

Sentimentality under Erasure in *Peter Grimes*

An admiral with three rows of medal ribbon was standing up at Sadler's Wells the other night. A good many other people were standing, too; but it is something when an admiral has to stand to hear an opera. And the opera was not one of your popular, hum-the-tune-on-the-way-home, Italian pieces of Verdi or Puccini. It was Benjamin Britten's new Peter Grimes . . . At the end the audience cheered [the composer] as if he scored for Chelsea. Well might he smile; Peter Grimes is spreading like measles.

—PHILIP WHITAKER, "THE ADMIRAL HAD TO STAND," 1946¹

On the evening of June 7, 1945, before even a note of Britten's new opera was sounded, emotions were running high: "The return of the Sadler's Wells Company," one critic speculated, "would have been welcome enough in any case, even if the occasion had been celebrated by nothing fresher than *Madam Butterfly*. But the Wells have done the thing in style."² This unveiling of a new British opera—rare enough at the best of times—came less than a month after VE Day, serving simultaneously as a celebration of victory, a symbol of peace, and the re-opening of a beloved theater after the war. "Not since 1934," another commentator gushed, "had London heard a new English opera [Lawrence Collingwood's *Macbeth*]. Not since the war had a new opera been heard in any of the world's capitals. Not since the night of September 7, 1940, . . . had music echoed through world-famed Sadler's Wells."³ As the first postwar premiere in any major capital, it was touted with triumphalist overtones, as if Lady Britannia had added "pen, harp, and buskin" to her shield and trident.⁴ Beverly Baxter, a Conservative MP and *Evening Standard* critic, went even further: "It may be," he conceded, "that the political domination of London is to be challenged by Moscow or Washington . . . but there is compensation in the thought that London will become the artistic centre of the world."⁵

Edmund Wilson, by contrast, located the work's significance in the immediate past: "This opera could have been written in no other age, and it is one of the very few works of art that have seemed to me, so far, to have spoken for the blind

anguish, the hateful rancors and the will to destruction of these horrible years.”⁶ In wartime, the Sadler’s Wells Theatre had sheltered displaced locals while the principals toured the war-weary provinces, thereby reinforcing the strong associations between the so-called “people’s company” and “people’s war.”⁷ After recounting his tale of an admiral standing in the gallery, Whitaker reinforced this vision, stressing that the work’s enthusiastic reception straddled traditional class lines.⁸ Another critic suggested that the mania had even spread outside the auditorium:

A friend boarded a 38 bus at Green Park, asked the conductor whether he went past Sadler’s Wells. “Yes, I should say I do,” he replied. “I wish I could go inside instead. That will be threepence for *Peter Grimes*” . . . as he left the bus he heard the conductor shouting at the top of a loud voice: “Sadler’s Wells! Any more for *Peter Grimes*, the sadistic fisherman!”⁹

With these images of rich and poor, admirals and bus conductors, coming together to cheer Britten’s opera enthusiastically, *Grimes* appeared to bring wartime images of national unity and solidarity into a postwar future. Indeed, to judge from several accounts, it was almost as if this single event made good on the cultural democracy that the war had promised to inaugurate.¹⁰

In leading with these hyperbolic discussions and vignettes, commentators were seeking both to do justice to and to justify their emotive responses. Yet even the most enthusiastic critics were anxious about the propriety of these responses. At a time when fears about cultural commodification were high, the bus conductor’s treatment of an opera as a tourist attraction threatened the boundaries between art and commerce. Whitaker’s ambivalence was even harder to miss. While the image of an admiral standing in the gallery played into utopian representations of Sadler’s Wells as a place where class took a back seat to culture, the transformation of a traditionally austere opera audience into a crowd of football zealots revealed the darker side of the same coin. In going on to compare *Grimes*’s success to the spread of measles, Whitaker laid bare its pathological implications.

For this reason, several commentators attempted to distance Britten’s opera from its own reception, as though it were something of an innocent host in the spread of this cultural epidemic. One critic raised the possibility of journalistic exaggeration, while another admitted difficulty in maintaining critical distance: “Our emotions were too strongly stimulated with memories of the past and this plunge into the future gave us no time to collect our thoughts.”¹¹ In stressing Britten’s rejection of the popular Italian mold, Whitaker went even further to imply that the opera had garnered popularity despite itself: “Peter Grimes,” he reported defensively, had “never a melody to stick in the memory, no glamorous, erring heroine, no exotic foreign setting—and not a single singer over 12 stone or so.”¹² Not confined to early critics, this defensiveness has taken root in scholarship too. While some have emphasized the plot’s existential realism, others have fashioned a *Grimes* that was emphatically more Schoenberg than Puccini.¹³ Donald

Mitchell, for instance, has recounted tales of jeering critics and a resigning cast in order to stress the shock and indignation of mid-century audiences: "It may be difficult, certainly, to re-imagine the first, sharp shock that was part of the early experience of *Grimes*, not only a shock in musical terms but also a *culture* shock: it was a work that appeared . . . radically to overturn the expectations and conventions that the image of opera summoned up."¹⁴ For all this, however, *Grimes* was never as shocking as Mitchell and others would have us believe. In fact, in anxiously stressing the opera's uncompromising realism and difficulty, Mitchell was not returning us to some original state of indignation so much as picking up the early reception's defensive thread. For even the earliest critics reacted in similarly apologetic ways, apparently worrying that *Grimes* was neither realistic nor difficult enough.

In this chapter, I want to return to June 1945, the time of *Grimes*'s now-mythic premiere. By tracing tropes of realism, difficulty, and transgression back to their mid-century roots, I will show that they were, from the very beginning, designed to obscure as much as they reveal. As I elaborate how early commentators sought to style *Grimes* as an emblem of modernist realism and difficulty, I will also uncover those "sentimental" aspects that they struggled to erase: its idealized image of love; its melodramatic staging of good and evil; its evocation of sympathy; and its musical lyricism. Ultimately, my intention is not to rebuke past commentators for their subtractive reactions but to ask what it was that encouraged their selectiveness.

OPERA AND SENTIMENTALITY

In a context in which popularity was regarded as a mark against an artwork's integrity, it is hardly surprising that commentators responded nervously to *Grimes*'s success. However, in reporting a reception that was not merely enthusiastic but flagrantly emotive, critics gestured toward a more specific problem than popularity. After all, images of audiences "possessed" by the opera and cheering uncontrollably at the end stood as classic symptoms of sentimentality, an affliction that had been diagnosed by I. A. Richards, one of the torchbearers of modernist criticism.¹⁵ According to Richards, sentimentality implied, first and foremost, a form of quantitative excess: "a response is sentimental," he explained, "if it is too great for the occasion."¹⁶ It also had a qualitative dimension, implying a crudeness of emotion quite separate from its intensity.¹⁷ The third and final definition stressed a certain narrowness of vision, as if viewing art and the world through rose-tinted spectacles.¹⁸ The common thread was that sentimentality substituted an easy and unrealistic response for the kind of intellectually challenging engagement that modernist critics were eager to promote.

In elaborating a theory of sentimentality, Richards was primarily concerned with a mode of reception, with the kinds of poetic "misreadings" he came across in criticism. At the same time, he suggested that certain poems—particularly those

of the Victorian and Georgian writers—invited sentimentality more than others.¹⁹ These poems apparently deployed hackneyed ideas and situations in order to elicit common emotional responses: “such stock poems are frequently very popular; they come home to a majority of readers with a minimum of trouble, for no outlook, no new direction of feeling is required.”²⁰ By the time Q. D. Leavis published *Fiction and the Reading Public* in 1932, antipathy toward sentimentality had blossomed into a full-blown thesis about the great divide: that the difference between highbrow novels and best-selling fiction was tantamount to the distinction between realism and sentimentality. The best sellers of her day, she argued, had guaranteed their popularity by regurgitating the most artificial and emotive story lines of the nineteenth century, affording readers maximum emotional stimulation with a minimum of effort.²¹

Against this backdrop, *Grimes*’s ambivalent reception begins to make sense. Often, the concept of sentimentality was invoked explicitly, usually as an example of what the opera was not. One critic lauded *Grimes* as a “tale without romance, sentiment or glamour.”²² Another insisted: “There is no facile emotionalism, no obvious operatic thrill or Mediterranean grand passion.”²³ As we have seen, Whitaker’s denials of Italian opera were even more specific.²⁴ Opera criticism clearly had its own sentimental benchmark: while the novels of Dickens and Trollope drew literary insults, “Mediterranean Opera”—the operas of Massenet, Gounod, Verdi, and, above all, Puccini—bore the brunt of musical anxiety. In their *Key to Opera*, published in 1943, Frank Howes and Philip Hope-Wallace cast Puccini’s operas as “too sentimental for most English stomachs,” belying assertions that they evinced “refinement of taste.”²⁵ Even Mosco Carner, a staunch Puccinian, conceded:

For a variety of causes we may feel out of sympathy with the world of Puccini’s operas. There is his all-pervasive eroticism and sentimentality; he deliberately aims at our tearducts: two of his three most celebrated operas are “tear-jerkers” *in excelsis*. There is a streak of vulgarity—inevitable in fullblooded artists’ instinct with animal vitality . . . Puccini does not set his sights high.²⁶

In striving to identify what many found so unsettling about Puccini’s operas, Carner came close to articulating a theory of operatic sentimentality: a calculated effort to manipulate the emotions of one’s audience and a tendency to pander to the vulgarians. While the models of musical sentimentality differed, the implications remained the same as in literature: French and Italian Romantic opera was charged with tugging gratuitously at heartstrings, via story lines that were at once far-fetched and conventional.

