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I Was Listening … but Did Not Succeed in Hearing You: Flann O'Brien, Ralph Cusack, and the Absurdities of Silent Musical Experience.

The very idea of soundless music seems impossible, a contradiction. Certainly, we can imagine music, recall or compose it in the mind's ear, and the skilled sight-reader can 'hear' the score before her eyes. A silent musical performance is less conceivable: it is this absurdity that John Cage exploited with his 'silent' composition, 4'33". In this essay, I wish to examine two episodes in mid-twentieth century Irish novels where instances of silent musical experience are posited. One of these novels is relatively well- known, though, perhaps, by its singularity and sinister playfulness, it is a book that still manages to avoid being thought canonical: Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1967).[1] The second is much more obscure: Ralph Cusack, better known, if known at all, as a painter, published one novel, *Cadenza* (1958) a surreal, absurdist work, grounded in autobiography, but avoiding any claim to fidelity or truth.

They were near-exact contemporaries. O'Nolan was born in 1911, Cusack slightly more than a year later, and the younger man pre-deceased his elder by a year in 1965. They would almost certainly have known of each other, and it is probable that they would have met in the very small world of Dublin bohemia in the forties and fifties. They meet on paper in Anthony Cronin's *Dead as Doornails*: Cronin knew both well, and here paints a more sympathetic picture of Cusack than in his novel, *Life of Riley*, where he appears as Sir George Dermot, a bullying, condescending, and oafish drunk, with a passion for music expressed through the medium of compulsory, and very loud, gramophone recitals for his houseguests.[2]

Despite this coincidence of time, place and, for a time, habitat, O'Nolan and Cusack were almost as different in background and outlooks as it was possible to be in early- to mid-

twentieth century Ireland. O'Nolan, a native Irish speaker, though not from a *Gaeltacht,* Catholic, generally conservative in matters political, was born in Strabane, in what would become part of Northern Ireland, into a large family, but moved to Dublin in his early teens and seems never to have left. He took a BA and an MA at University College Dublin and then entered the Civil Service, where he was to stay until taking early retirement in 1953. By contrast, Cusack was born in north County Dublin. His father had been a British Army officer and later a successful stockbroker. Cusack attended Charterhouse and then Cambridge and lived in France for much of his life. While it would seem – if *Cadenza* is to be believed – that he had Republican sympathies as a young man, his upbringing was solidly Protestant and Unionist, and his milieu was one that would have remained oriented towards London and further afield, even as the Irish state became ever more inward-looking, and, with wartime neutrality, at odds with the former colonial power. It is unlikely that O'Nolan would have felt much sympathy with the likes of Cusack.

It is not my intention in the essay to add anything substantial to the growing critical corpus on O'Nolan; I will say a little more about Cusack and *Cadenza* since there is virtually no literature on him.[3] My project is rather to show – using episodes from two works of non-realist fiction – that the culture of the Irish state in the 1960s was characterised by unease, anomie, and even exhaustion, a malaise of which uncertainty regarding the function of music, and its position within a culture of constraint, were symptomatic. Both authors felt this inadequacy, as we will see later; it is a stretch, of course, to suggest that the depiction of silent musical experience necessarily correlates to a cultural situation in which *some* musical culture, however etiolated, has survived. Using a distinction taken from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, that between the philistine and the aesthete as twin, but not complementary, comportments to music and musical experience, I show that, to borrow a metaphor taken from elsewhere in Adorno, as torn halves of a totality to which they do not add up, these two

attitudes, and their incommensurability, exacerbated the felt inadequacy of public culture in the 'new' state.[4]

Before moving on to a description of the episodes in question, it would be useful to establish the degree to which two works of fantastic fiction can be held to represent in some way a state of affairs, at a particular time, and in a particular place. The long voyage of *The Third Policeman* – or to give it its original title *Hell goes Round and Round* – to publication is well-known: written soon after O'Brien's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), it was rejected by that book's publisher, Longman, and lay in a drawer for a quarter of a century, until its author cannibalized it for *The Dalkey Archive* (1965), before it was eventually published the year after his death. The book is narrated in the first person by an unnamed, young-ish man who, we realise towards the end of the book, has been dead all along. Most of the action takes place in what must be a version of hell, one that, as Aidan Higgins noted, bears a striking resemblance to the landscape of the Irish midlands.[5] There are plenty of bicycles, two (or three) policemen and no women in the narrative.

