

Song (2016 Version)

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Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse,
 Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ,
 Dead things with inbreathd sense able to pierce.

(John Milton, "At a Solemn Music")

No carnage, but this single change:

Upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn
 The silken skilled transmemberment of song.

(Hart Crane, "Voyages III")

This essay is a revised version of the chapter on song in my first book, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (University of California Press, 1984). The chapter aimed to upend the traditional understanding of song, particularly art song, as a harmonious unity of words and music, and it has been fortunate in its reception. Over the years, like many other authors, I have idly mulled over the question of what the chapter would be like if I were to write it "today." The publication in 2017 of a collection of my writings on the general topic, *Song Acts: Writings on Words and Music* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers) gave me the opportunity to ask the question seriously. The text here is the answer. The overall argument remains the same, but I have sought to strengthen it with more refined formulations, better detail, and enriched interpretation.

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In its traditional definition, song is a form of synthesis. It is the art that reconciles music and poetry, intonation and speech, as means of expression. Milton, among many others, takes its "mixt power" as a reflection of the original synthesizing power of divine creation. Why, then, does Hart Crane in "Voyages" call song a "transmemberment"? The word is a

portmanteau combining "transformation" and "dismemberment"; in a poem about the links between poetry, love, and loss, it appropriately evokes the figure of Orpheus, the archetypal poet/singer who transforms both the world and the underworld until the Bacchantes dismember him. But the image of a transmemberment also points to something primary—and disharmonious—in the nature of song itself.

By "song" here, I mean primarily the classical art song: an independent composition for any number of voices in which, according to Edward T. Cone, "a poem ... is set to a precisely composed vocal line united with a fully developed instrumental accompaniment."¹ Perhaps the most widespread view of song in this sense is one that grounds the musical setting of a poem in the creative reproduction of poetic meaning. From this perspective, the song is a musical imitation of the text, or a kind of translation of it. The song is an adaptation in one medium of an artwork fashioned in another. It may be other things, but it is always also that. Goethe, whose poetry supplied texts for a superabundance of songs, was averse to anything more ambitious. He did not like settings, such as Schubert's, that he did not "feel to be, so to speak, identical with my poems."² Cone once suggested a less extreme version of the same view when he wrote that "Ultimately there can be only one justification for the serious composition of a song; it must be an attempt to increase our understanding of the poem."³

Art songs may encourage this way of thinking because they generally employ pre-existing texts that enjoy, or at least seek, high cultural status. Moreover, many songs do rely on translation effects, typically to establish a primary point of contact between the text and the music. Schubert and Schoenberg, for example, conclude their song cycles *Winterreise* and *Pierrot lunaire*, respectively, with songs that incorporate musical translations of poetic descriptions: Schubert's "Der Leiermann," in which the piano accompaniment imitates the

¹ Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 5.

² Quoted by Cone, *Composer's Voice*, p. 20.

³ Edward T. Cone, "Words Into Music: The Composer's Approach to the Text," in *Sound and Poetry*, edited by Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 15

sound of a hurdy-gurdy, and Schoenberg's "O alter Duft," which calls on E-major triads amid its atonal sound-world to evoke an "old fragrance from the days of fairy tales." Nevertheless, it seems odd to think of composers as merely writing footnotes to poems, even if we acknowledge the possibilities of reciprocal influence and ironic contrasts between the poem and the composition. A more plausible view is that poetry for the composer is only part of the "raw material" for composition. The phrase is Cone's, and both he and Suzanne Langer have sought to shape a view of song as the appropriation rather than the imitation of a text.

In *Feeling and Form*, Langer explains the supposed ability of poor texts to make for good songs by arguing that a poem, once enveloped by music, loses its individual identity; it simply becomes part of the song.⁴ Cone offers a more fully developed theory in *The Composer's Voice*. Song, he argues, is an interplay of several dramatic personae—those of the singer, the accompaniment, and the composer. But *not* of the poet:

A song is not primarily the melodic recitation or the musical interpretation or the criticism of a poem. Although it may be any or all of these things it is first of all a new creation of which the poem is only one component. The familiar pun that accuses composers of using texts as pretexts goes too far, but it contains an element of truth nevertheless. The composer is not primarily engaged in "setting" a poem. As I have pointed out elsewhere, a composer cannot set a poem directly, for in this sense there is no such thing as "the poem"; what he uses is one reading of the poem—that is to say, a specific performance, for even a silent reading is a kind of performance. He must consider all aspects of the poem that are not realizable in this performance as irrelevant. And to say that he "sets" even this reading is less accurate than to say that he appropriates it; he makes it his own by turning it into music. What we hear in a song, then, is not the poet's persona but the composer's.⁵

⁴ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), pp. 149-68.