DOWN AND OUT IN ALDEBURGH AND LONDON

One of the principal ways critics sought to distance *Grimes* from the fantastical aspects of operatic sentimentality was by invoking “realism”—a concept even

more slippery than sentimentality. While one commentator insisted that the opera “is, and is meant to be, life in the raw,” another contrasted its “real” and “English” subject matter with opera’s traditionally “fantastic” and “far-fetched” plots.²⁷ If sentimentality was associated with rose-tinted representation, realism was the antidote. By the time Britten’s opera was premiered, commentators could draw considerable critical support for oppositions between realism and sentimentality. F. R. Leavis would soon hold up the “great tradition” of realism against lowbrow sentimentality, while leftist critics were investing “new realism” with ethical and political imperatives.²⁸ “A good book,” Edward Upward insisted in 1937, “is one that is true to life . . . [I]f its emotional generalisations about life are able to help us live rather than to beguile us or dope us, [it] must view the world realistically.”²⁹ Montagu Slater, the opera’s librettist, was even more emphatic: “To describe things as they are is a revolutionary act in itself.”³⁰

Perhaps the most obvious symptom of the period’s realist concerns was in the exponential rise of the documentary film. As John Grierson explained, documentaries attempted to reflect “real life” accurately—in terms of both style and subject matter—at a time when cinema was attracted to sentimentality and artifice. “Its origins,” he went so far as to suggest, “lay in sociological rather than aesthetic aims.”³¹ Such aspirations were taken even further by the Mass Observation movement, which conducted interviews and surveys with “ordinary” people all over the country.³² Yet this urge to establish connection with working life, free from the conventions and exaggerations of bourgeois sentimentality, also left its mark on more established genres. While Barbara Nixon framed the Left Theatre plays as an antidote to “worthless, sentimental and romantic plays” and “grandiose melodramas,” others held up Auden for bringing poetry into contact with “real life.”³³

Britten and Slater had both cut their teeth on social realism, collaborating with Grierson, Auden, Isherwood, and others on left-wing documentaries and theater throughout the 1930s.³⁴ While *Grimes* seemed to mark a turn from these preoccupations toward a genre that—by Britten’s own admission—was ill suited to realism, it carried over some of the same aesthetic features and aspirations.³⁵ Adapted from George Crabbe’s poem *The Borough*, published in 1810, the opera is set in Aldeburgh, the provincial home of a poverty-stricken fishing community. In a *Listener* article from 1941, which originally piqued Britten’s interest, E. M. Forster cast Crabbe as a documentarist *avant la lettre*: “We are looking at an actual English tideway,” he insisted, “and not at some vague vast imaginary waterfall, which crashes from nowhere to nowhere.”³⁶ After the premiere, Peter Pears confirmed that it was Crabbe’s “amazing powers of observation” that ultimately made Britten settle on *The Borough* as a source text.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the creators chose to emphasize its realistic credentials when introducing the opera to the public. In the publicity materials distributed at the Wigmore Hall’s Concert-Introduction, the producer Eric Crozier pitted both the source poem and the opera alike against the sentimental conventions of their respective genres:



FIG. 1. Original Set Design for the Borough Street Scene (June 1945). Photographer: Angus McBean. © Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Library.

Crabbe was a realist. At a time when poetic fashion shunned “low” subjects, [Crabbe] set out to describe daily life . . . in all its meanness and familiarity. In basing their opera on his poem, the composer and librettist have broken away from the romantic scenes and heroic situations of operatic fashion, setting their action and their people in a homelier native background.³⁷

On the whole, early critics picked up this trope. Desmond Shawe-Taylor lauded Crabbe’s “minute and realistic picture” as “neither flattering nor romantic,” while others saved their biggest cheers for the opera itself. In a review titled “Opera for Tomorrow,” Harold Sear applauded *Grimes*’s brave new world of operatic realism, predicting new audiences would be attracted to the once-stylized and forbidding genre:

It has often been said that the subject matter of opera is so fantastic, so far fetched that honest John Bull can hardly be expected to endure even the warblings of triple-starred angels in so poor a cause. Well, here we are on entirely new ground. Crabbe’s folk are real enough and English enough in all conscience.³⁸

According to many, the most sustained realism could be found in the *mise-en-scène*. As Crozier later explained, the aim “was to evoke those ordinary streets, the curiously distinctive shapes and textures and juxtapositions of Aldeburgh buildings and the particular quality of light that bathes them.”³⁹ Modeled on designer Kenneth Green’s native Southwold and Aldeburgh, the sets included a level of historical

detail not usually encountered at Sadler's Wells. While the three-dimensional backdrops (see Fig. 1) made every roof tile and flint-stone visible to audiences, the forestage (see Fig. 2) was littered with workaday fishing props and objects (from boats and nets to ropes and pulleys).⁴⁰ Such fastidiousness was also evident in the costumes, which—being modeled on actual early nineteenth-century examples—departed from the company's usual practice of recycling costumes and sets. After praising the “detailed, realistic setting,” one audience member added: “Kenneth Green's excellent scenery and costumes . . . have all the fascinations of a series of old prints.”⁴¹ Another commentator was even more explicit: “Kenneth Green's sets and costumes are more than beautiful: they are right.”⁴²

Such visual markers were echoed by the opera's text, which occasionally gestured toward a similar kind of naturalistic authenticity. Spread thinly throughout Slater's libretto are colloquial words and phrases, suggesting a documentarist's desire to capture local workers' idioms. Our first encounter with Balstrode in Act I sees him chasing off local boys with a string of maritime metaphors and clichés—“Shoo, you little barnacles! Up your anchors, hoist your sails”—while the second scene's choral round presents a more sustained encounter with fishermen's-speak:

ALL
 Old Joe has gone fishing and
 Young Joe has gone fishing and
 You Know has gone fishing and
 Found them a shoal.
 Pull them in in handfuls,
 And in canfuls,
 And in panfuls
 Bring them in sweetly,
 Gut them completely,
 Pack them up neatly,
 Sell them discreetly,
 Oh, haul a-way . . .⁴³

While such colloquialisms are few and far between, commentators seized upon them as signs of a broader linguistic naturalism. One winced at the parts that “come a trifle too near photography and everyday talk,” while another was more positive: “the words of the libretto,” he snapped defensively, “shift sometimes into the imagery of poetry but never depart far from the colloquial.”⁴⁴ Yet another brought Britten's text setting into his realistic defense: “The greater part of the stage action is carried on in a sort of song-speech that keeps as faithfully as possible to the accents and the rise and fall and easy flow of ordinary speech.”⁴⁵

If the dilapidated huts and Suffolk dialect convinced some of an authentic encounter with working-class life, this was bolstered by the actual setting of the first production in a theater in the heart of one of London's poorest districts.



FIG. 2. Ellen Orford and the Apprentice (June 1945). Photographer: Angus McBean. © Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Library.

The Sadler's Wells Company was often championed in mythical terms for bringing opera into contact with “real life,” accomplishing on an institutional level what *Grimes* was said to have achieved aesthetically.⁴⁶ Edward Dent's history of Sadler's Wells, published in 1945, even arranged photographs of the work's first production against illustrations of the wartime stage—when it functioned as a shelter for displaced locals—in ways that drew none-too-subtle connections between the opera's humble scenes and its staging in the “theatre for everybody.”⁴⁷

For all the attention devoted to accuracy and authenticity, however, there was more to “realism” than met the eyes and ears. Nixon insisted, “realism is concerned with the essence of a character, situation or problem, not only its apparent characteristics.”⁴⁸ Grierson likewise stressed the importance of distinguishing “between a

method which describes only the surface values of a subject, and the method which more explosively reveals the reality of it.”⁴⁹ Drawing on modernism’s value-laden metaphors of surface and depth, these writers stressed a commitment to capturing the underlying experience of working-class life, exposing difficulties, hardships, and injustices without flinching or sugarcoating. This was an objective to which the opera’s creators apparently subscribed. Crozier spoke of a “selective realism,” devoted as much to the inner experience of a particular place and its people as to the “outer” photographic representations.⁵⁰ In Britten’s preface, he professed a similar faith in the representation of difficulty: “I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea.”⁵¹

