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An Anthology

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Hubbub

Nicholas Spice on music and Muzak*

Around eleven o'clock on Monday morning, I phone Dell Computers to query an invoice, but the accounts department is engaged, so I get put through instead to the development section of the first movement of the *New World* Symphony. The music I intrude on is intense and self-absorbed. I am like a child in a children's book who has stumbled through a gap in reality and fallen headlong into another world. I pick myself up and follow Dvořák's gangly, adolescent theme as it strides from instrument to instrument and key to key on its way home to the tonic. I think of it as healthy, wide-eyed and affirmative, trumpeting an ingenuous faith in energies which will lead to a new world far braver than any Dvořák might have imagined, the world of Dell Computers in Bracknell, of fax-modems, of the Internet, of telephones capable of pouring Dvořák's impassioned certainties into the ears of office workers on humdrum Monday mornings.

Into my mind drifts the image of Dvořák's head, moustachioed and visionary, gazing, a bit like the MGM lion, out of a locket-shaped gold-embossed medallion in the centre of the box which housed my LP of the *New World* Symphony when I was 12, a record whose brash appearance made me uneasy and slightly embarrassed. Reception interrupts my nostalgia to ask me if I want to go on holding (ah, if only I *could* let go!). When I mumble assent, I am returned to the symphony, where the mood has changed. It is the second movement now, and a cor anglais is singing above muted strings. This tender melody reminds me of a mawkish novel by Josef Škvorecký. The details elude me, but I fancy *Dvořák in Love* to have been a soft-focus, rural idyll, and I fall to imagining a red sun rising behind a field of gently rippling Bohemian corn, and, beyond it, a girl in a dirndl beckoning seductively. 'Good morning, Sales Ledger, this is Martine, how may I help you?' I have been put through.

Phone-hold music is a late, trivial but characteristic effect of the

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technical revolution which over the past century has transformed the way we encounter music. Until the development of the radio and the gramophone, people only heard music when they played it themselves or when they heard other people playing it. Music was bound by time and space. Now, music is everywhere, streaming through the interstices between the lumpy materials of life, filling the gaps in the continuum of human activity and contact, sitting up in vast uncharted archives. In Repeated Takes, Michael Chanan has written a concise history of the technology that has wrought this change and the commercial and creative forces that have shaped it. His account is elegant and impressively well-informed. He ranges across the entire technical field, from Edison’s invention of the phonograph in 1877 to the samplers and MIDI technology of the Nineties. He tracks in detail the peristaltic movements of the market, as it ingests and digests each technical innovation and reacts to and directs the whim of the punters and the creativity of musicians. And he has a strong grasp of the way different musical cultures – different ‘musics’ – from Machaut to Maderna, Tin Pan Alley to dub reggae, have adapted themselves to the revolution they have been caught up in, and been changed by it.

Chanan is an intellectual, and his ruminations on the meaning of his story are always sensible. Joseph Lanza despises intellectuals and has no more interest in being sensible than he has for a talent for it. Elevator Music, subtitled ‘A Surreal History of Muzak Easy Listening and other Moodsong’, is a dotty book, a tiresome and tiring panegyric to musical trash, a history which is surreal only in the capacity of its author to believe his own relentlessly foolish propaganda. ‘Muzak and mood music,’ Lanza announces, ‘are, in many respects, aesthetically superior to all other musical forms.’ He goes on to argue for this with all the acumen and none of the irony of Norman Tebbit arguing for the aesthetic claims of page-three girls (Rubens painted naked women, too). Thus Lanza: ‘Judging from their literature, the Greeks were rarely without some kind of perpetual musical soundtrack; ‘Gregorian chants most likely tranquilised monks for hundreds of years’; ‘the first church organ recitals . . . pacified worshippers between sermons’; ‘much of what today’s audiophiles reverenceently call the “Classics” served as background music for bluebloods.’

Elevator Music is mainly interesting as a work of inadvertent autobiography, the portrait it suggests of a man who really does seem to believe that ‘a world without elevator music would be much grimmer than its detractors . . . could ever realise,’ a portrait animated as much by anger as by enthusiasm. Lanza the super-nerd, the techno-freak, the fetishist of cultural marginalia, is also the red-neck barricaded inside his obsession, scanning the horizon for the cultural smart-arses, the liberal intellectual spoilers, the neurasthenic pedants, the sickheads who want to turn off the heavenly choirs for just a bit of morbid peace and quiet.

