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Imagining Compromised Creativity: Art and Fear in Shostakovich Bio-Fiction

Helga Schwalm

Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT
The life of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich features in several contemporary anglophone bio-fictions, both novels and film, raising the question of the larger implications of Shostakovich's life in art today. In my paper, I aim to address how such Shostakovich bio-fictions reinvent the composer's creative labour in the context of World War II, Stalinist and post-Stalinist politics. Shostakovich's life as artist and man appears torn between fear of persecution, social commitment, and the claim of individual, aesthetic autonomy tied to a controversial degree of political dissent. In Western eyes, the Soviet composer thus epitomizes the transnational figure of the twentieth-century artist – compromised, yet achieving an expression of his personal voice, creating an emphatically modern art that is bound to its times and yet ultimately eludes both the dictates of politics and mimesis.

KEYWORDS
Shostakovich; life writing; bio-fiction; Soviet music; Julian Barnes

While fear may be particularly symptomatic of our modern 'risk society', as Lars Svendsen claims in his *Philosophy of Fear* (2008), the literature of fear is perhaps as old as literature itself.[1] The affect of fear runs from ancient tragedy to gothic fiction, dystopia and genres of crime. Yet 'in times of war and social upheaval', Joyce Carole Oates states in her fine essay 'The Aesthetics of Fear', 'suicide is reported to be virtually unknown, for life, the merest shred of life, becomes infinitely precious. … In authentically fearful times, the aesthetic of fear is redundant'.[2]

The times of Dmitri Shostakovich were fearful indeed. Born in St Petersburg in 1906, he witnessed as a child the brutal repression of street riots by Czarist troops, lived through the Russian Revolution, the regime of Stalin, when '[f]ear gripped everyone',[3] and the Second World War including the siege of Leningrad. By the mid-30s, the young composer had achieved 'daring and indeed frightening publicity'.[4] At times, Stalin seemed to adopt the role of a personal antagonist, leaving Shostakovich's position dangling dangerously between approval and condemnation. The composer managed to tread a tightrope between 'formalism' and 'programme realism',[5] yet at some cost to himself as an artist. Famously, he survived Stalin's terror, living on until 1975, hailed by the state as the 'great composer of our time', a 'loyal son of the Communist Party' who 'devoted his entire life to the development of Soviet music',[6] and also much acclaimed in the West.

CONTACT Helga Schwalm helga.schwalm@rz.hu-berlin.de

His image as communist Soviet composer was toppled by the publication of *Testimony* in 1979, purportedly Shostakovich's memoirs 'as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov', smuggled out of the country and not published until after his death according to Shostakovich's wish.[7] The authenticity of this bestseller has been hotly contested and defended;[8] today, *Testimony* is considered thoroughly discredited.[9] The question of authorship aside, the underlying politics of the 'Shostakovich wars' are only too apparent: what is at stake is his cultural heritage: on the one side, there is Shostakovich, the 'People's Artist of the U.S.S.R.' and triple recipient of the Order of Lenin, the Shostakovich who was committed to Socialist Realism in music and who (infamously) denounced the formalism of Schönberg and Stravinsky; on the other side, there is the revisionist Shostakovich, whose music contained a secret code expressing resistance, a Shostakovich who, in fact, was a 'closet dissident'.[10]

Today, Shostakovich's music is present in concert halls more than ever, and he continues to capture the imagination. Numerous biographies as well as scholarly musicological monographs testify to his unabated significance.[11] Perhaps a more curious phenomenon is that the composer's entangled life features significantly in contemporary anglophone bio-works – both in book format and in film, and in various degrees of fictionality. As to Shostakovich fiction, apart from Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* (2016), there are also Sarah Quigley's *The Conductor* (2011) and William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central* (2005); among the less imaginative life writing, M. T. Anderson's *Symphony for the City of the Dead* (2017) for young adults is noteworthy. There are also a number of ambitious biopics – most notably Tony Palmer's *Testimony* (1988) and Oliver Becker and Katharina Bruner's *Dem kühlen Morgen entgegen* (2008).[12] In the field of contemporary English and American fiction, interest in the Soviet composer ties in with similar bio-fiction on art under Stalin,[13] and to some extent it resonates with more popular 'Stalin Lit'.[14] Speaking in general terms, the latter tends to weave together the terror that characterizes crime and espionage as a genre, with the particular setting of Soviet and Stalinist Russia, thus tapping into the fear of political terror. In any case, such anglophone fictions set in the Stalin era continue to engage in what Larry Wolff has labelled the 'Invention of Eastern Europe' by the West.[15]

With respect to novels about Shostakovich, the primary subject of this paper, evoking cold-war fear is certainly not their primary aesthetic purpose. They address the complex ambiguity of the life of a famous composer deeply entangled in twentieth-century history. As bio-fiction, they engage – almost by generic law, as it were – in entwining life and works by means of the fictive imagination. By undertaking to rewrite or reimagine the life of a real-life artist, whose work cannot be properly understood without its Soviet context, they offer what might be called a particular geopolitical twist to their reflections on how art and life are woven into one another as they fathom the artist's secret life and private musical self-expression as opposed to his public role as symphonic composer and supporter of socialist realism. Struggling with the forces of history, Shostakovich thus emerges as the epitome of a transnational figure of the twentieth-century artist – compromised,[16] yet achieving an expression of his personal voice, creating an emphatically modern art that is bound to its times, yet ultimately eludes both the dictates of politics and mimesis. On a simpler level, if we follow German acting chancellor Angela Merkel's reading of Julian Barnes, Shostakovich appears as an iconic figure representing

the threat to authenticity in the face of totalitarian political pressure (*Handelsblatt Global*, August 25, 2017). Fear is constitutive of Shostakovich's various Lives, which all circle around his private and public identities.