⁵ Cone, *Composer's Voice*, p. 19.

The arguments of Langer and Cone are more faithful than the notion of translation to the priority of music in the experience of song, but they do not yet capture the quality that Crane touched on with the word "transmemberment." The problem seems to stem from unquestioned faith in the ideal of organic form. Langer and Cone represent the appropriation of the poem as a smooth, unambivalent, almost alchemical process. It is not. Some songs may seek to give that impression, and they may even succeed, but at least as long as one pays attention to the poem, the impression almost necessarily belies the work that goes into it. The magical turning of the poem into music is a veil of illusion cast over a more difficult activity. To the extent that both are taken seriously, the poetry and the music of a song will tend to pull the voice in different directions. The genre of the art song hinges on the separate identities of the words and music. The identity of the song hinges on its negotiation of the divergent pulls. The terms of that negotiation are ultimately up to the performers, especially the singer, whose primary role I need to acknowledge here even though this study remains focused on composition.

A poem is never really assimilated into a composition. It is *incorporated*, and it retains its own life, its own "body," within the body of the music. The appropriation of the text by the music is not a *fait accompli* that is given to the listener with the sound of the first note. It must be enacted, must be evolved, during the course of the music. And to quote another poet, Wallace Stevens, "There is a conflict, there is a resistance / Involved." A song, we might say, does not *use* a reading that it substitutes for the text and presents in musical form. Instead, a song *gives* a reading, in both the performative and the critical senses of the phrase: the song gives itself as, gives itself over to, an activity of interpretation—emphasis on *activity*—that necessarily both takes apart and reassembles the text that it incorporates. The song is not the reading but the giving. In short: song is transmemberment. Appropriation always retains traces of an otherness that cannot be appropriated, and without which no appropriation would be possible. There are no clean sweeps.

On this view, the relationship between poetry and music in song is implicitly agonic. The song is a "new creation" only because it is also a de-creation. The music appropriates the poem by contending with it, phonetically, dramatically, and semantically; the contest is what most drives and shapes the song. Cone's dictum that the composer must consider as irrelevant whatever aspects of the poem that the music does not seek to realize is impossible to follow. The weighing and sorting of "relevance" is an audible process in the music and rarely, if ever, a seamless one. The mere presence of the text installs the music amid a constellation of alternative possibilities, and, on a wider canvass, of potentialities that may not seem possible at all until the song summons them up.⁶

Both composers and poets have sometimes recognized that song, to a large extent, is an arbitrary form, the expression of an interpretive will to power. Ives is characteristically pugnacious about the matter:

[A] song has a few rights, the same as other ordinary citizens. If it feels like walking along the left-hand side of the street, passing the door of the physiology or sitting on the curb, why not let it? If it feels like kicking over an ash can, a poet's castle, or the prosodic law, will you stop it? Must it always be a polite triad, a "breve gaudium," a ribbon to match the voice?⁷

From a very different temperament, Rilke's, comes an acknowledgment of the same violence, the same loss of original poetic authority to a musical coercion:

I am . . . quite sincerely averse to any accompaniment—musical as well as illustrative—to my works. It is after all my aim to fill with my own creative output the whole artistic space that offers itself to an idea in my mind. I hate to believe . . . that there could be any room left over for another art, which would itself then be interpretative and complementary. . . . We are faced with the task of each clearly

⁶ See footnote 10, below.

⁷ Charles Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata, The Majority, and Other Writings*, edited by Howard Boatwright (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 130.

deciding for one, his own, form of expression; and to this creative activity, enclosed in one province, all coming-to-the-rescue on the part of other arts becomes weakening and dangerous.⁸

Nietzsche argued for an even more radical incongruity than this, an audible disunion of elements that borders on a repudiation of language:

When the composer writes music for a lyrical poem ... he, as a musician, is not excited either by the images or by the feelings speaking through this text. ... A necessary relation between poem and music. . . makes no sense, for the two worlds of tone and image are too remote from each other to enter more than an external relationship. The poem is only a symbol and related to the music like the Egyptian hieroglyph of courage to a courageous soldier.⁹

Song, we seem forced to conclude, is not a refined way to throw language into high relief. It is a refined form of erasure.¹⁰

⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters, 1910-1926*, translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 246.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Music and Words," translated by Walter Kaufmann, in *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, by Carl Dahlhaus, translated by Mary Whittall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 112.

