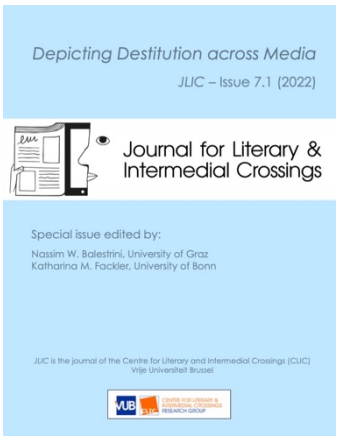

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"Wir arme Leut": Büchner, Berg, and the Activism of Art

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In the eloquent Call for Papers for the conference that inspired this collection of essays, the organizers foregrounded James Agee's potent verbal exploration of representing sharecropper poverty in 1930s America. This appeared in his book, created with photographer Walker Evans, entitled *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*:

> If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlour game. (Agee and Evans 13)

Part of the purpose, clearly, was to make us think about the multiple modes and media available to represent poverty, that is, what Agee later in that book calls "a portion of unimagined existence." Agee's particular position on this topic, however, also constitutes a challenge to both producers and receivers of aesthetic representations of the poor, and that challenge is clearly an ethical one: Who has the right to represent whom? How will the representation be made, and for what purpose and to what ends? These questions echo those posed by recent critiques within the field of poverty studies arguing that the discourses around destitution often frame the poor primarily for the purposes of the audience: They are "not us" (see Rimstead; Korte and Zipp; Jones). This distancing allows control, as well as differentiation, of course (Leviatin; Ehrenreich).

Elsewhere in that preamble to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee rather aggressively addresses the reader of his text (and the viewer of Walker Evans' photographs) with these words: "Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art" (15). We, however, want to take on this assertion and argue that it is precisely Art – a certain kind of art – that can offer us the way to imagine (ethically) that "portion of unimagined existence" that is poverty. And, perhaps surprisingly, we are going to be using the multimedial art form of opera to do so. We realize that opera is more associated in most people's minds with courtly entertainment or bourgeois exhibitionism, rather than with engaging themes of poverty. Certainly, opera's early subjects were the classical myths of antiquity (the singing poet Orpheus, for example). This is because the art form was born in Renaissance Italy as an attempt to recreate the musical and dramatic unity known to have characterized ancient Greek drama. Later, operatic subjects drawn from European history allowed servants to appear but as (often comic) foils to the aristocratic protagonists. And even with Verismo – the late-nineteenth-century operatic equivalent of literary naturalism – the focus was on the ordinary people or peasants, but not specifically on the poor (Sansone 955). There is one exception, however: a famous story of Parisian poverty and death by tuberculosis, and that is *La Bohème* (1896) by Giacomo Puccini, Luigi Illica, and Giuseppe Giacosa.

While we will use this Italian opera as a way to introduce the multimodal and multimedia elements of specifically operatic storytelling, this is not going to be the main focus of our attention here, as our title might already have suggested. It is Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925/1952) that will be, but Puccini's opera allows us to introduce the problems and reframe the vexing ethical challenge that Agee set for both artists and audiences. In fact, we will start by taking the point of view of an audience member going to a performance of that famous Italian opera representing poverty in nineteenth-century Paris.

As audience members, we arrive at the theatre with a certain horizon of expectations – that is, certain attitudes and understandings – based on our prior experience of opera, of *La Bohème* specifically, and even perhaps of the source text, Henri Murger's 1851 *Scènes de la vie de Bohème.* Even the least experienced of us will likely have *some* context, even if it is only the trope of the starving artist in a Parisian garret. But we also arrive as part of an interpretive community, that is, equipped with some strategies of interpretation to engage with the fictional world presented on stage. This is a theatrical world where each object is transfigured simply by being on stage: its presence there renders it significant; it becomes a signifying agent.

