The Violence of the Sublime

On Aesthetical Violence in Musical Language

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Je réclame la restitution au silence
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Expressing the Infinite

When Beethoven presented one of his most prominent compositions, the 5th Symphony, E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote:

> Beethoven's music stirs the mists of fear, of horror, of terror, of grief, and awakens that endless longing, which is the very essence of romanticism. He is consequently a purely romantic composer, and is it not possible that for this very reason he is less successful in vocal music which does not surrender itself to the characterization of indefinite emotions but portrays effects specified by the words rather than those indefinite emotions experienced in the realm of the infinite?[1]

These affects of fear, horror, and terror are expressions of the strong relationship between violence and the sublime and make up a significant axis of musical romanticism. Romanticism understood the violence against imagination produced by the sublime as the essence of the musical form. This understanding was also the expression of a certain kind of political commitment that criticized hegemonic conventions and representations in the social reproduction of our ways of life. In this contribution, I argue that there is a politics of sublime violence immanent to musical romanticism.

First, let us turn briefly to the philosophical discussion of the sublime. Sublime terror is a theme that has accompanied the discussions of the sublime, at least since Edmund Burke linked the sublime to the dimension of negative pleasures. Burke distinguishes between two kinds of pleasures produced by aesthetic contemplation: the positive and the negative. The former is linked to harmony, clarity, and smoothness—the framing attributes of beauty. The latter rises from contemplating objects that are in some way threatening and dangerous, and thus prone to cause pain.[2] Reflecting on the pleasure provoked by contemplating what threatens our physical existence, Kant will later claim that "sublime is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses, we like directly."[3]

This is a keen insight made by Kant. Finding pleasure in fear and pain means, in this context, the pleasure of going against the immediate interest of the senses, of discovering something in us that is not just the expression of our self-preservation. Kant adds something new to the idea of the sublime. For the English sensualists, the sublime arises from phenomena in which we discover nature's immense and violent character, such as great storms, uninhabited grasslands, and vast waterfalls, among others. But Kant points out that it is not the phenomena in themselves that constitute the sublime, but rather the discovery of something

in us that does not fear them but is capable of surpassing and dominating them. Thus, Friedrich Schiller, deeply influenced by Kant, claimed that contemplating the force of nature lets us discover a resistance that is not physical but rather a resistance to the dissociation between our physical existence and our personality. We are excited by what induces fear because there is a will beyond sensible impulses that makes us want what our impulses repudiate. That is, in beauty, reason and sensibility are in harmony. In the sublime, they find their point of deregulation.

Kant initiates this aesthetic discussion by showing how the sublime is a mode of autonomy: The negative pleasure on which the sublime rests indicates the existence of something within us that brackets our desire for self-preservation, deeply disturbing our imagination's schematism. Thus, Kant can affirm that the judgment of the sublime rests on the human disposition to moral feeling: Just as the beautiful prepares us to love something unselfishly, the sublime prepares us to cherish what goes against our sensible interest.

However, there is always an element of the inhuman, or monstrous, in the sublime. What is monstrous in the sublime is the discovery of something in us that does not conform to the image of the individual. This discovery comes only through the pleasure of contemplating what can destroy our sensible existence and crush our finite human dimension. If the romantic inflection of the sublime appears just as Western societies begin to form "societies of individuals," it is because art seeks to present experiences that such societies can only see through the lens of "infinite nostalgia."

Note, for example, the very specific use of the notion of infinity in Hoffmann's statement about Beethoven. It is an essential expression of the discomfort of early nineteenth-century artists with the formal conventions of language and the social order. Resorting to infinity was the romantic way of understanding a time of change in which the social order no longer held the

authority it once had. The norms that upheld the aesthetic forms and their functionality had to be systematically questioned due to their "finite" qualities.[4] Interestingly, writers like Hoffmann claimed that music was perhaps the only genuinely romantic art because it had the expression of infinity as its sole object. "Expressing the infinite" in this case means expressing what disrupts our ability to establish relationships based on identity and difference, thus denying the constructive aspirations of form. What is "musical" is therefore undetermined; it is played out in constant interaction with the formless—it does not arise out of the concept's prose (as the anti-romantic Hegel argued), but in proximity to the experience of infinity.

According to Hoffmann, an average contemporary listener would be amazed by Beethoven's musical language; the music would seem disorganized, as if fantasy overwhelmed the form, making his symphonies appear as a fickle succession of feelings and characters. As one critic at the time put it, Beethoven's listeners were "crushed by a mass of unconnected and overloaded ideas and a continuing tumult by all the instruments."[5] Beethoven's music is composed of fragmented themes, mostly small musical ideas of no more than four bars, whose transitions are often abrupt, cut off, and marked by pauses and interruptions.