The Third Policeman was offered to Longman in 1940 and we may assume it was at least partly written before the outbreak of war. *Cadenza*, written in the 1950s, is set, very loosely, in wartime. *Cadenza*, as noted, was Cusack's only venture into literature and it is an uneven, sometimes excessive book. It is narrated as the reminiscences of Desmond, a hero whose life bears a quite close resemblance to what we know of Cusack's. This un-chronological memoir is related from carriage 304D on a train serving Dundalk from Amiens St. (now Connolly) station in Dublin sometime during 'the Emergency'. Desmond decides he has had enough of the world and wishes to remain in this liminal situation for as long as he needs to, bribing and cajoling poor Mick, 'the Begrudger', who is some class of railway functionary and appears as the ineffective figure of authority. In this state of being permanently 'on the way', he recalls episodes from a north Dublin childhood and

adolescence, from time spent with his musical uncle Melchior in the Hebrides, and from his wanderings in the south of France.

Music, as a source of conflict and communion, plays a significant role in *Cadenza*. One of the early episodes recalls an incident at home in north Dublin during the civil war when, after dinner, a toast is proposed, and 'God Save the King' is sung. Desmond, and his friend, trembling with anger, launch into a chorus of 'Up de Valera, King of Ireland!' before fleeing into the night. Desmond's relationship with his uncle is structured by the performance and appreciation of music, and, as we shall soon see, one of the pivotal moments of the book features an episode of intense and transformative musical experience all the more so for being silent.

Clair Wills suggests that the *Third Policeman*, with its images of stasis 'cut off from commerce with the world outside' might drive home 'the feeling of confinement brought on by the war' although she admits that, since it was presumably more or less complete before the war that it would be 'wrong' to interpret it as a portrait of Ireland during wartime. [6] Cusack's narrator's voluntary confinement in compartment 304D of the Dundalk train during wartime is probably more apposite.

Two Episodes

In *The Third Policeman*, the nameless narrator finds himself in ambiguous custody at a police station manned by two policemen, with veiled and persistent references to a mysterious third, Sergeant Fox. Sergeant MacCruiskeen is the dominant voice, a man of many opinions, all of them wrong, and a compulsive hobbyist – as is his compatriot.

> MacCruiskeen had been at the dresser a second time and was back at the table with a little black article like a leprechaun's piano with diminutive keys of white and

black and brass pipes and circular revolving cogs like parts of a steam engine or the business end of a thrashing-mill. His white hands were moving all over it and feeling it as if he were trying to discover some tiny lump on it, and his face was looking up in the air in a spiritual attitude and he was paying no attention to my personal existence at all. There was an overpowering tremendous silence as if the roof of the room had come halfway down to the floor.

[. . .]

'That is my personal musical instrument,' said MacCruiskeen, 'and I was playing my own tunes on it in order to extract private satisfaction from the sweetness of them.'[7]

The sergeant's 'private satisfaction' leaves our narrator confused, and somewhat defensive:

'I was listening,' I answered, 'but did not succeed in hearing you.'

'That does not surprise me intuitively,' said MacCruiskeen, 'because it is an indigenous patent of my own. The vibrations of the true notes are so high in their fine frequencies that they cannot be appreciated by the human earcup. Only myself has the secret of the thing and the intimate way of it, the confidential knack of circumventing it. Now what do you think of that?'

[. . .]