For Shostakovich fear was notoriously grounded in a very real threat. Twice did he fall into disfavour with the Stalinist regime, and with Stalin himself. The first time, in 1936, occurred over his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (first performed 1934), which, after running successfully until then, was attended by Stalin, disapproved of, and subsequently attacked heavily in two unsigned *Pravda* articles for its formalism and 'coarse naturalism'.[17] Entitled 'Muddle Instead of Music', the editorial ended with the ominous threat 'It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly' (*Pravda*, January 28, 1936). Shostakovich was branded 'an enemy of the people'; he had failed to fulfil the aesthetic norms of socialist realism as required for symphonic music in the 1930s.[18]

The tremendous success of his Fifth Symphony led to his rehabilitation as quasi-chief Soviet composer. His popularity inside and outside the U.S.S.R. peaked with his legendary Leningrad Symphony of 1942, composed and performed during the siege of the city, turning the starving orchestra, its conductor Karl Ilyich Eliasberg, and above all the composer himself (who by then had agreed to be evacuated) into heroes. This is the much-told tale of music joining the battle against fascism, transmitted into the world, and it amounts to a World War II version of the artist as hero, it seems. It is also the subject of Quigley's novel, which tells the story of Eliasberg's heroic effort to realise a performance under the conditions of the siege. Vollmann also devotes a section to this,[19] offering a daring perspective through his choice of loyal Soviet narrator.[20]

After the short reprieve during the war, a second fall from grace occurred in 1948, when Shostakovich was dismissed from the Leningrad and Moscow Conservatories, and the All-Union Congress of Soviet Composers again denounced his music as 'formalist', castigating its 'abstract language'.[21] Most of his works were banned, and like Sergei Prokofiev, he was forced into self-incrimination.[22] By all accounts, Shostakovich was left isolated, totally 'exposed in his surroundings',[23] terrified and in financial dire straits. Only after Stalin's death in 1953 did his public symphonic career recover. As the U.S.S.R.'s leading composer, he was, or felt, compelled to finally become a party member in 1960, and he never actively or publicly sided with dissident positions.

If the unresolved issue of Shostakovich's secret dissidence as claimed in *Testimony* has divided the biographers, there is yet a theme shared across the warring lines: fear. Fear is also at the heart of Julian Barnes's bestselling novel *The Noise of Time*, which I shall principally focus on. (Barnes is no newcomer to the biographical novel; previously, however, he has tended to give it a decidedly metafictional, postmodern twist by reflecting on the relationship between fiction and reality.)[24]

Narrated almost entirely in the mode of Free Indirect Discourse,[25] *The Noise of Time* opens with fragmented snippets of reflection encircling the composer's fear of political persecution:

> They always came for you in the middle of the night. And so, rather than be dragged from the apartment in pyjamas, or forced to dress in front of some contemptuously impassive NKVD man, he would go to be fully clothed, lying on top of the blankets, a small case already packed on the floor beside him. He barely slept, and lay there imagining the worst things a man could image.[26]

Incorporated into this scene are various fragmented recollections of his past pertaining to the well-known facts about this period of Shostakovich's life: Stalin's presence at the performance of his successful opera, hidden behind the curtain and unfortunately placed too close to the percussion and the brass,[27] Stalin leaving early, the *Pravda* editorial, the composer's hope for intervention on his behalf by Marshal Tukhachevsky, and his narrow escape from his second summons as his interrogator 'had himself fallen under suspicion. His interrogator interrogated. His arrester arrested'.[28] But, he is only too aware that the regime is zeroing in on him.

> And so he began his vigils by the lift. He was not unique in this. Others across the city did the same, wanting to spare those they loved the spectacle of their arrest. Each night he followed the same routine: he … took the small case from her hands, and closed the front door. Almost as if he was going off for the night shift. Which in a way he was. And then he stood and waited, thinking about the past, fearing for the future, smoking his way through the brief present. The case resting against his calf was there to reassure him, and to reassure others; a practical measure.[29]

Indeed, the fear of 'awaiting execution' was to 'torment' decades of Shostakovich's life if Volkov is to be believed.[30] Fear runs through the composer's biography as an underlying, generative pattern of auto- and hetero-identification, a ground figure that spells itself out in one's biography.[31] Fear is tied to the metonymic item of the suitcase, which serves not as a symbol of exile or migration (as so often in twentieth-century European literature), but as a frozen image of impending terror. The composer and his suitcase, waiting for his arrest,[32] this is the master scene of Shostakovich biographical narratives – see, for instance, Becker and Bruner's and Palmer's handling of the leitmotif.[33] Vollmann's novel also highlights the suitcase as emblematic prop;[34] yet his narrator, positioned close to Stalin's apparatus,[35] underscores the element of grotesque humour as he spins out the quasi-stills of fear into a dialogue between Shostakovich and his wife Nina:

> Whispering every night with Nina, he tried to determine what had offended *that bastard*. … Loneliness had penetrated through his egotism first. Next he began to feel the fear.…
>
> He tried to be funny. He said: This is only the first movement, Ninochka. In the finale they'll have to shoot me … [36]

The relentless media persecution after Stalin's disapproval of the opera,[37] translated into intense narrative, is taking its toll, leaving Shostakovich to 'dream … that men in high, shining boots came calling for him in the night time'.[38]

Fear is always present. When, in Barnes's version, Stalin's displeasure hits again in 1948/49, all Shostakovich 'knew was that *this* was the worst time'.[39] Shostakovich is pictured on his return journey from the New York Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace in 1949, an event frequently seen as moment of his greatest 'humiliation'[40] because Shostakovich, under pressure, had not had the courage not to denounce his semi-idol, Stravinsky.[41] According to *The Noise of Time*, this was a matter of 'no choice'.[42] The narrative strategy that is at work in the extended scene is symptomatic: In line with Volkov and some of Wilson's collected sources, Shostakovich is portrayed as a self-fashioned puppet of the Soviet regime: 'Anyone with an ounce of understanding would know he hadn't written the speeches he gave', such as when he 'patronisingly explained to Americans how the Soviet music system was superior to any other'.[43] The sense of

alienation is enhanced as he subsequently reads about his delegation's visit in a Soviet magazine: '"On the way home I thought much about this", he read of himself'.[44]

Barnes's choice of narrative mode (FID) offers a construction of the biographical subject in silent detachment from his official speech or writing; as Shostakovich outwardly endorses the Soviet system, he inwardly recoils from it – and from his own involvement. His self-division comes to a head in the novel when the composer finally joins the Party and later lends his voice or pen to the public slandering of Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov. Inwardly, he is ridden by shame and self-disgust over his betrayals.[45]