¹⁰ In "Auf dem Flusse: Image and Background in a Schubert Song," *19th Century Music* 6 (1982): 47-59, David Lewin develops a sophisticated version of the idea that a song "expresses" its text. The music, he argues, chooses from among various plausible readings of the poem as an actor does with a script. Reading here takes on the sense of expressive performance, of staging, and Lewin seeks to show how such staging may influence deep compositional (specifically Schenkerian) structures. Lewin's model of reading from script has close affinities to the model of critical / performative reading from/of text that I outlined a few paragraphs above. But the models differ in their criteria of understanding. Lewin requires an array of "plausible meanings," but his own theatrical/performative model betrays the impossibility of restricting the text-music relationship to any such thing. Jonathan Wordsworth, a descendant of the poet, once intoned the latter's line "With rocks, and stones, and trees" — the conclusion of the Lucy poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" — in a manner more appropriate for the last act of *King Lear*. When challenged, he is supposed to have replied, "But the poor woman is dead!" The latter-day Wordsworth may have missed the point, but nonetheless there is no way to predict what meanings will be or remain "plausible," and many achieve plausibility only in retrospect. With respect to meaning, ideally at any rate, song does not select, but invents.

II

The dissociative, agonic quality of song is inherent in the fusion of words and music—so much so that vocal styles are perhaps best described by the ways in which they attack the text. The exaggerated accentuation of children's and nursery songs, the crooning of classic American popular song, the pitch bending and elaborate melisma of other popular genres, all make the point in ways appropriate to their social function. More broadly, we can refer to the almost universal use of sustained vocalic sounds and melismatic undulation as expressive devices.

The style of the classical art song since the Renaissance heightens the tension between words and music in two fundamental ways: first, by adopting an intonational manner that presents the voice as a precisely tuned instrument rather than as a source of utterance; and second, by opening the possibility of a musical response to the poetry that is complex enough to raise questions of interpretation. Other features—the expressive forcing of high and low notes, where the sound of the words inevitably fades into the effort of attacking the pitch; the complication of rhythm and the varied movement of the voice toward and away from speech-like patterns; the repetition, alteration, and syntactic breakdown of the text—also contribute to alienating the singing of the words from any plausible speaking of them, any context in which they might function as a speech act. In song, speech act becomes song act.

Since the art song is my concern here, the following discussion will jump to it unapologetically after some further discussion of the fundamental issue: the disintegrative effect of music as such on words as such. Most of the songs to be considered are *Lieder*, a choice that reflects the historical fact that the *Lied* brings the question of interpretive response to its fullest development. My brief excursions outside of this repertoire reflect the conviction that the same question is also raised elsewhere, though perhaps less consistently.

From a phenomenological standpoint, song is a partial dissociation of speech: a loosening of phonetic and syntactic articulation and a dissolving of language into its physical

origin, vocalization. If speech is taken as a norm, song is a regressive form of utterance, and its linguistic regressiveness seems to have a psychosexual dimension. Some lines from Wordsworth's "Michael" are suggestive:

Never to living ear came sweeter sounds
 Than when I heard thee at our own fire-side
 First uttering, without words, a natural tune;
 While thou, a feeding babe, didst in thy joy
 Sing at thy Mother's breast. (345-49)

This association of song with what Erik Erikson called "basic trust" in inner and outer continuity, the primary bonding of the infant to both others and to his own identity, may help to explain why the primary use of song in social life is to create intimacy, to relax inhibitions, and often to release erotic feeling.¹¹ Other suggestive links are not far to seek: the therapeutic effect of song on stuttering; the fact that to overhear spontaneous singing is to intrude on the singer's privacy; the more aggressive intrusiveness of forcing someone to sing, which Rilke evokes near the end of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.¹²

With all this as a context, the various adaptations of vocal composition to speech rhythm and speech accentuation that dot musical history take on the air of sublimations, an effect that is underlined by the images of purity and service that have historically justified text-centered styles. No matter how muted or naturalized it may become, the primary fact about song is what might be called a topological distortion of utterance under the rhythmic and harmonic stress of music: a pulling, stretching, and twisting that deforms the current of speech without negating its basic linguistic shape.

¹¹ On "basic trust," see Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2d edn. (New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 247-51.

¹² For a later discussion of the episode in *Malte*, see my introduction to *On Voice, Word and Music Studies 13*, ed. idem with Walter Bernhart, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), xiii-xiv.

The art song as a genre is the exploitation of this expressive topology—its shaping both as a primary musical experience and as a reflection of the contest between musical and poetic meanings. The result of topological variation is to defamiliarize utterance: to give it a stylized, even a ritual, quality in which the vocal line becomes an image of speech in much the way a mimed movement is the image of an action. The most immediate impact of song is to convert this dissociated speech-image into an occasion of expressive intimacy. By replacing the phonetic/syntactic integrity of the text with the gestural continuity of a melodic line, song re-connects the impulse to speak with its basis in physical sensation and the felt continuity of the ego—the subjective preconditions of communication. A good way to make this point is to contrast song with *Sprechstimme*. Schoenberg's declamatory invention is a technique of alienation, and the reason that it evokes genuine queasiness before one gets used to it (and even after) is that it carries out a topological distortion of speech without the consoling, enveloping presence of a continuous pitch-contour. Commenting on his Four Orchestral Songs, Op. 22, Schoenberg himself once claimed that song is a rhythmic imitation of the movement between pitches that characterizes the voice in expressive speech.¹³ If he was right, then song is in essence a stylization of the sound and feel of the self in its openness.