This fictional world has been concretized (or made physically real) through an interpretation of the basic materials of the opera, that is, what are called the "dramatic texts" (Elam 3) created by the librettists and the composer: the libretto with its story, dialogue, and stage directions, and the musical score. Unlike what Nelson Goodman calls an "autographic" form like a painting (where what we see on the canvas was put there directly by the artist), opera is an "allographic" art form (113), and a range of other individuals, artists in their own right, are needed to create what is called the "performance text" (Elam 3). In other words, a directorial team is required to create the concepts that will structure the production's interpretation and its *mise en scène* – the visual aspects of sets, costumes and lighting that will define the place, the time, and the atmosphere in which the performers will tell the operatic story through gesture, movement, and facial expression. These singing actors will also obviously communicate vocally, as they sing the words of a text specifically written to be set to music. In most opera houses today, this text is also rendered in a translated version through surtitles (projected above the stage), thus overcoming the difficulty of understanding sung text in a language that may be foreign to the listener.

Finally, there is also a conductor and an orchestra playing the music of the score. The music may well support the libretto's words but it may also carry and transmit meanings beyond that of the written text. This can occur through leitmotifs (musical phrases attached to specific characters, emotions, or objects) or through reminiscence motives, reminding us of previous moments in the opera. On the other hand, the music can also simply do what music does so well – express a mood or atmosphere crucial to the dramatic impact of the work as a whole. These multiple channels of visual, verbal, and musical communication may work together to reinforce a certain interpretation for the audience. However, at times, one channel may work to negate or at the very least complicate the message of another.

So, how does *La Bohème* deploy these multiple semiotic resources to establish a representation of poverty and its ultimate (in this case, fatal) consequences? The stage directions for Act I read: "Ampia finestra dalla quale si scorge una distesa di tetti coperti di neve" ("A large window, with a view of an expanse of snow-covered roofs") (Puccini 1). In naturalistic productions, the set is usually rendered, as per the stage directions, as a sparsely furnished, rather dilapidated garret room with an unlit stove, an easel, a bookcase, a table, a few chairs, and a bed, with a few candlesticks scattered about. The particulars of Paris of the 1830s were invoked in the original production by the characters' clothing, and also, in the text by the mention of the monarch, Louis Phillipe, in Act I (3) and one of his ministers, Guizot, in Act 4 (28). The text quickly establishes that the two young men on stage when the curtain opens – Rodolfo, a writer, and Marcello, a painter – are both freezing cold. Not surprisingly, they are also starving. The material consequences of poverty are often reinforced dramatically by scarves and blankets and by gestures as they try in vain to warm themselves by burning Rodolfo's newly composed play, act by act.

However, the music tells a rather different story. The opening theme, called the theme of the Bohemians, is more lighthearted youth than despair, a sense supported by the humorous banter about their deprivations:

Marcello: Rodolfo, io voglio dirti	I must make you
un mio pensier profondo:	a most sincere confession:
ho un freddo cane.	It's freezing cold here.
Rodolfo: Ed io, Marcel, non ti nascondo	And I will grant you this concession,
che non credo al sudore della fronte.	That I am not exactly perspiring. (1)

Later, in Act III, the mood and story change, however. In the snowy cold that is the governing temperature of *La Bohème,* Rodolfo tells Marcello (as Mimì, his lover, listens) about the illness that she suffers from (that is, tuberculosis) and its direct relationship to the deprivations of poverty. Though he loves Mimì, Rodolfo is afraid ("Ma ho paura!"):

Mimì è tanto malata!	Mimi is dreadfully ailing.
Ogni dì più declina.	Day by day she is failing.
La povera piccina	[The poor little one
È condannata!	Is doomed!][1] (24)

He goes on to explain that a terrible cough wracks her fragile chest, and her pale cheeks are flushed. He laments that his poor garret room is cold and squalid, and he fears he is therefore the cause of the malady that is killing her ("Me cagion del fatale/ male che l'uccide!") (24). He calls her a hot-house flower that poverty has destroyed ("Mimì di serra è fiore./ Povertà l'ha sfiorita") (24). As is well known, Mimì's eventual death from consumption is the climax and the finale of the opera – and Puccini's familiar, powerful music is more than capable of bringing out the emotional pathos of her death at such a young age.

[1] Translation in parentheses is literal and is our own. The libretto translation cited here reads more figuratively: "I fear the spark of life has lost its power!"

