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## The Musical Poetics of Witness Two Anthropocene Journeys

Heidi Hart

Over the past several decades, the ecocritical study of literature has moved from treatments of the pastoral, ideas of wilderness (with the problematic word “virgin”), and poetics of place to more urgent attempts to overcome the anthropocentric perspective.<sup>1</sup> The “animal turn” and “planetary turn” have destabilized humans’ once-central point of view, though of course, as creators of these labels, we have not been able to escape it. The self-irony that the term “Anthropocene” invites shows its problematic status as a signal for a particularly destructive epoch, named by and for the human beings who are still damaging the planet and its climate. Still, the paradoxical combination of arrogance and humility in what has become a buzzword, since atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen noted the term in 2000, is rich territory for investigating human history on earth.<sup>2</sup> Who is telling which story, and how does the telling change the tale? Are some forms of witnessing and reporting more effective than others in making this elusive epoch graspable, especially in light of climate crisis? As Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin have put it, on artists’ responses to the Anthropocene perspective, “Beyond the modernist valorization of the principle of shock in art, our current climate demands a different kind of aesthetic and sensorial attention.”<sup>3</sup> Two means of capturing such attention are sound, in particular music, and repetition. Because one cannot close one’s eyes to sound, and because repetition makes any art form more memorable, both material-kinetic experiences keep listeners, viewers, and readers more attuned to earthly

narrative. This article explores two novels that use both means to voice Anthropocene witnessing: Kerstin Ekman’s 1988 *Forest of Hours* (*Rövarna i skule skogen*, or *The Robbers of Skule Forest* in Swedish) and Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Visitation* (*Heimsuchung*, with echoes of “haunting” in German), published nineteen years later.<sup>4</sup>

Though many novels include musical references or even a kind of sonic saturation, from Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* to Noémi Lefebvre’s recently translated *Blue Self Portrait*, the two works under consideration here share three important features: a centuries-long narrative that locates the action in Anthropocene time; a liminal witness figure who foregrounds this perspective; and touchstone musical moments that evoke spiritual epiphany, transformation, or survival. In both novels, sonic elements work at structural and thematic levels. Speechlessness, sound imitation, and music figure heavily in both books, particularly in moments of loss or transformation. In Ekman’s novel, a troll named Skord (whose name combines the Swedish words for “forest” and “word”<sup>5</sup>) watches centuries of human history from the edge of the woods, where he sometimes emerges to participate in thievery, alchemy, sexuality, and even human feelings, for which he learns words by rote. In Erpenbeck’s book, a nameless and mostly speechless Gardener watches over a family’s lakeside property outside Berlin, before, during, and after the Nazi period. Both of these witness figures embody structural repetition and experience music as described thematically

in each text. The Swedish novel spans much of the Anthropocene (depending on whether its onset is marked by industrialization or by earlier human traces), from the “Dark Ages” into the nineteenth century; the German novel focuses on a particularly horrific century in that country’s history, with a prologue and epilogue reflecting the area’s deeper, geologic history. Both works register the land’s mediation of human history and trauma through sounds the reader can imagine hearing as she reads.

If, as Timothy Morton has famously claimed, climate change is a “hyperobject” nearly impossible to comprehend (though Arctic wildfires and rising southern seas make this position harder to support as every year goes by), the Anthropocene is also difficult for humans to grasp, for all our part in making it and naming it.<sup>6</sup> Storytelling helps. Material, or what Christine Marran has called “obligate,” storytelling, rooted in oral tradition, social obligation, and the body, can open the humanistic perspective to other subjectivities, so that “animal bodies, animal eyes, bodies of water, and human bodies will all be material and semiotic subjects” rather than objects of analysis or appropriation.<sup>7</sup> I would add “ears,” human or otherwise, to this list, especially in light of the way visual aspects of environmental narrative often obscure other senses. In Ekman’s and Erpenbeck’s novels, “humanness” becomes a spectrum in which a troll can be moved by church bells and a gardener can become absorbed into the cycles of the seasons, so that when notes from a piano strike him, they work like water drops eroding and changing the local geography. Sound becomes an “elemental medium,” like water itself, to use John Durham Peters’s term.<sup>8</sup> It requires air to move as pressure waves and reach its hearers. It registers a changing

world and leaves its traces in that world, mediated further in typeset, translated lines of text that make its sounds available to the imaginative ear as well.

### **Musical Novels and *Metanoia***

Novels that describe, evoke, or imitate music are hardly a rarity. From James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, with its famous “Sirens” chapter, to Jennifer Egan’s “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” section in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, music underpins or invigorates many works of fiction. Even a genre novel like Stephen King’s *The Stand* depends on song-lyric references and thematized music making to order its pandemic-ridden sprawl. In the German-language tradition, particularly in twentieth-century Austria, music is integral to cultural critique in narrative form. Thomas Bernhard’s agonistic novel *Der Untergeher* (*The Loser*), about a pianist who cannot escape his obsessive self-comparisons to Glenn Gould, and Elfriede Jelinek’s *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher* in translation and film), which sheds sadomasochistic light on classical musicians’ discipline, are just two examples. Music also figures heavily in a recent novel that imagines future geo-catastrophe, Lidia Yuknavitch’s *Book of Joan*, in which a Joan of Arc figure experiences musical rather than visual revelation, which she transforms into a world-destroying weapon. The two novels under consideration here are far less explosive but equally concerned with sound as earthly force. Like *The Book of Joan*, they also feature moments of personal and planetary transformation through music.