> They had promised to leave him alone. They never left him alone. … Nowadays, a late-night ring at the door meant not the NKVD or the KGB of the MVD, but a messenger scrupulously bringing him the text of an article he had written for the next morning's *Pravda*. An article he hadn't written, of course, but which required his signature. He would not even glance at it, merely scribble his initials. … Part of him hoped that no one would believe – no one could believe – that he actually agreed with what the letters said. But people did. Friends and fellow musicians refused to shake his hand, turned their backs on him. There were limits to irony; you cannot sign letters while holding your nose or crossing your fingers behind your back, trusting that others will guess you do not mean it. And so he had betrayed Chekhov, and signed denunciations. He had betrayed himself, and he had betrayed the good opinion others still held of him. He had lived too long.[46]

Barnes's composer as a Soviet puppet, hiding his opposition but inwardly recoiling from the public culturo-political role imposed upon him by the party apparatus, resonates with Volkov's portrait of Shostakovich as *yurodivy*, the traditional Russian court fool speaking in coded language:

> The *yurodivy* has the gift to see and hear what others know nothing about. But he tells the world about his insights in an intentionally paradoxical way, a code. He plays the fool, while actually being an individualist, who in his public role breaks the commonly held 'moral' laws of behaviour and flouts conventions. But he sets strict limitations, rules and taboos for himself.[47]

Rather than delve into any performances of such foolery, Barnes's narrative, however, foregrounds the moment of almost suicidal shame and political ventriloquism. A less Volkovian, more ambivalent assessment of Shostakovich's engagement with the party line is offered by Laurel Fay's scholarly biography. Just as an assessment of his condemnation of twentieth-century musical formalism may have to take into account his critical judgement of dodecaphony,[48] Fay considers his party membership in a more ambivalent light: Whilst the 'chronic fear, the terror that had warped his life' may have led to Shostakovich's 'capitulation', the political significance of his membership is deemphasised by Fay as he had never displayed much detachment from the party line and had 'to all appearances' already been a '"loyal son"' of the Communist Party, doing what was required of him. (This view is in line with Kurt Sanderling's explanation.[49]) Not only had he conceded his signature on many occasions, but since his Tenth Symphony he had 'devoted a disproportionally large portion of his music to the greater glory of Socialist Realism'. The inner turmoil over his party membership must, according to Fay, suggest that 'the demons Shostakovich wrestled with were his own, that he had crossed his own line in the sand'.[50]

The life writing on Shostakovich has sought to fathom the complexity of his struggle between the public symphonic (semi-)obedience that Fay diagnoses and the undercurrent of private pain, guilt, and perhaps even resistance in his music. The third part of Barnes's

novel also imagines Shostakovich's inner turmoil to a certain extent, yet the novel strangely eclipses the key site of this wrestle. The narrator offers the reader no sense of the more private dimension of the string quartets[51] (or chamber music for that matter)[52]; indeed, the novel fails to imagine, or chooses to blank the composer's musical/aesthetic struggle in general. Only at two points in the novel is his subject's perpetual walk on a tightrope tied into his musical aesthetics, suggesting a dimension of resistance. This concerns the final march in his Fifth Symphony.

The responses to the finale had varied enormously. The sighting of 'victorious fanfares' ('It finished with victorious fanfares whose "outspoken" nature could not be called into doubt')[53] was corroborated somewhat by Shostakovich's statement in 1938: 'I wanted to convey optimism asserting itself as a world outlook through a series of tragic conflicts in a great inner, mental struggle. … The finale resolves the tragedy and tension of the earlier movements on a joyous, optimistic note'.[54] Even the official side suspected subversion somewhere, though; the Stalinist composer Isaac Dunayevsky judged that the symphony's 'brilliant mastery' did not 'preclude the fact that it does not by any means display the healthy symptoms for the development of Soviet Symphonic Music'.[55] Symptoms could point either way, as Slavoj Žižek astutely observes;[56] in the case of the Fifth, the lack of positive symptoms of social optimism might indeed have been symptomatic of a double-language, with an under-cover 'true meaning' that Shostakovich (as represented by Volkov) subsequently purportedly claimed for this work:

> I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat … It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing'.[57]

Collating and rewriting biographical sources,[58] Barnes makes a similar case for his subject:

> The phrase also permitted those with asses' ears to hear in his symphony what they wanted to hear. They missed the screeching irony of the final movement, that mockery of triumph. They heard only triumph itself, some loyal endorsement of Soviet music … He had ended the symphony fortissimo and in the major. What if he had ended it pianissimo and in the minor? On such things might a life – might several lives – turn.[59]

In this respect, his hardly Volkovian biographer Laurel Fay similarly suggests a strategy of deliberate failure[60] by means of almost metronomic iteration[61] that suggests a 'mockery of triumph'. (Barnes incidentally replaces Volkov's iterative phrase with an explanation.)

Barnes, then, keeps in proximity to Volkov's vertical semiotics of music that sees a coded message of the *yurodivy* underneath. He imagines a public aesthetics with a private, encoded meaning hidden away, waiting to be understood by those among the public on the look-out for such an undercover message. The truth, then, is underneath, to be uncovered by the audience/reader/biographer, who are to engage not in a hermeneutics of suspicion (this would be left to the Stalinist spy) but in one of charity – unearthing the true, resistant musical meaning. Inspired by fear, it is covered by the compliance with the aesthetics of Soviet realism. But Shostakovich's internal monologue hastens to contradict this image of art as cover, or lie: '[Y]ou cannot lie in music'.[62] (Just how this would fit the earlier reading of the Fifth Symphony remains to be guessed.) Significantly, the very coda of the Fifth Symphony with its prevalent structural principle of iteration also features prominently in Semyon Aranovich's ambitious Soviet bio-film *Altovaya sonata*

(*Sonata for Viola*, 1981). The film, banned by the Soviet authorities after its completion,[63] pictures two performances of this very part of the Fifth in immediate succession, contrasting a majestic Mravinsky with Bernstein's very fast performance.[64] There is no obvious indication of a sense of irony; laconically, the narrator comments 'his music is reborn with every concert'.[65]