III

Predictably enough, composers have not agreed on what to make of the topological force of song. In a comment on his Mallarmé cycle, *Pli selon pli*, Pierre Boulez seems to relish the musical abolition of language: "As to the general understanding of the poem in its musical transposition, how far can one cling to this? To what point must this be considered? My idea is not to be restricted to immediate understanding, which is only one of the forms

¹³ Arnold Schoenberg, "An Analysis of Arnold Schoenberg's Four Orchestral Songs, Op. 22, by the Composer, as Read by the Late Hans Rosbaud for Radio Frankfurt on February 21, 1932," translated by Claudio Spies; in the booklet accompanying *The Music of Arnold Schoenberg* (Columbia M2S 709), v. 3, p. 28.

(the least rich, perhaps?) of the transmutation of the poem."¹⁴ Boulez speaks as a dogmatic avant-gardist, but that more intuitive experimentalist, Robert Schumann, seems to have held similar views. Schumann praised Brahms for writing songs that would be expressively sufficient without their words, and he once defined the role of music in song as the recreation of fine poetic traits in finer musical material (*Stoffe*: matter, material, fabric). Remarks of this sort suggest that, despite requiring due musical sensitivity to the text, Schumann thought of the Lied as an enhanced form of lyric piano piece—a "song without words" but with words. The music, not the poetry, is what matters.¹⁵

At the other extreme, Michael Tippett expressed compunctions about the damage that music does to poetry. "Nowadays," he remarked in 1980, "I am disinclined to 'destroy' the verbal music of any real poetry by instrumental or vocal music and prefer to 'manufacture' a scenario of words myself."¹⁶ The comment refers to Tippett's *Words for Music Perhaps*—not a song cycle on Yeats's Crazy Jane lyrics, but a series of interludes that "protect" the poems by alternating with recitations of them.

As Tippett suggests, it is hard to separate the defamiliarizing of an utterance from the destroying of it. Vocal music always seems to be struggling against a latent impulse to dissolve its language away. More often than not, this is a background effect; the music gives it realization as a vacillation between strain and restraint, an expressive sense of inner pressure that comes to the fore with vocal pyrotechnics at climactic, usually closing moments. Such topologically drastic inflections generally blot out the text as a direct, essentially willful transcendence of it. They seem caught up by what Nietzsche describes as "a musical excitement that comes from altogether different regions" than does poetic excitement.¹⁷ This is especially true in popular song, where interpretive response is less important than

¹⁴ Pierre Boulez, notes to the recording of his *Pli Selon Pli* (Columbia M30296).

¹⁵ See Eric Sams, *The Songs of Robert Schumann* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 1-3.

¹⁶ Quoted by Nicholas Kenyon, "Birthday," *The New Yorker* (January 28, 1980): 98

¹⁷ Nietzsche, "On Music and Words," p. 112.

expressive intensity, and in opera, where "musical excitement" and dramatic action are in constant tension with each other.

In certain vocal pieces, however, the topologically drastic climax appears as a concrete interpretive gesture. These pieces are typically concerned with emotional and metaphysical extremes, blurring of ego boundaries, and transformations of identity; in them, the disintegration of language by melisma, tessitura, or sustained tones becomes a major goal of the musical action. We can call this expressive process "overvocalizing," with the proviso that the term does not suggest something excessive; it simply refers to the purposeful effacement of text by voice. A striking latter-day instance, as premise rather than climax, appears in George Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), where the vocal line begins in the linguistic void of an undulating vocalese and gradually wends its way to enunciated song. Voice thus appears as the matrix from which text evolves or, if you will, devolves, in this case into the poetry of Lorca. Hovering in the background, perhaps, is the transition from tone to voice to song at the beginning of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*.

More detailed examples can be taken from Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms.

