

Mousike and Bluegrass

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The Generous Reader

What would Plato's *mousike* (μουσικε) sound like today? Charles Frazier's novel, *Cold Mountain*,¹ is a musical text, in ways so similar to Plato's *Republic* that one could say that Plato's *mousike* has been translated for us in the present — and it came out as bluegrass. Both books offer an account of a life well-lived that requires a tuning of the soul, carried out through repetitive and lengthy practice. This tuning opposes our tendencies to follow the dictates of the social and political realms with an insistent demand that there is something more real upon which we should base our lives than prevailing opinions. Plato and Frazier agree that education is soul work, not just brain work. And they figure this work as a mountainous ascent, both suggesting that some glimpse of what the spirit most longs for might be possible at high places. Both books not only tell us these things — they are musically composed to rehearse us in the movement of these best lives as we read them. If we attend to the ways Plato and Frazier do this with their writing, we might also begin to wonder whether other, less humane and less carefully composed books might be performing tunings of their own. What is at stake is not just what we will be able to do, but how fully human and humane we will become.

In this essay, I explore the musicality of these two texts, describing Plato's as hymnic and Charles Frazier's as elegiac, and explaining why I think the latter is what we need now. While education through conversation is at the heart of the *Republic*, education in *Cold Mountain* is inscribed on the body as callouses and scars. The *Republic* is hymnic, answering Glaucon's opening question — why be good, when the world is more likely to punish you for it and reward deceit? — by singing a hymn to the Good. The music of *Cold Mountain* is elegiac, performing its narrative as an act of remembrance and of mourning. Elegy leads to hope in the form of remembered rituals of care and respect and habits of attending to the world, practices that acknowledge the human need to belong to a particular place, to know and be known by particular people. In a world driven by the diminishment that comes from treating people as numbers, this is music we need now.

Like a musical composition, Plato's *Republic* is designed to do its work upon its readers as a whole, and a whole sequenced carefully in time.² The rift between philosophy and poetry has often been traced to this text, but maybe we don't know how to read it. Read dramatically, the *Republic* relates not a philosophical doctrine but an extraordinary teaching relationship. Read structurally, the *Republic* appears as a complex composition, constructed to rehearse an experience of movement in us as we read it, the same movement that philosophy will require of us. Read with attention to image and metaphor, the *Republic* appears as itself a work of poetry, itself an imitation, a recitation. Read as music, the *Republic* not only attempts to penetrate the soul to learn its nature, but to penetrate our souls and rehearse in us the activities that make for the most fully human life.

I turn to the *Republic* at the point where the examination of the city in speech is winding down and the imaginary city is replaced with an imaginary mountain. As he has been doing ever since the prelude, Socrates continually asks Glaucon to follow the argument on two levels: not just *where* it goes but also *how* it gets there. The argument takes on spatial dimensions with the “hunt” for justice³; Socrates guides Glaucon into and through a new kind of philosophical topography. Socrates figures the argument as physical activity. The exploration of the question of justice is a dangerous journey through rugged terrain, an ascent up a mountain. The travelers must not give up or become weary before they reach the peak. Justice itself is like a shy beast, hiding in the brush. They will pause in the argument/journey to kindle a fire by rubbing together two of the images they have already constructed (435a). Glaucon accepts the challenge, ready to follow Socrates not only logically but also imaginatively.

The carefully balanced structuring of the text in both time and space — its rhythm and harmony — aims at persuasion. With the help of two readers who attend to the structures of Plato’s text, Adi Ophir and Eva Brann, I explore this as a dimension of its musicality — that is, of its ability to tune our souls. While one criticizes Plato’s motives and the other celebrates them, both readers see the intricate structure of the text as part of Plato’s act of persuasion. The patterning of the text gives it an unusual dimensionality that is both spatial and temporal. How much we have been changed by reading the *Republic* will depend on how moving we have found the music — Ophir admires Plato’s performance but finds it dangerous; Brann is herself converted by it.

Ophir argues that Socrates’ spatial metaphors are part of a structuring of the *Republic* as a whole that functions seductively, leading us toward the question of the Good — but not its solution.⁴ Carefully mapping out each occurrence of a spatial metaphor, Ophir discovers that metaphors that direct attention to the “way” of the argument coincide with shifts in the topic of conversation. They move through a series of suspensions, leading to the center of the book. From that point forward, the suspended questions are resumed, each in its turn. When Ophir maps this pattern, the result is stunningly symmetrical and very like the metaphorical mountain Socrates claims to be ascending, as in figure 1 (*PIC*, 148).