Irony as a marker of Shostakovich's secret dissent, whose meaning would be obvious to those inclined to hear, turns out to be a difficult matter. To follow Žižek again: if its meaning was transparent to so many, how could this remain '*absolutely opaque* to those in power, to the cultural and political *nomenclatura*'? Were they 'really so incredibly stupid that they did not get what hundreds and thousands of ordinary people got?' What if 'we should merely conclude that *one and the same listener* was able to move on both levels', the 'explicit, ideologically innocent texture and the underlying … message'?[66] The symphony's finale may be a case in point. It is at this moment of relentless repetition in major (echoed in Volkov's phrase cited above but not in Barnes's) that optimism clad in sheer formalism seems to collapse into itself, or tips over. Iteration as a principle of the poetic function – the projection of equivalence onto the syntagmatic axis generating auto-reflexivity according to Roman Jakobson[67] – seems to parade, as it were, the very formalist, self-reflexive nature of music (eclipsing any message); at the same time, the very relentlessness of repetition turns its 'poetic effect' into a kind of (musical) mimicry of terror as it appears not as an echo but as an unstoppable quasi-feedback, annihilating everything outside its own force, verging on musical nightmare.[68] Barnes's phrase 'mockery of triumph' articulates a vague sense of such impact, no more; in any case, it is the very inner distance that is 'constitutive of ideology' and thus makes Shostakovich, according to Žižek, a 'prototypical Soviet composer'.[69] Furthermore, the assumption of a 'closet dissident' contradicts 'the very essence of a dissident act', which 'is that it is *public*'.[70]

Žižek proceeds to discuss the 'true greatness of his late music', in particular his chamber music, which Barnes neglects although the Eighth String Quartet in particular is considered to epitomize the composer's private, individual voice: 'Ideologically flawed' and 'of no use to anybody' (Shostakovich in a letter to Glikman),[71] it is his self-proclaimed autobiographical[72] chamber piece, replete with 'pseudo-tragedy'[73] and self-quotations[74] – among them from the last scene of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, including the deportation of prisoners to Siberia. Above all, its leitmotif is the composer's musical signature or monogram (the transcription of his initials according to German notation): DSCH, which also features elsewhere in his compositions, prominently so in his Tenth Symphony, a key instance of where his public music, too, would also prove 'his best revenge'.[75] But in the Eighth Quartet, the key mode is one of sustained sadness.[76] Its markers are repetition and self-insistence;[77] repetition comes into play as a means of aesthetic resistance in a very special and personal way that is seen as his autobiographical mode: 'In the eighth and in the later quartets, the composer as it were weaves the fabric of his life through quotations of his own music and the music he loves'.[78]

The silence and pain as expressed in the most autobiographical of his quartets[79] stand in contrast to the external 'noise of time' that Barnes borrows for his title from Osip Mandelstam's memoirs.[80] Although the Eighth was composed at the time of Shostakovich's entry into the party, it plays a tiny role only in Barnes's novel, except in the following

fleeting remark: 'During his last years, he increasingly used the marking *morendo* in his string quartets: "dying away", "as if dying". It was how he marked his own life too'.[81]

This is an observation that marks the composer's place in the twentieth-century aesthetics of moving towards silence – it would even seem to place him in unexpected proximity to Samuel Beckett's later work, which epitomizes the struggle for ultimate silence. The novel does not follow this trait,[82] however, and neither does it engage in novelistic empathy to imagine Shostakovich's chamber music, or late music at all, for that matter – in spite of the chosen mode of narration that gives priority to subjective experience.[83] This reticence of *The Noise of Time* is in striking contrast to Vollmann's *Europe Central*. Written in a style that frequently verges on the grotesque echoing Shostakovich's early avant-garde musical aesthetics, it is a novel of enormous scope, in which Shostakovich is just one of several figures, historical and fictional, tied into the twentieth-century history of central Europe. The tragic events covered are the Stalinist show trials, Operation Barbarossa, and the Holocaust. In spite of its fifty pages or so of documentary notes, this self-proclaimed 'work of fiction' does not attempt to stay entirely true to historical fact but aims instead 'to write a series of parables about famous, infamous and anonymous European actors at moments of decision' and thus to do 'poetic justice' to both the novel's historical figures and 'to their historical situation'.[84] Among this crowded ensemble, the key 'actor' is Shostakovich, whose life is told with some degree of freedom (although clearly based on a meticulous study of the primary sources). The fictionalizing is most noticeable with regard to Shostakovich's love life.[85]

Significantly, Vollmann's narrator, a Soviet ideologue and yet a far more ambivalent authorial voice than Barnes's, discovers the presence of Shostakovich's terror, pain and sadness in his later symphonic work, too. In his characteristic uncertain narrative mode, rendering authorial discourse and FID undistinguishable, the narrator acknowledges that with his Eighth Symphony Shostakovich had first begun to articulate

> the various *danses macabres* which he could no longer prevent himself from hearing. Bones, murdered or merely perished, ought to stay silent. That's the law. But quick and shrill as a violin-screech, *they come back*, to the terror of all who stand guilty of living, and then they dance … He dreamed that Elena Konstantinovskaya was calling out to him. Her face was milky with fear. They were taking her away and she was screaming and then a bomb began to whistle down upon the Black Maria and she was screaming, screaming![86]

In Vollmann's world-history-encompassing version of Shostakovich, the private/public divide that is so often made with respect to his musical oeuvre is not entirely clear-cut as the demons seek entry into his very public symphonic music. Yet for Vollmann, too, Shostakovich's string quartets are of prime significance. For the passage cited continues, and concludes the chapter with a proleptic reference to his most autobiographical string quartet: 'In time, these hauntings within his ears would evolve into a terrifying Opus 110. For now, the music still had an object other than Death itself: he could blame the Germans'.[87]

