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Silence, Subjective Absence and the Idea of Ultimate Reality and Meaning in Beethoven's Last Piano Sonata, Op. 111

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1. MUSIC AND URAM

1.1 *Music and Meaning*

The issue of musical meaning is a vexed one. The debate over whether instrumental music can have expressive content or not, and if so, how such content should be assessed, has been around at least since the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, and there seems little chance of any successful conclusion to this conundrum. The heated absolute-program polemic between Hanslick and the followers of Wagner has been relaunched during this century between the broadly Schenkerian-formalist school of analysis and other more 'meaning'-oriented approaches such as that of a British tradition initiated by Donald Francis Tovey. The more recent application of feminist, sociocultural and deconstructionist models within music criticism promises interesting results, but it seems as if the notion of 'meaning' here has so far remained limited to narrow ideological programs, with much debate centering around redefinitions of authorial intent.

Whereas it seems safe to assume that instrumental music cannot ever approach the narrative specificity of verbal language – if only because of the primacy lent to the latter by society – it would also be foolish to deny that any musical act produces meaning within context. Jean-Jacques Nattiez's definition is useful here:

> *An object of any kind takes on meaning for an individual apprehending that object, as soon as that individual places the object in relation to areas of his lived experience – that is, in relation to a collection of other objects that belong to his or her experience of the world* (Nattiez, 1990, p. 9).

What this statement points out primarily, as does most contemporary hermeneutical, poststructuralist and other non-Platonic or non-formalist thought, is that the transformation of musical experience into meaning is of necessity, at least, a partially private – or subjective – experience. This article intends to examine the ways in which an existing musical object – Beethoven's Op. 111 – has formed relationships with the idea of

Ultimate Reality and Meaning in literature: where ultimate experience is derived from a known external *object* rather than from a generalized system of belief, the hierarchical nature of ultimacy makes Nattiez's notion of placing the object in relation to a collection of other objects particularly apt. That is to say, in the same way that musical experience is often prized as a relatively free subjective phenomenon – an idealized space of subjective projection, as in the writings of symbolist and modernist authors such as Mallarmé, Valéry, Woolf, Pound, Huxley and Eliot (Aronson 1980, chs. 1 & 2) – the choice of an ultimate in music comes to be based within a *secondary* response, which, however much a variable of canon and of technical analysis, is primarily dependent upon personal selection from among different pieces.

1.2 *Ineffability*

There also exists, of course, a long Western tradition which holds that music as a whole somehow accesses or represents greater metaphysical realities or truths than other forms of human expression. Plato describes in Book X of *The Republic* how tones are generated by the revolution of the spheres, and how each sphere produces its own sound in natural harmony with that of the others. The notion of a numerically-based universal harmony found in Pythagoras and Euclid grants, then, that proper application of the tonal system amounts to an embodiment of greater principles of order within musical compositions themselves. The 'music of the spheres' also finds a later place in the Christian tradition of God as the author of all things, and is continued directly in the writings of Boethius and the *Somnium Scipionis.*

A further Biblical tradition, that of God as the ineffable, combines with the rise of instrumental music in the Eighteenth Century to separate musical experience from the perceived power of language to convey it. The impossibility of describing the music of the spheres is already a repeated theme in Milton and Shakespeare (Edgecombe 1993, pp. 2–3); it is however only under the sign of a 'religion of art' following the Enlightenment – especially within the Romantic tradition – that individual musical works assume the same status in relation to language. Thus for Schopenhauer – as for Schlegel earlier (Bowie 1990, pp. 201–3) – music is the highest of all the arts, an embodiment of pure Will, in which not even emotions can be separately identified (Schopenhauer 1958, II, p. 450). The German Idealist belief in 'music as the key to the transcendental world of absolute ideas' (Wallace 1986a, p. 3) is absorbed by Nietzsche, the symbolist poets and other late nineteenth-century writers, and it is Walter Pater's formulation in 'The School of Giorgione' that 'all art constantly aspires to the condition of music' (Pater 1948, p. 271) – in other words, that music is an ideal unmediated form where code and referent coincide – which has probably had the greatest effect on twentieth-century thinking on music in this regard. When music is set outside of reason and linguistic restrictions, then, ineffability itself becomes a sign on which the meanings of 'purity', 'transcendence' or 'ultimacy' can be hung. Where specific compositions are singled out, the act of identification of course does involve speech, and – partly because one cannot speak of degrees of ineffability – recourse is often made, as shall be seen, to correlatives within events, places or states of mind that are ineffable by convention, such as spiritual peace and paradise.

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We will begin the article by focusing on those specific literary responses to instrumental music that relate to Beethoven and to his last piano sonata. There is a strong tradition both of writing on music as a whole and on Beethoven's works in particular as being ineffable. While it is easy to recognise stock literary responses to instrumental music in analyses of Beethoven's last piano sonata, this paper will attempt to indentify aspects of writing that are unique to this composition and to Beethoven in general. We will investigate the ways in which Op. III has been linked to Ultimate Reality and Meaning, and look at how silence – which is the logical extension of ineffability – can be explained by a more 'objective' approach to analysis. To this end, we will explore the historical perspective offered by the philosopher Theodor Adorno's notion of the disappearing subject. Adorno's association of the subject with specific elements in a composition (such as theme, tone or instrument) provides a way of correlating subjective experience – and therefore 'meaning' – with formal developments within the piece of music itself; a negotiation can thus occur between the composer's and the listener's input in the production of Ultimate Reality and Meaning.

1.3 *Options*

As this approach will be a rather oblique one, it is worth briefly to elucidate the general ways in which the study of URAM might be forwarded within the confines of instrumental music. Nattiez' analysis is again useful here via its division of the 'total musical fact' into three definitional categories. The neutral (or immanent) level is the one at which traditional structuralism functions – in other words 'the symbolic form [which] is embodied physically and materially in the form of a *trace* accessible to the five senses' (Nattiez 1990, p. 12). The poietic level involves the compositional or improvisatory process, and the esthesic level concerns perception, or, in other words, the listener's construction of the musical text (*Ibid.*, ch. 1). Judgments regarding ultimacy in technical achievement can be related to the first level, while investigation of the composer's own URAM and intentions to the second one; all discussions regarding ineffability, meaning and physiological, psychological and spiritual effect also relate to the latter level.