Hoffmann has the opinions of the "musical populace" (*musikalischen Pöbel*) in mind when asserting that such disarticulation of the constructive formal principles, such deregulation of norms produced by Beethoven's music, was not merely a mannerism but a way of absorbing the tension between the expression of infinity and the regularity of conventions. Those who criticize Beethoven for seeking unity through respect for the grammatical rules of hegemonic musical language should look for the unifying force of the idea.

In this tension between the expression of infinity and regularity of conventions, the work does not break down into a

game with the formless because Beethoven's music provides new constructive processes. Note, for example, the way the famous first movement of the Fifth Symphony is organized. Virtually all motifs are derived from the same musical idea, expressed early on with its sufficiently reduced, straightforward and structured rhythmic figure to indicate no identity, no tone that would allow us to derive what its harmonic progression will be (though it is true that the next bars already make it clear that we are in C minor). This musical idea does not "develop" in the traditional sense of the word, but moves by contrast, accumulation, and modulation. The musical recollection of the idea even allows voids, cuts, and ruptures without compromising the unity of form. It is the productive force of the musical idea that produces what Hoffmann calls a "deep inner articulation" (*innere tiefe Zusammenhang*), that is, an approximation between opposites and mediation between extremes. Here the musical idea unifies setbacks, absorbs even the silence, and deconstructs determinations by bringing the difference back to an undifferentiated basic identity. From this disarticulation between difference and identity, the expression of infinity within the Beethovenian musical idea emerges.

Against the Community

A prime example of Beethoven's procedure is his *Coriolan Overture*, composed at the same time as the Fifth Symphony. The work is an opening for Heinrich Joseph von Collin's version of Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus*. The play focuses on the banishment of Roman general Coriolanus—a man turned hero through his bravery in commanding the troops against the Volsci. Coriolanus represents aristocratic ideals of honor, bravery, and arrogance. These attributes and his personality

complicate his relationship with the plebeians and the courts. After being appointed Roman consul by the Senate and asking for the people's vote, Coriolanus shows his inability to lead by arousing popular anger and, finally, being banished from Rome. Coriolanus is, above all, a man who does not know how to talk to the people; he does not know how to express himself. As an expatriate, he allies with his former enemies to march toward the city. At the gates of besieged Rome, Coriolanus prepares for the final attack when his mother and wife appear, begging him to abandon his hatred and not invade the city. Overwhelmed, Coriolanus listens to the women and abandons his plans, leading to his death at the hands of the Volsci.

In adapting Shakespeare's play, Collin makes two significant changes. First, he attenuates the aristocratism of the play, removing many of the moments in which contempt for the alleged inconstancy and irrationality of popular opinion is evident. However, the most dramatic change is that Collin's Coriolan commits suicide, which makes his tragic dimension clearer: a man without community, without place, whose self-assurance exiles him from contact with other men. His character is a clear representation of the tension between the nascent modern individuality and its incommunicability—its expression haunted by indeterminacy.[6] Thus, by choosing to transform Coriolan's murder into suicide, Collin expresses the consciousness of the modern experience of disorientation through Coriolan's banishment.

Beethoven's composition shapes the structure of conflict already in the very construction of the musical idea. The musical idea, expounded in the first chords, is based on the possible modulations of polarity and conflict between two groups of notes. Such polarity will structure practically all music, appearing as a constructive element internal to the motifs. The motif that appears in bars 15 through 19 demonstrates a procedure in which

the opposing polarity between two notes serves as a constructive basis. The polarity never resolves but is cut and suspended before completion (e.g., at the end of this first motif) or increased by accumulation and intensity. It is the best example of how in Beethoven,

> formal ideas and melodic detail come into existence simultaneously; the single motive is relative to the whole. By contrast, in the later nineteenth century the melodic idea acted as a motive in the literal sense of the word, setting the music in motion, and provided the substance of a development in which the theme itself was elaborated.[7]

In the case of the *Coriolan Overture*, we can say that the motif is the musical idea itself.