It would be wise to recall, however, that this hyper-emotional romanticizing is of a disease that was the single most common cause of death at this time. Tuberculosis or consumption was directly linked to poor living conditions, and social as well as material deprivation. Theodor Adorno would likely have considered *La Bohème* "affirmative art" (5) – a negative term, aesthetically and politically, for him: by this, he meant art that offers, through its "transfiguration" of suffering, the sense of a "tragic reconciliation with fate" (Geuss 44). In other words, *La Bohème* allows its audience to weep, and then clap and go home happy; it does not provoke one to demand social change. Transmuting suffering into conventionally beautiful music, Puccini's particular musical language in the end could not portray the true despair of poverty and its deadly consequences. However, to be fair, this was never the aim *of La Bohème,* the opera or its source texts. It *was* the aim, though, of Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck* (1836-67) and Alban Berg's opera from this source, *Wozzeck* (1925).[2] And Berg's musical language – with its free atonality and ample dissonances – turned out to be a much more adept medium for representing the seriousness of human suffering caused by poverty.

The opera (like the play) tells the story of one Franz Wozzeck, a man whose life could act as a case study in the definition of lived poverty, both then and now. By that, we mean poverty not only as the lack of food and shelter or the other basics needed to survive with dignity, but also (and importantly) as the lack of choice, of opportunity, and of any sense of agency. This is poverty as abuse at the hands of those in power, as susceptibility to violence, as powerlessness in the face of social institutions. Wozzeck is an impoverished soldier who tries to support his lover, Marie, and their child by earning money beyond his meagre pay: He gathers firewood for his superior officer, shaves the (generically named) Captain, and is medically experimented upon by the (equally

[2] The spelling difference is accounted for by a mistake in transcription that was subsequently retained – for aural purposes.

generic) Doctor. All of these characters exist in the story as unnamed figures of authority and oppression. Wozzeck is the voice of both the ordinary little man and of the destitute, mocked and abused by everyone with any power. Already on the brink of a breakdown when the opera opens, he suffers visual hallucinations and hears voices. It is Marie's infidelity with the (again unnamed) Drum Major (and his humiliating beating by him) that drives Wozzeck over the edge, and he murders Marie – the one good thing in his life – before (accidentally or on purpose) drowning himself. As a representation of poverty and its consequences, Wozzeck's tale – in either its dramatic or operatic form – is not in the least romanticized; nor are we allowed any comfortable distance from it. The power of the story makes the tragedy of the lives of the poor visible, audible, and almost palpable for the audience. This is what Büchner intended, and this is what Berg seized upon.

Georg Büchner may have lived only 23 short years and left behind as his literary legacy only three plays, one novella, and one revolutionary socialist pamphlet, but few writers have had the kind of impact on modern European theatre that he has had – even if belatedly, a century after his birth. Gerhard Hauptmann claimed him as the forefather of naturalism; Frank Wedekind and Georg Kaiser did the same for expressionism, as did Bertold Brecht for epic theatre and Antonin Artaud for the theatre of cruelty (Richards, *Georg Büchner's* Woyzeck xi-xii; Lindenberger 10; Reddick 4; Grimm 118). Büchner, the son of a doctor who had served with Napoleon's army, was raised in a liberal-thinking and Francophile family and sent to study in Strasbourg by his father. It was there, in France, that he experienced a degree of freedom and prosperity unknown to him in his native Hesse-Darmstadt. It was there that he was radicalized and made into an activist for the poor and oppressed peasants of his homeland.

Büchner's homeland was the Grand Duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt, and like other parts of what is now Germany, it had been a client-state of France during the Napoleonic years. It was part of the Confederation of the Rhine, founded after the destabilization and decentralization of power caused by the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. During the early years of the nineteenth century, then, it had been somewhat liberalized, at least politically, under French influence. With the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and the restoration of the old order, both liberalism and democracy were crushed by the triumphant return of a reactionary society that feared the ideals of the French Revolution, democratic governance, and national self-determination. As a result, the inhabitants of Hesse (most of whom lived on the land) experienced constant repression of civil liberties and ruthless exploitation through brutal oppressive taxation. A series of bad harvests, a population explosion, and crowding on the land further reduced the peasants of Hesse to utter poverty. When they revolted, opposition was crushed, the constitution rescinded, and an authoritarian autocracy – or really, a police state – was installed.