The solo quartet on "Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt" in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony calls forth an expressive dissolution of the text that is both transcendental and heroic. The passage, a cadenza transformed from ornament to substance and from the virtuosic to the sublime, is arguably the most critical moment in the "Ode to Joy." Formally, its purpose is to usher in the coda—which is to say the closure of the movement and the symphony—by resolving an extended harmonic digression onto the dominant. Expressively, it seeks a moment of epiphanic finality, a gesture of singular intensity that can stand as a full realization of joy in music. But the joy is not to be identified with Schiller's Daughter of Elysium and her spreading wings; that picturesque allegory is about to be overcome by purely musical images of continuity and all-inclusiveness. Beethoven forms his climactic gesture by erasing Schiller's language, and with it Schiller's imagery, in crisscrossing phrases that

distinctly unravel the text in the utterance of it, word by word. The headlong drive of the music to its final cadence is thus made to emerge from a moment in which the poetic text is distilled into tone, or more exactly to burst forth from the awed silence that follows.

The process begins with an extreme melismatic extension of "sanfter" that passes from voice to voice in ecstatic triplets; the soprano takes the lead in the upper portion of her range, followed by the alto and tenor in similar tessitura. A brief rest for the soprano and alto follows, then one for the tenor: written-out catches of breath that seem to poise the singers on the verge of some supreme effort. Meanwhile the bass renews—has already renewed—the triplet figuration on "sanfter" and rises with it over virtually the entire compass of his voice to a climactic high E. After repeating this note, the bass sinks quickly below the staff; but what Beethoven wants to span here is not just the compass of one voice but the very compass of the human voice, and so, with the mutual supportiveness that is characteristic of this passage, the soprano is called on to continue the ascent. Slowing expansively, she draws out the sustained first syllable of "sanfter" into a melismatic crescendo and rises to a penetrating pair of high B's on "Flügel." Beethoven marks the second of these notes *decrescendo*, as if to suggest a self-consuming intensity at work; and from here the soprano sinks to a more comfortable F-sharp. The passage ends in the next measure with a single sustained six-four chord, a sonority in which the singers' final outpouring can expand freely, luminously, and with only the barest trace of a text (Ex. 1). The expressive goal of the whole symphony arrives in the form of the most elemental sound in Beethoven's musical language: four solo voices meshed in a single triad.

Although that triad, as a six-four chord, is technically a transitional sonority, Beethoven conceives of it as a consummation, a consonance on the largest scale. Its sense of destination appeals not to finality but to potentiality. The chord evolves so smoothly that it seems less to arrive than simply to be there, to have been there, when it needs to be. When the

soprano is released from her brilliant high notes, the chord to which she sinks is a B-major triad. The alto responds at once with a compensating increase in brilliance, rising by skip to

Poco Adagio

The image shows a musical score for a vocal quartet and orchestra. The instruments listed are Clarinet in A, Bassoon, Violins 1,2, Viola, Cellos, Basses, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The tempo is marked 'Poco Adagio'. The score includes vocal lines with lyrics: 'sanft - - - - - ter' and 'Flü - gel weit, - - - - -'. The vocal lines feature triplets and dynamic markings like *p* and *sanft*. The instrumental parts include woodwinds and strings, with some woodwinds playing sustained notes.

EXAMPLE 1. Beethoven, “Ode to Joy”: “Wo dein sanfter Flügel weit,” solo quartet.

her high D-natural (supported at the octave by the tenor) and thus changing the chord to B minor, the relative minor of D. This prepares for the turn to the tonic triad, D major, in second inversion, which emerges almost imperceptibly with a B-A step in the bass. All that remains is for the vocal sonority to grow more radiant as the orchestral strings fall silent and the clarinets and solo bassoon, in weak registers, enrich the texture all but inaudibly. Beethoven infuses the entire climactic passage with a similar combination of urgency and serenity. Urgency, because the voices are asked for great suppleness in long phrases and high tessitura, and because the music—starting on the dominant of B major—takes so indirect a route to the

Clarinet in A

Bassoon

Violins 1,2

Viola

Cellos, Basses

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Flügelweilt, dein sanft - - - - - ter Flügel weilt.

Flügelweilt, dein sanft - - - - - ter Flügel weilt.

ter Flügel weilt, dein sanft - - - - - ter Flügel weilt.

dein sanft - - - - - ter Flügel weilt.

(quasi) tonic. Serenity, because the tempo is relaxed, the final chord an expansive release from vocal strain, and the harmonic movement carried out with the utmost transparency and simplicity.

