the question could be asked: why this propensity to autobiographical stories? My own hypothesis is that when autobiographical stories begin to circulate with a composition, this composition becomes more genuine, more authentic. The human mind feels uneasy with anonymous and unattributed works, and there is a feeling of relief when one knows that there is someone behind an artwork.

the composer intended one, the listener would not be able to decode it). Both positions are grounded on the autonomy of the musical work--which amounts to saying that the notes of a composition can be isolated from their contexts of production, reproduction, dissemination, and reception. This isolation, though, is unfeasible: the notes never exist by themselves (there is dance, stories, ritual, etc., that accompany them); and if the notes could exist without a context (which is like to say that a plant can exist without light and oxygen), they would be unknowable in a pure state, since no listener is a *tabula rasa* and the act of listening implies bringing to the notes many preconceptions. Thus, the answer to the question of whether autobiography can be encoded in a musical work is affirmative because the musical work is the notes plus all the elements that taint them in the process of production, reproduction, dissemination, and reception.

I will now present several cases of autobiographical music. I will show that the "notes," from the very beginning of the composition's inception, were accompanied by "stories" (the composer's statements, critical reviews, scholarly writings, etc.). These stories determined our understanding of the musical work not because they are peripheral, "external information" that helps disseminate the notes (the "internal meaning," according to Micznik), but because they are a

central, indispensable part of the composition.⁵²

SMETANA

In October 1876, Bedřich Smetana began to work on his String Quartet in E Minor, *Z mého života* (*From My Life*). As the title suggests, the work is densely loaded with autobiographical content. To be sure, Smetana was neither a novice in programmatic music, nor a beginner in music with "personal" tones. *Má Vlast* (*My Land*) is a symphonic poem including "diverse number of ideas and moods stemming from the very roots of Czech myth, its heroic past, the beauty of its nature, the life of the country folk and finally the prophetic vision of the nation...."⁵³ These traits are perhaps evoked by the viola motif in the first movement:



⁵²For ethnomusicologists, the stories, myths, legends, and traditions are an essential part of the musical work. Why should this not be so for so-called art-music. For an example showing that "stories" are an essential part of a musical work, see Anthony Seeger, *Why Suyas Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁵³Brian Large, *Smetana* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985) p. 269.

From My Life was meant as a nationalistic manifesto, and, as a result of its success, the composer became a national hero and a leader. The work is also a strong personal and intimate statement. Smetana adopts a confidential tone, and his choice of instrumentation--the string quartet--is certainly indicative of this. Throughout his life, in moments and even periods of depression and dim disposition, Smetana had resorted to his diary in order to quell his unrest. When on October 30, 1874 he realized that he was becoming deaf, he confided to his diary:

I am to stay at home for almost a week. I cannot go out and have my ears wrapped in cotton wool since I must have complete quiet. I fear the worst--that I will become permanently deaf. I can hear nothing at all. How long will this last? If I only could be healed. And what if I do not get better?⁵⁴

The quartet *From My Life* has to be understood in this same context; through autobiography, the composer was coming to terms with his suffering and spiritual desolation. In a letter to Josef Srb-Debrnov,⁵⁵ Smetana confessed the

⁵⁴Quoted in Large, p. 260. Unfortunately there is no complete English edition of Smetana's diaries. The Czech sources are the following: *Z deníci Bedřicha Smetany (1856-1861)* [From Smetana's Diaries], ed. Josef Srb-Debrnov (Prague, 1902), originally published in *Dalibor* XXIII/39, 41, 44, 45 (1901); *Smetana ve vzpomínkách a Dopisech (1840-41)* [Smetana's student Christmases], ed. F. Bartoš; other diary extracts were published in *Dalibor* XXXI/29-36 (1909), *Hudební revue* X/7-9 (1917), and *Smetana* IX/1 (1918).

⁵⁵Josef Srb-Debrnov (1836-1904) was a Czech writer on music and amateur musician. He organized the concerts of the Prague Hlahol Choral Society. He also edited Smetana's

autobiographical dimension of the Quartet, which, according to the composer, included a "remembrance of my life and the catastrophe of complete deafness."⁵⁶ Smetana considered the Quartet a "private composition"⁵⁷ and rationalized the choice of string quartet by comparing it to a conversation among four instruments commenting on the things that "tortured" him.⁵⁸

Although the Quartet in E Minor may have been a personal and intimate work in which the composer cast his innermost feelings, there is no reason to think that Smetana ever thought of it as a private composition in the sense that it was not to be performed in public. Autobiographies, whether musical, written, or otherwise, are works both private and public--private, because the autobiographer undresses his soul, so to speak, and voyeurism would obstruct his or her task; public, because part of the expectations autobiographers have of their personal testimonies is that they will overcome their distress by sharing publicly their beliefs and feelings.

So, at the same time that Smetana asserted the confidentiality of his Quartet, he made public the program contained in the music. On 12 April 1878, Smetana wrote to Srb-Debrnov:

As regards my Quartet I gladly leave others to judge its

diaries.

⁵⁶Quoted in Large, p. 317.

⁵⁷Large, p. 317.

⁵⁸Large, p. 318.

style, and I shall not be in the least angry if this style does not find favor or is considered contrary to what was hitherto regarded as "quartet style." I did not write a quartet according to recipe or custom in the usual form....With me the form of every composition is dictated by the subject itself and thus, the Quartet, too, shaped its own form.⁵⁹

Although most historical and theoretical accounts of nineteenth-century music have a tendency to explain music in terms of its technical principles (the laws of harmony, counterpoint, and form), there is no doubt that most nineteenth-century listeners, amateurs musicians, and professional performers thought differently of their activity. The Quartet in E Minor was the first real string quartet by Smetana, and perhaps he felt a bit insecure about his mastery of the genre. But as Smetana's own words show, the technical realization of the Quartet is the least interesting aspect for the composer--the "subject" is what really matters.

This interest in the subject as well as in the formal features is part of the nineteenth-century cultural milieu. In his outline of the history of the "character" piece, Willi Kahl quotes Johann Friedrich Reichardt⁶⁰ as saying:

Let them [the pianists] write their variations and rondos for their pupils, but may they spare us with their performance: for we require paintings of the emotions, not musical schoolboys' essays.⁶¹

The "essays" Reichardt is referring to is the type of

⁵⁹Quoted in Large, p. 318.

⁶⁰German music writer and composer (1752-1814).

⁶¹Quoted in Willi Kahl, *The Character Piece* (Cologne: Arno Volk, 1961) p. 8.

music that claims a total disengagement with explicit expression of feelings. To this should be added the famous Beethoven dictum concerning his *Pastoral* Symphony, which according to the composer was "more an expression of feeling than a painting."⁶² The "subject" of a composition (in Smetana's sense) was part of this composition as much as, say, the key signature and the dynamic marks, and they were assumed to be understood by the listener. To relate it to my earlier argument: the stories attached to *From My Life* are as much part of the work as its notes. Consequently, to explain European art music only in terms of its formal features is to do violence to this music and to misunderstand its cultural milieu.

Smetana's letter to Srb-Debrnov, besides pointing out the importance of the "subject" of the Quartet, shows an awareness of the conventionality of genre definitions. Music critics, when attempting a definition of a genre, take an ideal model of this genre and contrast all other examples of the genre to it. For example, one can consider that the ideal type of string quartet is the one that follows the principles established by Mozart and Haydn; thus all string quartets are seen as either precursors or the outcome of the Mozart-Haydn model. This way of thinking is fallacious, because in order to come up with an ideal model a survey of many particular cases is needed; but to carry on this survey, a preconceived

⁶²Quoted in Kahl, *The Character Piece*, p. 2.

ideal model needs to exist first.

Besides their possible heuristic value, genre definitions are bound to be extremely inaccurate. When Smetana says that his Quartet may be "considered contrary to what was hitherto "regarded as 'quartet style,'" he overtly recognizes the erratic character of all genre constrictions. The ideal type of string quartet may or may not exist; there are only arbitrary conventions that are not a matter of concern for the composer. He is only interested in the "subject," which he finally discloses in the same letter to Srb-Debrnov:

My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leanings towards art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune. The long insistent note in the finale owes its origin to this. It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which, in 1874, announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke because it was so disastrous to me. The second movement, a quasi-polka, brings to my mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing. The third movement (the one which, in the opinion of the gentlemen who play this Quartet, is unperformable) reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife. The fourth movement describes the discovery that I could treat national elements in music, and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery; but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret.⁶³

Smetana's plot for his Quartet in E Minor draws four broad images corresponding to each movement of the Quartet. Interestingly enough, all movements but the third are

⁶³Quoted in Large, p. 318.

explained with an analogy related to sound. In the first movement a high E imitates the "high-pitched tones" the composer heard at the onset of his deafness. The second movement stands for a "passionate lover of dancing" with a quasi-polka movement. The fourth movement describes his nationalistic musical style and his deafness. In short: Smetana's program boils down to sound (the Quartet) imitating sound (deafness, dance music, and nationalistic music).

At a specific level, then, Smetana resorts to imitation in order to portray his life. At a more general level, the composer relies on more vague techniques: when he asserts that "my intention was to paint a tone picture of my life," the listener must think of the Beethoven dictum concerning the *Pastoral* and the expression of feelings, not the exact imitation of nature. Music can imitate other sounds and other music, but it has no direct jurisdiction over the realm of the visible. Furthermore, Smetana relies on characterization techniques: when he purposely spells the notes B and Es (B S), there is no ambiguity that he means to stamp his name in his compositions.

It is important to remark that the title, *From My Life*, would probably be enough to suggest the general autobiographical content of the Quartet (though probably not the specific references to his deafness and so forth). Music critics, instrumental teachers, and anyone else involved in the transmission of the music would fill out the rest of the

story: Smetana's deafness, his nationalistic views, and other anecdotes of his life. Western music is generally passed on with stories attached to individual pieces and composers; even if a composer only intends to be remembered for his music, the stories associated with that music are as powerful and important for the listener as the music itself.