He got up and went to the dresser and took out his patent music-box which made sounds too esoterically rarefied to be audible to anyone but himself. He then sat back again in his chair, put his hands through the handstraps and began to entertain himself with the music. What he was playing could be roughly inferred from his face. It had a happy broad coarse satisfaction on it, a sign that he was

> occupied with loud obstreperous barn-songs and gusty shanties of the sea and burly roaring marching-songs. The silence in the room was so unusually quiet that the beginning of it seemed rather loud when the utter stillness of the end had been encountered. (O'Brien, p.116-17)

In *Cadenza*, Desmond, our narrator, finds himself one morning in a rustic café. As he downs the first of many glasses of pastis, he gradually begins to make out the other patrons of the dimly lit room:

> Seated at the table as far as possible distant from the other two there was a third, no, including Madame, a fourth personage; of indeterminate shape and uncertain size, clad in dark garments in the darkened room, he reminded me of unpleasant things which I could not recollect but feared I knew only too well. He was leaning very blackly over the scarcely white table, his arms splayed awkwardly and unevenly across it...silently strumming some alfresco sonata, upon which he was furiously concentrating, with the tips of strong, sensitive fingers, on the marble. Evidently he was drunk. ...
>
> Drinking, I watched, and the silent sonata continued. He played with both hands: obviously he heard it, and as I watched I could almost hear it too.
>
> Then I did hear it, he paused lifted his hands, then began again. I could hear it, I mean I could see and hear it: he had begun the slow movement of the fourteenth, Opus twenty-seven – the *Moonlight*. The more I watched, the clearer it became … it was a fine performance and I shared it all with him.[8]

Desmond, and the mysterious table-top pianist, who turns out to be the village priest, share a musical experience, and yet it is entirely soundless. Obviously, this depends on a very high level of musical knowledge and instrumental skill on both their parts; it would not be an experience available to the 'mere' listener.

As their adventure continues, ever more surreally and drunkenly, Desmond and the curé talk of how music pierces the veil of religion: 'the last Beethoven quartets … addressed mercifully to no friend of acquaintance of my bishop or his Pope … only an unbeliever could so deeply believe, only one deaf so resplendently hear!' (Cusack, p.106)

And later the village priest raises a toast:

'Here's to God's enemies—to their God's enemies —may he damn them!' (Cusack, p.106)

Philistine and Aesthete in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

In order to try and grasp the relation between the two episodes detailed above from the *Third Policeman* and *Cadenza*, and to attempt to make a more general point about the conceit of silent musical experience, we turn to Adorno, and more particularly to *Aesthetic Theory.*[9] *Aesthetic Theory* was unfinished when Adorno died in 1969 and was edited by his widow, Gretel, and Rolf Tiedemann. It contains many repetitions that would perhaps have been removed had Adorno lived to complete it. Nevertheless the way the figure of 'the philistine' returns again and again in the work is surely deliberate: the ghost that haunts the meeting of the artwork and the proper aesthetic comportment with its vulgar insistence on 'getting something' from art, whether that something be pleasure, meaning, or, with music, 'a feast for the ears'. The philistine is the bourgeois who wishes 'art voluptuous and life ascetic' when 'the reverse would be better' (Adorno, p.13).

The philistine is not the person who knows nothing about art, but rather the one who knows enough to have 'taste', but not enough to see or hear the excess embedded in the art,

its incommensurability or 'enigmaticalness', a quality that Adorno believes to be the necessary condition of the artwork, a condition of which music is the limit case, being at once 'completely enigmatic and totally evident' (Adorno, p.122).

The contrasting figure to the philistine, at least with regard to music, is a puzzling one: 'He alone would understand music who hears it with all the alienness of the unmusical and with all of Siegfried's familiarity with the language of the birds' (Adorno, p.122). Understanding, however, is not exhaustive, not akin to 'solving' a crossword. Rather, this special mode of elucidation proceeds by 'concretizing [the work's] enigmaticalness' (Adorno, p.122), in other words, by grasping that in the work that organises and preserves the enigma. If one element of this special kind of understanding may be the naïveté of the 'unmusical' the other element is possibly the opposite: 'Those who can adequately imagine music without hearing it possess that connection which is required for its understanding' (Adorno, p.122). The crab-like progress towards a set of criteria that might unlock a method for establishing the connection between this 'enigmaticalness' and 'truth content' of an artwork reproduces, mimetically, the mental journey *through* the artwork towards, but never arriving at, understanding.