The question of how sound moves through narrative texts has long been the subject of an underappreciated but rich area of study. In the field of intermediality,

“musical novels” have yielded insightful work on musical semantics, ekphrasis, and movement among various art forms. Werner Wolf’s *The Musicalization of Fiction* categorizes intermedial forms (“overt/direct” referring to two intersecting media and “covert/indirect” to intermedial relations in what seems to be a single medium) and, within this framework, different kinds of musical narration.<sup>9</sup> Wolf delineates the following forms of musical-textual relationship: imitation, in which fiction mimics musical form, usually as repetition or counterpoint; thematization, which describes music as an important element of plot; and evocation of music through “associative quotation.”<sup>10</sup> Wolf’s model allows for overlapping subcategories for musical-textual interplay, such as paratext, hybrid forms, and micro- and macrostructural levels of mimesis. For all such efforts, music does tend to elude categories—even when it “sounds” on a printed page. Scholars who have opened up Wolf’s taxonomic project into new directions include Irina Rajewsky, whose work on transmediation shows how material elements such as rhythm can cross from one art form to another,<sup>11</sup> and Emily Petermann, whose study *The Musical Novel* uses musical semiotics to investigate “jazz novels” and books based on Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*.<sup>12</sup> Beate Schirrmacher’s studies of Günter Grass and Elfriede Jelinek apply Sybille Krämer’s thinking on textual performativity to show how musical imitation not only evokes but also embodies violence in both authors’ works, through double meanings and rhythmic patterns.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Ekman’s and Erpenbeck’s novels, music works both structurally and thematically, through textual repetitions and imitations as well as

overtly descriptive references. It takes on a life of its own, particularly in *The Forest of Hours*, in that distinctions between speech and music, and even between sound and music, break down along with the human/nonhuman binary.

Exploration of music in environmental fiction is still relatively uncommon, though the 2016 anthology *Current Directions in Ecomusicology* includes ecocritical treatments of Italian opera and English folk ballads, and my recent work has explored music in dystopian fiction, from text to opera and documentary film.<sup>14</sup> Particularly in German ecocritical scholarship, most analyses relate to Romanticism (literary, not musical), geo-poetics, the Anthropocene in contemporary ecotrillers, and visual aspects of environmental film.<sup>15</sup> If a book makes readers more deeply aware of the Anthropocene perspective and/or of the very real threat of climate crisis, it probably works on more sensory levels than the visual-imaginative. Kinetic patterns in prose rhythm, musical associations with ideology or history, and repeated textual phrases make a novel resonate beyond its words on the page. As evolutionary biopsychologists have noted, music affects mammals’ homeostasis—and our awareness of what threatens it—both in the nervous system and in the experience of cognitive “induction.”<sup>16</sup> Even when music is read as description on the page and not directly heard, its associative power remains, and even more so when the text enacts familiar kinetic patterns. The overlapping of music and “mere” sound in the novels discussed here makes parsing their differences unhelpful; as Lawrence Kramer has put it, sound “makes imminence a sensory reality,” a sense that it “preserves” and “extends” in music.<sup>17</sup>

For readers of fiction, intense musical moments are likely to enact responses through rhythmic sympathy or associative memory. I would argue that in Ekman's and Erpenbeck's novels, characters' embodied musical "exposure" (to use Stacy Alaimo's term applied to environmental art and activism) works as a kind of *metanoia*, or inner transformation leading to outward change.<sup>18</sup> In both cases, vulnerability to musical sound—whether heard live in the moment or remembered in a time of crisis—contains this spiritual element, with explicitly religious markers (a church, the Lord's Prayer) as well. It leads Skord, the troll, to experience awe, and a young Holocaust victim to keep something of her earthly memory alive even as she faces imminent death. When Skord himself dies, as both witness and protagonist, the forest's sounds, resembling music, reabsorb his body in a literal transformation. Quasimusical sonic processes work on the land over time in both novels as well, changing it as the reader "hears" a glacier retreating, the forest reclaiming the troll's body, or a garden house disintegrating. Though the *metanoia* that central and/or liminal figures experience carries traditional religious markers in place and language, its resonance destabilizes the human perspective. As Marran puts it, "The apex of obligate storytelling is to listen to the water traveling under the earth's surface and furtively bear witness to the stray cat."<sup>19</sup> This combination of planetary and personal transformation, mediated heavily through sound, makes these two novels unique in the ecological-spiritual perspective they offer. To return to Christine Marran's "obligate storytelling," the materiality of sound links human or semihuman characters to water, stone, metal, and plant life, changing them as the earth itself changes. The analysis

that follows will show how this form of storytelling adds a transformative, earthly, and at the same time spiritual element to two musically rich novels.

