



Materiality

What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here', the most minimal occurrence

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Introduction

Lyotard's theory of the postmodern sublime and the avant-gardes as posited in "Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?" ("Response to the Question: What is Postmodernism?") (1983) and *L'inhumain (The Inhuman)* (1988), it is true, takes but little stock of music. Instead, and perhaps due to the typically specular orientation of postmodern culture, it bears mainly on the pictorial arts in general and the art of the American abstract-expressionist painter Barnett Newman in particular. Still, Lyotard's explorations are of relevance here in so far as they, firstly, reinforce (if in a secondary way) the (proto-)Romantic privileging of the art of music in the sphere of the sublime and, secondly, purport to offer a move away from the traditional, Kantian model of the sublime feeling.

Both these aspects of Lyotard's explorations, I will show in this chapter, are intimately tied up with his critical rereading of the sublime in terms of what he calls the postmodern sublime. The postmodern, in this instance, not so much refers to the historical period of post-modernism as to a subversive manner of (artistic) presentation that Lyotard relates to the rule-breaking practices of the avant-gardes. In the last chapter, I have already connected such rule-breaking to the idea of *Formwidrigkeit* in Romantic music, trading what Lyotard calls the "solace and pleasure" of the beautiful for the disruption and distress of the sublime (Lyotard [1983] 1999: 1014). However, in his all-too schematic, rigid distinction between Romantic and modernist art, Lyotard exclusively reserves the idea of a postmodern sublime as an unwarranted, dispossessing, and also joyful experimenting to late-nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century artistic practices.

Lyotard's main reason for doing so is that, according to him, only during the modernist period the aesthetic question "What is beautiful?" would have been exchanged for the critical question "What can be said to be art?" (ibid.: 1010). Though, once more, I do not agree with Lyotard's binary opposition between Romantic and modernist art in this respect, the point here is that the postmodern sublime is related to the second question in so far as this question is at once and already a self-questioning. What, for Lyotard, makes up the postmodern sublime is an

interrogation and breaking or undermining of the presumed conditions of any given art form. It is the uncertain feeling occasioned by an experimenting, a questioning of artistic restrictions and prescriptions in the full awareness that ultimate artistic grounds or foundations are no longer valid. As an aesthetics of the infinite, I explain, the aesthetics of the sublime would here be transformed into an aesthetics of a *plastic* infinity: of an “infinity of plastic essays to be made” in the absence of stringent indications what an art, any art, should be like (Lyotard 1998: 127). According to Lyotard, the confusion and delight felt on account of this possibility of an ever new, ever unknown next assay already resonates with a postmodern sensibility: the joyful accepting of the fact that metaphysical, political, and religious certainties have collapsed, that there is no ultimate reality, no foundation, but an infinite variety of different, possible world-makings. Thus, the postmodern sublime feeling feeds on a pain of disorientation that comes with dead certainties yet also, and at once, on a delight of open, infinite experimenting.

To be sure, there is a tension in this Lyotardian positioning of the postmodern within the practices of modernism. Thus the postmodern, with its general taste for pastiche, parody, and self-reflexive intertextuality, seems radically opposed to the discourse of origin and originality that, precisely, typifies and even defines the modernist ideology of avant-gardism. The postmodern celebrates the death of the author, as much as the death of authenticity, while the modernist dictum of the avant-gardes still generally celebrates the aliveness of the protean genius breaking the law and, in this way, heralding the new and unheard-of. Indeed, I suggest, if the adjective ‘postmodern’ thus seems oddly out of place with respect to radical avant-gardist experimenting, Lyotard even threatens to undermine the postmodern status of his own postmodern sublime. For as will be seen, the way in which Lyotard approaches and circumscribes what he takes to be postmodern ‘instances’ of the sublime in earlier twentieth-century art, turns out to be a veiled formalism. A formalism, I argue more specifically, recalling the modernist dictum of a Clement Greenberg that avant-garde painting undermined its own presuppositions in adopting the ‘method’ of music as a so called strictly sensuous, non-imitative art. Painting no longer figured ‘something’, but dis-figured and reinvented itself in presenting only itself, its own matter, and receding into its flat picture plane. If anything, this connects rather than contrasts with Lyotard’s central statement that the postmodern sublime no longer announces itself in the subject matter of an artwork but in its very matter, in the “presentation itself” (Lyotard 1983: 1014).

However, if this signals an essentially modernist privileging of form over content, Lyotard’s rereading of the sublime has nevertheless been of no little significance to late-twentieth-century reworkings of the sublime as a viable critical concept in postmodern theory. What will, in this instance, be of special significance to my own explorations into the possibility of an ‘alternative’ sublime is Lyotard’s decapitation of the

Kantian sublime: for Lyotard, the sublime no longer revolves around the realization of a supersensible destiny, but is rather recast completely on the level of sensibility as a specifically material moment, a break in one's conventional, imaginative ways of world-making. This rupture, as Renée van de Vall observes, triggers an "awareness, or feeling, or idea that does not hover above ordinary reality as some sort of thing or quasi-positive entity, but is rather present *within* that reality as an anxiety or limit" (Van de Vall 1994: 337). The radically 'other' that occasions the sublime feeling is here not positively determined – like Kant's idea of absolute totality that violates imagination – but rather stands as indeterminacy, as a question mark within the sphere of sensibility (ibid.: 337). As it were made to fit the soundings of twentieth-century experimental music, I will show, this rereading of the sublime has led theorists like Van de Vall to think the experience of the sublime anew in terms of the vicissitudes of creative processes. It remains to be seen, however, if such a rethinking truly offers a move away from Kant's self-surpassing, epically cast sublime experience.

Minimal Formation

In *The Inhuman*, Lyotard calls to mind the Burkean dictum that a pictorial sublime cannot but be a contradiction within the terms.¹ What, for Burke, is necessary to call forth the sublime feeling is obscurity, indeterminacy, invisibility. Yet how can a painting become invisible? Writing in 1883 – in the rearranged edition of *Modern Painters* (1848) – John Ruskin stated that it can at least become obscure, suggestive instead of imitative:

A few shapeless scratches or accidental stains on the wall, or the forms of clouds, or any other complicated accidents, will set the imagination to work to coin something out of them; and all paintings in which there is much gloom or mystery, possesses therein a certain sublimity owing to the play given to the beholder's imagination...The vacancy of a truly imaginative work results not from the absence of ideas, or incapability of grasping or detailing them, but from the painting having told the whole pith and power of his subject and disdaining to tell more; and the sign of this being the case is, that the mind of the beholder is forced to act in a certain mode, and feels itself overpowered and borne away by that of the painter, and not

¹The fact that Lyotard always and only focuses on art, rather than nature, in relation to the sublime perhaps has to do with his indebtedness to Theodor Adorno's theory of the sublime. Thus, as María Peña Aguado points out, for Adorno the sublime as Kant had described it in the third *Critique* can no longer be experienced in nature: no longer, that is, as an elevation above nature (Peña Aguado 1994: 99). After the horrors of the twentieth century, it would only be art that can keep alive "a different relation with nature" – which is to say, a dialogical relation, rather than one whereby the subject is posited as a master over, and safely locked away from, nature (ibid.: 99). Though Lyotard would similarly denounce the possibility of a natural sublime, and turn to art instead, he would nevertheless also reject Adorno's idea of the sublime feeling as being too nostalgic (ibid.: 99-104).

be able to defend itself, nor go which way it will. (Ruskin [1883] 1909: 185)

This recalls Burke, Beattie, and many of the early German Romantics discussed in chapters 2 and 4: the artistic sublime – though Burke excludes painting – turns on a certain imperfection, a leaving things out, unseen and undefined, so that the beholder is forced to imagine it herself, to picture what the painter will not show.

Lyotard, however, has something different in mind with respect to the sublime. In a manner comparable to Seidl, he associates the sublime not with an over-activation of imagination's associative powers, supplanting what has been left out, but rather with a temporary short-circuiting of its formative power. With, that is to say, an interruption of sight, in so far as the sublime interrupts the ability to see and grasp containable, self-subsistent forms. In order to achieve such an interruption, a painting would have to become imageless, figureless, vacant, resisting the efforts of the beholder to form or picture something after all.

To Lyotard's mind, Romantic art is not up to this task. Here, as he generalises quite grossly, overlooking Constable's or Turner's more abstract-tending studies, the indeterminacy crucial to the sublime can "still be only achieved in determinate fashion. Support, frame, line, colour, space, the figure – were to remain, in romantic art, subject to the constraint of representation", which, for Lyotard, involves figuration, narration, and illusory, three-dimensional reality-making (Lyotard 1988: 101). Symbolist or even Surrealist painting, for that matter, would face similar problems: no matter how strange, uncanny, and unfamiliar the 'combinations' it presents, it still shows. Surrealism, says Lyotard, still holds fast to the laws of "figurative presentation" in arranging "figurative elements" together in "paradoxical fashion" rather than abandoning the figurative altogether (ibid.: 85). This, evidently, does not hold for all Surrealist art but – and here Lyotard, to my surprise, unquestioningly supports Burke's naive notion of pictures as imitations and revelations – in so far as it is figurative, Surrealism is "still vulnerable to Burke's objection that painting has little potential for sublimity: residual fragments of 'perceptive' reality are simply being assembled in a different manner" (ibid.: 85). Surrealist painting still delineates, although it disfigures as well, still 'reveals', although its 'meaning' remains latent, hidden, or ambiguous. What, according to Lyotard, the sublime instead requires is an art that not merely evokes the invisible or ungraspable via a weird re-arrangement of the visual order, but one that explodes the visible altogether, without even a faint reminiscence of it.

The answer, for Lyotard, can be found in "what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation. He cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure, when reduced to near-nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity" (ibid.: 98). I am not so sure if this is by

definition the case, and if Burke's Lockean-based conception of an experience of the infinite as never coming one step closer to an end or goal through an infinite repetition of the same (minimal) presentation is not a more effective way to think such an "infinite contemplation of infinity". Still, by way of illustration, one could consider the painter Plasson in Alessandro Baricco's philosophical novel *Oceano Mare* (1994), who tries to paint the colour of the sea but ends up by showing nothing. His efforts to create are immediately self-defeating, for the only way he can conceive to paint the sea as an apparently indefinite expanse is to paint it with the transparent – and to that extent invisible – salty water itself: "The man...keeps staring at the sea. Silence. Every now and then he dips the brush in a little copper pot and sketches a few light lines on the canvas. The hairs of the brush leave the shadow of a bleak darkness, which the wind immediately dries so that the original white reappears. And on the canvas, nothing. Nothing that can be seen" (Baricco [1994] 1999: 10, my translation).