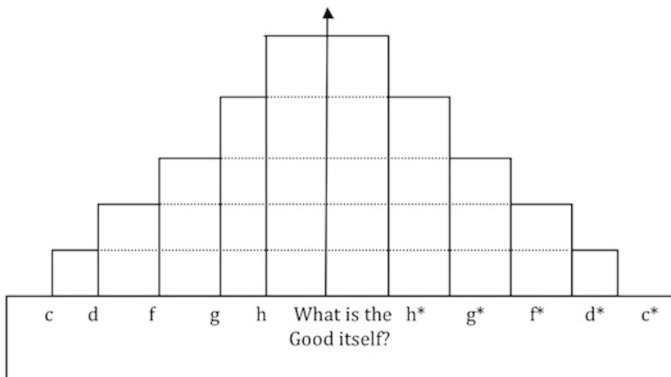


Figure 1: The Mountain: Adapted from Ophir’s Diagram of the *Republic*. (*PIC*, 148)

Even as Socrates creates an imaginary terrain up which he and Glaucon and the others labor, the suspensions climb toward the Good and then descend symmetrically from it.⁵ Ophir envisions them climbing switchbacks, as they “find themselves crossing the same region, yet at different altitudes” and “meet the same questions discussed twice on two different levels of the discourse” (*PIC*, 140). The effect of these literary techniques is “not to argue but to lead, not to prove but to show a way” (*PIC*, 136).

Ophir claims that the spatial metaphors are both powerful and deceptive. Plato lulls us into accepting the disappearance of dramatic space. By drawing us into imaginary movements in an imaginary space, the spatial metaphors make us forget the (unmoving) bodies and the (static) space of the participants in the conversation (*PIC*, 121). The dramatic setting of this conversation disappears, superseded by the imaginary space of discourse. “Speech is used like a drug” (*PIC*, 126) to tempt us to follow Socrates into a new activity, which Ophir calls “serious discourse” (*PIC*, 2).

Plato persuades us to accept both the creation of a discursive space and the masking of bodily and political space, not by argument, but by seduction. Using speech “like a drug,” in Jacques Derrida’s sense, Socrates seduces us into forgetfulness by means of metaphors (*PIC*, 126). Ophir asserts that Plato’s creation of a space for philosophy comes at great cost. Philosophy has been trapped in Plato’s lies about it ever since: excluded from the practical realm, stuck pretending that it does not represent interest or desire, only disinterested knowledge (*PIC*, 125). The Good is a tyrant who guards the boundaries of philosophical space.

Plato’s writing *is* powerfully seductive. Plato is indisputably critical of politics, or at least of any appeal to a mass of people. And the metaphors do accomplish a shifting of space — but that space remains vague. However, the *character* required to navigate it becomes increasingly clear. The striking substructure that Ophir excavates with such care carries us through the *motions* of learning philosophy — if, as we read, we remember well, pay attention, do not grow weary, and have courage as well as willingness to bend. To repeat, as much as any “theory of forms,” this is the aim of the *Republic*: to rehearse the character of the student of philosophy in us, its readers: remember well, pay attention, do not grow weary, have courage as well as a willingness to bend.

In her extraordinary essay, “The Music of the Republic,” Eva Brann argues that Socrates’ *images* of the Good are a kind of philosophical music.⁶ Their purpose is to “convert,”⁷ or turn, Glaucon toward philosophy.⁸ These images penetrate the soul and draw it. They train the soul in the recognition of the Good. And they engage us in philosophical activity and in that musical study to which Plato so briefly alludes at the end of Book IV.

Brann agrees that the structure of the book is crucial to its persuasive power. She offers us her own diagram of the structure of the dialogue, one that captures the shifts in genre within the text: the mythic opening and closing, the enterprise first of city-building and later of watching cities disintegrate, and, at the center of the book, the education of the philosopher. Like rings, myth and speech surround and point to the center of the dialogue, in which, Brann argues, its real action takes

place. Brann's diagram, when combined with the action of ascent within the book, also looks like a mountain — only hers is a topographical map.

