Anxiety
As long as the mind is there, there is no sublime. This is a feeling that is incompatible with time, as is death.
Jean-François Lyotard

Introduction
In the preceding chapters I have tried to point out the following. On the one hand, I have indicated the significance of (proto-)Romantic ideas on instrumental music to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions on the limits and possibilities of an artificially-induced sublime. Before and during the Romantic era, instrumental music was already claimed to inhere the indeterminacy that had been a first requirement for the artistic sublime since the days of Burke. Indeed, I have shown in chapter 4, in so far as the aesthetics of the sublime signalled an aesthetics of the infinite, instrumental music in its Romantic conceptions and realisations was granted a special position: its semantic and material indeterminacy familiarly embodied the indefiniteness marking the idea of the infinite. Later on, by the time of Wagner, Nietzsche, and Seidl, music was explicitly claimed as an art of the sublime rather than the beautiful: allegedly bypassing the world of appearances, it would not fit the self-subsistent, plastic-based forms of the beautiful, but rather conformed to the irregularity, otherness, and formlessness of the sublime.

On the other hand, and as it were in reverse, I have sketched the impact of the cult of the sublime on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical culture and practices. As I have shown in chapter 3, and up to a degree also in chapter 6, the musical sublime here often manifested itself in its traditional, more intimidating aspect. Thus, the sublime in music was associated with a pathos of mighty transport, or of delightful terror; with a rhetoric of artistic bravery and heroism, or of aesthetic unruliness; with a power of demonic possession, or of uncanny dispossession. It was associated with a pathos of elevation (still resounding in Seidl’s theory of the musically sublime), but also with a pathos of emancipation: with a wayward experimenting and a sense-confounding Formwidrigkeit.

At the same time, I have tried to show how the interaction between ideas of the sublime and the musical opened the way for a rereading of the sublime feeling differing signally from its normative conception. Or, differently said, most of the ‘alternative’ readings of the sublime that I have traced in chapters 2, 4, and 5 in one way or another converged with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas on instrumental music and musical experience. Even in Lyotard’s critical rereading of the sublime as a postmodern, no-longer-Romantic sublime the idea of the musical could, for that matter, still be heard to echo. Thus, Barnett
Newman’s paintings would stage the postmodern sublime in a way that exactly corresponded to Romantic and formalist ideas of musical (self-)presentation. Indeed, Lyotard explicitly referred to these paintings as soundings: the viewer, we have seen, is here “no more than an ear open to the sound which comes to it from out of the silence” (Lyotard 1998: 83). As a sublime ‘event’, the painting is for Lyotard like an aural event, fragile and elusive, seemingly unforeseen and uncontrollable.

Recent critical reworkings of this postmodern sublime could, however, not quite solve all the problems relative to the normative, Kantian model of the sublime feeling. Thus, I have shown, van de Vall’s elaboration on the Lyotardian sublime experience as a creative experience still held fast to the idea of a self-surpassing subject central to the Kantian sublime experience. Moreover, and in relation to this, van de Vall’s theory never quite succeeded in moving beyond the canon narrative structure of the Kantian sublime. It could, that is to say, not account for the sublime feeling as an internally divided feeling of pain and pleasure at the same time, captured in an aporetic structure of undecidability. Even Lyotard’s concept of the differend was, for that matter, not entirely equipped to deal with this undecidability, positing, as it did, the conflict at the heart of the sublime in terms of an unbridgeable opposition instead of an internal duality.

In this chapter I will, therefore, try to (re)process these ideas of irresolvability and conflicting simultaneity already traced in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ‘alternative’ readings of the sublime feeling within a contemporary critical framework. A framework, in which the subject is notably no longer thought in Kantian fashion as a wholesome and autonomous entity, but as a fragmented, self-divided and chaotic complexity: as difference instead of identity. In this context, which in some respects converges with the irresolvable existential conflict central to Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean philosophy, I will propose the following two possibilities to (re)think the sublime feeling. This concerns, on the one hand, an experience that is not an experience and, on the other, an experience that is not one. The first possibility recalls Nietzsche’s (sublime) experience of Rausch as an experience that cannot be borne, assimilated, or contained by the subject. This will lead me to reconsider the sublime feeling in terms of a traumatic experience: an experience that is somehow missed, that cannot be processed or retrieved and for that reason cannot be (fully) resolved and overcome. The second possibility is loosely connected to the Burkean experience of the artificial infinite, and will be considered in critical relation to the Freudian repetition compulsion. Ultimately, it will be seen, these two alternatives to the normative, Kantian conception of the sublime are intimately related and can indeed be regarded as two aspects of the same, failed or missed experience. Thus, though the difference between these two aspects of an alternative sublime feeling can be roughly defined as a

---

1I would like to thank Arjo Vanderjagt for these remarks.
difference between the dynamical (trauma) and mathematical (repetition) sublime, it will be seen that the latter can nevertheless also be considered a symptom of the former.

With respect to both these aspects, I will show how the resistance to closure that I deem symptomatic of the sublime feeling can be thought in specific relation to both contemporary and Romantic music. As for the first possibility – an experience that is not an experience – this concerns what I will call a break in conventional musical contexts, a sudden rupture within an otherwise ‘normal’ or conventional musical setting. With respect to the second possibility – an experience that is not one – this mainly concerns the irresolvable experiential double-bind generated by present-day repetitive music. Rethinking the sublime feeling in these two ways, I will show what a sublime experience of music could amount to within a present-day critical perspective as a musical listening that at once contradicts the traditional conditions of possibility of tonal listening.

**Mental Suspension**

In chapter 5, I have described how Nietzsche’s experience of *Rausch* can be read as, if you will, an unlived experience of the sublime. The moment when the subject can see through the destructive pattern of things and feels herself extending into, or partaking of, an infinite life-Will is as brief as it is uncontrollable. It is experienced beyond the bounds of consciousness and can, indeed, only be experienced when the subject momentarily loses or forgets herself as a subject. This forgetfulness radically detaches the Dionysian reality from the everyday world: the two are separated by a gulf of oblivion that cannot be mediated or traversed. A differend, one might say, of two unbridgeable and irreconcilable states. This differend carries with it the implication that the ‘insightful’ experience of a consciousness-suspending instant, painful and pleasurable at once, cannot fully pervade the waking subject as a subject: that the delight it issues cannot be fully felt or recalled. That, differently said, the delight is instantly forgotten in the immediate loss of the instant. It does not stick, and it cannot be retrieved.

By the same logic, one could imagine the experience of an extreme shock – such as a shock facing one with one’s own mortality – exceeding the assimilative powers of consciousness in such a degree that it cannot be included or retained within the bounds of consciousness. It passes through, so to speak, but it cannot be passed on to the schemes and networks of consciousness that see to its proper processing and sedimentation. Like the Nietzschean experience of *Rausch*, but lacking its dominant element of Dionysian ecstasy, one could imagine the experience of such an extreme shock as an experience that cannot be borne: that, indeed, ceases to be an experience in so far as – in Kantian philosophical terms – an experience is conditioned and directed by the forms of perception, the networks of memory (imagination), and the categories of understanding. It constitutes, precisely, a break in the context that normally enables one
to mentally process and appropriate things within the pre-figured world of time and space.

The failed ‘experience’ I am here alluding to has since the days of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud been known as a traumatic experience: an intrusive experience of an overwhelming and often terrifying event that, as Judith Herman has rightly pointed out, is no so much out-of-the-ordinary because it occurs rarely, outside the range of everyday life, but because it overthrows and interrupts “the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman 1994: 33). “Traumatic events”, she continues, "generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe" (ibid.: 33). Or, more precisely, traumatic events are those events for which no context is (as yet) available to deal with them in an effective way: to place or situate these events, to associate them with previous experiences in the networks of memory, and to thus integrate them in existing meaning schemes. These events cannot be adapted to or embedded within the mental apparatus so that, I will explain more fully below, they are somehow stored differently, outside the range of memory and even outside the range of language. The peculiar force of psychic trauma, as Cathy Caruth has elaborated on Dori Laub, “is marked by its lack of registration” – it constitutes “a record that is yet to be made” (Caruth 1995: 6).

In a way comparable to the Burkean existential sublime and the Kantian dynamical sublime, psychic trauma thus revolves around a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, a loss of control, and threat of annihilation. However, it never more than in a way resembles these two varieties of the sublime feeling. Firstly, traumatic events are precisely those events that are marked by a lack of distance, a lack of mediation. Such events are not only ‘too much’, they are also ‘too close’: they crush or overwhelm, they interrupt, indeed, the mediating activity of mind that otherwise pre-figures what Kant called phenomenal reality, and processes the manifold of experience (Ankersmit 2001: 312). Yet in Burke’s existential sublime, and more prominently so in Kant’s dynamical sublime, the experience of terror and helplessness is always mediated to the extent that it concerns only a fictional or imaginary threat: the (Kantian) subject never more than imagines itself being faced with a mortal danger, and is only overwhelmed from a safe distance. Indeed, it is the consistent awareness of one’s own safety that prevents the Kantian experience of the dynamical sublime from becoming a traumatic experience. As such, and as I have shown, this is not so much an experience of helplessness as an experience that is very much controlled and even exploited by the transcendental subject as a ‘moral person’.

However, Ankersmit has recently made the intriguing suggestion with respect to Burke that precisely the indirectness of the experience of
the sublime points to a possible connection with trauma. Thus, he argues:

When Burke speaks about ‘tranquillity tinged with terror’ this tranquillity is possible (as Burke emphasizes) thanks to our awareness that we are not really in danger. Hence, we have distanced ourselves from a situation of real danger – and in this way, we have dissociated ourselves from the object of experience. The sublime thus provokes a movement of de-realization by which reality is robbed of its threatening potentialities. As such, Burke’s sublime is less the pleasant thrill that is often associated with it than a pre-emptive strike against the terrible. (Ankersmit 2001: 310)

Not a cosy shivering in the full awareness of one’s own safety, but a “pre-emptive strike against the terrible”: a de-realization of an object, scene, or event that is brought about, precisely, by the inability to process this object, scene, or event in a ‘normal’ or ‘masterful’ way. A reality ‘too much’ and ‘too close’ in this way becomes a reality dispossessed (“robbed of its threatening potentialities)” and dissociated. This means, as Ankersmit proposes, that the sublime, like trauma, can be said to be “both extremely direct and extremely indirect” (ibid.: 310). That is to say, both trauma and the sublime refer to an experience that is too direct because it precludes or at least seriously undermines ‘normal’ – i.e. active – assimilation. At the same time, however, such an experience is “abnormally indirect” since we cannot face this directness and, precisely because of this, we dissociate ourselves from it and thus remain, in a way, external to it. From the latter perspective, both sublime and traumatic experience strangely present themselves to us as if they were somebody else’s experience. (ibid.: 310)

This “paradox of directness and indirectness” sheds an entirely new and different light on what I would like to call the ‘as-if factor’ of the sublime feeling in its traditional connotations: the suggestion of a transferred terror (i.e. a terror that does not affect the subject but another, or affects the subject only from a distance) predominant in theories of the sublime ranging from Addison to Kant here explicitly becomes an unclaimed terror, a terror that is and cannot be fully owned, as if it were “somebody else’s experience”. Or differently said, the ‘safe distance’ claimed for the subject in the experience of the sublime is in Ankersmit’s analysis not a sign of the subject’s mastery but of his/her powerlessness and helplessness. It points to a dissociation that puts a scene, object, or event of terror at a distance because it has already come too close, because it cannot be borne.2

---

2Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart have, for that matter, observed that with respect to trauma there is “little evidence of an active process of pushing away of the
Interestingly, this intrusiveness or ‘too-closeness’ of a terrifying or otherwise overwhelming experience was already emphasized in eighteenth-century accounts of the sublime feeling. Indeed, from the very first – in, for instance, the writings of Dennis – the sublime moment has been described in terms of an astonishment that literally short-circuits the mind: that cancels out the subject, one might say, as a controlling, shaping, directing, and mediating subject. Thus, I have shown in chapter 3, Burke classifies the feeling of astonishment as “the effect of the sublime in its highest degree” and describes this intense stupefaction in Dennisian fashion as a suspension of the mental faculties: it seems to break (through) what might be called the mental protective shield as it halts the mind “with some degree of horror”, reducing it to a state of stupefied helplessness (Burke 1990: II, sect. I, 53).