Indeed, at the heart of the novel comprising the longest, 100-page chapter, is the Eighth String Quartet of Shostakovich (Opus 110), 'perfect in its horror'. 'Best listened to in a windowless room, better than best in an airless room – correctly speaking, a bunker sealed forever and enwrapped in tree-roots', it is 'the living corpse of music', with a 'cello saw[ing] out a tune as dry as the buzzing wasps with in a skull' – it is

indeed an almost Beckettian space of enclosure and death that Vollmann discovers in Opus 110. Its music is coming 'from within' – far away from 'the patriotic clinking of tanks under Leningrad's arches, as translated into my Seventh Symphony',[88] and far still from the external terror of the Eighth Symphony. In his Opus 110, the source of pain and tragedy is Shostakovich's inner self. 'It's *himself*, starved, choking and weeping in an airless room'.[89] It expresses the sum of his struggle, pain and humiliation, his shame and disgust at his musical compromises. (At an earlier point in the narrative, Vollmann's narrator projects a trajectory from the Lady *Macbeth of Mtsensk* to Opus 110, claiming that the latter marks the end of 'our naïve, self-satisfied Mitya's belief that he might both "create beauty *and* be useful"'.[90])

For *Europe Central,* the tragedy as well as the aesthetic freedom of the Soviet artist is encapsulated by Opus 110. The complex biographical and aesthetic texture of Shostakovich's chamber music comes into play to conjure up the musical voice of the private Shostakovich beneath, or beyond his compromised public role. For Vollmann, nowhere is his self more deeply entwined with his music than in his chamber music, in particular the string quartet as an 'extremely private genre'.[91] First of all, there is the string quartet's early biographical significance – a private string quartet rehearsing in the neighbouring flat, little Shostakovich listening through the wall at his family home, this is a much-quoted scene in his biographies. Apart from its frequent private practice – which by the time Shostakovich remembered it would have become almost extinct due to the extremely cramped living conditions – the chronological place of the string quartet within Shostakovich's oeuvre also suggests a special private meaning: it was during the period when the composer's favourable position was still precarious in spite of the success of the Fifth Symphony that he turned to writing his first string quartet. According to Wendy Lesser, 'it was, in fact, the "pure music" of the quartets that ultimately emerged from this forge of repression'.[92] In her biography of the composer, Lesser goes as far as to proclaim the quartets the 'key to Shostakovich's own preoccupations', a 'kind of "diary" that records "the story of his soul"', offering 'unparalleled access to the composer's inner life'.[93] Malcolm MacDonald similarly sees them as 'surrogates for the composer's personal voice', given the vocal quality of string instruments.[94] The novel *Europe Central* goes further: the string quartet's voice of pain and suffering is transformed – although, whether for the narrator/listener or the composer remains ambiguous – into a music that has moved beyond subjective expression: 'he's but the catalyst of a biochemical reaction which turns pain into music'.[95] No matter the self-assertion of the DSCH identified in Opus 110, Vollmann's vision, with the almost Beckettian aesthetics of death and dying, goes beyond a reading of Shostakovich as secret dissident.

Concluding his investigation of the paradox of secrecy and dissent, Slavoj Žižek, with great sensitivity, also acknowledges 'the true greatness of his music' in Shostakovich's string quartets that is 'occlude[d]' by the label of closet dissident:

> Even to a listener with minimal sensitivity, it is clear that his (deservedly famous) string quartets are not heroic statements defying the totalitarian regime, but a desperate comment on Shostakovich's own cowardice and opportunism: Shostakovich's artistic integrity lies in the fact that he fully articulated his inner turmoil, the mixture of despair, melancholic lethargy, explosions of impotent rage, even self-hatred, instead of himself as a closet hero.[96]

Such emphatically articulated twentieth-century melancholy as suggested by Žižek pervades Shostakovich life writing. Vollmann's *Europe Central* envisions its complex aesthetics in both the context of Shostakovich's life and the tragic history of central Europe in the twentieth century; Tony Palmer's film also conveys, next to its sense of relentless agitation, a strong, intense impression of sadness. The First Violin Concerto (1947–48; first performed 1955) is tuned into the sound and picture of Shostakovich's colleagues' clapping hands giving their approval to his condemnation as formalist in 1948 at the Composers' Congress – captured in the film by images of almost Kafkaesque quality: Shostakovich calling on the authorities, the concert advertisement of his Fifth being torn off the billboards, and finally a resigned Shostakovich returning to his family home.[97] (It is worth bearing in mind how much Shostakovich's career was linked to film.)

The film concludes on the slow, sad notes of the slow movements of the Second Piano Concerto (1957)[98] and the Tenth String Quartet (1964).[99] Significantly, while the Soviet film *Altovaya sonata*, with its interplay of daring montage and strangely restrained narrative voice, remains elusive with respect to its view of the composer, its title carries distinct elegiac as well as autobiographical connotations: His last work, composed shortly before his death, the viola sonata's final adagio is not only imbued with an unmistakable sadness of voice, its theme of death,[100] but also with autobiographical reminiscences through references to his earlier work, among them to his unfinished wartime opera *The Gamblers*.[101] The film's title thus suggests a counterpoint to its merry images of Soviet culture, almost silently hinting at the composer's other voice.

In contrast, *The Noise of Time* falls very short of the composer's deeply torn, tragic late music. Indeed, the overall lack of innovative perspective is puzzling. It seems to decline the opportunities offered by biographical fiction as opposed to the work of the historian – as Arifa Akbar remarked, 'it may be the case here that the non-fiction of Shostakovich's story has sabotaged the fiction – real-life casting too long a shadow over the make-believe' (*The Independent*, January 7, 2016). It is almost as if Barnes shied away from adopting any voice of his own. Perhaps this is a British novelist's ultimate gesture of reverence, and the effect of a fundamental doubt of the power of ekphrasis: a refusal to speculate on what is (in spite of the many sources) beyond the scope of our, of any sympathetic/empathetic imagination. To a certain extent, in other words, the narrative may reflect the self-conscious medial limitations of the novel, lacking the option of 'music-image constructions' that Tony Palmer's film, with its techniques of montage, its 'mixing of fictive scenes with newsreel and documentary footage', 'episodic, non-linear organization', and 'extensive use of music performance and allusion' makes such brilliant use of.[102] Yet Vollmann's *Europe Central* bears witness to the ekphrastic scope of bio-fiction. The chapter 'Opus 40' seems to bring to life, as it were, the cello sonata in D minor, emanating from Shostakovich's intense love affair with Elena Konstantinovskaya in 1934:

> Then she laughed for joy and pounced on him; that was the genesis of the fourth movement (*allegro* again); call it a sprightly yet stately dance in a minor key, a dance not of skeletons – they're too mischievous, too *dramatic* for that! – although for a moment Opus 40 does lapse into what will become Shostakovich's signature greyness. The piano brings it back to life: Elena and Shostakovich are stalking each other like cats! … Shostakovich is happy! Here comes the *pizzicato*: Elena is drawing her long fingernails lightly and lovingly down his belly. Then the

> piano cascades gleefully into a warm bed of strings, where the young couple's bright, brisk, expert lovemaking glitters at us … [103]

Art appears inextricably tied to life. What might seem all too naïve a construction of a life-work relationship is displaced at a different point in the novel when the narrator muses on Shostakovich's symphonic music as expressive of the war. Blatantly and deliberately, he resorts to anachronism: 'Although it was the program music of the Seventh Symphony', he ponders,

> the course of the war is better symbolized by the first three movements of his incomparably greater Eighth Symphony in C Minor. … Shostakovich's version [of Beethoven's fate motif, H. S.] strikes as harshly as Russian winter …
>
> In Berlin, that other composer, Adolf Hitler, was putting the final dispositions on the score of his Thirteenth Symphony: Skizze B: Heeresgruppe … Operation "BARBAROSSA" …
>
> So came the night of 21–22 June 1941, when the stern, dignified melancholy of the Eighth Symphony's opening rapidly shrills into outright alarm. After a brief stretch of strings … [d]rumbeats like distant bursts of machine-guns announce full war, and horns scream like air raid sirens.[104]

These musings succeed the narrator's discussion of the musicological (and political) debate over the famous Rat Theme of the Seventh, which he – both Soviet ideologue and deeply sensitive to his music – more or less salvages for the anti-fascist cause.[105] Yet 'whatever conclusion we penetrate to', he acknowledges with respect to the programmatic meaning of this theme, 'there will always remain deeper levels of meaning, undiscovered bunkers, within the Seventh Symphony. Shostakovich escapes us; he'll die free'.[106] In turn, the narrator's own freedom at this point seems to deliberately project the Eighth onto the summer of 1941. (In fact, the Eighth Symphony was composed in the summer of 1943.) A covert, metafictional ekphrastic scepticism comes to the fore at this moment, foregrounding the projective nature of his musical empathy.

Barnes remains largely quiet on Shostakovich's music. Indeed, his novel ultimately shrinks from weaving the composer's art into his life, which would have been at the generic heart of bio-fiction. *The Noise of Time* plays the score of biographical sources yet again,[107] he imagines a composer's life in fearful times, his entanglement in world history that makes him the epitome of the twentieth-century artist, he illuminates Shostakovich's fear and shame, confirms the idea of dual voice, but his music remains silent (and the composer's ideas of it hazy) – unlike Vollmann's novel, Becker and Bruner's film, and, above all, Tony Palmer's artistic filmic biography, which has Shostakovich finally demand 'Ask me nothing anymore. Ask the music'.[108] Palmer's film offers a challenging structure that seeks to tie Shostakovich's music into its ambitious fragmented plot. It does so in various ways, both intra- and extradiegetic, both emphatic and contrapuntal.[109] Like Vollmann's novel, it follows his subject's fictive imperative, leaving his music to speak the last word.

The Noise of Time never asks the music. Not only does Barnes, the British, West European novelist in 2016 'blithely embrace … a romanticized version of Shostakovich's life that has been widely discredited', as Anne Midgette judged,[110] but at the end, in his framing narrative, he conjures up the ideal of a very pure art silencing the 'noise of time',[111] eluding all meaning, ambiguity and pain: In the midst of a – rather clichéd – Soviet war setting,

clinking glasses of vodka, Barnes's Shostakovich hears a 'perfect triad', a 'sound that rang clear of the noise of time, and would outlive everyone and everything'[112] – pure harmony beyond mimesis. Barnes's engagement with Soviet art in times of fear after all concludes on a note of ultimate formalism, on absolute purity.

Notes

1. Svendsen, *Philosophy of Fear*, 48–72.
2. Oates, "The Aesthetics of Fear," 176. She is referring to Bruno Bettelheim.
3. Barsova, "Between 'Social Demands'," 84.
4. Roseberry, "Personal Integrity," 9.
5. Significantly, Shostakovich always avoided giving programmatic titles. See Fay, *Shostakovich*, 103.
6. Cited in Fay, *Shostakovich*, 285. The *New York Times* agreed: '[Shostakovich] considered his music an expression of the Russian people, in line with the doctrines espoused by the Central Committee of the U.S.S.R.' (*The New York Times*, 11 August 1975).
7. Volkov, *Testimony*.
8. Ho and Feofanov defend Volkov's truth claim against what they perceive to be 'unjust criticism' (*Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 32).
9. See Wilson, *Shostakovich*, xiii; Fairclough, *A Soviet Credo*, xv, n. 15; Fay, "Volkov's *Testimony* Reconsidered".
10. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 2; compare the tenor of Volkov's introduction to *Testimony*. For a discussion of Volkov, see also MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, 1–17.
11. E.g. Wilson, *Shostakovich*; Ho and Feofanov, eds., *Shostakovich Reconsidered*; Fairclough and Fanning, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich*; Fanning, ed., *Shostakovich Studies*; Fairclough, *A Soviet Credo*.
12. For a comprehensive overview of earlier films until 2002 see Mitchell, *The Great Composers*, 208.
13. See Littell, *The Stalin Epigram*.
14. E.g. Meek, *The People's Act of Love*; Smith, *Child 44*.
15. 'Eastern Europe defined Western Europe by contrast, as the Orient defined the Occident, but was also made to mediate between Europe and the Orient. One might describe the invention of Eastern Europe as an intellectual project of demi-Orientalization'. Wolff, "Inventing Eastern Europe," 7.
16. His friend, the cellist Rostropovich, acknowledges in his interview with Armin Müller-Stahl how Shostakovich 'was forced to make compromises' (Becker and Bruner, *Dem kühlen Morgen entgegen*, 44:43).
17. See also Fay, *Shostakovich*, 88.
18. See Fairclough, *A Soviet Credo* for an extensive discussion, and Fay, *Shostakovich*, 89.
19. Vollmann's novel *Europe Central* accordingly stresses the legendary quality of this episode of Shostakovich's life, see 216.
20. See note 35
21. Cf. e.g. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 159–65.
22. In fact, what became known as the 'historic decree' (Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 277) had slowly been building up in 1946/47, with reservations over his Eighth Symphony and expectations of a glorious, celebratory Ninth, a 'Victory symphony', which Shostakovich's respective work of 1945, alternatingly satiric and melancholic, had fallen short of. (See Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 274.)
23. Mstislav Rostropovich, cited in Wilson, *Shostakovich*, 249.
24. Cf. Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984); *The Porcupine* (1992); *Arthur & George* (2005).
25. As a number of critics have pointed out, this choice of persistent internal focalization is not a happy one – all too often the inner monologue is not plausible (cf. e.g. *The New York Times*, May 9, 2016; *DIE ZEIT*, March 2, 2017). At other times, Barnes's narrative technique does not unfold sufficiently in terms of showing – particularly obvious is the case of his attendance of the World Peace Congress in New York (*The New York Times*, May 9, 2016). There are

