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The concept of suffering in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Berg's *Wozzeck* via Badiou's critique of Adorno's *negative dialectics*

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ABSTRACT

In his only book-length text on music, French philosopher Alain Badiou wrote a treatise on Richard Wagner that largely defends the composer against his staunchest critics. Chief antagonist among them is the philosopher and Wagner polemicist, Theodor Adorno, whose own book, *Negative Dialectics*, is the central text that Badiou uses to argue against Adorno's accusation of Wagner's dialectical Hegelianism via the example of Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*, which exemplifies unresolved suffering for the protagonist. Badiou also named the composer Alban Berg as Wagner's true heir in expressing operatic suffering, and it was Berg's opera *Wozzeck* that Adorno viewed as the essential prototype of his negative dialectics. This article appropriates Badiou's views on *Tannhäuser* and expands his conviction of its conformity to the ideals of negative dialectics by ascertaining these traits in the opera's libretto. The same approach is taken with *Wozzeck* to compare the two operas and pinpoint how they both denote the principles of negative dialectics via representations of suffering. The result allows these operas to be interpreted as artistic expressions of Adorno's theory.

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Within the musicological scope of opera studies, the figure of German composer Richard Wagner bears significance for his seminal contributions to music history, not least due to the importance placed on going beyond the music itself to focus on complex symbolic features of socio-cultural and philosophical meaning (Two key sources that exemplify this type of emphasis are: Borchmeyer (2003); Karnes (2013)). However, Wagner's legacy also bears association with his explicit antisemitism, which particularly pervades his prose texts. As such, scholars have also at times framed their critical engagement with Wagner to depict how his operas reflect and reinforce broader cultural themes of exclusion and nationalism (For example, see: Katz (1986); Lawrence Rose (1992); Weiner (1995)). In broad discussions of post-Wagnerian operatic traditions, the modernist Austrian composer Alban Berg is often cited as a successor to Wagner for his ability to harness Wagnerian idioms of both compositional form and depth of allegorical consequence (For a compelling study that juxtaposes Berg and Wagner, see: dos Santos (2014)). This includes Berg's ability to mirror Wagner's practice by fusing leitmotivic development with a rigorously structured language of extended tonality that preserves expressive continuity while radically modernizing its harmonic foundations. Like Wagner, Berg also delved into the psychological depth of his operatic characters, but transposed these themes into a fractured modern world marked by alienation and trauma. The objective of the present article is to contribute to this expanding comparative practice of juxtaposing overlapping themes in the libretto narratives of Wagner and Berg's operas in order to determine new commonalities that will also increase knowledge of the allegorical meaning of the individual works analyzed within a specific framework.

French philosopher Alain Badiou (b.1937) wrote a book on Wagner in 2010 titled *Five Lessons on Wagner*, which represents an important contribution to the philosophy of music and specifically to Wagner studies. The book offers a series of philosophical and ethical critiques of Wagner, drawing on the

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perspectives of some of his most outspoken critics, whose arguments Badiou recaps, occasionally endorses, and at times challenges. Badiou also presents his own interpretations and reinterpretations on some symbolic meanings in Wagner's works and his socio-historical legacy.

This article focuses on one of the key critical perspectives in *Five Lessons on Wagner* that Badiou highlights and reflects on: the thought of German philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), particularly his critiques of Wagner that Badiou filters through Adorno's book *Negative Dialectics* (originally published in 1966 as *Negative Dialektik*).[1] Broadly speaking, Adorno's work aims to articulate his understanding of human truth through the lens of negative dialectics. Badiou explores Adorno's argument that truth and reality should be seen in opposition to a core aspect of Hegelian dialectics—namely, the idea that two negatives are resolved into a positive or affirmative outcome. Adorno applies this critique to society, the arts, and specifically to Wagner's operas, which he claims always conclude with affirming, reconciliatory endings due to their underlying Hegelian structure. For Adorno, this is a problem: in the moral aftermath of the Holocaust—within the specific context of Auschwitz—art must confront suffering without offering redemptive closure. As such, any art that adheres to the logic of Hegelian dialectics is no longer an adequate reflection of human reality. Adorno wrote in *Negative Dialectics* that "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (Adorno, 1973, p. 362). This was a shift in his thinking, where he previously stated that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. This visceral "scream" is not an aesthetic expression; it is a basic and immediate form of testimony. This means that Auschwitz cannot be reduced to a symbol or metaphor (and instead functions as the historical rupture that conditions Adorno's rejection of redemptive aesthetic forms). For Adorno, Auschwitz represents a radical break in history—a point at which Enlightenment ideals of progress, culture, and reason collapsed into barbarism. This rupture must be understood not as a metaphorical abstraction, but as a historical and ethical limit that fundamentally reconfigures the conditions of aesthetic legitimacy. When Auschwitz is invoked in this article, it is not mobilized as a symbolic shorthand for suffering in general, but as the decisive event that, for Adorno, invalidates any artistic form predicated on reconciliation, affirmation, or transcendence. The relevance of Auschwitz here therefore lies in its function as a negative imperative—one that demands the persistence of unresolved suffering in art, rather than its sublimation or narrative redemption. Its horror is not something that can be sublimated into meaning; instead, it exposes the inadequacy of existing cultural forms. Therefore, the need to express suffering after Auschwitz—however fractured or inadequate—serves not to restore meaning, but to confront its collapse.

With this in mind, the present article analyzes Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* by examining its libretto to pinpoint textual representations of suffering and its ultimate lack of resolution. The same approach is taken with Berg's opera *Wozzeck*—the quintessential model of negative dialectics—by investigating that opera's libretto as well. My analysis also goes past Badiou where I attach a denial of desire to the principle of suffering, which is connected to the social stigma of moral deviancy. This extra layer of congruity associates *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* even further. This article's primary research question then becomes how related are the endings of these two operas to the extent that they both denote unresolved suffering via the principles of negative dialectics? These evaluations result in a deeper understanding of Adorno's philosophy, through Badiou's interpretation of it, where the operas *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck,* and in particular their tortured protagonists, are drawn into a symbolic alliance that depicts how these works are implicit and explicit examples, respectively, of the same philosophical architecture. Moreover, there is a certain logic and symmetry for the inclusion of Berg because he was Adorno's friend and composition teacher, where the two men shared a meaningful rapport for the last 11 years of Berg's life (For an example of their closeness, see their published correspondence: Lonitz (2005)). To be clear, this article is not a critique of Badiou's *Five Lessons on Wagner*,[2] but rather uses his ideas as a foundation from which to comparatively view *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck*. I am expanding on Badiou's ideas through narrative analysis and thematic comparisons to exemplify Badiou's notion (beyond the philosopher's own fleeting remark) that Wagner and Berg bear an intrinsic association. This pathway further perpetuates the musicological trend of comparing these two composers in more symbolic ways that goes beyond similarities of compositional technique in the music itself. I must emphasize this point to convey that I am analyzing operas primarily from a literary standpoint with musical considerations taking on a subsidiary role. The libretti[3] are analyzed without analogous references to the music in the operas because the

purpose here is to examine allegorical symbols through philosophical meaning, which is explicitly expressed by the characters' verbal articulations of feeling. This methodological decision does not imply a dismissal of music as philosophically significant, but rather reflects a strategic narrowing of analytical focus. Because Adorno's concept of suffering is articulated primarily through categories of experience, negation, and subjective consciousness, the libretto provides the most direct access to how suffering is linguistically framed and narratively sustained within the operatic medium. Musical analysis is therefore invoked only where it directly reinforces or complicates the philosophical claims under examination, allowing the libretti to function as the principal site of allegorical and dialectical articulation. This is a more direct method of understanding intention, however, I make a brief exception with *Tannhäuser* at the end of the analytical section on that opera when I conflate Wagner's reflections on the program of the opera's overture with musical coefficients. I do likewise with *Wozzeck* where I discuss specific elements of form, thematic treatment, and the musical influence of Berg's former teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. While this article does not pursue a comprehensive historical reconstruction of Wagner's and Berg's operas, it remains attentive to historical specificity where it is conceptually required by Adorno's philosophical framework. This analytical approach depicts how the operas may be regarded as artistic expressions of negative dialectics.

But what is an example of negative dialectics at play in an opera? Using Berg's *Wozzeck*, an initial example of Adorno's theory can be found in the way that Berg formulates the end of his opera. Indeed, there is no actual end to the opera, which is designed as a temporal loop of narrative repetition through the inheritance of suffering that the newly-orphaned child of the protagonists is bestowed with following the death of his parents, thereby perpetuating the cycle and withholding any semblance of a positive resolution. Likewise, it is argued that Wagner's Tannhäuser did not overcome his suffering either because he never managed to sufficiently reconcile with the moral and sexual impulses that were a constant source of conflict for him. These characters are trapped within a sameness of existence that defy Hegelian models and reflect Adorno's tenets of a form of truth and realism via dialectics of negativity.

Badiou utilizes this dialectical dissonance between Hegel and Adorno[4] in *Five Lessons on Wagner*, and agrees with Adorno that Wagner's operatic endings largely negate suffering because the composer clearly foreshadows its resolution and deliverance. However, he makes a brief argument for Wagner's early opera *Tannhäuser*, presenting his belief that this work, in fact, conforms with the tenets of negative dialectics through its depiction of suffering and waiting in vain, which Badiou believes ultimately ends in a manner that defies the Hegelian dialectic of a positive resolution. In addition, Badiou also makes the astute yet fleeting observation that Berg is Wagner's most effective operatic successor in depicting suffering. For the sake of clarity, Badiou's mention of Berg does not represent the philosopher's endorsement of *Wozzeck* as an example of negative dialectics. While Badiou explicitly distances himself from Adorno's negative dialectics as a philosophical system, his engagement with Adorno in *Five Lessons on Wagner* nevertheless provides a productive interpretive lens through which Wagnerian suffering can be reassessed. Badiou's use of Adorno does not function as a wholesale endorsement of negative dialectics, but rather as a strategic appropriation of its critical force—particularly its resistance to reconciliation and affirmative closure. It is precisely this selective engagement that allows Badiou to isolate moments in Wagner, especially in *Tannhäuser*, where suffering appears as an unresolved condition rather than a dialectically redeemed one. In this sense, Badiou serves here less as a doctrinal authority and more as a conceptual mediator through which Adorno's categories can be reintroduced into operatic analysis. Accordingly, Badiou functions in this article as a point of departure rather than as a governing interpretive framework: his reading of Wagner opens a path back to Adorno's negative dialectics, but it is Adorno's philosophy that ultimately determines the criteria by which operatic suffering is evaluated. I am taking the association that Badiou obliquely presents when he draws a parallel to the shared notion of suffering in Wagner and Berg, and am expanding its scope of possibility by inserting it into the discussion of Adorno's theories. Therefore, Badiou is again a jumping-off point, for how I present Berg here, but the latter then becomes entirely embedded in Adorno to demonstrate how *Wozzeck* is archetypal of negative dialectics, whereas *Tannhäuser*, with the assistance of Badiou, needs to be argued in order to share in the conviction that both operas represent negative dialectics in fundamental ways.