In his Essays on Philosophical Subjects (1795), Adam Smith has argued in a similar vein. Distinguishing between wonder, surprise, and admiration, he associates the first with “what is new and singular”, the second with “what is unexpected”, and the third with “what is great and beautiful” (Smith [1795] 1996: 233). Of these three, unexpectedness is also a central ‘ingredient’ of the traumatic event: it is sudden, and therefore defies a proper preparedness, and it is out-of-the-ordinary in so far as a context is lacking to adapt or accommodate, and in this way adequately prepare for, it. Or, as Robert Jay Lifton has put it in an interview with Cathy Caruth, in “trauma one moves forward into a situation that one has little capacity to imagine; and that’s why it shatters whatever one had that was prospective or experiential in the past” (Caruth 1995: 137). There was nothing that could have prepared one for it, there was nothing that could have enabled one to ‘take in’ and ‘situate’ the experience, connecting it to other experiences. Interestingly, Adams in this instance emphasizes that the effect of surprise is the most violent when the mind is “in the mood most unfit to receive it” – when it lacks a tense anticipation that, as it were, prepares for an as yet unknown external shock or interruption (ibid.: 235). Without this resisting tension, which apparently protects the mind to a certain degree, such an interruption seems “to crush and bruise [the mind], as a real weight would crush and bruise the body” (ibid.: 235). The effect of the unexpected in terms of violent surprise – crucial to both the sublime feeling and the traumatic experience – thus comes down to an inability to react or respond: to ward off, or to (adequately) absorb, a terrifying encounter: an encounter that is already terrifying in its radical otherness.

Psychic Trauma

It was, of course, Freud who already pointed to this inability to respond with respect to psychic trauma in his Jenseits des Lustprinzips (Beyond the Pleasure Principle) (1920). He described such trauma in overwhelming experience; the uncoupling seems to have other mechanisms. Many trauma survivors report that they automatically are removed from the scene; they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 168). More on dissociation below.
relation to what he called a repetition compulsion (Wiederholungszwang or Wiederholungstrieb) in soldiers-survivors of World War I with an otherwise ‘normal’ psychic apparatus. Exposed to unimaginable and unendurable terrors and strains in the trenches, they were haunted in their nightmares and (anxiety-)symptoms by a continuous return to the overwhelming, terrifying or catastrophic scenes and events they had encountered. Below, I will explain more fully the mechanisms of this repetition compulsion and its relation to the Freudian death instinct. For now, I will suffice to state that what intrigued Freud about the repetition compulsion in traumatized soldiers was that – to all appearances – it had nothing to do with repression. As Caruth puts it, he was astonished by the fact that the recurrent nightmares of these soldiers could not be understood “in terms of any [repressed] wish or unconscious meaning” but rather constituted “purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one” inhabited by that event (Caruth 1995: 5). “The traumatized,” she continues, “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (ibid.: 5).

However, the question now arises, whence precisely the incessant and involuntary return? Freud proposes the following, which, in view of what we have seen above, sheds an interesting light on the possible parallels between the traumatic experience and the experience of the sublime in terms of astonishment. Thus, Freud basically argues that the compulsion to repeat in traumatized soldiers concerns the mastery of a belated experience. It is the mastery of an excess of stimuli that could not be processed or assimilated because the psychic apparatus was not prepared for it, because, indeed, the “organ of the mind” lacked “any preparedness for anxiety” (Freud [1920] 1961: 36). Interestingly, and comparable to what I have observed above with respect to Adam Smith, what is thus at issue here is that, according to Freud, “the last line of defence” against (an excess of) external stimuli is paradoxically the preparedness to be shocked (ibid.: 36). In preparing oneself for a possible shock, one also and paradoxically exposes oneself (knowingly) to this shock, like one can, for instance, anticipate – and thus resist – a physical blow in the stomach by tightening the abdominal muscles. In proper Freudian parlance, this means that anxiety [Angst], which for Freud already signals a state of expecting a possible danger, “though it may be unknown”, constitutes the last protection against fright [Schreck], which signals “the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise” (ibid.: 11). Seen in this light, the repetition at stake in traumatic neurosis concerns the repetition of a painful experience that is yet to be lived.

3Below, I will explain in more detail this notion of repetition in relation to the idea of a belated – or unlived – experience.
What this, therefore, implies is that the incessant return to a traumatic encounter in dreams and (inexplicable) symptoms primarily—and somewhat paradoxically—concerns the developing “of the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (ibid.: 37). It is as if the psychic apparatus keeps on trying retroactively to prepare itself after all for a shock that could not be processed and assimilated at the time. Typically, however, the traumatized is not (fully) aware of the fact that s/he is, again and again, developing a preparedness to be shocked—that she is retroactively fortifying a ‘last line of defence’ in the form of a felt anxiety that had not been developed, or that could not be felt, during the traumatic encounter. For as I have already noted above, this traumatic encounter typically occasions a mental suspension or numbing: the traumatic event, as Caruth puts it, is not “experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 1995: 4). The subject is no longer, or not fully, ‘there’ when the traumatic event occurs and it is this absence or open space that the trauma occupies—and continues to occupy.

Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart have, for that matter, already argued that psychic trauma revolves around a dissociative rather than—as Freud already indicated—a repressive mechanism: “Under extreme conditions”, they point out, “existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which cause the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated form conscious awareness and voluntary control” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 160). It becomes, in the terminology of Pierre Janet, a ‘fixed idea’, a piece of truncated memory that cannot be made into a story to be recounted and related, adapted and assimilated to other stories.4

Thus, outside the reach of (narrative) memory and language alike, traumatic memory remains forgotten and unforgettable at the same time. It remains forgotten because it is ‘stored’ in an “alternate stream of

---

4What Van der Kolk and Van der Hart call the “monumental legacy” of Pierre Janet’s observations on the mental processing of memory, and the failure of this processing, was largely ignored during the later part of the twentieth century—even though Janet’s views “were well known during the early part” of the twentieth century (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 159). Most significant is the distinction that Janet made between narrative memory and ‘traumatic’ memory in 1889. The former would be a “uniquely human capacity” that “consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense of experience” (ibid.: 160). It is the memory that shapes one’s experiences into a coherent and memorable story, adding and connecting others to it. The latter, however, is a ‘memory’ that defeats memory. In Janet’s words: “It is only for convenience that we speak of a ‘traumatic memory.’ The subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event; and yet he remains confronted by a difficult situation in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation has been imperfect, so that he continues to make efforts at adaptation” (ibid.: 160). Like Jean-Martin Charcot, Janet worked at La Salpêtrière Hospital, where Freud visited in 1885. Indeed, Van der Kolk and Van der Hart claim, psychoanalysis “was born on the wards of Salpêtrière” (ibid.: 164).

253
consciousness" that bypasses the networks of memory; it remains unforgettable because it has not been processed and, in that way, mastered by those same networks (ibid.: 168). It is not past, but it is not fully and stably present (to consciousness) either. It is rather mysteriously, and no less persistently, present as a trace that cannot be (fully) re-traced, a trace of a past that cannot be named, remembered, or recognized: an effect without a stable and identifiable cause or, to translate this into semiotic terms, a sign without an identifiable signified. Indeed, because the traumatic event dodges the grip of memory, it cannot be actively forgotten but rather only be passively – and unknowingly – relived, again and again. As Van der Kolk and Van der Hart echo Freud, “there is little evidence for an active process of pushing away of the overwhelming experience; the uncoupling [from consciousness] seems to have other mechanisms” – and these other mechanisms are the mechanisms of dissociation (ibid.: 168). Thus, because the traumatic event has never ‘entered’ consciousness, it cannot even be pushed ‘out of’ consciousness ‘into’ the unconscious. It cannot be ousted or forgotten as it has not been (fully) integrated into the networks of memory. Instead, it lingers on as an inexplicable and inescapable anxiety: forgotten and unforgettable at once or, as Ankersmit has put it, “neither forgotten nor remembered” (Ankersmit 1999: 13, my translation).

Music and Trauma

What Caruth has called the unclaimed experience of trauma can thus be paralleled with the experience of the sublime in so far as the latter revolves around an astonishment – a mental suspension or interruption – in which the mind’s ‘last line of defence’ is, if not broken entirely, then at least ruptured severely (Caruth 1996). Indeed, Ankersmit has stated, the “trauma is the sublime and vice versa and at the bottom of both is an experience of reality which shatters to pieces all our certainties, beliefs, and expectations” (Ankersmit 1999: 9). Or at least, I would say, traumatic experience can be posited as a twentieth-century (alternative) version of the eighteenth-century experience of the sublime. As such, it is notably no longer directed at grand and violent nature with a triumphant, autonomous subject towering above it, but at massive, man-made atrocities (WW I, the Holocaust, Hiroshima) that attest to the utter failure of the humanist project. Instead of an experience of elevation – that, Geoffrey Hartman comments, “would seen impossible here” – this twentieth-century alternative to the traditional sublime feeling signals precisely an inability to overcome and come to terms with events that (still) defy imaginative and also conceptual grasp (Hartman 1992: 322).

Much has been written on the topic (cf. Lyotard 1988; Lang 1992; Hartman 1992; Friedlander 1992, 1993; Caruth 1995; LaCapra 1998; Ankersmit 1999, 2001), but here I will restrict myself to the way in which the particular structure of the traumatic experience can be taken as a
starting point to (re)read the sublime feeling as a feeling that cannot be unequivocally or satisfactorily resolved – that, indeed, contradicts its own resolution. Instead of closure and transcendence, there is here a pattern of (potentially endless) repetition; instead of the proverbial cathartic moment, the subject is trapped in an experience that is inaccessible (forgotten) and irremovable (unforgettable) at the same time – trapped in what Lyotard has called in *Heidegger et ‘les juifs’* (*Heidegger and ‘the jews’*) (1988, 1990) a “paradox of the immemorial”: a paradox of not being able to remember a shock or psychic blow, and yet precisely because of that, having to relive it again and again; to remember without being aware of the fact that one is constantly being forced to remember (Lyotard [1988] 1990: 12). With respect to psychic trauma, I have shown, this paradox thus does not so much pertain to a radical and irreconcilable opposition between forgetting and unforgetting, as to an interweaving or interlocking of the two: the event remains unforgettable in the forgetting of it, in its lack of inscription. It returns because it was not owned and cannot, as such, be retrieved, it is (not) past and (not) present at the same time.

Yet how, the question now arises, can this paradoxical structure of the traumatic ‘experience’ be thought with respect to art, and the art of music in particular? This is a most pertinent question as it concerns a transposition of the merely psycho-pathological into the aesthetic, a translation, more specifically, of the traumatic into the domain of the sublime as an (an)aesthetics of shock.

Evidently (though granting possible exceptions) art – music – cannot ‘traumatize’ in the way that real-life assaults and catastrophes can, if only because art is already in itself a mediation, presenting at best a possible or imaginary world. Still, it could well be proposed that certain musics can be heard to voice or stage a rupture embodying or performing the rupture of trauma: a rupture that resists narrative integration and, as such, resists an inclusive synthesis. This is not (necessarily) to say that a composer somehow deliberately ‘intended’ to stage a traumatic experience – since Roland Barthes we have, after all, moved past the myth of authorial intention – but that certain musics can be said to display or enact the (violent) break in the context, the paradox of the immemorial, and, in relation to this, the inability of closure or resolution that also typifies the ‘experience’ of trauma. In a way, this is also, and perhaps already, to say that such a traumatic embodiment in music need not be restricted to contemporary musics dealing explicitly with the irresolvable ruptures in (or: outside) twentieth-century history. Though the notion of psychic trauma has been claimed as a typically twentieth-century alternative version of the sublime in contemporary theory, I show in the following that the unclaimed experience of trauma – as a break in the context of ‘ordinary’ experience – can nonetheless already be made fully manifest in nineteenth-century Romantic music. Indeed, I argue, the sublime-as-trauma can perhaps be most clearly thought in relation to Romantic music because here an
accommodating, narrative context is still openly preserved that can at all be broken in the manner of a fissure within ‘ordinary’ perceptual frameworks.