The realization of this concern was hardly subtle. *Grimes* not only is set against the background of working life but is “about” it in a more thematic sense. At the heart of the narrative is an overworked fisherman, persecuted by the local community after his apprentices’ mysterious deaths-at-sea. While full explanation of the deaths is ultimately withheld, long hours and harsh working conditions are crucial to the tragedy. In Peter’s account of the first death, unforgiving working conditions take center stage:

PETER
 Picture what that day was like
 That evil day.
 We strained into the wind
 Heavily laden.
 We plunged into the wave’s shuddering challenge
 Then the sea rose to a storm
 Over the gunwales,
 And the boy’s silent reproach
 Turned to illness.
 Then home
 Among fishing nets
 Alone, alone, alone
 With a childish death!⁵²

In drawing connections between labor conditions, death, and alienation, this scene might appear more at home in leftist theater than in the opera house. While one critic commended its depictions as a “sober record of the life of the common people in a place where life was won hardly,” another insisted that they “present a view of Regency life seen rarely on stage. We are away from the Quality Streets and gay pavilions.”⁵³

Occasionally, the opera included even more pointed jabs at capitalism, as several critics pointed out.⁵⁴ In the first scene, the lecherous preacher decries the reduction of workhouse children to commodities, while *Grimes*’s downfall is elsewhere put down to his bourgeois aspirations:

PETER

They listen to money
 These Borough gossips
 I have my visions
 Fiery visions.
 They call me dreamer
 They scoff at my dreams
 And my ambition.
 But I know a way
 To answer the Borough
 I'll win them over.

BALSTRODE

With the new prentice?

PETER

We'll sail together,
 These Borough gossips
 Listen to money
 Only to money:
 I'll fish the sea dry,
 Sell the good catches—
 That wealthy merchant
 Grimes will set up
 Household and shop
 You will all see it!
 I'll marry Ellen!⁵⁵

These dreams ultimately prove illusory. The protagonist's attempts to redeem himself through hard work are marked as increasingly futile as the narrative progresses. Already by the opening scene of the second act, Ellen Orford comes to a prescient realization:

ELLEN

This unrelenting work,
 This grey, unresting industry,
 What aim, what future, what peace
 Will your hard profits buy?

...

You cannot buy your peace
 You'll never stop the gossips' talk
 With all the fish from out the sea
 We were mistaken to have dreamed . . .
 Peter! We've failed! We've failed!

*[He cries out as if in agony. Then he strikes her. The basket falls]*⁵⁶

From this moment onward, the protagonist proceeds through a downward spiral, culminating in his suicide: “The story,” as one critic pointed out, “is the grim tale of an ambitious visionary Suffolk fisherman who, in reaching for the stars, causes the death of two apprentices and eventually, helpless against public feeling, commits suicide.”⁵⁷ Given this trajectory, it is unsurprising that commentators reacted as they did, with one dubbing the opera a “realistic picture of grim life,” and another concluding: “The tale is fierce, its development tragic.”⁵⁸

In championing the opera’s realism, in other words, critics were alluding not just to its narrative of struggle but also its apparent pessimism. Nor is it difficult to see why: as Ben Singer has suggested, happy endings were strongly associated with sentimental melodramas, especially in the wake of modernism’s infamous apocalypticism.⁵⁹ In fact, some cast Britten’s opera not merely as a commentary on the “difficulty” of life—in the manner of *Traviata* or *Bohème*—but as a bleaker, even nihilistic, rejection of life itself.⁶⁰ One reporter mused on the opera’s Kafkaesque trajectory, while another imagined it surpassing even *Elektra*, *Wozzeck*, and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in its harrowing cynicism:

[T]his is about the last literary subject in the world which can be imagined in the form of an opera. It is gloomy, harrowing and depressing in the extreme, whereas the fundamental fact about opera is, historically and in the matter of its general practice, that it is festive—and to this even such grim specimens such as “Elektra,” “Wozzeck,” and “A Lady Macbeth” are not altogether exceptions.⁶¹

Invoking images of darkness and “gloom,” commentators were writing literally as well as metaphorically. One of the ways that Crozier and Green advertised the work’s pessimism was by plunging the stage into progressive darkness. While one commentator pleaded for “a little more light . . . at the beginning and end of the main action,” another sighed: “the décor was on the whole most effective, though I felt the lighting (or rather the lack of it) was rather overdone.”⁶² For all the complaints, though, this staple of modernist realism—apparently common in Slater’s own plays—succeeded in making the point.⁶³ After adding to the protests, one commentator ran with the symbolism anyway. “At times, the gloom is too profound: when night falls on the Borough, it is dark indeed, without glimmer of moon or star.”⁶⁴

SENTIMENTAL REALISM

In foregrounding the opera’s literal and metaphorical darkness, its violent images of poverty and suffering, commentators were fashioning a realism compatible with modernism.⁶⁵ Just as important: they were advertising the opera’s categorical rejection of sentimentality. In wielding realism against sentimentality in this way, however, critics were on shaky ground. While many mid-century commentators pitted the two modes against each other in ways that line up with the opera’s reception,

others threatened to wash away these precariously drawn lines in the sand. In an essay from 1940, George Orwell argued that Dickensian “realism” was actually a form of “middle-class sentimentality”: “[Dickens] sees the world as a middle-class world . . . He is vaguely on the side of the working class—has a sort of generalized sympathy with them because they are oppressed—but he does not in reality know much about them.”⁶⁶ Nor was Orwell’s own generation immune to this problem. Where Virginia Woolf accused Auden, Isherwood, and other “leaning tower” poets of ambivalence and insincerity, Orwell turned the documentary lens on his own *nostalgie de la boue*:

When I thought of poverty . . . my mind turned immediately towards extreme cases, the social outcasts: tramps, beggars, criminals, prostitutes. These were “the lowest of the low,” and they were the people with whom I wanted to get in contact.⁶⁷

In going on to describe class boundaries as a “plate-glass pane of an aquarium,” Orwell implied that genuine contact was as undesirable as it was impossible. Just as no one would actually want to live among the fishes, so realism’s appeal lay in a kind of voyeuristic spectacle, in which middle-class readers could experience the *illusion* of working-class contact without the water gushing in—that is, without compromising their own privileged positions and traditions.⁶⁸

These discussions implicate *Grimes* on multiple levels. In the year of its premiere, Dent cast Orwellian aspersions on the opera’s institutional setting. Taking issue with the idea of Sadler’s Wells as a “theatre for everybody,” which he otherwise helped to promote, he implied that the opera house thrived instead on a form of middle-class voyeurism:

[Lilian] Baylis may honestly have believed that in both regions there was a culture-starved proletariat hungry for Shakespeare and Mozart, but in reality both theatres were kept going by middle-class audience that came from all parts of London and the suburbs . . . [F]or certain plays and operas, especially if any sort of star was performing, the audience was quite obviously a West End one.⁶⁹

Beyond questions of West End audiences slumming in London’s East End, this accusation cast shadows on the opera itself. As a handful of critics implied, *Grimes* could be said to offer a similar experience on the level of style and subject matter—that is, not an authentic engagement with working life but a stylized and sentimental vision for middle-class consumption.

Some of the most obvious strictures were leveled at the libretto. While one commended Slater’s text as a masterpiece of “everyday speech” and another insisted that “little of the text is cast in set forms,” an even greater number argued the opposite.⁷⁰ After lauding the opera’s “sincerity and integrity as a whole,” Dent complained of the text’s “hackneyed . . . tricks of effect”: “I have come to the conclusion,” he explained, “that it is a mistake to try to write highly ‘poetical’ and ‘literary’ librettos. The poet ought to concentrate entirely on drama and absolute truth to

human nature.”⁷¹ A large part of the problem was Slater’s heightened poetic style. While the prosaic prologue came the closest to everyday speech, the greater part of the libretto was cast in four-beat lines with half rhymes. Slater spun the pattern as “appropriate for the quick conversational style of the recitatives,” but its effect seems more like a compromise between realistic prose or free verse on the one hand, and the grandiloquent five-stress line form on the other.⁷² When it came to more static operatic numbers, Slater was unapologetically “poetical.” As the curtain rises on Act I, the chorus of fishermen and women borrows heroic couplets from Crabbe’s original, singing of life’s difficulties in iambic pentameter:

CHORUS OF FISHERMEN AND WOMEN

CHORUS

Oh hang at open doors the net, the cork,
While squalid sea-dames at their mending work.
Welcome the hour when fishing through the tide.
The weary husband throws his freight aside.

FISHERMEN

O cold and wet and driven by the tide,
Beat your tired arms against your tarry side.
Find rest in public bars where fiery gin
Will aid the warmth that languishes within.⁷³

In casting aspersions on such passages, commentators were responding not just to poetic eloquence but also to philosophical abstraction.⁷⁴ In “What Harbour Shelters Peace?” (Act I, Scene 1), Grimes extends the storm metaphor in order to describe his own suffering. His subsequent aria invokes astrology to reflect upon the nature of fate:

PETER

Now the great Bear and Pleiades
where earth moves
Are drawing up the clouds
of human grief
Breathing solemnity in the deep night.