Is it possible to listen to Beethoven without thinking about his deafness? Is it possible to think of the Beethoven piano sonatas and neglect the descriptive titles (e.g. *Les adieux*) given to them by editors, publishers, amateurs, and professional musicians? At the expense of taking a short detour, I will now present two examples that show that stories are always attached to musical works, and that these stories are a very important part of this work.

Mendelssohn's *Song without Words* consists of a collection of forty-eight piano pieces that the composer wrote over a long period of time. Sometimes these pieces were composed and published as collections; at other times, Mendelssohn wrote the piano pieces independently, and only eventually did they become a new set of *Songs without Words*. Most of these pieces have descriptive titles assigned by the composer or the editors. Music lovers, generally speaking, know these pieces by their descriptive titles; this is the case, for instance, of the *Gondellieder*, also called "Venetian songs." For most listeners and players (and one should remember that in the nineteenth century most people who had access to this music

could play the piano) the key signature, the meter, and even the form of the piece happened to be much less important than the title's allusion--an image of a Venetian canal with a gondola gently swinging through it.

In Book III, song No. 6, op. 38, is titled, "Duetto: Andante con moto." In all probability, the song was written in 1837, the year of Mendelssohn's marriage. As the title indicates, the song is a duet: a soprano voice states a motive, which is responded to by the tenor voice, both accompanied by a middle voice filling the harmony with arpeggiated chords. Stretching the listener's imagination, it is possible to think of a rendezvous and a dialogue between two lovers. If listeners want to indulge their imagination, they could even think that this duet is a portrayal of Mendelssohn's love for his newlywed wife. And sure enough, this is precisely what a critic says about this "Song without Words": "Is it possible to give this composition a meaning other than autobiographical?"⁶⁴

Another example of autobiographical attribution is Roger Sessions' *From the Pages of My Diary*. According to Andrea Olmstead, Sessions' title for his set of piano pieces is the result of "the publisher's miscomprehension of the original title, *Albumblätter*."⁶⁵ The collection includes four piano

⁶⁴Rena Kyriakou, notes and performance in *Mendelssohn: Song without Words*, CDX 5077.

⁶⁵Andrea Olmstead, *Roger Sessions and His Music* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985) p. 73.

pieces written in the period 1937-1940 and dedicated to his students Milton Babbitt, Edward T. Cone, Carter Harman, and Vivian Fine. (The composer used a discarded fifth piece as the second movement of his Second Symphony.) It is extremely surprising that in subsequent editions and recordings of this set of pieces the error was not corrected, if it indeed it was the publisher's mistranslation. *Albumblätter* became forever *From the Pages of My Diary*. The only possible explanation is that either the publisher "edited" the title in order to make it more marketable or that once the error was made publisher and composer realized the larger appeal of a set of piano pieces in the form of an intimate diary. The piano, in the end, is not such a rare instrument in petty-bourgeois households; and keeping a personal journal could be considered another aspect of middle-class sensitivity. The associations summoned by the tandem, so to speak, between piano pieces and personal diary are numerous and cannot be accounted for, unless one takes into account that the success of the pieces had something to do with the suggestive title.

The previous examples were intended to show that despite so-called scientific accounts of music--such as those put forth by music theorists--music is always attached to stories and among the most favored stories one must count those with autobiographical content. These types of anecdotal stories are especially noticeable from the time that instrumental music took on a life of its own, and this gave rise to the

debate about whether music could or could not imitate, represent, and express other things besides itself.

To return now to Smetana: he was probably aware that music always circulates with stories and anecdotes about both the piece itself and the composer. By providing a specific plot for the Quartet, the composer only reached a higher level of authorship: he was not only going to be responsible for the music, but also for the numerous stories that generally circulate with that music. Program music (and this applies to Smetana as well as other program-music composers) represents a further step in the process by which the composer gets more and more involved in the authorship of his or her works. Smetana wanted to be in control not only of his work, but also the mythology surrounding this work.

Leaving a record of his illness in his diary, confiding his sufferings to Srb-Debrnov, giving his Quartet an explicit title, and finally, providing a complete program for the work can only be interpreted as a tactics to control his work at a higher level. The more a composer provides, the less a listener can freely elaborate and interpret. Consciously or unconsciously Smetana did just that: he furnished listeners with the mythology that they otherwise would have freely elaborated.

As a result of Smetana's success in his autobiographical undertakings through music, a whole new subgenre of musical autobiography was initiated in Czech music. Some of the most

remarkable examples include: Zdeněk Fibich's (1850-1900) *Voices, Impressions, and Recollections*, an intimate (musical) journal depicting his love affair with a woman; Janáček's Quartet *Intimate Letters* which chronicles the composer's love with Kamila Stoesslová; and Bohuslav Martinů's (1890-1959) Fifth Quartet, which describes his love for one of his students. In brief, Smetana opened a new path in Czech music, one that it has had its followers.

The autobiographical impulse in music can be explained as the composer's desire to provide himself the mythology attached to musical works. As a result, two important points must be mentioned: 1) it must be acknowledged that the stories attached to a composition are an essential part of the musical work, because they determine the way listeners sense the music, and this implies a broader definition of the ontology of the musical work; and 2) when the composer attaches stories to his compositions, he reaches a higher degree of control over his own output, because the more he or she provides, the less the listener needs to interpret.

5.4 Shostakovich's *Testimony* and his musical portraits and self-portraits

This section continues the theme explored in the preceding part. I will examine Shostakovich's written and musical autobiographies, focusing on the points where they intersect. I hope to show that Shostakovich's musical output has circulated with stories reflecting the composer's persona and that these stories are inseparable from the "notes."

The authenticity of Dmitri Shostakovich's autobiography, *Testimony*,⁶⁶ has been a matter of debate since its publication.⁶⁷ The book is presented to the reader as a book of memoirs by the composer "as related and edited by Solomon Volkov." Many books that show an editor's intervention are bound to be of suspect authenticity, all the more when the book is a personal account of the life of a famous artist. Ian MacDonald, however, a musician and music journalist, contends that despite all the "irregularities" of *Testimony*, the account can be taken as a true statement faithful to the composer's ideas.⁶⁸

The arguments against *Testimony* focus on the editor's

⁶⁶Solomon Volkov, ed. *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979; reprint, New York: Limelight Editions, 1990).

⁶⁷See Laurel E. Fay, "Shostakovich vs Volkov: Whose *Testimony*?" *The Russian Review* (1980) 484-93.

⁶⁸Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990).

unconventional method of compiling the materials. Solomon Volkov is a music journalist who came to the United States in 1976 with a typescript of the future autobiography signed on each page by the composer. Volkov included his own interviews and conversations with the composer as well as other previously published interviews with him. For reasons yet unknown (though readers may exercise their imagination here), Volkov has failed to produce the source of *Testimony*, which makes matters even more complex. Moreover, the content of *Testimony* presents Shostakovich as an enemy of the Soviet state and all totalitarian governments, an image that contrasts sharply with the notion of him as a supporter of the Soviet regime.

Testimony is nevertheless a work of first importance, and its existence "can hardly be ignored by any one discussing the political context or implied 'meaning' of Shostakovich's work."⁶⁹ In fact, despite all the textual inconsistencies and until further research confirms its alleged illegitimacy, *Testimony*, can be considered a valid account of Shostakovich's life and ideas, and as such is susceptible of analysis. The composer's son, the conductor Maxim Shostakovich, is reported to have rejected Volkov's book on charges of fraud; he declared to the *Sunday Times* (17 May 1981) that *Testimony* was

⁶⁹Christopher Norris, ed. *Shostakovich: The Man and His Music* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1982) p. 8.

"a book about my father rather than by him."⁷⁰ But in 1990 he supposedly embraced it as many friends of the composer did (the pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy and the singer Galina Vishnevskaya, among others) and they all share the same opinion: that *Testimony* is Shostakovich's own work.⁷¹

Readers might as well reserve a small dose of healthy skepticism and an awareness of the active presence of the editor. As I have shown in this study, in terms of authenticity, *Testimony* is not an exception at all among autobiographical texts: most composers' autobiographies have been mediated by ghost writers, editors, translators, critics, and publishers. It would be naive to think that a reader can have access to absolute truth about something. Just as some texts are better edited than others, some translations are more faithful than others, and certain amanuenses are more sensitive to an author's ideas than others, so too there are very good text "mediators" and very bad ones. However, an absolute truth about something is unattainable because the assumption that an author held a certain idea throughout his or her life and never changed his or her mind is improbable.

One of the most interesting points of the controversy about *Testimony* is how (and if) the memoirs allocate meaning

⁷⁰Norris, p. 10.

⁷¹See MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, especially the chapter, "Postlude: Immortality," pp. 245-264. See also Harlow Robinson's review in *The New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 25, 1990.

to Shostakovich's musical works. Christopher Norris charges Solomon Volkov with presenting the type of composer that the West wanted to see:

Volkov presents the composer as a kind of anarchic saintly fool, a deceiver of infinite resource, using his music to mock at officialdom through a muttering undertow of satire and deliberate double-meaning. Such things had often enough been said by Western critics, especially in connection with the geared-up "optimist" symphonic finales which do bear the marks of involuntary self-parody.⁷²

Consequently, *Testimony* presents a Shostakovich that was against the Soviet regime, but who did not (and could not) oppose it. Volkov sees optimism and humor in Shostakovich's music as evidence of the "self-parody" of a man who cannot but laugh at his circumstances; whereas Norris asserts that Volkov's apology for Shostakovich's alliances is supported neither by Shostakovich's statements during his lifetime, nor by his music, that is to say--the ideological content of his music. Norris states that all the scholars who contributed to the volume he has edited "acknowledge--unlike, Volkov--the irreducibility of music to any clear-cut programmatic meaning."⁷³ Volkov and others critics think otherwise, as will be seen.