**Interruption and Repetition**

In *The Romantic Generation* Charles Rosen has indicated how the idea of involuntary memory can be ‘heard into’ Romantic music. He here traces the idea of involuntary memory to Ramond de Carbonnière’s *Observations faites dans les Pyrenées* (*Observations made in the Pyrenees*) (1789). As Rosen quotes Ramond:

> There is something mysterious in odours which powerfully awaken the remembrance of the past... I do not know what sweeter instants of my life the flowering lime tree witnessed, but I felt keenly that it stirred fibres that had long been tranquil... I took pleasure in this vague reverie so near to sadness, aroused by the images of the past; I extended on to Nature the illusion that she had caused to be born, by uniting with her, in an involuntary movement, the times and the events of which she had stirred up the memory.

(Rosen 1995: 151)

This, Rosen comments, “is already, fully developed, the Proustian theory of memory: the most powerful and profound memories are those that cannot be consciously recovered, that can only be called up from the past involuntarily by sensations of taste or smell” (ibid.: 152). Taking this notion of involuntary memory to be a typically Romantic memory, a memory in spite of itself, Rosen then proceeds to show how it can be heard to echo in Romantic song cycles. Thus, he points to the postlude of the last (sixteenth) song of Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, op. 48 (1840), “Die alten bösen Lieder” (“The Old Evil Songs”). Here, the piano part to the final section of the twelfth song, “Am leuchtende Sommermorgen” (“On a Gleaming Morning in Summer”) returns in its literal form. This last section was in itself already a postlude – a new theme, as Rosen emphasizes, “not motivically related to the main body of the piece” (ibid.: 208). Suspending the vocal line, the piano here “does not so much continue the song as offer a melody of its own, which is like a meditation or commentary on what had preceded” (ibid.: 208).

In the last song of *Dichterliebe* the postlude returns in its literal if also a more extended form, neither as “a da capo” or “a formal close”: it is nothing more, or less, than the memory of the postlude heard in the twelfth song (ibid.: 210). Thus, as the literal echo of a postlude that once more becomes a postlude, once more suspending the vocal line, the last section of “The Old Evil Songs” constitutes a return of the past that is “unmotivated by any convention of form or even by the demands of the text” (ibid.: 210). It appears “spontaneous, an involuntary memory, governed by a law of its own”: a movement that returns, that is stirred anew for apparently no necessary, logical reasons whatsoever (ibid.:
Still, I would say that this return is not without a (dramatic) function within the song cycle as a whole and the last song in particular. Revolwing as it does around the attempt to bury the past – to bury the “old and evil songs,/ the dreams so evil and bad” in a huge and heavy coffin to “sink my love/ and my sorrow in it” – Schumann’s setting to “The Old and Evil Songs” undermines its own resolution. In re-invoking the postlude of the twelfth song – and re-invoking it apparently despite itself – the last song at once revokes or rebuts the resolve to bury the past and sink it deep in the sea: after the words are voiced, the past returns unbidden. As such, the postlude returns once again as an ironic commentary to the words sung.

Later, Rosen refers to such returns as “the unfinished workings of the past in the present” – a phrase well-suited to psychic trauma as well (ibid.: 218). Indeed, what involuntary memory shares with psychic trauma is that it is unwilled or uncalled-for and that, as such, it is not fully owned: a memory that cannot be ‘recovered’ by the conscious mind but returns unbidden. However, while this may equally involve a shock – a shock, perhaps, of the unexpected – involuntary memory is not by definition a ‘traumatic memory’: judging from Ramon and, later, Proust, the former typically refers to a blissful experience of the past (though it is often accompanied by the painful recognition that the past is no longer, or exists only as an illusory never-never land), while the latter refers to a past that could not be assimilated due to its very painful overwhelmingness and can, to that extent, not be overcome in the present. Traumatic memory, one could say, haunts and breaks a dispossessed subject, whereas involuntary memory beckons and (ful)fills an unsuspecting subject. Nevertheless, in spite of this, Rosen’s argument is of relevance here because it indicates how the idea of unwilled memory, or the unwilled return of the past, can be presented as embodied musical movement. The question now is: can musical movement also be heard and presented as embodying an unwilled return of the past in a specifically traumatic aspect?

In Romantic piano music, perhaps the most obvious and dramatic example is what pianist Alfred Brendel has still recently referred to as belonging to “the bravest and most shocking” pieces ever produced in music: the middle section of Franz Schubert’s Andantino from the Sonata in A major, D 959 (1828, 1838) (Brendel [1990] 1996: 87, my translation). The Andantino starts with one of the most beautiful-melancholic themes in Romantic piano literature: a lamenting melody in the right hand and a smoothly swinging figure in the bass (fig. 1). Seemingly harmless and

5Alternatively, perhaps, it could be suggested that the postlude constitutes what Rosen calls the “instrumental resolution” to the last notes of the singer: the songs are buried and sunken in the instrumental postlude that also appeared in the twelfth song (Rosen 1995: 210). Indeed, to Rosen’s mind the “improvisatory cadence which now rounds off the reappearance of the postlude is more satisfying than its initially laconic and more mysterious playing” (ibid.: 210). This would mean that the past is as it were resolved or ‘worked-through’ in the (unbidden) return of it.
resigned, and very much in the nature of a song, there is nevertheless something deadly, something faintly disturbing to the Andantino’s first 68 measures: it is a music that continuously turns back on itself, a music that seems to hold itself back. Thus, on the one hand, the melody constantly spins round and reiterates its initial notes, never evolving or developing beyond its own beginning. It is held in suspense, always moving in on itself again. Similarly, the swinging figure in the bass sustains and echoes itself throughout the first movement, in this way creating a similar suspension of progress and development. Only after the first 68 measures, the music starts to wander – literally wander away tip-toed in a cadence toward the edge of an abyss. This edge is first of all marked by a transition from F♯ minor to the distant key of C minor in m. 85. Rapidly, the music now undermines and loses its own ground, as if having moved past a point of no return, and disintegrates into an explosion via chromatic steps (mm. 101-122). Here, one may say, music ceases to be music in the context of earlier nineteenth-century conventions: what follows is a series of freakish improvisations or outbursts patched together without any thematic coherence or harmonic development. The music never more than tries a series of unexpected keys, rather than fully exploring them. Also in other respects, the destabilizing centre of the Andantino is most literally a transgressing of the boundaries of ‘good’ form, a breaking of the law: shrill, piercing sounds, speedily moving from the highest to the lowest registers of the piano and progressing in wave-like, unpredictable movements as if it were a storm increasing (mm. 103-107), abating (mm. 107-109), increasing (mm. 111-114), abating (mm. 115-116), and once more increasing (mm. 117-122), followed by a sudden and tense silence. Especially in mm. 103-104 and mm. 112-115, moreover, the simultaneity of very high and low, dissonant tones almost breaks the music apart. It seems to be conditioned by a law of its own, operating in the absence of an overall theme and feeding mainly on chromatic scales that defer, if here not expel, the possibility of a resolution.

The chaos appears to reach its peak in mm. 113-114, when the high-registered melodic E minor scale in the right hand of m. 113 is accompanied by a low, obstinate minor second (A♯-B), the music splitting apart and losing all sense of purpose, as if it were a disintegration within a disintegration (cf. Kloppenburg 1997: 231-234). In m. 114, the scale is transposed to the bass as a chromatic scale on C (the bass-line of mm. 111-113 already being chromatic) in a wave-like movement (ibid.: 232). The right hand here builds up a climax that is, however, suddenly cut short: what would have been the climax on E is unexpectedly without an accent, the sequence now falling apart into the chromatic triplets and their Lisztian-avant-la-lettre tremolo counterparts in the bass of mm. 116-119. Mm. 119-121 build up obstinately toward the climax in m. 122, but it is more like an impotent pounding out of the same chord exhausting itself out until the sharp fffz-halt in C♯ minor of m. 122. Cunningly, this chord only appears as closure
and in fact heralds a new series of ‘break-ins’. After its tense silence – a silence more tense than all the violence that preceded it – proceed a number of aftershocks that follow the same pattern of violent outbreak and dead silence (mm. 122-130).

These repetitive tutti-strikes, one could say, constitute at once a dramatic point of rupture – the music being reduced to a broken recitative with interrupting attacks – and a breaking point where the explosive middle section is suddenly smoothed out and reversed into a transitional stage leading back to the theme of the first part. This smoothing out is notably achieved by the transformation of the intrusive ‘attack-chords’ in mm. 122-130 into the softened arpeggio’s in the bass of mm. 133-144 (I will get back to this below). Something of a struggle remains, though, as if the music were trying to come to terms retroactively with its own irruption. With a hesitation in mm. 145-146, the movement then directs itself via a song-like accompaniment in sixteenths to what seems its initial position.

However, the beginning is not what it was before: it resonates with an echo on C♯ indicating a rest or residue, something left behind that continues to make itself heard in the (re)sounding of the initial theme – a literal resounding that, to use a phrase from Brendel, precisely “obstructs an easy return to the beginning” (Brendel 1996: 91). It seems, or hears, as if something irreversible has happened that cannot be silenced in the present, a gap that cannot be bridged and manifests itself as a resonance up-setting and hovering persistently over the opening melody (mm. 159-172). The bass, meanwhile, does not presume its opening movement but continues to be heard in sixteenths – an echo, perhaps, of the interrupted recitative in mm. 123-130. In mm. 177-184, this resonance evolves into a new voice in counterpoint that pierces and upsets more glaringly the opening melody.

In this way, Lawrence Kramer has observed, the return of the “plaintive melody” is “doubly disturbed” and cannot reach (full) closure:

[It is disturbed] by a stabbing counterpoint above it and a new, uneasily rocking accompaniment below. The closing measures avoid – or more exactly, dispel – a cadence and die away deep in the bass on a nerveless plagal progression (iv-i [prolonged] –i). The harmony forms an intimation that the seemingly bygone violence is cyclical, unexhausted. The plagal progression, right down to its voice-leading, is identical to the earlier progression that forms the transition to the disruptive interlude (mm. 65-68).6

---

6In modern music, a plagal progression refers to a cadence in which the chord of the tonic is preceded by that of the subdominant. Originally, ‘plagal’ was distinguished from ‘authentic’ in the Church modes (scales). A derivative from the latter, because it has the final (the tonic note of a church mode) in the middle of the compass rather than having a range extending from the final to the octave above, it was alluded to by means of the prefix ‘hypo’: Hypodoric instead of Doric, etc.
And indeed, mm. 195-200 re-invoke rather than dispel or transcend the outbreak of the “disruptive interlude” in their immediate similarity to mm. 63-68, so that this repetition as it were intimates another repetition: the return of the violent rupture. Or, more precisely, as at once a repetition and a slight differentiation of mm. 65-68, the “nerveless” repetitive movement on F♯ minor in mm. 196-202 suggests a movement of return instead of resolution. For despite the soft arpeggiated chords (that once again achieve little more than a superficially smoothing things out, a smoothing already disturbed by its own echo) and despite the almost over-insistent restatement of the tonic at the very end, was not the same be-octaved and repeated F♯ minor in mm. 64-68 also the onset to the violent rupture in the middle section? On this basis, therefore, Kramer proposes that the harmony in the final bars suggests that “bygone violence is cyclical, unexhausted”: instead of a conclusion, the ending of the Andantino alludes to a violence always threatening to come back, to a past that cannot be transcended. The music ends in the way in which it started to disintegrate, and if it is thus a “bygone” violence that is suggested to be cyclical here, this is really to say that the return to an “unexhausted”, not-quite-bygone violence is cyclical, cannot be warded off.

**The Traumatic Break of the Sublime**

Seen in this light, the Andantino can be most obviously said to embody or perform a traumatic movement in that it revolves around the (unwilled) return to a violent irruption that could not be fully overcome: around an intrusive past. This failure of overcoming already manifests itself in the all too fragile transition from the explosive middle section to the re-instatement of the opening melody. As I have noted, what happens here is that the blasting tutti-chords are simply smoothed out and literally tuned down in the form of arpeggio’s: they are not removed, they are not resolved, they are merely covered up. One is reminded here of what James Williams observed with respect to Turner’s *The Devil’s Bridge* in elaborating on Lyotard’s notion of the differend: there is a bridge but not one that you feel is passable. The impact of the entire explosion seems, for that matter, too sharp and too deep to allow for any such a final and conclusive way out – the contrast is too dramatic to be fully and convincingly resolved or harmonized.