Büchner grew up in this repressive Grand Duchy in the *Vormärz*, that is, in the years of reaction to the 1830 July Revolution in Paris, the 1833 storming of the guardhouses in Frankfurt, and any number of other European peasants' and workers' revolts (Grimm 11-14). Serfdom only ended in Hesse in 1820, and the medieval guilds still held power in this totally non-industrialized part of Europe. When Büchner returned from Strasbourg to Germany – for it was the law that students could study elsewhere for only two years – he saw his homeland through different eyes. Influenced by the utopian socialist ideals of the eighteenth-century French agitator and journalist François-Noël Babeuf and the economic theories of Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, the young Büchner saw anew Hesse's hopeless political and economic stagnation and, even more importantly, the subhuman existence of the poor peasants whose labour kept the ruling class in

luxury. In this police state, the people were not free; their lives were totally determined by forces not under their control (Richards, *Georg Büchner and the Birth* 10; Lindenberger 5-6). In March 1834, Büchner proceeded to establish – first in Giessen, where he was a medical student, and then in Darmstadt, where his family lived – the Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte (Society for Human Rights), based on the model of the radical French secret society, the Société des droits de l'homme et du citoyen, to which he had belonged in Strasbourg (Lindenberger 10).

The young radical was determined to find a way to challenge the oppressive rule and agitate for a democratic, republican system of government that would guarantee the equality of all men and eliminate both social injustice and the related material want resulting from the exploitation of the poor by the rich. But he also knew that it would take an uprising, not of a few intellectuals, writers, or students like himself, but of the masses of peasants and workers to bring this about. As he wrote to a friend: "The relationship between poor and rich is the only revolutionary element in the world. Only hunger can become the goddess of freedom" (qtd. in Richards, *Georg Büchner and the Birth* 15). To help incite such an uprising, in May of 1834 Büchner produced a proto-Marxist pamphlet known as *Der hessische Landbote (The Hessian Courier* [1834]); a fellow-radical, the Pastor Friedrich Ludwig Weidig, who had access to a printing press, collaborated – toning down the young man's impassioned language and Christianizing it along the way. It reads today like a naïve, but socio-economically radical combination of statistics – of who benefited and who paid taxes – and idealistic notions of human freedom, along with an inflammatory prophesy of how a united peasantry could drive away corrupt rulers and install a Christian democracy. (Interestingly, the pamphlet was extensively reprinted after World War II in East Germany, along with Marx's writings [Richards, *Georg Büchner and the Birth* 215].)

The 300 printed copies of this insurrectionary anti-poverty pamphlet were meant to be distributed to the local peasants and farm field workers in order to provoke them out of their oppressed lethargy and plant the seeds of rebellion. Its motto was "Friede den Hütten! Krieg den Pallästen [*sic*]! ("Peace to the homesteads! War on the palaces!" [Büchner, *The Hessian Courier* 231]). But, since most of these peasants were illiterate, and anyone caught in possession of such a document in this police state could be tried for high treason, it is not surprising that many simply turned in their copies unread to the police. When a co-conspirator betrayed the plot, authorities arrested some of Büchner's friends (including Pastor Weidig) and searched Büchner's rooms, where they found nothing incriminating. Shortly thereafter in 1835, though, he fled to Strasbourg when called to give evidence. But Weidig, who had been arrested and imprisoned, was questioned, and then died – either a suicide or a murder-victim.

It is in these circumstances – and thus in part to pay his living expenses – that Büchner (now in Strasbourg) sublimated, if you will, his rage against social injustice suffered by the poor into writing, producing a play about the French revolutionary who became a victim of his own Revolution (Styan 8) called *Dantons Tod.* This was the only work of his that would be published in his lifetime. He also translated two of Victor Hugo's plays and wrote both a novella called *Lenz* and an ironic romantic comedy, *Leonce und Lena.* In 1836, as he completed his doctoral dissertation in comparative anatomy, he began writing the play we know today as *Woyzeck*, a work that contained in sublimated form all his anger about the plight of the poor and thereby enacted many of the beliefs articulated in *Der hessische Landbote*. He would leave the work unfinished, in draft and in fragments, when he died in February of the next year of typhus at the age of 23.