Furthermore, as the discussion builds from *Tannhäuser* to *Wozzeck*, where Badiou recedes more into the background and Adorno emerges in the foreground due to the philosopher's keen experience with

Berg's opera, an argument is made to suggest that Adorno viewed the modern, authentic person—a realistic embodiment of his negative dialectics—as an individual who waits in vain for that which will never come. In regard to that, this article also proposes that the person of Alban Berg was Adorno's ideal image of such an individual from the way that Berg both inserted himself into *Wozzeck* as expressed in his letters and autobiographical inclusions, and also by the way that Adorno wrote about Berg's personality, which clearly mirrors the tenets of negative dialectics. As such, this article develops its investigative scope that begins with Badiou and Wagner and builds to the most explicit representation of negative dialectics with *Wozzeck* and its orbit of Adorno and Berg, establishing a philosophical commonality between the operas before addressing Berg's personal image in the eyes of Adorno as a fundamental model for the latter's conception of actualizing his theory. This approach of focusing Berg's humanity through negative dialectics also goes beyond Badiou, who did not perceive in Adorno's theory a concrete plan of action, but rather a warning to never repeat the events of Auschwitz again.

In addition, it must be made explicitly transparent that this is a libretto-centered opera analysis that remains attentive to musical form and historical context where conceptually required, rather than declaring a removal from history. As such, this study encompasses an interdisciplinary framework of philosophy that is not meant to be interpreted as a contribution to furthering these specific philosophies. The texts by Badiou and Adorno, as well as the inclusion of Hegel are not incorporated here to stimulate wider intrigue into how *Five Lessons on Wagner* and *Negative Dialectics* fit into the broader structure of these philosopher's outputs. Nor do I presume to suggest that their use here constitutes a comprehensive discussion of these themes within their oeuvres. A streamlined focus is essential in order to maintain attention to the two operas. The ultimate value in juxtaposing the thematic similarity of irreconcilable suffering in *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* shows how these operas, respectively, can be indirectly and directly seen as embodying tenets of negative dialectics as metaphorical artworks. This, in turn, demonstrates how the same essential end result in both works is reached by different pathways, deepening an understanding of how operatic endings can transcend conventional narrative conclusions and express philosophical statements that neutralize finality.

Philosophical foundations: Hegel, adorno, and badiou

Regarding Hegel, it would be helpful to briefly explain what is referred to as his positive or affirmative dialectic to pinpoint how this will be challenged in the subsequent arguments. Terry Pinkard summarizes Hegel's dialectics most effectively, describing Hegel's aim of devising a holistic and comprehensive logic, which is, simply stated, dividing all logical reasoning into three categories: "Being" describes tangible observations about things that are more directly perceptible and do not require argument or explanation to judge them. "Essence," conversely, refers to why something is as it is or appears as it does, so it contains an element of deduction and explanation. Lastly, "the Concept," is basically the judgment of a judgment, where one takes stock of the applied logic in order to consciously review if the logical conclusion makes sense (Pinkard, 2020, p. 461).

In regard to Hegel's notion that two negatives are sublated into a positive, Hegel writes that "the negation of the negation is not a return to the first immediate, but is rather its true result, the mediated and true ground, the unity of the first and second negation" (Hegel, 1969, p. 833). The double negation, therefore, is a sublated positive, where the original point and its negation are turned into this positive. Furthermore, Hegel adds that "the True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself" (Hegel, 1977, p. 11). This suggests that true nature comes about when it transitions through its opposite and then negates that negation, which produced an affirmative result. These views are in conflict with Adorno's negative dialectics because Hegel supports a form of ideological reconciliation that Adorno is against when he discusses his belief of non-identity (presented below) and the lack of resolution for the object because reality does not reflect positive closure.

Turning to Adorno, a more nuanced classification of negative dialectics is presented by Alison Stone, who describes Adorno's theory as a criticism of Hegel's dialectical logic, whereby Adorno converted it to

a negative dialectics that investigates the connection between concepts and objects, which Adorno refers to "identity thinking" and the "non-identical" (Stone, 2014, p. 47).[5] With this in mind, negative dialectics (in a simplified summation), suggests that if the identity of an object or concept, or its specific perception, cannot be subordinated to the universal (in other words, cannot be defined by a ubiquitous awareness), then there is an incorrectness to the universality of the concept. Adorno's non-identity of concepts seeks to establish truths[6] from a different approach than that of general, historical dialectics, where negative dialectics are employed to challenge the older dialectics of Hegel and argue against the reduction of a specific perception to a universal concept, where the perception must always lead to an exact concept. In that sense, negative dialectics do not default to the concept, but present a non-identity of the concept as the truth of the perception. The point is that if perceptions are reduced to being identified only to the extent that they constitute the larger concept, the perception has no individuality of its own and is the same as any other concept-defining perception. This is the dialectical formula that Adorno is against, where his negative dialectics remove the perception's identity as the vehicle for the concept, and by rendering it non-identical, he gives the perception a uniqueness of meaning. Adorno categorizes this non-identity as "the thing's own identity against its identifications" (Adorno, 1973, p. 161). Elsewhere, he states that "this cognition [dialectical thinking] seeks to say what something is, while identitarian [identity] thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself" (Adorno, 1973, p. 149). Additionally, Vangelis Giannakakis describes Adorno's non-identity as a negative experience because it both rejects an endorsement of any specific prior view, and does not qualify truth as an extension of a subject's ability to influence reality (Giannakakis, 2022, p. 14).

Broadly speaking, an example of the historical dialectic is how Adorno views capitalism as subordinating society by removing individuality and promoting uniformity in people (Adorno wrote about this more extensively in an earlier study. See: Adorno and Horkheimer (2016)). Badiou concurs with this notion in Adorno's text that looks to argue Hegel's universalizing identity when he writes: "What must be salvaged in identification is non-identity; (Badiou, 2010, p. 33) or, in other words, not to make the non-identical identical" (Badiou, 2010, p. 47). Adorno discusses this idea in *Negative Dialectics*, explaining how we understanding things through identifying them using labels or concepts, but that this is a fallacy because reality of the thing does not match the concept that we associate with it. Therefore, the non-identity of the thing in question is more important because it differentiates between truth and our perception of it, and that recognizing this differentiation is how our thinking should be oriented (Adorno, 1973, p. 149). Badiou also addresses these themes in Adorno's critique of Hegel, writing in his Wagner book that "Adorno considered that the Hegelian dialectic, in exemplary fashion, is a dialectic that does not let difference be, that actually engulfs difference in sameness. As an affirmative—not, indeed, a negative—dialectic, the Hegelian dialectic ends up reducing difference to sameness" (Badiou, 2010, p. 18). In relation to this, Badiou also notes how *Negative Dialectics* argues against Hegel's identity principle of the One, which itself proposes an "identity whereby one thing can apply to everyone, or, to put it another way, it consists in reducing everyone to the same insofar as the same is this universal norm" (Badiou, 2010, p. 31). In summation of Adorno's book, Badiou offers: "The linked themes of the need for appreciating differences, the respect for otherness, the criminal nature of identitarian disrespect of differences, and the inevitably violent will to universal sameness are basic themes throughout *Negative Dialectics*" (Badiou, 2010, p. 32).

I must also clarify that while I focus on associating negative dialectics with Adorno's assessments of Auschwitz, and use this as a central tenet of my discussions, that aspect alone does not constitute a full understanding of Adorno's term. It is merely the central framework for linking Adorno with Badiou, Wagner, and Berg motivically, and establishing a plausible interrelation between them all in the central premise of isolating this article's purpose of categorizing *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* as examples of negative dialectics. Additionally, beyond his advocacy of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as a supporting tenet of *Five Lessons on Wagner*, it should be stated that Badiou was not a proponent of negative dialectics. He did, however, share the pursuit of truth as a common thread with Adorno.

Badiou, in the preface of his book *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, presents his view of *democratic materialism* as the belief that there are only bodies and languages in the individual's perception of the world in which we live. If Hegel's dialectic was a proponent of this *democratic materialism*, which isolates

bodies and languages, Badiou counters Hegel with the notion of the *materialist dialectic*, which presumes the following: "There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths" (Badiou, 2019, p. xx).[7] Anton Syutkin reflects on this passage, noting that "Badiou implements a materialist appropriation of the dialectic, (where) the process of truth takes, for him, the place of changing the world" (Syutkin, 2019, p. 395). Moreover, in his essay "Beyond Negative Dialectics," Badiou expands on the line from *Logics of Worlds*, adding: "A materialist I am, because I affirm that what exists is composed of bodies and languages and of nothing else. A dialectician I am, too, because we must add: all that exists is composed of bodies and languages—except that some truths also exist" (Badiou, 2020, p. 9). There is nuance, of course, to all of these juxtapositions of philosophers, and Badiou assuredly shares some similarities with Hegel, as Jim Vernon writes: "Both thinkers insist on the fundamental capacity of thought to force itself beyond, or negate, all merely received determinations in politics, art, science, love and philosophy. In this sense, Badiou is certainly, as he often claims, a fundamentally *dialectical* thinker" (Vernon, 2015, p. 2). In regard to the sentiments from *Logics of Worlds*, they present one avenue in which Badiou and Adorno's philosophies combat Hegelian dialectics in a different pursuit of truth. As such, Adriel Trott writes, "in *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou affirms the multiplicity of worlds seen in terms not of the being of the world but in its multiple appearing" (Trott, 2015, p. 60). In relation to Auschwitz as a philosophical crux for Adorno, as well as the connected notion of suffering (which I parallel in the two operas), Badiou reaffirms the move towards the non-identity of negative dialectics as not being related to thought. He explains that it is not related to thought because it is "something different from itself, especially when confronting the radical dimension in experience of what is not thought, the living subject's suffering" (Badiou, 2010, p. 47–48).

In his article titled "Affirmative Dialectics: from Logic to Anthropology," Badiou mentions Adorno's negative dialectics and explains his opposition to it:

> Theodor Adorno thinks that the classical Hegelian dialectics was too affirmative, too submitted to the potency of the Totality and of the One. He proposes a sort of hyper-negativity, the name of which is 'Negative Dialectics.' We know today that in this way, we have nothing else but an ethics of compassion, a vision where the hero of our consciousness is the suffering human body, the pure victim, and we know also that this moralism is perfectly adequate to capitalist domination under the mask of democracy (Badiou, 2013, p. 2).

Badiou further explains that

> "what I try to do in all of my work is propose a new dialectical framework which is not a return to the young Karl Marx or to Georg F. W. Hegel, but that is neither the negative dialectics of Adorno, which is like the aesthetics of human rights…"

Badiou (2013, p. 2–3) and, perhaps most explicitly of all, Badiou writes: "I agree with Adorno—and it has been explained with great clarity before me—when he says that dialectics, Hegelian dialectics, for example, must escape the risk of totalization. True dialectical thinking cannot be imprisoned in a figure of totality or of absolute and final knowledge. But dialectics for me is always affirmative dialectics and not at all negative dialectics" (Badiou, 2020, p. 14). These examples are meant to show that while I position Badiou in a supportive role to Adorno's negative dialectics for the sake of arguing *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck*'s reflections of negative dialectics, the French philosopher generally did not align his thinking with this staple of Adorno's thinking.

Wagner in the orbit of Adorno's *negative dialectics*

Badiou's analysis of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is meant to pinpoint key thematic areas that Badiou then orients towards a discussion on Wagnerian ontology. For our purposes here, a few central features of Badiou's analysis will be described in preface of their comparative application between *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck*. To begin, Badiou notes how Adorno criticizes the Hegelian ethos (borrowed from mathematics), which presumes that "the negation of negation is an affirmation" (Badiou, 2010, p. 35). Adorno addresses this point in *Negative Dialectics* thusly: "To equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification. What thus wins out in the inmost core of dialectics is the anti-dialectical principle. If the whole is the spell, if it is the negative, a negative of particularities—epitomized in that

whole—remains negative" (Adorno, 1973, p. 158). Wagner is Hegelian in this sense because his endings negate the negative arc of suffering in his works. Where Badiou seeks to recover moments of unresolved suffering within Wagner's operas—most notably in *Tannhäuser*—as potentially consonant with negative dialectics, Adorno's critique remains more uncompromising: suffering that is anticipated as redeemable, whether musically or dramaturgically, is already dialectically falsified.