Plasson paints the sea in a most literal sense – one could say that he exemplifies it in the way that an entirely green painting exemplifies the colour green – yet this, what might be called, material realism leaves no visible trace. On the canvas there is nothing that can be seen, and it is such a canvas, like "the 'white'...of Malevitch's squares", making it "impossible to see" in the sense of discerning or identifying something, that Lyotard associates with the sublime (Lyotard 1999: 1013). Why? Because here the beholder's imagination is faced with a blankness that it cannot contain as form, giving rise to the pain of a creative (i.e. formative) frustration. Yet at the same time, this blankness literally creates an openness allowing imagination to explore its own limits, to try and "figure even that which cannot be figured" (Lyotard 1998: 98). Alternatively, however, one could say that such a blank painting embodies a Kantian (abstract) idea of reason, an idea for which imagination cannot give a corresponding instance or presentation. The fruitlessness of its efforts to do so after all would, in turn, signal something completely other that resists formation and visualization.

Conforming, as Lyotard maintains, to such an idea of a negative presentation – whereby a painting evokes the infinite in explicitly stating in one way or another that it cannot show or present; in thematising its own figurative failure – twentieth-century abstract art would be intimately wound up with the aesthetics of the sublime, rather than that of the beautiful (*ibid.*: 125). Indeed, Lyotard hypothesises rather daringly, given the eighteenth-century theoretical fascination with negative presentation in relation to the sublime (not only in Kant but also, we have seen, in Burke, Usher, or Lowth) one could suggest that even "before Romantic art had freed itself from Classical and Baroque figuration, the door had...been opened to enquiries pointing towards abstract and Minimal art" (*ibid.*: 98). To state, though, that avant-gardism (abstract art being, of course, intricately part of the pictorial avant-garde) "is thus present in germ in the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime" is overshooting

the mark (ibid.: 98). After all, firstly, if avant-gardism is about a relatively free or lawless experimenting, then this conflicts with the way in which Kant interposes the power of judgement as, precisely, always curbing such lawlessness. Secondly, Kant clearly states in the *Anthropology* that the sublime in art is always embedded within the 'good' or pleasurable forms of the beautiful (Kant 1960: §67, 428). This sharply contradicts with Lyotard's idea of avant-garde painting as escaping the aesthetics of the beautiful since "its works appear to the public of taste to be 'monsters', 'formless' objects, purely 'negative' entities" – artistic presentations "that make presentation suffer" (ibid.: 125).

Newman and the Instant

If Lyotard thus largely ignores the harmonizing tendencies of the Kantian sublime, he is nevertheless right about the significance of the sublime to twentieth-century avant-garde artists. Apollinaire, he points out, used the term in his studies on the *peintres artistes*, while the abstract-expressionist painter Barnett Newman employed it in his titles – *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* – and writings (ibid.: 126). What Lyotard likes about Newman's pictorial evocations of the sublime is not just that they would conform to the invisibility-thesis: that these huge colour-field paintings are imageless or formless to the extent that they bypass any kind of figuration. Rather, as Van de Vall explains, it is that Newman's paintings do not represent a sublime event (as, say, the nineteenth-century spectacle-paintings of John Martin do), but *perform* a sublime event. For Newman, she writes, "the sublime in painting is not so much to be portrayed or depicted, such as the portrayal of a sublime landscape or the depiction of a sublime literary theme, or...merely alluded to, as to something outside the painting...Instead of being *about* a sublime event, the painting had to *become* a sublime event" (Van de Vall 1994: 221, my emphases). It does not show, it *does* – precisely by casting off the bounds of figurative form and the laws of illusory, visible reality-making.

Or, as Lyotard argues, a painting by Newman presents or offers itself, colour, paint, line, without mirroring or presupposing anything beyond of itself. It "arises, just as an occurrence arises", suddenly, out of nowhere, pointing to nothing but itself (Lyotard 1998: 83). It might be awkward to thus think of a painting as an occurrence, something that happens instantaneously. After all, one familiarly tends to conceive of paintings in terms of substantiality; something spatial instead of temporal, something fixed instead of something suddenly arising, which takes some time to 'consume'. But that is precisely it: as a painter Newman is less concerned with the manipulation of space than the sensation of time. And not historical or narrative time but now-time, this moment now, the time of an instant, the occurrence of the momentary: that time, the instantaneousness of the instant, "is the picture itself" (ibid.: 78). As Lyotard comments on Newman's fourteen *Stations of the Cross* (1958-1966): "The time of what is recounted (the flash of the knife raised

against Isaac) and the time taken to recount that time (the corresponding verses of Genesis) cease to be dissociated. They are condensed into the plastic (linear, chromatic, rhythmic) instant that is the painting" (ibid.: 83). The painting performs instead of recounts, it becomes the instant recounted in the verses of Genesis. The instant is performed, it happens, rather than being pictured as having happened: the place (makom) where Abraham stood before G-d (Hamakom) becomes a *taking place*, and this taking place is the painting itself.

Lyotard tries, to this effect, very hard to empty Newman's paintings out of 'empirical' meaning or content, eagerly conceding that Newman "never used his paintings to transmit a message to the viewer" – none of his paintings have "any purpose other than to be a visual event in itself" (ibid.: 83). To *do* and *be*, instead of to represent, and to be independently. For Lyotard, Newman's paintings are self-sufficient (as self-sufficient as music in its Romantic conception), and do not even conceal technical secrets. A painting by Newman, he states, "hides no...cleverness that might delay the understanding of our gaze, or that might therefore arouse our curiosity. It is neither seductive nor equivocal; it is clear, 'direct', open and 'poor' " (ibid.: 83). It is an 'open' sign that is also open in its own materiality: a surface that covers no intricate substance, just as it hides no secret meaning.

Everything is there – dimensions, colours, lines – but there are no allusions. So much so that it is a problem for the commentator. What can one say that is not given?...The best gloss consists of the question: what can one say? Or of the exclamation 'Ah'. Of surprise: 'Look at that' So many expressions of a feeling which does have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition (and in the work of Newman): the sublime. (ibid.: 80)

Lyotard's Formalism

All this is very well, positing a painting as a sublime happening, yet in this way, Van de Vall notes, Lyotard hardly moves beyond "the formalist reductionism of Clement Greenberg" that Newman's paintings have no "content", or rather that their (plastic) form *is* their content, and that their sole function is to *be* rather than to be *about* something (Van de Vall 1994: 339, 340). Indeed, more seriously, not just Lyotard's approach to Newman but even his conception of a specifically postmodern sublime appears ultimately rooted in a formalist privileging of 'form' over 'content'. This may not be immediately evident as Lyotard lays so much stress on the (alleged) fact that avant-garde art can evoke the sublime in so far as it takes on *itself* the formlessness (i.e. the absence of clearly defined, conventional, recognisable shapes) associated with it. As Barnett Newman observed in "The Sublime is Now" (1948): "The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty" – to destroy beautiful, ingratiating forms (Newman [1948] 1999: 573). Thus, music here approached "unformed sound" (Iannis Xenakis), painting often consisted of "unformed blots of paint" (Jackson Pollock), while poetry

deliberately aspired towards a state of “unformed language” (Stéphane Mallarmé) (Van der Sijde 1998: 87, my translation). Still, there is an undeniably formalist streak in Lyotard’s claim that the postmodern sublime differs from the modern (i.e. in this context: Romantic) sublime in its turn away from ‘subject matter’: that the sublime here announces itself in the manner of presentation of an artwork, or the manner in which it undermines presentation, rather than in *what* it would re-present.

This formalist echo becomes quite distinct when comparing Lyotard’s idea of the avant-garde as more or less evolving out of the aesthetics of the sublime, to Clement Greenberg’s genealogy of the avant-garde in his “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1948). Significantly, Greenberg here argues that the abstract ‘currents’ of earlier twentieth-century avant-garde art – the exclusive terrain of Lyotard’s postmodern sublime – have grown out of a fascination with, even a jealousy of, the allegedly suggestive, sensuous, and non-representational ways of instrumental music as “an art in itself” (Greenberg [1948] 1999: 557).² Due to, Greenberg observes, “its ‘absolute’ nature, its remoteness from imitation, its almost complete absorption in the very physical quality of its medium, as well as because of its resources of suggestion, music had come to replace poetry as the paragon art. It was the art which the other arts envied most, and whose effects they tried hardest to imitate” (ibid.: 557). Only when, however, the avant-garde’s focus on music changed from a focus on musical *effects* into one on “music as a *method* of art”, did it find a way to verily reconceive of the arts of painting and poetry (ibid.: 557).

That method was the method of a so called “‘abstract’ art, an art of ‘pure form’ ”: an art, as Adam Smith has noted long ago and Hanslick would reiterate in the nineteenth century, that is strictly its own subject matter (ibid.: 557). An art, in contrast to what the early Romantics,

²Not surprisingly, being a formalist, Greenberg attributes this fascination with music, or more properly ‘music’, as we are here clearly dealing with a (Romantic) *idea* of music, to an artistic desire to preserve art as a pure *sanctum* away from everyday “ideological struggles of society” (Greenberg 1999: 556). This heralded the necessity to escape ideas, for ideas were apparently “infecting the arts” with precisely these struggles and “came to mean subject matter in general” (one can now at best smile piteously at such presumptions) (ibid.: 556). Art, in other words, was not to be considered a *cultural* practice (which of course it always inevitably is; it informs culture as much as it is even unknowingly informed by it). Hence the emphasis on form, rather than subject matter, and on self-sufficiency; on the arts being “entitled to respect for their own sakes, and not merely as vessels of communication. It was the signal for a revolt against the dominance of literature, which was subject matter at its most oppressive” (ibid.: 556). Following the example of ‘music’ (here implicitly represented in opposition to culture and the ‘full’ linguistic sign) thus proved a way out of this alleged oppression of literature. This had, moreover, the added advantage for painting to “expand the expressive resources of the medium, not in order to express ideas and notions, but to express with greater immediacy sensations, the irreducible elements of experience” (ibid. 556). (An expressive expansion based on the conventional assumption that music is only about evoking and eliciting immediate sensations, not about mediated thinking).

Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche had claimed, that does not ring with metaphysical significance but is rather – in the radically formalist view – strictly its own significance: that creates, sustains, and revolves around its own world of tonally moving forms. What, according to Greenberg, the avant-gardes discovered, was that this presumed self-absorption or self-centredness could also be made to apply to the arts of painting and poetry. That, more specifically, the effects of these art would be no longer accidental to their “formal natures” – that the content or ‘subject matter’ of painting could be its own substance, colour, paint, and nothing else, operating only on the sense of sight as colour, paint: a ‘pure’, objectless, non-individualizing world in itself (ibid.: 557).

