



“The True Life-Giver”: The Importance of Music in *Nausea* and *Steppenwolf*

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Literature and the Human Condition

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Jean-Paul Sartre and Herman Hesse's novels *Nausea* and *Steppenwolf* both examine the relationship of music to the human condition. Writer/musician Ralph Ellison and composer/philosopher Richard Wagner believed that man could come to a better understanding of himself and his identity if he could truly express himself musically. They both thought that a man needed to express his emotions through his music rather than simply regurgitate interpretations of societal norms if he were to maintain the uniqueness of his existence and personality. Although both wrote extensively on the concept of music and its relation to the self, Wagner focused on the idea of superficiality in music resulting from courting success and popular approval, while Ellison concerned himself more with music's relation to race and understanding of one's cultural background.

In *Nausea*, protagonist Antoine Roquentin enjoys music, and he finds it to be a source of optimism and a way for him to escape from the problems and discomfort he feels with himself. When Roquentin hears a particular piece of music, he feels liberated from the struggles that constantly burden him. On the other hand, *Steppenwolf's* protagonist Harry Haller has only an insincere, intellectual relationship with music, and as a result he feels highly uncomfortable with himself. However, once Haller meets Pablo, he finally appreciates music on an emotional level and becomes more in-touch with himself. Through the Ellisonian and Wagnerian lenses, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* show that music, whether used as authentic self-expression or simply appreciated, helps man to come to a better understanding of himself and the struggles of life which define the human condition, which liberates him from the shackles of oppression faced by one who does not have as keen a sense of self-awareness. On the contrary, one who has only a superficial relationship with music cannot develop as strong a sense of self-consciousness.

The musician who makes music devoid of any true emotion coming from within himself can no longer truly live an authentic existence. When a man creates something that comes out of a

manufactured, insincere emotion, rather than being a reflection of himself, he has lost touch with his identity. In the essay "Opera and Drama," Richard Wagner describes melody as "the true life-giver" (41). He believes that melody has the capability to give someone character and personality. When he calls it a "life-giver," he means that it gives them a reason to live and makes their lives worth living. However, as much as he believes in the power of music and melody, he also thinks that music that without emotion is "death in empty forms...melody...when stripped of that pretence [sic] of Character...must seem to him a hollow sham" (42). Wagner in this quote referred in particular to the glitzy and campy Italian operas that he saw as the epitome of musicians selling out and not creating genuine music from within themselves. Rather, they were simply making music that the general public wanted to hear.

Wagner believed that this music had so little life and such an absence of humanity that he referred to it as "death in empty forms." It was nothing more than "a hollow sham" because it bore a vague relation to the genuine music that he loved, insomuch that the same medium produced both of them, but the Italian opera which he lambasted contained none of the same power or expression as the music which provoked deep feelings within him. He believed that music could be very powerful, with the potential to be "the true life-giver," but he also thought that people often misused it and made it shallowly emotionless.

Whereas Wagner thought that creating impassive melodies created a spiritual void in one's existence, Roquentin's enjoyment of music allows him to feel more comfortable with himself and frees him of the burdens that he places upon himself. He particularly enjoys the jazz standard "Some of These Days." In the following quote, he explains the feeling which listening to the tune gives him: "I grow warm, I begin to feel happy...I love this beautiful voice... When the voice was heard in the silence, I felt my body harden and the Nausea vanish" (Sartre 21-22). Clearly, music has a very strong effect on

him. It frees him of the existential self-loathing and discomfort that plagues him throughout most of the rest of the novel. It allows him to escape from his problems, even though it only diverts him from them temporarily. It does not *cure* him of any of the serious identity problems and struggles he goes through, but music soothes him and allows him to accept his identity and his role in society.

For Roquentin, this particular piece of music acted as “the true life-giver,” just as some music had the potential to be for Wagner (41). Although the music’s effect on Roquentin was merely emotional rather than physical, it provoked him so powerfully that it impacted his life no less importantly than anything physical or tangible. Writer Henry A. Grubbs agreed, saying, “The effect upon the listener [Roquentin] is striking, and the listener’s reaction is not that of pure esthetic appreciation of music as an art; it is an emotional reaction...the music seems to suggest to the listener the possibility of happiness” (516). Roquentin feels better and briefly forgets his troubles because of “the possibility of happiness” which Grubbs describes. It gives him hope, which he lacks in the rest of his life. Interestingly, Sartre never explains whether the music which Roquentin reacts so strongly to bears a closer resemblance to the glitzy Italian Opera or to “the true life-giver” in Wagner’s essay. However, according to Wagner’s logic, Roquentin’s forceful response could never happen from music “stripped of that pretence [*sic*] of character” (42).