It is impossible to stipulate exclusively the category at which URAM is *located,* especially since musical meaning is, as we have seen, a highly nebulous issue and usually has to do with more than one of Nattiez' levels. Moreover, a variable such as the quality of musical performance further complicates the production and reception of URAM: a poor rendition might conflict with the perceived supremacy of a composition. Pragmatically speaking, it is probably safe to say that in regard to URAM, both because investigations of the purely poietic in music are unlikely to tell us much about the music itself and because pure technical analysis needs an element of the esthesic before it can be employed in the discussion of URAM, a study such as this one is likely to privilege objects that exist or originate within the esthesic sphere. In other words, attention will generally be focused on the *reception* of ultimacy.

2. BEETHOVEN AND OP. 111

2.1 *The Work*

Beethoven's last piano sonata, dedicated to the Archduke Rudolph of Austria, was

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completed early in 1822, the third of a series that was supposedly composed 'at one stretch' (Schindler in Landon 1992, p. 194) and which, with the *Hammerklavier* Sonata and the Diabelli Variations, form the main body of piano works composed within what Lenz and other biographers identify as his third or last creative period. Here Beethoven returned to C minor – a key which he had not used since the *Pathétique* sonata – to write the last of four sonatas in his career that contain only two movements.

Op. 111 concluded a long and fruitful interaction with a musical form which not only produced some of Beethoven's greatest works but also acted as a reliable barometer of his development as composer. The piano itself played an important role in Beethoven's world. He was an accomplished performer and great improviser, and when Charles Rosen writes that 'Beethoven is perhaps the first composer for whom the exploratory function of music took precedence over every other: pleasure, instruction, and even, at times, expression' (Rosen 1971, p. 445), it is work at the piano which forms the initial and physical step in the process.

2.2 *The Beethoven Myth*

The name 'Beethoven' itself is what the French philosopher Roland Barthes might term a 'mythical signifier', a social reflection that has been inverted and naturalized (Barthes 1990a, p. 165). Its historical proximity to the signifier, great music, has remarkable tenacity, even where such music itself is negated by certain trends in popular culture. The connoted system which is linked to it may well contain, in Barthes' sense, the ideological signifieds of German mastery, high culture, patriarchy and so forth, but it seems as if neither cultural criticism nor what Barthes calls the 'pull of the purely signifier' – the turning of the word into pure form – has in this instance managed to dismantle the Romantic discourse of the hero or musical genius. Thus Joseph Kerman could write in 1980 that 'Beethoven has survived demythification' (Sadie 1980, p. 394).

Whereas Beethoven was exceedingly popular while still alive, an ensuing Romantic sensibility that targeted him as the archetypal artist-as-hero pushed his standing to unprecedented heights. Bettine von Arnim, a friend of Goethe, was particularly influential in promoting this view during the earlier part of the Nineteenth Century, initiating a personality cult based on attributes which Arnold Schmitz identifies as child of nature, revolutionary, magician, religious leader and prophet (Cooper 1991, p. 296). While classical-style stoicism remains important to the myth's inherent moral idealism, these Romantic qualities soon gained precedence.

We thus find the composer described in messianic terms by Liszt, who wrote that "[f]or us musicians, Beethoven's music is like the pillar of cloud and fire which led the Israelites through the desert" (*Ibid.*). Wagner conceived of Beethoven 'as a sublime and unique supernatural being' (*Ibid.*), and as late as 1911, Paul Bekker wrote of him as 'crucified and descending to hell and rising again' (Cooper 1970, p. 5). Elsewhere he is described as the 'sun of the musical firmament' (Crowest 1908, p. 253).

The revolutionary musical leader who follows the dictates of his own imagination rather than social expectations (Einstein 1958, p. 244) is necessarily also a moral transgressor. While a major work such as the Eroica Symphony was, for instance, banned in

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Prague after being declared 'morally corrupting' because of its display of 'musical anarchy' (Cooper 1991, p. 293), it was exactly such a crossing into new dimensions which captured the Romantic imagination of writers at the time. A fascination with limitlessness, ineffability and transcendence began to appear among early Romanticists such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, who claimed as early as 1808 that 'Beethoven's instrumental music opens to us the realm of the colossal and the immeasurable' (*Ibid.*). French writers such as De Vigny, Lamartine and Hugo were all drawn to the concept of the 'infinite' in Beethoven's music (*Ibid.*, p. 297) and Balzac wrote of the Fifth Symphony: 'After that supreme musical poem, we have nothing left to say; we can only lower our hands and meditate' (Barricelli 1988, p. 24).

The narrative of the heroic, the Promethean figure who overcomes personal struggles against Fate – deafness, loneliness – by creating great art, whose art *embodies* these successes, attains an ambiguous conclusion in Beethoven's late-period style. Here the heroic or 'dramatic' mode, which found its fullest expression in middle-period works, is replaced by what has been called a period of 'transcended antitheses' (Philip Barford in Wallace 1986b, p. 102), one in which 'conflicting principles somehow become component parts of a harmony' (*Ibid.* p. 108). The late-period works, especially the string quartets, have – more so than any other body of music in history – attained a widespread transcendental currency among writers and composers alike. The glorification of the problematic Ninth Symphony is well known. Wagner, for one, wrote of how this piece 'preaches repentance and atonement in the deepest sense of divine revelation' (Aronson 1980, p. 91). It was also Wagner who initiated – partly as a means of promoting his own ideas on music – a widely-supported critical tradition which sees the choral movement as resulting from the fact that Beethoven had definitively 'fulfilled all that was possible in the domain of absolute music, surpassing everything that had been achieved before' (Crowest, 1908, p. 231).