In this way, Greenberg infers, the emphasis in avant-garde art “was to be on the physical, sensorial”, in so far as the avant-gardes borrowed the principles of music “as a ‘pure’ art, as an art which is abstract because it is almost nothing else except sensuous” (ibid.: 557). What Greenberg means to say by this is that music is abstract in so far as it would figure nothing but its own, sensuous movements, which in turn would have no referential relation to the outside world. There is, as Hanslick stated in *On the Musically Beautiful*, “nothing in nature for music to copy”, music “reiterates no subject matter already known and given a name; therefore it has no nameable content for our thinking in definite concepts” (Hanslick 1986: 73, 80). If, in Greenberg’s essay, ‘abstract’ denotes an absence of recognisable, empirical shapes and ‘subject matter’ (as, for instance, stories have a subject matter), an exclusive focus on the forms and material of an artwork as ends in themselves rather than these being used as a means for an end, then music can be abstract because sensuous – because its sensuous forms do not reiterate an already known or named, because it has no ‘concrete’ content other than this.

In this radically formalist conception, ‘music’ would have led avant-garde painting to become increasingly self-reflexive. It renounced representation, image-making, formation (to the extent that, say, colours or brush strokes “defined for their own sake” embody matter not transformed into a recognisable figure), and became one-dimensional, leaving a shallow “material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas” (ibid.: 558). In this way, in resisting tradition, painting at once progressively surrendered “to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane’s denial of efforts to ‘hole through’ it for realistic perspectival space”, along with the destruction of the ‘realistic’ pictorial object (ibid.: 558). Avant-garde painting thus undermined its viewer’s expectations in so far as it blocked the possibility to see through, to see *as*, or to see *in*.

Glossing these Greenbergian typifications of avant-garde painting, it is not hard to see the parallel with Lyotard’s characterisation of Newman’s sublime paintings. They would not show, would not have a

'subject matter',³ would not allude to anything other than themselves, their own material substance, would not carry a 'message'. In this way, they also resist (narrative) interpretation or verbal translation and undermine the three-dimensional illusion of realist painting, offering only the flat, bare picture plain in huge, one-dimensional colour-fields. This, in turn, would at once make Newman's paintings liable to bring forth the sublime in, according to Lyotard, its postmodern rather than its modern variety:

The avant-gardes in painting fulfil Romanticism, i.e. modernity, which, in its strong and recurrent sense, is the failure of stable regulation between the sensible and intelligible. But at the same time they are a way out of Romantic nostalgia because they do not try to find the unrepresentable at a great distance, as a lost origin or end, to be represented in the subject of the picture, but in the very matter of the artistic work. (Lyotard 1998: 126)

If, however, one takes seriously the Greenbergian genesis of the avant-garde out of the spirit of 'music', then this strict distinction between the Romantic and postmodern sublime becomes doubtful. The irony, after all, is that what according to Greenberg is the effect of a still very much Romantic pull toward the musical in avant-garde art (or rather what, in the nineteenth-century, instrumental music was conceived to be in formalist aesthetic theories), results for Lyotard in the *possibility of a postmodern, no-longer-Romantic sublime*: a sublime which resides in the substance, the flat surface of a painting, not 'over there', over the rainbow, but down here in the (happening of the) painting itself. Thus, one could suggest, avant-garde art fulfils Romanticism not just because it brings forth the sentiment of the sublime, but also because – *in its very difference from most Romantic-pictorial evocations of the sublime* – it does so by realizing in a most radical way the Romantic-artistic quest for the musical: by becoming imageless, indeterminate, open, 'immediately sensuous', and self-presentational instead of representational.

Of course, it would be incorrect to reduce Lyotard's postmodern sublime solely to the abstractionism of the avant-gardes – or, for that matter, to reduce the self-questionings of these avant-gardes entirely to the question: How can my art become like 'music'? Indeed, I have already noted in the introduction to this chapter, Lyotard's main argument for a postmodern sensibility already being present in the

³This requires explanation and attenuation: subject matter in the sense of a story, event, scene 'external' to the medium of presentation is indeed absent from Newman's paintings. Even subject matter, however, can be self-referential or 'internal' to the matter of a painting. Thus, the subject matter of a painting can, for instance, be painting itself, the process of pictorial creation (which for Lyotard "is what happens (this) in the midst of the indeterminate") – and this is how subject matter survives in Newman's abstract-expressionist work (Lyotard 1998: 82). Without it, Newman maintained, painting would become merely ornamental (ibid.: 81).

essentially modernist practices of the avant-gardes is that it calls in question the viability of so called 'meta-narratives': of transcendental truths and totalitarian ideas defining and dictating the 'nature' of things. That, to reiterate the issue, it would have undermined an aesthetic foundationalism in problematizing the supposed preconditions of the various art forms. What is painting, poetry, music, ballet, or dance, and what is 'essential' to it? Does one need to produce images in order to produce a painting, do words have to make sense, or refer to a world beyond themselves, to make up a poem, is music strictly organised sound, construed as a coherent, logical whole, is ballet only ballet in presenting the physical movements traditionally defined as such? It was these questions that the avant-gardes probed in their work and it was, in turn, their work which thus questioned the necessity and legitimacy of the presumed foundations of their art.

Still, the locus of Lyotard's postmodern pictorial sublime cannot be completely disconnected from Romantic notions on the self-sufficiency of art as exemplified by the art of instrumental music. Indeed, even the absence of solid foundations and the embracing of indeterminacy characteristic of the postmodern sensibility has a certain Romantic ring to it. Thus, the Romantic and even pre-Romantic delight in the instability of meaning parallels the postmodern delight in the fragmentation of 'reality', the loss of a stable centre or footing – of a stable, ultimate signified (cf. De Mul 1999). True, the Romantics were still very much concerned with a noumenal reality, a kernel or thing-in-itself which would ground the world of appearances. And true, this distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal has largely, and without much regret, been effaced in postmodern critical theories: there is no ultimate reality underlying a world of appearances, appearances rather are the only possible reality – 'reality' is a fiction. Nonetheless, it will be seen in the following sections, if the postmodern sublime no longer pines after an unreachable beyond, or a lost past, it still shares with the Romantic sensibility the necessity of a radically open future. A future, that is to say, which is not construed as homecoming, which is not planned ahead by all sorts of ideals, schools, or prevailing preconceptions, but which is preserved as an undetermined space ahead in which something un-thought or unforeseen might suddenly occur.

Plastic Indeterminacy

For Lyotard, the indeterminacy relative to such an idea of a radically open future first and foremost concerns not a transcendental but a plastic indeterminacy. He thus hardly has a higher (quasi-)entity in mind when stating that avant-garde painters bear witness to the fact that there is indeterminacy, that "something remains to be determined", or that they "allow the indeterminate to appear as question mark"

(Lyotard 1998: 91).⁴ He hardly means to say that such artists pay tribute to a transcendental unknown and unseen by presenting – or better, not-showing – it as unknowable and invisible. Instead of alluding to a missing or hidden ‘absolute’ that must remain unspecified, a Lyotardian witnessing to the indeterminate should be thought of as a question posed by the artist about the medium and material s/he is working with. It quite simply means, in accordance with what we have seen above, that the ‘basic’ preconditions and presuppositions of art – whether it be literature, painting, architecture, dance, or music – are *subject to doubt* and that it is this doubt the artist must testify to. This is, at least, what Lyotard’s postmodern variety of the sublime, inextricably intertwined with the experimental ‘assays’ of the avant-garde, would logically have to amount to:

The doubt which gnaws at the avant-gardes did not stop with Cézanne’s ‘colouristic sensations’ as though they were indubitable, and, for that matter, no more did it stop with the abstractions they heralded. The task of having to bear witness to the indeterminate carries away, one after another, the barriers set up by the writings of theorists and by the manifestos of painters themselves. A formalist definition of the pictorial object, such as that proposed in 1961 by Clement Greenberg when confronted with American ‘post-plastic’ abstraction, was soon overturned by the current of Minimalism. Do we have to have stretchers so that the canvas is taut? No. What about colours? Malevitch’s black square on white had already answered this

⁴Critics like Lacoue-Labarthe (1999) nonetheless maintain that Lyotard, too, embraces negativity, the negative presence of the sublime in an ultimately positive way. One can, in this instance, think of the way in which Lyotard appears to embrace Kant’s idea of negative presentation: if one cannot present the absolute, he says, one can still “present that there is some absolute” (Lyotard 1998: 126). Thus, one can present *that* ‘there is’ without showing or domesticating. More pregnantly put, the not-saying and not-showing, or minimal showing, characteristic of negative or abstract presentation – as in non-figurative painting – attests to the ‘fact’ *that* there is an absolute. This is almost a confirmation of the absolute, comparable to the way in which the anxiety of imagination in the Kantian sublime bears witness to and even represents the immense scope and power of reason. Seen in this light, Lacoue-Labarthe is indeed right to state that the Lyotardian unrepresentable “is like the Jewish God in the Hegelian analysis of sublimity, breaking through presentation itself, annihilating it for its greater (dialectical) glory. We would thus need to think, according to the (onto-theological) outline of negative presentation, that there is presentation, not of what is beyond presentation, but *that* there is something beyond presentation” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1999: 90). A presentational limit here, in other words, still signals its invisible beyond so that even Lyotard, or so it seems, does not escape that nostalgia for a ‘lost absolute’ which he otherwise safely relegates to the Romantic sublime. This is, however, not the whole story, and if one were to present this as the whole story one would be bypassing the ultimate ‘plasticity’ of the Lyotardian sublime. Here, I will explain below, the sublime is felt not in the becoming aware of a higher moral destiny, or in sensing the infinite scope of one’s reason, but in the anxiety *and* jubilation that would be felt in the disintegration of familiar ways of world-making. In, simply, the space opening up within the domain of sensibility when all sorts of proscriptive, constitutive laws of artistic representation no longer count and a virtual infinity of unknown, unimagined ‘assays’ stretches out in front.

question in 1915. Is an object necessary? Body art and happenings went about proving that it is not. A space, at least, a space in which to display, as Duchamp's 'fountain' still suggested? Daniel Buren's work testifies to the fact that even this is subject to doubt. (ibid.: 103)

Thus, Lyotard continues, "the investigations of the avant-gardes question one by one the constituents one might have thought 'elementary' or at the 'origin' of the art of painting. They operate *ex minimis*" – whether minimalist or not (ibid.: 103). They are in question, their work is in question because it refuses to be reconciled with 'elementary criteria'. It materializes what, and indicates that, these criteria repress.⁵

One could also say: avant-garde art revolves around the shock of the new. In the absence of 'essentials' or absolute foundations something new and unforeseen by artistic rules and traditions suddenly happens. And what for Lyotard is sublime, is that something happens after all, when all well-known conditions of possibility of a given art form have been subverted: when, in the absence of such conditions, the certainty of a next work automatically following this or that work created in this or that tradition, is undermined. (Or, alternatively, when all possibilities of any given art form seem to have been exhausted, or all modes of execution of a given piece of music seem to have been exhausted, and someone thinks of a different mode, transforming a potential void ahead into a world of creative possibilities.) A painting without an object, a music without tones – anything goes. And if anything goes, if anything is possible in the absence of pre-determined artistic laws or programmes, one cannot think of anything that cannot be made.