This extensive permanence of the musical idea allows for the integration of events that could be understood as radical denials of the functionality of the work. A good example is how the dynamic polarity between notes becomes a conflicting polarity between motifs and themes. The whole play is traversed by the antagonism between the motifs, associated with Coriolanus and organized basically through polarities between two notes and a meandering melodic theme associated with the female voices of the mother and wife. The first presentation of the motif by the first group of violins and the group of violas is in C minor tonic. The second is under a modulation for the minor flat B tonic. It is no coincidence that the construction of the melody that represents the female voices is based on a perfect C major chord when played by violins and a perfect B major chord when played by clarinets. The idea of counter-position and distension is evident, although it cannot be said that there is any organization based, for example, on the antecedent-consequent scheme or even on some principle of transition. We might think of a

contrasting relationship, but such a contrast follows no form of organic development. At certain times, it operates by simple juxtaposition or uses long pauses and suspension of dynamics for the "feminine" melody to be replayed. It can be said that the piece moves by antithesis, since the moments, taken individually, seem to contradict each other. That is, taken in isolation, each of the musical moments contradicts what follows. This unresolved character of the conflict lasts until the end of the play, where the musical transposition of Coriolanus's idea of suicide takes the form of an unsurpassed ending, of music that simply dissolves without conclusive cadence or promise of teleological reconciliation. It doesn't resolve itself; it just stops.

At this point, we find a fundamental idea. The impossibility of resolving the conflict and the continuing struggle against organicity does not lead us, as we might initially expect, to a form without synthetic force. The processuality of the idea already provides unity on the constructive level. This is the central point: The contradiction between moments, potentiated by the elimination of visible processes of transition, does not eliminate the univocity produced by the relation of each moment to the idea. The idea has the power to refract itself in contradictory updates, without losing its univocity. At the same time, it develops the antagonism between the finitude of its moments and the univocity of its infinite processuality that absorbs the multiplicity of determinations.

However, if the musical idea lies, simultaneously, in the voice of Coriolanus and in the voice of his women; if it lies, at the same time, in the recognition of the expelled individuality of the community and in the voice of the community that asks to be spared, that is because the idea expresses the lack of common ground in social reality in which these two voices might *not* contradict each other. For this reason, it can only appear as what constitutes the themes and motifs and what dissolves them into a pure becoming that so clearly exposes the

fragility of the rooting of all moments. Both community and individuality are presented as moments to be dissolved. In the *Coriolan Overture*, Beethoven clearly shows how the essence of what constitutes the voices is already what dissolves them as moments of becoming.

In a way, this is an interpretation that underlies much of Theodor Adorno's understanding of Beethoven—an understanding that starts from the argument that the unity of the work is provided by the systematic exploration of the character of the form as a process. Let us take, for example, Adorno's well-known comparison between Beethoven and Hegel:

> Beethoven's achievement lies in the fact that in his work – and in his work alone – the whole is never external to the particular but emerges solely from its movement, or, rather, is this movement. In Beethoven, there is no mediation between the themes, but, as in Hegel, the whole, as pure becoming, is itself the concrete mediation.[8]

This is a way to say that in Beethoven, the musical idea is what builds a notion of dynamic wholeness. Due to its clear presentation—never breaking any elementary structures, such as the polarity between tonic and dominant—the musical idea allows the listener to keep the perception of the internal procedurality of the form, despite the presence of all that at the time would be seen as indices of a disintegrating form, in continuous flirtation with the formless. Therefore, there is not exactly a mediation between themes, but a continuous becoming, which never stops because it seems to be able to unfold everywhere, to fold in everything, even violence.

Thus, the theme of the sublime may appear as a way of understanding the autonomy of works in relation to formal regularities and style conventions. It allows not only to clarify how

the works are built from the annulment of the elements that conform language to the demands of communication; it also allows works of art to be the moments in which language resizes itself by letting the foundation of what is produced appear.

What is Terror?

If the sublime character of Beethoven's music lies, on the one hand, in its ability to use the musical idea as an initial principle of indetermination that ultimately produces a higher and more encompassing order, there is still a second point. As Hoffmann says, Beethoven's music produces "fear, terror, horror," though at first, it is unclear what musical phenomenon it exactly refers to. Was it the massive and overwhelming character of the use of musical resources? Or should we look for the source of such feelings elsewhere?