I scoff at Lanza, but I see myself reflected in his crazy encomia, gesticulating, as it were, on the other side of the mirror. Angry exchanges swim up from the past. I am in some crass restaurant in Holland Park which has been dolled up to look like the outside of a street in Rome – walls artfully distressed to resemble weathered stone, trompe-l’oeil window grilles, a floor of bumpy flagging. A waiter waltzes up to declaim the day’s specials. His rococo soliloquy is made unintelligible by being delivered, like a piece of 18th-century melodrama, against the ‘Dies Irae’ of the Mozart Requiem. By the time I’m eating the main course, the tape has been changed to the Four Last Songs. Unable to hold a rational conversation against Strauss’s heavy-lidded eschatology, I ask the waiter to turn the music off, but he looks blank and calls the manager, who flatly refuses. We argue. I give up. As I pay the bill I catch the five last words of ‘Im Abendrot’: ‘Ist dies etwa der Tod?’ ‘You might well ask,’ I growl, escaping into the street.

Much as I hate classical music in restaurants, I realise that it cannot be reasonable to argue in principle against background music in places where you are not obliged to suffer it. The case for a ban on public music seems stronger in places where people have no choice but to endure it: in airports and railway stations or in hospital waiting-rooms. But suppose it were to be rigorously demonstrated that certain sorts of public music lowered stress levels, enhanced productivity at work, cut absenteeism and illness and thereby reduced demand on public health resources. If it turned out that most people enjoyed and welcomed it, should we not then embrace piped music as a public good? The American Muzak Corporation would say that we should.

Since it began selling canned music in the Thirties, Muzak’s viability as a business, like that of a pharmaceutical company, has always depended on convincing its customers that its products do them good. The customers have mostly been other large corporations, and the benefits Muzak has sold them have been improved productivity and a more compliant workforce. Muzak’s corporate literature bristles with the results of scientific and behavioural research to back up its claims. An early boost came from Britain. In 1937, two industrial psychologists, Wyatt and Langdon, published a paper, ‘Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work’, which showed that young women worked more
efficiently and with less resentment when they worked to music. Meanwhile, cows in McKeesport, Pennsylvania were reported to yield more milk when milked to the ‘Blue Danube’. Data accumulated on every side: experiments by the Human Engineering Laboratory of the US Army found that programmed ‘functional’ music improved vigilance, mental alertness and working efficiency; in 1972 Black & Decker reported a 1.42 per cent gain in productivity once music by Muzak was installed, while, at St Joseph’s Hospital in Yonkers, NY, Dr Frank B. Flood, chief of cardiology, saw improved recovery rates in the intensive care unit.

From the start, the two cardinal aims of Muzak’s operation have been that its music should not draw attention to itself and that it should work in optimal co-operation with nature, with the laws governing the ebb and flow of biological energy. A technique called ‘range of intensity limitation’ flattens the music out to make it unnoticeable, ‘like wind playing between the leaves of trees’ (Joe Coco, Muzak engineer for more than forty years). Meanwhile, ‘Stimulus Progression’ matches the pace and rhythm of the music to the highs and lows of the working day. A thoroughgoing refinement of these techniques was mastered by U.V. ‘Bing’ Muscio, who became Muzak president in 1966. The aptly named Muscio, ‘a man of international education and culture...a man of forceful candour, concise wit and deft literary allusion’ (Muzak corporate blurb), ushered in the era of the ‘New Muzak’, setting up a Scientific Board of Advisers, psychologists and doctors who worked closely with Muzak ‘musicologists’ and engineers to re-examine the content and effect of Muzak’s programming.

Nowadays, Muzak’s programmes are created by a computer which slots tunes (coded for stimulus value) into a 24-hour schedule which is then beamed around the world by a satellite transmitter in North Carolina. The schedule is divided up into 15-minute segments (13.5 minutes, to be exact, with 1.5 minutes of silence in between), each of which plays five or six tunes, arranged in ascending order of stimulus value. The 15-minute segments are themselves arranged in a Muzak stimulus curve, with peaks between 10 and 11 a.m. and 3 and 4 p.m., when workers tend to flag, and troughs after 12 midday and 6 p.m. to ‘counteract the excitement at lunchtime and at the end of the day’.

Although the 15-minute programme segments end in silence, it is a fundamental assumption of the Muzak project that people do not like silence. As a Muzak spokesperson has said, ‘we maintain that most people are uneasy with an absence of sound. We feel an empty space requires some kind of pleasant sound. Music is one of the more pleasant sounds.’ And, of course, Muzak has the data to prove it.