As such, it could be suggested that while the sudden change from the ‘attack-chords’ to the arpeggiated chords points to some sort of immediate forgetting (a covering up, an instant resumption to ‘normalcy’), it is a forgetting that at once fosters its own undermining, that harbours an un-forgetting. For the problem is that the sudden and seemingly unmotivated change from the final attacks in mm. 124-130 to the over-sweet arpeggio’s of mm. 133-144 suggests, precisely, a lack of registration, a lack of power to assimilate and neutralise the violence: the chords continue to sound, the attacks are still ‘there’, even though they have become inaudible as attacks. The violence, to recall
Ankersmit, is here dispossessed, but it nevertheless continues to possess the music. This possession, I have shown, is reinforced by the fact that the ‘forgotten’ continues to assert itself as a disturbance of the present (in the echo’s and accompaniment of the resumed melody) and finally even manifests itself as an unforgettable in the final plagal progression, which suggested a (cyclic) regression into a potentially still active past.

As such, the irruption of the Andantino ceases to be simply intermediary, even though this is what its traditional ABA-form suggests: beginning, middle, ending, with the wildness in-between and the smoothness on the sides. Instead, however, the irruption cannot be contained and moves as it were to the outer side, reasserting itself within, and in fact undermining the traditional function of, the last, concluding part. The latter becomes a conclusion without conclusion that no longer allows the irruption to be thought as an interruption, something that can be controlled, encapsulated, and be done with. Seen in this light, the Andantino embodies the impossibility of closure that I deem symptomatic of the shock of the sublime in its analogy with traumatic shock. Typically, this is not a shock that can by definition be transcended in a glorious or relieving moment of self-recuperation. It is, instead, a shock that remains in-tact; that persists and insists.

Still, by an evident paradox, the drama of the violence nevertheless wholly depends on the very presence of its ternary or, if you will, narrative context of beginning-middle-ending. For what is most obviously traumatic about the ‘middle’ section of the Andantino is that it manifests itself as such a violent break within the context: that it resists a complete integration in its radical discontinuity with that context. Or more precisely, the ‘middle’ section can only manifest itself as a traumatic break due to its very irruption in the ternary context of the Andantino. It is not just the break itself but rather its irreconcilable contrast or break with its ‘before’ and ‘after’ that makes it into a gaping, open wound – that makes it literally into a trauma. The familiar, narrative context of beginning-middle-ending, to paraphrase Ankersmit, is here indeed “a condition that the irruption can announce itself as such, at all, and disrupt that context in the process from the inside out (Ankersmit 1995: 113, my translation). This, of course, also extends to the Sonata in A major as a whole that incorporates and constitutes, as it were, its own rupture without the means to wholly mend or transcend it: the last chords of the Andantino continue into the following Scherzo but this by no means ‘lifts’, so to speak, the pressure of the irruption. It remains there, at once part of and severed from its immediate context, as a break that cannot be (fully) integrated.

Broken Listening

Seen in this light, Schubert’s Andantino at once reveals and ruptures its own ternary structure: it collapses at the very centre that, as a breaking-point which literally signals a breaking apart, becomes ex-centred in its looming or threatening return at the end. As such, I have
tried to show, it embodies a rupture that can never be wholly overcome or transcended: as of m. 133, the violence is dispossessed and in that sense erased, forgotten, but it nevertheless remains unforgettable in its continued disturbance of the peace. In this way, the Andantino can be said to resist the normative narrative scheme of rest-crisis-resolution that, for instance, defines the Kantian sublime experience as an experience feeding on an intermittent crisis that guarantees an ultimate closure-in-transcendence. Embodying a movement of traumatic shock that breaks through the shield of ‘ordinary’ experience without a way to integrate it within the text of convention (let alone transform it into a purposive break), the Andantino allows the shock of the sublime to be thought as an intrusion that literally in-sists.

As such, voicing a shock that cannot be contained or overcome, the Andantino could also be said to rupture a way of listening that has become dominant and conventional with respect to sonata-form-music since the earlier nineteenth century – if not, as Scott Burnham has suggested, with respect to Western tonal music at large. Thus, Burnham argues convincingly, since the canonization of Beethoven during the earlier nineteenth century, the typically Beethovenian ‘master narrative’ of rest-adversity-crisis-resolution has come to be normative for Western tonal musical listening as a whole (Burnham [1995] 2000: 3). This is a narrative listening that according to Burnham focuses on a “thematic process and development” of “struggle and renewal to a point of apotheosis”: a (canonic) narrative scheme – the very same scheme defining the Kantian sublime experience as presenting a crisis that allows the subject to reassert its autonomy with a vengeance – by which one’s listening, and a music listened to, becomes meaningful and purposive (ibid.: 122, 157). Apparently, Burnham continues, “we want our music to go somewhere, to complete a process, to integrate theme and form, subject and object, and to strive forth to a momentous and necessary conclusion” (ibid.: 153). Indeed, this narrative scheme has been so powerful that it seems as if the “musical process” conceived as a mythic plot-process of rest-adversity-crisis-resolution has “assumed the role of a Kantian transcendental category; has...become an a priori condition of hearing music” (ibid.: 161).

Though Burnham questions the validity of this assumption, it would nevertheless seem that tonal listening can hardly escape the narrative thrust – the schematised process of rest-crisis-resolution – implied in (traditional) sonata-form music. That is to say, philosophically speaking the narrative scheme that Burnham alludes to might well function as the (culturally encoded) synthesis that makes ‘tonal’ listening possible: listening to tonal music is already listening to music as a process of rest-tension-relief and, in this way, listening to it as a meaningful and purposive totality. Jos de Mul has, in this instance, also pointed to the essential goal-orientedness of tonal listening as being “largely dependent upon memory and anticipation. We may even say that these activities constitute the actual musical experience" (De Mul 1999:)
Normative, ‘tonal’ musical listening, in other words, is a listening made possible by an imaginative synthesis in which the past, the present, and the future of a musical process is integrated as a coherent whole.

One of the basic means or ‘signposts’ facilitating such as a synthesis is the presence of a tonal centre. In “Opinion or Insight?” (1926), Arnold Schoenberg already emphasized the significance of the tonic to musical comprehension: “this is the true reason for the marked development of tonality: to make what happens easily comprehensible. Tonality is not an end in itself, but a means to an end” (Schoenberg [1926] 1984: 259). The tonal centre facilitates a (tonal) listener’s mental ability to oversee a musical progression, to grasp it as an integral whole and to position herself with respect to the music. It is a point of gravitation that according to De Mul can be compared to the central perspective in painting, constituting “a specific place for the listening subject” (De Mul 1999: 128).

This specific place, as De Mul argues on the basis Ton Lemaire, is above all a differentiated place: starting in the Renaissance, the central perspective in (landscape) painting carried with it the implication of a representation of the world in which “the human figure is no longer absorbed in the world-space but rather places himself over against the world” (ibid.: 82). Or, as Lemaire phrases this connection between the rise of the central perspective and the modern subject:

…it is by means of perspective that the subject imposes his will on the world, in reducing everything visible to a manifestation of his own eyes. Perspective is thus the world made apparent for the benefit of the autonomous gaze of experience. In short: perspective is the technique of the emancipating subject to distance himself from the world, to ‘gaze through’ it, to make it transparent. (Lemaire 1970: 24, my translation)

As a (radical) reorientation, central perspective is at once an “appropriation”, an appropriation of the world through the gaze of a detached and controlling subject (ibid.: 24). As such, Lemaire concludes, the development of central perspective from the Renaissance onward signals “the self-differentiation of the subject who severs himself from the world so as to oversee and control it” (ibid.: 25).

This, one could suggest, is already the Kantian transcendental subject that represents for and by itself the only possible reality that can be cognised and experienced. It is also and already the Kantian subject of the sublime experiencing its distance from and dominion over nature – a subject taking up a superior and untouchable position of control and oversight. Seen in this light, the function and significance of central perspective can be compared to the function and significance of the tonal centre in sonata-form music in so far as the latter, like the former, is literally a point of orientation allowing a listening subject to represent a music heard as a meaningful totality. Or, as De Mul puts it, the totality of
the musical structure in sonata-form music – a structure essentially composed as a ternary structure of rest-tension-resolution, and whereby ‘tension’ and ‘resolution’ are relative to the presence of the tonic, the ‘centre’ – “appears as a representation of the representing subject”: the result of a mental act or construct (De Mul 1999: 128). The subject is here in command, having receded into a safe detachment from which it can project its own synthesising activity onto a music heard.

Granting these parallels between the tonal centre and central perspective in terms of self-representation, it could well be imagined that the unexpected absence or disintegration of a tonal centre in a music heard compromises the possibility of any such self-representation: that it momentarily disrupts the control or dominion that characterises ‘ordinary’ experience as modelled on the modern subject. Of course, this is by no means to say that all music undermining or dispensing with the tonic by definition brings about a break in the context of ‘ordinary’ experience – in fact, much a- or poly-tonal music will find yet other ways to sustain or, conversely, to disrupt the continuity of listening. However, if the tonal centre suddenly falls apart within a specifically tonal setting this catches the “autonomous gaze of experience” off-guard, leaving it with little else to feed on so as to organise and control listening as a tonal, synthetic listening. Compare it to a narrative in which the proverbial crisis – the point of convergence that gives momentum, consequence to the narrative, de-stabilising it only to re-stabilise it – unexpectedly and literally becomes a point of disintegration, with words, phrases and sentences decomposing into a chaotic web or texture, no longer appearing to make any sense at all, and frustrating a pattern of meaning to be projected. It is in a way similar to this that the ‘middle’ section of Schubert’s Andantino can be said to dramatise a break in the context of ‘ordinary’ experience as an irremediable break within tonality, as a disorientation within the context of tonal listening.

Firstly, and most obviously, this dramatisation concerns the undermining of the possibility of a harmonic centre. As I have already noted above, the Andantino’s ‘middle’ section never more than tries one unfamiliar key after another without ever settling down or even evolving toward an – at least – imaginary point of focus. Listening – tonal listening – here lacks a stronghold to steady its course and is, instead, overwhelmed by an excess of articulations that already shift and evaporate into different successions before they can be projected into a meaningful unity or, for that matter, a coherent contrast. The only structural stronghold left is the chromatic baselines and scales, but that is at best a weak stronghold, and more like a continuously shifting field than a stable focal point. Moreover, even if the presence of dissonance still always, and also in this case, implies an awareness of a key, the key relationships here remain so unfixed and indeterminate that this awareness cannot adequately serve as the basis for an at least rudimentary orientation or focalisation. Indeed, the harmonic fragmentation that destabilises the Andantino at its very core radically
prevents the possibility of recognizing any harmonic relationship with its opening part: the irruption cannot be recognized – and thus domesticated or contextualised – in the light of what went before. This impossibility of association already indicates the tension or high ‘difficulty degree’ that tonal listening is faced with in this instance: synthetic activity bumps against a sonorous matter that literally resists to be brought into relation (both internally and with respect to the first section) and in this way opposes a formative activity feeding on recall, recognition, and integration.

According to Schoenberg, this problem of recall, recognition, and association is already a characteristic of the majority of dissonances, presenting the ear “with a new and unknown situation, often a situation for which there is no analogy” (Schoenberg [1934] 1984: 282). In the Andantino, however, there are also other destabilising factors at work as regards the possibility of recall and relation. Thus, essentially Formwidrig in terms of harmony, the ‘middle’ section also resists a thematic representation: there is no possibility for a ‘peg’ to project the music as a comprehensive totality, divided into different segments or units that can be recognized and patched together. Musical memory, Schoenberg notes, is crucial to musical grasp or comprehension and depends in its turn on repetition – the repetition of a theme, idea, or motif facilitating recognition and association (Schoenberg [1930] 1984: 103). The outbreak of the Andantino, however, not so much accommodates as constantly frustrates musical memory. Moving from one fragmented figure to another in every two measures between mm. 101-112, and then regressing into what I have called a disintegration within a disintegration, the irruption lacks a theme or idea that can at all be repeated and developed. Indeed, the very fragmented and fragmenting thrust of the music seems to be directed at a thwarting of recognition, at a breaking of musical memory in its capacity to retain and relate a musical manifold so as to integrate it into a unity.