Mimesis is central to *Aesthetic Theory*: aesthetic experience is, essentially for Adorno 'the configuration of rationality and mimesis' (Adorno, p.127). Mimesis is both semblance and process. With the partial exception of visual art, the artwork relies for its effect and for the understanding of that effect on an ordered sequence of events, whether these events be words, sounds, images, or gestures. This ordering is experienced as given and it is that ordering that cleaves individual experience to the artworks, which are 'schemata of experience that assimilate to themselves the subject that is experiencing' (Adorno, p.287). This processual ordering of experience is both archaic and futural: pointing to a kind of knowledge with one foot in ritual and superstition and another that '[anticipates] a condition

beyond the diremption of the individual and the collective' (Adorno, p.131) The logic of the artwork, of which music, for Adorno, is the paradigmatic and perhaps supreme type, thus has a uncanniness to it, being part dream-memory and part anticipation of a state of being not, as yet, arrived at. The peculiar nightmarish 'reality' of the *Third Policeman*, and the drunken surrealism in *Cadenza* are therefore heightened by the silent musicality of these episodes.

The exemplarity of music as the artform that displays the dialectic that structures both expression and reception most clearly is also apparent in Adorno's insistence on the particular mode of address of music: '[it] says 'We' directly, regardless of its intentions' (Adorno, p.167). The 'we' is 'a social whole on the horizon of a certain indeterminateness' (Adorno, p.168). This is not to suggest that music is an undialectical universal language: it speaks through the 'ruling productive forces and relations of the epoch' but can at least suggest the finitude and historicity of those forces and relations (Adorno, p.168).

To return to our priest and policemen, it is easy enough see in MacCruiskeen's performance of 'coarse' musical enjoyment a parodic mimesis of musical experience without the 'we'. Using his own private instrument, of which he has 'the knack' – the masturbatory resonances are hard to miss – the Sergeant leaves out the essential component of the musical: its publicness, and the announcement of a 'We' that unites the subject with the singular object that, in providing a schema of a kind of experience that we live *through* but not *in*, removes us from private experience.

The world of the two (or three) policemen is one in which rules are written back into the world with absurd and terrifying results. MacCruiskeen's 'mollycule' theory, where men become bicycles through the exchange of atomic matter *via* constant intercourse between arse and saddle, and the complicated and terrifying system of levers and dials by which their demi-monde is ordered, speaks of a disordered rationality, a world gone mad through the

excess of reason and want of sense. Our narrator escapes the gallows by being nameless and thus, despite all the somatic evidence, not existing. It is also a world in which the police appear to be the *polis*; there is no civil authority visible beyond them. In this light, the sergeant's privatised access to musical experience takes on an even more sinister character – if that were possible – suggesting a class- or caste- based privilege.

As O'Nolan's original title suggests, hell is a place where nothing even happens, or rather nothing ever happens for the first time: repetition, stasis, and the fetish-like absorption in the wrong details – the reduction of all questions to being, in the end, 'about a bicycle' – produce a world from which escape is impossible.

Cusack's narrator and his curé are brought together by an act of magically precise mimesis. Desmond's experience of watching the priest's mime becomes the experience of listening through 'exact imagination', the understanding being led by a trained engagement with music that gives access to it without hearing it.[10] Unlike the sergeant's absorption in his own private instrument, the curé performs his engagement with Beethoven in a way that invites the kind of engaged attention that, for Adorno, is the opposite of the mechanised and de-humanised consumption that characterises the products of the culture industry and its sedated subjects. Between them, Desmond and the priest perform the *Moonlight Sonata*, and its status as a 'schema of experience' that is entirely singular, but 'assimilates to itself the subject (s) that [are] experiencing it' is made present. The curé is also an authority figure, but one who has abdicated.

On Being Irish as an Art-form: Music and the Irish Literary Revival

> People who call to my lodgings for advice often ask me whether being Irish is in itself an art-form … it would save so much trouble if we could all answer in the affirmative. [11]

In order to understand how these two modalities of musical apprehension might have been instantiated in practice during the time in which *The Third Policeman* was written, and in which the action of *Cadenza* might be taken to have occurred, we need to understand the condition of music during that period in Ireland. The invention of Ireland was an artistic enterprise that preceded the institutional form the country took when a conditional independence was achieved.[12] As such, the actual existing country was never able to live up to the imaginative project. More than that, the condition of real, existing early to mid-twentieth century Irish people was relativized to a set of sometimes contradictory criteria, and there was a sense that, as a member of the first proud cohort of modern Irish citizens, one was expected to 'perform' Irishness in a way that did honour to the 'dead generations'.