To be sure, Lyotard believes, the postmodern sublime is directed toward this infinity of finitudes; "towards the infinity of plastic essays to be made rather than towards the representation of a supposedly lost absolute" (ibid.: 127). Feeding on the uncertainty caused by the subversion of tradition (of proscriptive master narratives), the postmodern sublime thus bears on un-thought 'not-yet-givens' to be invented. It pertains to a shock of discontinuity – there is no guarantee that after this painting "another is necessary, permitted, or forbidden", triggering the anxious question: What now? What next? Will there be a next? – yet also to a joy that in the absence of a strict continuity just anything *could* happen (ibid.: 91).

⁵Seen in this light, avant-garde art testifies to the indeterminate in so far as it works without familiar, determining categories or criteria – and cannot, as a consequence, be judged according to any such criteria (Lyotard 1999: 1015). The avant-garde 'work' of art is rather "looking for" such criteria, as if looking for a fugitive object(ive), and precisely "puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" by leaving something to be determined – both as concerns form and judgement (ibid.: 1015, 1014). Seen in this light, too, the Lyotardian indeterminate can be considered something *not yet*, some untapped plastic possibility, or rather some unasked question, that may or may not be probed.

It may well strike one as rather curious to recapture the sublime feeling in this particular way. In my view, it seems as if Lyotard here tries to reprocess Burke's existential sublime in what may be called plastic terms. In chapter 2, I have for that matter already pointed to Lyotard's characterisation of the Burkean sublime in terms of a double privation: first the soul is threatened by a privation of life, light, certainty, then it is "deprived of the threat of being deprived" of these (ibid.: 99). And indeed, Lyotard applies this series of privations to the avant-garde in the following way: first, there is a shock or fright caused by an absence of solid foundations and easy continuations (i.e. a privation of certainty). The suspension of tradition creates a gap, with nothing, no rules, or schools or programmes to fall back on. For instance, if objects and even colours are no longer stringent conditions of painting (like Malevitch's white squares), one has no guarantee as to what kind of painting will come 'next', after this painting painted in this way, and even *if* there will be a next painting. When, however, a painting appears after all, defying one's expectations and suspending the anxiety that possibly no next might appear, this makes for the delightful relief characteristic of the Burkean sublime. Breaking the rules, yet also breaking new grounds, the avant-gardes would thus at once stage and remove the Burkean threat of privation (ibid.: 98-100).

In this way, one could say, the Lyotardian shock of the avant-garde undermining the certainty of tradition and easy continuation functions at best as a metaphor of the Burkean existential shock of the sublime facing one with one's own mortality. While in Burke's theory, the subject is momentarily faced with a possible discontinuation of life, and subsequently distanced from it, Lyotard posits the threat of a possible discontinuation of art, which is then once again dispelled by art itself. This is not to say that all avant-garde art can by definition occasion the specifically existential terror that Lyotard takes up from Burke. Rather, it is to say that avant-garde art exemplifies the Burkean privation of continuation (of life, light, or certainty) in its disruptive, self-questioning strategies: in thematising or making explicit the suspension of – what Lyotard calls – the *It happens* in the realm of art. Or, differently said, not the depiction of a spectacle of death, or some other terror-inspiring scene, but the staging of the disruption *per se* associated with the idea of death is what links the avant-gardes to the intensifying shock of the sublime.

Sounding

What thus makes up the postmodern sublime is nothing more or less than a *Formwidrigkeit* manifesting itself as a breaking of conventional artistic rules in a break-through of matter that refuses to be put into (recognisable or 'good') form. This breaking, in turn, at once calls in question the validity or legitimacy of the supposed preconditions of any art form, opening up an infinite space ahead in which just anything might occur without warning – or not. It is this tension of the suspension of

the known, safe, and familiar that avant-garde art stages, and it is also this tension that links the avant-garde to the aesthetics of the sublime.

Yet how, the question now arises, can this postmodern sublime be related to music rather than to painting? The answer seems obvious enough. To start with, and as I have already pointed out, Lyotard's conception of a postmodern pictorial sublime with respect to Newman's art is modelled on a formalist conception of instrumental music as an art of (sensuous) self-presentation rather than of re-presentation. Or, to put it differently: if Newman's paintings are not so much *about* a sublime event as *become* a sublime event, and if it is – amongst others – this performativity that marks for Lyotard a postmodern sublime, then in formalist and also Romanticist terms this performativity constitutes the musical aspect or 'method' of the postmodern pictorial sublime. Lyotard in fact openly avows to this musical aspect when depicting Newman's *Stations of the Cross* in sonorous terms: "I (the viewer) am no more than an ear open to the sound which comes to it from out of the silence; the painting is that sound, an accord" (ibid.: 83). Even as a pictorial sublime, the experience of the sublime is for Lyotard an experience of the ear, an experience of listening – an experience of looking-as-if-one-were-listening.

As such, secondly, Lyotard's notion of the postmodern sublime seems as it were made to fit the music of twentieth-century composers like John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, or Christian Wolff. This is not just due to the fact that these composers display a shared fascination with an indifferent, almost anonymous "sound come into its own" – a sound that appears to occur irrespective of any expressive, formal, structural purpose or intention, irrespective even of a composer and that, as such, radicalises the formalist conception of music as an art of (sensuous) self-presentation, presupposing nothing outside or beyond of itself (Cage [1959] 1999: 68). Rather, it is also due to the fact that this 'sound come into its own' typically manifests itself as a chance-like, material occurrence in what John Cage has called an indeterminate or experimental action: in a suspension of pre-set rules and intentions that allows the unexpected to present itself.

Typically, for Cage an experimental action is one "the outcome of which is not foreseen", so that sounds are not predetermined to appear in (the service of) a certain structural or narrative order with an established beginning, middle, and ending (ibid.: 69). They are rather allowed to just 'be' without one knowing or planning in advance if, how, or when they will be, how they will develop, or where they are going to. There is no absolute control, no foresight. (Yet even then I, a listener, have trouble hearing these sounds as sounds come into 'their own', as sounds 'in themselves'. The composer may have detached him- or herself from traditional ways of music-making but I may still be preconditioned by traditional ways of music-listening, and unknowingly though quite inevitably bring to these sounds not only memories of music heard before, but also traces of listening conventions that cannot be

wiped out just like that. Hearing sound as 'sound alone', unstructured, unburdened by expressive conventions, and hearing it completely newly, barely, disinterestedly, requires at the very least an act of faith).

Examples of such experimental music – not merely experimental because it tries new sounds, modes, and methods, but rather also because the performance of this music is not so much an execution as an experiment in itself – are Earle Brown's *4 Systems* or Wolff's *Duo II for Pianists*. With respect to the former, Cage observes in his "Lecture on Indeterminacy", the function of the performers is "that of making something out of a store of raw materials", while in the latter each performer is comparable "to a traveller who must constantly be catching trains the departures of which have not been announced but which are in the process of being announced. He [she] must be continually ready to go, alert to the situation, and responsible" (Cage [1958] 1999: 38, 39). The implication here is that of risk, of being vigilant: anything may happen, because these 'pieces' (which really are not 'pieces' at all but graphs, figures or drawings) are works in process; events, "expositions without development" or a fixed outcome (Cage [1959] 1999: 72). Apparently, one can compose in such a way, by means of such a "vague suggestion", that any given performance of what has been notated (if anything) remains (largely) unpredictable: "nothing one does gives rise to anything that is preconceived" (*ibid.*: 69).⁶ There is merely a hint of what may be done. Score and performance here cease to relate to each other in terms of cause and effect. The emphasis is on "the identification with what is here and now", with this performance now happening; with this present which, because very little (proscriptions, exhaustive instructions laid down in print) has been predetermined or preconditioned, is always different and contingent (Cage [1958] 1999: 46).

This music thus centrally revolves around the occurrence of a sound which can neither be foreseen, controlled, nor repeated. It 'simply', uniquely happens. Or, as Cage would say, this music centrally revolves around acceptance. The acceptance, that is, of indeterminacy, of "no matter what eventuality", of

⁶Cage himself, in this instance, proceeds in the following way: "I take a sheet of paper and place points on it. Next I make parallel lines on a transparency, say five parallel lines. I establish five categories of sound for the five lines, but I do not say which line is which category. The transparency may be placed on the sheet with points in any position and readings of the points may be taken with regard to all characteristics one wishes to distinguish. Another transparency may be used for further measurements, even altering the succession of sounds in time. In this operation...nothing is foreseen, though everything may be later minutely measured or simply taken as a vague suggestion" (Cage [1959] 1999: 69). Feldman, initially, preserved indeterminacy by dividing "pitches into three areas, high, middle, and low, and established a time unit. Writing on graph paper, he simply inscribed numbers of tones to be played at any time within specified periods of time" (*ibid.*: 72). But even if a notated structure is determinate (as to, for instance, what instruments will be used or how many players are involved), method, or what Cage calls the "note-to-note procedure", may still be indeterminate (Cage [1958] 1999: 35).

what comes without preconceived ideas of what will happen and re-gardless of the consequences. This is, by the way, why it is so difficult to listen to music we are familiar with; memory has acted to keep us a-ware of what will happen next, and so it is almost im-possible to remain a-live in the presence of a well-known masterpiece. Now and then it happens, and when it does, it par-takes of the miraculous. (Cage [1959] 1999: 136)

The canonized masterpieces – we have heard them all before. Not only the score and certain musical conventions aiding the listener's memory and comprehension (such as the use of a theme, a tonal centre, repetition, a regular beat), but probably even more so certain prevailing traditions in performance, execution, listening and recording, prevent one from being "alive" to these pieces, both as player and listener. One knows what will happen and one knows in advance, consciously or unconsciously, knowingly or unknowingly. One feels safe, one knows how to listen, or what to listen for, anticipating certain movements and developments.

Mid-twentieth-century experimental music, however, requires a different, more precarious sort of listening. It is not the structural listening of the musicologist, or the narrative listening associated with sonata form, granting the listener full oversight or orientation. Neither is it the emotive listening associated with much Classical and Romantic music, allowing the listener to project his or her own subjectivity into the sounds heard and be blissfully lost or borne away. It is, rather, an impersonal and suspended listening, a listening to silence (cf. Cage's 4'33'') or a listening to 'undeveloped' sounds without an identifiable beginning or ending. As Cage puts it with respect to Feldman's music (such as *Piano and Orchestra*, *Intersections*, or *Last Pieces*), it is a listening with an "immediately" open ear that hears a sound "suddenly before one's thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical" (in Nyman 1991: 1). That simply hears, in other words, a sound *that* arises – an open, 'accepting' rather than overweening kind of listening, a listening in, or of, the here and now.