Who can decipher
In storm or starlight
The written character
of a friendly fate—
As the sky turns, the world for us to change?

But if the horoscope’s
Bewildering
Like a flashing turmoil
of a shoal of herring
Who can turn skies back and begin again?⁷⁵

In response to such scenes, some raised concerns about abstraction—noting that “it strains my sense of the appropriate when . . . Grimes starts philosophizing in this fashion”—and added elevated vocabulary to Slater’s list of sins.⁷⁶ Ernest Newman complained of “bookish diction,” while Dent implored the librettist to “use the very simplest words which everybody can understand.”⁷⁷ These concerns were exacerbated by the context of Grimes’s starry-eyed soliloquy, coming as it did directly before the aforementioned sea shanty: “I could wish,” Newman explained, “that some of the dialogue had been less colloquial and some of the more highly strung passages less ‘literary.’”⁷⁸ Tyrone Guthrie was even more emphatic on this point: “Britten is not consistent: snatches of verismo are interpolated with the boldly abstract expression of atmosphere and emotion.”⁷⁹

Such concerns were not limited to the critical reception, but were a source of tension in planning, as Crozier and Britten apparently fought with Slater to eliminate his “purple patches.”⁸⁰ They also spoke to wider debates within the literary world. If Woolf often complained of eclectic passages just like *Grimes’s* pub scene—“cracked in the middle” between beauty and reality—she elsewhere cast aspersions on the broader paradox of “realistic” poetry: “[Poetry] has never been used for the common purpose of life . . . Her accent is too marked; her manner too emphatic. She gives us instead lovely lyric cries of passion.”⁸¹ As a prose writer who felt excluded from poetry on the grounds of gender instead of class, Woolf had her own reasons for railing against realistic poetry. Yet she also captured wider concerns. Much like *Grimes’s* critics, Woolf jeered at the gap between poetry’s exalted register and the “real life” it strove to represent. At the same time, she clarified that the problem was not simply one of stylistic propriety. Poetry’s pattern of iambs and dactyls, its metaphors and abstractions—she insisted—risked redeeming an otherwise bleak existence, sentimentalizing its supposedly unromantic meaning.

Where some critics echoed Woolf, identifying stylistic tension between realism and sentimentality, others implied that the subject matter pulled in contradictory directions too. While the difficulties of working life are often center stage, they occasionally recede, as backdrops—or even foils—to explicitly sentimental tropes. The most obvious is the love story, which had commentators writhing in their seats. After conceding that “one woman stands out from the crowd, the gentle schoolmistress, whom Peter loves,” one critic hedged: “But as love does not affect his actions its value as a dramatic theme is not important.”⁸² Others opted for outright denial: in this “somber tale of an ill-adjusted fisherman, there is no love interest.”⁸³ Titling an entire subsection “Love Is Abolished,” another commentator explained:

Mr. Slater was further commissioned to avoid the well-trodden paths of the librettist of opera. The great stand-by of composers and dramatists, the love passion, was to be avoided at all costs as it was felt, no doubt, that such feelings would be alien to a race described by Crabbe as fierce, intolerant of check and curb on its primitive instinct.⁸⁴

Such assertions are curious not only because the love potential between Ellen and Grimes persists throughout, but also because it was added to Crabbe's poem, presumably to provide precisely the "conventional" intrigue that critics denied. Ellen is, as it were, Elisabeth to Grimes's Tannhäuser; as she strives to set him on the straight and narrow and restore his name, her love, compassion, and friendship promise redemption. After the noise and violence of the courtroom prologue, Ellen brings the protagonist back from the angry brink: "My voice out of the pain," she sings, "Is like a hand / That you can feel and know: / Here is a friend."⁸⁵ Elsewhere she is cast as a shelter from the storm:

PETER
 What harbour shelters peace?
 Away from tidal waves, away from storm
 What harbour can embrace
 Terrors and tragedies?
 With her there'll be no quarrels
 With her the mood will stay,
 A harbour evermore
 Where night is turned to day.⁸⁶

Contrary to claims that Britten's opera was entirely without light, this aria seems to foreground the tension between day and night, love and suffering, as a central theme. Although commentators may have been right to cite the tragic conclusion as evidence that the opera was not just another heartwarming romance, the problem remained that—at several points—it comes perilously close.⁸⁷

Although "love interest" was the sorest spot, it was not the only aspect that threatened a sentimental spin. As Newman pointed out, romantic love was part of the broader humanistic strain that Slater injected into Crabbe's original scenario. After praising the librettist for taking the poet's characters "from under the sometimes pitiless glass of the poet's microscope, and mak[ing] them breathe and move in company," he added Balstrode's "bluff, honest seafaring humanity" to the limited list of benevolent types.⁸⁸ If Ellen sides unequivocally with the persecuted Grimes, Balstrode extends compassion to whomever is in need. After protecting Auntie's "nieces" and their lecherous aggressor (Bob Boles), Balstrode implores everyone to get along:

BALSTRODE
 Pub conversation should depend
 On this eternal moral;
 So long as satire don't descend to
 To fisticuff or quarrel.
 We live and let live, and look
 We keep our hands to ourselves.

And while Boles is being forced to his chair again, the bystanders comment:

CHORUS

We live and let live, and look
We keep our hands to ourselves.

BALSTRODE

We sit and drink the evening through
Not deigning to devote a
Thought to the daily cud we chew
But buying drinks by rota.⁸⁹

As the chorus takes up Balstrode's refrain to the lilting rhythms of an operatic drinking song, the Borough sounds less like the violent mob of Gissing's *Nether World* (1889) and more like the Plornishes from *Little Dorrit* (1855–57)—people who endure their suffering with fortitude and good humor. Much as in the opening chorus, the pub is imagined as a place of respite and solidarity, where human bonds are forged through a shared sense of stoicism—a common commitment to enjoying life despite.

Even when Slater's libretto offered less redemptive visions, the sentimental specter loomed nevertheless. Although most critics saw darkness and pessimism as signs of modernist realism, Joseph Kerman took a different tack:

The libretto is not only effective, it is positively slick, reading sometimes like a textbook of tried devices of verismo melodrama—the milling chorus, the tavern scene, the storm, the fight on-stage, the set song, the stage-band and all the rest. Local colour is spread on much too thick, with emphasis on the seamy side of village life; and though Britten makes good and legitimate use of it, the general effect would seem more appropriate to [*Porgy and Bess's*] Catfish Row.⁹⁰

For Kerman, *Grimes's* bleakest moments were its most affected and sentimental. To his compilation of working-class clichés, we might add drunkenness, drug addiction, domestic violence, workhouse orphans, maltreatment of children, and prostitution. With these images in mind, it is hard not to think of Orwell's aestheticization of dirt—a voyeuristic spectacle of suffering staged less as a window into reality than as a stylized means of evoking cathartic sympathy.

SYMPATHY AND THE SENTIMENTALIST'S GRIMES

If the foregoing patterns, styles, and tropes suggested sentimentality, the issue of sympathy cut right to its heart. While Richards defined sentimentality primarily as a mode of reception, James Chandler has more recently associated it with contrivance about audience sympathy, as if the affective response were somehow inscribed within a sentimental text. Drawing on a visual metaphor to describe relationships between characters and the audience, he explained: “The spectator faces the virtual action of the printed text, but that action is itself often constituted by the interaction of virtual faces viewed by virtual eyes.”⁹¹ Chandler elaborated

that this “orthogonal (or triangular) structure[—]the spectator who beholds what amounts to a mutual beholding on the part of two other parties [within the narrative]—becomes a hallmark of the sentimental mode and its way of making a world.” If sentimental artworks are those that not only elicit emotional responses but also represent them in their narratives, *Peter Grimes* is no exception. Running alongside its themes of poverty, hardship, and suffering is an interrogation of the affective dilemmas that they pose. According to some critics, the opera was as much about responses to Grimes as about the title character himself, with the chorus often serving as a proxy for the audience’s interpretative dilemmas and vacillations.⁹²

From the moment the curtains rise on Grimes’s inquest, self-consciousness about how to respond takes center stage. Sympathy had long been associated with moral judgment, with the trial scene functioning as a sentimental conceit—a way of staging oppositions between good and evil, sympathy and an absence thereof.⁹³ But while Dickensian readers are usually privy to information hidden from judge and jury, *Grimes*’s audience is left in the dark in yet another way: it lacks sufficient evidence to arbitrate between contradictory responses to the protagonist’s testimony. The Borough gossips respond with passionate hostility, casting moral aspersions while refusing to feel sympathy. Swallow comes to a similar position via a different route, modeling a legalistic—even mechanical—detachment: “Peter Grimes,” he declaims with stiff, staccato rhythms, “we are here to investigate the cause of / death of your apprentice William Spode, whose body / you brought ashore from your boat, ‘The Boy Billy’ on / the 26th ultimo. Do you wish to give evidence?”⁹⁴ At the other end of the spectrum is Ellen, who stands and feels with Grimes as though his suffering were her own. “I did what I could to help,” she explains, inaugurating her role as the Borough’s long-suffering teacher of sympathy.