The constitutive mistake outlined above, the view that creating the 'right' kind of subject-citizen by a process of cultural management was both desirable and even necessary to defend the integrity of the nation state has its roots in a particular discourse that forms the 'backstage' portion of a large part of the argument in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Beginning with Kant and working through Herder and Schiller, the priority of a proper and disinterested form of aesthetic judgement as the prerequisite of mature political judgement was also formative for the notion of 'absolute' music that developed through the nineteenth century: the view that music was uniquely exemplary of disinterested and therefore ideally universal aesthetic experience.[13]

The posited connection between the aesthetic and the political, which is the demand of reason, must remain at a level of indeterminacy for Kant if freedom is to be maintained. As Adorno remarks, for Kant the notion of disinterest hides 'the wildest interest' (Adorno, p. 11). That which is hidden here is the embedded notion of progress, the idea of taste as 'an ability yet to be acquired'.[14] The exercise of taste will, in this formulation, lead to an overall

amelioration in the coherence, transparency, and sympathy within social and political wholes – states – and reduce the possibility of conflict. Thus, for Kant, aesthetic judgement, not necessarily for him the judgement of art, but also of natural beauty, trains a kind of thinking that can then be enlisted in the service of political maturation.

David Lloyd notes Kant's recommendation of 'reciprocal communion between the more cultured and ruder sections of the community' as the task and outcome of the exercise of and refinement of judgements of taste.[15] Such a 'reciprocal communion' was the task that Irish nationalism faced in the years before independence, an ambition it shared with the architects of the literary revival. As Lloyd notes elsewhere, the nationalist project too quickly collapsed the modes of subjectivity that Kant was careful to keep apart: 'The Irish nationalist merely insists on a different notion of what is to be formed in the encounter with genius: not so much the intermediate subject of taste as, directly, the political subject, the citizen subject, itself'.[16] Or, as Myles has it, this political subject would be expected to live 'Irishness' as an 'art-form'.

Myles was in no doubt as to the philistinism of the Irish public with regard to music. This was, for many of O'Nolan and Cusack's generation, part of a more general disillusionment with post-independence Ireland. They were too young to have fought for that independence, but lived with the consequences of the cultural and economic isolationism that followed.He writes of:

> A nation of befuddled paddies, whose sole musical tradition is bound up with blind harpers, tramps with home-made fiddles, Handel in fish-handel street, John McCormack praising our airport, and no street in the whole capital named after John Field.[17]

As the ambition towards national self-determination began to find cultural expression, there was one distinction between the Irish experience and that of many of the other countries that aspired to and achieved national independence at the same time. As Harry White puts it:

> The most significant event in modern Irish cultural history is the literary movement which stemmed directly from the Celtic revival of the 1890s [and] between the death of Parnell in 1891 and the Easter Rising of 1916 [produced] a body of literature written in English [that] changed utterly the complexion of cultural life in Ireland and … threw into sharp relief the relationship between Irish political aspiration and political expression.[18]

What is notable, for White, is a failure to thrive: under these auspicious conditions 'the concept of art music failed to develop in any significant way at the turn of the century'.[19] The contribution of music to the nationalisms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is almost taken as a necessary condition by Dahlhaus: 'Nationalistic music invariably emerges as an expression of a politically motivated need, which tends to appear when national independence is being sought, denied or jeopardised, rather than attained or consolidated'.[20] As Ireland in this period paradigmatically represented the state of independence being 'sought, denied or jeopardised', the failure of a national art music to emerge that captured and sustained this is, on the surface, puzzling.