We may have a suggestive approach if we look to a concept Theodor Adorno developed to describe Beethoven's later works. In Beethoven's music, we are looking for something inordinate and monstrous in relation to the limits of individuality. We could appeal to excess as a manifestation of inordinateness, that is, to the way in which some of his works are excessively long by the standards of the time, monumental, mobilizing vast musical resources, such as the Ninth Symphony. But we can also, and this seems to me to be a much more interesting approach, look for the excess in the experience of subtraction—a subtraction that reminds us of the monstrous presence of what silences us and nullifies our individuality, namely the presence of death. This is the sense Adorno employs when he refers to the notion of the "late style" in Beethoven's last works.[9]

One might initially imagine that Adorno's interest in the "late style" would come from his quest to understand aesthetic

experiences that seem to culminate in later works. But "culminating" does not mean, here, the most finished and harmonious achievement of a mature project. As the literary critic Edward Said recalls: "The power of Beethoven's late style is negative, or rather *it is negativity*: where we would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds a bristling, difficult, and unyielding—perhaps even inhuman—challenge."[10] This is a way of stating that the late character of a work actually exposes its ability to be an explosive tension between form and expression. To say that the power of Beethoven's late style is negative means that the tension proper to the so-called classical phase of his work will be enhanced by the very development of the composer's musical language.[11]

Often the peculiarity of his last phase has been ascribed to psychological motives such as extreme deafness and a certain degree of despair. However, Adorno insists that there is an internal reason for the development of musical language. Thus, the notion of the late style will not only be a description of one phase of Beethoven's artistic experience, but a key to understanding works by various composers such as Schoenberg and Strauss, among others. Said claims, and he is not entirely wrong, that the late style is the central concept of Adornian aesthetics. In fact, it would be the description of the art experience itself at its highest point of tension, for it exposes the profound formal instability, the fragile and contradictory agreement between constructive plans and expressive demands that no longer come in the form of what we understand by "expression."

"In the history of art, late works are catastrophes." This sentence by Adorno is central to our discussion. If late works are catastrophes, it is because they appear as the locus of a break with the conventional determinations. Regarding Beethoven's later works, Adorno states, for example, that they lack harmony: periods of silence increase, breaks often occur in the

middle of musical phrases, contrasts seem simply juxtaposed. At first, we might believe that such a lack of harmony would be the result of an oversized subjectivity that seeks some form of integral expression and therefore does not fear exploring extremes devoid of mediation. This would explain why such subjectivity would try to break, or at least ignore all the rules hitherto respected.

However, this unreason appears in Beethoven through the abandonment of what seemed to guarantee the organicity to form, as well as the use of explicitly appearing conventions—as if we were facing a kind of indifference to appearance that allows the composer to deliberately use conventional formulas and phrasings. This use of convention can no longer guarantee the appearance of organicity.

Let us note, then, that if the power of Beethoven's music is negative and sometimes inhuman, it is because the sublime horror it provokes comes from its force of subtraction and refusal of what was hitherto understood as fundamental elements for the recognition of the "humanity" of expression, and not from its grandiose exposure of materials. Given his late style, we can say that Beethoven shows us how sublime works seem to transform subtraction into acute awareness of the atrophy of language. However, I would like to show how such an idea of late style brings possibilities for understanding the procedural ties of the musical form that provide us with the genealogy of compositional strategies that are closer to contemporary aesthetical problems.

Poi a poi di nuovo vivente

Among several possible examples of late style, we could analyze the adage of the Piano Sonata no. 31, op. 110, with its articulation between an arioso and a fugue. Several elements in this piece

surprise Beethoven's listener. First, in the *Coriolan Overture* and the Fifth Symphony, the musical idea is not clearly presented. On the contrary, the first seven introductory bars are among the most impressive moments of musical indeterminacy in romanticism. The tone is completely oscillating; seven bars in which the music oscillates between at least B-flat minor, B-flat major, M major, and C-flat minor. This oscillation expresses the spirit of a suspended song, which draws a motif that abruptly ends in an arpeggio, which suspends development to insist obsessively on the pure repetition of the same note for almost two bars. When the music begins, with an *arioso dolente*, it will not be in the tone that characterizes it (A-flat major). The tone stabilization will only come when a fugue finally appears.

The introduction of the adage functions as the announcement of the monstrosity of expression without grammar, which seems to have renounced its place as a dynamic motor of the musical idea, apparently breaking the unity that constitutes the very specificity of Beethoven's musical experience. The expressive position in this situation will lead the music to a movement of deep splitting, as we have seen in the antagonism present in the dynamics of the *Coriolan Overture*. However, here the split will develop in another way. With the retraction of the musical idea, the work will be constructed through the radicalization of the principle of mediation by extremes. The fragmenting tendency is controlled not by a final synthesis, but, as we shall see, by the internal alteration of forms.