indeed logical problems of the FID mode, for instance, when facts about his condemnation are recounted (Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 17–8, also 22 and 75f.).

26. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 15. Note the comic relief over cigarettes, 16.
27. Ibid., 19.
28. Ibid., 50.
29. Ibid., 51.
30. Volkov, *Testimony*, 140.
31. I am referring to Bude's concept of 'Lebenskonstruktion' ('construction of life'), which he conceives of as unconscious ("Rekonstruktion von Lebenskonstruktionen," 13).
32. Barnes's Shostakovich wonders: 'was it brave standing there waiting for them, or was it cowardly? Or was it neither – merely sensible?' (Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 51) The scene immediately melts into childhood memory with the suitcase (or its absence) a contingent detail: from there the train of association takes him to the strange proportions of his family's summer residence, bringing in a nightmarish quality of his childhood life.
33. Becker and Bruner, *Dem kühlen Morgen entgegen*, 19:20–19:26 and Palmer, *Testimony*, 58:26–59:08. The front cover of Barnes's *The Noise of Time* also shows Shostakovich carrying his suitcase.
34. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 516; 671.
35. As to the identity of the narrator, see, for instance, remarks such as 'in our Soviet Union' (e.g. *Europe Central*, 170 etc.). There are numerous passages where he reveals his political affiliation as in 'we'd arrested a few thousand more of those scum by then' (*Europe Central*, 98). 'If one believes, as any true Bolshevik' (*Europe Central*, 141), as well as in his comment on Shostakovich's song cycle *From Jewish Poetry* ('We forgave him the Zionist provocation' [*Europe Central*, 668]), or his assessment of Kirov's assassination (*Europe Central*, 156).
36. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 165.
37. Ibid., 164–5.
38. Ibid., 168. Later, in 1941, he is still full of fear, see ibid., 179.
39. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 61.
40. Cf. e.g. Kurt Sanderling in an interview in *Dem kühlen Morgen entgegen*, 53:24–53:31. In this film, the deepest humiliation is countered by the immediately succeeding 'denunciation' of Stalin, as the actor-director Armin Müller-Stahl comments, by his Tenth Symphony with its DSCH motif.
41. This has been variously documented, e.g. Klefstad, "Shostakovich and the Peace Conference."
42. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 95.
43. Ibid., 98–99.
44. Ibid., 111.
45. 'One fear drives out another, as one nail drives out another. So, as the climbing plane seemed to hit solid ledges of air, he concentrated on the local, immediate fear: of immolation, disintegration, instant oblivion. Fear normally drives out all other emotions as well; but not shame. Fear and shame swilled happily together in his stomach'. (Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 61) – Fay also judges that Shostakovich deeply regretted his strongly criticized '"unforgivable"' role in the campaign against Sakharov, reading the composer's bitter comments about the physicist in Volkov's *Testimony*, i.e. in Shostakovich's purported memoirs, as a sign of 'defensiveness' (Fay, *Shostakovich*, 278).
46. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 165–6.
47. Volkov, *Testimony*, xxi.
48. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 214.
49. Cited in Fay, *Shostakovich*, 219 and Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 163.
50. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 219.
51. Lesser even goes as far as to contend that the quartets as a whole represent a 'key to Shostakovich's own preoccupations', a 'kind of "diary" that records "the story of his soul"', offering 'unparalleled access to the composer's inner life' (*Music for Silenced Voices*, 3).
52. According to Shostakovich it is in chamber music that musical genius will prove itself, where it cannot hide behind the bombast of public sound: 'Chamber music demands of a composer

the most impeccable technique and depth of thought. I don't think I will be wrong if I say that composers sometimes hide their poverty-stricken ideas behind the brilliance of orchestral sound' (Shostakovich, cited in Fay, *Shostakovich*, 141).