As Lloyd notes, the coming to consciousness of a panoply of overlapping, but also contradictory, versions of the Irish nation during the years of the literary revival, the concurrent revival of interest in re-instating the Irish language as a vernacular for the entire country which replaced the more modest antiquarian interest of previous generations of enthusiasts, and the gradual, and then sudden, substitution of constitutional and gradualist

nationalism with a more militant separatism, could all coexist as 'a horizon of transcendence' one that promptly disappeared once there was an actual country to run.[21] A country, that, as Lloyd also notes, in a pattern that was to be replicated across the former British Empire, 'put in place institutions entirely analogous to those of the colonial state which [previously] dominated [it]'.[22]

As a consequence of these conflicting ambitions, the Irish state, when it finally arrived, was struck dumb: it could no longer speak the language of aspiration, the past re-cast as a bright future. It was caught on a selection of contradictions: the first being the performative contradiction common to all nationalisms – the desire to take one's place as an equal in the community of nations, because one's nation was a nation 'like any others' founded in the equal and opposite conviction that one's nation was *not* a nation like any other, but was fundamentally and substantially different from the colonising power and could not simply be subsumed into the 'mother country'.

This inability to enunciate the ideal of nationhood when faced with the actuality was echoed in the musical life of the new state. White says that 'the tone of deploration which characterises so much periodical literature on music in the period 1920-50 is unrelieved'.[23] The new state had little time for art music which was seen as an ascendancy fetish: nor did the attempt to establish a Gaelic Ireland, focussed as it was on reviving the Irish language – with little success – manage to bring music in its slipstream. As Fleischmann noted, and as quoted by White at the head of his chapter on Sean Ó Riada:

> Irish folk music, unlike that of nations whose music followed a normal course of development, has never been properly assimilated into a broader tradition of art music, due to the chasm – political social and religious – which existed for centuries between the spontaneous song in the vernacular which was the natural

> expression of the Irish people and the purely English tradition of music making in the towns.[24]

The notion that there was a 'normal course' of development, which Ireland failed to follow, is question begging. Whatever the causes, art music in the Free State was poorly resourced, the hobby of a class that could afford it, or of a class that aspired to the distinction that it afforded, without the social capital to nurture, or even to understand it.

One way in which the difference from the former colonial power was performed was as an anti-modernity that was a close cousin of artistic modernism and sometime found expression in that idiom. England, with its mass culture, its industry, its vulgarity, and its materialism, was everything Ireland was not. Ireland was not innocent of material modernity by any means: as Eagleton notes, Belfast, by the end of the century was the fifth most productive industrial city in the world.[25] Nor was industry confined to the north east: the transformations in Irish land holding and the changeover from tillage to pasturage made Irish agriculture part of an industrial chain that led from the small-holdings of the west, to the grazing lands of Meath and onto the slaughterhouses of London.[26]

However, as Seamus Deane has it 'the modernisation of Irish society after the famine was accompanied by the archaicizing of the idea of Irish culture'.[27] In musical terms, this meant a projection onto the actual existing folk music practices of the Irish rural and urban working classes of continuity with a tradition of court music that was more or less extinguished by the end of the eighteenth century, only to be mummified in the collections of Bunting and Petrie before being subsumed as a sentimental fetish in the lyrics of Thomas Moore. [28]

The 'folk music' that Fleischmann and White would have wished to see assimilated into a national art music was itself a phantasm of the archaicizing cultural imperative noted

by Deane. In a misrepresentation that continues to this day, the wildly eclectic and synthetic dance music that was being performed throughout the country from the late nineteenth century onwards, was not, as is still claimed, part of 'a river of sound' flowing from ancient times.[29] The near seamless integration of instruments such as the accordion and the banjo that were then as new as synthesisers would be a century later, and the co-option of tunes from the stage and from the musical fare of polite society into the repertoire of the musicians playing for house dances in rural Ireland gives the lie to that fiction.[30] In truth, Irish 'traditional' music had more in common, in terms of its eclecticism, it performance practices and general heterogeneity, with the popular music forms that were developing at the same time in the Americas.