According to *Testimony*, one of the most important concerns for Shostakovich was the meaning of his music. The

⁷²Norris, p. 9.

⁷³Norris, p. 10.

Soviet regime imposed on composers guidelines for their music, and "understandability" was one of the chief objectives. Shostakovich complied with the Communist Party's precepts--although, according to *Testimony*, he had his own misgivings--by assigning titles and programs to his otherwise abstract music. As part of this effort of allocating explicit meaning to his music, Shostakovich also experimented with musical portraiture; more specifically, he composed a musical portrait of Stalin. In *Testimony* Shostakovich describes Stalin as follows:

He was an ordinary, shabby little man, short, fat, with reddish hair. His face was covered with pockmarks and his right hand was noticeably thinner than his left. He kept hiding his right hand. He didn't look anything like his numerous portraits.⁷⁴

The fact that Stalin did not look like his painted portraits is important for the composer, because he wants to present Stalin as a manipulator of true creative artists. According to Shostakovich, Stalin thought that artists were "engineers of human souls"⁷⁵; that means that Stalin firmly thought that artists could shape people's way of thinking. Having such faith in artists, Stalin attempted to control the image of himself as depicted in films, literature, and paintings. "He liked watching *Unforgettable 1919*,"⁷⁶ Shostakovich recalls, because he was portrayed in a heroic

⁷⁴Volkov, p. 254.

⁷⁵Volkov, p. 254.

⁷⁶Volkov, p. 254.

manner. In addition, Stalin had several artists paint his portrait, but the dictator was always unsatisfied, because he "wanted to be tall, with powerful hands, and he wanted the hands to be the same."⁷⁷ Only Nalbandian painted Stalin to his satisfaction and reproductions of the picture "hung in every office, even in barbershops and Turkish baths."⁷⁸

Thus it came time for Shostakovich to depict in music the dictator's deeds in music. Shostakovich's Symphony No. 9 in E flat, op. 70 (1945), was supposed to be a celebration of the end of World War II and an homage to the "leader and teacher" Stalin. The work displeased the dictator because its meaning was unclear: "There was no chorus, no soloists. And no apotheosis. There wasn't even a paltry dedication. It was just music, which Stalin didn't understand very well and which was of dubious content."⁷⁹

Shostakovich decided to please Stalin by depicting him in his Tenth Symphony (1953). The composer offers the following account:

I wrote it after Stalin's death, and no one has yet guessed what the symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the scherzo, is a musical portrait of Stalin, roughly speaking. Of course, there are many other things in it, but that's the basis. I must just say it's difficult work depicting the benefactors of humanity in music, evaluating them through

⁷⁷Volkov, p. 255.

⁷⁸Volkov, p. 255.

⁷⁹Volkov, p. 141.

music.⁸⁰

The composer did not provide any other program or content for the symphony other than the one quoted above. Moreover, he stated that listeners must "listen and guess for themselves" what the possible meaning of the work was.⁸¹ Nevertheless, Communist critics attempted to assign a specific program to this symphony. D. Rabinovich, for example, saw in the score "a picture of a man versus evil *en force*."⁸²

Shostakovich always tried to keep the meaning at the abstract level. He asserted that the Scherzo was a (rough) portrait of Stalin, but he did not provide any clue to help us decipher how Stalin was portrayed. Did he depict him short and with a thinner right hand? Did he present him as a dictator and criminal or rather as a "leader and teacher"? Since all these questions seem unanswerable, there is the possibility that the composer left traces and clues about the meaning of the work solely to induce a more active role on the part of the listener.

Another remarkable aspect of the Tenth Symphony is that the composer portrayed himself in music. Following a tradition that includes Bach, Schumann, and Smetana, Shostakovich used the letters of his name transliterated into

⁸⁰Volkov, p. 141.

⁸¹Volkov, p. 112.

⁸²Quoted in Roy Blokker, *The Music of Dmitri Shostakovich: The Symphonies*, with Robert Dearling (London: Associated University Presses, 1979) p. 112.

German to create a musical motif--Dmitri Schostakowitsch became D, E flat, C and B natural. Subsequently, Shostakovich used this motif in some other compositions: the First Violin Concerto (1948) and the Eighth String Quartet (1960), a composition that uses this motif almost exclusively.

One can explain the use of a motif based on the composer's name as the affirmation of the composer's personality in periods of low self-esteem. In Shostakovich's case, some critics state that pressure and censorship of the Soviet Communist party resulted in an identity crisis, which in turn goaded a process of reaffirmation of his personality. Thus one reads that Shostakovich began to use the DSCH motif with a certain frequency from 1948 to 1960, when he felt that the Communist leaders disapproved his music altogether:

This is the period during which the composer would have been most concerned to establish and assert his own personality, at first covertly, and then, with the death of Stalin and the world-wide acclaim of the Tenth Symphony, with utmost self-assurance.⁸³

Shostakovich uses self-representation as a retreat from worldly pressures and as a means of self-affirmation. His motivations are not very different from most autobiographers: through self-depiction one finds a solution to his personal crisis. An acronym, understood as a form of autobiography, nevertheless presents some special features that distinguish it from other autobiographical forms. An acronym is a synecdoche, a trope in which a part of a thing substitutes for

⁸³Blokker, p. 119.

the whole; thus "crown" stands for the "king" or "monarchy" in sentences such as, "the crown does not accept the new divorce law." A composer's musical acronym, consequently, stands for the composer himself not by an arbitrary symbol representing it, but by using some letters of the name in order to evoke the whole persona.

Synecdoche is a very powerful trope, and listeners and critics identify it effortlessly with the composer. In fact, critics very often confuse the synecdoche status of the DSCH motif with the physical composer, which causes some excesses of prosopopoeia. In his discussion of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, Robert Dearling asserts that the third movement presents "Shostakovich's personal signature" in a solo horn played forte and then repeated piano: "This is one of the most moving and vitally important moments in symphonic music: the composer, unmistakably identified by the DSCH motif, utters a stern warning."⁸⁴

Dearling also describes the Andante (the second movement) with lavish prosopopoeia. After qualifying the movement as "optimist" he asserts:

The evil second movement takes complete charge, but the Symphony, at this point, is not strong enough to resist its influence, and it marshals a monstrous unison *tutti* statement of DSCH with which to repel the intruder. For a moment the music is stunned, its momentum only recovering, and then only with the assistance of the DSCH phrase standing on guard nearby on *piano* trombones. The oboe's protest returns, now on three oboes and three

⁸⁴Robert Dearling, "The First Twelve Symphonies: Portrait of the Artist as Citizen-Composer," in Norris, ed., p. 73.

clarinets, extending into wailing unison. Incongruously, a garrulous solo bassoon restates the first subject of the *Allegro*, and festivities resume despite warning horn statements of DSCH. Now, it seems, optimism under the aegis of DSCH may be not only allowed, but encouraged, and the movement is given its head as timpani, *ff*, repeatedly assert DSCH in the final bars.⁸⁵

Dearling's narrative uses a prosopopoeic mode of description. That means that the narrator attributes to objects qualities proper only to human beings. Thus one reads that the second movement is "evil" and it "takes charge"; later the Symphony is said to "resist" the "influence" of the second movement. Dearling also affirms that the DSCH motif is stated tutti in order to "repel the intruder"; the oboe "protests"; the horn states the DSCH motif as a "warning," optimism is "allowed" and "encouraged," and "festivities resume." The trope presiding over this account is a battle ground with a final victory and subsequent festival. The triumphant warrior is the DSCH motif as a synecdoche standing for Shostakovich; by now the composer's emblem and his own real being have been totally fused thanks to the account's network of tropes. "No more thrilling affirmation of the composer's personality," writes another critic, "could be imagined. It is almost vocal in its eloquence, the composer's own voice rising triumphantly from the surrounding clamour."⁸⁶

According to *Testimony*, the Twelfth Symphony (1961) was

⁸⁵Dearling, p. 74.

⁸⁶Blokker, p. 117n.

supposed to include a musical portrait of Lenin.⁸⁷ The idea of paying homage to the father of the Soviet state had already come to him in 1938, but because of the events of World War II he had to postpone his projects.⁸⁸ Finally in 1961 Shostakovich undertook the task of honoring Lenin and the 1917 revolution. The program of the Symphony is revealed in the titles of the movements: Revolutionary Petrograd, Razliv [Lenin's retreat], Aurora, and Dawn of Humanity.

Despite the titles, the content of the symphony is rather abstract. Critics such as Dearling have bridged the semiotic gap between the score and its alleged content and proposed readings with specific meanings. "A solo tenor trombone speaks in grave tones at the end of 'Razliv.' Could this be a portrayal of Lenin himself giving final orders and bestowing earnest good wishes upon his lieutenants?"⁸⁹ Dearling also reads the music for strings as a sign of the triumph (again the war metaphor) of the "New Age" for humanity. Moreover, he interprets this symphony as the composer's attempt to bring together his musical ideas and the "Soviet ideals of epic directness."⁹⁰ He also points out that from this symphony on the composer will neglect more and more the programmatic qualities of his music and will focus more on his own personal

⁸⁷Volkov, p. 141n.

⁸⁸Blokker, p. 128.

⁸⁹Dearling, p. 79.

⁹⁰Dearling, p. 79.

ideas.

In conclusion, this section continues exploring the hypothesis stated in the preceding part (5.3): the stories that circulate with a composition are a central part of it, not just a marginal, peripheral aspect of it. In order to show this, I examined Shostakovich's written and musical autobiographies; besides writing a full-fledged autobiography (*Testimony*), Shostakovich used music to portray people (Stalin and Lenin) and historical events (the Soviet state); in addition, he provided his own self-representation by manipulating the DSCH motif, an acronym based on his name. A musical acronym is a synecdoche since a part replaces the whole--DSCH supplants the flesh-and-bone composer Dmitri Shostakovich. This replacement stimulates and even provokes literary descriptions of the music (for example, Dearling's accounts), which eventually become as essential a part of the musical work as its notes.