Because this climax is so carefully shaped, the collapse of the poetry into rhapsodic vocalization suggests a literal movement from the expressible to the ineffable. Schiller's genially conventional iconography of Joy is displaced (not "set") by a sonorous image of harmony as vocal communion, a representation of four solo voices as complementary aspects of a single continuous voice. In particular, Schiller's personification of joy, a figure that Beethoven has so far accepted, is now cancelled out by a reverse figure in the music, one that

can be said to de-personify the singers. Completing each other's gestures at the extremes of breath, range, and strength, the voices are transformed by a loss of distinctiveness; they become impersonal, like the ecstasy, the going-out of the self, that their song celebrates. Where Schiller's classical figure humanizes a joy that is supposed to be divine, Beethoven's overvocalizing draws forth a countervailing sense of otherness, an awed acknowledgment of mystery. By disarticulating the pictorial rhetoric of the text, Beethoven claims for voice its ancient privilege of communicating transcendental immediacy. There is a curious poetic justice in this, given Schiller's own claim in the essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry" that the excellence of "modern" art depends on ideas that cannot be represented in bodily form. A letter of 1817 shows Beethoven elevating music over poetry in just these terms: "In this respect [visual representation] the poet, too, whose sphere in this case is not so restricted as mine, may consider himself to be more favored than my Muse. On the other hand my sphere extends further into other regions and our empire cannot be so easily reached" (to Wilhelm Gerhard, July 15, 1817).

The close of Schubert's song "Ganymed" also evokes a feeling of rapture, but one based on an idealized eroticism that is very remote in spirit from the "Ode to Joy." The text, by Goethe, represents the union of Ganymede with Zeus as a dissolution of the ego brought about by an ecstatic immersion in nature. The source of this ecstasy is Ganymede's own imagination, which projects his aroused sexuality into the progress of a spring morning:

Dass ich dich [Frühling] fassen möcht

In diesen Arm!

Ach, an deinem Busen

Lieg ich, schmachte,

Und deine Blumen, dein Gras

Drängen sich an mein Herz.

Du kühlst den brennenden

Durst meines Busens,
 Lieblicher Morgenwind!

Could I but grasp you [Springtime]
 In my arms!
 Ah, on your bosom
 I lie and languish,
 And your flowers, your grass
 Press themselves to my heart.
 You cool the burning
 Thirst of my bosom,
 Beloved morning wind!

Schubert's song underplays the shaping, striving aspect of Ganymede's consciousness. Drifting through unrelated keys and constantly varying its melody, the music stresses the bedazzled movement of the poem rather than the powerfully generative sequence of images that leads with intuitive logic from rising mist to descending clouds, from the personified breast of Spring to the mythified lap (Schoss) of the god. This creates a "yielding" sensuousness in the music that undermines the fusion of active and passive eros suggested by the climactic cry "embracing embraced!" (Umfangend umfangen!). When Ganymede's ego melts away at the close of the song, his rapture appears as an exalted passivity, a supreme letting-go. Schubert embodies this release in the almost unbearably prolonged melismatic distortion of the poem's last line, "all-liebender Vater" (Ex. 2). The self dissolves along with the words that it fails to command.



EXAMPLE 2. Schubert, "Ganymed": closing melismas.

Both Beethoven in the Ninth Symphony and Schubert in "Ganymed" focus on extremes of psychological union and separation. So, too, does Brahms in his *Alto Rhapsody*, for contralto, male chorus, and orchestra, another work that overvocalizes its primary moments of transition and resolution. Goethe's text, excerpted by Brahms from "Harzreise im Winter," is an evocation of both human and natural wastelands (Wüste):

Aber abseits, wer ists?
 Ins Gebüsch verliert sich sein Pfad,
 Hinter ihm schlagen
 Die Sträucher zusammen,
 Das Gras steht wieder auf,
 Die Öde verschlingt ihn.

But apart there, who is it?
 In the brush he loses his way,
 Behind him strike
 The branches together,
 The grass again rises up,
 The emptiness swallows him.

The music begins with a C-minor Adagio in which the movement of the voice stalls repeatedly until it dissolves into the "pathlessness" of complete immobility. The vocal line breaks apart into detached phrases that obscure the sense of Goethe's sentences. These forlorn arcs of melody move entropically, all of them ending with a melodic descent that retards the pace of the alto, which is already enervatingly slow. This pattern reaches a numbing climax with the distended vocalizing of "Öde" at m. 42 and the remarkable harmonization it elicits, a bare F# octave in the deep bass posed against the alto's upper C. Nothing else: the texture is as bleak as possible. Brahms does not at first resolve the dissonance of this gaping tritone (Ex. 3). The queasy descent of a minor ninth that completes the enunciation of "Öde" is harmonically immobile; it can only circle back to the very F#-C interval that produced it. The deferred resolution that follows, an extended half-cadence tinged with non-harmonic dissonance, is inadequate at best—perhaps feeble is more like it—and only confirms the immobility, matched by emotional paralysis, concentrated in the two-measure overvocalizing of "verschlingt" (mm. 44-45).