It must be stressed here that this experimental concern with indeterminacy and the here and now will, of course, not as a rule make for a Lyotardian sublime experience of an unforeseen and instantaneous happening in the midst of silence. An experience, as Van de Vall has put it in more existential terms, mounting to the "old philosophical wonder that there is something rather than nothing", something unforeseen apparently arising out of nowhere for no reason whatsoever (Van de Vall 1995: 71). Nevertheless, it may well be argued that the implication of risk(-taking) in the performance of experimental music, the not knowing on beforehand what will happen next or how it will happen, easily creates the tension of indeterminacy that has been a condition of possibility for the artistic sublime since the days of Burke. More precisely said: experimental music as described by Cage embodies or stages a

'situation' – i.e. the disruption of the known, safe, and familiar, the suspension of pre-set structures to fall back on in the performing of and listening to music – in which the sublime *could* (ideally) announce itself.

This 'situation' or condition is what Lyotard has called by the name of *passibilité* (passibility), nicely merging the term possibility with the idea of something coming to pass or being allowed to pass through. Basically, being in a state of passibility means being in a mental state that hinges between activity and passivity, a state of being open so *that* something unexpected can arise. It is a "soliciting of emptiness", an "evacuation" of preconceptions and intentions so as to (in Lyotard's typical terms) "let a givable come towards you" that you somehow could not have appropriated or calculated in advance (Lyotard 1998: 18). It is, more simply put, a state of indeterminacy in which you leave all options open, in which your mind is suspended, so as to allow something un-thought – a word, phrase, colour, sound which "doesn't yet exist", waiting to be materialized – to come to pass (ibid.: 19). And then, it 'happens' – or not. Thus, one might suggest, the postmodern sublime no longer turns on a mind suspended by shock but on a mind willingly suspending its own intentions to welcome the unknown.

Creativity

What, it may now be wondered, could this state of passibility mean for the possibility of an alternative sublime feeling? A sublime feeling that does not revolve around the realization of a supersensible destiny, that is not thought in terms of elevation, but is rather – as I have already argued with respect to Burke's experience of the artificial infinite – located within the sphere of the sensible, within the realm of imagination? A feeling that is triggered in the midst of an experimental action, instead of a moral self-realization? One (obvious) possibility, Van de Vall has argued in elaboration on Lyotard, is to reconceive of the sublime feeling in terms of the pains and pleasures of creative processes. This possibility is worth pursuing here, not only because it unburdens the sublime from its Kantian, transcendental weight, but also because it affirms the necessity of indeterminacy that I have already postulated with respect to the (artistic) sublime in chapters 2 and 4. It remains to be seen, though, if this indeterminacy here also extends to the sublime feeling 'itself' as an internally divided, constantly oscillating feeling of pain and pleasure at the same time that resists closure or resolution.

Basically, Van de Vall's argument is that indeterminacy and unpredictability are as central to any creative act as they are to the occurrence of the sublime (Van de Vall 1994: 397). Frightening and threatening, delightful and intensifying, or both, the openness that indeterminacy entails is as much a condition for creativity as it is a condition for the happening of the sublime. Or at least, it is a condition for creativity where 'creativity' is almost by implication referred to as the creation of the new or unheard-of. This, I have just shown, was indeed the case in the American experimental composers who more or less

tried to liberate the occurrence of sound from what might be called notational possession or determination. It was also the case, according to Van de Vall, in those painters of the New York School (Newman, Rothko, Clyfford Still, Philip Guston) who sought to express in their work not their "individual self", but gave shape to the pains and pleasures, the uncontrollability and invigorations, of the creative process: "They did not paint according to a preconceived plan; they worked up to a moment" in which something unforeseen would suddenly manifest itself (ibid.: 396).

Starting from such abstract-expressionist accounts of the act of creating as both a trembling before and a welcoming of the new or unknown, Van de Vall observes that there is, indeed, a "structural parallel" between

the experience of the sublime and that of the creative process. It consists in the conflicting relation of the known and familiar to the new and indeterminate. In the experience of the sublime a familiar way of perception and thought is disrupted, a rupture which is necessary to experience something 'other'. Likewise, [according to avant-garde logic], in the act of painting it is necessary to break with the familiar, with an acquired language of forms in order to, as Lyotard would say, present something that is not yet present. In both cases the turning point is built on a sense of emptiness: the moment when the limit of the known, determined, and regulated has been reached, the moment when something may arrive – or not. (ibid.: 397)

The initial stage of this process, which would literally be the starting point of creation, is attended by fear or at least uncertainty: staring at a blank canvas or page and not yet knowing how to proceed in the absence of a preconceived plan. This is what Lyotard already connects to the sublime of the avant-gardes. Undermining the certainty as much as validity of an "acquired language of forms", and disrupting the (imaginary) necessity of continuity, they would awaken one to

the possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, forms or sounds not coming; of this sentence being the last, of bread not coming daily. This is the misery that the painter faces with a plastic surface, of the musician with the acoustic surface, the misery the thinker faces with a desert of thought, and so on. Not only faced with the empty canvas or the empty page, at the 'beginning' of the work, but every time something has to be waited for, and thus forms a question at every point of questioning [*point d'interrogation*] at every 'and what now?' (Lyotard 1998: 92)

The anxiety that such an uncertainty may bring about is nicely illustrated by Igor Stravinsky's notes on the vicissitudes of the compositional process. Really trying to argue that a radical openness or indeterminacy

is an *obstacle* to, rather than a prerequisite for, the creative process, Stravinsky shows almost inadvertently that for him the moment of creative conception is accompanied by the same paralysing terror of uncertainty as that of the sublime. Or rather, a terror of infinity in Lyotard's postmodern sense of the term – a total lack of limitations, a lack of foundations and accepted, familiar 'building blocks', a terror that 'anything goes', anything is permissible, that there is no limit to what can be made:

As for myself, I experience a sort of terror when, at the moment of setting to work and finding myself before the infinitude of possibilities that present themselves, I have the feeling that everything is permissible to me. If everything is permissible to me, the best and worst; if nothing offers me any resistance, then any effort is inconceivable, and I cannot use anything as a basis, and consequently any undertaking becomes futile.

Will I then have to lose myself in this abyss of freedom? To what shall I cling in order to escape the dizziness that seizes me before the virtuality of this infinitude? (Stravinsky [1942] 1997: 194)

This is what may happen when there are no rules or indications saying: after this, that, or: on the basis of this, that will or must follow. A desert of freedom, presenting no obstacles or repression, offering no resistance to *not* do anything that comes to mind. An absolute freedom which, precisely, may momentarily paralyse creativity: any effort to present is futile because anything at all may here lead to nothing at all. Psychologists might say that Stravinsky fears the so called 'oceanic stage' of creativity in which, Van de Vall explains, a 'normal', which is to say "familiar" and "harmonious", way of perception is "suddenly undermined. The conventional and secure are disrupted, one has nothing to go by. There is an excess of impressions [cf. Stravinsky's dizzying excess of possibilities]... For a moment one does not know what to do. For a moment things are uncertain", treacherous even: when nothing can be made because too much can be made, because it would make no difference, vacuity threatens (Van de Vall 1994: 399).

Such terror as described by Stravinsky would give to indeterminacy a predominantly negative connotation: an uncertainty that has to be surmounted, suppressed, erased so that one can proceed and create. Alternatively, however, one could also exploit this moment of confusion. One could welcome it, pass through it and, as it were, end up in a 'new' place. Indeed, facing an empty page and more or less hoping or waiting for something to happen on that page can lead to anxiety, despair even. Yet cannot waiting, waiting in the face of complete empty- or openness, also be (inadvertently) productive or creative? Is not the suspension of intentions that waiting here entails, and the suspension of continuation (of the known and familiar, of time, of rules and categories continuing to apply) that waiting here faces, not also a – not

altogether painless but nevertheless effective – way to create an opening in which unfamiliar, unexpected possibilities may suddenly announce themselves? Is not, in other words, the anxiety of waiting, of not-knowing ahead, also an essential stage in the creative process?

This is what Lyotard, as Van de Vall, maintains. Both consider the stage of suspension a necessary passage-way leading from the pains of frustration and indeterminacy to the pleasures of invention. Here the safety of the known and conventional is removed, plunging one into a chaos that, however, often redirects one to a different and surprising way of seeing and forming things: a *trouvaille* (a feeling of suddenly hitting upon something) that comes before all conscious, critical deliberating (ibid.: 397-399). For Lyotard, such a suspension of conventions and intentions amounts to the blankness “that has to be obtained from mind and body by a Japanese warrior-artist when doing calligraphy, by an actor when acting: the kind of suspension of ordinary intentions of mind associated with *habitus*... It's at this cost...that a brush encounters the 'right' shapes, that a voice and a theatrical gesture are endowed with the 'right' tone and look” (Lyotard 1998: 18). It is at the cost of surrendering to a willingness to be will-less, absent, responsive to let the unexpected come to you that you can feel the delightful wonder of the 'right' gesture. You have to be open to be surprised. You must be “resolving to be irresolute, deciding to be patient, wanting not to want” to let a not-yet-given, something un-thought, befall to you (ibid.: 19).

In accordance with the idea of passibility, one may refer to this state as an active passivity: an active resolution to be passive, to be in suspension. One could compare this to the pianist Claudio Arrau who, in an interview with Elyse Mach, reports that in preparing for a concert he vacates himself, prepares himself to be unprepared, open to the unexpected: “I try not to be distracted by anything and just prepare for the marvellous thing that *might* happen... Many times it has happened that, while I was playing a concert, even though I had decided how I would play the work, some nuance, some turn of phrase crept into the playing that made the performance transcend what I had hoped for. I could have searched for ever and never found it; yet it was there” (Mach 1980: 9). In fact, because he did *not* consciously search, because he did *not* purposefully ‘dig’ or rule in advance, because he was somehow absent, it could happen. The creative state, Peter Tchaikovsky has said long ago, is a “*somnambulistic*” state: “*on ne s'entend pas vivre*. It is impossible to describe such moments” because they seem to happen without one's knowledge; one does not regulate these moments (Tchaikovsky [1878] 1956: 255). Here, Lyotard claims, in the creative process, “the mind isn't 'directed' but suspended. You don't give it rules. You teach it to receive” (Lyotard 1998: 19). Or, in Cage's words, you teach it to accept.