According to several commentators, Britten’s music was on her side. When Swallow instructs Grimes to take the stand with dry, brash, wind-punctuated patter, the protagonist’s slow, pathetic string dominant sevenths and chant-like response invite an altogether more sympathetic hearing (Ex. 1). “The strings in the prologue,” William Glock remarked, “express beyond a doubt the composer’s tender attitude towards Grimes.”⁹⁵ When the Borough chorus enters immediately afterward, the sinister whispers, noisy crescendo, and jagged vocal lines set the protagonist’s “tender” accompaniment in even sharper relief.

This melodramatic opposition returns in Grimes’s “Now the Great Bear and Pleiades” aria (Act I, Scene 1), where his aforementioned poetic eloquence and sensitivity are brought out by comparable musical signs. As the townsfolk guzzle ale and banter noisily, the protagonist bursts into the pub, looks to the sky, and sings of the stars with the same shimmering string halo and floating melody as in the prologue. After responding, “he’s mad or drunk . . . his song alone would sour the beer,” the chorus descends into a harsh, patter-filled round that swells into a harrowing mass of sound. This image is reinforced by the text, which moves quickly

SWALLOW 1 Peter steps into the witness box.
Hobson brings him a large Bible.

p Will you step in-to the box. Pe-ter Grimes! Take the oath! Af-ter me!

pp Brass *Str. p espr.* *p*

PETER *p sostenuto sempre*

I swear by Al-migh-ty God that the

I swear by Al-migh-ty God that the e-vi-dence I shall give

f con forza Brass *mf* *pp* Str. Brass *mf* *pp* Str.

P. e-vi-dence I shall give shall be the truth, the

Sw. shall be the truth, the whole truth and no-thing but the truth!

mf *pp* *mf* *pp*

2

P. whole truth and no-thing but the truth!

Sw. Tell the court the sto-ry in your own words.

ff *fz* *pp* *ff* *w.w.* *Trb.*

EX. 1. Peter Grimes (Prologue)—“Take the Oath”.

from the playful “Old Joe has gone fishing” refrain to altogether more sadistic imagery: “Gut them completely / Pack them up neatly / Sell them completely.”⁹⁶ One commentator put it mildly, observing: “There is supposed to be something poetic and elemental about [Grimes] that sets him apart from the bickering and petty gossip of the township.”⁹⁷ Others appealed to the music too, citing both the “beauty” of Grimes’s vision and the musical “anger” directed at his Borough foes.⁹⁸

Evidently touchy about such melodramatic gestures, some commentators were defensive: “[Grimes] is not presented as a worthy character (that would be too much),” one commentator explained, “but as an outcast: romantic, Byronic and misunderstood.”⁹⁹ Others denounced the “romanticized hero” explicitly, lamenting that the “sadistic side of ‘Peter Grimes’s’ complex nature [was] watered down as compared with Crabbe.”¹⁰⁰ Robin Holloway, writing in 1964, went even further to complain of “artistic falsification”:

In Crabbe’s poem the hero was a straightforward ruffian . . . a thoroughly anti-social person whom the crowd did right to persecute. But in Britten’s intensely sentimental version Grimes has become the outcast from society, the lonely, sensitive-souled visionary (in itself a romantic cliché) and the crowd an aggressive, destructive force.¹⁰¹

This “struggle of the individual against the masses” was not just a romantic staple but also, by his own admission, “a subject very close to [Britten’s] heart.”¹⁰² At *Grimes’s* premiere, however, it touched several nerves. Some commentators raised aesthetic objections, citing its status as operatic cliché, much as Holloway would later do. Others had moral reservations about what kinds of characters merit sympathy and to what effect: “Despite attempts to present this bully in a sympathetic light with the help of Ellen Orford,” one critic proclaimed, “he remains a repellent character whose fate arouses little pity.”¹⁰³ Shawe-Taylor was even more combative: “what neither composer nor librettist seems to realize is that, after all, the sympathetic schoolmarm was wrong . . . whereas poor Mrs. Sedley was dead right.”¹⁰⁴ For some, in other words, the problem was evidently not sympathy per se but the unworthy character upon whom it was bestowed.

The majority, however, parting company with those who bemoaned Grimes’s heroism, praised the “modern” opera for avoiding precisely this trope. “Determined to avoid anything smacking of conventional opera,” one commentator explained, “the composer and his librettist . . . have given us an opera, which has [no] hero.”¹⁰⁵ “Peter,” the critic concluded enthusiastically, “does not and is not meant to engage very deeply our sympathies.” Where some saw the chorus as purposefully dissolving sympathy for the protagonist, others thought him capable of doing that for himself. One reviewer gleefully invoked the “grim and, it must be said, unlikable figure of Peter Grimes” while others drew connections with infamous modernist miscreants. Comparing Britten’s opera to Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth*, one commentator enthused: “In both, we have an unromantic central figure, repelling rather than engaging sympathy.”¹⁰⁶ Anti-heroism had recently become a benchmark in

mid-century criticism, a way of sorting high from low.¹⁰⁷ As F. R. Leavis's "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero" essay makes clear, defending a work from sentimentality in this period often—somewhat counterintuitively—involved debunking or even denouncing its protagonist.¹⁰⁸

For those wanting to add Grimes to the expanding canon of anti-heroes, the disagreeable traits were there. "He is seen in the prologue," one commentator noted, "accused of causing the death of a first apprentice at sea; then we see him contriving the death of a second apprentice; he finally appears as a raving lunatic who goes to seek death by drowning in the raging sea."¹⁰⁹ As several critics pointed out, there were musical sides to *Grimes's* sadism too. After concluding that "this hero remains curiously negative," one commentator offered musical evidence up to the prosecution's bench: "The music which presents Grimes himself—in the witness-box, in his fierce approaches to Ellen, in that half-drunken outburst which silences the brawling pub, above all in that curious scene of muttering self-communing . . . is music of an uncannily chilled and anguished sort."¹¹⁰

Yet this was only one side of the story, and those who asserted Grimes's anti-heroism had also to explain away some heroic tropes, such as his aforementioned love for Ellen. Indeed, the very fact that critics were able to espouse such contradictory perspectives suggests that the protagonist was more ambivalent than either side cared to let on. While most of the opera has Grimes shuttling back and forth between saint and sinner, the Act III, Scene 2 "mad scene" sets this conflict in relief (see Figs. 49–51 in the published score). As the chorus chants his name, doubling as the voice of the approaching Borough and those in the protagonist's head, Grimes's mutterings mark him as the best and worst of all the cast: the violence of the Borough, Ellen's hope and compassion, not to mention his own moments of visionary eloquence. This tension is matched by a corresponding musical struggle: between the Borough's speech-like patter and Ellen's redemptive lyricism. From this extended rumination upon his name and identity, Grimes emerges as a patchwork of textual and musical quotations; his subjectivity less a stable substance than an ongoing reaction between disparate impulses and traits. "[T]he opera," as William McNaught pointed out enthusiastically, is "a study of a distempered character, at once the victim and maker of his evil fate."¹¹¹

If a handful recognized this complexity, it did not make them more open-minded about the question of sympathy. On the contrary, in the fight against sentimentality, these tensions and struggles became yet another line of defense. After all, such ambivalent visions were advanced by post-Freudian critics to confound the supposedly crude binaries of Victorian sympathy. Modernism's fragmented subjects—Eliot's Prufrock, Joyce's Bloom, Berg's Wozzeck—were seen as more psychologically "realistic."¹¹² Some of Grimes's defenders appealed to these notions, describing him as a "real man," "very far from the common operatic conventions," while Peter Pears proudly cast him as neither hero nor villain but "an ordinary weak person."¹¹³ Hans Keller gave this an explicitly Freudian spin: "His

pride, ambition, and urge for independence fight with the need for love; his self-love battles against his self-hate.”¹¹⁴

For Q. D. Leavis, these warring psyches—typical of literary modernism—were more inimical to sympathy than straightforwardly anti-heroic ones, and Britten’s critics apparently agreed. One, writing about the mad scene in particular, suggested that “the strokes by which the revelation was made” were neither cogent nor coherent enough to elicit sympathy: “We never really meet the man. His death breaks no heart. His suicide is a mere item of police court news.”¹¹⁵ For Keller, however—writing against the grain of contemporary criticism—these complexities and tensions were less a rejection of sympathy than an invitation to it: “in each of us there is something of a Grimes, though most of us have outgrown or at least outwitted him sufficiently not to recognize him too consciously.”¹¹⁶ “But we do identify him,” he concluded, “and ourselves with him, unconsciously, which is one reason for the universal appeal of the work.”¹¹⁷ While most mid-century critics associated sympathy with black-and-white moralism, Keller instead insisted that it was the opposite: the struggles, tensions, and ambivalence that compelled sympathetic response instead. Nor is this all that surprising; as, from Dickens’s Nancy, through Hardy’s Tess, to Verdi’s Violetta, moral struggle was a well-established romantic convention of evoking sympathy—indeed, one with a considerably longer heritage than even Keller’s Freudian diction would suggest.¹¹⁸ Only one critic suggested as much, insisting: “The poet’s powerful study . . . would not have made, just as it stands, satisfactory material for opera, if only for the reason that brutality and final madness so unrelieved would have chilled the sympathies of the audience.”¹¹⁹ “Mr. Slater,” he noted, “has wisely shown the self-haunted man as a complex of warring impulses, fatally prone to harshness but with a vein of poetic imagination running through him, a frustrated sensitive who breaks himself against the sharp angles of the world.” Yet it was this same romantic convention of unconventionality that allowed critics to play up sentimentality’s associations with morality, re-writing its nineteenth-century history as more moralistic than it was. In this, they had a pointed objective in mind; by doing so, they could distance Britten’s opera from long-standing conventions of evoking sympathy even as it drew on them all the same.