Other, less easily accessible late-period works received similar attention: Stravinsky is said to have considered the *Grosse Fuge* from String Quartet no.13 the greatest piece of music ever written; Burnett James wrote of how the late quartets 'stand alone among expressions of profound mystical experience in terms of created art' (Von Geyso, 1963, p. 76). Eliot, Huxley and Woolf were all deeply affected by Beethoven's late music, and seemed to desire certain of his effects in their own works (Aronson 1980, especially ch. 1). Perhaps the most extreme moments of adulation occur in a book that did much to promote the late Beethoven myth in the twentieth century: J.W.N. Sullivan wrote in 1927 that '[t]he music of the last quartets comes from the profoundest depths of the human soul that any artist ever sounded' (Sullivan 1933, p. 217) and argued that in the final stages of his life Beethoven finally came to peace with his complete deafness, transcending human suffering completely and achieving the 'state of great visionaries where there is no more discord' (*Ibid.*, p. 238). Such a biographical explanation is directly translated into his assessment of the C sharp minor quartet:

> It is the completely unfaltering rendering into music of what we can only call the mystic vision. It has that serenity which ... passes beyond beauty. Nowhere else in music are we made so aware, as here, of a state of consciousness surpassing our own, where our prob-

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lems do not exist, and to which even our highest aspirations, those that we can formulate, provide no key (*Ibid.*, pp. 132–3).

Such ideas have had great appeal, and they reappear almost directly in Renate von Geyso's claim that what 'makes [Beethoven] unique, is his simultaneous artistic and spiritual development. The wisdom and clarity of the music of the third period resulted directly from the spiritual wisdom, the being at one with God, which he had attained by that time' (Von Geyso 1963, p. 76).

2.3 *Reception of Op. 111*

This discourse of lastness, of ultimate vision and unbridled creativity before the prospect of final transgression, finds its way also into discussions on Op. 111. Apart from attempts at presenting the sonata as the formal perfection and transfiguration of all Beethoven's earlier piano works, a large number of commentaries exist in which the concept of transcendence, of entry into a paradisiac realm above language, occurs with great regularity, especially in descriptions of the second movement. The fact that Beethoven wrote at least seven more groups of piano music after this sonata is most often elided, partly because emphasis is generally laid on Beethoven's last works as the culmination of Classicism in music, which had essentially been represented by the sonata-allegro form itself. We thus find impressionistic glosses on Beethoven's transcendent vision such as those of Carl Reinecke who in 1897 talks of the work's 'supernaturally glorified sublimity and profundity' (Reinecke 1897, p. 139) and, more recently, of Robert Wallace and Wilfred Mellers who respectively claim that the sonata arouses '[m]ystical visions [that] are indescribable ... [and] inhabit[s] spiritual realms rarely probed in either instrumental music or prose fiction' (Wallace 1986b, p. 103) and that 'Opus 111 is *truth in process*' (Mellers 1983, p. 278).

Paradise appears as the logical extension of visionary insight, and already in Benz's biography of 1855 we find the two movements of the sonata respectively described as *Sansara* and *Nirvana* (Barford 1969, p. 110). William Behrend writes that 'this pure, transfigured and exalted music ... and the deep wisdom of [Beethoven's] thoughts have opened for us a view into a beautiful, mystic and far-off land' (Behrend 1937, pp. 191–3); Wilfrid Mellers claims that 'Beethoven entered paradise in effecting "a communication that reaches its goal"' (Mellers 1983, p. 283); Robert Wallace calls the second movement 'heavenly' (Wallace 1986b, p. 102), arguing that 'Beethoven reached, in Opus 111, the frontiers of what is possible in a piano sonata' (*Ibid.*, p. 108).

If we read paradise as that which lies before, above or after earthly human existence, and therefore outside of language, the use of language to deny itself is a logical further progression. Eric Blom maintains that

> to write about this farewell to the sonata for the piano [the second movement] ... is to come as near an attempt at describing the indescribable as any one can possibly be faced with. One cannot even extract musical quotations from it. No idea can be given of the theme on which Beethoven bases his variations except by writing out the whole of it; this

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> movement ... can be formally analysed but is extremely hard to assimilate spiritually (Blom 1968, pp. 238–9).

Similarly, for Barry Cooper 'Op. 111 epitomizes Beethoven's late style ... Words are inadequate to convey the range of emotions – the tension, the despair, the sublimity – expressed therein' (Cooper 1991, p. 242). Marion Scott writes that 'no human terms can give an idea of [the first movement's] magnitude. Nor can words describe the serenity and light of the arietta that follows – a set of variations upon what one may call a theme of light and peace everlasting' (Scott 1943, p. 146). In more extreme fashion Philip Barford calls bars 106–9 of the second movement 'the profoundest moment in all music, a still emptiness transcending thought and emotion' (Barford 1954, p. 331).

It is important to note that the contemporary reception was often not as flattering. While Beethoven's music enjoyed considerable popularity during his lifetime, especially during his middle period, the later music was generally not well received by the public, particularly for reasons of its unusual harmonic and structural configurations. Although a number of recent studies have shown how the general notion of the genius being misunderstood by his contemporaries is itself often a myth (Lennenberg 1980), it does seem as if the sonata, together with a number of other late-period works (Wallace 1986a, ch. 3; Barricelli 1988, p. 21), took a long time to gain acceptance outside that of a specialized audience. Maynard Solomon writes that

> Beethoven in his late sonatas and quartets may be regarded as the originator of the avant-garde in music history ... The late sonatas had been Beethoven's first works that were composed without the expectation of performance in either aristocratic salon or public concert ... their audience was in the private musicale (Solomon 1980, pp. 440–1).

During this phase, Beethoven himself moreover seemed to place great belief in the judgement of posterity; a memorable example of this attitude occurred after finishing the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, op. 106 (Solomon 1980, p. 416).