If we read the relationship between Beethoven's classic and late style dialectically, we can say that the retraction of the idea opens for the assumption of spaces of formal indetermination. However, the retraction of the idea is not its pure annulment. As the Beethovenian language is defined by its ability to produce totalities in which identities are continually reconfiguring, something of the idea may remain even when it is absent, namely

the notion of process, even if it is now dramatized by the retraction of the element that guaranteed its unity. Let us see how this happens inside the sonata.

The sonata will unfold through a juxtaposition of two forms: the arioso and the fugue. The arioso, with its spirit between the aria and the accompanying recitative, presents an extensive melancholic theme at a different time from the time of the introduction (from 4/4 to 12/16). It is accompanied by a fugue at another time (6/8). There is no transition between the two materials; one is not the introduction to the other because everything that could function as a transition has been subtracted. One moves from the adage of the arioso to the allegro of the fugue in a completely unexpected way—which could not be otherwise since we are in a presentation of extremes: the profoundly monophonic character of the half-spoken corner of the arioso and the polyphony of the fugue.

The use of fugue, in turn, was considered musically archaic at the time. To compose a fugue in 1822, was to revisit an aging mode of composition, with rules of counterpoint and transposition that went against harmonic clarity and expressive freedom defended by romanticism. It would seem to be the last thing to do for those who seek to assert "unreasonable subjectivity." However, in its own way, the second movement of the sonata describes the process of giving life to what seemed merely conventional—which becomes clear in the passage from the second exposure of the arioso to the second exposure of the fugue at the end of the sonata. Returning to the arioso quite abruptly, cutting a sentence in half, Beethoven writes in the score "perdendo le forze, dolente." The piano must be played with the horror of those who feel the force going away: One must find a fading expression whose intensity ranges from *piano* to *pianissimo*, as one who makes the recited lament of the arioso a search for the zero degree.

Note, however, that none of this implies an effective suspension of the processuality of the piece. As Adorno will say, the later works remain a process, although it cannot be understood as development. Here, we do not have the process as a movement of overcoming antagonisms through the progressive unveiling of the constructive force of the musical idea, as we saw in the *Coriolan Overture*. We have another form, based on the presentation of the formless within the works and its transformation into a motor for the reconfiguration of conventional forms. In Sonata op. 110, this transformation occurs through the final return to the fugue. At the end of the melody of the arioso, Beethoven presents a sequence of thirteen chords in intense amplification whose function is to mimic a movement of emergence, which explains why the return of the fugue is displayed in the score with the indication "piu a piu di nuovo vivente." It is within the second exposition of the fugue that, little by little, life will return.

Regarding this massive sequence of progressing chords, Rosen writes, "Beethoven not only symbolizes or represents the return of life, but physically persuades us of the process."[12] His analysis is also correct in remembering that the fugue exposure is made using the most elementary rules: the inversion of the fugue theme, the increase and the decrease. The life that returns little by little uses the seemingly outdated norms, gradually showing how to change them. In this process, the sonata produces its most fantastic achievement. Beethoven retains the theme of the fugue and its transposition between the left and right hand, but instead of using the counterpoint, he uses accompaniments completely foreign to Baroque language. However, since everything must be done "poi a poi" (there are three indications in the last part of the score), as there should be no break in the mutation of forms, they now change in continuity. And in this change in continuity, it becomes possible to realize the integration

between two distinct times of the musical material. Thus, the fugue remains, but without being a fugue anymore. It remains identifiable even if there is nothing else to identify. Life, which returns little by little, finds a way to produce new forms, breaking the discontinuity of time by presenting itself as an expression of what is no longer restricted to linear time.

Back to the Present

From the romantic discussion of the sublime in music, we have identified some significant aesthetic themes. First, the interplay between the sublime and the indeterminate makes the works of art a space of tension toward the formless: The works are inhabited by a constructive principle that, at first glance, seems impossible to realize, leading to an apparent tendency toward the fragmentary. This trend is, in fact, the first impression of a new order that is built, overcoming setbacks. Second, sublime works are monstrous: They provoke the violence of terror, not only because of their grandeur, evoking something greater than nature on its inhuman scale, but because of their inhumanity and their subtraction from what we normally associate with human language.

These topics found in musical romanticism will also be present in the contemporary recovery of the concept of the sublime. The contemporary presence of the sublime may indicate a suggestive permanence of productive strategies between works, beyond the evident difference of styles. However, we can discuss the works considering not only their formal characteristics but also their internal issues. In this sense, perhaps some of today's broader aesthetic issues still resonate deeply with romanticism.