5.5 Schoenberg's painted self-portraits and his diaries

Another form of autobiographical representation with a long tradition is the painted self-portrait. In his *Natural History* (Book XXXIV/83), Pliny the Elder tells us that the architect and sculptor Theodorus (sixth century B.C) had his own portrait cast in bronze; in Greece, Phidias included his self-portrait as a warrior; Renaissance artists such as Jan van Eyck, Massaccio, and Raphael also depicted themselves. But it was perhaps Dürer who began to use painted self-portraits as psychological studies and Rembrandt who fully explored the psychological possibilities of the genre--his self-portraits record his path through life from youth to senility. Schoenberg's self-portraits belong to this psychological tradition; his paintings are both a record of his mood and an act of affirmation--by depicting his semblance over and over, Schoenberg was sampling his soul at the same time that he was casting out doubts about himself.

THE PLACE OF PAINTING IN SCHOENBERG'S CAREER:

PROFESSIONAL OR AMATEUR?

In a 1949 interview with Halsey Stevens, Schoenberg declared his conviction that if he had followed up his vocation as an artist, he would probably have achieved the same type of

recognition he received as a composer.⁹¹ The story seems to indicate that Schoenberg did not see himself simply as an amateur painter, but rather as an artist who, besides having a professional career as a composer, could also convey his artistic vision through painting. Throughout his life, Schoenberg demanded serious, professional attention for his paintings, and he was very explicit about what he considered to be his place in the art world.⁹²

In a letter to Max Liebermann, Schoenberg took credit for helping to establish modern painting.⁹³ Writing about Kandinsky--who had contributed to Schoenberg's 1912 show's catalogue with a laudatory essay--Schoenberg maintained that not only had he never been influenced by Kokoschka, but he had already found his path as an artist long before Kokoschka was generally known. He also disengaged himself from any aesthetic relationship with Kandinsky himself, whose name he claimed not to have known until Kandinsky wrote to him.⁹⁴

⁹¹Halsey Stevens, "A Conversation with Schoenberg about Painting," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* II/3 (1978) 178-80.

⁹²See Josef Rufer, "Schönberg als Maler, Grenzen und Konvergenzen der Künste" in *Aspekte der neuen Musik*, ed. W. Burde (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1968); and Werner Hofmann, "Beziehungen zwischen Malerei und Musik" in *Schönberg, Webern, Berg: Bilder, Partituren, Dokumente* (Vienna: Brüder Rosenbaum, 1969).

⁹³Erwin Stein, ed., *Letters*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Faber & Faber, 1964) p. 125.

⁹⁴Schoenberg, "Arnold Schoenberg on Wassily Kandinsky," Gertrude Zeisl, trans. *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* II/3 (1978) p. 239.

Schoenberg acknowledged that painting was for him a way to express himself, to present his own emotions, ideas, and feelings.⁹⁵ To be sure, painting was something more for the composer. On 7 March 1910, in a letter to Emil Hertzka, director of Universal Edition, Schoenberg requested to be hired for some paid jobs, as for example as an orchestrator. He argued with conspicuous logic that his income had decreased while his expenses were increasing daily. And then, in passing, he added: "But there is something else I would like to tell you. You know that I paint...."⁹⁶

Schoenberg proceeded by stating that his paintings were well-received by the experts (he probably meant Kandinsky), and then, almost bluntly, he stated his plan: he wanted the influential publisher to convince "one or two" wealthy patrons to have their portrait made by him. If the publisher procured these clients his commission would also consist of a portrait at no charge. The composer also reminded the publisher of the honor of having a painting by a renown composer "whose name already belongs to the history of music."⁹⁷ He concluded by asserting his conviction that his art, besides its intrinsic value, possessed historic significance because of his reputation as a composer.

In another letter to Hugo Heller, the art dealer who in

⁹⁵Stevens, "A conversation," p. 178.

⁹⁶Stein, *Letters*, p. 25.

⁹⁷Stein, *Letters*, p. 25.

1910 organized a show of his paintings, Schoenberg detailed the points of their agreement: the show is to last 14 days; the dealer gets a 20% commission on the sales; the printing of the catalogue and invitations is the artist's responsibility, but the dealer will pay the rent of the exhibition space; on the opening evening Schoenberg's Second String Quartet will be performed; the ticket earnings from the sales are the composer's. Finally, Schoenberg discussed the potential performers for the evening, and with courtesy he politely asked the dealer for some advice about his art.⁹⁸

Based on this evidence, it is safe to say that Schoenberg saw in his paintings not only the possibility of expressing his aesthetic ideas, but also a way to promote his music and at the same time to have access to some ready cash. As Dahlhaus has asserted, Schoenberg possessed an "aesthetic theology."⁹⁹ He understood music and painting as the manifestation of a higher idea: whether he was composing or painting, the artist Schoenberg was attempting to bring into the realm of the senses a higher, more abstract thought. In a sense this notion had already been put forward by Schumann

⁹⁸See appendix to the exhibition catalogue *Arnold Schönberg: Pintures i dibuixos* (Centre Cultural de la Fundació La Caixa, Barcelona 16 September-1 November 1992), Thomas Zaunschirm, ed. (Barcelona: Fundació La Caixa, 1992) p. 348.

⁹⁹Carl Dahlhaus, "Schönbergs ästhetische Teologie," *Bericht über den 2. Kongreß der Internationalen Schönberg-Gesellschaft 1984*, (Vienna: Internationale Schönberg Gesellschaft, 1986), pp. 12-21.

when he wrote that literature, painting, sculpture, and music were all different media for a single idea. Schoenberg still belongs to this tradition.¹⁰⁰

Thus Schoenberg's art must be understood as the result of his aesthetic belief that both painting and music were legitimate media through which to express his artistic impulses, which in turn he considered to be higher and beyond the media through which they manifest themselves (music and painting). But he also thought of his art as a commercial enterprise aimed at supplementing his meager income as a composer. Obviously, the fact that Schoenberg asked for money for his art does not mean that its aesthetic interest and quality is demeaned. However, because most criticism dealing with it (and with most expressionist art in general) tends to have a mystifying slant, it is important to keep in mind that, besides "expression," "inner life," "unconsciousness," and the rest of the vocabulary associated with the expressionist movement, basic material needs were also sources for his art in Schoenberg's case.

THE EXPRESSIONIST PERIOD IN MUSIC AND PAINTING

Most of Schoenberg's pictorial production was realized during the period 1906-12. Now, the question could be asked: why do

¹⁰⁰See the Preface in Robert Schumann, *Album für die Jugend* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1946) p. 6.

his paintings belong almost exclusively to this period? Why did he practically give it up later? Why, in 1949, commenting on his art, did he exclaim "I was a painter, but I don't paint any more?"¹⁰¹ Does his artistic activity then have any sort of correlation with his musical development?

In "My Evolution" (1949) Schoenberg described his musical development in three phases: 1) tonal, under the influence of Brahms, Wagner, Strauss, Reger, and Mahler (e.g. *Verklärter Nacht* and the *Kammersymphonie* op. 9); 2) freer tonality (*Fünfzehn Gedichte aus "Das Buch der hängenden Gärten"*); and 3) twelve-tone compositions (*Klavierstücke* op. 23).¹⁰² In more recent assessments, Schoenberg's oeuvre is divided into four periods: tonal (until approximately 1907), expressionist (1908-1920); serial (1921-36), and late (1937-51).¹⁰³ This second arrangement is practically the same as the one the composer envisioned for himself, the only difference being the addition of a "late" period, which obviously the composer in 1949 could not yet anticipate.

It is interesting to notice that Schoenberg was especially active as a painter during the so-called expressionist period. The designation as an "expressionist,"

¹⁰¹Stevens, p. 178.

¹⁰²Arnold Schoenberg, "My Evolution," in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) pp. 79-92.

¹⁰³See O.W. Neighbor, "Schoenberg, Arnold," *The New Grove*, XVI.

to be sure, came earlier for his art than for his music; in 1911 three of his paintings were selected for the Munich exhibit of the group headed by Kandinsky and *Der Blaue Reiter*, and according to *The New Grove* article he had "personal contact" with the Viennese painters Oskar Kokoschka and Richard Gerstl at the time.¹⁰⁴ As stated earlier, Schoenberg denied any influence on his art from these artists; the expressionist alliance, nevertheless, is obvious.

Some of the most representative musical works of the expressionist period include: *Fünfzehn Gedichte aus "Das Buch der hängenden Gärten"*, *Erwartung*, *Die glückliche Hand*, and *Pierrot Lunaire*. There is one thing these works have in common--besides the expressionist aesthetic--and that is that they are not pieces of pure instrumental music, but rather music with words and staged drama. Schoenberg did indeed write some instrumental music during this time (e.g., the *Drei Klavierstücke*, op. 11, and *Fünf orchester Stücke*, op. 16 both from 1909), but they seem to be less emblematic and certainly less successful than his dramatic compositions.¹⁰⁵ It was also during this period that Schoenberg wrote his *Harmonielehre* (1911), a work that summarized his theoretical procedures and

¹⁰⁴Neighbor, p. 711.