Late-period works were called 'obscure', 'abstruse', 'capricious', 'meaningless' and 'aimless', 'difficult to play and understand', 'perversely extravagant' (Crowest 1908, p. 250); and it is of relevance that Beethoven's supporter Grillparzer wrote in one of the last conversation books, 'We can make nothing of your music' (Cooper 1970, pp. 11–2). While publishers were uneasy about the fact that the sonata only contained two movements (Behrend 1937, pp. 187–8) – an aspect that also puzzled Beethoven's *famulus* Anton Schindler (Landon 1992, p. 195) – blame was laid elsewhere on the composer's complete deafness and perceived mental deterioration. William Gardiner wrote in 1837 that in Beethoven's last works '[h]is imagination seems to have fed on the ruins of his sensitive organs' (Slonimsky 1953, p. 46), and even Lenz identified the extra thirty-second notes found in certain measures of the second movement as 'the spectacle of madness' (*Ibid.*, p. 49) . A review in *The Harmonicon* of August 1823 is particularly slighting:

> The Sonata, op. 111 consists of two movements. The first betrays a violent effort to pro-

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> duce something in the shape of novelty. In it are visible some of those dissonances the harshness of which may have escaped the observation of the composer ... [The signature variation of the second movement] really is laborious trifling, and ought to be by every means discouraged by the sensible part of the musical profession ... [T]he publishers have, in their title, deemed it necessary to warn off all pirates by announcing the sonata as copyright. We do not think they are in much danger of having their property invaded (*Ibid.*, p. 43).

More telling, however, were accusations of 'scientificality', of the departure from a humanistic compositional basis in favour of artificially contrived formal complexities. The *Harmonicon* accused the composer a year later of 'studied eccentricity' (*Ibid.* p. 44), and Schindler writes of how the piece was criticized for the 'excess of scientific methods' that went into its making (Landon 1992, p. 195). He cites a review from Leipzig:

> It has pleased the composer, in working out his fine material, to make use for the most part of such artificial means as we consider not quite worthy of his genius. (*Ibid.*)

The *Berliner Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* similarly criticized Beethoven for not writing 'more naturally' (Wallace 1986a, p. 58); other writers subsequently tried to find connections between Op. 111 and the composer's obsession with arithmetic figures at that stage of his life (Cooper 1970, p. 45). Sir George Smart's opinion that 'although the later works of Beethoven may have been theoretically correct, they were to the ear harmoniously unpleasant' (Crowest 1908, p. 228) seems to sum up the attitude entailed.

3. REASONINGS

3.1 *Philosophical Influences*

If we wish to move beyond merely descriptive analysis, there are two questions to be answered at this stage. Firstly, what are the reasons for Beethoven's last piano sonata specifically being linked to the experience of ultimacy? Secondly, is there anything that sets the variation between the two forms of reception elaborated above aside from the reception of other works, and is there any way of connecting the two? There is no space here for a full-scale analysis of the 'Beethoven myth', nor for any proper investigation of Romantic aesthetics and ideology, and points will be made only in so far as they are relevant to the presentation of Op. 111 as identified.

The idea of transcendence through art is central to the discourse of Romanticism. Whereas Beethoven, in the words of Martin Cooper, 'remained to the very end of his life ... a man of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment' (Cooper 1970, p. 105), the strong ethical drift traditionally observed in his work (Crowest 1908, pp. 229–31) comes into conflict with introspective tendencies in the late music. Prometheus becomes more Faust-like, and the 'overreacher' (Steiner 1967, p. 58) provides a suitable model for both early writings on the 'morality of art' and later Romantic concepts

such as Nietzsche's idea of *übergehen*, which in the last analysis of course amounts to a rejection of the language of society as well.

Robert Jacobs has successfully identified the similarities between Beethoven's recorded statements and the thought of Kant (Jacobs 1961), and it is not difficult to see how Kant's moral idealism arrives at Beethoven's door via Schiller when the composer writes in a letter that '[o]nly art and science give us intimations and hopes of a higher life' (Solomon 1980, p. 438). Schiller's dictum that the artist must 'set himself the task of an idyll ... that will lead humanity, for whom the path to Arcadia is forever closed, onwards towards Elysium' (Kramer 1990, p. 27) seems to be at the centre of Beethoven's self-concept. This is clear from statements such as 'Whosoever understands my music will henceforth be free from the misery of the world' (Von Geyso 1963, p. 76). Kant's propagation of the noumenal as a sphere resistant to control via reason, with attendant shades of ineffability, is further reflected in a request supposedly made by the composer to Von Arnim: 'Tell [Goethe] to hear my symphonies and he will then agree that music is the only bodiless entry into a higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind, but which is not comprehended by it' (*Ibid.*).

Beethoven is thus complicit in being assigned messianic status and in initiating the general tradition of discourse on his music. Again, to a critique of his later symphonies he replied: 'You have not the energy, the bold wing of the eagle, to be able to follow me' (Crowest, 1908, p. 229). Although there seems to be little evidence concerning his own opinions on the last piano sonata, it is clear that he himself saw his later music in transcendent terms. In a letter written to the Archduke Rudolph shortly after the completion of Op. 111, he states that '[t]here is no loftier mission than to come nearer than other men to the Divinity, and to disseminate the divine rays among mankind' (Cooper 1970, p. 118); he is also known to have considered his last works better than his earlier ones (Barford 1969, p. 110).

It might be worthwhile to note that among the books found in Beethoven's possession after his death, there were three by the theologian Johann Michael Sailer, who argued that art was the expression of the divine in human terms; the thesis that the religious and the artistic impulse are identical is extensively elaborated in one of these three, the *Bund der Religion und der Kunst* (Cooper 1970, p. 113). We can only speculate on the extent to which Beethoven was directly influenced by Sailer's ideas, since these had already been expressed in a similar form elsewhere; suffice it to say that they were in keeping with the composer's beliefs as discussed. To the extent that authorial intention is acknowledged, then, the sonata does 'express' or 'create' paradisiac or transcendent states of mind.

3.2 *Technical Achievement & Expression*

As far as the notion of ultimacy in terms of technical achievement is concerned, it is likely that Beethoven did develop the classical piano sonata form as far as he felt necessary. Whereas unfinished works after 1822 include a Mass, an Overture on the notes B-A-C-H, a String Quintet and a Tenth Symphony (Cooper 1991, pp. 275–8), no attempt seems to have been made at writing a thirty-third piano sonata. After condemning the physical limitations of the piano by proclaiming that it 'is, after all, an unsatis-

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factory instrument' (Tovey 1931, p. 297), the only keyboard compositions completed were the Diabelli Variations and a number of short pieces. A. Forbes Milne writes that Op. 111 'crowns with success the efforts which Beethoven made to combine the harmonic and structural principles of the sonata with the contrapuntal requirements of the fugue' (Milne 1925, p. 58), and it is likely that the composer would have been highly satisfied with his successful implementation of a form that had caused much difficulty for him before. There is an unusually clear line of development in Beethoven' s sonata writing, and Milne identifies the attempt at such a fusion as the logical conclusion to this progression.