The systematic exploitation of the subliminal effects of music (as narcotic and stimulant) is especially abhorrent to those musicians and listeners who wish to think of music as an art, and who are often most vocal in their opposition to background music of any kind. The grandfather of their cause, its most formidable prosecutor, was Theodor Adorno. Adorno’s life (1903–69) was co-extensive with the rise and flourishing of the mass market in music. He watched its phenomenal growth with horror. At the heart of his concerns was an ideal of attention, just as, one might almost say, at the heart of Muzak’s concerns is an ideal of inattention. For Adorno, great music is music which demands and repays a full and undivided attention. Undemanding music, music which can accompany another activity (eating, dancing, talking), is, by Adorno’s definition, a degraded, worthless kind of music, a music which panders to human laziness, to what he scathingly calls our habit of ‘regressive listening’. Proper listening, ‘concentrated listening’, requires effort, but repays the listener with an experience of alertness and a sense of reaffirmed individuality. By contrast, ‘regressive listening’, easy listening, turns the listener into an unindividuated consumer, a passive purchaser of commodities. Music which repays ‘concentrated listening’ is a highly differentiated music. Music for background listening is standardised and one piece sounds much like another.

The political dimension to this analysis is immediately evident. Adorno’s concentrated listener, critical faculties fully awakened, is a potential activist, an individual capable of opposing the established order. The regressive listener, drugged by the music of the mass (Stravinsky spoke of such a listener as falling ‘into a kind of torpor’), is an acquiescent accomplice of a marauding capitalism.

Part of me returns a powerful echo to Adorno’s ideal of concentrated listening. When my attention is held by music, I achieve a state of mental and physical equilibrium which no other experience gives me, except perhaps the experience of silence, and I sometimes think of music as a species of silence. I was recently struck by this relationship of music to silence when I saw the Mark Morris Dance Group perform ‘Neue Liebeslieder Walzer’ to the music of Brahms. At the end of the work, when the dance has subsided into a circular tableau of figures sleeping in the shadows, at the precise moment when the sound of the last note is about to merge with silence, one of the dancers at the farthest edge of the circle suddenly sits up, a silhouetted figure looking out into the
dark, an image of alertness at the edge of a silence as manifold and interesting as the music that has given place to it. If this is music, then muzak, which seeks to fill up silence, must be anti-music. And any music which abuses silence could be thought of as aspiring to the condition of muzak.

In one sense, radio and recording inevitably disturb music’s relationship to silence. The breaking of silence by music is at its most beautiful when there is a real rapport between player and listener. A recorded performance hands over the decision to start the music entirely to the listener, so that the onset of recorded music will always have a certain mundanity to it. On the radio, the performer regains control of the start of the music, but this time at the listener’s expense. On the other hand, the radio allows the listener randomly to butt in on the music and to leave it again just as abruptly. Chanan, summarising Adorno, expresses this well: ‘Music on the radio . . . becomes a pot-pourri, a continuous atomised medley which leaves the impression of a kind of collage.’ In Britain, Classic FM has contrived, perhaps even set out, to exaggerate this effect. It broadcasts music as though it were a piece of fabric to be unrolled, one pattern succeeding another without acknowledgment of the differences between them. On Classic FM the disregard for silence is wilful: music, advertising, features, news, the weather, are spliced together seamlessly so that the music is robbed of its poise, its place within the flow of time.

There is a view, which Chanan does not contradict, that the act of recording music does not just disturb its relationship to silence, but damages it fundamentally, by freeing it from its dependency on the contingencies of a particular time and place and by making it permanent: ‘The integrity of the musical work of the past, its intimate unity with the time and place of performance, what Walter Benjamin called its aura, has been destroyed. Music has become literally disembodied.’ But, as Chanan points out elsewhere in Repeated Takes, when Benjamin spoke of aura he was referring to visual art and the image, not to music and sound. To apply Benjamin’s observations about the effects of photography on art to the effects of recording on music is to make a false elision. For in music there are no original objects as there are in art. We cannot refer back to an object identified a Beethoven’s op. 111 Piano Sonata as we can refer back to Bruegel’s Hunters in the Snow, and we cannot, therefore, speak of reproductions of the sonata as we can speak of reproductions of the painting. In one sense, our only access to the sonata is through reproductions (performances) of it, and there is no difference in category between the reproduction we create in our heads when we read the score, the one we hear when we listen to someone play the sonata in front of us, and the reproduction we listen to on a recording. In each case, we encounter a version of the sonata, and a version is all that is available to us. The coherence and beauty of any one version will depend on how the performer puts the notes together. Except for the way the music begins and ends (its relationship to the circumambient silence), these tensions and connections are unaffected by the act of recording.