Badiou writes how in Wagner's works,

> rather than being truly and genuinely confronted, the Other's suffering is dissolved in a rhetoric of compassion…an articulation of suffering that, instead of being the point at which all rhetoric comes to a halt, as Adorno would have it, on the contrary *fuels* the rhetoric. Wagner consigns suffering to the rhetoric of becoming.

Badiou (2010, p. 77), Badiou states that Wagner's works evolve towards "affirmative finales" because they are about "reconciliation" and "suffering to the sublimation of becoming" (Badiou, 2010, p. 78). Adorno's negative dialectics seek to transcend finality and closure by proposing a dialectical non-resolution, which he sees as effectively embodied in Berg's *Wozzeck*.

The need to deny affirmation and signify no resolution, Badiou says, stems from Adorno's conviction that following the Holocaust of World War II, art must not depict resolution any longer. More specifically, after Auschwitz, "one couldn't assert the positivity of anything that was culture, and perhaps even anything that was existence" (Badiou, 2010, p. 40). Badiou sees this as a pervasive feeling of guilt (Badiou, 2010) over creating positive beauty in the existential aftermath of a genocidal event. As we will later see, this is why *Wozzeck*, to Adorno, reflects his negative dialectics perfectly: there are no positive assertions in that work, unlike Wagner's affirmative outcomes. Moreover, it becomes evident from Adorno's perspective that Auschwitz cannot be redeemed, or the guilt averted, so Wagner's model of guaranteed redemption is inauthentic to the world in which we live because Auschwitz destroyed any future semblance of redemption in Adorno's eyes. Auschwitz functions in Adorno's philosophy not as an abstract moral principle detached from history, but as a historically singular catastrophe whose ethical demand persists precisely because it resists conceptual closure. Rather than functioning as a metaphor or heuristic device, Auschwitz marks the historical and ethical rupture that renders any aesthetic promise of reconciliation fundamentally suspect in Adorno's thought. Wagner's model of guaranteed redemption appears dialectically inauthentic not because Auschwitz can be analogized to his operatic structures, but because Adorno's post-catastrophic philosophy refuses any form of artistic closure that would symbolically annul real, unreconciled suffering. While the present analysis concentrates on the aesthetic and philosophical consequences of art after Auschwitz, this focus does not detach the event from its historical determinants. Auschwitz remains inseparable from the history of modern antisemitism that culminated there, a historical reality that fundamentally conditions the force of Adorno's philosophy after Auschwitz. Adorno addresses these points in *Negative Dialectics* where he writes how our despair for the world feels real to us, and that this creates a false reasoning that leads us to believe that there is a missing component that can alleviate this despair. Therefore, this despairing feeling deceives us into thinking that a solution exists, but due to the flawed, inauthentic world in which we live, we must not assume that it is possible to overcome this universal despair (Adorno, 1973, p. 372).

Badiou next notes that the personification of suffering and the idea of "waiting in vain" are the post-Auschwitz necessities of artistic expression using negative dialectics. Adorno writes that "the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth" (Adorno, 1973, p. 17–18). The disagreements here with Wagner are extensive. Badiou explains how Wagner does not permit suffering to exist in and of itself because he prophesizes its ultimate redemption, reducing it to a correspondence of before and after (Badiou, 2010, p. 39). From this perspective, Wagnerian suffering is not real if there are certain assurances or projected hopes for its alleviation. The Auschwitz imperative necessitates "the feeling that there will be no relief, that there is no salvation, that justice has not been done, [which] must be expressed and made explicit" (Badiou, 2010, p. 42), as Badiou writes. This sentiment is reflected in *Negative Dialectics* when Adorno writes how "after Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims" (Adorno, 1973, p. 361). This passage claims that any attempt made at perceiving the world as good or meaningful in the aftermath of Auschwitz disgraces the truth of what took place there. Badiou's previous expression is also akin to what Adorno refers to as "waiting in vain," which is

a negative act that transcends the positive outcome for a more "open" interpretation of art that categorizes two negatives perpetuating the negative (so no Hegelian positive). This "openness" changes the form to a "formlessness" that does not ascribe to any formal ordering, but is rather arbitrary or unpredictable (Badiou, 2010, p. 43). Adorno's point here is not only to convey what Auschwitz has ethically taken from the parameters of human expression, but signifies the need to ensure that something like that never happens again. His negative dialectics fundamentally stem from that singular conviction, where Badiou observes Adorno does not advocate for what must be done, but rather purports the negative command of never again (Badiou, 2010, p. 51). Even if Badiou's opinion is true and Adorno does not explicitly prescribe a path of action, as we will see later, Adorno's curation of Berg's personality argues that the philosopher did have a path, or rather a model, in mind as a plausible example of negative dialectics in action as an individual's fundamental outlook on life.

The argument against Wagner reenters due to the composer's formal impetus of final resolutions that invalidate the anticipatory delay and the chromatic harmonies that have tonal endings, leading to "the constant postponement of the finale" (Badiou, 2010, p. 59). As such, Wagner cannot create a "waiting in vain" because he always presents a satisfying resolution at the end. Badiou notes that Adorno charged Wagner with this fault due to his "latent dialectical Hegelianism" (Badiou, 2010, p. 120). There is certainly waiting in Wagner, but to be in vain, there must be no finality of closure or emotional catharsis. This dialectical inauthenticity is not experienced in *Wozzeck*, which is devoid of any resolution whatsoever. Indeed, on this matter in Berg, Adorno writes: "…the central significance given a very characteristic expressive device in Berg, that of waiting in vain, evident in both *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. With guile characteristic of both the man and his work, Berg's longing for happiness tries to coax the impossible from what he knows to be an impossibility" (Adorno, 1994, p. 17).

Badiou himself presents a counterargument here by stating his belief that Act III of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* constitutes a significant waiting, even if Isolde finally comes to the dying Tristan's side at the end of the drama. Badiou believes that despite the resolution of their union at the end, it does not negate the suffering and waiting that has been building thus far. This is so, Badiou states, because upon her arrival, Tristan utters "Isolde" and then dies, equating this end of Tristan's waiting as a "supplement to the waiting," rather than a resolution (Badiou, 2010, p. 121). Although there is plausibility to this argument, it is still false from Wagner's philosophical perspective because both Tristan and Isolde's deaths fulfill the Schopenhauerian ideal of death being the metaphysical vehicle for transcending the empirical will. It is certainly, therefore, a full resolution and not some pseudo interpretation of waiting perpetuated. It is assumed that Tristan and Isolde are together in death in the realm above space and time in which they idealistically sung in the second act. This is so because in her final *Liebestod*, Isolde sings of seeing Tristan in the realm of their eternal love, waiting now for her own arrival, which she fulfills with her earthly death and transfiguration to this other realm. The argument against Badiou here stems from the philosopher maintaining the matter from Tristan's perspective and the latter's seemingly unresolved death, from a certain point of view, whereas I am interpreting the ending based on Isolde's admission of a unified resolution beyond death. It is a semantic argument, to be sure, but one where there is technically nothing "in vain" regarding the ending of *Tristan* from the symbolic purview of Wagner's metaphysical intentions.[8]

From the perspective of Adorno's negative dialectics as presented by Badiou, it is clear that Wagner fails at representing this post-Auschwitz model of artistic expression. *Wozzeck*, conversely, is the perfect proponent for negative dialectics because not only does Wozzeck the character experience no catharsis, he passes his waiting in vain onto his son as a cyclical perpetuation in lineage of waiting and wanting a resolution. *Wozzeck*'s inherent circular structure ensures that the waiting will essentially be eternal for Wozzeck in perpetuity through his doomed descendants.

Despite the accusations levied against Wagner in context of the tenets of negative dialectics, Badiou cites important characteristics of suffering within Wagner's *Tannhäuser* that embody salient symbolic associations with *Wozzeck*. The following narrative analysis of these matters, as they are inherent to both operas, will act as a counterpoint to Adorno's disavowal of Wagner in order to demonstrate thematic similarities between the two works in an effort to categorize *Tannhäuser* as representative of negative dialectics in its own right and in its darker resemblance to *Wozzeck*. We commence with *Tannhäuser* first.

The sufferings of Tannhäuser

Before delving into narrative intricacies of the opera, a brief synopsis of *Tannhäuser* is presented here: The story centers around the knight and minstrel Tannhäuser, who is conflicted between sacred and profane love. Having spent time in the Venusberg—the realm of the goddess Venus—Tannhäuser grows weary and longs for redemption. He leaves Venus and returns to the mortal world, where he is welcomed back by his fellow minstrels whom he left prior to the start of the opera. There he reunites with Elisabeth, the niece of the Landgrave of Thuringia, who loves him and represents spiritual purity. During a song contest at the Wartburg, Tannhäuser shocks the court by praising Venus and erotic love. He is condemned and told the only hope for redemption lies in a pilgrimage to Rome. He goes, but the Pope denies him absolution. Despairing, he returns, intending to go back to Venus. But he learns that Elisabeth has died, sacrificing herself in prayer for his salvation. As her funeral procession passes, Tannhäuser collapses and dies. During the funeral procession, the Pope's staff blooms, suggesting that Tannhäuser's soul has been redeemed.

To begin, Badiou isolates certain themes that he uses to argue some of the dialectical criticisms made against Wagner, particularly regarding its antithetical correlation to Adorno's negative dialectics. He makes a short illustrative analysis of *Tannhäuser* where he identifies notions of suffering and restless wandering as central representations of the work. Badiou ultimately makes a claim as to why he believes *Tannhäuser* actually does conform to the negative dialectical ideal. However, a deeper narrative analysis is necessary to pinpoint these key pillars of meaning in the opera, where I will elaborate on how these expressions are explicitly rendered in the libretto, and to also expand the idea of suffering to encompass a denial of desire, as well as resulting from the social stigma of moral deviancy. These additional parameters will ultimately serve to better associate *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* in the following section.

The representation of Tannhäuser's immediate and nearly uninterrupted suffering is stated from the opening scene of the opera in the magical realm of the Venusberg where the goddess Venus rules her hedonistic world of unrepentant sexual indulgence. Tannhäuser's first expression is of a dream of subconscious redemption that he could awake to, which he equates to an uncertain sound of bells that has been denied to him for a long time (Wagner, 2011, p. 62). This is a foreshadowing of the end of the opera where the bells of redemption ring for Tannhäuser, but do not absolve him of his perceived sins. His reverie at the opera's start speaks to his quest for salvation from now until the end of the work, and his perpetual suffering for being denied this desire.

To an unsympathetic Venus, Tannhäuser describes his innate mortality as instilling in him a desire to experience change that a blissful eternity of repetition cannot afford him. He is of the mortal world and wishes to suffer in reality so that presumably he may ultimately experience the hope that comes with anticipating the future. There is no satisfaction for him if his bliss is guaranteed. Joy is only rewarding if suffering is experienced and overcome rather than removed altogether from existence. This is, then, Tannhäuser's idealized conception of what mortal life is or at least should be. This is also the first example of his need to wander and not stay in one place. The physical act of wandering sublimates the movement and journey towards spiritual enlightenment. This is a specific implementation that Badiou says is an autobiographic reference to Wagner himself. Indeed, Badiou writes that "Wagner is also the great poet of the character who cannot remain in one place, who is bound to wander. Wagner was himself without question a wandering character" (Badiou, 2010, p. 93). Mike Ashman concurs on this autobiographical point, noting that the "ideas drawn from the *Tannhäuser* scenario extends also to the autobiographical. If Wagner was Tannhäuser, Tannhäuser is now Wagner" (Ashman, 2011, p. 10, 12).