In mm. 120-122, it is true, some stronghold is regained as the music works up steadily in C minor to what would seem to become a cathartic climax: the ffz-chord of C minor. Indeed, this chord allows for a momentary sense of relief in its very brief yet powerful assertion of closure. However, and this is what in my view marks the Andantino’s sublime moment, the sense of relief generated by its assertive sounding is already subtended by a tense anticipation due to its fierce abruptness before a dead silence: as it were halting the preceding violence, it signals a climax, it peaks, and hangs suspended in one and the same movement, bringing about a mixed and confusing sense of release (tensionlessness) and indeterminacy (tension) in one. Like the extreme brevity of the Schopenhauerian sublime moment, the C minor chord at the same time discloses and forecloses an opening to relief and re-orientation as its affirmative thrust – without getting even a chance to resonate and thus sustain its potentially stabilising effect – stops short in, and is indeed already dispossessed by, a vacuum that holds listening in
suspense, depriving it of the means to direct, orient, and, if you will, prepare itself. This undermining of any sense of preparedness is then continued and reinforced in mm. 123-130. Here, the repeated intrusions of the tutti-chords – as an almost perverse echo of the C minor chord that had briefly hinted at closure and release – reduce tonal listening to a passive astonishment, with the attack-chords literally interrupting the continuity of a pre-structuring and directing musical ‘gaze’. For a moment, this ‘gaze’ is fragmented and disarmed, as it were opened an enveloped by rather than itself actively enveloping, a sensate, discontinuous sounding. A jouissance, one might say, a mixture of loss and ecstasy, that arises precisely out of a being dispossessed; of ‘ordinary experience’ being de-automised.7

Just as suddenly, this envelopment evaporates but it is not a complete evaporation, not a complete de-fragmentation. True, tonal listening rehabilitates and reorients itself after its own disintegration in mm. 133-200, yet it does not – to recall Van de Vall – achieve a new and final synthesis. This is not just because the Andantino resists a final resolution in the intimated return to its own irruption, but also because the disintegration leaves as it were a gap or hole in the totality of the synthesis of listening – a gap that, it could be suggested, returns as a hallucination in the disturbing echoes hovering above the melody in the last part and continues to resist a narrative ‘working through’. For formally there are, if you will, no leads or anchors in the last part of the Andantino to integrate and thus place the irruption in a liberating creative gesture, to relate and assimilate it with the quiet, repetitive movements that ‘frame’ it. Technically speaking, indeed, the rupture cannot be heard within the confines of tonal listening: breaking the formulaic scheme, the ‘transcendental category’, that conditions the possibility of tonal hearing, it is in excess of the habitual representations that the tonal ear is able to project. It is heard, yes, but it is at once what irrupts, disarms and suspends tonal hearing in its domesticating and paradigmatic, goal-oriented functionality.

**Repetition and Repetition**

In this way, one could imagine a broken listening that is ‘traumatic’ in an aesthetic rather than psychopathological sense: it is a discontinuous listening that in its very breaking articulates an excess which – like the sublime – subsists outside the subject-based and subject-

[7Recalling Nietzsche’s (non-)experience of Rausch, it could in this instance be proposed that the pain of disorientation, the pain of being briefly disarmed, here at once also invokes its other: a momentary access to a lost object, if you will, that remains inaccessible to the differentiated, ‘autonomous gaze of experience’. What intrudes here, one might say with Slavoj Zizek, is a return or “answer of the real”: an answer from a surplus-effect generated by the differentiations conditioning tonal listening: the chaos, or alternatively the plenitude, that is left outside (Zizek [1991] 1997: 29). The rupture within tonal listening could as such also be seen as an opening to an ‘other’ that otherwise cannot be accessed and cannot be heard.}
centred (narrative) infrastructure of ‘ordinary’ experience. This discontinuity, I have shown, was already reflected in the Andantino’s embodiment of a paradoxical combination of forgetfulness (tensionlessness) and unforgetfulness that – also a distinguishing mark of the Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean sublime – epitomizes the unclaimed experience of trauma: it did not so much embody a radical and irreconcilable opposition between forgetting and un-forgetting, as an interweaving or interlocking of the two. The traumatic event remains unforgettable in the forgetting of it, in its lack of inscription, and this lack of inscription manifested itself in the dispossession of an intrusion, a violent attack, that precisely signalled an inability to move past this intrusion: it insisted as a continued break-in or disturbance.8

In this way, one could say, the re-presentation of sublime experience as an experience that is not an experience (i.e. an experience in the Kantian sense of the term, pre-structured and shaped by the subject) here also and already calls forth the idea of an experience that is not one: it paradoxically intertwines or interlocks two conflicting ‘principles’ (here: forgetting and un-forgetting) that cannot finally be reconciled as one. It is an ‘experience’ that remains locked in

8Ruth Leys has argued in “Traumatic Cures” (1996) that an ultimate and full transformation of such a dispossession into an integration within the schemes of narrative memory – let me say: a dialectic reversal through a ‘talking cure’ – is not by definition an option with respect to psychic trauma. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1995) have, for that matter, already indicated that though a trauma can be ‘cured’ – and hence resolved or transcended – through an instatement of the traumatic event within the registers of language and narrative memory, the patient often continues to live in two parallel worlds (the world of trauma and the world of memory) that cannot be wholly bridged or reconciled (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 176). The cathartic release – through hypnosis or the talking cure – of a painful intrusion that may still be related to the traditional sublime feeling as a relieving and self-saving, all-integrating moment of closure, can thus not implicitly be thought in relation to trauma. Trauma, to put it differently, cannot by implication be thought as an intrusion (continuing to possess the traumatized) that is ultimately relieved and resolved in a (therapeutic) moment of closure, cannot by implication be thought within a narrative scheme of beginning (the intrusion), middle (the continued and unwilled re-enactment of it), and ending (the complete lifting of the intrusion through an exercising hypnosis or narrative integration). Indeed, Leys has argued with reference to Freud, such closure is often thwarted due to “the inherent irretrievability” of the traumatic event (Leys 1996: 119). The main obstacle here appears to be that – as Freud observed – even after a therapeutic ‘retrieval’ the patient lacks “conviction as to the reality of the reconstructed traumatic scenes” (ibid.: 119). These scenes still appear as other rather than one’s own and to that extent continue to resist active integration, indeed, as Leys observes, continue to resist remembering in the literal sense of a re-memberment (ibid.: 119-120). The “lack of confidence in the reality of the memory of the trauma” already implies a continued “inability to remember” – even if the trauma can be told (ibid.: 119). Thus, the failure of memory as a failure of “self-narration and self-representation” cannot be all that conclusively resolved (ibid.: 120). As Leys refers to Freud’s article “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” (1914), nothing is less certain than whether the repetition compulsion “can be converted into conscious recollection” (ibid.: 120). In this way, traumatic shock once more indicates the difficulty of closure relative to a break in the context of ‘ordinary’ experience.
its own internal duality of forgetfulness and the inability to forget due to what Ruth Leys has called the “inherent irretrievability” of the traumatic event (Leys 1996: 119, see also note 6). In Schubert’s Andantino, this inability to unlock, this failure of transcendence, manifested itself in a figure of repetition, a return to a not-quite-bygone violence.

However, if this figure of repetition can thus be termed a mark of a failure of transcendence, a symptom of a traumatic shock that cannot be integrated and removed, it can on a more general level also be thought on its own terms in relation to the sublime. Indeed, I have shown with respect to Burke, the figure of repetition holds its own right in the aesthetics of the sublime: it signals not (only) the after-effect of a shock of astonishment, it is also of central significance to a rather different, more quiet aspect of the sublime as an aesthetics of the infinite. Thus, I have shown, the Burkean experience of the artificial infinite revolved around a never coming one step closer to an end or goal in a virtually incessant rhythm of a repetition of the same. This experience of the artificial infinite opened up the possibility to think the sublime feeling as a feeling that simultaneously, and irresolvably, combined pleasure (tensionlessness) and pain (tension) in one: a feeling that is regressive and progressive at the same time, a feeling that is not one.

In what follows, I will explore more fully this possibility of a feeling that is not one in the context of the aesthetics of the infinite (the mathematical sublime) rather than the aesthetics of (traumatic) shock (the dynamical sublime). I will do so in critical elaboration on the claim made in the last chapter that the paradox of pain and pleasure in the experience of the sublime can no longer be thought as pertaining to a mixture of two opposing, independent principles, but as pertaining to an intertwining of two unstable, ambiguous intensities that are paradoxically inscribed in each other. To probe the ways in which such an intertwining can be thought, I will once more turn to Freud’s remarks on the repetition compulsion in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In his more metaphysical moments, I will show, Freud here represents the compulsion to repeat as a double-bind pointing in two contradictory directions: backward (life-negating) and forward (life-affirming) at the same time, without a way to reconcile the two. It is this peculiar structure of the repetition compulsion, rather than its specific directedness to a traumatic shock, that I will then connect to the (Burkean) alternative sublime experience as an experience without end and without resolution that is trapped in its own conflict.

**Beyond Pleasure**

Burke’s experience of the artificial infinite, I have shown, revolves around a vacillation of apparently mutually exclusive intensities that are already at work in each other: pain and pleasure, tension and tensionlessness, desire and fulfilment. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle this vacillation concerns a conjunction of the apparently diametrically opposed life and death instincts: Eros and Thanatos. The latter bears a
special significance to the title of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as Freud (hesitatingly) posits the death instincts beyond the dominion of what he considers a general tendency toward a reduction of tension (unpleasure) in the mental apparatus. Thus, Freud remarks cautiously that though the “the meaning of the feelings of pleasure and unpleasure [Lust und Unlust]” has remained basically obscure, the following, tentative hypothesis could be proposed: “We have decided to relate pleasure and unpleasure to the quantity of excitation that is present in the mind but is not in any way ‘bound’; and to relate them in such a manner that unpleasure corresponds to an *increase* in the quantity and excitation and pleasure to a *diminution*” (Freud [1920] 1961: 4). With reference to G.T. Fechner, Freud then postulates a dominance of the pleasure principle in mental life. The “mental apparatus”, he speculates, “endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant” (ibid.: 5).

The “most that can be said” in this instance is thus that “there exists in the mind a strong tendency towards the pleasure principle” (ibid.: 6). However, this tendency is nevertheless also “opposed by certain other forces or circumstances, so that the final outcome cannot always be in harmony with the tendency towards pleasure” (ibid.: 6). Typically, the Freudian-conceived mind is in (perpetual) contradiction, rather than in harmony, with itself, with alternating forces or intensities appearing to undermine the dominance of the pleasure principle. For what, in turn, holds in check and in fact necessarily obstructs or suspends the imperatives of the pleasure principle is the *reality principle*. Apparently, there is something so self-destructive about the pleasure principle that its demands must be somehow restrained and kept in waiting. As a “method employed” by the “sexual instincts”, the ego must keep the pleasure principle at bay so as not to lose itself in the total release of indomitable, annihilating Triebe (ibid.: 7). Repression is the answer. Certain instincts must be rerouted and their satisfaction suspended, causing their (occasional) ‘illegitimate’ breakthrough to be felt as unpleasurable. Freud calls this unpleasure felt on account of the satisfaction of an ‘illegitimate’ instinct a “neurotic pleasure”: a pleasure that cannot be felt as such (ibid.: 8).