The idea that recording destroys music’s aura, derives, in part at least, from a misconception of the nature and role of spontaneity in music. Chanan speaks of the way a record ‘robs the performance of its sense of spontaneity’, and he quotes Jacques Attali’s remark, in Noise, that recording removes from a performance the ‘unforeseen and the risks’. ‘The new aesthetic of performance,’ Attali continues, ‘excludes error, hesitation.’ But error, hesitation and other unwished-for spontaneities have never been part of the felicities of live performance. Classical musicians devote themselves to trying to thwart the uncertainties and hazards of playing live. This is because they have something very specific they wish to get across: their understanding of how the music should go, the interpretation they have worked on for months, perhaps years, prior to the performance. While acknowledging that the special tension and atmosphere of live performance can, at best, create moments of unplanned beauty, classical musicians know that such moments only happen within a rigorously pre-ordained design. This design, even when it appears to unfold spontaneously before our ears, does not get lost when it is fixed on a recording. What does get lost, but then only when the recording is heard for the second time, is the listener’s surprise. In this respect, the experience of music is no different from any other aesthetic experience. We can only see the Sistine Chapel for the first time once, and we can never be surprised twice by the outcome of a poem or a novel, the unexpected modulations of a piece of Haydn or the wild ramifications of an improvisation by Coltrane. Only those who did not know the result of the 1995 European Cupwinners’ Cup Final, only those who had sat through the unfolding drama of the match over two long hours up to its final thirty seconds, could experience the consternation and wonder wrought by Nayim’s unimaginable spontaneity, lobbing the ball from the half-way line clean over David Seaman’s head into the net to win the match for Zaragoza. In none of these cases is the beauty of the events lost when we revisit them. Indeed, one could well argue that it is only by revisiting the site of a moment of artistic inspiration that its beauty can properly be understood and enjoyed. Surprise
has its disadvantages, and, until the arrival of recording technology, music was particularly handicapped by them.

To borrow a term of Adorno’s, I would say that Chanan and others, maybe Adorno himself, ‘fetishise’ the physical actuality of musical performance. In doing so, they turn our attention away from a truer cause for despondency: the routine deadness of so much classical music performance today, irrespective of whether it is recorded or played live. If it is true that performances of music from the classical canon now rarely invite the sort of concentrated attention Adorno spoke about, then this can only be indirectly attributed to the effects of recording technology. The transformation of music overnight into an art form like literature, with a past available to anyone with the inclination to consult it, cannot have been anything but an advantage to the performing musician. But the concomitant increase in the amount of music a musician could hear (whether or not he, or she, wished to hear it) may have contributed to a gradual undermining of interpretative confidence.

In a world which is drenched in diatonic harmony, giving meaning to diatonic music demands a degree of musical independence and originality far beyond what was demanded of musicians in the pre-recording age. Musicians have responded to this identity crisis by fleeing the responsibilities of authorship (having something of their own to say about the music) for the relative safety of authenticity (mimicking what someone else might once have had to say). As a result, performing music has increasingly become an occasion for visiting historical (or pseudo-historical) objects, rather than for making something fresh happen. A sense of the vital presentness of the music (its aura, if you like) has been forsaken. This loss is there to hear. You need only compare older performances of the classical canon on record with the experience of modern performances live in the concert hall to get the point. Without Rosenthal’s performances of Chopin, or Artur Balsam’s Mozart, early Menuhin, the Budapest String Quartet, Klemerer conducting Mahler or Furtwängler conducting Brahms, I think our sense of what ‘aura’ in music might possibly be would be well on the way to extinction.

The problem – if there is one – could be greatly eased, if performers spent more of their energies with the music of their own time rather than with the music of the past. The turning away from contemporary music which has characterised 20th-century culture was underway well before recording technology came on the scene, and the technology cannot be held to have caused the trend, although it was certainly used to accelerate it. As Chanan observes, the technology itself is neutral in this respect. While classical music culture has been busy building its vast musical mausoleum, pop and jazz and folk music have used recording technology as a means to create an endless succession of new works.