¹⁰⁵The Second String Quartet (1907-8) presents autobiographical traces. See Frank Schneider "Autobiographische Symptome in Schönbergs Musik: Modell--Streichquartett II op. 10" in *Komponisten, auf Werk und Leben Befragt*, ed. Niedmann Goldschmidt et al. (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1985) 83-98.

about which he later said, "I now find that some of the statements in my *Harmonielehre* are too strict, while others are superfluous. Intoxicated by the enthusiasm of having freed music from the shackles of tonality, I had thought to find further liberty of expression."¹⁰⁶

It is, then, within this musical context that Schoenberg concentrates his creative energies on painting. He is clearly aware that his music is in a new phase (expressionism) characterized by a release of the "shackles" of tonality in order to gain liberty in artistic expression. Schoenberg's interest in music that is not purely instrumental can be partially explained as an attempt to give music cohesion through the text, although in "The Relationship to the Text" he remarked that musical meaning must always prevail over the text.¹⁰⁷

KANDINSKY'S INTERPRETATION OF SCHOENBERG'S ART

Schoenberg's paintings are expressionist in style and indeed coincide with his period of musical expressionism. But they also represent an attempt to carry one step further the emancipation of dissonance. Kandinsky contends that Schoenberg's paintings function within the totality of his output as the composer's attempt to overcome his expressionist

¹⁰⁶Schoenberg, *Style*, p. 88.

¹⁰⁷Schoenberg, *Style*, pp. 141ff.

phase in music and move on to a new idiom, the peculiarities of which he only knows abstractly in the world of ideas. In brief: Schoenberg's art represents the composer's search and exploration of what eventually would be known as twelve-tone composition or dodecaphonism.

The first to hint at this hypothesis about Schoenberg's art was the perceptive Kandinsky, a man concerned not only with the act of painting, but also with theorizing about art. It is apparent that Kandinsky--a professional painter and one who valued Schoenberg's art highly--considered it nonetheless a "composer's art" and not the production of a professional painter. Because of this idea, Kandinsky attempts to explain Schoenberg's art as an aesthetic project in association with his music. What Kandinsky seems to suggest is that Schoenberg is an "artist" in the general meaning of the word, a person with an aesthetic vision and the urge to convey it by any means available to him, whether painting or music.

In the essay included in the catalogue of the 1912 exhibit,¹⁰⁸ Kandinsky remarks that Schoenberg's art can be classified in two different categories: 1) natural representations (landscapes and still-lives) and 2) Schoenberg's "visions" (portraits and self-portraits). While Kandinsky states that Schoenberg himself calls the second group "visions," the composer noted elsewhere that it was

¹⁰⁸Wassily Kandinsky, "Schoenberg as a Painter," trans. Barbara Zeisl in *The Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, II/3 (1978) 181-84.

Kandinsky who called "visions" a group of paintings that he had called simply "gazes." It is important to remark this change of appellation, because it marked the beginning of the reception history of Schoenberg's art. From that moment on Schoenberg's art was generally interpreted as "visions" of the "visionary" artist with a "vision."

Kandinsky also declares that Schoenberg himself considers the first category as mere "exercises." About the second group, the so-called "visions," Kandinsky suggests that they are the result of the soul's convulsions and spiritual urges that have not yet found a viable musical expression and manifest themselves in the shape of paintings. This does not exactly mean that Schoenberg uses painting as a substitute for musical composition--the implication is that Schoenberg is an artist, a creator, a channel through which an *idea* comes into existence.

In the same essay, Kandinsky contends that Schoenberg's paintings are "registers of the moral man."¹⁰⁹ In Schoenberg's production (whether musical, pictorial, or literary one) the Idea comes first and the expression of this Idea materializes later through any available medium. Schoenberg, says Kandinsky, paints without thinking; but this is more a sign of artistic integrity rather than a lack of professionalism, he remarks. For Schoenberg the aim of painting is to give external expression to an internal impression. This duality

¹⁰⁹Kandinsky, p. 239.

between interior and exterior is crucial to an understanding of Schoenberg's art and especially his self-portraits: Schoenberg does not intend to paint a person (himself, most of the time) or an object, but rather the interior of this person or object.

Painting, according to Kandinsky's hypothesis, functions as a form of aesthetic exploration for Schoenberg. But when the composer has found his path he translates his Idea into music with the resulting neglect of painting. This path that Schoenberg was scouting during his expressionist period was what came to be known as dodecaphonism. Kandinsky's hypothesis proves to be true if one considers that he suggested it in 1912 and Schoenberg wrote his first dodecaphonic music in 1920 (*Klavierstücke*, op. 23).

Kandinsky's rationale for Schoenberg's art is extremely perceptive. He avoids the dichotomy concerning Schoenberg's amateurism and professionalism as a painter, while presenting him as an *artist*, a creator with many means of expression accessible to his palette. Music is the main one for Schoenberg, but this does not imply that his art occupies a lesser grade in his production, only a different one. Painting is not for Schoenberg a surrogate for music, but purely a way (among others) to explore, search for, and bring to life an aesthetic Idea.



Arnold Schoenberg, *Green Self-Portrait*

THE SELF-PORTRAITS

Schoenberg's output of paintings consists of 269 items.¹¹⁰ These include full-scale paintings, drawings, sketches of sets for his dramatic works (*Erwartung* and *Die glückliche Hand*), drawing notebooks, and even hand-painted playing cards. He uses most of the techniques and materials available to an artist of his time; there are numerous oils on paperboard, pencil or ink drawings on paper, water colors, pastels, and some oils on canvas. The subjects most commonly treated are: self-portraits, portraits, caricatures, landscapes and exteriors, stage sets, and finally interiors and still-lives.

The self-portraits are without a doubt the most represented theme in Schoenberg's production; there are at least 78 items whose title is "Self-portrait" or can otherwise be clearly identified as such. That means that more than a third of his production is self-referential. As pointed out by John Russell, Schoenberg's self-portraits are a form of autobiography as well as an "alphabet of self-scrutiny."¹¹¹ Schoenberg uses self-representation as a means of learning about himself; every depiction of his own bust is an examination of his psychological world.

It is not difficult to describe the external appearance of these self-portraits, since most of them are very similar.

¹¹⁰The latest, most complete list of works is found in Zaunschirm, *Arnold Schönberg*.

¹¹¹John Russell in Zaunschirm, *Arnold Schönberg*, pp. 66-71.

A great majority of these paintings display the frontal portrait of a bust of a man. He is conspicuously bald and dresses modestly, but with care (like a country school teacher, perhaps). He appears to be in his forties (which, in fact, he is). The poor materials used in these self-portraits indicate that the artist has chosen to limit himself to shoddy elements or rather that he has no choice and paints with his most accessible, inexpensive components (incidentally, only a few self-portraits are oil on canvas). In order to stress this sense of "commonness" the range of colors used is extremely limited, with a clear favoring of brown. Indeed, most self-portraits are monochrome or in any case the artist confines himself to a very small palette.

Schoenberg's restrictive use of the painterly possibilities of his paintings was a conscious act. He deliberately confined himself to the minimal use of the external qualities of the picture as such. By "external" I mean the apparent, explicit, and visible elements of a painting such as color, drawing, materials, technique, and composition. Consider that Schoenberg's art is almost monothematic (portraits and self-portraits); moreover, the techniques in which his themes are depicted is also extremely limited, if not repetitive. Schoenberg was not interested in the external aspects of his pictures, but only in what these aspects may conceal--the painting's meaning.

While the external elements of a picture are susceptible

of empirical observation, the inner elements fall in the realm of subjectivity. If one speaks about the subjectivity of Schoenberg's self-portraits, the question could be asked whether one refers to the creator's subjectivity or rather the viewer's subjectivity. Contrary to popular belief, subjectivity is not subjective; there is a whole sphere of thoughts, feelings, and signs that are shared among people--the "intersubjective sphere." The inner aspects of Schoenberg's self-portraits are psychological studies conveying the intersubjective sphere of human beings.

The self-portraits are repetitive; at first glance, nothing in them seems to stand out and demand the viewer's attention since their creator, as shown, has deliberately limited and constrained the external elements of the pictures. Closer observation indicates otherwise: it seems as though all external elements of the picture were played down in order that one aspect might be brought out conspicuously. This is the figure's eyes, his gaze, his absorbing stare. The figure's eyes glance at the viewer, but they are also eyes that reveal a vision: they are loaded with psychological insight, their content cannot be described, but it is conspicuously present.

For the human mind there are very few images as forceful as the eyes. Words frequently conjure other words and invoke realms of thoughts and feelings: the word "eyes" has so many connotations that they become practically indescribable.

EYES: look, glance, glimpse, stare, gaze, sight, insight, see, peek, peep, image, vision, envision, visualize, observe, understand, comprehend, perceive, inspect, examine, scrutinize....

The intersubjective sphere that Schoenberg attempts to bring forth (the realm of abstract thoughts and feelings that creator and viewer share) is the world of associations summoned by his eyes. The metaphor of the eyes turns out to be an allegory for humanness--everything that is human or belongs to human beings. In the self-portraits Schoenberg does not strive for the small, specific treatment of a subject; but rather he strives to present a holistic explanation for the human condition. One becomes human, he seems to be saying, because one sees, visualizes, and understands. The artist is a person with the gift for seeing; the artist has a vision because he sees.

In his essay "Gustav Mahler: In Memoriam," Schoenberg expressed the relevance of the metaphor of the eyes.¹¹² The essay begins bluntly by stating: "Gustav Mahler was a saint." This may give an idea of the kind of writing that follows. For Schoenberg the artist is a saint who illuminates (shows the light) to those who wish to be enlightened. "We are still to remain in a darkness which will be illuminated only fitfully by the light of genius," he writes. "We are to

¹¹²Arnold Schoenberg, "Gustav Mahler: In Memoriam" in *Style*, 447-72.

remain blind until we have acquired eyes. Eyes that see the future. Eyes that penetrate more than the sensual, which is only a likeness; that penetrate the supersensual. Our soul shall be the eye."¹¹³

The artist is thus the being who has eyes, the one who can see, and the one who can make others see. In the so-called Breslau lecture, Schoenberg described the stage for *Die glückliche Hand*, which is presided over by the notion of eyes, gazes, stares, and vision. Schoenberg writes:

At the beginning you see twelve light spots on a black background: the faces of the six women and the six men. Or rather six gazes....is a chorus of stares, as one perceives stares, even without seeing them, as they say something to one....Just as the gazes are rigidly and unchangeably directed at the man, so the musical ostinato makes clear that these gazes form an ostinato on their part.¹¹⁴

Schoenberg's privileging of the eyes over other senses can be surprising, since he was a composer. But, in fact, Schoenberg's attitude reveals a general tendency in Western philosophy consisting in granting privilege to visual qualities of objects over the attributes conferred on things by other senses. Western thought assumes things to be more genuine if they are visible; in turn, visibility authenticates experience and reality. This is what the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot calls the "optical requirement" in the

¹¹³Schoenberg, "Gustav Mahler," p. 470-71.