In his essay, *A Communication to my Friends*, from 1851, Wagner describes *Tannhäuser* as "an entry into the spirit of the sufferer's wanderings" (Wagner, 1993, p. 337–338), which corresponds to Badiou's observation of this phenomenon representing a theme in Wagner's own life. Then, in his essay *On the Performing of Tannhäuser*, from late 1852/early 1853, Wagner conveys that Tannhäuser's suffering is his guide when he writes, "Sorrow: this profoundly human yearning was to lead him to the woman [Elisabeth] who *suffers* with him, whilst Venus has but joyed" (Wagner 1995, p. 200). Tannhäuser's desire to suffer as an actualization of his humanity is poetically described by Dieter Borchmeyer, who writes, "paradoxically, he suffers from a lack of suffering" (Borchmeyer, 2003, p. 131).

Tannhäuser says to Venus: "I long for beauties still denied me" (Wagner, 2011, p. 64),[9] which can be interpreted as an empirical fleetingness of beauty that is to be cherished because it is not eternal. Ironically, Tannhäuser is rejecting eternal bliss for idealization of empirical bliss, which is a testament to his humanity: to desire that which one does not have in the fantasy that its acquisition will be more fulfilling. Wagner is here anticipating the Schopenhauerian will that governs empirical desires and instills suffering as a byproduct in the individual. To live is to suffer, and despite his existence in a version of bliss, Tannhäuser has not sufficiently transcended suffering to feel entitled to his bliss, which is the only tangible recourse for re-introducing him into the world of suffering, from which he will not, in a way, be able to escape from again.

The endless wanderer further emerges in Tannhäuser's early exchange with Venus when he states that "your love is an obsession that has trapped me" (Wagner, 2011, p. 64),[10] and "my life with you in slavery shames me" (Wagner, 2011, p. 65).[11] To this, Venus prophetically retorts: "So go, you dreamer, seek to be saved, seek for the peace you will not find!" (Wagner, 2011, p. 65–66).[12] Before his wish is fulfilled and Venus releases him, Tannhäuser states that "it is death I am seeking, and death that draws me on" (Wagner, 2011, p. 67).[13] In this context, it is not necessarily death in the sense of his demise that Tannhäuser is seeking, but death as a metaphor for an end to endlessness and the banality of eternity.

When he is reintroduced to the mortal world and finds himself amongst the pilgrims, Landgrave, Wolfram, and the other minstrels, Tannhäuser initially rejects their please to join them, invoking the theme of the endless wanderer by stating that "staying with you is useless; I will not find the peace I need. My destiny lies ever onwards, for me there is no turning back…I must be gone from here!" (Wagner, 2011, p. 71).[14] This is additionally interesting because this moment mirrors the very ending of the opera after Tannhäuser has returned following his failed pilgrimage to Rome and again attempts to flee. At that later moment, just as in this one, the name of Elisabeth is used as a spell to root him in place and to overcome his wandering desires in order to experience a higher purpose in her presence. These are the first and last invocations of Elisabeth as a means of steering Tannhäuser towards a more righteous path that he too comes to accept but can never maintain. These real and metaphoric associations with Elisabeth are further mixtures of suffering, wandering, and denial of desire, as Tannhäuser grapples with the existential dilemma of his purpose and the conflicting duality of his nature that will soon lead to his social stigmatization and extended suffering, which will ultimately break him and lead him to implore Venus to take him back, as she prophesized he would.

The second scene between Tannhäuser and Elisabeth is the most passionate and erotic in the entire opera, despite the staunch observation of empirical chastity. It is clear that the pair never consummated their emotional union, yet this scene still reads as a fervent love duet. The sexualized imagery expressed in the love duet is a visceral, philosophical quality that is largely forbidden for various reasons, and where the illusion of these unions is immediately destroyed by the limitations of society and morality in the next scene. Empirical suffering cannot be supplanted for too long, and once the song contest begins, Tannhäuser's perpetual decline leading to his death is set in motion.

The introduction of the song contest, in the aftermath of the passionate emotionality, seeks to reinforce the true values that must be adhered to without fault. The Landgrave presents a lengthy monologue where he first speaks of righteous morality regarding political structures, with the threat to "… crush dissent within our nation's confines;" (Wagner, 2011, p. 76)[15] and also "for virtue and our ancient customs, for chastity and true religion…" (Wagner, 2011).[16] It is clear that the social values are predicated on quelling subversion and deviancy of the prescribed moral code. Perhaps ironically, in the face of this dogma, the task of the contest is laid out for the contestants to sing about love and its essence. It is evident that the only version of love that is permissible is the kind that reflects virtue, chastity, and religion—the tenets of empiricism that stand antithetical to the metaphysical sexual indulgence of the Venusberg.

As Tannhäuser prepares his song, his stage direction states that he becomes suggestively spellbound, as if by Venus, and goes on to completely counter the mantra of chaste love with his devotional expression of sexual love. The deviancy naturally causes complete outrage, and his death is sought for as a result. Tannhäuser, still under the presumed spell, retorts by charging his accusers as being oblivious to

the actual throes of love. He escalates his position, provocatively invoking Venus and naming the Venusberg as the height of loving ecstasy:

> by lust for love man's heart and soul are driven, and hopes made flesh by you whom all adore. And blest the man who on your beauty has feasted, for he alone knows all that love can be. Poor mortals, who true love have never tasted, make haste, haste to the Venusberg with me!

Wagner (2011, p. 80),[17] this is a critical juncture in Tannhäuser's judgment by his peers. The Venusberg is a symbol of everything that the courtly minstrels stand against, and Tannhäuser's invocation of it is the last straw of his systematic decline. The reaction is damning: "Filthy blasphemer! Did you hear? Boasting he was in Venusberg! He has no shame; proud of his sin, he dares proclaim that he has tasted fruits of hell" (Wagner, 2011).[18]

Elisabeth lobbies for leniency towards Tannhäuser and names the condition of his penance and ultimate salvation as a pilgrimage to Rome to be forgiven by the Pope. The social stigma of moral deviancy does not only pertain to Tannhäuser, but also extends to Elisabeth, because everyone knows that she waited for his return in chaste devotion, so his admittance that he engaged in carnal acts during his absence also shames Elisabeth's dignity and her faithful devotion to him. Returning to Adorno's complaint against Wagner, the end of the second act of *Tannhäuser* demonstrates the implication of the Hegelian dialectic of resolution. Redemption is offered to Tannhäuser, nullifying suffering from the perspective of Adorno's negative dialectics by charting a path for his catharsis.

The end of the opera brings Tannhäuser back to the Wartburg after his failed pilgrimage where he did not manage to secure the Pope's absolution, who ended up condemning him further. So great is Tannhäuser's suffering now that he once again seeks to find the Venusberg and its metaphysical salvation from the empirical suffering that he originally wanted, thereby fulfilling Venus's prophecy of his return. Moreover, when he has reached his lowest moral point and calls to Venus, Tannhäuser expresses the Adorno-associated plea of waiting in vain when he begs the goddess: "Once long ago you came to show me, let not my search be vain today, for now man and his church have cursed me, come to me, Venus, show the way!" (Wagner, 2011, p. 90).[19] As Venus approaches, Tannhäuser indicates a connection to the metaphysical realm in the same questioning manner that Isolde (from Wagner's later opera *Tristan und Isolde*) likewise expresses in her *Liebestod* when he tells the unseeing Wolfram: "And can't you tell that she is near us? Don't you hear jubilant voices? A whirling band of lovers rejoices!" (Wagner, 2011).[20] In the depths of his suffering, as Wolfram beseechingly attempts to keep Tannhäuser on the virtuous path, the latter states: "All hope, all hope has been denied me; only in love lies my salvation!" (Wagner, 2011, p. 91).[21] In her guise as ultimate temptress, Venus seductively beckons Tannhäuser to come to her with promises of metaphysical salvation, which is undone when Wolfram speaks Elisabeth's name, and the battle for Tannhäuser's soul is over, with Venus disappearing. Elisabeth's sacrificial corpse is then brought on stage, and by all practical accounts, it would appear that Tannhäuser is redeemed in his final living moments before he dies, and with this conclusion, justifying the criticism of Hegelian dialectics.

We will return to Badiou to mediate this dilemma regarding the function of resolution, or lack thereof, at the end of *Tannhäuser*. First, however, he writes the following about Wagner:

> I would say that the suffering subject, for Wagner, is nothing other than a split that cannot be made dialectical, that cannot be healed. It is a split in the subject that really establishes an inner heterogeneity without any hope of genuine resolution. Just because there are episodes of reconciliation in Wagner's operas does not mean that this split is not expressed as such in the present. It is not expressed in the plot sequence in which it occurs; rather, it is expressed as a present of absolute suffering.

Badiou (2010, p. 91), furthermore, this split in Wagner is characterized by Badiou as "irresolvable suffering" (Badiou, 2010, p. 92). Tannhäuser's split stems from the two factions of love that he cannot reconcile: the chaste, Christian love of Elisabeth, and the sensual, pagan love of Venus and her Venusberg. From this perspective, the Hegelian dialectical ideal of ultimate resolution is impossible because the inner split in character that Wagner projects, according to Badiou, is irresolvable. Badiou would, therefore, argue that there is a case to be made for the presence of Adorno's negative dialectics due to this phenomenon. But how could this notion conceivably counter the textual resolution at the end of *Tannhäuser* where Elisabeth's sacrifice redeems the title character? One could argue in support of Badiou that

Tannhäuser's acquiescence and willingness to forsake worldly Christian redemption and return to the immoral sexual hedonism of the Venusberg is his authentic, non-dialectical split at its most irreversible.[22] The choice of this perception stems from his inability to deliver himself from his own suffering by conforming to prescribed empirical doctrines of showing sincere penitence and then being absolved of one's sins. To Badiou, this is presumably the true ending of the opera (solely from the perspective of the libretto) based on the protagonist's consistent path of suffering without the sought-after absolution from the Pope in Rome, which was the approved path in the narrative of Tannhäuser's redemption. Concerning this, Badiou writes: "This is one dogmatic Pope, in short, and he plunges Tannhäuser into total despair since the only solution that was recommended to him for healing his inner split has not worked" (Badiou, 2010, p. 95). In that regard, Elisabeth's sacrificial death, and with it, the collective public perception of Tannhäuser's redemption, is only a dramaturgical superficiality that does not reflect the truth of Tannhäuser's inner non-dialectical split. The split cannot be reconciled by another's sacrifice, therefore resulting in the opera's actual moral ending being one of unresolved negativity due to unattained inner salvation via the only method that the sufferer could implement to avoid this fate. I believe that Badiou thought this as well because he writes that the non-dialectical split "occurs *within* Tannhäuser; he is at bottom nothing other than this split, the consequence of which is his utter inability to remain in any one place," (Badiou, 2010, p. 93) meaning the world of Elisabeth or Venus. By virtue of this existential dilemma being an inner phenomenon, it justifies the premise that Tannhäuser cannot be redeemed by any exterior force or agent, but must find the inner peace himself in order to transcend his suffering. Since he never manages to achieve this convincingly for himself at the end of the narrative, an affirmative Hegelian ending for Tannhäuser is denied. However, this is a semantic debate that Adorno might not hypothetically accept. Nevertheless, Badiou's interpretation bears merit when considering the degrading extent of Tannhäuser's character and his inability to achieve salvation in the method he had faith in. His faith was shattered; he had given up; and he looked for peace in the Venusberg, which he did not receive either at the end. If he was denied everything he wanted, up to and including the very end, how then can his situation plausibly be seen as being resolved? In a sentiment reflecting Badiou's notion of the non-dialectical split, Timothy McFarland writes that "Tannhäuser's 'Rome Narration' is not merely the demonstration of his despair, it is also the musical enactment of the disintegration of his personality. We may nevertheless wonder how much of him [Tannhäuser] there is left to save after the destruction wrought by the conflict that we have just seen and heard tearing him apart" (McFarland, 2011, p. 32).