The image shows a musical score for Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody*, Example 3. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in C minor, 4/4 time, and features a long, sustained note on "Öde" followed by a melodic descent. The piano accompaniment is in the same key and time, featuring a prominent F# octave in the deep bass and a minor ninth interval in the upper register. The dynamic marking is *ppp*.

EXAMPLE 3. Brahms, *Alto Rhapsody*: "Die Öde verschlingt ihn."

The real resolution of the intractable F#-C interval is not really the dominant G in m. 44, but something on a larger scale: the revivifying turn of the music from the C minor of its first half to the C major of its second. The transitional movement is restless—Poco Andante replacing Adagio--and repetitive. It is vexed by introspection: poetically, as the voices of the narrator and the wanderer seem to fuse, and musically, as observation turns to accusation and self-accusation. The wanderer, says the text, has drunk hatred of humanity from the fullness of love. The music presses the point with three increasingly overvocalized, increasingly dissonant statements of the phrase “aus der Fülle der Liebe trank.” The last, longest, and most torturous of these arrives, as if without quite knowing it, at the point of release. The large-scale melodic movement is from C to G, with a closing resolution to the dominant through F# (Ex. 4). Unlike the dominant at the end of the Adagio, which had frozen in place in response to the gulf between F# and C, the dominant here moves forward steadily, three times repeating the decisive resolution and its F#-G step.

The image shows a musical score for Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody*. It features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "Aus der Fülle der Liebe trank." written below it. The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *pp*. The score is in 3/4 time and shows a transition from C minor to C major.

EXAMPLE 1.4. Brahms, *Alto Rhapsody*: transition to second half.

This long-range reply of one overvocalized gesture to another is the expressive pivot of the work. The subsequent perfect cadence brings C major home to the music over quickening pizzicato triplets in the cellos (mm. 115-16). "Liebe" exhausts the alienating power of "Öde," even though Goethe's text still links love only to "hatred of humanity" (Menschenhass). And the music that follows belies Goethe's text still further, or else it

suggests the text's unacknowledged impulses. For the poem turns to a prayer for consolation in a tone of uncertainty racked by the consciousness of waste. Its phrasing is conditional:

Ist auf deinem Psalter,
 Vater der Liebe, ein Ton
 Seinem Ohre vernehmlich,
 So erquicke sein Herz!

If on your Psalter.
 Father of love, there is one tone
 Audible to his ear.
 So quicken his heart!

The prayer turns on a question, not about whether consolation will be given, but about whether it is possible. But the radiantly diatonic music grants the prayer in the act of its utterance. The music is already a consolation—not a prayer for a heart-quickenning tone but the realization of one. It comes, moreover, with entry of the men's chorus which has thus far been silent, bringing the wanderer (and the narrator) into the community from which he, or each of them, has felt excluded.

Overall, the C-minor half of the Alto Rhapsody creates an ironic relationship between the music, which must fight off a despair that renders it immobile, and the poem, which describes an implacable wandering. The implication is that the anguished journey "abseits"—apart, away from the path—is more than the outer projection of the wanderer's sense of alienation as the poem describes it: "He feeds on his own worth in secret, / in barren self-seeking." The wandering suggested by Brahms is not projection but compensation. It seeks to replace numbness with pain, self-seeking with seeking others, stagnation with transformation. Consistent with this orientation, Brahms makes little attempt to reproduce the poem's

rhetorical stresses; so "hinter" receives more emphasis than "schlagen." The purpose of the music is to interrogate Goethe's poem, not to recite it.

IV

British and American Romantic poets, who provide a rich phenomenological record of how song is heard—what John Hollander calls "great anatomized acts of listening"¹⁸—follow the composers in singling out the climactic moment when the music of song all but erases its speech. In a central Romantic genre, the poet hears a song that assumes the power of epiphany precisely because it is unintelligible, often at the very point where it passes the threshold of intelligibility. The singer in these poems is usually either a bird (Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Shelley's "To a Skylark," Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"), or a girl (Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West"). Either way, the listener/poet acts out a large-scale rhythm of verbal effort and exalted release from it, both movements shaped by the music. The poet's first impulse is to insert his own words in the linguistic gap opened by the song. Once in place, these words gradually dissolve like the song's own, leaving the poet mute and transfixed, usually in a posture of more intense listening.

In "The Solitary Reaper," to take a seminal instance, Wordsworth turns his inability to understand the "melancholy strain" that fascinates him into a speculative rapture, an epiphanic act of hearing.¹⁹ As he listens, he improvises a poetic text to replace that of the reaper's song. This text, in turn, represents her singing as a free movement of imagination that recalls Coleridge's description of a magical, synthesizing power in which discordant qualities are

¹⁸ John Hollander, "Wordsworth and the Music of Sound," in *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, edited by Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 59.