Two philosophers who have tried to rethink the concept of the sublime, each in their own way, and with contributing

greatly to the musical aesthetics are Jean-François Lyotard and Theodor Adorno. Here, I would like to focus on the latter. In the late 1960s, Adorno intended to publish an aesthetic theory, which would only be issued after his death. The theory contains seminal ideas about the possibility of using the concept of the sublime within twentieth-century art. The first striking aspect of the text is the recognition of the political function that such a recovery may have:

> In the administered world, artworks are only adequately assimilated in the form of the communication of the uncommunicable, the breaking trough of reified consciousness. Works in which the aesthetic form, under pressure of the truth content, transcends itself occupy the position that was once held by the concept of the sublime. In them, spirit and material polarize in the effort to unite. Their spirit experiences itself as sensually unrepresentable, while on the other hand their material, that to which they are bound external to their boundary, experiences itself as irreconcilable with the unity of the work.[13]

There are some fundamental ideas here. First, within a managed world, a world in which modes of determination and representation only reproduce reified realities, it makes no sense to appeal to some dimension of the original or the archaic that would promise forms of reconciliation. It is better to transform works of art into an open exposition of conflicts between communication and the incommunicable, between the unity of form and the tendency of its materials. In this sense, works of art should appear as aporias, appealing to an experience that still has no place in social life. These open aporias, however, have the political force to propel the critique of modes of reconciliation present in social reality. That is why our time could no longer give way to the beautiful. The free play of the faculties

that the beautiful promised was no longer historically possible, nor politically desirable. Perhaps this is why someone like André Breton claimed, "beauty will be convulsive, or it won't be beauty." Convulsion, by the way, was never a feeling that the aesthetic tradition understood as proper to the contemplation of beautiful objects.

The contemporary appeal to the sublime is linked to the need for art to uncover the fundamental contradictions that prevent social reconciliation. Such contradictions should be seen, not as an overcoming of contradictions, but rather as constituting a language in which reconciliation is not the result of the conflict, but in which the conflict itself becomes eloquent.[14] That is, the contradiction is sustained through a language that bears the marks of the irreconcilable.

If we ask ourselves what such a language should look like, perhaps we can say that it will necessarily be inhuman and silent. Through the sublime, Adorno affirms that art brings forth a humanity incompatible with the "ideology of service to men." Art is faithful to men only through its inhumanity against them (*Treuen hält sie den Menschen allein durch Inhumanität gegen sie*). This is, in fact, a political reading of the monstrosity proper to sublime terror and violence. In other words, the recovery of the sublime aims to affirm that truthful art allows the subject to go beyond the current image of man through the display of inhumanity toward himself. Thus, the sublime work of art will be the exposition of a certain aesthetic of inhumanity and violence.

At this point, we can understand a fundamental development in the Adornian recovery of the concept of the sublime. Contrary to the romantic concept, based on the experience of the domination and overcoming of nature, Adorno speaks of a certain "return of nature" allowed by sublime works: "Such emancipation [produced by the concept of sublime] would be the return of nature [*Ruckkehr von Natur*], and it—the counterimage of mere

existence—is the sublime."[15] We have seen how the romantic use of the sublime was imbued with the belief in the greatness of man as the master of nature. By safely contemplating the overwhelming force of nature, we discover at the same time the precariousness of our empirical individuality and our greater destiny as rational beings, which is not limited to the empirical dimension and the feeling of self-preservation. We can thus reduce nature to something whose strength is to be mastered and overcome. This is why sublime works are monumental: They seem to tell the story of humans who overcome the natural forces.

However, the Adornian recovery starts from the defense of a sublime that has lost its dominating grandiloquence, since such grandiloquence would now sound unreasonable; or perhaps it was only possible as a ruined grandiloquence, as we know through the work of Anselm Kiefer. Herein lies an important discussion about the use of models of monumentality in contemporary art and their political consequences.

This peculiar "non-grandiloquent sublime" or, if you will, the "sublime of atrophy," is what ultimately guides Adorno's thinking, marking an important distinction between the romantic and modernist sublime. It appears, for instance, in a text about Anton Webern, in which Adorno states that Webern's formal law of music is atrophy (*Schrumpfens*)—atrophy that seems to go toward the recovery of a musical work that abandons musical time as extensive grandeur and leaves behind the architectural nature of the traditional idea of form. Even if we find some of these procedures in the discussion on Beethoven's late style, it is not to suggest a direct line between Beethoven's and Webern's compositional strategies. However, we can insist that the romantic use of the atrophy of form is radicalized in modernism, allowing the composers to open a new frame of production upon problems proper to the permanence of the sublime as a normative horizon for works of art.