While Ophir describes the moving qualities of Plato's writing in the language of corruption — as a seduction, a deception, a drug — Brann describes those same qualities as Socratic music. While Ophir argues that philosophical discussion in the *Republic* supersedes political action, Brann argues that, at the center of this text, philosophical discussion *becomes* political action: "The philosopher's city is coming into being while Socrates and Glaucon converse: *the* primary political act is the 'conversion' to a philosophical education of one youth by one man."⁹ Brann's structural reading places the teaching relationship of Socrates and Glaucon at the center of interpretation of the *Republic*.¹⁰

As Socrates and Glaucon draw nearer to the Good and the "peak" of the book's journey, the language of their endeavor becomes explicitly musical — and religious. The Good, which cannot yet be presented to Glaucon except as a promise, has now eclipsed the gods of epic poetry. Although it lacks the dramatic pull of those unpredictable but interesting characters, it is now shown worthy of hymns of praise — and of many years of study.¹¹ The purpose of the *Republic* is not to generate interest in the Good, used to regulate philosophical space, but, by singing the hymn to the Good, to affirm that a life that aims at the Good is both possible and desirable. Its great demands become its great pleasures.

Plato's text argues, persuasively, that we have to think about education, and especially education for justice, in terms of its effects on the soul. The soul needs tuning, if we are to see the world accurately, and to be able to appreciate things in their relationships to one another — not just a part, but all of them. But Plato's music has become difficult for us in the present. The hierarchies of men over women, soul over body, and so on, have been rightly challenged. We have seen that idealizing the soul as something separable from the body too easily leads to the abuse of bodies. And if the soul has become a troublesome notion, the Good has become even more of one. Whose Good? How do we reach it?

Charles Frazier's novel *Cold Mountain* suggests some answers to these questions, translating Plato's project of the musical education of the soul toward the Good into a version that grapples with our contemporary predicaments. In Frazier's composition, elegy replaces hymn, and attunement becomes embodied. *Cold Mountain* sings elegy to a way of life that is no longer with us. With the passing of that way of life there have been other deaths: words have passed out of usage and been forgotten, ideas have passed out of thought, knowledge has been lost, and moral knowledge, in particular, has faded. Frazier shows connections between these various parts of an economy, leaving us to wonder what kind of life is possible for us in the economy of the present, and whether "contentment" can be a part of it.

Plato's metaphorical mountain, so surprising in comparison to much of later philosophical writing, pales in contrast to Frazier's actual mountain, which stands just outside of Asheville, North Carolina. While Plato's city is constructed in speech, Frazier's novel is performed in a specific place and time — the southern Blue Ridge

mountains in the final year of the Civil War, and with it a specific musical genre. The Greek musical modes survive in the haunting music of the mountains, music of fiddle and banjo and voice pitched high and nasal. Frazier writes about this music in its relationship to its local worlds: natural, social, and spiritual. While education through conversation is at the heart of *The Republic*, education in *Cold Mountain* is inscribed on the body through physical work, and the callouses and scars that result. While Plato tells us what it means to know, Frazier warns that knowledge that strays too far from particularity too often leads to violence.

Just as Plato rewrites epic poetry, Frazier rewrites Christianity in an insistently concrete and local form. Even while the book seems to fit into the trope of the ascent of the mountain as spiritual and heroic quest, Frazier subverts this trope. Redemption, in this book, comes to us through contact with the material world in all of its particularity, not through escape from it into some more perfect or more ideal realm. The verbs here are literal, and, as Ada, one of the two central characters, remarks, “all of them tiring” (*CM*, 104). To be fully human, to keep our souls alive, we need the physical touch of another human. While Plato argues that the possibility of knowledge depends on the Good, Frazier suggests that we find contentment in acknowledging a world that is independent of us but upon which we depend.