The play was based on the real-life story of a man named Johann Christian Woyzeck who was publicly executed in Leipzig in 1824 for the jealous murder of his unfaithful mistress. This

former soldier, often homeless and begging, had been prey to paranoia and depression, and so his lawyer had claimed he was mentally disturbed when he committed the murder and thus could not be held responsible. Hofrat Dr. Clarus was appointed to examine Woyzeck and give a medical assessment of his sanity. However, his final report stated that the accused was of sound mind and that his aberrations were the result of his physical constitution and moral degeneration; the only motive for the crime was passion over reason, he asserted. And so the public execution was carried out. (As an aside, the case was reopened 10 years after this and Woyzeck was found of unsound mind and exonerated – but rather too late to be of much benefit to him [Lindenberger 97].)

Clarus subsequently republished the report of his investigation in a popular medical journal – one to which Büchner's father subscribed and which the young medical student himself later read (Beiber 131). It was from this case report that Büchner took not only his protagonist's name but his background as a soldier and barber, his apocalyptic visions, his irrational fear of freemasons, his discovery of his mistress dancing with another man at an inn, and so on. From Clarus's mechanistic judgment and his moralistic report, though, also came the writer's anger against the injustice of the rigid institutions – and the general society – that condemned one poor and deluded man to death without taking his social, economic, physical, and psychic condition into account. The result is that "Büchner's portrayal of an ordinary 'little' man victimized until his precarious hold on reality and mental stability gives way, has become as much an icon of the twentieth century as the uncomprehending protagonist of a Kafka story" (Sagarra and Skrine 147).

Woyzeck is the revolutionary play that George Steiner, in *The Death of Tragedy*, called a "radical extension of the compass of tragedy" that had been fixed since Aeschylus: "*Woyzeck* is the first real tragedy of low life. It repudiates an assumption implicit in Greek, Elizabethan, and neo-classic drama: the assumption that tragic suffering is the somber privilege of those who are in

high places" (272). He went on to say that Büchner "was the first who brought to bear on the lowest order of men the solemnity and compassion of tragedy. He has had successors: Tolstoy, Gorky, Synge, and Brecht. But none has equaled the nightmarish force of *Woyzeck*" (274).

The fact that this play – one that was to become a mainstay of modern German theatre – survived, that it was ever published, and so could have this impact, is nothing short of a miracle. When Büchner's brother Ludwig edited and published the author's papers in 1850, he omitted *Woyzeck* – for the handwriting was too difficult for him to decipher. It wasn't until the 1870s that Karl Emil Franzos found the manuscript among his papers (Perle 21-22). It is not hard to understand the appeal of the play's powerful narrative about the suffering of a poor outcast figure for its editor. Franzos was a liberal Jewish writer from Galicia – the poorest part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, deliberately kept poor and isolated by authorities. Its oppressed peasants and schtetl Jews would be Franzos's main topics as a writer. As an editor, he ordered the fragments of Büchner's manuscript, deciphered his handwriting – treating the paper with acid in order to try to read it more clearly – and even made changes to the wording of the text (some of which have been thought brilliant, others not).

The publication of this version, first in a journal in 1875 and then in book form in 1879, revived (or even, in a sense, created) critical interest in Büchner, and in 1909 the play took its place, in a new and reordered edition by Paul Landau, in the writer's *Collected Works*. Other editions followed, but the Landau version – with a new ordering of the drafts and fragments of drafts – is the one that was premiered on the eve of the First World War at the Munich Residenztheater, on 8 November 1913, presented by the well-known impresario Max Reinhardt. So, 80 years after it was written and almost 40 years after it was first published, *Woyzeck* found a ready audience: Naturalism had been superseded by expressionism and the public was now

familiar with the conventions of episodic drama and with seeing on stage themes, emotional states, and types of characters once considered below the dignity of serious art (Richards, *Georg Büchner and the Birth* 150).

The play opened in Vienna on 5 May 1914, and this is where the young composer Alban Berg saw it and was so moved that he knew he had to compose an opera – his very first – on that text. That said, the conservative theatre audience at that Vienna premiere did not know who Büchner was and apparently hissed their disapproval at what they assumed was a new, avant-garde dramatist's radical work. But the progressive artists in the audience appreciated it – for its politics (as a proletarian tragedy of a poor and underprivileged soldier) as much as for its radical, proto-modernist episodic form. And it was fortuitous that Berg saw and loved the play. As Douglas Jarman has noted:

> If Büchner's *Woyzeck* was discovered and first performed at the 'right time,' in the sense that the artistic and social thought of the 1910s and 1920s made the techniques and concerns of the play seem strikingly contemporary, it was also performed at a time when Berg's own musical language had developed to a stage at which it was peculiarly well suited to handle the extreme emotional and mental states depicted in the play. (Jarman 16)

Deeply moved by the fate of Woyzeck for many reasons, Berg nevertheless did not actually begin composing the work until several years later (in 1917) – that is, after his own parallel experience as a soldier-in-training and his time in the War Ministry. As he wrote to his wife: "There is a bit of me in this character since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact humiliated" (qtd. in Perle 20). Inflation in Austria in the years that followed the war, during which the opera was mostly written, meant that Berg's life was severely restricted (Ebeling). Paper shortages hampered his composition; he could not afford to go to the opera or buy books. And hunger too was a reality: He and his wife lived on Quaker Oats, noodles, dumplings, polenta, rice, potatoes, coffee, and cocoa (Hall 39). He

wrote to his brother in the USA: "To keep me capable of working and to protect me from illness, I alone eat a tiny piece of meat every day" (qtd. in Hall 48). In other words, Berg identified not only with Wozzeck's dehumanizing military experience but, to some extent, with his experience of poverty.

Büchner's powerful drama resonated with more than just the composer, however. The war had left German-speaking peoples feeling defeat and humiliation. As one Berg scholar notes,

> [e]verything that they had suffered during the war – the deprivations, the sacrifice of nearly two million lives, the wounding of another four million soldiers – suddenly seemed to have been without point. They felt a sense of betrayal and resentment towards those who had led them into the war. (Jarman 9)

The post-war poverty and sense of social (and psychic) vulnerability provoked a range of responses, both negative and positive, as we know. Among the more positive – at least in Vienna – came a new humanitarian politics and aesthetics.

Berg had been a student of Arnold Schoenberg during the very years his teacher moved "from the highly chromatic but nonetheless tonally-based language" of his early works to the free atonality of his opera *Erwartung*, "in which tonality, triadic harmony, and the very concept of consonance and dissonance […] disappeared" (Jarman 16). What Berg did in *Wozzeck* was to write music that sat on the uncomfortable borderline between familiar tonality and more dissonant atonality, thereby creating an eerily unstable musical language that could not only *represent* but also *communicate directly* at once its protagonist's extreme mental condition and the impoverishment that brought it about. Reducing the number of scenes in Büchner's play, Berg ordered the opera into three symmetrically structured acts with 5 scenes each. Act I is expository: We meet Wozzeck and the other characters and the environment in which they live. Act II stages Wozzeck's realization of Marie's infidelity with the abusive Drum Major, leading to his decision

to kill both of them. And the last act presents Marie's murder at Wozzeck's hands and his own subsequent death, leaving their hapless child orphaned and alone.

This narrative is set to music that is rigorously structured by the composer: Having abandoned the proven structuring means of tonality, Berg had to find other forms of what he called "compelling musical unity" in order to build the architecture of a large-scale work like an opera (Berg, "A Lecture on" 154). The solutions he found are ingenious. For instance, Act I is called "Five Character Sketches" and the first scene is composed using textbook (indeed, antiquated) musical forms, in this case, a Suite with its Prelude, Pavane, Gigue, Gavotte, and Air. This structure is dramatically fitting, as an archaic analogue to what is happening on stage – in this case, the articulating of the outmoded moral vision of the Captain (as we shall shortly see). Yet, despite the opera's complex structuring that delights musicologists still today, Berg was aiming to do something else. As he wrote a decade after the composition of the work:

> No one in the audience, no matter how aware he may be of the musical forms contained in the framework of the opera, or the precision and logic with which it has been worked out, no one, from the moment the curtain parts until it closes for the last time, pays any attention to the various fugues, inventions, suites, sonata movements, variations and passacaglias about which so much has been written. No one gives any heed to anything but the vast social implications of the work which by far transcend the personal destiny of Wozzeck. (Berg, "A Word about" 153)

How exactly this larger vision is brought about is explained by musicologist Douglas Jarman when he notes that "much of the extraordinary dramatic impact of Berg's opera springs from the fact that, at crucial moments, we in the audience are forced to experience what Wozzeck experiences and feel the strength of his hallucinatory vision of the world" (4). Thanks to the intermedial complexity of opera, we actually see and hear a nightmarish reality through Wozzeck's eyes and ears. We witness – in the sense of bearing witness to – the abuse of this fearful, alienated man by various members of the sadistic, hard-hearted, self-centered ruling class of a society that keeps

him in his place through its financial domination and its hypocritical appeals to vacuous moral ideals (Jarman 3). Nowhere is this more evident than in the opening scene of the opera.