¹¹⁴Quoted in John C. Crawford, "Die glückliche Hand: Schoenberg's *Gesamtkunstwerk*," *Musical Quarterly* LX/4 (1974) 593.

philosophical tradition began by the Greeks.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, there has been a counter-tradition to this view; a book of recent publication, *Downcast Eyes*, surveys writings by Bergson, Bataille, Foucault, Derrida, and others to show how thought can be possible outside the realm of the visible.¹¹⁶ Schoenberg belongs to the "optical" tradition; because he understands human thought and experience within the realm of the visible, his self-portraits are allegories of seeing.

If the symbol of the eyes is the aspect of Schoenberg's self-portraits that stands out in a more evident manner, there is still another less noticeable (nevertheless present) aspect in these pictures--silence. Schoenberg's heads are silent: not only does the portrayed character not speak, but he does not seem to be able to speak. One further comment: these effigies invoke the viewer's silence, too. In churches and museums the crowd (at least ideally) tends to be silent or otherwise people whisper: Schoenberg's self-portraits inspire this same pious silence. Schoenberg's self-portraits are depictions of silent men inspiring silence in the viewer: the composer demanding silence so that his music can be heard.

There are, therefore, two basic allegories articulating Schoenberg's self-portraits: the most important is the

¹¹⁵Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

¹¹⁶Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

allegory summoning the realm of the visible through the image of the eyes; the second is the depiction of the act of not speaking (or not being able to speak) and inspiring silence. (Incidentally, in German, unlike in English, there is a specific verb for the act of not speaking, *schweigen*.)

Schoenberg explicitly dealt with the theme of the visionary who cannot communicate his message in his opera *Moses und Aron* (1930-32). The two characters, Moses and Aron, illustrate the dichotomy between, on the one hand, the visionary prophet who has a deep message to pass on but who is unable to communicate it, and, on the other, the talker with a popularizing tendency, who, despite the vacuity of his teachings, is able to make himself understood to the crowd. Without a doubt, Schoenberg identified himself with the first model. The title of his compilation of essays *Style and Idea* also expresses the same dichotomy: "style" is the external side of things, what permits the artist to communicate his or her message; "idea" is the true, deep content of this message. Like Moses, Schoenberg possessed the "idea," but was insecure about getting it across.

In *Die glückliche Hand* (1908-13), Schoenberg deals again with the same theme--the torments of the artist that go uncomprehended by the public. With great perception, John C. Crawford has asserted that Schoenberg's libretto for *Die glückliche Hand* "contains strong autobiographical elements,

albeit on a symbolic level."¹¹⁷ The opera relates the story of an unnamed (identityless?) man in love with a woman; she abandons him, but later returns to him. (In real life, Schoenberg's wife left him, but afterward they reunited.) After regaining the woman's love, the man finds the necessary inspiration for artistic creation; his art is symbolized by a trinket, which he finds artificial, but which rouses envy among his enemies. In brief, the opera recapitulates some of Schoenberg's favorite themes: besides the motif of women's fickleness, the opera's main point is the artist's solitude and the distance separating him from his public and the world at large.

Schoenberg saw himself as an artist in the broad sense of the word--a creator. But an artist should be not only a creator-entertainer, but rather a prophet, an oracle of truth. The true artist knows that beauty does not actually exist: "he is satisfied with truth."¹¹⁸ Since Kant's three *Critiques*¹¹⁹ it has usually been assumed that ethics, aesthetics, and the pursuit of truth (epistemology) are three distinct, independent spheres. This means that an artwork,

¹¹⁷Crawford, p. 583.

¹¹⁸Quoted in Zaunschirm, p. 53.

¹¹⁹Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn, (New York: Dutton, 1969); *Kant's Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914); *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London: Longmans, 1967).

for example, can be beautiful despite being immoral and untrue. Schoenberg does not subscribe to this assumption: the artist must pursue the truth, and the rest (the aesthetic and ethic dimensions) will be the outcome of the probe. The artist, as a result, must be a prophet, an inexhaustible seeker of the truth.

Schoenberg represented himself in his paintings as such a prophet.¹²⁰ The images of the eyes and the mouth--the only distinct elements of the pictures--represent an artist-prophet with a vision, but totally unable to communicate it. The fact that the figures seem unable to speak is also revealed by a series of paintings depicting heads and hands. The idea is self-evident: if one cannot speak, one gesticulates. These paintings represent hands holding a head or reaching for something.

In conclusion, Schoenberg uses the autobiographical mode of the self-portrait as a spiritual search. As pointed out by Kandinsky, the self-portraits are the explorations of an artist in search of a new path--dodecaphonism. These paintings present depictions of an artist-prophet incapable of making himself understood (perhaps only by gestures). Like a scientist taking samples of the water in a pond in order to find something, Schoenberg, during the period 1906-16

¹²⁰Schoenberg's 1937 essay "How One Becomes Lonely," is the composer's complaint regarding the audience's lack of receptivity for his musical developments. Again, is the image of the prophet claiming in the desert, unheard or misunderstood. See Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, pp. 30-52.

"sampled" his inner life through painting. What Schoenberg discovered was a new way of organizing music without relying on functional harmony--dodecaphonism. He also unearthed from the depths of his psychology his qualms and terrors: the anxiety of not being able to communicate, the fear of not being understood by the audience.



Arnold Schoenberg, *Hands*

SCHOENBERG'S DIARIES

Around the time Schoenberg gave up painting, he began another autobiographical enterprise: his "Attempt at a Diary" (1912).¹²¹ Schoenberg had been tempted to write a diary for some time, but it was only in 1912 that he began with hesitation:

January 20, 1912

Finally started. Had intended to for so long already. However, I could not rid myself of the idea that I had to note down things I remember about my earlier life first. That is why I let ten or more years slip by. But it will work now. Because I have resolved to deceive myself by persuading myself [that] every day I will write down very short remarks for which I can find the time.

The diary covers 1912 with regularity; then after almost three years of silence, there is a final entry for 24 May 1915. In general, the annotations chronicle Schoenberg's daily activity: lessons, rehearsals, and meetings with colleagues, students, and friends. Schoenberg's relationship with his publishers is also noted. There are frequent allusions to the music on which he is working at the moment: the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, op. 16, and *Pierrot lunaire*, especially. Finally, it includes his comments about an all-Schoenberg concert and his own arrangements of several Beethoven songs.

Generally speaking, Schoenberg's prose is clumsy. The translator into English declares that she has tried to render

¹²¹An English translation of all the journals by Schoenberg can be found in the *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* IX/1 (1986), guest editor, Jerry McBride.

a literal version preserving Schoenberg idiosyncracies and lack of what could be called with some reservations "good style." The beginning of the diary as quoted above is a good example of Schoenberg's prose: it is hesitant, unclear, and repetitive. Apparently, Schoenberg doubted his qualities as a narrator; as we saw, he considered himself a "Moses"--a prophet unable to make himself understood. In the end, the desire to preserve in writing his daily events was stronger than his awareness of his skills as a writer.

Schoenberg was always conscious of his importance as an artist. On 14 February 1912, he reports that he has received a copy of *Der Ruf*, a journal that contained a short anthology of Schoenberg's aphorisms. Schoenberg complains that his name does not appear on the cover page as an "attraction." Very annoyed, he declares, "I don't give a hoot," which invariably means that he cares deeply and feels aggravated. Then he contends that the magazine *Pan* advertised *his* article as a main feature, "and that is how it should be."

This self-assurance contrasts sharply with his doubts and indecision when it comes to keeping diary. On 11 March 1912, he states:

I am in danger of not continuing this diary. It is barely a diary anymore in any event. The journey to Prague and many other occupations kept me from it. Whether I still even know the most important of the factual things is already doubtful. Actually, I would have liked to jot down the other things, the things which have nothing to do with facts. I will try to say whatever still comes to mind.

Schoenberg makes a startling revelation here: first he

declares his lack of perseverance in writing and then he confesses that he wishes to write not about events and facts, but about other things, "things that have nothing to do with facts." The truth is that this 1912 diary offers practically no glimpse into Schoenberg's personal life. In fact it could be argued that while the paintings reveal the innermost swings of his psychology, this diary is actually an attempt to present a self-controlled being. The diary's emphasis on the events and facts of the composer's everyday routine cover his troubled personality, but they do not hide it altogether. On 4 March 1912, he writes, "I do not remember anything special." This declaration can only mean one thing: I refuse to remember, to open my inner life to the public, to share my joys and sorrows.

The 1912 diary was followed by the "War-Clouds Diary" (1914). In this text Schoenberg records the visual patterns of the sky (the clouds, the sunshine, etc,) and tries to relate them to the events of the World-War I. The diary is extremely sketchy, but it is illustrated on the margins of the page with several color drawings. In a sort of a preface to his own diary, Schoenberg declares:

Many people like myself today, will have tried to interpret the events of war by the sky, since finally the belief in higher powers and also in God has returned. Unfortunately only now the thought occurred to me to put down my impressions in writing. But I will do so from now on and hope to find some coincidenc[es] once more accurate reports are available, since so far a number of war events could be premonitioned by the "mood" of the

sky.¹²²

The diary, therefore, does not tell the reader anything about the composer, his music, his thoughts. It attempts to be a straight-forward "weather report," although the composer's psychology emerges anyway. On 24 September, he asserts, "icy cold mood," which could mean that his mood is icy or that the sky's "mood" is icy. Thus once again Schoenberg tries to avoid the direct personal confession by shifting his topic towards the external events, but nonetheless his personality comes through his writing.