Though mastery, experience, and expertise also undoubtedly play a large, if not necessary, part in this, the gist of the matter is that the moment of inspiration, that sudden moment of creative conception,

cannot be fully planned, programmed or directed. One can only create the conditions of possibility for such a moment – it then has to 'happen'. This takes time. Waiting, listening, or glancing around for a not-yet-given to occur to me, rather than aiming for a set target, may take hours, days, weeks even. Indeed, Van de Vall maintains, one cannot order on the spot, as it were, that “fruitful emptiness” in which

the thinker, writer, or painter [or composer, or musician] forgets his intentions, and the listener, reader, or viewer forgets his expectations. That is the emptiness in which...thought, writing, and painting becomes a 'letting come to you'... You cannot directly pursue this fruitful emptiness, as you can aim for a result – a high grade, so many written pages per day. Thought, writing, and painting therefore escape directing, planning, and efficiency. Lyotard will emphasize this time and again, as an act of defiance against the economic-directed, all-reductive tendency to gain time on everything. Thought, painting, and writing [as well as composing, music-making, or any other creative act] constitute a *loss* of time, and are indeed supposed to do so. (Van de Vall 1994: 375-376)

In so far as creative processes revolve around a suspension of intentions, an active-passive waiting for something to happen, then it also implies a surrendering or submitting to time. To wait for an 'eventuality' to come to pass, rather than being ahead of it and having appropriated it before it even came to pass, is not to control time but to suffer to it. One could also say: the hesitancy or indeterminacy that is at stake in creative processes is a manner of postponing time, in the way that – I have shown in chapter 4 – the subject of Romantic desire wants to postpone time to linger in an open space, before anything has come to pass, and in which anything may still come to pass. Conceived as such, creative processes seem irreconcilable with the fixation of present, postmodern, technology-controlled cultures to be ahead of time, and to make the future as predictable as possible. To make, in fact, the future into the present so that *nothing* remains to be determined. No uncertainties, no blind spots or empty spaces, but efficient planning. No tarrying, no (apparent) inactivity (i.e. waiting, lingering, accepting what may come along), but being busy, pressed for time, and ruling out contingencies. This, according to Van de Vall, is precisely what Lyotard is concerned with: he wants to protect that which appears “essential to any form of creativity” (which is to say: indeterminacy) from “the will to gain time” – as time is money (Van de Vall 1994: 375).

The difference, however, between the Romantic desire to preserve the future as an open future, and the future of the creative process is that in the case of the former the future must always remain as an undetermined space ahead, while in case of the latter it will materialize as a result: the artwork. At some stage, indeterminacy is literally converted into a materiality: the right brush stroke, the right tone, the

right colour, the right phrase or turn, giving rise to the joy of invention. This, Van de Vall says, is where the creative process ends, paralleling the delight of the sublime feeling. Through, not despite, an intermittent openness, and no doubt aided by his or her expertise in the field, the artist has achieved a different way of spatial (or, in the case of music, temporal, sonorous) organisation.

This finally indicates that Van de Vall's rewriting of sublime experience as a creative experience can be subdivided into the following three moments. First, there is an "unproblematic phase" that is, however, soon disturbed: either by the anxiety of a blank page or canvas, by the question of: what now?, or, as we saw with Arrau, an "impulsive gesture" that leads one into an unexpected and unknown direction (ibid.: 401).⁷ This "disturbance rouses ambivalent feelings" of tension, hope, and anxiety: "it is the moment that constitutes the pivoting point of the sublime turning. There is an emptiness which contains the threat of chaos, but also the possibility" of a different possibility, a form or structure latently present in mind or body as an "unconscious substructure". If this possibility can "assert itself", the second, "oceanic" phase of the process is heralded. Out of this second phase, in turn, arises the third phase in which the unconscious substructure – as 'another way' – is concretised in a created form on the page or canvas (ibid.: 401).

Transpositions

Theoretically and also historically, such a reworking of the sublime feeling seems viable. Thus, it may be noted, Seidl already considered the

⁷It is necessary to point out here that Van de Vall also very much tries to attenuate the absolute contingency that Lyotard ascribes to the creative moment. If, as she argues, the sublime moment can be reconsidered as a creative moment – given shape in paintings such as Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* – then this moment is not as fully accidental and unintentional as Lyotard makes it out to be. Though the moment of inspiration cannot be enforced or entirely controlled, the unintentional gesture of the painter or pianist, or the sudden hunch of a writer or thinker, is not entirely undirected. Rather, it is also (unconsciously) directed by one's experience: the suspension of mind and *habitus* that Lyotard associates with passibility will often involve an unconscious activity (an "unconscious scanning") directing one, as it were, to another way of putting, shaping, or sounding things (Van de Vall 1994: 400). Not a complete suspension of mind, not a complete passivity, the passibility central to creativity rather signals a 'diffuse concentration' or 'active absent-mindedness'. There is, as Van de Vall remarks with reference to Anton Ehrenzweig (1967), something in-between "the indeterminacy of the rule and the utter contingency of the impulse": it is that unconscious or "hidden order of art which is based on the integrative activity of unconscious scanning, as it may occur in the purposeful purposelessness", the wilful will-less-ness of the act of painting or any other act of creativity (ibid.: 403). It is, really, the artist falling back on her or his unconscious, bodily knowledge to make (without thinking) the right gesture, the right movement, or, as with Arrau, to create the right touch for a sound to arise. Lyotard's binary opposition between tradition, rules, and direction on the one hand, and an 'acting on the impulse' in which something suddenly happens on the other, can thus be relativized: the known or acquired and the unexpected or the new do not exclude but rather *reinforce* each other.

sublime effect of dissonance in music in a way comparable to what Van de Vall describes. Given the fact that dissonance connotes tension and indeterminacy, Seidl in this instance first of all points to the fact that “strong dissonances with countless combinatory tones and more or less suspensions” contain elements of the “unclear, shrouded, turbid, and obscure” that are analogous to the idea of darkness central to the aesthetics of the sublime (Seidl 1887: 90). Nevertheless, this does not mean that all (sharp) dissonances can occasion a sublime feeling. For the fact is that not all dissonances by implication present “an other, unknown measure” transcending grasp or comprehension (ibid.: 90). Still, Seidl grants, one can easily imagine a sublime effect when certain dissonances are not resolved into an expected consonance (recall Wagner’s Prelude to *Tristan*), or when they are resolved into an ensuing dissonance. The following conditions would then have to apply:

the ground bass and the three upper voices of the chord (imagined as a four-part chord) proceed up or down respectively in a contradictory movement by way of one or more tones. In this way, the imagination [*Phantasie*] of the learned listener feels itself at once shattered as if shaken by a violent turn, yet at the same time also broadened [*erweitert*], as if an un-thought, unending space opens up before it. (ibid.: 91)

By way of example, Seidl points to the “Inflamatus est” from Franz Liszt’s *Christus* where a second on B, which is supposed to be resolved into either F major or F minor, is unexpectedly resolved into a fourth-sixth on A flat (D flat major). The implication is that an unexpected, more or less violent turn here at once blocks the imagination to shape the (course of the) music. Its expectations have been thwarted, obstructing a controlling oversight. Yet, through this very unexpectedness, the chord also uncovers an open space ahead in which many different, un-thought or un-imagined possibilities may present themselves.

In so far as this parallels Van de Vall’s delightful feeling of ‘another way’ presenting itself through a temporary confinement or confusion, then even long before Seidl – and, for that matter, Lyotard and Van de Vall – John Dennis had described the sublime moment explicitly in terms of a creative moment. Thus, Dennis observes in his *Remarks on a Book Entitled, Prince Arthur* (1696) that

felicity of writing has the same effect upon us that happiness in common life has: that in life when any thing lucky arrives to us, upon the first surprise we have a transport of joy, which is immediately followed by an exaltation of mind: *ut res nostrae sint ita nos magni atque humiles sumus*; and that both these, if the thing that happens be beyond expectation fortunate, are accompanied with astonishment: we are amazed at our own happiness: that the very same thing befalls us upon the conception of an extraordinary hint. (Dennis [1696] 1996: 30).

'Hint', derived from the Middle English *hinten* or to seize, here connotes a gift of invention, the joy of hitting on something unexpected. It is the happy amazement that the writer, musician, or painter may feel when knowing: that's it, it must be like this – and it is, to recall Arrau, more than one had planned or foreseen.

This very joy, however, also at once points to the central problem at stake in the reworking of sublime experience as a creative experience. Dennis's remarks are, in this instance, illuminating. As he observes, the delight of the sublime here consists in a soul being "transported" by its own power of conception, by, more specifically,

the consciousness of its own excellence, and it is exalted, there being nothing so proper to work on its vanity; because it looks upon such a hint as a thing peculiar to itself, whereas what happens in life to one man, might as well have happened to another; and lastly, if the hint be very extraordinary, the soul is amazed by the unexpected view of its own surpassing power... Joy in excess as well as rage is furious. And the pride of soul is seen in the expression as well as in the mien and actions, and is the cause of that elevation, which Longinus so much extols, and which, he says, *is the image of the greatness of the mind.* (ibid.: 30)

As a stroke of genius, Longinus' well-timed stroke of sublimity here becomes a lucky stroke that astonishes and exalts the striker/seizer. Accordingly, the delight of the sublime becomes a delight of artistic creation; of a "genius" surpassing itself and taking pride in that singular 'hint' which it has itself so fortuitously conceived (ibid.: 31). As such, however, Dennis's focus on a soul being proud and astonished at its own creative capacities has the same narcissistic implications as Kant's notion of a mind being elevated by its own superiority and autonomy. In both cases, the subject is amazed at its own exceeding powers and unexpected, fortunate 'hints'. This is to say that in both cases the experience of the sublime becomes one of self-assertion through a revelation of one's own powers.

Van de Vall's theory of the sublime moment as a creative moment, I suggest, can never quite dispel these narcissistic implications. As she in fact states, sublime experience conceived of as a creative experience involves an initial "loss of self or a fragmentation", a moment of confusion or disorientation, on the one hand, and "a feeling of surpassing oneself", a subsequent moment of recuperation, on the other (Van de Vall 1994: 402). Thus posited, the joy of invention, the joy of surpassing one's own creative bounds, can hardly be disconnected from the self-elevation at stake in the Kantian sublime. True, the obvious significance of Van de Vall's theory is that it tries, precisely, to relieve the sublime from its Kantian, supersensible burden. Thus, in rereading sublime experience in terms of creative processes, Van de Vall suggests that this

experience should be reconsidered as bearing on a movement *within* the realm of sensibility alone, rather than moving from sensibility to a 'higher' moral destiny (ibid.: 402). This is to say that sensibility (which here specifically concerns the creative capacity of imagination) is here not violated in order to give rise to a feeling of supersensible limitlessness or autonomy. Sensibility is, instead, pained in the experience of *its own creativity*.

All the same, while this may effectively dispel Kant's idea of a subjective finality as the delightful realization of a supersensible vocation, it never dispels the idea of a subjective finality as such. Emphasizing the three-stepped movement of the creative process, Van de Vall explicitly represents the pain of disorientation (the second stage) as a necessary and purposeful pain to achieve 'another way' or 'the right gesture' (the third and last stage). As with Kant, in other words, the indeterminacy giving rise to a pain of confusion or diffusion is only intermediary. It is a preparation, if not a condition, for the delight of creative conception.