MUSIC UNDER ERASURE

Discussions of Britten’s score were just as fraught, matching the long list of literary denials—of poetry, love interest, redemption, sympathy—with a musical lineup just as elaborate. On the most general level, this meant disavowing connections with nineteenth-century opera, in its infamous artificiality, emotionalism, and excess. Whitaker, we might recall, insisted that *Grimes* resisted Italian opera’s easy conventions and he was not the only one.¹²⁰ “[I]t will not do,” another critic warned, “to listen to [the work] in the constant hope of something happening that will bring it into the category of standard opera.”¹²¹

For most commentators, “operatic” meant lyrical: “There is little, on the whole, for the Butcher Boy to whistle on his rounds” enthused one critic, following a remarkably common trope.¹²² As we have seen, lyricism was associated with sympathy, but there was more to it than that. In refusing to write “good singable tunes,” the composer could bolster his modernist musical credentials: “With the courage of youth, Britten casts aside all convention. There is no love duet, no coquetting Musetta, or melodious Mimi, no Prize or Flower song.”¹²³ For other commentators, realism was at stake: “Sombrely realistic,” one critic insisted, “there are no catchy airs.”¹²⁴

These assertions were selective at best. If one critic could insist, with relatively clear conscience, that the action “rarely halts for purely ‘operatic’ purposes,” this was arguably because musical numbers were written into the narrative: the workers’ choruses and drinking rounds; the Church *scena*, based on an actual hymn; the tavern dance; and so on. These set pieces had a long history in nineteenth-century opera, but—as Arman Schwartz has explained—they took on heightened significance in the push for operatic realism.¹²⁵ Yet these “self-justifying performances”—to borrow Schwartz’s phrase—were not the only extended numbers. Britten’s own professed eschewal of Wagner’s “permanent melody” in favor of “separate numbers that crystalize and hold the emotion of a dramatic situation” was evident throughout the score.¹²⁶ The Act II women’s quartet bears a striking resemblance to Strauss’s *Rosenkavalier* trio, and Ellen could indeed easily be described as the Borough’s “melodious Mimi”: every time she opens her mouth, we hear luscious strings, angelic harps, and sumptuous lyricism that seems to halt dramatic time.¹²⁷ When Ellen passes her lyricism on to Grimes at the end of the prologue (Ex. 2), we hear the stirrings of the kind of love duet that critics anxiously denied:

In this example, the jagged edges of Grimes’s speech-like “agitato” collide with, then give way to, Ellen’s soaring lyricism; before we move into the duet proper, the star-crossed lovers come together vocally and harmonically as Peter gives up his somber F minor and joins Ellen on a sustained high E (m. 18). As we move into this short duet, in which they declare their friendship in almost matrimonial unison with swooping gestures and sequential thirds, Puccini could easily be put in one’s mind. It is not, however, just the melody that focuses attention on this moment of lyrical reconciliation; it is also the text, which is “about” the voice’s redemptive power. Slater’s metaphorical invocation is, in other words, actualized by Britten’s setting: Peter and Ellen begin singing about singing to each other, and about melody’s capacity to elicit sympathy out of pain.

In erasing these passages, critics were rehearsing their concerns about what we might call redemption through melody; yet their anxieties were not without grounds in the score. After all, the text itself proves rather anti-climactic, culminating less in a passionate declaration of love than in an agape-driven promise of friendship. These tensions were present in the music too. Even at its most mellifluous, Britten’s music often undermines its own lyricism, as if to invite the defensive

9 Recitativo
(Senza misura)

ELLEN *p dolce*

PETER *pp molto piu lento*

Pe - ter, Pe - ter, come a -
truth... the pi - ty... and the truth...
way! But we'll-gos-sip too, and talk and rest...
Where the walls them-selves gos-sip of in-quest! While Peep-ing Toms
sempre tranquillo
Pe - ter... we shall re-store your name, warmed by the
nod as you go You'll share the name of out-law too!...
new es-teem that you will find... There'll be new
f energico
Un - til the Bo-rough hate... poi-sons your mind.
cresc. ed accel.
shoals to catch, life will be kind. Un - cloud - ed... the hot sun will spread
f
Ay!... on-ly of drown-ing ghosts! Time will not for-get... the dead... are
dim. e rall. *pp Piu lento e tranquillo*
his rays a - round. My voice out of the
wit - ness, and... fate is blind. Your voice out of the

EX. 2. Peter Grimes (Prologue)—Love Duet.

pain is like a hand that you can feel, that you can
 pain is like a hand that you can feel, that you can
 feel and know: Here is a friend, here is a friend!
 feel and know: Here is a friend, here is a friend!

EX. 2 (continued).

reactions it received. While the love duet mimics the gestures of nineteenth-century Italian opera, it is riven by harmonic tensions and ambiguities. Admittedly Britten's note-spelling—putting a $D\flat$ arbitrarily in place of $C\sharp$ —makes the melody look more awkward than it actually sounds. Nevertheless, the passage constantly shifts harmonic focus, passing quickly through 11 out of 12 notes in the chromatic scale. The lack of accompaniment compounds this meandering effect. And while the melody's swooping gesture smacks of Italianate lyricism, the minor ninth is quite difficult to sing, as if the result of an octave leap pushed too far. If this characteristic interval implies overstretching, Britten's dynamic markings suggest the opposite impulse: to pull away from lyricism at its most cathartic moments. Instead of swelling into the climactic notes on “voice” and “hand,” the composer backs away, moving against the expansive lyricism of the opening.

Britten's “love duet” is neither the only nor even the most obvious instance in which lyricism is at first advanced and then retracted. When describing “that evil night” when his apprentice died, Grimes's melodies are interrupted and scrubbed out by contradictory material (Ex. 3). To the same rising minor ninth in a now more symmetrical vocal line, the orchestra responds with short, brash, and violently syncopated chromatic half-steps. Elsewhere, it is Peter himself that interrupts, “checking” himself—as one critic described it—“on the verge of simple melody.”¹²⁸ In the opening of “What Harbour Shelters Peace,” a variant of the same melody—now sporting a major ninth—is reined in by speech-like and tonally disruptive interjections (Ex. 4). In the continuation of this aria, where Grimes's lyricism is allowed to blossom into something resembling a climax (Ex. 5), the composer finds other means of undermining his sentimental melodies. Even as Grimes works his way up to his melodic peak—now bolstered by a dominant pedal

We plunged in - to the
 waves shud - der - ing chal - lenge.

p
cresc.
f marc.
marc. 3

EX. 3. *Peter Grimes* (Act I, Scene 1)—“We Plunged into the Waves”.

Peter alone - gazing intently into the sea and approaching storm.

What har - bour shel - ters peace,
 a - way from ti - dal waves, a - way from storms,

espress. 49 *largamente* *a tempo*
ppp
 Fl. Clar.
 Trpt.
 Trb.
 Str.
ppp
marcato

EX. 4. *Peter Grimes* (Act I, Scene 1)—“What Harbour Shelters Peace”.

50

espress.

With her there'll be no quarrels,

pp espr. e so

Hrns.

piu f

With her the mood will stay.

EX. 5. *Peter Grimes* (Act I, Scene 1)—“With Her There’ll Be No Quarrels”.

with doubling horns and cellos—we hear storms brewing in the syncopated string dissonances. The B \flat /E juxtaposition on the word “stay” has a similarly destabilizing effect, poised uneasily between romantic coloration and dissonant irony.