Now, as I have already pointed out above, what struck Freud about the compulsion to repeat in traumatized soldiers was that it had – to all appearances – nothing to do with repression.9 That is to say, contrary to repression, the thing which returned in these soldiers’ nightmares and indomitable symptoms was not even a secretly, obscurely, or illegitimately pleasurable one. Referred to as a demonic-like possession,

---

9Ruth Leys rightfully observes that in 1920 the demonic compulsion to repeat painful experiences was “a phenomenon long familiar to psychoanalysts as the ‘fixation’ to the trauma in the case of female hysterics..., but apparently during World War I as the revelation of a ‘new and remarkable fact’ now that is was seen to apply to a large number of males” (Leys 1996: 130).
Jacques Derrida has observed in “To Speculate – on Freud” (1987), the
demon in the Freudian repetition compulsion is “the very thing which comes back [revient] without having been called by the pleasure principle”: the former seems to bypass the latter (Derrida 1987: 341). Indeed, Patricia de Martelaere comments, what appeared so enigmatic about these soldiers to Freud was the inexplicability of neurotic symptoms in cases where no repression had occurred previously. When people with a perfectly ‘normal’ psychic structure suddenly develop, on account of traumatic events – such as war experiences, disasters, assaults – nightmares or visions in which precisely these traumatic events are repeated endlessly, without any repressed instinct being apparently satisfied in this way, then this casts serious doubt on the pleasure principle. (De Martelaere [1993] 2000: 49, my translation)

As she continues, the only “instinct that can realize itself in such obsessive mechanisms appears to be a fundamental ‘repetition compulsion’ in itself”, acting independently from the pleasure principle (ibid.: 49).

The repetition compulsion thus marks a tendency “beyond the pleasure principle” (Freud 1961: 17). It has apparently nothing to do with the sexual instincts that, as reproductive instincts, are tied the life instinct, but is attached exclusively to a death instinct located ‘beyond’ or ‘before’ the dominance of the pleasure principle.

What follows in Beyond the Pleasure Principle is not a little complicated, and not in the least, as Derrida has indicated, because Freud is constantly dissatisfied with his own speculations, constantly rejecting, questioning, or doubting what he has proposed, and then picking it up again, returning to it, to (re)consider it once more without, once more, coming to a definite conclusion or solution – as if the text itself were performing the repetitive movement it inscribes (cf. Derrida 1987: 397). Moreover, Freud’s argument is at times bizarre to say the least, especially when he tries to inscribe typically later nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century speculations on the genealogy of biological life into his account of the pleasure principle and its beyond. I will, therefore, restrict myself to elaborating on the idea of an internal duality that, as Derrida and De Martelaere have shown, Freud’s text allows to be thought in relation to the pleasure principle: the apparent opposition between life and death instincts becomes an internally divided movement of two intensities paradoxically inscribed into each other.

**Awakening as Return**

Oddly, given the fact that the death instinct for Freud signals a ‘beyond’ of the pleasure principle that he is taking under consideration, the death instinct comes to the fore relatively late in Beyond the Pleasure Principle – “almost half the book”, as Derrida writes, “[d]ead silence about death” – when Freud starts to speculate on the relation between instincts and repetition in general (ibid.: 353). As, it will be seen,
a backward-moving force this death instinct initially appears to be opposed in binary fashion to the seemingly progressive force of the life instincts (i.e. the sexual instincts) tied to the pleasure principle. The former is impelled by a tendency to return, the latter by a tendency to move ahead. Thus, the life instinct is directed at the preservation of life, while the death instinct “seeks the elimination of the tension that is characteristic of life”: ‘life’ is tension, strain, change, development, ‘death’ is tensionlessness and stasis (De Mul 1999: 134). Here, however, the paradox already emerges that marks Freud’s account of the death instinct in its ‘relation’ to the pleasure principle: if the latter revolves around an absence of tension, death surfaces as the ultimate ‘goal’ of the pleasure principle that is nonetheless the ‘method’ of the life-greedy sexual instincts. How to think this paradox which, subverting familiar notions of self-preservation, may point the way to think anew the irresolvable paradox of the sublime feeling?

The answer can be epitomized in this single phrase: the idea of an awakening (to life) as a return (to death). This idea is the product of Freud’s attempt to project, and thus account for, the ‘inexplicable’ tendency to return in traumatized soldiers onto a more general level of biological and psychic life. Taking, as Cathy Caruth puts it, the literal return of the past as a model for repetitive behaviour in general, Freud ultimately argues...that it is traumatic repetition, rather than the meaningful distortions of neurosis, that defines the shape of individual lives. Beginning with the example of the accident neurosis as a means of explaining individual histories, Beyond the Pleasure Principle ultimately asks what it would mean to understand history as the history of a trauma. (Caruth 1996: 59-60)

In Caruth’s analysis of Freud, this history amounts to the history of a traumatic awakening – more specifically, a traumatic awakening to life for which there was no preparation. I do not want to tread into the more eccentric elements of Freud’s biological argument here, but it should be stated that he even goes so far as to define the instinct as such in terms of the death instinct, i.e. the desire to return to a state of in-animation: “It seems...that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things” (Freud 1961: 43). Seen in this light, the death instinct (the instinct as such) is not an instinct that can be reduced to the pleasure principle. Rather, it comes ‘before’ it – even though the former shares with the latter the tendency to eliminate tension as much as possible.

Secondly, speculating in Schopenhauerian fashion that life is a mere detour on the way back to death, Freud also speculates that the instinct for self-preservation also and at once signals its other. The urge to preserve one’s life, he suggests, is ultimately an urge to secure one’s own ‘proper’ death (ibid.: 47). Thus, the instinct for self-preservation that Burke posited at the heart of the sublime becomes at once an instinct for self-
destruction: in preserving one’s life, one’s “immanent” death is guarded. Such behaviour, Freud adds, is “precisely what characterizes purely instinctual as contrasted with intelligent efforts” (ibid.: 47).

The forces of Eros and Thanatos that Freud postulates to be at work in the psychic organism thus seem to operate in a double-bind of, on the one hand, a death instinct that moves backward and, on the other hand, a life-instinct that moves forward only out of sheer necessity to follow what it is in principle (the instinct already signalling a movement of return) its backward-oriented path. As Freud puts it, one could presume “two kinds of processes constantly at work in living substance” that operate “in contrary directions, one constructive and assimilative and the other destructive or dissimilatory”, representing the sexual ‘instincts’ and the death instincts respectively: two rhythms simultaneously moving in their own contradictory ways, though also, and at the same time, being constantly at work in each other through a dominant rhythm of return (ibid.: 59).

Interestingly, Jacques Derrida has observed, in this double-bind of death and life conventional semantic distinctions between life and death, tension and tensionlessness, preservation and destruction, pleasure and unpleasure, start to falter. For one thing, the instinct for self-preservation that – we have seen in chapter 2 with reference to Burke’s existential sublime – is familiarly conceived as the urge to protect or defend life turns out to be an urge to preserve one’s own death. The sentinel of life, as Derrida paraphrases Freud, “having to become that which it ‘originally’ will have been, the courier of death, everything changes sign at every moment” (De rrida 1987: 361). Thus, progression becomes at once a regression, development ultimately turns out to be motivated by an urge to resist change and renewal, an urge to return, the guardians of life are originally the guardians of death, the aim of life – and Freud here explicitly refers to Schopenhauer – is death, and the instinct itself, conventionally understood in terms of strife and advance, reveals itself as a rhythm of delay (Freud 1961: 59).

By the same paradoxical logic, the complete satisfaction associated with the pleasure principle and the destruction associated with the repetition compulsion no longer appear as two binary opposites but rather as two sides of the same coin. As De Martelaere puts it, the repetition compulsion and the pleasure principle are not to be understood as mutually exclusive ‘tendencies’ but as “qualitative allies

In this way, Derrida comments, it “is not there itself, the living organism, it is nothing other outside this demand and this order: let me die properly, I am living so that I may die properly, and so that my death is my own, my inheritance” (Derrida 1987: 358). In this context, the Burkean existential sublime could be said to revolve around a feeling of relief and rejuvenation only in so far as not life, but the possibility die one’s own death, is secured after a threat has been warded off. Likewise, the monotony of life that for Burke may lead to suicide has to be interrupted or broken through to ensure this same possibility. The sublime feeling would thus not so much signal a sense of being alive, as a sense of being able to die properly.
on a continuum that can...shift from one pole to the other" (De Martelaere 2000: 50). Or: the death instinct associated with the repetition compulsion is already at work in the life instincts that work through the pleasure principle, and vice versa. If, as Freud says, the pleasure principle is a “tendency” operating in the service of a “function”, and if this function is “to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible”, then this function “thus described would be concerned with the most universal endeavour of all living substance – namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world” (Freud 1961: 76). In other words, the pleasure principle operates in the service of the death instinct. If this is how the death instinct is already inscribed into the life instinct, then the latter is also at work in the former to the extent that the instinct to return is also at once the “task of living” (ibid.: 77).

Reading this untiable knot of death and life instincts in terms of différance – difference (an apparent difference in direction; backward and forward) and deferral (a deferral as delay, as detour; the detour of life, or life as detour) – Derrida ultimately proposes to read the pleasure principle itself “as an incarnated différance” (De Martelaere 2000: 50). This, in De Martelaere’s words, is ultimately what Derrida detects in Freud’s text: Freud “does not undermine the pleasure principle from the outside, but from the inside by describing it as an internal duality” (ibid.: 51). Instead of something beyond the pleasure principle, there is something at work within the economy of the pleasure principle that, serving the ‘function’ of the death instinct, at once interrupts and sustains it in its search for complete constancy and satisfaction. Derrida: the pleasure principle “would not be a function but a tendency in the service of [a] general function”, which is the “return to the inorganic and Nirvana...via the intermediary or place of passage..., to wit the PP [pleasure principle]” (Derrida 1987: 396-397).

**Vacillation**

Right now, a parallel can already be drawn between the Freudian account of the death and life instincts, both going after the same thing in their separate ways, and the alternative sublime feeling as it is expressed in Burke’s experience of the artificial infinite, as well as the Romantic feeling of Sehnsucht. Thus, as we have seen in chapter 4, the latter can be described as a frustrated longing forward that is at the same time an impossible longing backward for an imaginary wholeness, comprising tension and respite, ‘progress’ and deferral, at once. The same internal duality characterises the Burkean experience of the artificial infinite, where a ‘drive’ to go ahead and to keep on going ahead, without end, is constantly subtended by a tendency to return, holding stasis and mobility in one. The two tendencies are interlocked, without a possibility to relieve their difference.

Though it would be too much to simply represent the Freudian forces of Eros and Thanatos as being at work in both experiences, it is
nevertheless the structure of a movement that constantly – without end or solution – vacillates within itself, hinging between (auto-)destruction and satisfaction, that can be projected onto the sublime feeling as an internally divided feeling without closure or transcendence. Comparable to the conflict encountered in Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean philosophy, the (internal) conflict that Freud posits with respect to the pleasure principle is so structural and, indeed, irresolvable that it already precludes the idea of a (narrative) development (from crisis to resolution) on which the normative, Kantian conception of the sublime feeling depends so heavily. Or, more precisely, the idea of a (narrative) development culminating in the dialectic resolution of what appeared to be an irresolvable clash between two binary opposites (finite-infinite; limit-limitlessness; imagination-reason). No longer thinking in terms of such strict opposites, but rather in terms of an internal duality, Freud (or should one say: Freud as read through the pen of Derrida?) also precludes the comforting possibility of a dialectic resolution, of a ‘third way’ in which all conflict will have been overcome. At best, one could circumscribe the Freudian parallel movements of the death instinct (repetition) and the life instinct (development) operating in the service of the latter as a narrative of return that is always out of phase with itself:

It is as though the life of the organism moved with a vacillating rhythm. One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey. (Freud 1961: 49)

As such a narrative of return, however, I add that if the Freudian life instincts signal an (enforced) tension (Freud refers to them as “breakers of the peace”) and the death instinct a (primary) tensionlessness, the former can nevertheless include the latter – even if it is not an inclusion as reconciliation (ibid.: 77). Recall, in this instance, the peculiar mechanism at work in Romantic Sehnsucht: on the one hand, it involves a tension of frustrated desire, a desire that wants to go forward but cannot find, and does not even know, its object or end-point. On the other hand, however, this tension of frustration can be deconstructed as a strategy of deferral, of wanting to remain in one’s place or constantly return to one’s initial position, suspending any kind of (tension-inducing) change or development. It has, we have seen, the character of a compulsive repetition, always looking for a way to dodge its own resolution. Thus, differently said, and this also applies to Burke’s experience of the artificial infinite, because desire here constantly contradicts and undermines its own end, the tension at stake in Sehnsucht at once harbours a tensionlessness of suspension: it allows for an infinite deferral of renewal and transformation, and the ‘labour’ involved in it. Sehnsucht allows, I have explained, for a vacuum, an open and indefinite place-in-waiting within the tense rhythm of an apparently
forward-rushing movement, that already takes on the character of the infinite for which Romantic desire craves.