Music is in *Cold Mountain* in more than one way. Most explicitly, occasions of fiddling and singing and listening are threaded through the novel. The making of music is described in terms of human hands and human throats and set in an intermediary position, with natural sounds on one side and human expressions of pain on the other. Next, the transformation of the characters in the novel is *musical* change, marked by physicality, motion, and repetition. Finally, like the *Republic*, the novel is structured musically. Frazier seems to be reaching for an extra dimension in the writing of his narrative, resulting in a novel that plays with the linking and contrasting of voices, images, phrases, actions, and questions across time and space.¹²

The novel weaves together the stories of two main characters like alternating parts of a fiddle tune filled with longing. Both Inman and Ada struggle to survive — literally, to eat — and to find their way home to Cold Mountain. Ada’s “journey,” metaphorical in the sense that she is already on Cold Mountain, is no less physical than Inman’s. The two voices meet only in their shared memories of a brief and inconclusive romance and in their final reunion near the end of the novel. In the final third of the novel, the story of another character — Stobrod the fiddler, neglectful father of Ada’s friend Ruby — breaks into this pattern with a third, explicitly musical voice.¹³

Like refrains, images and animals punctuate the novel and create both continuity and rhythm. They interlace Inman’s story with Ada’s, in a counterpoint that is the material of this love story. This is otherwise a strange romance. The two lovers are separated for far more time than they spend together. The novel begins four years into their separation, with their brief romance only told as memory. Their remembered time together is awkward, with Inman saying almost nothing and Ada sharp and defensive. Only as their two stories intertwine in the musical space of the novel do the two become able to share in one another’s lives, opening up not only speech but also a common sense of a worthwhile life.

At the center of the novel, Ada and Ruby, walking home at dusk, come upon a great blue heron standing in the river, staring intently down at the water.

The heron stared down into the water with fierce concentration.... [H]is staring so heedfully into the water reminded Ada of Narcissus, and to further their continuing studies of the Greeks, she told Ruby a brief version of the tale.

— That bird's not thinking about himself at all, Ruby said, when Ada finished the story. (CM, 192)

Three images that run backward and forward through the novel intersect here: the heron, the monk, and Narcissus. These link Ada's thoughts and experiences to Inman's in spite of — or even by means of — the distance that separates them. The heron strikes Ada as a solitary bird, but also a mystical one:

She knew by the look of him that his nature was anchorite and mystic. Like all of his kind, he was a solitary pilgrim, strange in his ways and governed by no policy or creed common to flocking birds.... She had seen a scant number in her life, and those so lonesome as to make the heart sting on their behalf. Exile birds. Everywhere they were seemed far from home. (CM, 193)

Inman, too, sees the heron as an exemplar of loneliness. At the novel's beginning, he feels "lonesome and estranged from all around him as a sad old heron standing pointless watch in the mudflats of a pond lacking frogs" (CM, 22). But Inman's Cherokee friend Swimmer has also described the character of the heron as "grim single-mindedness," and conferred the same quality on Inman (CM, 21).

Multiple images of Inman overlap in this moment, for he is not only lonesome, exile, far from home, but also in his own way anchorite. The language of Ada's thought links the heron to her vision, early in the book, of a shadowy figure walking down a road, a vision Ada associates with the tune *Wayfaring Stranger*: "A black silhouette of a figure moved as if walking, but the image was too vague to tell if it approached or walked away. But wherever it was bound, something in its posture suggested firm resolution" (CM, 49).

A more dangerous edge of Inman's existence echoes in the heron's gazing — seeing what? — into the water. In one of Inman's bleakest moments, he has been so long alone and hungry that he seems more like an animal than a man. The image inverts Ada's remembrance of Narcissus; Inman turns away from his own face.

He found himself one afternoon crawling on the mossy ground of the creekside, grazing at the water edge like a beast of the wild, his head wet to the ears, the sharp taste of cress in his mouth and no idea whatsoever in his mind. He looked down into the pool and caught sight of his visage looking up at him, wavery and sinister, and he immediately frabbed his fingers in the water to break up the image for he had no desire to look upon himself. (CM, 299)

Instead, he wishes to become a bird and fly up beyond the reach of people. Inman's wish that he could be bird, not human, echoes a song that Stobrod sings to Ada and Ruby: "More wonderful and horrible still was the human voice speaking the song's words, wishing away its humanity to ease the pain inflicted by lost love, love betrayed, love left unexpressed, wasted love" (CM, 380). Ada determines that neither her life, nor Inman's, should be thus given over to resentment and pain. At the end of the novel, she draws Inman, and herself, back, with human touch, "a loving hand laid soft and warm on shoulder, back, leg" (CM, 410).