In addition to this, Tannhäuser's final words before death are telling: "Blessed St. Elisabeth, pray for my soul!" (Wagner, 2011, p. 93).[23] He dies immediately after. From one point of view, these words read like a request more than a declaration. Tannhäuser, therefore, seemingly still believes that he requires salvation, which is only posthumously stated as having been granted even if Tannhäuser is still technically alive when the chorus of men and minstrels sing: "Happy the sinner, he who has won hope of salvation at her hand" (Wagner, 2011, p. 92).[24] It is not clear whether Tannhäuser heard this proclamation of his salvation. He likely only knows that Elisabeth is dead, and in her new capacity as a saint, he asks for absolution. This carries the implication that in his heart, Tannhäuser still feels guilt and is still not at peace. Even if it is conjectural, there is no outright catharsis with this theory, and certainly none with the theory of his inner non-dialectical split, which Badiou concurs is an "irresolvable subjective splitting" (Badiou, 2010, p. 95).

Lastly, and perhaps most simplistically, one could accept Tannhäuser's lack of resolution if one believes in the prophetic accuracy of Venus, who, before she expels Tannhäuser from the Venusberg at the start of the opera, tells him that "your prayers will not save you, and peace will escape you: come back to me when all hope has gone" (Wagner, 2011, p. 67).[25] This is essentially exactly how Tannhäuser's fate has transpired, which makes a further compelling argument for his lack of a cathartic ending.

Following a discussion of the *Tannhäuser* libretto, it is helpful to include a brief symbolic overview of the music of the opera's overture, as Wagner described it in his 1853 program note, "Overture to 'Tannhäuser.'" In this short prose work, Wagner describes in detail the solemn opening that features the Pilgrims' Chant motif, which dissipates with encroaching nightfall, and leads into the seductive music of the Venusberg. Tannhäuser is drawn deeper into the otherworldly realm of sexual hedonism, solidifying the corruption of his virtue. However, Wagner explains, "when the sun ascends at last in splendor, and the Pilgrims' Chant proclaims in ecstasy to all the world, to all that lives and moves thereon, salvation won, this wave itself swells out the tidings of sublimest joy. So wells and leaps each pulse of life in

chorus of redemption" (Wagner 1995, p. 231). This programmatic scenario for the overture[26] lays out the path of the opera's conflict and dialectical resolution. The music's diatonic consonance at the start and end depicts the virtue of the pilgrims, which is juxtaposed with the chromatic dissonance of the Venusberg. The orchestration of the Pilgrims' Chant is built around wind and string textures that include triplet figurations that are overall less contrapuntal and more uniform to suggest a cohesion of intent (Wagner, 1984, p. 5). The Venusberg music of the Bacchanal[27], conversely, is more exotic and chaotic, using brass and particularly percussion amidst frenzied passages of chromatic virtuosity that underscores the intensity of sexual indulgence. The full potential of the orchestra and louder dynamics also accentuate this scene as a contrast to the preceding section (Wagner, 1984, p. 423–477). These thematic differences in the overture appear again at the end of the opera, confirming the resolution that the music prophesied in the overture. Nevertheless, while the music and Wagner's prose note signify an overarching catharsis, Tannhäuser's own fate is more open to interpretation when we consider the significance of his non-dialectical split and inability to find redemption from within, as evidenced separately in the libretto. It is at this juncture that the limits of Badiou's recuperative reading become fully apparent. While Badiou isolates moments of unresolved suffering within Wagner, Berg's *Wozzeck* will demonstrate that negative dialectics achieves its most rigorous operatic realization only when the possibility of reconciliation is structurally foreclosed rather than ambiguously deferred. Following these points in Wagner's opera, we now turn to an unequivocal representation of negative dialectics in Berg's *Wozzeck*.

The irredeemable hopelessness of Wozzeck

Although his book is about Wagner, Badiou makes a few important mentions of Berg. In particular reference to suffering, he states his belief that Wagner's only true operatic successor is Berg, noting their kinship in how they associate music and drama (Badiou, 2010, p. 90). This is an important admission, and it becomes relevant now to apply the theories that Badiou used in his interpretation of *Tannhäuser* to ascertain the same characteristics in *Wozzeck* to depict the extent to which Berg really is Wagner's heir in connection to the human drama as it reflects Adorno's negative dialectics. This section will lay out plausible arguments to justify Berg's inclusion in this discussion.

Briefly encapsulated, the story of *Wozzeck* tells the tragic account of a soldier driven to madness by poverty, humiliation, and betrayal. Franz Wozzeck is a low-ranking soldier struggling to support his common-law wife, Marie, and their toddler son. He endures constant abuse from his superiors—the Captain ridicules him, and the Doctor subjects him to dehumanizing experiments. Marie, feeling trapped, begins an affair with a Drum Major. Wozzeck discovers the betrayal and, tormented by jealousy and psychological deterioration, murders Marie by a pond. He later drowns while trying to hide the murder weapon: a knife. In the final scene, their child plays innocently, unaware of his parents' fates, as other children cruelly inform him of his mother's death.

One of the central elements of Tannhäuser's character is his persistent wandering and feeling of placelessness. As such, Tannhäuser is always on the move (much like Wagner was), and so is Wozzeck. The latter's wandering is characterized by the thematic point of the Captain always telling him to go slowly, which Wozzeck never obeys, and is constantly rushing in and out of situations. This theme also connects to the Captain's warped sense of morality and is the first example of the social stigma of moral deviancy that Wozzeck is constantly accused of. This is reflected in the Captain's text when he says: "Wozzeck, you always look so rushed! A worthy man takes his time, a worthy man with a conscience that's undefiled does all things slowly" (Berg, 1952, p. 1).[28] The Captain continues to shame Wozzeck: "…you have no moral sense. You have a child which is not blessed by the clergy" (Berg, 1952).[29] This exchange triggers Wozzeck's reply, which is another central theme in the opera and expresses the root of his suffering. He states (speaking of himself): "Poor people like us…people like us are always unfortunate…in this world and in any other world" (Berg, 1952, p. 2).[30] This is a powerful statement that has metaphysical implications, since Wozzeck is aware that salvation will be denied to him in the empirical world in which he lives and in any other realm that he may exist in. His comment foreshadows his own unresolved ending, which further conforms to the desired tenets of negative dialectics.

The fourth scene of Act I features Wozzeck and the sadistic Doctor, who presumes to exacerbate Wozzeck's suffering and social stigma much like the Captain previously did. Wozzeck desperately and

incoherently tries to explain the extent of his despair: "…when nature has vanished…and the world's so dark, so dark that you have to grope round it with your hands…searchingly…what is there to cling to?" (Berg, 1952, p. 6).[31] The Doctor neither sympathizes nor understands the underlying meaning of Wozzeck's expression, and for that reason says: "Wozzeck, your mind is wandering…such an excellent aberration…"(Berg, 1952).[32] This exchange and accusation speaks to Wozzeck's worsening insanity and social persecution as instilling a mental wandering that is causing him to lose touch with reality and be charged with deviancy by his superiors.

Wozzeck's sufferings ensue when he laments over his infant son's shared fate, saying: "All our days spent endlessly toiling…even sweat in sleep…poor, wretched people!" (Berg, 1952, p. 8).[33] He soon rushes off, unable to remain there, as if his wandering could somehow afford him peace from reality, which it naturally cannot. In the next scene, Wozzeck is now confronted by both the Captain and Doctor, who emotionally torture him by implying that his common-law wife, Marie, is an adulteress, where the Doctor sarcastically asks Wozzeck if he has a faithful wife. They continue to ridicule Wozzeck and his obliviousness, to which Wozzeck at last, in full despair, utters: "One might in desperation end all by hanging" (Berg, 1952, p. 11),[34] after which he rushes off again. Although the societies in *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* stigmatize their title characters somewhat differently, the issue of dogmatic non-conformity is equally condemnable, with an overlap of chastity that vilifies all expressions of sexual love that are inherent within the operas. However, although Tannhäuser is stigmatized for shaming Elisabeth with his admissions of sexual indulgence, Wozzeck is the one who is further stigmatized for Marie's infidelities in order to emasculate him. The difference here is that Tannhäuser's society is overzealous in their doctrines, while Wozzeck's society is simply cruel and ironically immoral. What is presented as normative values between both operas contributes to the ultimate correspondence to negative dialectics: Wagner offers a path for redemption, even if that path and ultimate attainment are dubious. Berg, conversely—and in full conceptual compliance with Adorno's theory—never offers so much as a hint that this would be possible for his protagonist, despite instilling the desire in him to find it, even if he (Wozzeck) knows he will not. Although *Wozzeck* predates the Holocaust, its Expressionistic distortion and hopeless outcomes retroactively parallel the values of artistic expression that Adorno wanted to see reflected via his negative dialectics. The main essence is that Tannhäuser's society at its core wants Tannhäuser to find absolution and be virtuous, while Wozzeck's only seeks to dehumanize and subjugate him.

Wozzeck is now firmly on the path of murdering Marie after he justifies the taunts by catching Marie with the Drum Major. His suffering is enflamed at the sight of them and he says: "Everything twists and turns in lechery…man and woman and beast!" (Berg, 1952, p. 14).[35] In the second scene of Act III, Wozzeck murders Marie in a frenzied reaction to being denied his desires. Right before he thrusts a knife into her throat, he tells her: "No one, Marie! If not me, then no one!" (Berg, 1952, p. 18).[36] Later, in the moments leading up to his death, Wozzeck professes his version of a *Liebestod* as he sings to his dead partner: "Marie! Marie! What red string do you have around your neck? You earned the red collar, like the earrings, with your sin!" (Berg, 1952, p. 20).[37] This line of accusation is merged with Wozzeck's own irreconcilable guilt. He subsequently drowns as he calls himself a murderer and attempts to wash the blood off of himself in a pond. The opera does not end here, though. The true stamp of the negative dialectic reaches its climax in the final scene of the opera where the orphaned child of Wozzeck and Marie—the picture of innocence—is not spared his fate of suffering in a cruel, indifferent world, and wanders on the path to finding his mother's murdered corpse, and further still, in inheriting his father's social standing and accompanying suffering. The fatalistic circularity of the opera's ending is acknowledged by Berg, who wrote that the ending and beginning of the opera can be logically connected: "Although it (*Wozzeck*'s ending) clearly cadences on the final chord, it creates the feeling that it could keep going. In fact, it does keep going! The first measures of the opera might well link up harmonically with these final measures without further ado, thus closing the circle. Here is the end of the opera, then the beginning" (Berg, 2014, p. 232). Misha Donat also considered the final D minor orchestral interlude leading up the last scene of the opera to be a figurative overture that musically suggests that the opera will be repeated (Donat, 1970: 458). Therefore, the close with the orphaned son is actually the emergence of his story as a perpetual loop of irreconcilable doom and suffering. As such, this ending renders *Wozzeck* as the quintessential anti-Hegelian example, signifying its adherence to the notion of Adorno's negative dialectics.