Adorno insists on the well-known reduced characteristic of Webern's works (all of his compositions taken together are no more than three hours long) to insist on the importance of the composer stunting musical time, thus allowing an intensification of expression that coincides with the interdiction of temporal extension. Thus, Webern serves as an example of Adorno's claim that there is no possible lyricism that does not go through atrophy. This intensification of expression is necessarily a reduction of music to the gesture of an "absolute expression," which allows Adorno to state:

> The pure sound to which the subject tends, as a support of his expression [*Ausdrucksträger*], is released from the violence that subjectivity inflicts upon the sound material in shaping it. The subject, making sound, without any mediation of musical language, allows music to provide the sound of nature, and no longer of subjectivity.[16]

Adorno's strong statement demands attention. An expression devoid of language mediation, or whose true mediation is the atrophy of language, is a peculiar mode of mediation that allows the subject to free itself from a subjectivity that would operate by building organizations that are modes of domination, freeing itself from its own image, thus providing the conditions for a "return of nature" as an organic process. This is what Adorno sees in Webern's early compositions; it does not, however, prevent him from sharply criticizing Webern's musical language development due to the fetishized use of the twelve-tones series, exemplified by the critical analysis of a piece such as the Variations for Piano op. 27.

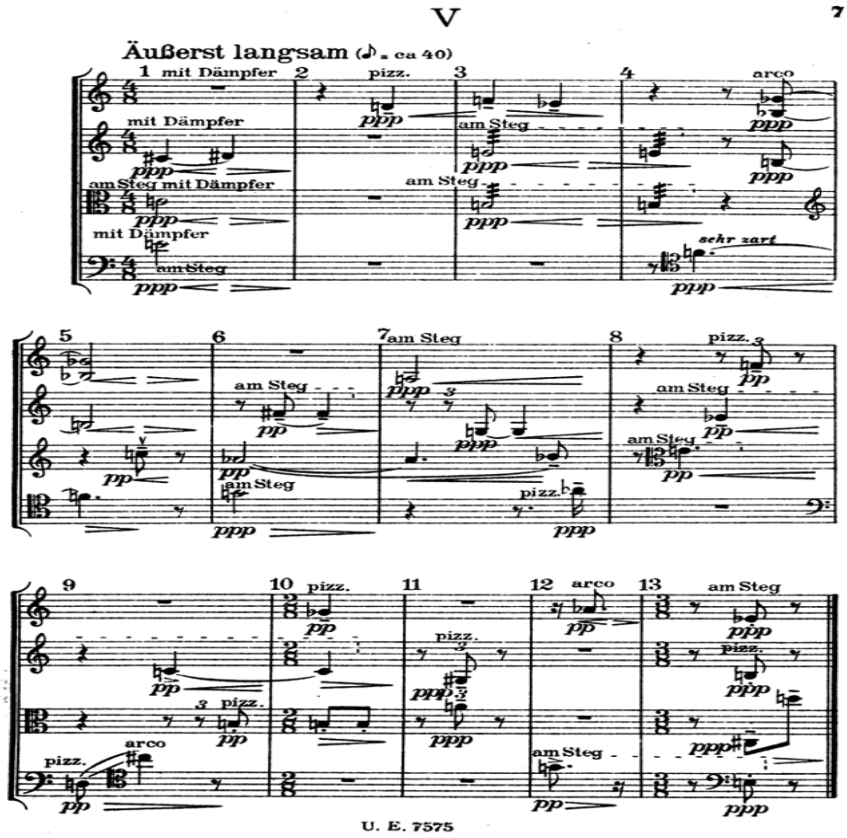
György Ligeti stated in an important article about Webern that the Austrian composer had managed to isolate gestures and musical configurations of romanticism from its network of

traditional relationships. Thus, the form becomes static since it can no longer rely on formal supports of development, such as the infinite melody or the continuous processuality of the musical idea. For this reason, "to the reduction of expression and gestures to some very concentrated motive cells is added the impossibility of all work and all thematic development—which is, by the way, in accordance with the staticity of the form."[17] In this gesture of reduction, the network between musical elements takes the form of juxtaposition.

However, these concentrated parts are not devoid of any principle of construction. They are, in fact, the reduction of the principle of construction to the enunciation of a musical gesture with great plastic force, as if a quality pertaining to physical gestures now becomes the productive foundation of form. This may explain the idea of an immanent transposition of the expression into form instead of mere formlessness. In fact, the musical idea responsible for producing form is taken directly from gestures. Thus, the piece is, in a way, the expansion of the productive potentiality of an instant gesture—a gesture that would normally pass imperceptibly, and that can only be heard and released because time has gone silent.