This shuttling back and forth between melody and speech, lyricism and its erasure, made the sentimental melodies less conspicuous, allowing critics to disavow them. In following Grimes’s lyrical harbor with the famously violent orchestral “storm” interlude, moreover, Britten matched these local-level gestures of erasure with larger, formal ones. For almost as common as denials of vocal lyricism was a tendency to overwrite it with moments of orchestral prowess. One commentator followed his quip about there being neither Prize nor Flower song with an instrumental substitute: “‘My theme is mob and the sea’ [Britten] seems to say ‘and the orchestra tells their story.’”¹²⁹ Apart from the “rare” lyrical outpourings, another insisted: “the main burden . . . is laid on the orchestra in a number of interludes.”¹³⁰ “[P]articularly impressive,” he enthused, “are the prelude (and postlude) to the opera that defines the grey atmosphere of the hard-bitten little fishing town, the brooding night-piece that introduces Act III, and the superb passacaglia between the first and second scenes of Act II.”¹³¹ This praise was obviously bound up with the opera’s much-vaunted realism. Where some found authenticity in the harrowing subject matter, detailed sets, or speech-like utterances, others evidently found it in the orchestral imagery: “Britten has written salt-water music of unequalled

intensity—the sting and crash and the scream of great waters have never been caught and translated into music with such fidelity.”¹³²

In some respects, this response was unsurprising. Britten’s preface trumpeted his own firsthand experience of the Suffolk seascape, and his time in the documentary film unit was nothing if not an apprenticeship in faithfully rendering “objective” sounds.¹³³ Much like the composer’s melodies, however, his “realism” was conflicted. The fifth interlude harks back to the nineteenth-century tone poem, which would have been considered sentimental by “new” realists of Britten’s own time.¹³⁴ With the exception of the sporadic chinks of “moonlight” in the flute, harp, and percussion, it represents its maritime subject matter only in the most general sense: the expansive phrases and swells evoke oceanic grandeur, but the emphasis seems to be on the solidly “musical” criteria of formal proportion and development. At the other end of the spectrum is the sixth interlude, which comes as close as possible to the documentary ideal of pure, unmediated sound: after the opening burst of white noise—including snare drum, rattle, and whip—the only consistent feature is the unrelenting drone of the horn chord. Against this musical fog, we hear snippets that, while based on prior motifs, invite hearing as evocative but elusive sound effects.

While these orchestral portraits demonstrate Britten’s extremes, his now-famous “storm” interlude was more representative: at times, confounding oppositions between music and sound; at others, shuttling back and forth between them. Much like the fifth interlude, it begins with musical processes front and center: a mock fugue, itself based on the choral fugato from the previous scene (“Now the flood tide”). Yet even here, alterations to the once-lyrical melody—thematic fragmentation, oscillating patterns, and chromatic scales at breakneck speed—threaten to derail the counterpoint into noise. This is compounded by the “nonsensical” dissonance—as one critic described it—of the Phrygian seconds: “dissonance has been heard [before],” another commentator noted, “but Britten’s music runs from perky jigs in the woodwind to forceful, dissonant barkings in the brass.”¹³⁵ The threat of disintegration is realized in the interlude’s “*Molto animato*” section at Fig. 58 (in the published score), where spiraling sequences erupt into a sonic picture evading “musical” sense: wave-like crashes of brass and percussion, fishlike flailing of woodwinds and contradictory rhythms. The fugal order reestablishes itself at Fig. 59, but it soon dissolves again into sound. In the run-up to Fig. 60, the gentle hum of the seascape sets the stage for an orchestral reprise of “What Harbour Shelters Peace.” If this “aria” originally staged a tension between lyricism and speech, its re-appearance here—with its slow A-major string melody pitted against the staccato seaside effects—at Fig. 60 implicates a broader opposition between music and noise.

Critics naturally sought to diffuse this tension, whether by supplementing melodic denials with those of music generally; or by casting Britten’s score as unmediated sound: “it is full of eerie sounds, of terrifying silences, of monotonous

sea waves, and in one scene a recurrent fog horn.”¹³⁶ These strategies had the advantage of speaking to popular images of musical modernism as “noise” while bolstering what Schwartz describes as the realist “fiction of authorial abdication.”¹³⁷ But this rhetoric existed in tension with long-standing beliefs about music’s deep-seated resistance to realism. Where Woolf saw poetry as capable of sentimentalizing the bleakest subjects, music was riskier still. Even Auden—the target of Woolf’s critique—dubbed operatic realism a contradiction in terms, pitting the genre’s subjectivism against the “impersonal necessity” and mechanical objectivity to which documentary aspired: “music is in essence dynamic, an expression of will and self-affirmation, and opera . . . is a virtuoso art.”¹³⁸ “[A]n actor who sings,” Auden concluded, “is an uncommon man, more a master of his fate . . . than an actor who speaks.”

Given opera’s image as the epitome of romanticism—“the last refuge,” as Auden put it, “of the high style”—this position is not hard to understand.¹³⁹ Yet, as Schwartz has pointed out, verismo’s sonic fantasies often performed the collapse of will and agency that Auden disallowed.¹⁴⁰ While scholars have tended to hear *Grimes*’s musical tensions through a psychological lens—extending the mad scene’s struggles between good and evil—this context suggests something broader at stake. Indeed, it seems plausible that the shuttling back and forth between music and noise gestured less to fragmented subjectivity than to the erasure of subjectivity itself. Much like Schwartz’s *Tosca*, Britten’s protagonist often risks disappearing into the scenic void, “left by the lack of music.”¹⁴¹ Nor was this the first time that the composer used noise to evoke this dystopian idea. The threat of drowning out individual subjectivity by the machinery of modern industry, for instance, was an important theme in documentaries like *Coal Face* (1935), upon which both Britten and Slater worked. In this film about coal miners, the perspective veers between a “scientific” description of industrial systems, against which man is rendered insignificant, and a more “human” view where family relationships and friendships take center stage. As Philip Reed has argued, moreover, the composer and his collaborators often drew on precisely these dichotomies—between poetry and prose, singing and speech, music and noise—to draw this thematic tension out.¹⁴²

In *Grimes*, it is the storm and seas that constantly threaten to erase subjectivity, giving the overwhelming force a potentially more romantic spin. From the working men’s chorus beaten by the tide to the storm clouds gathering overhead, an indifferent nature threatens to wash away human life: “O Tide that waits for no man,” the chorus pleads, “Spare our coasts!”¹⁴³ When the storm interlude finally hits, its tensions seem a reflection less of Grimes’s psychological struggles than of the various vantage points—sympathetic or otherwise—from which they are viewed. This theme, introduced in the prologue, comes to a dramatic head in the final scene (Ex. 6). As Grimes stands reeling from his mad scene, we hear the “objective” sounds of the distant foghorn and Borough chorus while Ellen and Balstrode look on.¹⁴⁴ Echoing the prologue, Ellen interrupts the diegetic noise

Ellen and Balstrode come in, and stand waiting till Peter has calmed. Ellen goes up to Peter. Peter does not notice her.

lento pp *rall.* *PPP* *p* *dolce*

P. Grimes! Pe-ter Grimes! Pe-ter We've come to

CHORUS Grimes!

Fog: horn *PPP*

espress. *parlando*

take you home. O come home out of this dread-ful night! See, here's Bal-strode. Pe-ter, don't you

52 The voices are now very distant

Andante comodo e molto tranquillo

hear me?

SOPRANO *pp* Grimes! Grimes! Grimes! Grimes!

ALTO *pp* Grimes! Grimes! Grimes! Grimes!

TENOR *pp* Pe-ter Grimes! Pe-ter! Pe-ter! Pe-ter! Pe-ter!

BASS *pp* Pe-ter Grimes! Pe-ter! Pe-ter! Pe-ter! Pe-ter!

dolcissimo *senza voce*

PETER What har - bour shel - ters peace, a-way from ti - dal waves, a-way from storms!

Grimes! Grimes!