In regard to Berg's musical construction of *Wozzeck*, the opera's architecture—fusing traditional forms such as character pieces, a suite, rhapsody, passacaglia, inventions, and symphonic movements (For a full diagram of the opera's formal design for each scene, see: Jarman, 1989, p. 42)—subverts the coherence those forms typically promise by channeling them into a collapsing dramaturgy. The use of atonality, developing variation, and motivic saturation resists thematic closure and tonal centering, creating a field of tension where nothing is ever resolved, only transformed or deformed.

Fragmentation in both orchestral and vocal lines, intensified by *Sprechgesang* and extreme registral and timbral pressure, enacts a musical logic of non-identity: themes refuse to stabilize and subjects are never whole. Berg's harmonic language, avoiding traditional resolution, keeps the listener suspended in contradiction—mirroring Adorno's insistence that truth emerges not through synthesis but by dwelling in the fractured, unresolved antagonisms of the real. Berg's music, therefore, refuses to offer reconciliation either musically or dramatically, embodying the very dialectical negativity that Adorno upholds. An example of these tenets can be found in the second scene of the third act where Wozzeck murders Marie. At the moment of her murder, Berg incorporates into the orchestration all of the motifs associated with Marie in rapid succession. This is an example of motivic saturation that is distorted and varied in a way that promotes a negation of identity rather than an actualization of self. Berg describes this passage and its musical themes thusly:

> When finally, the murder of Marie is committed to the sound of the fortissimo drum beat on 'B,' all the motives connected with her are sounded precipitately. They pass through her mind with lightning speed and in distorted form, like the image of life which may well pass through the mind at the moment of death: the Lullaby from Act I, scene 3; suggestions of the jewelry scene in Act II, bar 8–9; the Drum Major himself; the motive of Marie lamenting her wretched life, which finally fades away in the moment of her last breath with the motive of dreamy fifths—the motive of waiting in vain (Berg, 2014, p. 251–252).

Within the texture of the orchestration of Marie's moment of death, the moment she screams "help" and Wozzeck plunges the knife into her throat, her "waiting" motif is played in the figure of the oboes and trumpets in bar 103, while her "fear" motif plays in the same bar in the first and second violins, viola, and celli (Berg, 1955, p. 413). In the next bar alone: beats one and two reference the seduction scene of Act I in the horns and strings; the second and third beats in the piccolo isolate the lullaby theme; the third and fourth beats represent the jewelry theme of Act II; and the sixth beat plays the Drum Major's theme (Berg, 1955, p. 414). The following bar (105) isolates the theme of Marie lamenting her wretched life in the first half (Berg, 1955, p. 415), while the stacked intervals from the middle of bar 106 to the end of the first two beats in bar 107 represent Marie's "waiting in vain" theme in the flutes, horns, trumpets, timpani, harp, and first violin (Berg, 1955, p. 416). Berg then notates Wozzeck's "entrance/exit" theme in the bassoons before the curtain drops in the next bar (Berg, 1955). In just four and a half bars, Berg notated eight themes related to Marie, with the last one—waiting in vain—perfectly encapsulating Adorno's dialectical imperative of non-resolution both musically and narratively.

In addition to his close proximity with Berg's music, Adorno also held important convictions about Arnold Schoenberg, Berg's composition teacher and later friend. Schoenberg is an important factor in determining the compositional trajectory of *Wozzeck*. Berg's opera exemplifies an assimilation of Schoenberg's pre-serial innovations: it retains expressive dissonance without resolving it (a break from tonal affirmation), demonstrates constructive rigor through formal procedures like variation and passacaglia, and forgoes traditional narrative resolution, embracing an anti-affirmative, fragmentary dramaturgy. These elements mirror Schoenberg's own early atonal works, which sought structural coherence without tonal centers. A key work by Schoenberg that embodied these trace elements in *Wozzeck* is the monodrama *Erwartung* (1909), which Adorno describes as a work that

> unfolds the eternity of a single instant in four hundred measures; from the suddenly shifting images of *Die glüchliche Hand*,[38] which wipe out a life even before it has been established in time—from these came Berg's great opera *Wozzeck*. Indeed, exactly that: a great opera. It resembles *Erwartung* in its detail as well as in its conception as a presentation of anxiety; it resembles *Die glückliche Hand* in the insatiable piling-up of harmonic complexes, an allegory of the intricately layered psychological subject.

Adorno (2006, p. 30), Derrick Puffett concurs, arguing that Berg's vocal writing in *Wozzeck* mirrors that of *Erwartung* (Puffett, 1990, p. 201), and that *Wozzeck*'s act one, scene two is Berg's first significant tribute to *Erwartung* with that scene's use of *Sprechstimme* (Puffett, 1990, p. 208). In addition, the scene change

prior to and including the third scene of *Wozzeck*'s second act, duplicated the precise instrumentation of Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 1, which Berg indicates in his score: "Chamber orchestra (in the instrumentation of Arnold Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony) possibly separated from the rest of the orchestra" (Berg, 1955, p. 264). Moreover, these realizations align with Adorno's negative dialectics, where truth emerges not from resolution, but from the sustained tension of conflict. *Wozzeck*'s refusal to resolve musical and narrative tensions embodies Adorno's idea of autonomous art that resists ideological closure by remaining formally and expressively unresolved.

Returning to Badiou, the philosopher had previously mentioned what he perceived as Wagner's inclusion of autobiographical projections in *Tannhäuser* in the guise of the endless wanderer and Tannhäuser's entrancing musical skill. These associations between the composer and his work are compositional mainstays in virtually all of Berg's music, and *Wozzeck* is no exception. Indeed, Berg made it clear that he viewed his doomed protagonist as a version of himself. He expressed as much in a letter to his wife dated 7 August 1918, where the composer spoke of his emotional and experiential connection with his character as a result of Berg's experiences in World War I:

> There is a bit of me in his character, since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact humiliated.

Grun (1971, p. 229) in addition to this admission, Berg specifically changed some elements of Büchner's play (For texts that compares and contrasts Berg's libretto with Büchner's original play, see: Stein (1972); Perle (1967)) to make his opera libretto comply better with his own experiences in the Austrian military. This was reflected in the Doctor's dietary instructions to Wozzeck reflecting what Berg himself had to eat at the command of his own sadistic army doctor, as well as the sleeping soldiers in the barracks of the fifth scene of Act II, which was also reminiscent of Berg's life in his own barracks (Jarman, 1989, p. 66). From these accounts, it becomes clear that Berg's experiences serving in World War I deeply informed *Wozzeck* by shaping the opera's depiction of psychological disintegration, brutality, and dehumanization. The extended tonality of the music's harmonic language, coupled with the militaristic rhythms, and social hierarchies that marginalized Wozzeck at every turn, all conflate into a type of narrative trauma that mirrored Berg's own encounters with oppressive authorities and existential despair.

After these comparisons of the libretti of *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* to pinpoint the extent to which they convey an essence of suffering as Badiou imagined it, the question now becomes how similar are the two operas in their respective endings as conduits of negative dialectics? Badiou cited Tannhäuser's non-dialectical split of character as the crux of his irredeemably, while Wozzeck did not have these polarizing dichotomies that constantly tore at his being. Indeed, the catalyst for Tannhäuser's sufferings were these opposites that he could never reconcile: sexual vs. chaste love; paganism vs. Christian doctrines; Venus vs. Elisabeth. Tannhäuser's wanderings did not allow him to fully accept any one side of his bisected character, and Wozzeck too suffered as he was incapable of coming to terms with empirical reality and the hopelessness that it will never change for him. It is clear that both characters suffered and did not experience any real fulfillment of their desires as a resolution for their suffering. Badiou does not believe that any implication for Tannhäuser can fix his non-dialectical split, even if the narrative attempts to suggest otherwise (which was itself disputed). A conclusion can be reached, therefore, that despite varying representations of pessimistic hopelessness, both *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* represent the ideals of negative dialectics because both wander and remain stuck in irredeemable sameness, which Badiou says in the case of Tannhäuser, results in him being "condemned to be nowhere" (Badiou, 2010, p. 95). The same is unequivocally true for Wozzeck.

In context of *Wozzeck*'s success as a stage work, and in connection with the present argument, Adorno had this to say:

> But such effectiveness would be unthinkable if Berg's constructive, musico-dramatic power were not joined with a spirit equating the human condition with suffering, a spirit that generally too easily falls victim to constructive considerations. This element in *Wozzeck* has acute contemporary relevance, for today music's right to exist hinges upon its success in giving definition to new characters.

Adorno (1994, p. 6) in other words, the suffering that *Wozzeck* espouses is congruous with the post-Auschwitz expressive landscape that negative dialectics aim to embody. Adorno's personal

experiences with Berg are crucial in deciphering the composer's moral and personal associations with his opera, particularly when Adorno uses imagery to describe Berg and *Wozzeck* that mirrors the ethos of his negative dialectics.

In addition to his determination of suffering in *Wozzeck*, Adorno also writes that "Berg's undiluted goodness is synonymous with a deep longing for happiness, one that perhaps knows itself to be always in vain yet remains entirely undeflected" (Adorno, 1994, p. 17). Once again, the central notion of waiting in vain reemerges in context of Berg's capacity to retroactively reflect negative dialectics, the tenets of which, it may be argued, Adorno had formulated with Berg and his work in mind (For a study on Berg's association with and influence on trends in Adorno's philosophy, see Rich (2016)). Adorno barely discusses music (Two additional sources that analyze Adorno's texts on music are: Paddison (1993); Paddison (2004)) in *Negative Dialectics*, but he crucially mentions Berg and waiting in the same breath at the end of his book when he writes: "in *Wozzeck*, Alban Berg gave the highest rank to bars that express idle waiting as music alone can express it. Idle waiting does not guarantee what we expect; it reflects the condition measured by its denial. We despair of what is, and our despair spreads to the transcendental ideas that used to call a halt to despair" (Adorno, 1973, p. 375). In this sense, *Wozzeck* promotes a form of waiting in vain that is associated with despair, which in turn, is perpetual.

As far as Wagner was concerned, Adorno's largely-polemical writings on that composer are well known, where the philosopher also engaged in juxtaposing Wagner with Berg to highlight deficiencies in the former and evolutionary advancements in the latter. However, these differences, perhaps ironically, actually serve to associate Wagner and Berg more compellingly. For example, the circularity of *Wozzeck* as a symbol of the narrative repeat that is meant to indefinitely perpetuate the suffering of Wozzeck and his successors, functions as a return to nothingness, as the starting point and ending point are the same. In relation to this, Adorno writes: "the eternity of Wagnerian music, like that of the poem of the Ring, is one which proclaims that nothing has happened" (Adorno, 2005, p. 30). In further accordance with Bergian time, Adorno says of Wagner's music that it "acts as if time had no end, but its effect is merely to negate the hours it fills by leading them back to their starting-point" (Adorno, 2005, p. 32). This passage could easily be construed as a description of *Wozzeck*. Adorno also characterizes Wagner's sound as "negating the flow of time;" (Adorno, 2005) "canceling time;" (Adorno, 2005, p. 50) and making "time seem transfixed in space" (Adorno, 2005, p. 52). These are all expressions that acutely correspond to Berg's temporal designs as well in *Wozzeck*. Lastly, Adorno argues that for Wagner, "in no passage does the sound go beyond itself temporally; instead, it is dissipated in space. In Wagner, the fundamental metaphysical category was renunciation, the denial of the will to life" (Adorno, 2006, p. 140). The dissipation into space can be construed as a mirroring configuration for Berg, where the ending is one of nothingness. All of this is also reminiscent of Badiou's previous statement of *Tannhäuser* that his non-dialectical split condemns the character to be nowhere. The similarities ensue further when Badiou write that Wagner's music "is made to serve as the medium for the transition from one site, or world, to another. This truly creates a time of transition" (Badiou, 2010, p. 124). He adds: "Thus, as far as Tannhäuser's fate is concerned, we are in an in-between time, suspended between his departure and his return" (Badiou, 2010, p. 126). Adorno confirms both of these notions by writing that "Berg possesses a special technique for taking defined thematic shapes and, in the course of developing them, calling them back to nothingness. Wagner, who was the first to compose essentially chromatically, defined composition as the art of transition" (Adorno, 1994, p. 3). Elsewhere, Adorno writes of Berg: "Probably the underlying reason for his aversion to traditional lyricism was that he resisted finite, self-sufficient form altogether. His music is all transition" (Adorno, 1994, p. 24).