Frazier challenges us to learn to listen for these resonances. The associations between Inman's heron and Ada's and Ruby's take shape in the memory of the reader, the way that a melody, heard one passing note at a time, only takes shape in memory. But the world so articulated seems to have a new dimension of fullness to it, not hemmed in by narrative's linearity. A chart gives some sense of this musicality (see Figure 2). Those who are familiar with sheet music will see that the chart *looks like* music; it resembles a duet. While the arrows on the chart show only one group of images as they entwine, oppose, and intersect, the chart notes a number of other images that might also be similarly traced. The recurrence of images in the novel is both rhythmic, giving a sense of regularity, and polyphonic, passing back and forth between distinct voices.¹⁴ Like Plato's music, Frazier's is subtle, and carefully composed.

Frazier links the music *of* the novel to the music *in* the novel, so that as Inman becomes the "Wayfaring Stranger," the novel becomes a rewriting of that bluegrass hymn.¹⁵ The hope expressed in the song becomes a hope not for escape to heaven, but for a life of "contentment," a life in which scars are carried with us and work never ceases, but in which fragrant harmonies offer some hope of redemption.

Cold Mountain aims to tune us. The music of the novel reaches out to shape our attitudes toward knowledge, spirituality, and life, challenging us on several fronts to examine and perhaps retune our ways of being in the world. As we read it, we practice a kind of knowing that does not harm ourselves or other living things, a discipline of attending that involves knowing the names of particular things, and an understanding that a fully human life is one lived in relationship with others. In its central mountain and in its artfully structured musicality, its attention to the nature of knowledge and to the question of the shape of a life well-lived, the novel is in continuity with Plato's *Republic*. Like that text, it rewrites religion in ways it deems necessary to make a good life possible. But the new faith here carries us closer to the world, not further from it. In its focus on embodiment, on calluses and scars, on the twisting of pegs and the swooping of the bow and the hand fraying against the banjo, it insists that the good life is an embodied one, one shaped by what Ada names "rituals of concern" (*CM*, 134). It sings us a song for a time when space for us to live fully human lives seems to be shrinking, when the constraints of our economy and the deterioration of the natural world have become apparent. In the face of such circumstances, it reminds us how to remember, to mourn, and to touch — that is, how to be fully human beings.

If Plato and Frazier are right, that education is soul work, and that books can call us toward rhythms and tunings, then it might make us look at books with new regard. There might be a moral dimension — a function of tuning — to all kinds of books that we normally don't think about in this way. In response, Plato would have us ask, What kind of world are we taught to recognize? What kind of selves are we called to become? Charles Frazier's question would be: What things are worth knowing?