Schoenberg's last diary fragment dates from 1923. It is not an attempt to chronicle his life, but only to give several accounts of a supernatural occurrence, namely the apparitions of his wife. Schoenberg was deeply affected by his wife's death; as a result, he felt her ghostly presence on several occasions. On 28 November 1923, Schoenberg reports: "I suddenly heard 3 or 4 times (perhaps oftener) in my wife's voice (which in the beginning took to be Görgi's): 'Papa, Papa....'"¹²³ Then he remarks that, besides the maid, there was no one in the house, which confuses the composer even more. Finally he asserts: "If only Mathilde would speak further! Did she want to warn me?"

On 29 November 1923, Schoenberg recalls that Mathilde

¹²²Schoenberg, "War Clouds Diary," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* IX/1 (1986) p. 61.

¹²³Schoenberg, "1923 Diary," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* IX/1 (1986) p. 79.

told him once that she had seen her mother twice after her death. Then Schoenberg asserts his belief that the dead can affect our lives, as the living do. He also realizes that such thoughts are personal and should not be disclosed: "Maybe I also should not write anything about it."

The final entry is from 9 December and relates how Schoenberg heard a rattling noise. At first, he thought it was the dog, but then he realized the dog was sleeping; moreover, there was no one in the house. Then a visitor arrived and claimed that something moved next to the sugar bowl; he suspected that it was the sugar tongs. Surprisingly, Schoenberg did not tell him anything about the early occurrences. Schoenberg concludes: "It may have been an accident."

The diaries of Schoenberg are a personal statement that complete the image of Schoenberg as an autobiographer. They do not provide too much personal information, but it is precisely this lack of intimate detail that indicates not only Schoenberg's difficulties in expressing confidential information, but his need to do so. Schoenberg's self-portraits reveal the composer's inner life better than his diaries. The diaries also reveal the mystical side of Schoenberg, his tendency to the supernatural, and his belief in determining higher forces. Throughout his life, Schoenberg felt he could not express his thoughts with precision, and his diaries show that his written expression was clumsy. As we

saw, his paintings depict silent heads that gesticulate in order to make themselves understood. Both the diaries and the self-portraits seem to claim music as the only possible way to express what words are unable to articulate.

5.6 Conclusion: A new ontology of the musical work

Many critics have challenged the idea that music can encode biographical and autobiographical information (see the discussion of Micznik's essay in 5.3). Their argument reveals an understanding of the musical work as defined by its notes. This supposition is grounded on a paradigm that assumes certain elements as central and others as peripheral or marginal. Generally speaking, the notes are considered to be "central" elements (intrinsic) of the musical work, while a letter by a composer is regarded as "marginal" (extrinsic). (Within the realm of the notes themselves, there is also another hierarchical system: pitches are often seen as central, while dynamics marks and instrumentation are deemed marginal.)

Although the notes are a very important part of the musical work, they are not the musical work--not even its central part. It is true that it is the notes that makes a composition recognizable, as the faces of friends allow us to identify them. But that a face identifies a person does not mean that the face is the person--for example, the person has a personality, which is not always accessible through the face. Thus to identify a musical work by its notes does not mean that these notes are the entire musical work.

Another reason to question the belief that the musical work is synonymous with its notes is the resulting implication that the listener has no role in the process of delivering a

musical message. As Nattiez demonstrated, the listener constructs and construes a musical work by bringing into the process of listening his or her prejudices. Since there can never be a listener/*tabula rasa*, there can never be a musical work that is not affected by the listener's perception. So, the musical work is changed according to the listener's expectations; a modern concert-goer (and of course there is not "one" single, stereotypical concert-goer) does not expect the same of a Beethoven sonata as did the Countess d'Agoult in the nineteenth century (the Countess was the dedicatee of several of Beethoven's piano sonatas).

How, then, are these prejudices that shape our expectations of a musical work and that ultimately form the musical work itself patterned? In this chapter I have shown that what shapes our perception of a composition are the stories that circulate with the notes. Ultimately, these stories are the musical work and do not remain marginal in the ontology of the musical work; rather, they are central, intrinsic aspects of the composition.

Exploring Virgil Thomson's musical portraits, examining Smetana's autobiography in music, and inspecting the criticism spurred by Shostakovich's portraits, I concluded that these works are genuinely autobiographical because either the composer or the critics (and very often both) have decided to disseminate them as such. The hierarchical model that establishes the notes as the center of the musical work and

everything else as marginal is no longer a valid paradigm. Once we as musicologists understand (as most listeners do) that the stories that circulate with the notes are as much the musical work as the notes, we can accept that autobiography in music is a legitimate and widely practiced procedure. That a composer's autobiography is not always found in the intervals and melodic turns should not be a reason to dismiss the authenticity of autobiography through music.

The notion of autobiography is thus expanded from the literary medium to music and painting. Autobiography consists of acts of self-representation, and as such can adopt any available channels. Schoenberg, on the other hand, is one of the few composers who left a painted autobiography. His self-portraits show the composer's moral and aesthetic preoccupations. In fact, for Schoenberg, there was no difference between the ethical and the aesthetic realms: the self-portraits depict the artist as a prophet with a "vision" who makes his followers "see" and understand. Schoenberg's self-portraits cannot be separated from his music--the paintings shape our understanding of the music and vice-versa. Thus these pictures too are in a certain way part of the ontology of his musical works.

In brief, this survey has shown that composers accede to many modes of self-representation besides the customary verbal-written one. Composers can infiltrate their music by providing an autobiographical program (Smetana), by presenting

an acronym as a musical motif (Shostakovich), and by portraying themselves in a keyboard piece (Thomson) or on a canvas (Schoenberg). In all these cases, the composer's autobiographical voice clamors to be heard and surfaces to be noticed.

CONCLUSION

The student and reader of autobiographies...is a vicarious or a closet autobiographer.--James Olney

A theory of autobiography in music

Although the ideas exposed in the Introduction concerning the genre of autobiography apply to the phenomenon of autobiography in music, the latter presents many specific characteristics that make it unique. In order to understand the traits particular to autobiography in music, we must recapitulate the genre's genealogy delineated in Chapter I.

Broadly speaking, autobiography in music derives from two different sources: on the one hand, a confessional tradition best represented by Augustine's *Confessions*, and, on the other, the lexicographical practice of biography. To the "confessional" type we must affiliate (besides the likes of Augustine and Boethius) such medieval and Renaissance musicians as Machaut, Wolkenstein, Dufay, Guerrero, and Whythorne.¹ These early autobiographical records were conceived as modes of self-representation more concerned with the truths of the soul or the writer's imagination than with

¹Some of the Provençal troubadour and trouvère lyrics present depictions of musicians-courtiers. The *Vidas*, though, were written by other troubadours, never by themselves. See Margarita Egan, ed. and trans., *The Vidas of the Troubadours* (New York: Garland, 1984) p. xxiv.

On the other hand, autobiography springs from biography, a scholarly genre concerned with the account of the lives of "eminent" and "famous" people. A good example of this is Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. In the sixteenth century this tradition was continued by Vasari with his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. Music biography, undoubtedly rooted in this same tradition, originated in eighteenth-century Germany with the work of lexicographers such as Walther, Mattheson, and Marpurg. Their efforts focused on the elaboration of music dictionaries in which composers wrote their own biographical entries.

The standard autobiographies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Wagner's, Berlioz's, Spohr's, Stravinsky's, Shostakovich's, and a very long *et alia*) participate in both traditions. For example, when Berlioz published his *Memoirs* (which, actually, are a compilation of letters), he was relating events of his actual life and reflecting on general issues, incorporating elements from both the confessional literature (Augustine, Whytborne) and the lexicographical literature (Walther, Mattheson). Consequently, it was both practices--confessional and lexicographical--that created music autobiography as it came to be known in the nineteenth century.

Several thoughts and considerations arise from the preceding examination of autobiographies by Western composers. Generally speaking, composers follow a pattern that involves integrating the events of their lives with a discussion of their works. The composer sees his works as landmarks or prominent features in a flat landscape, while the life's events bridge and fill in the gaps between these landmarks. In a musicians' autobiography an everyday event is not a significant fact in itself, but only the road that leads him from one landmark to the next, from one composition to the next.

With its emphasis on this life-and-works pattern, autobiography reveals a progressive emergence of two fundamental concepts in Western art music: the concept of *author* of musical works (the composer) and the notion of *work* itself (the composition). We can understand the importance of the notions of author and work when we realize that in dealing with Western art, musicologists undertake the task of determining them even when the author is not known and the work is not well defined. Art historians do the same: when confronted with a corpus of art that presents certain stylistic affinities, they make up an artist's name, such as the Master of the Female Half-Lengths. Autobiography thus shows how composers--besides developing a sense of themselves--acquired a sense of possession of their works. From the

early *Berufsbiographien* examined in Chapter I to Cage's writings, autobiography is a statement of authorship of musical compositions.

But let us examine what "authorship" means. Etymologically, both "author" and "authority" derive from the Latin word *auctoritas*; authors, therefore, are both makers of something and authorities over something. In other words: to be an author means to be a creator of something, but it also means to claim authority and ownership over this thing. When composers begin to give an account, however short, of their lives and accompany it with a list of their works (this is the case of the aforementioned *Berufsbiographien*), composers assert themselves both as creators and owners of their works. Autobiography is thus a declaration of property--intellectual property, to be sure.²

We might recall that at the beginning of music autobiography Machaut, by identifying himself with the narrator of the *Voir-dit*, "becomes in his own eyes and the eyes of his contemporaries an 'auctor,' an authority, as before only a Latin author could be."³ Whythorne also used

²See Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). He argues that the notion of authorship is grounded on a mercantile economic system and our modern concept of individual.