**Repetitive Music and the Sublime**

It is in this way, as a Janus-faced movement tending to advance and withdraw at the same time, that the idea of the sublime feeling ultimately conforms to what John Baillie called the paradox of a mind “that is the subject of contradictions”, experiencing “joy and grief, pleasure and pain” at once (Baillie 1953: 31). Both in Romantic and Freudian thought this vacillation of agitation and suspension amounts to little less than a condition of life that, one could say, only makes itself felt as such in the experience of the sublime: conceived as an experience that is not one, the experience of the sublime can be circumscribed as an experience which foregrounds an irresolvable existential conflict. Instructive, in this respect, is Freud’s remark that the life instincts “have so much more contact with our internal perception...while the death instincts seem to do their work unobtrusively” (Freud 1961: 77). Usually, the operations of the latter go by unnoticed, except, we have seen, in the case of traumatic neurosis, but also in other, more ‘normal’ instances of what is experienced as a diabolic return: in, for instance, people who meet “with a repetition of the same fatality”, such as the case of the woman who married three successive husbands who each fell terminally ill (ibid.: 24).

While in art, such a “compulsion of destiny” might function as an apt way to invoke the uncanny – which, I have shown in chapter 6, can be considered a modality of the sublime as terror – I here want to use the open manifestation of the repetition compulsion in a different way (ibid.: 25). With a view to Burke’s experience of the artificial infinite, I want to show how in art and more specifically in instrumental music, one can not just be made affectively aware of an otherwise unnoticed urge to repeat, but also of the paradoxical crossing or intertwining of this urge to repeat with its (apparent) other. Translating this crossing into aesthetic terms of tension and tensionlessness, or pleasure and pain, I will show how an irresolvable dead-lock interlacing two opposing ‘tendencies’ of stasis and return on the one hand, and mobility and agitation on the other, can make itself felt in the act of listening. It is this felt double-bind that constitutes the ‘moment’ of the sublime feeling as a feeling of the (artificial) infinite that is and cannot be one.

To illustrate the ways in which such a feeling can be brought about by artificial means, I here point to the particular strategies employed in present-day repetitive music.¹¹ This choice is obvious in more than one

---

¹¹ I prefer the term ‘repetitive music’ to the term ‘minimal music’ that is also regularly used to denominate the music I will here address. The second term, according to Michael Nyman, refers to a music that “not only cuts down the area of sound-activity to an absolute (and absolutist) minimum, but submits the scrupulously selective, mainly tonal, material to mostly repetitive, highly disciplined procedures which are focused with an extremely fine definition (though the listener’s focusing is not done for him)”
way. To start with, in the Enquiry Burke of course already points to the effect of the steady repetition of similar parts to invoke a feeling of the (artificial) infinite. If anything, it is around this pattern that much contemporary repetitive music revolves. Hoffmann, for that matter, likewise highlighted the idea of an incessant return in Beethoven’s Fifth, or the Coriolan Overture, in his discourse of instrumental music as an art destined to bring about the feel of the infinite. Secondly, twentieth-century American composers of minimal and repetitive music such as La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, or the Dutch composer Simeon Ten Holt, (as different as they are in their respective methods and styles) already reveal a fascination with limitlessness, and in certain cases more specifically with the evocation of an eternal moment – a moment without beginning or ending that is felt as infinite. Thirdly, in so far as I intend to relate the Freudian story of the death and life instincts to a musical experience of the sublime, composers/philosophers such as Wim Mertens ([1980] 1983) and philosophers like Jos de Mul (1999) have already projected the mechanism of the death instinct onto present-day repetitive music. With respect to the latter this is, indeed, explicitly done to argue for the possibility of an experience of timelessness that Wagner already linked to the musically sublime. Thus, one can already presume a viable critical basis to explore the ways in which contemporary music can bring about a feeling of the sublime as reread through the movements of the Freudian repetition compulsion.

However, and notwithstanding this, the problem with respect to both Mertens and De Mul is that the idea of repetition in contemporary American music is not elaborated in the ‘double sense’ that I have suggested above. That is to say, both Mertens and De Mul – the latter elaborating on the former – represent the effects of repetitive music exclusively in terms of the complete forgetfulness, the complete tensionlessness that recalls the (Schopenhauerian) feeling of the beautiful rather than that of the sublime. Thus Mertens, calling to mind the timelessness that Freud attributes to unconscious processes, simply argues that repetition in contemporary repetitive music “is in the service of" the death instinct and leads to a (hallucinatory) regressive, trance-like state in which all sense of reality, including the sense of time passing,

(Nyman 1999: 139). In imitation of Wim Mertens, however, I prefer the term ‘repetitive music’ because not all repetitive music is by definition minimal music, and because ‘repetitive music’ emphasizes more clearly “the decisive nature of the repetition as a structural principle in contemporary American music” (Mertens [1980] 1983: 16). Granted, the label ‘repetitive’ in turn raises its own problems. Thus, the music of La Monte Young cannot, as a rule, be called repetitive “since in this case the principle of continuity is decisive” (ibid.: 16). Still, apart from the fact that La Monte Young nevertheless also composed repetitive works, and that in the work of Terry Riley, Steve Reich, or Philip Glass repetition precisely also results “in the continuity of the uninterrupted process”, Young’s use of continuity can nevertheless “be considered as a particular form of repetition” (ibid.: 16). The difference between La Monte Young and the other three composers is at best “a difference in stress” (ibid.: 16).
has been momentarily obliterated (Mertens 1983: 123-124). Similarly, De Mul circumscribes the effects of repetitive music in terms of the “lessening of life tensions such as is also realized in many meditative techniques” (De Mul 1999: 134). In both instances, a binary and to my mind illegitimate opposition is created between life instincts and death instincts, and this (partly) accounts for the – in my view – erroneous assumption that the experience of repetitive music revolves around a blissful absence of tension alone.

Before showing how this experience can be interpreted rather differently, it must nevertheless first be granted the De Mul postulates some kind of conflict after all in the listening to contemporary repetitive music. For what he does is to posit the “lessening of life tensions” as being bought at a painful cost. This can be explained in the following way. First of all, repetition in present-day repetitive music serves an entirely different function than in classical Western music. Indeed one could say that is serves a dysfunctional purpose with respect to the listener. As Mertens puts it with reference to Glass’s *Music with Changing Parts* (1973), an essential element in the musical thinking of Glass “is the disorientation of the listener by upsetting in a treacherous or brutal way, what would seem, at first sight, a music made stable or harmless by the comfort of repetition” (Mertens 1983: 15). Something like the Freudian *heimlich* becoming at once *unheimlich*, repetition here undermines the listener’s perspective and thwarts her or his sense of overview, while in traditional music the use of repetition serves, precisely, to provide for such a perspective and sense of overview. Mertens basically ascribes this to the fact that much contemporary repetitive music lacks a “narrative and teleological frame” and consequently does not use the instrument of repetition in the service of this frame (ibid.: 16). Simply put, the lack of a teleological and narrative frame means that this music lacks an either implicit or explicit directedness and a plot-like (harmonic) development of beginning-middle-ending (rest-tension-resolution) that familiarly typifies sonata-form music. In the latter,

musical components like rhythm, melody, harmony, and so on are used in a causal, pre-figured way, so that a musical perspective emerges that gives the listener a non-ambivalent orientation and that attempts to inform him of meaningful musical contents. The traditional work is teleological or end-orientated, because all musical events result in a directed end or synthesis...a directionality is created that presumes a linear memory in the listener that forces him or her to follow the linear musical evolution. Repetition in the traditional work appears as a reference of what has gone before, so that one has to remember what was forgotten... (ibid.: 17)

...and anticipate what is yet to come. Traditional music grants the listener a place that allows for a controlling listening, for an ability to recall, anticipate, and oversee. By contrast, repetitive music does not work along the lines of an evolutionary development but rather revolves
around the steady repetition of “short or long melodic and rhythmic cells”, and later also of “chord progressions” (ibid.: 16). Terry Riley’s classic *In C* (1964), for instance, consists of fifty-three different motifs which, constantly relating to a pulse shaped in the form of a steady quaver high C, can be freely repeated by any number of performers but are nevertheless to be played successively. In C (fig. 2) opens with the pulse (Riley commends this is traditionally played by a beautiful woman), the other performers deciding when to join and how many times to repeat the motifs or cells presented – though always taking due note of the other performers. Indeed, the performers must try to remain within a compass of four or five cells of each other, sometimes merging in unison. As has often been observed, the effect of this music recalls the mesmerising effects of Balinese gamelan music and African tribal drumming – a common source of inspiration for composers like and Reich and Glass as well.

The disorienting effect of this music is not so much due to its potential limitlessness (according to Riley it can go on from over an hour to, possibly, days, weeks, or even longer) but to the fact that the listener cannot project a (narrative) structure enabling her or him to make sense of the music in terms of beginning-middle-ending. As a listener, the ground beneath your feet becomes a bottomless depth, and your stronghold or footing something of a treacherous quicksand. The constant repetition of similar parts – albeit a diversified repetition – here undermines or breaks through the traditional function of repetition as aiding the listener to integrate what has gone before with what is still to come: to take up a position from which to control and oversee the music as a coherent whole.

De Mul, in this instance, points to Reich’s Piano Phase (1967). Arguing that this music is no longer typified “by a linear structure directed at an ultimate synthesis (A, B, C, A), but rather by a cyclical structure that knows no real beginning or ending (A, A, A, A)”, he suggests that the “listener is led into a particular trance, a feeling of timelessness that is strengthened by the fact that, because of the lack of a structuring centre, the subject appears to lose himself in the music” (De Mul 1999: 132-133). It is this loss of self that constitutes the painful cost alluded to above: the loss of ego-boundaries, even if it concerns an imaginary loss, poses a certain threat of un-becoming, of (a metaphorical) death. However, this threat of self-loss is nevertheless compensated for or “‘rewarded’ with a lessening of life tensions such as

---

12 As Edward Strickland points out, during “rehearsals for the premiere of *In C* the freedom inherent in the score became a problem insofar as the musicians found it hard to preserve ensemble amid the fun. One of them, himself a drummer, suggested that a steady, purely rhythmic figure might facilitate the cohesion that was lacking. He came up with a suggestion Riley liked and adopted drumming out C’s on the keyboard as a way of keeping time. The musician who ‘just threw out the suggestion – it was Terry’s piece’ was Steve Reich, the composer who took Minimalism into its next phase – phasing” (Strickland 1993: 180). More on Reich’s phasing below.
is also realized in meditative techniques" (ibid.: 134). Thus, one could say that repetitive musics like Reich’s *Piano Phase* are evocative of the sublime in so far as they ‘undo’ subjective control, causing a perhaps painful sensation of self-loss, yet also and in this very way bring about a reduction, if not elimination, of tension that is experienced as delightful.

I would, nonetheless, approach the matter in a different way, partly because De Mul’s interpretation of *Piano Phase* does not appear altogether satisfying to me. For one thing, one cannot well characterise *Piano Phase* as a structure of A, A, A, A. It is, rather, structured into three parts, and typified by a decisive harmonic progression. This music is not about stasis alone, the static repetition of the same that can induce a hypnotic state, but also about a development of some sort. In an interview with Robert Davidson (www.topology.org.au/davidson/reich.htm) Reich indeed explicitly states that *Piano Phase* has a beginning (twelve beats long), a middle (eight beats long), and an ending (four beats long), and that one can actually regard the piece as a II-V-I progression in minor, ending in A minor. Nevertheless, even if *Piano Phase* can thus be said to have a certain goal-oriented- or directedness it is at once also cyclical, albeit cyclical in three parts: performed by two players, the first executes a fixed part that repeats, as Mertens observes, a “basic pattern throughout the piece”, while the second player fades in and accelerates the pattern very slightly to take the first part out of phase (Mertens 1983: 49). The latter does so in order to “produce an ever-changing alignment against the first part, resulting in the stressing of constantly different notes or groups of notes” (ibid.: 49). Thus, the second player moves one quaver ahead of the first yet, continuing the phasing, “after a certain number of repetitions, both players reach unison again. Three cycles are run through in this way, and each time a new cycle begins the basic motive is altered” (ibid.: 49).