Pe-ter! Pe-ter! Pe-ter! Pe-ter! Grimes!

ppp

EX. 6. Peter Grimes (Final Scene)—“Peter, We’ve Come to Take You Home”.

by calling out with redemptive song. This time, however, Grimes appears not to notice, as she falls—flat and dejected—into reportorial speech (see Fig. 52). His reprise of “What harbour shelters peace,” along with the chorus’s softening from diegetic shouts to choral lament, suggests that subjective connection is not lost.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, the distant foghorn beckoning Grimes out to sea gives this lyrical outburst an ironic tinge, marking it less as a triumph of human agency and connection than as a tragic ode—as one critic described it—to “what might have been.”¹⁴⁶

Regardless, the cold, hard lens of documentary soon returns as Grimes’s redemptive song of “night turned to day” ironically gives way to a harsh reality: the stage is plunged into darkness in response to Britten’s musical cues. “[A]ll colour and sound drain out of the world,” reported one critic enthusiastically, as the “only lines of spoken dialogue in the work” are uttered.¹⁴⁷ At the climactic moment of death, in other words, we fall out of music entirely into unadorned speech, accompanied by only stifled sobs and shingles crunching as Ellen and Balstrode retreat.¹⁴⁸ For those anxious about sentimentality, this might seem the perfect way to end. One commentator dubbed the silent death a “clever touch,” while another highlighted abstemiousness: “Slater and Britten leave in the air by their fastidiousness” a point that “would have been driven home by Boito and Verdi with a touch of barnstorming.”¹⁴⁹ Yet, as with most assertions of this kind, the opposite was equally true. If following Verdi meant his “broken hero singing to the last”—to borrow the words of Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker—the collapse into silence and speech could have a similarly sentimental effect.¹⁵⁰ One need only recall the spoken endings of *Bohème* or *Traviata* to understand why some heard Grimes’s conclusion as even more melodramatic than the full-throated ones it sought to avoid. After noting that “at the crucial moment . . . the spoken voice intrudes,” one commentator concluded: “[Britten’s] audacity succeeds everywhere but in the last scene of all.”¹⁵¹

Despite the impression given by most critics, however, the opera does not end there. “After a long pause,” one noted, “life returns: dawn breaks, the mist disperses, the music on the high strings which began Act I comes back again, the townsfolk begin to go about their daily business.”¹⁵² For hardcore pessimists, this signaled betrayal: “a hazardous passage from climax to anti-climax, from tragic night to common day,” from coldly objective noise to music’s restorative power.¹⁵³ Yet, in many respects, the episode seems not to resolve the opera’s tension so much as it prolongs it. Even as the musical dawn suggests the optimism of a clean slate, it also implies a crushing indifference to the tragic events. When critics described the suicide as a “mere item of police court news,” they meant it literally as well as metaphorically:

SWALLOW
 There’s a boat sinking out at sea,
 Coastguard reports.

FISHERMAN
Within reach?

SWALLOW
No.

FISHERMAN
Let's have a look through the glasses.
*[Fishermen go with Swallow to the beach and look out. One of them has a glass.]*¹⁵⁴

As the onstage spectators watch Grimes disappear into the sea, they offer no response, as if the cold objectivity of nature finally merges with the indifferent crowd. The return of the dawn music seems to reinforce this “realistic” reading with its phonographic sound: the rising tide evoked with an ethereal violin and flute melody, the waking birds with clarinet, harp and viola arpeggios, and the gentle warmth of the morning sun with a brass chorale. When the chorus comes in at Fig. 54 (in the published score), their words double down on this reading: “To those who pass the Borough sounds betray / The cold beginning of another day.” Critics latched on to it: “the townsfolk begin to go about their daily business, we reach the ‘cold beginning of another day.’”¹⁵⁵

Yet, for all this, the ending was even more ambivalent still. Tucked away amid the final chorus’s imagery of unpitied nature, the distant toll of mourning resounds: “O hollow sound from the passing bell / To some departing spirit bids farewell.”¹⁵⁶ Nor is this without musical parallel: if the violin’s grace notes can be heard as ornithological noise, they also suggest the sobbing of a human lament, which soon develops into pathos-laden flute melody. And while the chorus’s words mostly thematize indifference, its hymn-like textures recall the opening solidarity—the sense of community that comes from being vulnerable to the same overwhelming forces of nature. As these gestures suggest the enduring possibility of sympathetic connection, the warm A major brass chorale and harp arpeggios confirm that the prospect of redemption is not altogether lost.

SENTIMENTAL MODERNISM

Surveying press responses soon after *Grimes*’s premiere, the critic William Glock found himself bemused. As one of the few to admit the opera’s sentimental tropes, Glock railed against the modernist rhetoric of realism and difficulty that had already taken root: “During the last fortnight, I have heard and read several comments on *Peter Grimes* . . . which describe it as a fierce and challenging work. What spoiled babies we have become.”¹⁵⁷ We have seen the sophisticated ways critics tipped the anti-sentimental scales, but Glock reminds us that some got straight to the modernist point. “‘Peter Grimes’ is no child’s play,” insisted Scott Goddard: “The tale is fierce, its development tragic, and the music fascinating.”¹⁵⁸ Baxter

described the opera in similar terms, stubbornly predicting that “Peter Grimes’ will shock the fashionable first-nighters” even after it was hailed a success: “The music is merciless, arrogant, tempestuous, and strangely moving, but it makes no concession to the ear which had been tuned to crooners and the jungle-wailing of the foxtrot.”¹⁵⁹ Elsewhere, the same critic drew hyperbolic connections between Grimes’s suffering and the experience of being in the opera’s audience:

The music is so harsh and relentless that the ear cries for mercy, but Britten’s retort is: “Did the people show mercy to Peter Grimes?” In the whole of the long first act, there is hardly a touch of beauty in the score, and none at all of tenderness. The harmonies are modern and discordant, as if the composer were some kind of robot with a hatred of mankind. “There is no bodily pleasure in it” said a well-known operatic tenor to me as he went out for a breath of air.¹⁶⁰

While such accounts appear to confirm the carefully crafted visions of *Grimes* as an archetype of modernist realism—which shocked and offended early audiences—we have seen that things were never this straightforward. For one thing, its modernism was invariably framed as a defense, not an accusation. That this difficulty was explained negatively—in terms of what the opera was not—allowed critics to identify its less “difficult” characteristics even as they denied them. Baxter’s portrait of audience suffering was, after all, inseparable from the denials—of romance, sentiment, love duet, flower song, beauty—seen throughout this account. Although Glock put this down to simple prejudice, this chapter has uncovered something more sustained and reciprocal at work. For, in raising sentimentality in order to deny it, *Grimes*’s critics were arguably reenacting gestures written into the opera itself. In fact, there is a sense in which this sentimentality can *only* be read under erasure in the Derridean sense; in pitting love against pessimism, moralism against cynicism, lyricism against fragmentation, music against noise, it was as if composer and librettist put a line through the most sentimental features. But it was a line that not only left them legible, but highlighted them all the more.

This explains how audiences were able to enjoy sentimentality, realism, and difficulty at the same time, while revealing something more fundamental about the relationship between them. By pitting “romantic” tropes against “modernist” ones, sentimentality against its erasure, *Grimes* was able to stage its own difficulty, translating modernism’s aesthetic challenges into a recognizable style.¹⁶¹ This meant turning the rejection of sentimentality into a kind of literary and musical rhetoric, but also a more literal staging of difficulty in the narrative of struggle too. By interpreting the work’s style and subject matter as a proxy for the aesthetic experience, Baxter—in other words—arguably laid bare a broader critical sleight of hand, one that penetrated far deeper into the heart of twentieth-century modernism than most commentators would be prepared to admit.

In its explicit blend of realism and modernism, Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) offers an obvious example. However, we might ask similar questions about *Ulysses*—the

locus classicus of literary modernism—too. For all its experimentalism, Joyce's novel from 1921 shared with sentimental realism all the paradoxes and tensions that Orwell outlined.¹⁶² While the inclusion of defecation, urination, and prostitution took concerns with "ordinary" life to a transgressive extreme, it also gestures to the same aestheticization of dirt. Like Grimes, Bloom is something of a sympathetic outsider; despite his flaws, his ability to imagine a brighter future makes him feel the cold, sharp edges of modern life with peculiar force. While Clive Hart has described Bloom's vision of his dead child, Rudy, at the end of "Circe" as harking back to Dickensian sentimentality, we might see it looking forward to Grimes's "fiery visions" as well.¹⁶³ Like the latter, these glimpses of redemption are at once more sentimental and difficult for being offered and then denied. Where Robert Scholes has cast Joyce's difficulty as a "cloak" for inner sentimentality, we might suggest that they were two sides of the same coin.¹⁶⁴ It seems likely that—much as with Britten's opera—the novel's infamous "difficulty" had as much to do with the literal struggle and suffering of the Grimesian protagonist as with the formal experimentation and originality that critics have often prized.¹⁶⁵

There were comparable examples in the musical world. To allow for what Suzanne Clark has called a "sentimental modernism"—that is, a sentimentality within and without modernism—is to recognize that even *Wozzeck* was never as cold and austere as *Grimes's* critics supposed: here too we have the same anxious flitting back and forth between suffering and redemption, lyricism and speech, music and noise, set against the stylized grit of working-class life.¹⁶⁶ Though Berg's reputation as the soft touch of the Second Viennese School makes this unsurprising, his more hard-nosed colleagues were implicated too. At roughly the same time that critics were stopping their ears to *Grimes's* melodies, some were doing the opposite to Anton Webern's works, struggling to hear lyricism in this proverbially difficult music.¹⁶⁷ That they were able to do so suggests that even Webern's music enacted similar gestures of erasure, whereby musical sentimentality was at first advanced and then retracted, offered and then denied. Indeed, the problem with works like *Grimes* was not simply that they performed their "difficulty," reducing modernism to the level of style. It was, rather, that in doing so they exposed the extent to which modernism's difficulty was always thus, a rhetorical performance that depended for its effect on the very sentimentality it rejected.