### **Bells and Birdsong**

In her book *Transdisciplinary Journeys in the Anthropocene*, Australian researcher Kate Wright uses Lewis Carroll's Alice tale—the white rabbit's invitation to a parallel land of "strange creatures, twisted physical laws and new ways of being in the world"—to invite readers toward "non-fiction ... encounters that encourage wonder at the more-than-human world."<sup>20</sup> What happens if a work of fiction, which I would argue humans still need in order to imagine more empathic relations with the earth, takes the opposite perspective, that of a "strange creature" viewing children, thieves, and scholars from the "Dark Ages" to the time of Swedenborg's transcendent fictions in the nineteenth century? The "how would aliens perceive us?" trope has long been the territory of science fiction and fantasy, taking the form of semihuman, liminal creatures in Nora Jemisin's novels, for example, but Kerstin Ekman's book offers a more earthy, if improbable, vision of human history from a troll's perspective. That history also includes the changing ecosystem of the Swedish forest from which Skord emerges and to which he returns, centuries later, at the end of his life. Though the novel has been called a "*Bildungsroman* of human consciousness," I see it as a chronicle of planetary consciousness as well, evoked through word, image, and sound, musical and otherwise.<sup>21</sup>

Ekman's novels encompass literary and "Nordic noir" genres with environmental sensibility. Her prize-winning 1993 *Blackwater* (*Händelser vid vatten*, or *Events*

on the Water in Swedish) is less about the murder that occurs on a remote Swedish lakeside than about the geography itself, amid 1970s logging controversies, hippie communes, and fraught borders between Swedish and Sami culture. In *The Forest of Hours*, whose “Book of Hours” association in English evokes a chronicling of sacred time, repetitive narration also evokes the widening of tree rings in the forest. That the novel’s Swedish title focuses on human robbers in the woods shows its double framework of linear human history and cyclical “forest time.” Linda Haverty Rugg has called the book “a kind of Bayeux tapestry that preserves the power of magic and the unconscious,” in which, at the same time, “the reader is faced with all the calamities of history, for which human reason and, by association, language and writing, must take the blame.”<sup>22</sup> Skord’s slow, mimetic entry into the world of human words and script gives him more power in that world, but it costs him, too. He witnesses human cruelty, greed, and destructiveness in the forest ecosystem that has raised him. His “ear” is what links his forest sensibility—the ability to understand the sounds of birds and other animals—to the creaturely in human culture, its rhythms of language and music, its drives toward knowledge, sex, food, awe. This link or ligature in the sense of “obligate storytelling” weaves a narrative of rustling leaves and human whispers, water stumbling over rocks and bells that move even a troll to something like religious ecstasy. In this narrative mode, the story may have an overall linear trajectory (the coursing of several centuries) but works on a deeper level through linked sounds and images whose repetition gives the book a cyclical quality as well.

*The Forest of Hours* begins like a fairy tale. “There was once an old crone, who lived in Oringen with her two grown sons ... .”<sup>23</sup> In the Swedish version, this opening is more matter-of-fact: “Up in Oringen lived an old woman who had two grown sons.”<sup>24</sup> At this stage of history, human language is still tied to that of animals, another ligature of sound and story. When Skord emerges from the trees, more a scruffy *trollkarl*, or “trickster,” than the lumbering ogre of Norwegian folklore,<sup>25</sup> one of the two tree-felling sons tries to speak to him in bird-language: not “chaffinch to chaffinch” communication but rather “the language used between raven and finch, grey siskin and peregrine falcon ... a language that foxes can understand and mimic, with some difficulty, and it is known by weasels and hares.”<sup>26</sup> Just as humans could once imitate bird language and perhaps be understood, Skord learns to approximate human sounds (“though at first he sounded like a starling mimicking human speech, toneless and whistling”) and eventually written symbols.<sup>27</sup> Learning comes from craving: “He could not escape from his need to hear human speech.”<sup>28</sup> Skord’s ear is ever attuned to relationships around and including him. He attributes a kind of sonic conductivity to natural forces, perhaps more in Bruno Latour’s sense of “actant” than conscious agent.<sup>29</sup> On any given page, the text is sounding: “A high wind moved through the treetops and droned like the sea ... .”; “The forest ... allowed the brambling to go on whistling and the water of the streams to go on rustling between the stones ... .”<sup>30</sup> Skord can even hear the insides of cows as they ruminate with “low, rumbling noises.”<sup>31</sup>

At the novel’s crux is a scene, set in the Middle Ages, in which Skord has been pressured by thieves to rob a Christian

church of its treasure. He finds the stone space dizzying and the image of the crucifix like “a wild beast” with “empty eye-sockets.”<sup>32</sup> He escapes in the form of a raven, shape-shifter that he is, and is comforted by the “deep notes of the firs” below.<sup>33</sup> When he returns to the church, he hears human singing. At first it annoys him, since he finds no more response from these humans’ beast/god on the cross than apparently they do, but he feels himself surrendering to the sound, even knowing what this “sacred language” knows about “breaking bones, cracking skulls and knocking teeth from jaws, about flayed bodies, crushed paws, chopped-off tails and wounds brimming with blood.”<sup>34</sup> Only when daylight comes and Skord hears, outside the church, the sound of forest birds, does he feel at home in the world again. Strangely, the sounds of the black grouse and of the migratory flocks overhead blend with his memory of human singing, until he can’t help but take part.