When new technologies bring about a shift in the way we relate to each other and to the world, there are always voices warning of decline and loss. The pharaoh who is offered the invention of hieroglyphics by a god, in Plato’s story in the Phaedrus, refuses it, as John Ray recalled in these pages, ‘because it would ruin his subjects’ powers of memory and concentration’. Television stands accused of promoting apathy and inertia, pocket calculators of the decay of mental arithmetic. Often technology is blamed for an aspect of human behaviour which it just happens to make conspicuous. Joseph Lanza is so far right when he points out that the aristocrats who listened to new work by Haydn and Mozart were scarcely paragons of concentrated listening.

A favourite object of techno-censure is the walkman, which is held to have encouraged deplorable displays of private anomic in public places (Chanan speaks of the way the walkman ‘induces a sense of solipsism . . . by isolating the listener from the world through music’). But it is ludicrous to think that people wearing headsets have somehow retreated from the warm community life of the inner city street or the camaraderie of mass commuting. There’s nothing to retreat from, and listening to music is no worse a way of acknowledging this than sitting immersed in a book or lost in a daydream. In any case, who wants to live in a world where behaviour has to be unrelentingly positive and where pleasure is uniformly conflated with edification? Adorno’s structures ignore the range, variability and inconsistency of human needs. There are times for attention and times to relax, times for concentrated listening and times when you just want the music to flow over you or flow on by.

Eighteenth-century concert promoters kept the audience for art music exclusive by setting ticket prices very high and through advertising for listeners of the right social class. Until the 20th century, art music remained the preserve of a relatively small Western cultural élite. The new recording technologies and radio democratised music at a stroke, bringing every kind of it within earshot of a large part of the world’s population. At the same time, music was freed from the confinement of the concert hall and the domestic salon. It became as portable as the written word. We can now listen to Bach as we climb into the heavens in a Boeing 747, which is neither more wonderful nor more inappropriate than reading Proust. And we can dip into music as
we might dip into a book, to remind ourselves of it without having to sit through it from beginning to end. Adorno hated the way people dealt in what he called musical 'debris' – bits and pieces out of context. But he underestimated our ability to recall the whole from a quick reference to the part. My forty seconds of the New World were enough to remind me that I didn’t need to hear the symphony complete in a concert hall.

The hugely increased participation of music in the processes of ordinary life, and the sometimes bizarre conjunctions it can lead to (listening to Gibbons while you have your teeth drilled), has undoubtedly altered the sorts of thing music may seem to say to us. Music is naturally promiscuous. It attaches itself to our moods, to the meaning of words, to images and to stories, so that even the most severely inexpressive music can fall into deplorable (to the composer) allegiances. If you played a section of Boulez’s Pièces Serviables as the background to a natural-history film about dangerous spiders, it would acquire a menacing, creepy-crawly character. It was a long time before I could rid the slow movement of Schubert’s E Flat Piano Trio of the unpleasant emotional atmosphere of Kubrick’s Barry Lyndon. And, of course, the bonding process works even more powerfully in reverse: music lends its expressiveness to the world. Once you know Britten’s setting of Hardy’s ‘At Day-Close in November’ you will never again be able to read the poem innocent of the music’s view of it.

Most films would be helpless without music –Java without the rhythmic thud of approaching doom. Film, TV and even radio now expect us to feel uncomfortable with action or image unaccompanied by music. It’s as though we are not to be trusted to react properly without the promptings and guidance of a musical score. Certainly, much good TV and film drama is marred by its soundtrack. The emotional complexity of Jane Campion’s The Piano had a constant battle with the sentimentalization of Michael Nyman’s simple-minded music. In the BBC’s well-mannered and agreeable dramatisation of Middlemarch, it was felt necessary to push up the progress of Dorothea and Ladislaw’s love with a plangent oboe.

The presence of music shifts any represented action towards fiction. So there is perhaps good reason to deplore the tendency of news analysis and real crime programmes on television to use music to put us in the proper frame of mind. News bulletins the world over are introduced by music, all of it basically in the Also Sprach Zarathustra vein: stirring orchestral gestures to signal urgency, crisis, global portent. The Big Breakfast, which punctuates the flow of items in its news updates with volleys of marcato chords, is only a step away from orchestrating the

items themselves, though how they’ll devise a soundtrack for the trade figures is anyone’s guess. Classic FM already plays Baroque music behind the weather forecast, and Classic FM, its news feature program, attaches a piece of music to each item of analysis: for example, a chunk of Delius’s incidental music for Flecker’s ‘Hassan’ to introduce an update on the Middle East peace process.