As O'Shea points out, by the early years of the newly independent state, the 'pure drop' of Irish folk music was not uninflected with the taint of jazz or of modern cultural consumption practices. Irish music recorded in the USA, from the 1920s onwards, particularly the discs of the virtuoso Sligo fiddler, Michael Coleman, were listened to avidly across Ireland, and had a huge influence, spreading Irish regional styles and tunes across the country. These recordings generally had a piano accompaniment that, though far removed from African American ragtime or jazz melodically or harmonically, echoed that style of accompaniment with a bass note on the 'on' beat and the rest of the chord on the off-beat. It's a rhythmic style so engrained by now in popular music that it is hard to hear that it would once have been 'innovative or modern'. As O'Shea argues

> it is even more difficult to conceive of Irish traditional music as a resistant or subversive cultural form; and yet popular music practices in rural Ireland were not the same as those sanctioned by the Irish state … Irish traditional music exhibit[ed]

> a diversity and unruliness that needed to be standardised and disciplined in the interests of creating a unified national culture.[31]

Some of this 'unruliness' was a cause of moral concern to the Catholic church. Informal dances held in private houses, and 'jazz' dancing in dance halls were held to provoke a dangerous informality in the relations between the sexes. The church successfully lobbied for legislation to regulate this; the Public Dance Halls Act (1935) was the result of this, and, while there is some debate in the historiography concerning its actual effectiveness, it at least testifies to a desire for social and cultural control by the church and its lay allies.[32]

The doomed project of a 'unified national culture' meanwhile, was being pursued through the institution of 'a national music curriculum' in schools, to be assessed competitively at feiseanna and by exam. This contributed to, as O'Shea puts it, 'the task of translating into state policy and legislation the nationalist ideal'.[33] Essentially, this policy superimposed forms of bourgeois musical study and performance practice onto folk forms whose provenance was subjected to a process of ideological mystification, the better to represent an impossible ideal.

Silent Music and the 'New Aestheticism'

I suggested above that the sergeant's solipsistic engrossment in the product of his private musical instrument can be read as congruent with Adorno's image of the philistine. This figure is not the person ignorant of, or indifferent to, art and music, but rather the one who sees artistic experience as something from which one gets a return – whether that be pleasure or social distinction. Art, or music, is instrumentalised, pressed into the service of aims beyond the disinterested appreciation that is the traditional view of the aesthetic. For Adorno, this 'traditional', Kantian view can no longer be supported: the chains of correspondence and

sympathy between the social organism and the artwork have been shattered, to be replaced by an irrationally 'rationalised' totality, to which the artwork can only address a mute gesture of refusal. When the notion of a 'return on investment' in art becomes a matter of public cultural policy, and the return is measured in the currency of identity, the error is amplified a thousand-fold.

Dave Beech and John Roberts, in *The Philistine Controversy* (2001), take aim at what they call the 'new aestheticism', a product of a renewed interest in Adorno after the translation into English of *Aesthetic Theory*.[34] They indict what they consider to be the occlusion of the social theory that drives Adorno to his belief that only the autonomous work of art can fully express – negatively – the brokenness of contemporary life. For Adorno, art is – and must be – as it is, because society is as it is. Remove this necessity, and aestheticism becomes merely a complaint about the awfulness of popular culture, and the pious hope that taste can be improved through education and the amelioration of the worst excesses of capitalism, which brings us back to Kant with no real gain in traction.

Read in the light of this critique of the new aestheticism the finale of the scene in *Cadenza* between Desmond and the curé remains ambiguous. That the conversation starts with Beethoven is significant in that Beethoven is, for Adorno, the name of the last time any affective correspondence between the social and the aesthetic was possible, or, more simply, when a composer could write music that a lot of people might like without betraying the autonomy of the artwork. Whether, in the last drunken shout against Pope and empire, they imagine a restoration of that correspondence or whether, in stubborn despair, they are with Kafka, is accepting that 'there is (or was) hope, but not for us' is un-guessable.