The blood went to his head and roared in his ears. He gave way to an impulse to sing even more loudly, and sang in the sacred language about the rose dripping with goodness. . . . He wanted to boom with the church bells and read the Mass with the priest. He wanted to mumble and pray and sing praises and be full of holiness—there was nothing else for it! There was no reason for his being in this world except to join in with speech and songs.<sup>35</sup>

In this moment of transformation, Skord inhabits a liminal zone between human and nonhuman, where what David Abram calls the “animal dimension” in human language, the “rhythmic, melodic layer of speech by which earthly things overhear *us*,” shows that “human speech is simply . . . part of a much broader conversation.”<sup>36</sup> That a quasihuman creature can experience *metanoia*, craving

“holiness” as much as food, and that this craving rises from both bird- and human song, unsettles the *Bildungsroman* model in favor of more radical links. As Marran puts it, “The mutual mapping of the human and nonhuman is a refusal to repress or to submit to a socialized, ethnized imagination of being and language.”<sup>37</sup> The usual human distinctions between “sound” and “music” break down here, in what Lawrence Kramer calls “the audible,” the material-sonic quality that inhabits “music, speech, writing, media, imaging, the body, and intimate and social relations”—human or not, I would add.<sup>38</sup>

After his moment of epiphany, Skord continues his observer-participant role in human culture, but he always returns to the woods to recover his sense of animal-spiritual connection. His understanding of alchemy and eventually science remains elemental, as trapped as it may be in “tinctures, powders and mixtures.”<sup>39</sup> Skord finds and loses human love. He matures sexually, passing puberty in a few centuries, and crosses the interspecies divide with human partners who see him as one of them, if a bit smaller, darker, and odder. He moves to the city and is known as Dr. Kristeriern Schordenius. He meets a fellow liminal creature, a woman named Xenia who was kidnapped into the woods as a child, and together they re-encounter the plant and animal world they have left behind. When history’s human track brings talk of railroads and steam engines, Xenia is seized with “palpitations” without knowing why.<sup>40</sup> The Anthropocene is bearing down. After Xenia’s death, Skord finds his way back to the forest, accompanied by a dog-mink, where he meets his own end after attempting to make peace with his lost home. At the end of a rhapsodic passage in which Skord

can hear “the forest breathing,” he realizes that his own breathing has become alien. He wonders if the forest really is his home ground, or if there is no ground at all. As he is dying, Skord imagines future birdcalls, after the human age has passed: “the time will come when the Earth will scrape off everything human like scabs, like crusts of dirt. Then . . . no one but the raven will listen when the raven caws, and no one but the curlew will listen to the drilling whistles of the curlew.”<sup>41</sup> These final moments cycle back to a premonition Skord had early in the book, its tree rings returning and spreading: “All forest things were impure and dissolute. They wanted to merge with one another. Fluids seeped and penetrated, tissues ruptured and roots worked their way through the torn fibres. The ground wanted him to lie down on it. If he did, his body would dissolve . . .”<sup>42</sup>

The last sound Skord hears is the “murmuring of water, the constantly running and falling water,” words repeating like that liquid motion over stones.<sup>43</sup> On a larger narrative level, like the thematic and formal repetition of animal music throughout *The Forest of Hours*, water has returned again and again and finally takes Skord with it, as he forgets his human name and knows the world will, too. As an eroding and inscribing force, water becomes a kind of language in the end, more material than semantic. It transforms the ground through which it moves. It opens up time and nontime, underworlds, and empty spaces in the center of many of Ekman’s texts.<sup>44</sup> In its human blockage and overuse, in its drought and its rebellious flooding, water’s literal force, and the commodification of that force, tell a story, too. Thinking of persistent drought in Australia, Kate Wright reflects that “the lost gully of my youth is a scar on the land

and a scar in my mind. Through this eco-mental scar I travel from the first rains that fell on our planet to our deep water past as an earlier incarnation of our species emerging from the sea.”<sup>45</sup> An imaginative journey through later human history, from a nonhuman perspective, can illuminate such scars in ways raw data does not. For the reader of *The Forest of Hours*, the raven’s voice likely remains after the book is closed. The sounds of church bells and of water may begin to merge. Human craft and language start to sound more tangled in a larger ecosystem, in a narrative more “obligate” than linear. Hearing with “Skord’s ears”—his understanding of animal voices, his yielding to the sound of human song, his attunement to the sound of water and the “deep notes of the firs”—may translate into greater care and action for a world that may not survive our time on it, giving the reader an opportunity for transformation as well.<sup>46</sup>

### **Piano at the Edge of the Abyss**

In Ekman’s *Forest of Hours*, the Thirty Years’ War scars the landscape and lives of humans, animals, and at least one troll. Skord describes what remains after a battle: “Clumps of thistles. Drifts of nettles where men and horses had pissed during their weeks in camp. The army was like a large, voracious swarm of insects moving onwards, a mass of worms feeding off the German provinces.”<sup>47</sup> In Erpenbeck’s *Visitation*, this seventeenth-century scar remains into the twentieth century. When the Red Army invades Berlin and its surrounding landscape at the end of World War II, the event echoes with earlier traumas in the land, and with another “swarm of insects.” From the perspective of the Gardener, this novel’s nameless, liminal witness figure, the land is violated again and again.