Seen in this light, Van de Vall's theory seems not so much a radical move away from Kant's (epic) variety of the sublime feeling, as a mere transposition of the Kantian sublime moment from the level of the supersensible to that of the sensible. The setting changes, one might say, but the idea of a bridge or 'turning' from pain to pleasure, from frustration to release, remains the same. Holding fast – like many other contemporary theorists⁸ – to what I have called the canonic narrative structure of the Kantian sublime, all that Van de Vall's theory can finally do is change Kant's closure-in-transcendence into a closure-in-immanence.

Such a theory would therefore be unable to account for what I have called the deadlock of pain and pleasure in the sublime feeling. Van de Vall disentangles the two feelings, representing the latter as relieving, instead of coexisting with, the former. Admittedly, it could be argued that the indeterminacy typical of the second stage of the creative process that Van de Vall describes is painful and pleasurable at the same time: painful, because uncontrollable and unpredictable, one does not know what or if something is going to happen, and pleasurable because precisely this openness or undecidability holds the possibility of a different possibility, of something other suddenly announcing itself. It is, we have seen, at once an unnerving (because one has let go of the safe and familiar) and an exciting, even hopeful tension; it combines fear with the thrill of expectancy.

However, because Van de Vall explicitly represents the (double) tension of indeterminacy as being finally resolved in the third stage of the creative process – which is the end or outcome of the second – this tension is here ultimately but a transition or bridge to a concluding, unifying moment of release. Or, as she puts it elsewhere in relation to

⁸See for instance Hertz (1985) or Crowther ([1993] 1996).

Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*: the experience of the (Newmanian) sublime consists "first of a rupture in a familiar way of orientation – one that could be called 'objectifying', then of the possibility of a different way of spatial 'organisation' – one that is guided by more affective and imaginative ways of orienting oneself in space" (Van de Vall 1995: 75). The "contradictory experience" of the sublime is thus not contradictory in its being a simultaneous experience of pain and pleasure, but a successive experience of disorientation and a subsequent (albeit non-totalising) re-orientation (ibid.: 75).⁹

Differend

An alternative to this transposed Kantian sublime would therefore have to be found in a theory that represents the conflict at stake in the sublime feeling as an irresolvable conflict, as a limit-experience that is not dialectically resolved but rather gives rise to the awareness of a limit as such (Pries 1988: 30). An experience, literally leading up to a threshold that cannot be overstepped. As Lyotard also maintains, the 'happening' of the sublime concerns a crisis or break, rather than a subject breaking through to a 'higher', supersensible level. It remains to be seen, however, if this break can or should be actually mended or resolved.

Instructive, in this respect, is Lyotard's concept of the *différend* or differend that, though never mentioned explicitly, always hovers at the background of his reflections on the sublime and the avant-garde. As I will explain below, this differend refers to an irremediable conflict or irreducible difference that may, in a slight adaptation, well help to dispel the happy ending that is central to the Kantian sublime and still echoes in Van de Vall's rewriting of it. It will, more specifically, help to show that what is conventionally conceived of as the sublime 'turning' from pain to pleasure is really an impossible turning: the bridge from the former to the latter ultimately turns out to be an impassable one. The question is,

⁹Because she starts from the central assumption that 'the' sublime feeling does not exist, but rather manifests itself in "many different shades, nuances and forms" – that, in other words, "one can intuitively recognise *many different* ways in which the unrepresentable is presented" in art – it must be noted here that Van de Vall offers a different variety of the sublime feeling with respect to Mark Rothko's *Blue, Green and Brown* (1951) (Van de Vall 1995: 71-72). Thus, and in contrast to her analysis of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, she here describes the sublime feeling as a more ambiguous, undetermined feeling. Representing the tensions and contradictions in Rothko's painting as basically irresolvable, she characterises it as "both radiant and melancholic, serene and full of uncertainties. It presents a sense of space, but also of time – something is imminent, but not yet there" (ibid.: 73). A tension of expectation remains, the conflicting looking that the painting elicits cannot be resolved, thus more or less resembling the sublime experience as I have described it in chapter 4 with respect to the early German Romantics and Hoffmann's account of Beethoven. All the same, it is Van de Vall's analysis of *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* that dominates more heavily her account of the sublime feeling, that she indeed takes as a starting point to formulate her alternative to Kant, and that can as such well be said to exemplify her rereading of the experience of the sublime in terms of the vicissitudes of creative processes.

though, if this idea of impassability can in the end fully account for the sublime feeling as a deadlocked feeling in which – we have seen in chapters 2 and 4 – apparently irreconcilable opposites such as tension and tensionlessness, pain and pleasure, or despair and expectancy somehow start to collapse into each other.

Liotard's account of the differend in his *magnum opus* *Le différend* (*The Differend*) (1983) is not a little complex and perhaps even a little estranging. As Van de Vall puts it, Lyotard here evokes a world in which “only utterances such as phrases or paintings are taken seriously philosophically, and addressors, writers and painters, or addressees, readers or viewers, are merely thought as instances of the universes of those phrases or paintings” (Van de Vall 1994: 343). At the risk of simplifying many of the intricacies and nuances in *The Differend*, I will here not plunge all too deeply in these universes of phrases, with their phrase regimens, genres of discourse, and the rules these genres supply to link heterogeneous phrases. Instead, I will try to give a basic, if also general, idea of what the differend amounts to on the basis of two examples that illustrate in a more concrete way Lyotard's abstract reflections on the problem of ‘phrases in dispute’. Subsequently, I will show, firstly, how Lyotard uses this idea of the differend to read the conflict or *Widerstreit* at stake in the Kantian sublime, and, secondly, how this reading may lead to a critical recasting of the sublime feeling as an unresolved limit-experience in which two opposite intensities of pain and pleasure, or tension and tensionlessness, coincide without a means to mediate or remove their differences.

Simply phrased, the differend may be said to pertain to a conflict (legal, historical, political, personal, etc.) between two parties that is not a litigation. This means that a differend is not a dispute allowing both parties the recourse to a legitimate defence. Rather, one of the parties, the wronged party, is deprived of the possibility to express a wrong s/he has suffered. S/he is deprived of this possibility because the conflict at hand is resolved in the idiom of the party that has caused or was responsible for this wrong in the first place. As Lyotard puts it: “I would like to call a *differend* [*différend*] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim... A case of differend between two parties takes place when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (Lyotard [1983] 1996: 9, nr. 12).¹⁰

¹⁰As Lyotard states earlier, it is “in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong. A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes a victim if one loses these means. One loses them, for example, if the author of the damages turns out directly or indirectly to be one's judge. The latter has the authority to reject one's testimony as false or the ability to impede its publication. But this is a particular case. In general, the plaintiff becomes a victim when *no presentation is possible of the wrong he or she has suffered* [because he or she is forced to express this wrong in the idiom of the one who has caused this wrong]” (Lyotard 1996: 8, nr. 9, my emphases). Put differently and

An example: in accordance with contemporary, poststructuralist and feminist theories 'reality' can be posited not as a given but as a construct (the well-known idea of the world-as-text). What is more, one can read this construct as being both created and dominated by what has come to be known as a phallogocentric language: a language of and for men which, according to Judith Butler, rests on "univocal signification" (Butler [1990] 1998: 31). Or, differently put, what, in Western, white-washed culture is recognised as 'truth', 'real', 'norm', 'self', etc., is never 'neutral' but rather always already male-oriented, male-constituted, and male-dominated. If this is the case, a differend will occur when, for instance, a female identity is to be phrased. A differend, because this identity can only be presented in the idiom or terms provided by the phallogocentric order – wo-man, not-man – in which 'women' and the 'feminine' have been notably disprivileged (being relegated to the status of 'other' in opposition to the masculine norm).

For theorists like Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, the problem thus arises that within the phallogocentric scheme of things an independent female identity constitutes an *impossibility*. As Butler puts it: "the feminine 'sex' is a point of linguistic *absence*, the impossibility of a grammatically denoted substance" because whatever 'she' is, is defined, desired, and determined by this phallogocentric linguistic order (ibid.: 32). She is not merely not-man, she is no(t) one. She cannot be said, she is absent. She does not yet exist within the 'legitimate construction' and the forms of presentation it permits of – she is as yet unpresentable. Or rather, in so far as the phallogocentric order *makes* her presentable, she will be the Lyotardian victim of a perfect crime: the wrong that has been done to her cannot be attested to. For her identity is assimilated into, or appropriated by, the idiom of the author who has committed the wrong of denying her a place and name of her own.

Another example: in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1955), the classic novel about the absurdities of war, there is a dead man in protagonist Yossarian's tent. Yossarian has, however, never seen this dead man. The latter was sent to fly a mission immediately after his arrival in the squadron-camp in Italy where Heller's story takes place. Nevertheless, the dead man – Mudd – annoys Yossarian to such an extent that he tries to complain about it to his superiors. The problem now is that Yossarian cannot appeal to his superiors about Mudd. For, firstly, the latter was killed in action before even having reported for duty, and, secondly, his superiors only recognise the life and death of individuals whose names have been recorded administratively. Differently put: in the administrative idiom of Yossarian's superiors, Mudd never existed (read: was never recorded as living) and never died either – and there is nothing Yossarian can do to prove the opposite.

simply: a differend occurs when the plaintiff becomes victim; when a wrong remains unpresentable.

Later, exactly the same but also exactly the opposite will happen to Doc Daneeka. His problem is that he has been incorrectly recorded killed in action. The power of written, administrated 'facts' proves stronger than the power of physical life as Doc Daneeka, far from dead, complains about a terrible coldness to his two enlisted men – Gus and Wes – who are taking his temperature:

'Just look how cold I am right now. You're sure you're not holding anything back?'

'You're dead, sir,' one of his two enlisted men explained.

Doc Daneeka jerked his head up quickly with resentful distrust.

'What's that?'

'You're dead, sir,' repeated the other. 'That's probably the reason you always feel so cold.'

'That's right, sir. You've probably been dead all this time and we just didn't detect it.'

'What the *hell* are you both talking about?' Doc Daneeka cried shrilly with a surging, petrifying sensation of some onrushing unavoidable disaster.

'It's true, sir,' said one of the enlisted men. 'The records show that you went up in Mc Watt's plane to collect some flight time. You didn't come down in a parachute, so you must have been killed in the crash.'

'That's right, sir, you ought to be glad you've got any temperature at all.'

(Heller [1955] 1961: 351)

The authoritative, administrative idiom here deprives Doc Daneeka of the means to prove his existence or even to prove that a wrong has been done to him. The record shows his death, and that is that, case closed – a plaintiff turns victim, a wrong cannot be phrased. Something remains to be presented. This is, indeed, how Lyotard epitomizes the differend: "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be", for instance, a wrong that cannot be rightfully presented in ruling, dominant, oppressive idioms (Lyotard 1996: 13, nr. 22). 'Something', something as yet unpresentable, is in suspension, waiting to be phrased. Knowing this, knowing that the differend revolves around victimisation and a 'waiting for phrasing' of a pain and wrong inflicted, let me now turn to Lyotard's reading of the Kantian sublime as (ostensibly) involving precisely such a differend.