Berg's adaptation of Büchner's play stressed even more the psychological and social effects of the economic degradation of the protagonist, and his utter lack of agency or free will (Richards, *Georg Büchner and the Birth* 189; Reddick 361). Forced to earn extra money to support his mistress and child, Wozzeck daily shaves his Captain – and in the process, suffers (very verbose) verbal abuse about his seeming stupidity: "Oh, Er ist dumm, ganz abscheulich dumm!" (1). This is abuse that Berg's atonal music renders dissonant, even strident. Most directors cannot resist having Wozzeck's submissive body language in this scene reinforce his expressionless compliance as he inarticulately repeats – on a single note – "Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann." The Captain assails Wozzeck for having no moral sense ("keine Moral") because he has a child not blessed by the clergy ("ohne den Segen der Kirche") (1), citing the regimental chaplain with palpable moral superiority. It is the Captain's appeal to this hypocritical (if conventional) morality that provokes Wozzeck to respond with passion that such decorous behaviour is only possible for those with money and position. And poor people, like himself, have no chance and no choice – in this world or the next (2). The audience's sympathy for Wozzeck is reinforced by the fact that Berg sets his opening words, "Wir arme Leut" (we poor people), to a leitmotif (a minor chord with an added major seventh) that will recur frequently in the opera, always acting as the aural signal of both Marie and Wozzeck's alienation and inability to escape their poverty (Perle 97; Jarman 48).

The Captain is not the only one to bully and debase, indeed dehumanize, Wozzeck: The equally two-dimensional medical Doctor uses the soldier for his strange dietary experiments, commandeering his body in exchange for the money Wozzeck needs to support his family.

Chastising the soldier for following what Wozzeck calls the demands of "nature," the Doctor insists that nature has nothing to do with it, that man has free will and can overcome what he calls "nature" (6). Of course, despite the Doctor's claims, poor people are not allowed to have free will – as the opera goes on to show most vividly.

Poverty is also a gendered issue in this opera, as in the play (Richards, *Georg Büchner and the Birth* 155). In Act II, scene 1, Marie, Wozzeck's mistress and mother of his child, is as trapped and as devoid of free will and agency as is Wozzeck. But, living a woman's life of dehumanizing misery, she is also open to sexual exploitation. In one scene, Marie is admiring (in a broken piece of mirror) the earrings the Drum Major has given her – in return for her sexual favours:

Unsereins hat nur ein Eckchen [in der Welt	Folk like us have but a corner in the world
Und ein Stückchen Spiegel.	and a piece of mirror.
Und doch hab' ich einen so roten	But look, I have surely as red a
Mund, als die grossen Madamen	mouth as the noble, rich ladies
mit ihren Spiegeln von oben	who have their mirrors from floor
bis unten und ihren schönen Herrn,	up to ceiling, and all their handsome lords,
die ihnen die Hände küssen;	who snatch up their hands and kiss them;
aber ich bin nur ein armes Weibsbild!	yet I am always so poor and wretched! (8)

Both Büchner and Berg manifestly felt great sympathy for Marie and for Wozzeck, two trapped victims condemned to suffering the dreary squalor and indignities of their perpetual poverty. And the tragedy does not end with their deaths, as we are about to find out. Their child will suffer the same fate. The audience *feels* Berg's sympathy for this doomed family through his music – especially through his rare use of pure consonance in a musical environment of harsh dissonance. In Act III, scene 1, for instance, Marie tells a fairy tale to the child and the passage is in F minor – one of the few uses of a key signature in the entire opera (Ardoin 71). There is a tune here, but the message of the tale is dire:

Es war einmal ein armes Kind und hatt' keinen Vater und keine Mutter – war Alles tot und war Niemand auf der Welt, und es hat gehungert und geweint Tag und Nacht. Und weil es Niemand mehr hatt' Auf der Welt […].	And once there was a poor wee child and he had no father, nor any mother – for all was dead, there was no one in the world, therefore he did hunger and did weep day and night. Since he had no one else left in the world […]. (17)

The fairy tale's foreshadowing of the ending of the opera reminds us that no one escapes the snares of poverty. Wozzeck murders Marie by a lakeside – thus ending the one meaningful relationship of his life – and later he disappears into the very waters of the lake. The two scenes are linked visually: They take place in the same locale, and an ominous red moon hovers above both the dead and dying. After Wozzeck's demise, we hear a ravishing (again, tonal) orchestral interlude that acts as a threnody for the protagonist. Berg called this the confession of the composer himself who offers "an appeal to humanity through its representatives, the audience. From a musical standpoint," Berg went on to say, "this final orchestral interlude represents a thematic development of all the important musical ideas related to Wozzeck" – including the leitmotif of "Wir arme Leut" which achieves its fullest orchestral force here (Berg, "A Lecture on" 169). The analogy that is often made is with the musical recapitulation of Siegfried's life during his funeral march in Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (written in 1848, premiered in 1876). But here one leitmotif is tragically (and appropriately) missing: that of the murdered Marie. This is a recapitulation of Wozzeck's suffering – and thus, of his entire life.

But this is not where the opera ends. Berg avoided what Adorno – who was his student, after all – thought of as anything potentially sentimental and "affirmative" (in the Adornian sense) by continuing the tragic story. This is not the ending of *La Bohème*, in other words. *Wozzeck*, the opera, ends with the orphaned child, alone on stage, as he now is in life.

Condemned to suffer the fate of the poor boy in the fairy tale that his mother told him earlier, the child faces a future life no better, indeed perhaps worse, than that of his parents. As one critic pointedly remarked: "*He* isn't mystified into thinking real suffering has some deeper meaning or significance. He simply doesn't even yet realise what has happened, but we can be reasonably sure he will soon enough" (Geuss 45). Berg's music enacts this circularity of fate through what the composer called a "sort of *perpetuum mobile* movement": "the opening bar," he noted, "could link up with this final bar and in so doing close the whole circle" (Berg, "A Lecture on" 156). Musically, as well as dramatically, then, there is no way out of the trap of poverty.

It is through the music of Berg, the words of Büchner, and the dramatic *mise-en-scène* of the director of any production we might see on stage that we come to feel, to experience the reality of poverty and its human consequences. And we feel this not through any cathartic climax of grief like Rodolfo's at Mimì's death, but through the stark realization that misery goes on . . . and on, no matter how much sympathy and/or outrage we might feel for its victims. As Susan Greene put it so forcefully: "Marie and Wozzeck are crushed under the gavel of moral hypocrisy – a moral hypocrisy that would damn these victims for their futile efforts to be human." She goes on to assert that

> Wozzeck cannot be condemned for his madness and murder, nor Marie for her adultery. Rather Berg seems to intend that we admonish the society that would judge them. It is the same society that entrapped these people in an impoverished web of misery, the deliverance from which must await their deaths. (Greene 85)

But, as we have seen, it does not end even there. Both Berg and Büchner wanted us to experience the continuation of the tragedy of poverty in the life of the child. There is no villain to blame – other than the society at large – and there is thus no real hope for change either (Lindenberger

113). As Maurice Benn has argued, the play – and the opera, we would add – offers "the rare synthesis of a pessimistic world-view and a progressive social and political activism" (262).

As Arnold Whittall has remarked, "Berg helped to legitimize a music which, while technically progressive, could embrace compassionate social 'comment': He helped to legitimize a music in which the 'sordid' and the 'sublime' converge and even fuse" (257). There is little distance here for the audience: Destitution and its consequences are staged, endured, experienced visually and aurally. Suffering, once witnessed in this way, cannot be easily exorcized or rationalized. Perhaps, though, as Büchner intended, the public imagination, the "social imaginary" (to use Charles Taylor's term [23]), can be changed when faces and voices are given to poverty (Korte and Zipp 5). It is not that we can ever escape the ethically fraught issues of representing poverty, but as Martha Nussbaum has argued, "a particularized narrative of suffering has unique power to produce motives for constructive action" (n.p.).

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