The horses scrape at the ground that is just beginning to thaw, transforming it into a morass within a single day, the horses eat everything around them that can possibly serve as food: the fresh leaves and blossoms of the forsythia bush, the young shoots of the fir shrubs and the lilac and hazelnut buds. The Russians confiscate the entire supply of honey. By this time the potato beetle, pursuing a course diametrically opposite to the direction in which the Red Army is marching, has already reached the Soviet Union and is preparing to devastate what potato fields there were spared by the Germans.<sup>48</sup>

In a book whose third-person sections (“The Girl,” “The Red Army Officer,” and others) alternate with the Gardener’s, internal prose repetition such as “the horses . . . the horses” adds another layer of circular movement, like a Baroque canon within a canon. Though imitating musical form in text is hardly exact mirroring, it does take on a material and even kinetic quality that “sticks” in the memory. In the German text, Erpenbeck’s piling on of genitive and prepositional constructions gives the above passage more cumulative drive than in the English translation, a drive that the reader’s body can register, as the insects and armies cross paths: “Zu dieser Zeit hat der Kartoffelkäfer in gegenläufiger Bewegung zur Marschrichtung der Rotarmisten die Sowjetunion bereits erreicht . . . .”<sup>49</sup> From the perspective of the Gardener, who resembles mythical-musical figures like Pan and the suffering satyr Marsyas, such textual music becomes embedded, and embodied, in his acts of witnessing.<sup>50</sup>

Music sounds thematically throughout Erpenbeck’s book as well. It is more an undercurrent than in novels by Günter Grass, Thomas Bernhard, and Elfriede Jelinek, who

set their historical-cultural narratives at a high emotional pitch. It is part of a move by many early twenty-first-century German writers to eschew shock and wartime drama in favor of subtler approaches or even subjects that avoid the Nazi past completely. Even East German chronicler Christa Wolf, in her last published work, downplayed the war itself in her portrayal of a group of senior citizens on a bus tour; the novella-length *August* (2011) evokes their wartime childhoods in allusions to popular songs that, unless the reader recognizes their military or Nazi-appropriated associations, sound only fleetingly in the text. In *Visitation*, readers are most likely caught off guard by scenes that they realize, reading back into the text, do in fact refer directly to the Holocaust or to a sexual assault by a Soviet soldier. Erpenbeck’s prose folds these events so firmly into the landscape’s own history that they become part of earthly as well as human trauma. This technique does not diminish human suffering, however; the novel’s insistent music makes that suffering impossible to forget.

*Visitation* opens with a geologic prologue, set off in italics: “*Approximately twenty-four thousand years ago, a glacier advanced until it reached a large outcropping of rock that now is nothing more than a gentle hill above where the house stands.*”<sup>51</sup> In the English version, the text sweeps forward through millennia like the phrasing of a planetary symphony, while in Erpenbeck’s German, impacted subordinate clauses sound like layers of stone deposited and worn away through time.<sup>52</sup> The novel’s human history begins with the Gardener, who, like Skord, lives on the forest’s edge, is apparently ageless and certainly landless, but knows the geography intimately. “No one in the village knows where he comes from. Perhaps he was always

here . . . .”<sup>53</sup> The novel then moves to “The Wealthy Farmer and His Four Daughters,” part fairy tale, part village incantation: “When a woman gets married, she must not sew her own dress . . . .”<sup>54</sup> Interspersed with these extended songlike passages that read like spells is the story of the literal farmer and his daughters, whose descendants will inhabit the lake house outside Berlin. Meanwhile, the Gardener witnesses the growth of human community and domestic plant life over what may be centuries, or only decades. The locals find his silence “unsettling,” though, like Skord, he moves his lips among the plants, as if imitating speech or “talking with vegetables.”<sup>55</sup> Readers meet the Architect, the Cloth Manufacturer, the Architect’s Wife, and the Girl, whose story they may realize only at its end has taken her to be shot by a Nazi soldier as she stumbles out of a boxcar.

Throughout the novel, structural repetitions create a musical experience on the page, from the larger construct of “Gardener” sections at regular intervals to echoes within the text, such as the small but disturbing word *Heil*. More subtle repetitions occur within the Gardener’s sections, for example a description of a layer of sand where he is digging that “still displays a wave-like pattern, immortalizing the winds that blew across the water long ago”<sup>56</sup> and, later, “a layer of sand with groundwater coursing through it that displays a wave-like pattern showing how, thousands of years ago, the wind blew across the lake . . . .”<sup>57</sup> As this witness figure clears and cuts and digs, his own labor a form of rhythmic repetition, he is also chronicling the deep time of the land of which he seems to be a part. Sound is crucial to his memory project. He hears the bees and burning leaves, the laughter and weeping inside the lake house, the

hours of piano practice, the cuckoo that answers a typewriter’s incessant tapping from outside. He hears the Russians soldiers riding in, tethering their horses that “scrape the ground that is just beginning to thaw, transforming it into a morass within a single day.”<sup>58</sup> By then the Girl who lived inside the house is gone, her piano scales silenced. The Gardener is witness to her absence, too.