Take, for example, some features of the Six Bagatelles for String Quartet op. 9. Composed in 1913, that is, before the twelve-tone phase, the piece chooses a smaller genre. A bagatelle is usually a short, unpretentious song written in a light style—as if the lightness of musical writing is proportional to its capacity to be built by the gesture it expresses.

We can use the fifth bagatelle as an example. Its construction starts from a chromatic technique with a preponderance of minor seconds. Already in the first two bars, we find the presentation of a dense chromatic network composed of the C, C #, D #, and E in the first bar, which will be completed by the D of the second bar. Gradually this relationship of minor seconds increases,



either upward or downward, to the seventh bar. However, these amplifications of the harmonic field are not homogeneous, as if following a rule. They are organic and, therefore, asymmetric and relatively free. For example, the symmetry between the high and low harmonic fields is broken at the end of the seventh bar. Upward, the field enlarges one degree more than downward.

We must speak of more or less freely developed structures, because here, as Ligeti maintains, order and freedom seem to seek a balance. However, from the seventh measure, the magnification gesture continues but ceases to operate chromatically by smaller second intervals—as if the gestural principle of construction was released to the maximum stress point of the form. In this movement, the music is no longer chromatic but keeps the old figure as its fundamental principle of movement: "We are facing an organic process: the form is neither schematically constructed

nor free from all restrictions. It is born, like everything that is living, from growth and restraint, widening afterward until at last the chromatic harmonic field is torn."[18] In this way, the work shows the productive force of a gesture that can be read as "the return of nature" and, in the same movement, as the awareness of the internal restlessness of the gesture itself. Thus, the stunted time of the work is not a still time. For it is not the immobility of repetition that seeks ecstasy. It is the contraction of time that observes a gesture at its bursting point.

Basically, with his discussions of the atrophy of musical language, with discussions about the cunning of an expression that wants to show its irreducibility in relation to the fetishized codification of affects, Adorno radicalizes the principles of analysis he had developed to speak of Beethoven's late style. This could not be otherwise, since we are, in fact, facing the unfolding of problems linked to the possible uses of the category of the sublime within musical aesthetics. Even if we are dealing with different historical periods, the analysis of historical discontinuity of languages and styles could be applied to a continuity of problems. To think the complexity of this relation between continuity and discontinuity is a task for critical thought today.

Notes

1. E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (Jan 1917), 128.
2. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge, 2008).
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 127.
4. Adorno had understood it when he states that "the experience of post-Kantian German Idealism reacts against philistine narrowness and contentment with the compartmentalization of life and organizes knowledge in accordance with the division of labor ...

The watchword 'infinity' which flowed so easily from all their pens as it had not from Kant's, takes on its specific coloration only in relation to what were for them the privations of the finite, of entrenched self-interest was reflected." Theodor Adorno, *Three Studies on Hegel*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1993), 62.

5. Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Expanded edition, 1998), 393.
6. The idea of modern individuality indicates here the constitution of a social and philosophical subjectivity that is consolidated between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. For this notion of "modern," proper to the emergence of an empirical-transcendental double, we can refer to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: The Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
7. Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1989), 42.
8. Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 24.
9. As Adorno reflected, about the late style: "The formal law is revealed precisely on the thought of death. If, in the face of death's reality, art's right lose their force, then the former will certainly not be able to be absorbed directly into the work in the guise of its 'subject.'" Theodor Adorno, "Beethoven's Late Style," trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: California University Press, 2002), 566.
10. Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 12.
11. Beethoven's works until 1803 indicate his allegiance to the classical style. In this sense, the Third Symphony represents an important formal rupture toward a romantic style, where the relationship between expression and construction would change considerably. We know the traditional division of Beethoven's work in three phases. See Wilhelm von Lenz, *Beethoven et ses trois styles* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010), but I would insist on a more productive idea that stresses Beethoven's role on the passage from classicism to romanticism; see Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig*

von Beethoven: Approaches to His Music, trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

12. Charles Rosen, *Beethoven's Piano Sonatas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 240.
13. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 196.
14. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 197.
15. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 195.
16. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 96.
17. György Ligeti, *Neuf essais sur la musique* (Genève: Contrechamp, 2001), 40 (my trans.).
18. Ligeti, *Neuf essais*, 48.

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