The idea of the limit is relevant also in other ways. While it is for instance impossible to objectively gauge levels of expressive content, there is a sense in which Beethoven's supposed achievement of unprecedented expression *within* Classical forms (Crowest 1908, p. 241; Von Geyso 1963, p. 73) can indeed be identified as a historical event. It is at points of renewal – and particularly of individualist renewal – in musical development that expression can in one sense be said to occur: the individual appears exactly where there is a departure from convention. The composer's endless striving towards formal development – often in rejection of social expectations – can be read, together with the increasing number of score directions (the appearance of *molto espressivo and cantabile* in particular) as a tipping of Classical balance towards subjective experience, in preparation for what becomes known later as Romanticism. The tendency towards 'organic form (Wallace 1986b, p. 39) can already be observed in the *Pathétique* Sonata, where the separate introductory section is combined with the first theme of the allegro. In the first movement of Op. 111, the exposition almost fuses with the development stage, suggesting an extensive progression towards primacy of subjective exploration.

While Beethoven never quite abandoned classical forms (Einstein 1958, p. 70), he did stretch them according to what Paul Henry Lang calls 'their maximal tensile strength' (Wallace 1986b, p. 11). In the exceptionally long Arietta movement the harmonic configuration of the 'little song' remains 'almost primitively simple' (Cooper 1970, p. 201) and Beethoven can – from an optimistic perspective – be said to achieve the old ideal of maximum content within an established form, again occupying an ideal transitional locus between two aesthetic codes, those of Classicism and Romanticism. Whereas the first movement of Op. 111 still carries elements of the 'dramatic style', the switch to variation form in the second movement (as also in the only subsequent piano work of importance, the Diabelli Variations) indicates an attempt at drawing the most from a simple stretch of musical material. The length of the second movement, the scope of octaves employed, the technical difficulty of performance, the repetitions, the great number of extended trills and also of silences between notes, and above all, the sheer scope of dynamic, rhythmic and melodic redefinition within variations, all point to a desire for maximum deliberation (or exhaustion) within a consciously limited framework. Where expression is accepted as compositional aim, it is easy to see how these expressive elements in Op. 111 come to be seen as aiming towards silence – or towards self-exhaustion – and are transposed into descriptions of the ultimate or paradisiac.

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3.3 *Lastness*

The discourse of ultimacy, be it in terms of expressiveness or otherwise, cannot, of course, be sustained on technical explanation only. Writing on Op. 111, Eric Blom claims that '[f]orm ... is not only an indispensable attribute of a work of genius; it is the only attribute that is analysable' (Blom 1968, p. 236). The conflation of musical achievement with a valorized biographical program is evident in his statement that '[t]he last Sonata sums up the whole experience gathered by Beethoven throughout all the sonata writing that had occupied him on and off for twenty-six years' (*Ibid.*, p. 236). Wilfrid Mellers makes the point even more directly: 'Though opus 111 has only two movements, it traverses the total range of Beethoven's experience, as manifest in the previous sequence of sonatas' (Mellers 1983, p. 240).

Discourse on the last music forms a logical narrative conclusion to a more well-established myth: the artist who has heroically battled against setbacks throughout his life now reaches peace, a happy ending. A long-standing tradition maintains that the successful resolution of a long struggle over the guardianship of Beethoven's nephew as well as final acceptance of deafness led to a period of peaceful and unhindered creation. The composer's self-absorption and neglect of physical appearance here – and even his questionable dealings with publishers – are signs of his unworldliness (Scott 1943, pp. 79–81, Von Geyso 1963, p. 76, Sullivan 1933, II ch. 6). Factually, however, this is simply not true. Beethoven's concern over financial matters, his health and his nephew's education placed him, if anything, painfully in the middle of worldly affairs. What occurred, rather, was a separation between art and life, reflected stylistically in the departure from the 'heroic mode'. Maynard Solomon cites Beethoven's loss of patronage, his waning popularity in favour of Rossini's 'narcotic' music, and a general public disillusionment with the social and political ideals of the Enlightenment in this regard (Solomon 1980, pp. 317–8 & ch. 19).

Other writers have seen the late works as the result of sickness and struggle themselves – either in terms of sublimation or of joyful inspiration upon recovery (Crowest 1908, p. 250). Psychoanalytic readings have attempted to explain the creative fertility of the late period as the direct outcome of pathological mental fragmentation (Lichtenberg 1984), and some have cited the composer's supposed syphilis as the source of creative success (Barford 1969, p. 108). On a more mundane level – if we accept Schindler's record – the fact that the last three sonatas were written in response to accusations of inventive exhaustion (Thayer 1960, pp. 48–9) might well account partly for their formal excellence.

The idea that a composer's last works, because of their general temporal proximity to death, manage to capture visions of afterlife is not unique. Mahler's Ninth Symphony for instance still carries the 'I saw death' tag even though a Tenth Symphony was almost fully completed. The trope of artistic foresight is extended to the ultimate limit itself, and the temporal status of last works contributes directly to their being assigned supremacy in terms of general vision or expression. For a writer like Thomas Mann death is central to all artistic creation, and this explains his strong attraction to late Beethoven works in a novel such as *Doctor Faustus* (Mann 1948).

What is more problematic, however, is a response to Op. 111 from Berlin published

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while Beethoven was still alive, in which the reviewer claimed to hear 'the sounds of the grave' and 'the digging of the grave' in the sonata (Wallace 1986b, p. 126). While rumours of Beethoven's physical and supposed mental deterioration might be at the root of this, the chance that contemporary musical perception might have functioned in ways inaccessible to modern-day analysis cannot be discounted. Even when considered metaphorically, these images have an aptness, as shall be shown, beyond mere criticism of the compositional result.