The central passage in the novel, where the Holocaust reveals itself almost belatedly, reverberates with music in a more overt, descriptive form. As the Gardener hears Polish forced laborers tell of the potato beetle’s progress, the Girl, hiding in the dark in a Polish ghetto, hears her memories of the lakeside house where she visited an uncle, who taught her the circle of fifths that she now recalls by rote, trying to order her frightened thoughts amid the human and nonhuman sounds of “everything that ever was”:

The rustling of leaves, the splashing of waves, the horn of the steamboat, the dipping of oars into water, the workers next door making a racket, a flapping sail. From C major you retreat by way of G major, D major, A major, E major and B major, going all the way to F-sharp major, further and further one sharp at a time. But from F-sharp back to C is only a tiny step. From playing all the black keys to playing all the white keys is the briefest of journeys, just before you return to the easy-as-pie key of C major everything’s swarming with sharps.<sup>59</sup>

This passage is striking in its link between human and nonhuman sounds (the way Skord hears in *The Forest of Hours*, here another “obligate storytelling” move) and in its sense that the leap between the furthest points in the circle of fifths is actually very small. This “tiny step” looks problematic at first in both the German and English

versions, from a music-theory point of view, but it may indicate another collapsing of distinctions, another strange ligature, in a character's extreme state of being. Just as Skord conflates birdsong and human liturgy in his ecstatic moment, the Girl binds distant pitches in her spatial-acoustic memory as she faces a deadly threat. Leaves, water, piano keys, a flapping sail--all of it becomes part of the life, the earthly existence in all its sensory richness, about to be extinguished. Though the Girl is not the novel's liminal witness, as the Gardener is, and thus plays a different role than the troll does in *The Forest of Hours* (as both witness and protagonist), her transformative experience through sound grounds her in a particular historical moment that resonates through the rest of the novel, as does Skord's experience in the church. These passages press through the rest of each text like sound waves or tree rings, materially linking other stories across decades and even centuries.

The Girl's form of transformation, though hardly redemptive in the usual sense of *metanoia*, is mediated through sound like Skord's and blurs the human-nonhuman boundary. While the troll becomes more human in his ability to experience awe and musical joy, the Girl becomes less so. She has turned "wild" in her dark hiding place, where she "doesn't speak, doesn't sing."<sup>60</sup> She has become a frightened, cornered mammal. She turns to music, which in her experience orders and domesticates, in a desperate bid for momentary psychic survival. Though the Girl has Jewish blood, she also finds order in Christian liturgical time, reciting the ghetto's street names in the time it takes to say the Lord's Prayer, as she is herded into the train. As she is later forced off and shot (an "inconvenience" as a "motherless child"), an omniscient

narrator takes over, seeing this horrific moment in the larger span of earthly time: "For three years the girl took piano lessons, but now, while her dead body slides down into the pit, the word piano is taken back from human beings."<sup>61</sup> In the German text, the repeated word *zurückgenommen* (taken back) resonates with another musical novel voicing the horrors of Nazism, Thomas Mann's 1945 *Doctor Faustus*. In a famous passage, the Faust-figure and composer Adrian Leverkühn voices an agonistic wish to "take back" or revoke Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, as the paean to human kinship and freedom rendered meaningless in 1945--at least to Leverkühn in his complicity in the collective soul-sickness of "high culture" wedded to National Socialism.<sup>62</sup> That the Hitler-Goebbels propaganda machine had also coopted the Ninth for nationalist ends adds even greater sting to this passage. In the death of the Girl in *Visitation*, even the word "piano" is revoked from humankind, which has proven itself unworthy of the music (and ambivalence, meaning both "quiet" and the instrument) that word signals.

Later in the novel, when the lake house finds itself in what is now East Germany, the Gardener receives a government permit to keep living on the property. He digs and plants and waterproofs with tar. He hears, inside the house, the Writer typing away as she attempts to tell the story of her life over traumatic decades. "The tapping of her typewriter mixes with the calls of the cuckoo."<sup>63</sup> This material joining of human and nonhuman utterance is an act of "obligate storytelling" in Marran's sense of embodied narrative, bound not only to other humans but also to the larger ecosystem.<sup>64</sup> The Writer types over and over, "I a-m g-o-i-n-g h-o-m-e," since "with this typewriter she had typed all the words that were to

transform the German barbarians back into human beings and her homeland back into a homeland.”<sup>65</sup> The German text does use the fraught word *Heimat*.<sup>66</sup> This word, and the place, become impossible for the Writer as she realizes that after directing the typewriter’s “machine gun fire” (suddenly very different from the cuckoo’s call) at her once-homeland, she has already given it up, and is now to be at home only among other humans, in “no one country,” still haunted by doubt and homesickness.<sup>67</sup> The pattern of her repeated wish keeps tapping through the text like an obsessive, and now violent, refrain. Outside, another form of violence occurs as the Gardener tears down the boat shelter beside the lake—dry rot—and saws up a walnut trunk.