Additionally, in his essay "On the Characteristics of 'Wozzeck,'" Adorno expresses one way in which he positively corresponds Berg with Wagner. The philosopher notes how both composers require their operatic music to fully mirror the character of the stage drama, which renders their music jointly symphonic. *Wozzeck* was particularly suited to this because the second act is formally a symphony, which Adorno equates to Wagner. Both composers, Adorno argues, merge the music with the dramatic impetus in a way that heightens their expressive potential while avoiding tedium (Adorno, 2011, p. 39).

Adorno's views serve to illustrate how notions of circularity, nothingness, reversing time, and denying linear flows of time, all contribute to a destabilizing effect that Wagner and Berg share, which can, in turn, be viewed as their shared symbolic realization of negative dialectics that are derived from certain

logical deductions. It is true that *Wozzeck* possesses an explicit darkness that *Tannhäuser* masks better due to the jubilant ending of the opera. Yet, *Tannhäuser*'s ending has been argued as being different from Tannhäuser's personal ending, and this is the key conclusion that renders Wagner's opera—through Badiou's conceptual foundation—as indicative of negative dialectics. Or, from another perspective, yields a view of *Tannhäuser* that is dialectically less Hegelian than the endings of Wagner's other works.

Interestingly, Adorno included a pithy and representational birthday greeting to Berg on the occasion of the composer's 50th and final birthday in a letter dating 6 February 1935 (three days before Berg's actual birthday), which reads:

> my wish that you retain your primordial capacity for suffering forever and at all times, this capacity that spawned *Wozzeck* and, I am sure, now also *Lulu*—this wish is joined with another, namely that this ability, which can find enough nourishment for a whole life in but one day, should bring as much happiness as one human life can hold; indeed such a surfeit of happiness as should be necessary for this capacity for suffering to bear life at all.

Lonitz (2005, p. 207) this passage reflects the ethos of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* in a way that should not be interpreted literally as a hope of suffering in and of itself, but rather as a reflection of Berg's ability, as Adorno observed, to turn the inherent pessimisms of reality into allegorical musical abstractions, as Adorno believed he did in *Wozzeck* and will also likely accomplish in his second opera *Lulu*, and to paradoxically bear the suffering of life by heroically embracing that experience. The recognition of suffering as a relevant theme of life in that era bears retroactive symmetry with what Adorno would later ascribe to this theme in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Adorno's symbolic wish of suffering to Berg derives its figurative roots even earlier from the philosopher's 1929 article, "The Opera *Wozzeck*." In this text, Adorno writes how "the suffering of the oppressed human being has no more been assuaged by the class struggle, up to now, than art that takes this suffering as its subject is lost. From such a contradiction springs the music of *Wozzeck*…Music and the world meet in the power of suffering, and the music salvages a suffering that may have been intended in *Wozzeck*'s words but that the verbal drama no longer supports" (Adorno, 2002, p. 619). The focal association of suffering and *Wozzeck*'s authentic representation of it, once again speaks retroactively to the tenets of negative dialectics and the necessity of expressing humanistic truths through art. This fundamental conviction of Berg's opera would become the crux for Adorno of what art needed to consist of after Auschwitz, and to stand contrary to Hegelian dialectics. In this regard, *Wozzeck* can be seen as a prototype and a timeless mirror to Adorno's socio-cultural values, as he spent decades thereafter, continuously writing of the opera's applicability to the orders of modern reality. It is hardly surprising, then, that the career culmination of *Negative Dialectics* would recognize its conceptual ideal in *Wozzeck* simply because the opera has always been just that, and the world has not evolved to where a different or newer truth is required. Hypothetically, Badiou could easily admire this shared pursuit of humanistic truth, to which he too has devoted his career to determining and relating to the realities of life as he sees them.

Berg's personal embodiment of negative dialectics

As a dialectical theory, one could argue that if Adorno wanted his perspective to reflect reality and truth, it must become a conviction akin to an individual's personality trait. Negative dialectics is, after all, a staple of Adorno's larger critical theory. The most basic summary of Adorno's focus within critical theory is his view that after the Second World War, societies were reduced to repressed masses of capitalist consumers. The values of this new reality induced a passivity in people that removed their ability to resist oppressive implementations of this mass conformity to industrialized culture. Therefore, it can logically stand to reason that Adorno saw models of his idealized perspective inherent in certain individuals to conclude that it is an attainable ideological attribute. Following this course of logic, if *Wozzeck* is viewed as the quintessential artwork of negative dialectics, and if Adorno often drew parallels between Berg the person and his music, it can therefore be plausible to consider Berg as the humanistic proponent of negative dialectics. Indeed, Adorno wrote that "even in its overall appearance Berg's music, at once immoderate and frail, is in his own image" (Adorno, 1994, p. 15). Elsewhere, he writes: "the

expansive gestures in Berg's music reaches out in search of an unselfconscious happiness that refuses to conform to reality" (Adorno, 1999, p. 72). Moreover, Berg's music, and particularly the operas, "call to mind a nature that has been oppressed and degraded by the taboos of culture…(they have) a strong admixture of nostalgic skepticism and irony and are full of the profound knowledge that there is no hope other than that contained in the gesture of bidding farewell to the world and its goods…This is the riddle of Berg's music. We could scarcely describe it more simply or accurately than by saying that it resembled him" (Adorno, 1999, p. 72, 73, 76).

Adorno continues by bringing *Wozzeck* into the fold more explicitly:

> In Berg's case, selflessness was no metaphor. Presumably the reason for this was his relationship to death, the absence of bravado, and attitude of 'let it be.' The *gestus* of *Wozzeck* expresses this…and, in the large orchestral interlude preceding the last scene, steps before the curtain of the musical theater: 'the poet speaks.'

Adorno (1994, p. 17) with this passage, Adorno is echoing Berg's own admission of self-representation in this orchestral interlude, for which Berg writes in his lecture on *Wozzeck* that the final interlude, following Wozzeck's death, acts "as a confession by the composer, who has stepped outside of the theatrical action; indeed, as an appeal to the audience, inasmuch as it represents mankind" (Berg, 2014, p. 258). From this, it becomes evident how much, like Adorno after him, Berg viewed *Wozzeck* as a paradigm of humanity in the bleakest and most oppressed sense. Furthermore, it was previously mentioned that Adorno observed the "waiting in vain" phenomenon in *Wozzeck*, which he equates with Berg's "deep longing for happiness, one that perhaps knows itself to be always in vain yet remains entirely undeflected" (Adorno, 1994, p. 27). Later in the same passage, Adorno concludes that "the specifically melancholy tone in his music is the obverse of the longing for happiness, a disillusionment and a lament at the world not satisfying the utopian expectations of his natural temperament" (Adorno, 1994, p. 27). Ultimately, what is negative dialectics but a disillusionment of utopian expectations, which Hegelian affirmation does not recognize as modern truth? Adorno clearly reveres Berg's pessimistic outlook with the composer's detached resignation towards life, waiting in vain, and a general sense of disappointment with the world, as fundamental characteristics that fueled the philosopher's path towards an anti-Hegelian dialectic, which found its muse in the personal convictions and music of Alban Berg.

One can further argue that it was the same disillusionment of utopian expectations that led to Tannhäuser's non-dialectical split, and to Badiou's belief that it is an irredeemable fact for Tannhäuser. Berg's world view is therefore evident in Tannhäuser's reality (not to mention Wozzeck's), where the roots of negative dialectics stem from, which Adorno developed into a new philosophy of the existential truth of life in the world in which we live, in the aftermath of great and chaotic suffering. Adorno encapsulates this bleakness poetically by stating that "the music comes close to the chaos simmering at the core of Berg's nature" (Adorno, 1994, p. 18).

Conclusion

While Badiou and Adorno are both dialecticians, their philosophies differed regarding affirmative versus negative dialectical avenues.[39] In *Five Lessons on Wagner*, Badiou took Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics and combined it with Adorno's other polemics against Wagner to depict how Adorno did not view Wagner's music as a representation of negative dialectics. While acknowledging the valid points that Adorno presented, Badiou nevertheless presented a brief counterargument in the form of his characterization of Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* as a plausible refutation of Hegelian dialectics. In addition, Badiou also cited Berg's opera *Wozzeck* as the greatest post-Wagnerian example of operatic suffering. From this initial framework, the present study has aimed to compare these two operas using their libretti to determine their association, and particularly their endings, in furtherance of their dual reflection of negative dialectics. Themes of suffering, wandering, a denial of desire, and the social stigma of moral deviancy are isolated for their perpetuation of negative ideals that conform with Adorno's pessimistic worldview, as well as autobiographical projections in the operas by both composers to unify their shared values even further.

By placing *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* in critical dialogue, this article's interpretive position reveals how both operas enact a form of negative dialectics that resists resolution and narrative closure. This

comparative lens illustrates operatic aesthetics as a space where negation itself becomes form, foregrounding the radical modernity latent even in Wagner from this perspective. Crucially, the analysis also considers how opera responds to historical catastrophe—most notably World War I in the case of *Wozzeck*—not through direct representation, but through fractured form and tonal disintegration, revealing how aesthetic rupture carries the trace of historical trauma. Ultimately, the analysis advances a theory of opera as a philosophical medium where the failure to reconcile becomes a method of critique.

In doing so, it contributes to Adorno studies by reinterpreting negative dialectics not simply as a critical tool, but as an operatic mode of articulation; and it enriches opera scholarship by showing how works in the genre can represent philosophical resistance through musical structure and traumatic allegory.

The analysis of the *Tannhäuser* libretto showed that Tannhäuser was never able to gain the sought-after absolution, and that as a result, his psyche shattered under duress of extreme suffering from which he never recovered, as exemplified by his fervent desire to return to the Venusberg. Badiou posited that this was due to Tannhäuser's irreversible non-dialectical split, which, furthermore, could not be redeemed by Elisabeth's sacrifice because it was an inner turmoil that only Tannhäuser could reconcile for himself. As such, the true moral ending of the opera is shrouded in non-resolution, negating Hegel's dialectical imperative. This interpretation also mirrors Venus's damning prophecy at the start of the opera that essentially came to pass.

Correspondingly, the libretto of *Wozzeck*, which conforms much more explicitly to Adorno's dialectical tenets, also showed how the opera's end is steeped in non-resolution due to the circular structure of the narrative that functions as an endless perpetuation of suffering that is hereditarily passed from Wozzeck to his son. This feature illustrates how Wozzeck is hopelessly rooted in unchanging sameness, which Badiou also perceived for Tannhäuser, where both are trapped in their constructs of suffering without the possibility of salvation, thereby fulfilling the fundamental principle of negative dialectics.