4. SILENCE AND THE DISAPPEARING SUBJECT

4.1 *Difficulty of the Late Style*

The extremity of the difference between the two broad types of reception mentioned earlier might suggest the general nonverifiable nature of linguistic responses to absolute music. Yet on consideration the two are undeniably linked in their descriptions of motion away from understandable 'language', musical or otherwise. Joseph Kerman identifies a 'drive toward dissociation' in Beethoven's late works which signifies for him the dialectical obverse of the composer's dominant synthesising impulses (Kerman 1966, p. 256). Similarly, Martin Cooper writes that one of 'the characteristic marks of his late style' is that 'nothing is conceded to the listener, no attempt is made to capture his attention or hold his interest' (Cooper, 1970, pp. 10–1). This process can be read as a departure from (and, as shall be seen, a self-deconstruction of) Enlightenment ideals such as the synthesis between individual and society: the dissolution of the middle-period style, with its powerful resolution procedures, results in a denial and subsequent exclusion of the human subject as integrated entity. The language of reason and of successful appropriation of exterior objects such as music begins to fail, and silence offers the possibility of an ambiguous reading in either positive or negative direction.

The work of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno offers an interesting perspective on this process as historical event and, in so far as Op. 111 is representative of the late style in general, illuminates many of the apparent contradictions in its reception. It is common knowledge that Adorno acted as musical advisor to Thomas Mann in the writing of the latter's novel *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend* (Mann 1948). Mann incorporated Adorno's analysis directly into what is probably the most famous verbal account of the sonata, the lecture given by Mann's fictional character, Wendell Kretschmar.

4.2 *Thomas Mann on Op. 111*

In a lecture entitled 'Why did Beethoven not write a third movement to the Piano Sonata Opus 111?', the organist Kretschmar recounts the reception of the work in a passage borrowed partly from Schindler:

> [I]ndeed it was not easy to see [the sonata in C minor] as a well-rounded and intellectually digested work, and [it] had given his contemporary critics, and his friends as well, a hard aesthetic nut to crack ... In the works of the last period [these friends and admirers] stood with heavy hearts before a process of dissolution or alienation, of a mounting into

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> an air no longer familiar or safe to meddle with; even before a *plus ultra,* wherein they had been able to see nothing else than a degeneration of tendencies already previously present, an excess of introspection and speculation, an extravagance of minutiae and scientific musicality ... Beethoven's art had overgrown itself, risen out of the habitable regions of tradition ... into spheres of the entirely and utterly and nothing-but-personal – an ego painfully isolated in the absolute, isolated too from sense by his loss of hearing; ... only at moments, only by exception, ... could [his most willing contemporaries] understand anything at all (Mann, 1948, p. 52).

While Kretschmar acknowledges the truth in these critiques, he insists that they are 'good or right only conditionally and incompletely' (*Ibid.*). Such a response is valid only in conjunction with the Schopenhauerian praise to come, for, as he explains,

> [O]ne would usually connect with the conception of the merely personal, ideas of limitless subjectivity and of radical harmonic will to expression, in contrast to polyphonic objectivity ... and this equation, here as altogether in the masterly late works, would simply not apply. As a matter of fact, Beethoven had been far more "subjective" ... in his middle period than in his last ... Untouched, untransformed by the subjective, convention often appeared in the late works, in a baldness, one might say exhaustiveness, an abandonment of self, with an effect more majestic and awful than any reckless plunge into the personal. In these forms ... the subjective and the conventional assumed a new relationship, conditioned by death (*Ibid.*, pp. 52–3).

Death, or the limit of personal existence, is posited – together with stylistic exhaustion – as reason not only for the denial of a 'whole' subject position within the late music, but also for more far-reaching greatness within pre-classical forms:

> Where greatness and death came together, [Kretschmar] declared, there arises an objectivity tending to the conventional, which in its majesty leaves the most domineering subjectivity far behind, because therein the merely personal – which had after all been the surmounting of a tradition already brought to its peak – once more outgrew itself, in that it entered into the mythical, the collectively great and supernatural (*Ibid.*, p. 53).

Mann here negotiates between Adorno's theories on the subject-object relation – which, as will be explained, accounts for much of the negative reaction to the sonata – and the Beethoven myth as discussed above by invoking death as a third, a connecting term; the variance within reception is dislodged within ultimacy. In his account of the writing of *Doctor Faustus*, Mann reveals his attraction to Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence (Mann 1961, p.125; Carnegy 1973, pp. 113–5) ; the linking to the philosopher's notion of self-transcendence, so apt to the Beethoven myth, is evident here.

The notion of ultimacy, as it relates to both technical and expressive exhaustion, provides the answer to the question posed by Kretschmar in his lecture title. The sonata, especially the second movement, is repeatedly described in vertical or transcendent imagery, and the arietta theme achieves a super-ontological status in its exhaustive

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movement 'through a hundred vicissitudes, a hundred worlds of rhythmic contrasts' (*Ibid.*, p. 52) . This results in 'an utterly extreme situation, when the poor little motif seems to hover alone and forsaken above a yawning giddy abyss – a procedure of awe-inspiring unearthliness' (*Ibid.*, p. 55), resolved in the end by the return of the original D-G-G motif now transformed to C-C#-D-G-G and described as 'touching in its mildness and goodness' (*Ibid.*). At the end, it 'takes leave and in doing so becomes entirely leave-taking'; accordingly

> [t]he sonata had come, in the second, enormous movement, to an end, an end without any return ... not only this one in C minor, but the sonata in general, as a species, as a traditional art-form ... it had fulfilled its destiny, reached its goal, beyond which there was no going ... the gesture of farewell of the D G G motif, consoled by the C sharp, was a leave-taking in this sense too, ... the farewell of the sonata form (*Ibid*)

Kretschmar emphasizes that a third movement, a 'new approach' or 'return after this parting' (*Ibid.*) would be altogether impossible, and after playing the sonata speaks only 'a few words' (*Ibid.*), insisting that this answer is obvious from the music itself. Beethoven had, once and for all, transcended all human possibility of sonata writing; the sonata had achieved its ultimate potential in all manners of speaking.

In the description of the sonata, the motif furthermore enacts Beethoven's own biographical details, and this anthropomorphization or conflation of individual and musical subjects is thus carried into the notion of ultimacy itself. If placed in the language of Schopenhauer – a philosopher to whom Mann was strongly drawn (Carnegy 1973, pp. 151–4) – the sonata in this section directly embodies Beethoven's 'will to death'. Adorno's approach to the late music is perhaps more historically sophisticated, and he explains the difficulties of the sonata in terms of an approaching historical impasse.