Most significantly, what this indicates is that Reich’s music does not revolve around a mere reduction or elimination of tension but rather around a mixture of tensionlessness brought about by an incessant repetition of similar patterns in three cycles, and tension brought about by a continuous change and friction (i.e. the phasing). Or as Mertens puts it, in *Piano Phase* “one can see quite clearly the dualism of stasis and movement characteristic of repetitive music” (ibid.: 49). It is this dualism, though I would rather call it a double-bind, of stasis and mobility that allows a paradoxical, simultaneous experience of tensionlessness and tension to be thought which, in my view, typifies the (alternative) sublime feeling. Far from restricting this double-bind to the phase-shifting peculiar to Reich’s early music, I will argue in the following how the

---

13As Mertens points out, Reich describes the phase shifting process as “an extension of the idea of infinite canon, or round in medieval music, in which two or more identical melodies are played; one starts after the other, as in traditional rounds, but in the phase shifting process the melodies are usually much shorter repeating patterns, and the imitations…are variable” (Mertens 1983: 48).
instrument of repetition in certain contemporary musics triggers not so much a relieving sense of timelessness alone, but rather also (and in a way comparable to my interpretation of the Prelude to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*) a tense awareness of endless time.  

**Forward-Backward**

As a focal point, I will here use Terry Riley’s *In C*, referring to its recent live performance and recording by the *Nederlands Blazers Ensemble* (Netherlands Wind Ensemble) (2000). Like Reich’s *Piano Phase*, the paradoxical simultaneity of stasis and mobility in Riley’s *In C* could be ascribed to the fact that it combines a repetition of the same with a texture of continuously changing motifs. One can compare it to a kaleidoscope constantly changing colour with different motifs fading in and out, expanding and again retracting. However, if this constant colour-switching suggests a sense of motion that is set against a stubbornly repetitive pattern, *In C* appears to be always departing without ever arriving in a truly ‘new’ stage, meandering ever so slightly from within in different sonorous textures. It seems to start off in the manner of a regular canon, yet it never comes even close to articulating a full – or fully developed – phrase. What it offers are fragments or threads of a canon that are never integrated into an entity but rather constantly – and merely – *tend* or *point* toward any such entity, here and there disintegrating into a seemingly amorphous mass resembling the preparatory tuning of instruments before a performance is about to...

---

14 Of course, one could approach the paradox of stasis and mobility in twentieth-century repetitive music in a rather more traditional way when it comes to the sublime feeling. Thus, for example, Terry Riley’s *In C* can – depending on the performance – bring about that typical sense of sublime wonder when a seemingly immovable tone-mass, fixed in endless repetition, suddenly starts to stir and motion (through acceleration or dynamic intensification, or both), as if like a huge and massive rock starting to shift in a seemingly miraculous, inexplicable movement. Something similar happens in John Adams’s quasi-repetitive *Harmonielehre* (1985). Here, Adams translates a dream he had about a huge tanker in the San Francisco bay suddenly taking off like a rocket, into musical sounds and motions; it evokes the sense of an impossible levitation, of something starting to heave and lift itself that is not supposed to heave and lift itself. As in the paintings of the American abstract-expressionists, the fascination with the grand and majestic here persists alongside a concern with minimal presentation. Phillip Glass’s *Itaipu* (1989), a grand-scale symphonic evocation of the massive hydro-electric dam at Itaipú on the Paraná river (the border between Brazil and Paraguay), which includes the text of a creation myth of the local Guarani Indians about the Paraná river being the place where music was born, can be said to fall into the same category. Of its four parts, especially “The Lake” is able to evoke a tense but almost addictive and thrilling sense of anticipation, as it shifts from a dreamy, wave-like movement into a rapidly forward-rushing, swollen motion that, after having subsided, subsequently leads into the massive strokes of “The Dam”. However, if American repetitive music thus – strikingly – recaptures the experience of sublime nature and twentieth-century technological achievement in conventional terms of awe and wonder (as if a postmodern reworking of the eighteenth-century sublime), it also points in the direction of the ‘alternative’ sublime feeling as I have described it in relation to Burke’s experience of the artificial infinite. I will explain this more fully below, in my analysis of Terry Riley’s *In C* as giving rise to the mixed sensation of timelessness and endless time referred to above.
take place. It is this sense of something impending, but never arriving, that typifies In C throughout.

Pointing to the paradoxical combination of repetition and motif-shifting, Michael Nyman suggests that In C presents a mobility within a seemingly immobile setting: “Within a completely static musical ‘environment’ is perpetual motion” – or, in reverse, within perpetual motion is complete stasis (Nyman 1999: 145). The shifting motifs suggesting this motion constitute but infinitely small changes that do not signal a substantial motif-wise development. Indeed, as the opening motifs already indicate, the substantial here makes room for what is familiarly referred to as the ornamental in traditional teleological musical structures: the ‘substance’ of the music is its insubstantiality, its ornamental figuration that refuses to convey a fixed direction, a (subordinated) functionality. Usually, in such traditional teleological musical structures, functionality is as it were already added in the adding of a new tone that will develop, say, either away from or back to the tonic, creating a sense of tension or relaxation in the process. A tone, a motif, a phrase is in the service of a larger totality. In In C, interestingly, this functionality is not simply fully absent but is rather tentatively gestured toward while at the same time being short-circuited, cut short. Or, to put it differently, the sonorous space in which such functionality usually materializes is here opened only to be never purposively realized, to transpire on the spot.

Thus, one could say that in terms of temporal economy In C – and more specifically the performance of In C I am here referring to – saves time only to not cash in on it. In traditional teleological structures the temporal economy serves to set something in advance, to hold out the prospect of a result or return. In C, however, does not so much refrain from any sort of temporalisation as temporises without giving or yielding a plan: a plan in terms of a measure-by-measure development, a hierarchy of beats, or an all- and only-pervasive sense of progression derived from tonal functionality. There is no break-point, no opening in which something breaks through as was the case with Schubert’s Andantino, as there is basically nothing to break against, no law that can be broken, but only an endless, open prediction. Indeed, one could say that In C rather temporises in the sense of interminable delay so as to gain time endlessly and purposelessly, to never evolve beyond a stage of preparation, beyond a ‘being on its way’.

---

15 I would like to thank Sander van Maas for his suggestions relative to this idea of temporising.
16 In this respect, Riley’s In C stands in marked opposition to the more recent work of Simeon ten Holt. Primarily working with triads, Ten Holt similarly evokes an endless, open prediction through a repetitive texture but in works like Canto Ostinato, Horizon, or Lemniscaat there is nevertheless always an opening in which a melody (however briefly) breaks through. This, I would like to suggest, rather more fits the idea of sublime experience as a creative experience: the unexpected ‘happening’ or ‘announcing’ of something, of a lustrous form, within a sphere of radical indeterminacy and (apparent) undirectedness.
This endless gaining of time suggests not so much a simple dulling of the awareness of (the passing of) time, as a quickening of the awareness of a constant, tentative time-shift that keeps deferring its own (narrative) development, its own consumption. Temporalisation, I have said, is not absent here, even though it is a temporalisation without a plan (a purposiveness, to use Kant’s phrase, without a purpose): it is gestured toward through the pulse that never stops to (literally) indicate time, in the pattern of repetition itself that – to recall Locke and Burke – never stops to suggest a ‘continued enlargement’ within the rhythm of time, an endless sequence continuing ahead, and the adding of new motifs – however small, almost subliminal the changes thus brought about may be. As with the Prelude to Tristan and Isolde, one can never quite erase the claustrophobic sense of not being able to transcend time as constant flux, of an endless time, however much the reiteration of the same may tempt one to lose track and awareness of the passing of time – of a time shaped and measured into a specific goal or direction. Paradoxically, indeed, in listening to In C one feels trapped in the very repetitive structure sustaining the illusion of timelessness: a sense of boundlessness, of without-limit, is here constantly subtended by a sense of constraint, of frustration.

The frustration, in this instance, refers to a tense anticipation bearing on the process of interminable delay implied in a repetitive texture that itself holds stasis and mobility in one: stasis in the sense of an absence of development, a reiteration of the same or a standing on the spot, and mobility in the suggestion of a sequence that could go on for ever, multiplying itself ad infinitum, precisely because a ‘next’, a new stage, or a ‘goal’, an end-point, is interminably deferred. There remains infinite room for more – an indefinite extension – in a temporal economy that continuously postpones its own realization. Listening, this indefinite extension feels as a rhythm one labours to, but cannot get past: the musical imagination can put no stop, no encompassing limit or boundary, to the constant reiteration of similar ‘parts’. Every (imagined) step forward turns out to be a remaining-in-place, as if one were trying to reach a horizon that recedes ever further the closer one believes to approach it. This is, however, precisely how In C can evoke the (Burkean) artificial infinite. The feel of an incessant progression here, too, turns on a stasis or immobility, a remaining within the same place, brought about by the continuous return to one’s initial position: a tendency to return is already at work in a tendency to move ahead as one seems to be moving incessantly (and fruitlessly) forward in, precisely, a movement of incessant return.

This Freudian forward-backward paradox typifying the experience of the artificial infinite at once indicates that a purely regressive experience is here not at issue. Listening to In C, the regressive and progressive rather presuppose and reinforce each other in so far as the former propels the latter, allowing a reiteration of the same to be felt as an indefinite extension that one cannot grasp. Or, to put this differently,
while *In C*’s repetitive texture (constantly suspending the unfolding of narrative time) on the one hand induces a tense anticipation of time (literally) not coming to pass, of an end being continuously kept from view, this tension is on the other hand sustained by a regressive movement that, precisely, reduces tension in a rhythm of return foreclosing the ‘labour’ of change and renewal. What this in fact means is that a tension or displeasure brought about by the feel of an unending, ever-unaccomplished movement here already includes the respite or pleasure fostered by a (deadly) constancy: pain is as it were interlocked with its other in a suspension without end that constantly precludes a relief or resolution, as the deferral of movement productive of a ‘hypnotic rest’ creates at once an ever opening space, an ever-expanding rhythm that one cannot put a stop to.

In this way, one could imagine a sublime feeling that does not manifest itself as an experience of liberation-by-way-of-frustration, but as an experience of stasis-in-mobility, or mobility-in-stasis that endlessly vacillates between pleasure and pain in an endless internal conflict. It is the experience of an in-between, an experience (hesitating) between regression and anticipation that cannot be concluded as one: the ‘way back’ of regression cannot guarantee a complete respite or relief as it is itself already implied in, and propels, the ‘way forward’ of anticipation. Embodying this paradox, *In C* makes explicit in experiential terms the ambiguity, the two-sidedness of a movement gesturing ahead without limit, without end, that is paradoxically motivated and ‘kept going’ by a tendency to return: like the irresolvable double-bind of Freud’s life and death instincts, this music moves in inclining, tending, to return, the shifting motifs creating a tension that, precisely, the music seeks to ward off in a texture of constant reiteration.

Or rather, within the texture of repetition a movement is created that constantly tries to cancel itself out, to un-become through reiteration and return, yet in this very way becomes a movement that is felt as extending indefinitely, without relief. Approaching *In C* in this way, I have not only sought to relate its politics of repetition to the aesthetics of the sublime as an aesthetics of the infinite, but also to show that on a more general level repetitive music can offer rather more than the easy listening, the hypnotic leisure time familiarly ascribed to it in the critical and popular imagination. Rather, it incorporates a tense rhythm of deferral and return that encapsulates the sublime feeling as a double yet immobile movement that cannot be harmonized into a unified experience.
Figure 1 Franz Schubert, Piano Sonata in A major, D 959: Andantino