Dry rot continues to accumulate through the last third of the book, until the house is worn to a shell and the villagers say that “for some time now” the Gardener has “eaten nothing but snow.”<sup>68</sup> Like Skord’s forest of dissolving trunks and fungi, the piece of land that is, in a sense, the central character in *Visitation* dissolves its human traces. As earth itself reclaims the lakeshore property, a Visitor—or visitant, one who haunts—is surprised that, as a grandmother, she can still swim as she did in childhood. She finds that she is now a stranger in the world. Still, unlike the Girl shot as she left the train, this woman is somehow able to reclaim the music once revoked with the word “piano”—in both senses.

Then her granddaughter comes back up from sunbathing on the dock, humming quietly to herself just as she has done all her life, even as a little girl. Which means that in the end there are certain things you can take with you when you flee, things that have no weight, such as music.<sup>69</sup>

The Gardener does not stay long to witness the house’s takeover by the Illegitimate Owner and its subsequent demolition. Like a fairy-tale character, or like Skord the troll retreating to the woods, this witness to human and geographic history leaves his clothing, boots, and tools and simply is not seen again. The house is silenced as heavy equipment takes it down, in the book’s italicized postlude that mirrors its prologue, this time in bureaucratic rather than geologic language: “*Secondly, care should be taken to minimize vibrations when the demolition is carried out so as to reduce the environmental burdens of dust and noise and prevent cracks from developing in nearby buildings.*”<sup>70</sup> Briefly, after the house’s violent, noisy silencing, “*the landscape . . . resembles itself once more.*”<sup>71</sup>

In its canonlike, repetitive structure and musical allusions, Erpenbeck’s *Visitation* gives her landscape’s history a cyclical rather than linear dynamic. On either end of the book, geologic prehistory and bureaucratic post-history—as if the garden house’s dry rot had taken living, breathing human narrative with it—bracket what reads like a dark Anthropocene fairy tale. Music’s materiality brings that tale to sometimes disturbing life throughout the book. The figure of the Gardener, like Skord in Ekman’s novel, witnesses each passing decade from a marginal, listening position. His closeness to the natural world, ever at the mercy of human efforts to domesticate it (including—in the Gardener’s case—his own) makes him a mediator, in Sybille Krämer’s sense of “messenger” or even “angel” with transformative powers.<sup>72</sup> The figure of the writer herself, like the spiritually homeless Writer in Erpenbeck’s novel, is also such a mediator, in the gifted and cursed position of moving between worlds and finding marginal spaces in which to listen across

their borders. In a 2014 *Paris Review* essay describing her East German childhood, Erpenbeck writes,

At the same time, though, there was a second world quite close to us, hidden in the earth and sky. For me, an empty space did not bear witness to a lack. It was a place that had been either abandoned or declared off-limits by the grown-ups and therefore, in my imagination, it was a place that belonged entirely to me.<sup>73</sup>

The writer's liminal zone, whether literal or figurative, is where she becomes "permeable and transparent," as poet Jane Hirshfield puts it, to the larger world.<sup>74</sup>

Skord and the Gardener are likewise vulnerable to the children, houses, wars, and droughts that pass by them through the years. Their outsiders' perspective, from their "second" worlds (to use Erpenbeck's term), offers a glimpse into what aliens might think of humankind, in the science fiction conceit, if they could hear our songs and cries. For humans, these witness figures

provide a view into the world of animal communication and striving, fecund, fragile plant life across a long swath of time. The troll's and the Gardener's cyclical orientation counters the relentless marching of human armies with the seasonal returns of snow, harvest, and migratory birds. These novels' "obligate storytelling" presses the lives they portray against the human-nonhuman boundary until it gives, in moments of transformation mediated through music. In the age of climate crisis, readers would do well to listen, as our sensory relation to a warming world is growing more and more precarious, through no one's fault but our own. Ekman and Erpenbeck both treat human brutality as part of their Anthropocene chronicles, making clear the cost as well as the beauty of human culture on earth. That this brutality is now directed at the planet itself makes these two novels acts of unexpectedly urgent love as well: the rustling forest and the lapping lake do not have long to live.

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## NOTES

1 For a detailed treatment of the problem of conceptualizing “virgin” wilderness, see Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

2 See Joseph Stromberg, “What Is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?,” *Smithsonian*, January 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-164801414/> (accessed March 29, 2018).

3 Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, “Art and Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment and the Sixth Extinction,” in Davis and Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 11. See also Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010).

4 Kerstin Ekman, *Rövarna i skule skogen* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1988); trans. Anna Paterson as *The Forest of Hours* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998). Jenny Erpenbeck, *Heimsuchung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Eichborn, 2007); trans. Susan Bernofsky as *Visitation* (New York: New Directions, 2010).

5 Rochelle Wright, “Narration as Transformative Power: Kerstin Ekman’s *The Robbers of Skule Forest*,” *Swedish Book Review* 1991/1: 12.

6 See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

7 Christine L. Marran, *Ecology without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 28.

8 See John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

9 See Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 50.

10 *Ibid.*, 67–69.