4.3 *Adorno on the Late Beethoven*

One of the central 'theses' of Adorno's unyieldingly pessimistic musical and general artistic philosophy is the paradoxical formulation that the greater the autonomy of the work of art, the more likely it is to embody the exterior social forces at play during its production. He argues that, ever since the late Enlightenment, western art has moved towards increased isolation from society, and that in complicated ways the free modern subject, who has become impossible as an ontological category, can find the hope of expression only in entirely rigidified formal artistic structures. In music, this position is represented by the serial music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, whose work is a culmination of tendencies already present in Beethoven's late style.

In an excellent interpretation of Adorno's analysis of the late Beethoven, Rose Rosengard Subotnik explains how his thinking is rooted in a dialectic between form and freedom, two 'forces' which are at the same time contradictory and interdependent. Form is social, extrinsic to subjective freedom, yet still provides the structure in which such freedom can find expression (Adorno 1973, pp. 32–3). Beethoven's second-period style, according to Adorno, corresponds to exterior historical conditions which appeared to offer the *possibility* of dialectical synthesis (*Ibid.*, pp. 55–6 and Jameson

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1971, ch. 1, section 3). In Beethoven's music from this period, then, the musical individual (or 'subject'), 'being at times identical with the individual tone, at times with the "theme" or with the part for the concert instrument' (Feher 1975, p. 106; Adorno 1964, p. 14 on the first movement of the Fifth Symphony) is said to '[subject] itself to logical, dynamic change while simultaneously retaining its original identity, thus overcoming the contradiction between identity and non-identity' (Subotnik 1976, p. 249), that is, between subjectivity and form. The clearest example of this phenomenon is, of course, to be found in the development and recapitulation procedures of the sonata-allegro form (Adorno 1964, p. 14 on the *Appassionata* sonata), and it is indeed Beethoven's sonatas and sonata-form symphonies from this period that traditionally constitute his most widely liked body of works, a body which is popularly read as being engaged in a successful battle against Fate, or, then, objectivity.

It is important, however, to note that Adorno nowhere claims that dialectical synthesis *did* occur during Beethoven's lifetime; the composer, rather, fulfilled in his second period a historical possibility within the realm of art, which served to criticize society's imperfections through its own wholeness (*Ibid.*, p. 250; Jameson 1971, pp. 38–40). Even in the second-period style, Adorno claims, Beethoven was bringing into question the authenticity of the principle of synthesis; the replacement of an older, fixed metaphysical system by a dialectical model, which conclusively occurs in Beethoven's second period. This inevitably introduces the need for new formal principles to contain subjective existence (Adorno 1976, p. 120, pp. 122–23). The result is that 'Beethoven's development tends to wear down its engendering material – the musical subject – to the point where the latter negates itself entirely in the service of the larger entity ... turn[ing] freedom into enslavement' (Subotnik 1976, p 252).

The possibility of subjective integration disappears, and the 'process of dissolution or alienation', to which Mann's Kretschmar refers, becomes the first signal of the artistic subject's eventual position in the modern age. In the third period, music – if it was to be authentic – had to forgo its pretence to individual freedom, and had to express in some way the irreconcilability of subject and object (or, of individual and society). It was thus forced to negate 'affirmative culture', with the result that Beethoven had to sever affinities between his art and the exterior social world as far as possible. Artistic specifications had to come from within himself, with the result that his music became 'consciously and implacably autonomous' (*Ibid.* p. 255; Adorno 1976, p. 123). Because, as Adorno believes, the purpose of authentic art is to protect individual freedom, this 'split in human wholeness' would however render the artist ineffectual, unless the musical subject acquired confirmation from the more forceful precepts of objective reality (Adorno 1976, pp. 118–23). Hence, for Beethoven's third-period music to retain its authenticity in Adorno's sense, it had to embody the principles of autonomy and heteronomy at the same time (Subotnik 1976, p. 255).

Adorno finds a solution to this paradoxical situation in what he identifies as a reformulation of the subject-object relation, one which reflects what has now become their absolute incompatibility. The musical subject, in order to achieve such a reflection, had to yield to and assimilate the formal features of objective reality to a far greater extent than ever before (Adorno 1976, p. 122); Subotnik writes that 'by increasing the explic-

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itly formal character of music, the subjective could acknowledge its own underlying dependence on a foreign source of authority, objectivity, without ever going beyond the autonomous processes of musical construction" (Subotnik 1976, p. 256). To put it simply, the musical subject had to disappear from the music; and Adorno accordingly claims that in the late Beethoven corpus it almost never appears directly, being instead dispelled to a position of 'permanent renunciation' (Adorno 1976, p. 122). The music of this period maintained its identity exactly through its own negation, thereby comprising both autonomy and heteronomy at the same time (*Ibid.*).

In his essay on the *Missa Solemnis,* Adorno elaborates a number of ways in which Beethoven achieved this, and I will briefly mention them (Subotnik 1976, pp. 257–61). First of all, he extensively reintroduced counterpoint, which Adorno identifies as a more objective or 'collective' form (Adorno 1964, pp. 13–4 & 16–7; Adorno 1973, pp. 90–5, Adorno 1976, p. 117), as well as other Baroque and pre-Baroque techniques such as use of the church modes (*Ibid.*, p. 116), 'the dissolution into often short, hardly symphonically integrated parts, the lack of decisive thematic inspirations ... and a lack of discharging dynamic developments' (*Ibid.*, pp. 116–7). Secondly, convention, unlike in the second period, suddenly played a heightened role in the last works. Adorno attaches special importance to the appearance of 'trills, cadenzas and fioritures' (Adorno 1964, p. 14), the accompanimental bass pattern, and the simple V-I cadence. Convention for Adorno signifies what Nietzsche would call the *immergleich* aspect of external reality, the unchangeable elements unaffected by subjectivity; thus Beethoven's return to convention in his last works signified that the belief in subjective musical ordering was but a 'passing phase', even if convention is now self-consciously assimilated (*Ibid.*, pp. 14–6 on similar tendencies in the late Goethe and Stifter). Thirdly, Beethoven replaced development with repetition or variation: the *Missa* for instance 'does not at all break out of the pre-planned objectivity of the model through any subjective dynamic, nor does it create the totality ... out of itself'; its motifs 'rather constantly reappear in changing light though they are always identical' (Adorno 1976, p. 117). Fourthly, there is an absence of mediating structures (*Ibid.*, p. 116) between extreme moments within last-period works, so that we often find unresolved collisions or unusual silences.

In Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Kretschmar states in his lecture that 'art always throws off the appearance of art' (Mann 1948, p. 55) B this idea is central to Adorno's principal essay on Beethoven's late style (Adorno 1964, p. 15), and the methods by which subjective presence is denied on a surface level all amount to such a 'throwing off' in the face of death or larger historical necessity. Kretschmar's paradox – that individual subjectivity is subsumed by the 'collectively great and supernatural' (Mann 1948, p. 53), in other words objectivity is explained by Adorno in a parallel but less historical fashion. In the essay he speaks of the relationship of convention to subjectivity as a 'law of form' (*Formgesetz*), one which becomes visible to the artist only when the reality of death, which amounts to the abolishment of art, is considered (Adorno 1964, p. 15). It is, however, associated only with 'the creature, not the creation' (*Ibid., transl. mine*), and therefore appears in broken form within the artwork, as that which Adorno calls *allegory*. Psychological interpretations which seek to explain late styles as a move towards unlimited and regressive subjectivity therefore miss the point; Adorno writes

that 'in the later works the power of subjectivity lies [instead] in the rapidly upward-moving gesture with which it departs from the work of art' (*Ibid.*, *transl. mine*), thereby shaking off the illusion of art. The meeting between creative genius and such a process is elaborated as follows:

> Touched by death, the masterly hand sets free the material which it had formed earlier; the cracks inside it, evidence of the ultimate powerlessness of the I when faced by Being, is its [the I's] final creation ... [The] fragments, fallen apart and left behind, are finally transformed into expression; expression now no longer of the solitary 'I' but of the mythic one of the creature and its fall, whose steps, in the same manner as is found in moments of holding back, are figuratively hewn by the late works (*Ibid.*, pp. 15–6, *transl. mine*).

While Adorno is not specific on the notion of genius (which perhaps in turn points towards a more personal perception of ultimacy) here, the point of association is clear.

Many of the compositional specifics listed earlier are of course to be found in Op. 111, and if we accept Adorno's explanation, accusations of 'artificiality' can be understood within a framework of incipient alienation. Whereas this is a far more pessimistic reading of subjective expression than the one expressed earlier, the subject can be said to tend towards ultimacy by assuming a position of 'implacable autonomy', even if that subject is no longer redeemable from the outside. It is worth noting that Adorno himself considered the *Missa Solemnis* – completed soon after the last sonata – as 'the greatest of [Beethoven's] works' (Adorno 1976, p. 124). The reason is most probably that this 'resistant' composition embodies a pessimistic and yet idealistic stance toward both religion and the certainties of the Enlightenment tradition of bourgeois humanism, which Adorno values as 'humanity' at its peak (Adorno 1981, p. 137) and which was realised by Beethoven in his second period (Subotnik 1976, pp. 244–5). In a sense Beethoven's return to convention is thus more authentically subjective than the works of later Romanticists who take his middle period as their starting point.

Where the subject is still to an extent discernible, as in the Arietta motif of the second movement of Op. 111, the listener's identification, if it does occur, leads him or her to exhaustion, fragmentation or silence. In both cases the subject comes to be defined by absence, and the assignment to the sonata of both paradise – which Adorno might well call regressive (see Adorno 1990) or link to 'affirmative culture' – and anti-humanist artificiality make sense under the sign of *horor vacuis* assumed at the limits of subjective being. It is to Adorno's benefit that he sees the difficulty of the late music as an atemporal phenomenon – in 1959 he could write of the *Missa Solemnis* that 'recognition of its content ... [is] to this day ... still missing' (Adorno 1976, p. 113; pp. 113–5) – and it is in this sense that the two responses elucidated are not bound merely to ideological positioning or historical 'progress'.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to investigate and account for the ways in which a musical composition has been linked to the idea of Ultimate Reality and Meaning; it would

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seem that 'ultimacy' in a work of music is bound to result in the positing of a correlative related in some way to silence. In the terms of literary theory, paradise reads as a deletion of language, a locus where the production of meaning operates neither through Saussurean difference nor Derrida's *différance*. If it is accepted that Beethoven's late music occupies a tentative position between the integrated and the totally absent subject in music, it can be argued that guided access into emptiness within Op. 111 allows for a form of ecstasy similar to that aimed for in certain Eastern religious traditions, one that is also akin to the self-annihilation desired in certain symbolist and modernist literary works. Adorno's assertion that the *Missa Solemnis* 'balances on a point of ineffectivity which approaches nothingness' (Adorno 1976, p. 120) is particularly relevant in this regard.

Silence, however, becomes in many cases a term against itself, as the excessive verbal discussions on the inadequacies of language have indicated earlier. While God cannot be described, paradise and the human condition of silence can – and in a sense must – be given linguistic form. Barthes writes about the musical adjective:

> Naturally, this epithet, to which we are constantly led by weakness or fascination ... has an economic function: the predicate is always the bulwark with which the subject's imaginary protects itself from the loss which threatens it. The man who provides himself or is provided with an adjective is now hurt, now pleased, but always *constituted* (Barthes 1990b, p. 179).

This statement is highly relevant to how we view Ultimate Reality and Meaning as a principle of continuation. In the final analysis – if the present line of argument is followed – the terms 'meaning' and 'ultimate reality' are incompatible: meaning returns as a linguistic means of ordering musical experience into a continued human existence that is not transcendental itself. As a corollary, art replaces religion as transcendental signifier, finding its specific and accessible embodiment in a work of music such as Beethoven's Op. 111. Whereas Beethoven's own life history can be embraced as a principle of artistic heroism, it is this musical limit that remains, and which can, in the end, be read as the place where the non-human, human and archi-human come together.

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