The twin silences of our two episodes are two sides of the same thing: the sergeant's unheard organ is the muteness of an irrational and unaccountable authority, whereas the soundless musical experience in the village café is a refusal of that authority – a refusal that

must be silent to avoid co-option. The nameless subject of the three policemen cannot 'succeed in hearing' because such authority has nothing to say beyond the announcement of its power. Nor can it be resisted, except through a gesture that it finds incomprehensible. Whether these twin silences can be related, as I have suggested, to the condition of music and of cultural life more generally in Ireland between independence and the end of the Second World War cannot, of course, be proven. I am not arguing that these silent musical experiences can be taken as representations of the poverty of musical life therein; rather that the first enacts the inability to hear over the ideological clamour of exceptionalism, while the second mimes what may have seemed to be the only refusal possible, one by necessity unvoiced.

NOTES

1. As recommended by the International Flann O'Brien Society, O'Nolan will be referred to in matters biographical or otherwise factual by his given name and according to the relevant pseudonym when dealing with individual works.

2. Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails*, (Dublin: Poolbeg Press 1980); *Life of Riley* (London: Secker and Warburg 1964).

3. See, for example, *Is it About a Bicycle?: Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Court Press 2011); *Flann O'Brien, Gallows Humour*, ed. by Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press 2020); *Conjuring Complexities* ed. by Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: QUB Press 1997); Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press 1995).

4. Theodor Adorno *et al*., *Aesthetics and Politics* (Verso: London 2007), p.122.

5. ‘It is, in fact, the landscape of Hell, which, as the Irish novelist Aidan Higgins has pointed out, is unmistakably that of the Irish midlands around Athlone: flat, fertile, and unremarkable, downright sinister in its ordinariness.’ Roger Boylan, ‘We Laughed, We Cried: Flann O’Brien’s Triumph’, *The Boston Review*, 1 July, 2008, http://bostonreview.net/

6. Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber 2007) p.265.

7. Flann O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*, (London: Harper Collins, 1966), pp. 80. Subsequent references to this work are included parenthetically in the text.

8. Ralph Cusack, *Cadenza* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1984), p.97. Subsequent references to this work are included parenthetically in the text.

9. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997). Subsequent references to this work are included parenthetically in the text.

10. Shierry Weber Nichelsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

11. Quoted in Carol Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys: The Citizen and the Artist’ in *Is it About a Bicycle?* ed. by Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), pp.124-5.

12. See, for example: Seamus Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Leith Davis, *Music, Colonialism and Gender* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

13. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987); Friedrich Schiller, *The Aesthetic Education of Man,* trans. by Reginald

Snell (New York: Dover, 2004). For more on this, see Stan Erraught, *On Music, Value and Utopia: Nostalgia for an Age Yet to Come?* (London and Lexington: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

14. Kant, *Critique of Judgement* p.89. (5:240 *Akademie* pagination)

15. Kant *Critique of Judgement*, p.231. (5: 356)

16 David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,1993), p.88.

17. Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: Selections from An Cruiskeen Lawn* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p.241.

18. Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital*, *Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770-1970* (Cork: Cork University Press/ Field Day 1998), p.94.

19. White, *Keeper's Recital*, p.97.

20. White, *Keeper's Recital*, p.8.

21. Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, p.73.

22. Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, p.113.

23. White, *Keeper's Recital*, p.129.

24. White, *Keeper's Recital*, p.125.

25. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p.274.

26. See, for example, Conor McCabe, *Sins of the Father* (Dublin: The History Press, 2014).

27. Seamus Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.51.

28. Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender: The Construction of Irish National Identity 1724-1874* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

29. See, for example, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, sleevenotes to *A River of Sound*, CD, Hummingbird Records, 1995.

30. See, for example, Martin Dowling, 'Rambling in the Field of Modern Identity: Some Speculations on Irish Traditional Music', *Radharc*, vol. 5/7 (2004-6), 107-34; Gerry Smyth 'Amateurs and Textperts: Studying Irish Traditional Music', *Irish Studies Review,* 3.12, (1995): 2-10.

31. Helen O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), p.31.

32. See Barbara O'Connor, *The Irish Dancing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2013), pp.39-59. See also Flann O'Brien, 'The Dance Halls,' *The Bell* 1.5 (February 1941): 44-52.

33. O'Shea, *Making of Irish Traditional Music*, p.33.

34. Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy* (London: Verso 2001).