Revisiting Kant

In his *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime (Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime)* (1991), Lyotard tries to show that the Kantian sublime feeling is only apparently harmonious but in reality irremediably differential in nature. At the heart of the Kantian sublime feeling, Lyotard argues, there is a differend and this differend is constituted by the

problematic encounter of the infinite (which reason can think, but imagination cannot form) and the finite (which imagination can form). What, in Lyotard's view, happens in the Kantian sublime is that reason

challenges the thought that imagines: 'make the absolute that I conceive present with your forms'. Yet form is limitation. Form divides space and time into an 'inside', what it 'comprehends', and an 'outside', what it puts at a distance. It cannot present the absolute. But there is something more serious still. The limitation constituted by the 'comprehension'...of givens in a form is also limited. Presentation cannot grasp an infinite of givens at one time in a single form. If it is asked to present more, it comes up against a maximum, its 'measure' which is the subjective foundation of all magnitude. This measure is the absolute of the thought that presents..., the absolute 'aesthetic' magnitude that is possible. (Lyotard 1994: 123)

What, to start with, is here waiting for phrasing, or forming, is the absolute (a 'not-something' or 'not-given' beyond all comparison). This absolute cannot be made present in the 'idiom' of the thought that imagines, which has been challenged or violated by reason to do so all the same. One could say with Lyotard that here two absolutes 'meet': on the one hand, "the absolute whole when [reason] conceives", and on the other, "the absolutely measured when [imagination] presents" (ibid.: 123). This is thus a meeting of two aspects or abilities of thought. The one is able to think limitlessness, the other encircles finitude(s), gathers together and retains what it can comprehend at once in a form (form being limitation), putting at a distance or putting apart (*absonderen*) what exceeds its power. Thus, what causes the conflict or *Widerstreit* in this meeting is not merely the limitlessness demanded by reason, but also the absolute limit of presentation against which imagination (the "thought that imagines"), as it were, bumps itself.

Now, Lyotard continues later on, if a differend or irresolvable conflict arises between the faculties of reason and imagination respectively, this is not simply to be ascribed to the "incommensurability of their respective causes (in the juridical sense)" (ibid.: 151). That is to say, to the fact that the former is turned to the conception of an absolute whole, while the latter can only grasp and form a limited whole. Rather, a differend can be felt (in thought) when, precisely, imagination is challenged, or demanded, to remove "itself from its finality...to put itself at the measure of the other party [reason]" – and fails signally (ibid.: 151). It can be felt in what Lyotard reads as a failed transition from the empirical to the supersensible, from concepts of the understanding to ideas of reason, from frustration to elevation. Indeed, a *failed* transition, and nothing more than that: while Kant compensates for imagination's pain in an ultimate awareness of moral freedom, Lyotard emphasizes that there need *not necessarily* be, and perhaps *cannot be* a transition

from the empirical to the supersensible, from indeterminacy to resolution, in the experience of the sublime (Brons 1995: 132).

Thus, instead of a transcendental resolution there may be but a negative presentation 'resulting from' the sublime feeling: a "trace of a retreat", a trace of a failure or pain that 'something' cannot (yet) be formed (Lyotard 1994: 152). This trace does not suppress but rather *makes explicit* the differend that has occurred between reason and imagination. It exemplifies an unbridgeable gap between the two and, more than that, attests to the absurdity of the demand of reason to present the absolute. After all, as James Usher already made clear, to offer a negative presentation is really to say: I cannot (yet) form, this demand is beyond my means and quite senseless, too, because to form the limitless is, in the end, to not-form at all. Seen in this light, Lyotard observes, " '[n]egative presentation' is...merely the demonstration of the inanity of the demand that the absolute be presented" (ibid.: 152). Even more importantly, this negative presentation makes one aware, rather than makes one forget, that an injustice has been done: reason has made an unjustified claim to imagination to transcend, deny itself. Imagination has been violated and this is what the negative presentation ultimately shows.

Seen in this light, a transition from frustration to resolution is not merely not guaranteed, not necessary, but it can also be necessary to *not achieve* a resolution when a differend has occurred. Contrary to Lyotard, however, I maintain that this differend is covered up in the Kantian sublime in the final, harmonious moment of closure-in-transcendence. For Kant, after all, the 'injustice' done to imagination is as it were lifted in the realization of a supersensible destiny that is judged as delightful for the *entire province of mind*. Differently said, the differend is here sublimated or forgotten in an overall, subjective finality: Kant postulates the pain of imagination as being transformed in a necessary, intermediate pain, a pain, indeed, indicating that imagination and reason would have worked *together* in achieving a delight that lifts the Kantian mind as a whole, in its entirety.¹¹

¹¹It must nevertheless be stated here that in his *Lessons* Lyotard also admits to an almost Hegelian dialectic pervading the Kantian sublime that, precisely, points to a finalization instead of an irresolvability. Referring to the "paradoxes of logic under the name given to it by the first Sophists, the argument called the *antistrephon* or retortion", Lyotard summarizes the dialectical figure as follows: "...it is precisely in affirming that the series of your judgements is finite that you deny it, for in so doing you add a new judgement to this series. It is precisely, says reason to the imagination, in showing that you cannot 'comprehend' more magnitudes in a single intuition than you are doing that you show you can, for in order to show the limit, you must also show beyond the limit. Such that the pleasure in infinitude, which is mine, is already in the unhappiness you feel in your finitude. The process consists in displacing the examination of judgement from its (negative) quality to its (assertive) modality: you say that...is not, but you affirm it" (Lyotard 1994: 128). This is, precisely, the process of the variety of the sublime as informed by the pattern of effort and difficulty overcome: the 'positive' is already signalled in and indeed presupposed as well as affirmed by the 'negative'. According to Lyotard, however, "this reading is not the correct one" (ibid.: 130). It would presuppose a 'third instance'

Gaps and Interlockings

Still, Lyotard's concept of the differend appears useful to think an alternative sublime feeling that is defined by a conflicting simultaneity of two opposed intensities: as an irreducible difference, the differend concerns two co-existing 'parties' whose conflict cannot be solved in either direction (without an injustice being done). Or as James Williams has put it in *Lyotard and the Political* (2000), as a "thinker of the differend", Lyotard takes to and rethinks the feeling of the sublime as a feeling that would stop any "false bridging between absolute differences" – a bridging that is, to my mind, still very much at stake in the Kantian sublime (Williams 2000: 4). According to Lyotard, Williams continues, "the sublime feeling halts our drives to understand, to judge and to overcome. It does not so much cancel them as leave them in suspense by welding to them feelings that indicate that a difference is impassable" (ibid.: 4). The effect of the interruption of the sublime concerns a felt gap between two 'sides' or 'positions' that cannot be integrated as one, and *it is this gap that halts the mind*.

By way of illustration, Williams points to William Turner's *The Devil's Bridge, Pass of St. Gothard* (1802). This painting captures the bridge over the soaring depth as a

fragile line thrown between great alps that threaten to stretch, twist and throw it into the abyss at the faintest change in the tumultuous skies. There is a bridge, but not one that you feel is passable. It is a sign that there is hope in fording the waterfall that has cut an irreparable gulf into the mountain, allied to a sign that hope is in vain. (ibid.: 4)

In this way, Turner does not resolve but instead exploit a contradictory, simultaneous feeling of hope (passability) and despair (impassability) – "the contradiction stands as long as his painting captures us" (ibid.: 4). Thus, the guaranteed passage from frustration to self-elevation in the Kantian sublime is here exchanged for a sustained ambiguity: a sustained feeling that a conflict cannot be resolved, a limit cannot be transcended, or a bridge cannot really be passed.

On the face of it, this rendering of the sublime feeling as a 'sign' of the differend seems more than adequate to account for the sublime feeling as – what I have called – an irresolvable double-bind,

mediating between imagination and reason, and homogenizing a conflict that reduces both to "moments of a finalized process" (ibid.: 130). Lyotard refers to this third instance as "becoming itself" that is "not graspable except as this undecidable, affirmative work of the negative. Which here would be the work of reason" (ibid.: 130-131). He concludes that such a dialectical reading "expresses the transcendental illusion" as outlined by Kant in the Appendix to the first *Critique* and has, as such, "no access to a sublime that is subjectively felt by thought as differend" (ibid.: 131). The fact remains, however, that this feeling of a differend bypasses the subjective finality of the Kantian sublime. The dialectical reading is, in other words, not so 'incorrect' as Lyotard makes it out to be.

undermining as it does “the precept of logic that we cannot be in a state of simultaneous hope and despair” (ibid.: 4). Nevertheless, in contrast to Williams, I would suggest that the irresolvability and conflicting simultaneity of the sublime feeling as I have traced it so far is not so much due to an irremediable conflict *alone*. Thus, for a start, the Burkean double-feeling of the infinite intertwines a pleasure of tensionlessness with a pain (or labour) of tension: it is a Janus-faced experience pointing forward and backward at the same time, in which the strain of un-fulfilment (an impatient and restless imagination, over-activating itself without becoming productive in a positive or determinate sense) intersects with a joyful suspension of change or development (an imagination deeming itself limitless in the incessant repetition of similar ideas). Similarly, in Usher’s rereading of the sublime feeling as a mighty unknown want, and in my reading of *Sehnsucht* as an unresolved experience of the infinite, a (sustained) lack of fulfilment makes for a pain of want or frustration but also, and simultaneously, for a pleasure of deferral and suspension. The infinite, I have said, is here felt in never coming one step closer to an end, so that there remains endless room for more. If this emptiness hurts, it also helps against hurting: it makes for tension, for agony, but for tensionlessness, for respite, at the same time.

What all this suggests, is that the resistance to closure typical of the sublime feeling is not so much due to an unbridgeable difference but to a difference that manifests itself as an *interlocking* of two conflicting intensities. It is not a matter of an unsolvable opposition *per se*, but an unsolvable opposition that is, as it were, entangled or ensnared in itself – a dead-lock or an untiabable knot rather than an abyss with two opposites standing, if you will, separately on either side. Instead, these alleged opposites intertwine, making them less schematically oppositional than they seem to be. Or, as I have observed with respect to Burke and Usher, the undecidability inherent in the aporia of the sublime is not due to the fact that pain and pleasure are represented as mutually exclusive but, instead, as interchanging and interdependent. Both feeding on an indeterminacy that obstructs fulfilment or resolution, pain and pleasure are here *inscribed into each other*, rather than being separated by an impassable gap and existing side by side on its respective edges. Seen in this light, I argue in the next chapter, 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 principles with a fixed and autonomous ‘existence’ or ‘position’. Rather, this paradox can be reconsidered as an endless shimmering or – as I have said in chapter 4 with respect to Hoffmann – colour-switching of two unstable, ambiguous intensities, without a binary opposition of two constant and self-same principles being thought in the background. Instead, the one principle can here be said *to be always and already at work in the other*.