In real life, this fictionalisation of reality can be deranging. I am intrigued, for instance, by the soundtrack which Gatwick Airport has deemed suitable for the brief ride on the monorail that takes you from the satellite terminal to the main building. If you have just staggered off an intercontinental flight and are already suffering from time slippage, the experience of this little trip is especially disorientating. The doors suck themselves shut and the transit train slips away to the sound of a high electronic humming. A voice-over in the accents of a Pathé Pictorial announcer (the same voice which tells you to ‘mind the gap’ at Embankment tube station) welcomes you to Gatwick Airport (the hub without the hubbub) on behalf of British Airways (sponsors of the shuttle), and goes on to tell you of the delights, awaiting you in the main terminal, of ‘Avenue Shopping and Eating’, a mall which is apparently the only reason for your visit to Britain. As you try to make head or tail of all this, you become aware of a strangely disquieting music played by a string orchestra, a faintly minatory, darkling piece, which tips the atmosphere towards nightmare and gives you pause to wonder whether you haven’t perhaps died in an air crash and are not now in transit across Purgatory.

Provided we are in control, we seem to like to arrange a soundtrack for our lives, perhaps because music makes us feel as though we belong to a more exciting story than the one we mostly seem to take part in. As we swing out onto the open road in our Vauxhall Cavalier, music enhances the pleasure of feeling free, that momentary delusion that we are going somewhere. At the end of an evening with friends, the Miles Davis track ‘Mood’ can seem to bind the good things together. The sound of a Bach organ prelude thundering up the stairwell on a bright Sunday morning stirs us, as we brush our teeth, with the feeling that life might, after all, be rather grand.

We choose these musical backgrounds to match and enhance the rhythms of our lives, but the most poignant encounters with music are inadvertent and unplanned. Church bells heard across the fields on a Sunday evening, the forlorn plinking and plonking two streets away of an ice-cream van on solitary summer afternoons, someone practising
the saxophone in a neighbouring house: such half-heard music sets up
momentary perspectives on our situation, touches us with sadness or
strikes us with interesting incongruities. It is the literary imagination
which is stimulated by music heard by chance, the imagination that
enjoys the possibilities suggested by the collision of disparate realities,
the imagination that feeds on the ironies which a split attention (not a
distracted attention) perceives. The history of music has been a long
argument between musicians' music – pure music for a pure attention –
and literary music, music which celebrates the relationship of music to
narrative, to mind states, and which has sought, especially in song, to
depict the ironies of a split perspective. In his great essay 'On the
Beautiful in Music' Eduard Hanslick complained about the organ-
grinder out in the street who interrupts his conversation, but it is an
organ-grinder overheard by the protagonist of Die Winterreise who
inspires one of Schubert's greatest songs.

Even the most thoughtlessly mechanical abuse of music can provide
moments of curious richness. The forty seconds I spent that Monday
morning lost in a daydream about Dvořák, about my childhood, about
a bad novel I once reviewed, were reclaimed from vacancy and oblivion
by the phone-hold music on the Dell switchboard. And my encounter
with Martine was transformed: 'her words came, as through bubbling
honey' and she spoke of VAT.

And what then of the dreaded muzak? What countless scenes of love
and anger and indifference have been enacted against the background
of its blithe fatuities? How many moments of emptiness and despair has
it redeemed through incongruity? You are alone on a sales trip to
Holland, staying in a hotel in Rotterdam. It is November and you're up
at 7 a.m. The breakfast room is in a windowless basement. Outside, fog
hugs the cobblestones and Dutchmen cycle to work. You sit down at a
table covered with a carpet. A young waiter just out of catering school
brings you a module of Dutch breakfast: two pieces of currant bread, a
jug of hot water already too cold to revive the Lipton's tea-bag in the
accompanying cup, a boiled egg – white, tepid and undercooked. No
one speaks. The waiter moves about discreetly behind the breakfast
hatch clinking tea-cups. Only the occasional pop of vacuum seals on
miniature jam pots breaks the silence. You take a bite out of the currant
bread which is sweet and unappetising, crack the egg and attempt to
spoon the sloggerly transparent egg white into your mouth, but you do
not succeed, so that a strand of protein bounces between your lower lip
and the spoon. At this point you feel so sad that you do not know
where to put yourself. And then you notice the muzak – 'songs of time-

travel into amniotic bliss', perhaps – and the incongruity of it all tips
this moment, which, experienced in complete silence, would be unbear-
able, into absurdity. A gap opens up between you and the music, and
into that gap you escape.

6 July 1995