11 See Irina Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* (Tübingen: Francke, 2002).

12 See Emily Petermann, *The Musical Novel* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014).

13 See Beate Schirrmacher, “Musical Performance and Textual Performativity in Elfriede Jelinek’s *The Piano Teacher*,” *Danish Musicology Online*, Special Edition 2016: 85–99, [http://www.danishmusicologyonline.dk/arkiv/arkiv\\_dmo/dmo\\_saernnummer\\_2016/dmo\\_saernnummer\\_2016\\_WMS\\_08.pdf](http://www.danishmusicologyonline.dk/arkiv/arkiv_dmo/dmo_saernnummer_2016/dmo_saernnummer_2016_WMS_08.pdf) (accessed July 2, 2018).

14 See Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe, eds., *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2016), and Heidi Hart, *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

15 See Sabine Wilke and Japhet Johnstone, eds., *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies, and Beyond* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), and Caroline Schaumann and Heather I. Sullivan, eds., *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

16 See Mark Reybrouck and Tuomas Eerola, “Music and Its Inductive Power: A Psychobiological and Evolutionary Approach to Musical Emotions,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 1–14.

17 Lawrence Kramer, *The Hum of the World: A Philosophy of Listening* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 7.

18 See Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

19 Marran, *Ecology without Culture*, 53.

20 Kate Wright, *Transdisciplinary Journeys in the Anthropocene: More-than-Human Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 121.

21 Per Wästberg, “Kerstin Ekman i de gåtfulla tecknens rike,” in *Lovtal: Utsökta lovtal till prisbelönade författare* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1996), 233; cited in German in Beate Schirrmacher, “Die Wiederholung utopischer Entwürfe im Roman *Gör mig levande igen* von Kerstin Ekman” (Master’s thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 2000), 6. Translations mine unless otherwise indicated.

22 Linda Haverty Rugg, “Revenge of the Rats: The Cartesian Body in Kerstin Ekman’s *Rövarna I Skuleskogen*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 1998/70: 431.

23 Ekman, *The Forest of Hours*, 3.

24 “Oppe i Oringen bode en käring som hade två vuxna söner.” Ekman, *Rövarna i skule skogen*, 9.

25 Wright, *Transdisciplinary Journeys in the Anthropocene*, 11.

26 Ekman, *The Forest of Hours*, 5.

27 *Ibid.*, 12.

28 *Ibid.*, 20.

29 See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

30 Ekman, *The Forest of Hours*, 89.

31 *Ibid.*, 90.

- 32 Ibid., 160.
- 33 Ibid., 161.
- 34 Ibid., 162.
- 35 Ibid., 164.
- 36 David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 172–75.
- 37 Marran, *Ecology without Culture*, 53.
- 38 Kramer, *The Hum of the World*, 32.
- 39 Ekman, *The Forest of Hours*, 183.
- 40 Ibid., 469.
- 41 Ibid., 479.
- 42 Ibid., 89.
- 43 Ibid., 479.
- 44 Schirrmacher, “Die Wiederholung utopischer Entwürfe,” 14.
- 45 Wright, *Transdisciplinary Journeys in the Anthropocene*, 164.
- 46 Ekman, *The Forest of Hours*, 161.
- 47 Ibid., 244.
- 48 Erpenbeck, *Visitation*, 69.
- 49 Erpenbeck, *Heimsuchung*, 93.
- 50 Thanks to Doris McGonagill for her insights on the mythic and Baroque layers in Erpenbeck’s text, “Nature and Culture in Germany,” undergraduate course at Utah State University, November 2017.
- 51 Erpenbeck, *Visitation*, 1.
- 52 “*Bis zum Felsmassiv, das inzwischen nur noch als sanfter Hügel oberhalb des Hauses zu sehen ist, schob sich vor ungefähr vierundzwanzigtausend Jahren das Eis vor.*” This passage continues with further embedded clauses and genitive phrases. Erpenbeck, *Heimsuchung*, 9.
- 53 Erpenbeck, *Visitation*, 5.
- 54 Ibid., 4.
- 55 Ibid., 16.
- 56 Ibid., 19.
- 57 Ibid., 45.
- 58 Ibid., 69.
- 59 Ibid., 60–61.
- 60 Ibid., 63.
- 61 Ibid., 68.
- 62 Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2007), 692–93.
- 63 Erpenbeck, *Visitation*, 87.
- 64 Marran, *Ecology without Culture*, 6.
- 65 Erpenbeck, *Visitation*, 88.
- 66 Erpenbeck, *Heimsuchung*, 114.
- 67 Erpenbeck, *Visitation*, 89. For a detailed study of the “Heimat” idea in ecological perspective in Erpenbeck’s novel, see Axel Goodbody, “Heimat and the Place of Humans in the World: Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Heimsuchung* in Ecocritical Perspective,” *New German Critique* 43/2 (2016): 127–51.
- 68 Erpenbeck, *Visitation*, 108.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid., 148.
- 71 Ibid., 150.
- 72 See Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, trans. Anthony Enns (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015). Krämer works to rehabilitate the “postal” model of media, with its messenger quality, after several decades of theorists’ indebtedness to and critiquing of Marshall McLuhan’s “medium is the message” approach.
- 73 Jenny Erpenbeck, “Homesick for Sadness,” *Paris Review*, Nov. 8, 2014, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/11/08/homesick-for-sadness/> (accessed July 15, 2018).
- 74 Jane Hirshfield, “Writing and the Threshold Life,” in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 223.