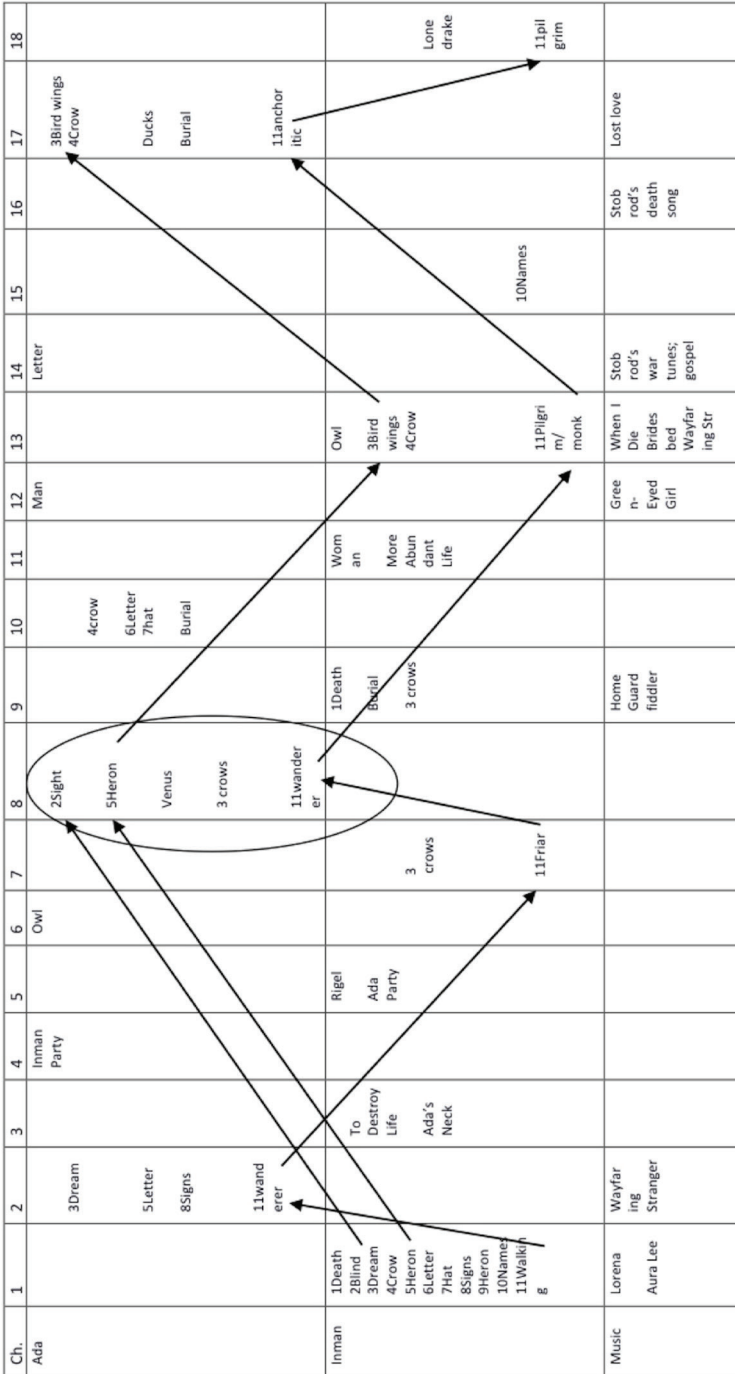


Figure 2. Images and animals punctuate the novel and create both continuity and rhythm.

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1. Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain*, (New York: Grove Press, 1997). This work will be cited as *CM* in the text for all subsequent references.
 2. So the dialogue shares with Frazier's novel (and maybe even Adam Smith's essays) the irreducibility of its content. A summary here is no more adequate a representation of Plato's intent than a summary of *Cold Mountain* would be of Frazier's. In both cases, the experience of reading the book as a whole carries meaning that cannot be summarized.
 3. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 432b–d.
 4. Adi Ophir, *Plato's Invisible Cities: Discourse and Power in the Republic* (London: Routledge, 1991), 134. This work will be cited as *PIC* in the text for all subsequent references.
 5. Or, to think of it another way, they all *hang* or *depend upon* the question of the Good, a dependence that we *experience*.
 6. Eva Brann, "The Music of the Republic," in *The Music of the Republic: Essays on Socrates' Conversations and Plato's Writings* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004).
 7. *Ibid.*, 140. Brann uses "conversion" in the text, but I use "convert" here for the purposes of this sentence.
 8. This is a complex text, and the language of conversion, in its fully religious sense, is every bit as apt as the language of seduction. I elaborate on this point below.
 9. Brann, *The Music of the Republic*, 140.
 10. *Ibid.*, 155.
 11. *Ibid.*, 157.
 12. Novelists have experimented in a number of different ways with the possibilities for musicality of text. While music seems to fade from ethics, it is rediscovered by fiction as a sister-art. See, for example Alex Aronson, *Music and the Novel: A Study in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), ix.
 13. Portions of this section were presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion (SECSOR) in March, 2005, in a presentation entitled "Many Worse Things to Know: The Ethics of Knowledge in Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*."
 14. In a complex analysis, Stephen Benson explores the application of the term "polyphony" to narrative literature by Mikhail Bakhtin and Milan Kundera. The writer of a "polyphonic novel" faces a difficult task, "the maintenance of the independence of elements (voice, motif, genre) within a paradoxically indivisible whole." Stephen Benson, "For Want of a Better Term? Polyphony and the Value of Music in Bakhtin and Kundera," *Narrative* 11: 292–311.
 15. Sarah E. Baker writes persuasively that Ernest J. Gaines's novel *A Lesson Before Dying* is a "literary spiritual." "Ernest J. Gaines and A Lesson Before Dying: The Literary Spiritual," in *Literature and Music*, ed. M. J. Meyer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 117. Baker's article served as a helpful model for considering how a novel might be musically structured.