Wozzeck is associated less with Badiou beyond the few cursory remarks that the philosopher made about the opera in his Wagner book. So why was this opera so central in juxtaposing with Wagner? Berg's work was included to take Badiou's thoughts and to use themes from Badiou's analysis of *Tannhäuser* to ally *Wozzeck* more directly with Adorno through a parallel investigation of overlapping concepts. Adorno positions Berg's opera in *Negative Dialectics* as an archetypal representation of the philosophy in his book, which is further suggested from separate readings of Berg's prose where the composer discusses the circular and repetitive feature of the opera's musical and narrative construction. This design of the opera's ending, with its lack of a positive resolution, echoes Douglas Jarman's bleak conception of a doomed, predestined repetition when he describes Berg's presentation of his protagonist as the composer's

> "view of man as a helpless creature unable to alter his preordained fate and unable to break out of the tragic and absurd dance of death within which he is trapped—a fatalistic and deeply pessimistic view of life that underlies all Berg's mature compositions."

Jarman (1979, p. 241) this cynical sentiment underscores nihilistic attitudes that resemble Adorno's larger views on Berg, when he writes how when "immersing oneself in Berg's music one feels at times as though Berg's voice were speaking in a tone combining gentleness, nihilism, and intimate trust to the point of utter enervation: 'Oh well, in the end, it's all really nothing.' (It) proves at heart to be simply a means of emphasizing the idea that all is nothing through the contrast inherent in erecting an elaborate musical structure that springs from nothingness and trickles away into nothingness" (Adorno, 1994, p. 2). A little later, Adorno adds: "Berg possesses a special technique for taking defined thematic shapes and, in the course of developing them, calling them back into nothingness" (Adorno, 1994, p. 3). From these reflections, as well as Jelica Sumic's belief that "it is no exaggeration to say that Adorno's negative dialectics, a proper philosophy of dissonance, is almost exclusively shaped by his experience of contemporary music" (Sumic, 2020, p. 181), it becomes clear how intrinsically symbiotic negative dialectics are with Berg's aesthetic idiom and its recognizable features in *Wozzeck*. Adorno and Berg, therefore, present an ideological symmetry that renders *Wozzeck* as the quintessential dialectical depiction of the binding philosophy presented here that conflates *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* as kindred entities from this perspective.

Along these lines, Adorno's comprehensive faith in *Wozzeck* is mirrored by the plausible suggestion that Berg himself acted as a moral model of negative dialectics as a man who constantly waited in vain and expressed his innate disillusionment with the world in his music. This prompted Adorno to complement Berg directly for his "primordial capacity for suffering," which in this context, Adorno conveyed as a virtuous characteristic that reflects the truth of existence as Adorno saw it and Berg lived it. The philosopher's extensive prose on Berg repeatedly confirmed these convictions within Berg's personality and the composer's insertions of his chaotic being into his compositions, and particularly into *Wozzeck*. Such a realization evolves the aesthetics of negative dialectics that are evident in the ending of *Tannhäuser*, by elevating the theory to an embodied trait when viewed through the prism of Berg's psyche and Adorno's idealization of his mentor and friend's existential image.

We must finally ask ourselves what lessons can be learned from the two philosophers and the two composers that are the focus of this article. Badiou stated earlier that he subscribes to affirmative dialectics, which did not hinder him from envisioning an alliance between *Tannhäuser* and negative dialectics. Yet, it would seem that as a general humanistic outlook, Badiou would not endorse Adorno's theory as an arbiter of social truths. However, it might appear more accurate to maintain a malleable perspective towards dialectics, where we view Hegel's and Adorno's models as historical dialectics of a specific time rather than of timeless applicability. The dialectical pessimism that Adorno inherited from Berg's personal example has a meaning wherever chaos and suffering are evident, but is this really the only truth of existence? Badiou would argue against it, whereby an ideological compromise may be the simplest and most effective recourse against extremist views of life being only in black and white. A neutral dialectics of sorts may just be the sought-after middle ground that reflects a cautious awareness that recognizes the mutual potential for both happiness and suffering, rather than always anticipating one over the other as Hegel and Adorno do. Nevertheless, by interpreting *Tannhäuser* and *Wozzeck* as representational of a more pessimistic outlook regarding their unresolved endings, the operas demonstrate their adaptability to a philosophy that is in and of itself important due to its claim of realism, even if that chosen reality is, in hindsight, less relevant today than when it was first conceived. Such a realization pushes the theory of negative dialectics more into the realm of history and historical study than an idealistic mantra that we should all strive to live by. Berg did so, but then again, perhaps he needed to in order to composer a work such as *Wozzeck*, and Adorno needed to intimately know the man who composed said work in order to devise an existential theory around it.

Notes

1. For a compelling study that isolates Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics and also expands it into the realm of critical theory via critical rationality, see: O'Connor (2005).
2. There is a wealth of secondary source material analyzing various aspects of Badiou's book on Wagner. One engaging collection of articles was published in *The Opera Quarterly* 29 nos. 3–4 (summer–autumn 2013). These are: Smith (n.d); Gallope (n.d); Kane (n.d); Waltham-Smith(n.d); Reinhard (n.d). These articles problematize Badiou's positions using semantic arguments as to why Badiou may reduce and make "generic" some of his claims through his polemical refutations of Wagner's most critical opponents historically. But no insights are made beyond brief mentions of Badiou's ideas regarding suffering and *Tannhäuser*, nor is there any mention of Berg as Wagner's heir.
3. Wagner was known for writing his own libretti, and Berg is also considered as his own librettist to the extent that he freely adapted the plays he set to music and adjusted the text at will to reflect personal associations. The two analyzed libretti, therefore, must be viewed as entirely legitimate representations of both composers' authorship and artistic inclinations.
4. For a study that contextualizes the main criticisms of Hegel's dialectics, including Adorno's position with negative dialectics, where the author also presents his own disagreements with Adorno's interpretations of Hegel, see: Rosen (1982).
5. Stone unpacks this statement in the rest of her chapter by elaborating on this evolution of dialectical thought from Kant to Adorno by way of Hegel.
6. For a source that analyzes Adorno's pursuit of truth in *Negative Dialectics*, see: O'Connor (2020), 519–529.
7. For another study that isolates Badiou's theory of materialist dialectics, see: Karlsen (2014).
8. For a comprehensive survey of Wagner's most important associations with philosophy, as well as the most pervasive philosophical symbolisms in his ten canonical operas and music dramas, see: Magee (2001).

9. "Verlange nach des Waldes Lüften." Although I acknowledge that this translation of the libretto is not a verbatim transcription, it is rendered into idiomatic and more-symbolically representational English than previous translations that can read as more linguistically cumbersome.
10. "Dein übergrosser Reiz ist's, den ich fliehe!".
11. "Bei dir kann ich nur Sklave werden.".
12. "Zieh hin, Betörter! Suche dein Heil, suche dein Heil—und find es nie!".
13. "Hin zum Tod den ich suche, zum Tode drängt es mich!".
14. "Mir frommet kein Verweilen, und nimmer kann ich rastend stehn. Mein Weg heisst mich nur vorwärts eilen, und nimmer darf ich rückwärts sehn…Fort! Fort von hier!"
15. "…dem verderbenvollen Zwiespalt wehrten.".
16. "Der Anmut und der holden Sitte, der Tugend und dem reinen Glauben…".
17. "Dein süsser Reiz ist Quelle alles Schönen, und jedes holde Wunder stammt von dir. Wer dich mit Glut in seinen Arm geschlossen, was Liebe ist, kennt der, nur der allein – Armsel'ge, die ihr Liebe nie genossen, zieht hin, zieht in den Berg der Venus ein!".
18. "Ha, der Verruchte! Fliehet ihn! Hört es! Er war im Venusberg! Sein frevler Mund tat das Bekenntnis schrecklich kund. Er hat der Hölle Lust geteilt.".
19. "Ach, lass mich nicht vergebens suchen – wie leicht fand ich doch einstens dich! Du hörst, dass mir die Menschen fluchen – nun, süsse Göttin, leite mich!".
20. "Und atmest du nicht holde Düfte? Hörst du nicht jubelnde Klänge? Das ist der Nymphen tanzende Menge!".
21. "Mein Heil, mein Heil hab ich verloren, nun sei der Hölle Lust erkoren!".
22. Badiou writes elsewhere that "I think the problem today is to find a way of reversing the classical dialectical knowledge inside itself so that the affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before the negation instead of after it. The question is not whether we need to struggle or oppose, but concerns more precisely the relation between negation and affirmation. So when I say that there is something non-dialectical…formally, it's the same idea." Badiou, "Affirmative Dialectics," 3. Therefore, while Badiou may be commenting on Tannhäuser's irreversible condition in *Five Lessons on Wagner*, his philosophy elsewhere attempts to break from this hopelessness with an alternative idea.
23. "Heilige Elisabeth, bitte für mich!".
24. "Selig der Sünder, dem sie geweint, dem sie des Himmels Heil erfleht!".
25. "Nie ist ruh' dir beschieden, nie findest du Frieden! Kehr' wieder mir suchst einst du dein Heil!".
26. Wagner's note was written in 1853, so his description conforms to the earlier Dresden version of the opera, which contains this programmatic scenario as he described.
27. Wagner included the balletic Bacchanal for the 1861 Paris production of *Tannhäuser*, which is the version of the opera used in this study. While this music does not wholly correlate to Wagner's earlier prose note, the essence of the ideas tied to the program in Wagner's note remain the same.
28. "Wozzeck, er sieht immer so verhetzt aus! Ein guter Mensch tut das nicht. Ein guter Mensch, der sein gutes Gewissen hat, tut alles langsam.".
29. "…Er hat keine Moral! Er hat ein Kind ohne des Segen der Kirche.".
30. "Wir arme Leut! Unsereins ist doch einmal unselig in dieser und der andern Welt!".
31. "…wenn die Natur aus ist, wenn die Welt so finster wird, dass man mit den Händen an ihr herumtappen muss, das man meint…an was soll man sich da halten?".
32. "Wozzeck, Er kommt ins Narrenhaus….eine köstliche aberratio…".
33. "Nichts als Arbeit unter die Sonne, sogar Schweiss im Schlaf. Wir arme Leut!".
34. "Man könnte Lust bekommen, sich aufzuhängen!".
35. "Alles wälzt sich in Unzucht übereinander: Mann und Weib, Mensch und Vieh!".
36. "Ich nicht, Marie! Und kein Andrer auch nicht!".
37. "Was hast Du für eine rote Schnur um den Hals? Hast Dir das rote Halsband verdient, wie die Ohrringlein, mit deiner Sünde!".
38. Schoenberg's "drama with music" in four continuous scenes, which he composed between 1910 and 1913 right after *Erwartung*.
39. As a text that further compares and contrasts Adorno and Badiou, see: Giannakakis (2022, 49–51). In this section, the author notes that the two philosophers both present theories of how to diverge from the status quo: for Adorno, this constitutes an inner adjustment of "self-critical reflection," while for Badiou, a decisive event is required that changes established norms, which in turn cause new avenues of thought that bring with them new ways of reflecting on those changes. However, differences between the philosophers abound as well, which, succinctly put, pertain to historical elements in their philosophies, and political considerations of convention and truth.

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Data availability statement

My research and the "data" I collect for it is purely historical and theoretical in nature. Therefore, I do not use human informants or any kind of data-collection methods that either requires permission of any sort, consent, or can be construed as being related to any questions regarding ethics. Every piece of information in my article can be shared with no restrictions, and there are no privacy or security concerns. As the author, I hereby agree to make the data, materials, and anything else in my article available to Cogent Arts & Humanities, Taylor and Francis, and any other governing body associated with my article's submission and possible publication.

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