53. Cited in Wilson, *Shostakovich*, 157.
54. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 103.
55. Cited in Žižek, *Totalitarianism*, 100.
56. See note above.
57. Volkov, *Testimony*, 140.
58. For a discussion of the intent of the finale, see also Fay, *Shostakovich*, 309.
59. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 58. Compare to Shostakovich on major and minor in Volkov, *Testimony*, 102–3.
60. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 104.
61. 'It was as if he was always on the wrong metronome setting', thus Barnes's *The Noise of Time*, 12.
62. Ibid., 125.
63. Riley, *Dmitri Shostakovich*, 103 and Mitchell, *The Great Composers*, 215. (This film juxtaposes private photographic and filmic material, Soviet propaganda and contemporary newsreels).
64. Aranovich and Sokurov, *Altovaya sonata*, 0:50–0:55. I am grateful to the Arsenal Berlin for allowing me access to its film archive to view the film.
65. Aranovich and Sokurov, *Altovaya sonata*, 0:55.
66. Žižek, *Totalitarianism*, 124.
67. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," 27.
68. I am indebted to Jeff Dolven for the phenomenology of echo and feedback in a different context (HU/Princeton Workshop "Sympathy and Aesthetic Experience", Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, July 2017).
69. Žižek, *Totalitarianism*, 125.
70. Shostakovich's 'inner distance' 'makes him a prototypical composer – this distance is constitutive of ideology' (Žižek, *Totalitarianism*, 124–5).
71. Shostakovich, *Letters*, 90–1.
72. I.e. sorrow, anger, and self-mockery in a letter to Glikman (Shostakovich, *Letters*, 91).
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 165.
76. DSCH is taken from the German spelling and German musical notation (see, e.g. Roseberry, "Personal Integrity," 29). This signature makes manifold appearances in Shostakovich's oeuvre, perhaps most notably in the third and fourth movements of his (earlier) Tenth Symphony, insisting on his own presence in the face of Stalin's death as it were. The Eighth String Quartet is characterized by its slow, elegiac handling of his musical signature; see the opening of the Largo movement, Quartet no. 8 in C minor, Op. 110.
77. Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 154.
78. Kuhn, "The String Quartets," 53.
79. Whereas the Eighth Quartet is seen as his most autobiographical composition, his Fifteenth is counted as his self-monument or requiem, cf. e.g. Kuhn, "The String Quartets," 67. Intermedial differences and the issue of authenticity set aside, the mode of the autobiographical Eighth is very different from the pseudo-autobiographical memoir *Testimony*, which is deeply erratic and associative in style and claims to be 'not memoirs about myself', but 'memoirs about other people' or the 'testimony of an eyewitness' (*Testimony*, 1). It is certainly obsessive about other people, above all Prokofiev.
80. See *The Guardian*, January 17, 2016. – 'Noise' also crops up in Volkov's *Testimony*, 103; 110.
81. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 176.
82. Barnes's novel links the aesthetics of *morendo* to Shostakovich's self-disgust inspired by his ultimate moral failures as a public man of 1960 and after: 'he had lived long enough to be dismayed by himself' (Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 177).
83. I do not agree with reviewers such as Michael Maar from *DIE ZEIT* who see a novelistic empathy (*DIE ZEIT*, March 2, 2017).

84. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 753.
85. Given that the novelist's objective is a 'parable', this flexibility is, or may be, entirely functional and legitimate, yet the biographical impulse seems crucially different from Barnes's. Unfortunately, in order to serve the purposes of his parable, Vollmann renders Shostakovich 'a muddle-headed bumbler' (Gioia, "The Bumbling Shostakovich"), a far cry from the veiled reticence of his subject's language that his contemporaries testified to.
86. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 220–1.
87. Ibid., 221.
88. Ibid., 622–3.
89. Ibid., 223.
90. Ibid., 159.
91. Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 45.
92. Ibid., 26.
93. Ibid., 3 (Lesser's work undertakes to write his life through the perspective of his 15 string quartets).
94. MacDonald, "Shostakovich's String Concertos and Sonatas," 142. (MacDonald discusses the personal voice of the string quartets along with the string solo concertos).
95. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 623.
96. Žižek, *Totalitarianism*, 125.
97. Palmer, *Testimony*, 01:25 ff.
98. Ibid., 02:18:45 ff. This follows nightmarish scenes of paranoid intensity that suggest the aging composer's sense of guilt, Palmer, *Testimony*, 02:18:12 ff. – *Dem kühlen Morgen entgegen* also chooses the Piano Concerto for its concluding scenes, 01:12:42 ff.
99. Palmer, *Testimony*, 02:27:06–02:30:15.
100. Fyodor Druzhinin, cited in Wilson, *Shostakovich*, 530.
101. Composed in 1942, *The Gamblers* was not performed until 1978 (Fay, *Shostakovich*, 286; 347).
102. Tibbetts, "Shostakovich's Fool," 175 and 186. – In contrast, the emphasis of *Dem kühlen Morgen entgegen* rests on the *search* for Shostakovich, the 'little man' and great composer, a life emphatically discussed by actor-director Armin Müller-Stahl and his interlocutors, and with manifold interviews with family members and contemporaries. Interspersed are imaginative re-enactments by puppets of key scenes, predominantly the encounters with Stalin. Music plays a lesser role than in Palmer, but is allocated its biographical place, for instance the Seventh Symphony playing to images of death in the streets of besieged frozen Leningrad (00:29:15 ff.), or is suggestive of a biographical logic, as with respect to the footage of the party member Shostakovich, interwoven with his inner despair performed by the puppet, and his energetic piano trio suggestive of energetic power and dissent (00:57:27 ff.). Another instance is the slow movement of the Fifth Symphony emanating from his fear (18:06 ff.). Shostakovich's film music is also placed in analogy with themes in his biography, as, cf. 00:15:18–00:21:02.
103. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 93–4.
104. Ibid., 179–81.
105. Ibid., 184–5.
106. Ibid., 186.
107. 'Since Shostakovich's story is well known and often told, Barnes's role here is less that of a novelist than of a musician: He is performing a canonical work, trying to give an Important Story [sic] a new life. He isn't aiming for a radical rewrite, but an interpretation, an act of devotion – as if Barnes himself has some personal connection in relation to the story, as if each artist shares in Shostakovich's guilt' (*The New York Times*, May 9, 2016).
108. Palmer, *Testimony*, 02:26:01–02:26:08. Evidently, Tony Palmer's eponymous film is indebted to Volkov's *Testimony* to a large extent (see closing credits), but its project is to liaise documentary material, imaginative scenes such as the final imaginary conversation with Stalin, and Shostakovich's music.
109. Ultimately, Tony Palmer accepts Shostakovich as a 'divided soul, part responsible Soviet citizen and part dissident artist', as Tibbetts concludes his analysis, "Shostakovich's Fool," 181.

110. Midgette rightly laments Barnes's

> failure to delve deeply into the ideas that shaped the composer's life, even a lack of intellectual curiosity that lets the author be content with falling into step with previous artistic work rather than really making this material his own. (*Washington Post*, May 9, 2016)

111. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 164.
112. Ibid., 180.

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