Just as music provides optimism for Roquentin and enables him to escape his identity problems, music helps African Americans to deal with their problems of discrimination, gives them inner strength, and allows them to be comfortable with their identities. Ralph Ellison wrote extensively on this topic in his essay “Some Questions and Some Answers.” He believed that African Americans needed to be true to their roots in their music. He thought that African Americans who tried to imitate European (classical) music were only lying to themselves and creating nothing more than “death in empty forms” (Wagner 41). He believed that, by attempting to adopt styles that were not their own, they only grew

ashamed of their identities and did not learn to love themselves. However, he thought that African Americans became much more stronger as a people once they embraced their past musically. He wrote, "Negroes are no longer ashamed of their slave past but see it in sources of strength, and it is now generally recognized that the spirituals bespoke their birth as a people and asserted and defined their humanity" (Ellison 269). He, like Wagner, believed that people had to express themselves authentically if they were to truly be in touch with themselves.

Just as "Some of These Days" gave Roquentin "the possibility of hope" and allowed him to rid himself of his problems, the slave spirituals that Ellison described helped to humanize African Americans by identifying them with their past and their heritage (Grubbs 516). Once they connected with their history through the spirituals, they no longer lived their lives under the false pretenses which they lived with when they only imitated European music rather than relying on themselves for sources of authentic self-expression. They were able to take pride in themselves and their people once they started expressing themselves through music that genuinely belonged to them, and Roquentin was able to find a similar comfort with his identity when he listened to "Some of These Days."

While music allows African Americans to take pride in their heritage and appreciate who they are, Harry Haller in Hesse's *Steppenwolf* cannot come to terms with himself until he develops a genuine appreciation for music rather than simply an intellectual one. Early in the novel, Harry only listens to classical, academic music, and he only enjoys because he thinks that he should. When he hears jazz, he hates it, although he seems to harbor affection for it. He writes, "This kind of music, much as I detested it, had always had a secret charm for me. It was repugnant to me" (37). Clearly, since he finds this "charm" to be "repugnant," he only denies his to desire to appreciate it. Enjoying popular music does not fit his image of the serious intellectual that he considers himself to be, so he pretends that it has no effect on him. This connects to his denial of other human desires such as lust and companionship. He

tries to prevent himself from becoming a typical member of the bourgeoisie, and he does everything he can to be unlike them because he has such a strong desire not to join them. In order to avoid conforming, he pretends to have no interest in contemporary music.

As much as he wants to deny his desire for human emotions, he eventually gives in when he sees how happy Hermine and Pablo are. Once Pablo introduces him to the joy of music, he develops a new sense of happiness and self-confidence which he did not have before he allowed himself to enjoy popular music. He discusses Pablo's influence on him in the novel, saying, "I had marveled at...this smile in my friend, Pablo, when he hung over his saxophone in the blissful intoxication of playing in the orchestra...on this blessed night, I myself, the Steppenwolf, was radiant with this smile...I danced without stop and with anyone who came in my way" (168-169). Haller's desire to dance "with anyone who came in my way" shows him to be a very different man from the introverted Haller whom Hesse introduces beginning of the novel. Furthermore, his declaration of "I myself, the Steppenwolf," shows that he no longer feels shame about his true self and is not afraid of his identity. Writer Marc A. Weiner agreed that jazz was very significant in Harry's change, saying, "It is jazz that transforms the constitution of his personality" (482). Just like the African Americans that Ellison described, Haller uses music as a "source of strength" (Ellison 269). African Americans once used music that came from within them and their heritage to combat discrimination and its stigmas, and Haller finds a similar comfort in music's ability to empower one once he truly understand its capabilities. He now experiences music as "the true life-giver" which Wagner talked about (41).

Music has a tremendous importance to Haller in *Steppenwolf*, as it does to Roquentin in *Nausea*, and Wagner and Ellison as well. Wagner and Ellison argue for music's significance in men living authentic existences and having strong understandings of themselves. They believe that the creation of insincere music only leads one to losing touch with their true selves. *Nausea* and *Steppenwolf*

illuminated this point repeatedly. In the contemporary world, artists continue to struggle for self-identity through their music. It has become harder and harder for people to come up with original musical ideas, and some try so hard to be original that they end up creating work which does not represent their true feelings. Artists and consumers of art must stay true to themselves if they want to keep any sense of self-identity.

Works Cited

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