³"Il [Machaut] devient, à ses propres yeux et aux yeux de ses contemporains, un 'auctor', une autorité comme seuls l'étaient auparavant les auteurs latins." Beaumarchais, "Guillaume de Machaut," p. 1069.

self-depiction as a means of publicizing his poetry, his music, and his potential as a teacher, although those were not his only reasons for writing his autobiography. Likewise, the composers who submitted autobiographies for the dictionaries of Walther, Mattheson, Marpurg, and Sainsbury, implicitly or explicitly asserted their existence as composers and marked the borders of their intellectual property by listing their production, their "work," as eventually such products would be termed.

At the same time that autobiography is a composer's statement of authorship of a work, it can also be understood as a process of legitimation of the work by assigning it an author or stressing its authorship. An example will clarify this aspect. The melodies that form the musical corpus generally designated as Gregorian chant date from the seventh and eighth centuries, perhaps earlier; however, the well-known legend about Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) being the author of this musical corpus dates from the ninth century. This retrospective attribution can only be interpreted in one way: auctorial attribution is a form of legitimating a musical work (any art work, for that matter). In the ninth century, when the Gregory story began to circulate, the objective was none other than "packaging" (to use marketing jargon) the disjointed fragments of a tradition into a coherent musical corpus under the name of Gregory the Great. Gregorian chant was indeed the first "work" (a self-contained structure) of

Western music and it became a "work" only by attribution--misattribution, as it happens. In consequence, autobiography functions with a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it establishes a composer's artistic property and, on the other, it associates or identifies a musical work with a specific composer; thus by establishing authorship the work becomes legitimated, genuine, and valid. Following up this argument, one could say that Gregorian chant only became true and authentic when it was attributed to Gregory the Great.

The role of the author in Western music is worth examining in some detail. Foucault considers that the notion of author has very specific functions in our society. "The author function," he writes, "is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses."⁴ The notion of author thus allows a system of copyrights and related matters; it is therefore a concept connected with a mercantile society. The rise of the author, according Foucault, is also linked with the fear that discourses could be transgressive and a single author could thus be held responsible and punished. If there were no authors, he adds, there would be no criticism

⁴Foucault, "What is an author?" in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) p. 113.

because critical language is based on vocabulary of accusation, defense, and judgment. Without an author's name attached to a work, criticism would not be feasible since there would be no one responsible for the works. Furthermore, Foucault argues that the meaning, status, value or merit we ascribe to an artwork depends on our preconceptions about its author.

Thus, the author, Foucault says, is a concept used as a way of organizing thought, a notion which helps to put together a set of images, ideas, or experiences. For example, in our cultural context everyone understands (albeit vaguely) what a "Marxist" music history or a "Freudian" approach to opera is. Among intellectuals, the words "Marxist" or "Freudian" summon a set of ideas, emphasizing social issues, on the one hand, or the role of the unconscious, on the other. Consequently, our perception of the authors Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud is not limited to their physical being, nor even by extension to the works they wrote: now they also stand for a large, imprecise set of notions.

An author is not a real being, but a "principle" according to which one makes sense of an artwork by limiting its meanings.

Foucault argues that "the author [the composer in this context] allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations.... He is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free

circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."⁵ The author (and therefore the composer) imposes structure and coherence on a fragmentary work or corpus of works.

The question of what is an author has several important ramifications. As we saw, Foucault argues that an author is not an individual, but a "principle." But even so, most artworks have authors, if we understand the term as meaning "makers." Thus the question could be asked of whether this author or maker is autonomous and self-determined or rather dependent on socio-historical circumstances. Or to put it differently: do authors make their own artistic choices or are they mere agents of socio-historical conditions?

This question is of great import for autobiography: the notion of autobiography is grounded on the idea that there is an autonomous subject, an individual who chooses his or her own destiny and artistic alternatives. Autobiographies reflect individuals who are not determined by the socio-historical circumstances surrounding them, but who are their own masters and they make their own choices in art as well as in life. Composers who write autobiographies obviously see themselves as autonomous subjects, since they reflect their compositional choices, professional decisions, and personal options as the result of their own choice.

Foucault, however, opposes the notion of the autonomous

⁵Foucault, "What is an Author?" pp. 118-19.

subject and contends that the subject is a discursive practice, an effect of language, which is understood as the inescapable web of preestablished categories, hierarchies, systems, and patterns. For Foucault, Descartes's idea that the only true knowledge is that which is found in oneself is preposterous. One's subjectivity, he argues, is nothing but an internalized version of social networks that appear one's own because of language. Thus, if one believes that the subject is socially determined, nothing is a personal choice, and therefore autobiography is impossible. As a corollary to Foucault's ideas, one could add that autobiography gives the illusion that there is an autonomous subject, but this is just a fabrication to fight off the fear of knowing that there is neither subject, nor author, nor authority to which the artwork can refer.

Let us recapitulate the most significant points presented so far. We saw that autobiography is a form of establishing authorship because the concepts of author and work articulate the narrative. As a form of authorship, autobiography gives the composer the authority to control the meaning of his musical works. In addition, by establishing an unequivocal authorship, autobiography makes a work or a corpus of works more legitimate and genuine, and therefore more accessible for

dissemination. But, since these traits could apply to autobiographies by artists in general, what differentiates music autobiographies from other autobiographies? Do music autobiographies depend on a different set of conditions from general autobiographies? What is idiosyncratic about autobiography in music?

Music autobiography depends on two distinctive principles: first, the composer's life story is set against the composer's work; that is to say, the work is the composer's justification for relating his or her life account. A composer's work creates an "autobiographical space"⁶ or a frame of reference for the reader, which determines his or her perception of the life's narrative. The reader of a composer's autobiography reads it because he or she knows the composer's musical works. This reader has prejudices about how the composer's life and personality should be, and the act of reading provokes a constant negotiation between these preconceptions and the composer's own self-depiction. The "autobiographical space" is the reader's framework, acquired by listening to the composer's musical works, with which the reader engages in a dialogue, so to speak, with the composer's autobiographical text. Lejeune points out:

if the autobiography is a first book, its author is thus unknown, even if he relates his own story in the book. He lacks, in the eyes of the reader, that sign of reality which is the previous production of other texts

⁶Philippe Lejeune has coined this expression in *On Autobiography*, p. 26.

(nonautobiographical), indispensable to that which we will call "the autobiographical pact."⁷

Composers do have an "autobiographical space": when reading the texts readers of their autobiographies do, as a rule, have in mind their musical works, and they engage in a comparative game between the works and the narrative of the life.

Second, a composer's work is supposedly *a-semantic*. Whereas a painter depicts a winter landscape and a fiction writer describes it with words, whether one can convey such an image through purely musical means is more debatable (though I explained my own position in chapter V). Consequently, a musician's autobiography, besides relating life events, is a form of assigning signification to an art which allegedly is without content. Composers, as we saw, are authors and authorities (*auctoritas*), and as such they claim the prerogative of determining the meaning of their musical works.

There is no better example of this than Stravinsky. Stravinsky's written *Autobiography* represents the ideal type of composer's autobiography because it shows an author exerting his authority over his musical output and demonstrates how the author attempts to limit the "cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations," to repeat Foucault's words. The *Autobiography* reveals the author's anxiety over the possibility of his work being not only misinterpreted, but even plainly interpreted: hence,

⁷Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 12.

Stravinsky's constricted views on performers and his obsession in recording his own works so that all interpretative ambiguity is eradicated. Stravinsky, as we saw, was one of the major proponents of the alleged a-semantic view of music, and precisely because he believed that music was contentless, his autobiographies took up the task of affixing meaning and content to his music so as to remove all semantic ambiguity and allow the composer's ascribed meaning to prevail.

But not only Stravinsky: Wagner too used his numerous autobiographical writings to channel the proliferation of meanings of his music dramas. In *My Life, A Communication to My Friends*, the "Autobiographical Sketch," and the endless diaries, Wagner undertakes the mission of providing lengthy exegeses of the meaning of his works--and when the author/authority provides an interpretation, all other exegeses are immediately ruled out.

Cage belongs to this tradition as well. With his usual frankness, he tells us: "Well, back in the thirties people found my music unusual and had questions about it, so my writings actually began as responses to people's questions in an attempt to let people know what it was that I was doing."⁸ But the process of providing explanations results in ruling out other possible interpretations, because, as we saw, an author has certain prerogatives of authority. An author, Foucault teaches us, is an organizing principle as well as a

⁸Kostelanetz, p. 25. Also quoted in Chapter IV.

claim of ownership: once we know that composers think such-and-such about their compositions, all other possible interpretations become less and less important, even to the point of being dead wrong. In the end, authors own their works.

Autobiographical programs attached to compositions are extremely catchy, and we examined several examples: Roger Sessions' *Albumblätter* became *Pages from My Diary*, probably for publishing reasons; and Smetana provided a detailed autobiographical program for his Quartet in E Minor. Why do composers append autobiographical programs to their music?--certainly to make the music more genuine by restating the author's presence. There is yet another reason: since listeners tend to perceive music as autobiographical (as I illustrated with the Mendelssohn example), composers assign autobiographical programs so that the listeners do not assign their own. Thus autobiographical program music is also a form of authorship, authority, and administration of meaning.

And this is what is particular and unique to autobiography in music. Autobiography serves to articulate and limit the meanings of the musical work--an entity that traditionally has been considered a-semantic. Throughout this study, I have attempted to demonstrate this premise by presenting representative autobiographies from different periods. I aspired to go beyond the "bios" part of autobiography: an autobiography is indeed the life story of

someone, but there is more to it than that. I delved into problems involving the "autos" and the "graphos" parts of autobiography--the fact that individuals represent themselves and the fact that they leave a trace that is usually written, but also sometimes painted or musical. The notions of author and work have also been the focus of study because they are the backbones of autobiography. Without our presuppositions about what an author and a work are, autobiography would be meaningless.

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