¹⁹ See also Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1817* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 3-18.

reconciled. The near and the far, past and present, heroic and humble, all blend together as the possible subjects of the song:

Will no one tell me what she sings?—

Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow

For old, unhappy, far-off things,

And battles long ago:

Or is it some more humble lay,

Familiar matter of today?

Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,

That has been, and may be again? (st. 3)

Animated by this imaginative overflow, the song breaks the linguistic frame in which Wordsworth has placed it and enters a virtual eternity that is purely musical. More exactly, there is a double eternity: one in the immediacy of the poet's rapt listening, in which "the Maiden sang / As if her song could have no ending," and one in his recollection of the indecipherable music, which is the origin of his poem: "The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more." This eternalizing process finds its focal point in the singing voice itself—the voice in the act of vocalizing, the agent that de-creates speech into pure music.

This focus on the voice as process and enigma has a sublimating effect that keeps Wordsworth's rapture from becoming mere captivation. The solitary reaper is not a siren. Here, as in its other features, "The Solitary Reaper" is exemplary; its "thrilling voice" is echoed in the "full-throated ease" of Keats's nightingale, the "thousand warbling echoes" that Whitman spins from "the mockingbird's throat, the musical shuttle,"²⁰ and the voice that Stevens hears creating a world at Key West:

²⁰ Whitman's version of the vocal pattern is especially intricate. "Out of the Cradle" begins with a fully intelligible song—the mockingbird's—which becomes a "speechless" epiphany when it migrates into

It was her voice that made
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.
 She measured to the hour its solitude.
 She was the single artificer of the world
 In which she sang. (33-37)

One thing missing from Wordsworth's poem, however, is any recognition of the emotional and erotic violence implicit in moments of overvocalizing. A pointedly extravagant passage from Whitman's *Song of Myself* more than makes up for that lack. Though the ostensible subject here is opera, Whitman is interested in voice, not musical drama. What he depicts is the flood of transcendental intuitions—the "exquisite meanings" in the "volumes of sound," as it he puts it elsewhere²¹—that overwhelms him when singing effaces language:

I hear the violoncello ('tis the young man's heart's complaint,)
 I hear the key'd cornet, it glides quickly in through my ears,
 It shakes mad-sweet pangs through my belly and breast.

I hear the chorus, it is a grand opera,
 Ah this indeed is music—this suits me.

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,
 The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?)
 The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
 It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possessed them,

the poet's inner self, appearing there as the "melody" of his own "thousand songs" before he has words for them.

²¹ Walt Whitman, "That Music Always Round Me," l.7.

It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the indolent waves,
 I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
 Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death,

At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
 And that we call Being. (1892 version, ll. 596-610)

These lines trace the step-by-step dissociation of the poet's identity as his response to the music intensifies. The most striking feature of this process is the continuous sexualizing of musical response, and more particularly the juxtaposition of images that displace erotic feeling from instrumental to vocal objects and back again—for instance by identifying the cello with the young man's heart's complaint, then turning to the openly phallic cornet. (Whitman himself gives the clue to this libidinal freedom a few lines earlier: "I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice, / I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused, or following.") Though the music seems to lure, even to seduce the ear by eliciting an aroused and arrogant vitality—"This indeed is music—this suits me"—its primary effect is to thrust the listener into an erotically charged passivity, most tellingly so when it "fills" him with the singing of the tenor "large and fresh as the creation." Disorientation and self-estrangement follow in the form of unforeseen "ardors" and a phantasmagoria of place (from the orbit of Uranus to the seashore). Finally, in rapid succession, the music wounds, lulls, and kills the ego.

Taken as a whole, the process depicted here is a translation of the experience of song into a sensuously detailed replica ("fake")²² of death and rebirth, a movement of transcendence that is at once orgasmic and maiming. The exultant perversity of being thus "steep'd in honey'd morphine" is redoubled by the suggestion of oral sexuality in the "orbic

²² Earlier versions of the text read "the fakes," and the difference is significant. "Fakes" are coiled ropes; the image is one of being strangled. But by 1892, "fake" as a noun had assumed its current meaning; by cutting the definite article, Whitman allowed "fakes" to be taken in two senses.

flex" of the tenor's mouth. At the same time, the conversion of erotic delirium into a kind of visionary free fall appears in the paradox that the tenor's mouth re-creatively fills with song the ego whose boundaries it devours.

For our purposes, the most significant aspect of this sweetly destructive transit of identity is its link to overvocalizing. Whitman's ravishment by the music is so complete that he disarticulates the soprano's text by losing track of what she is singing: "I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?)." (The original 1855 version of the poem reads instead: "I hear the train'd soprano . . . she convulses me like the climax of my love-grip" [ellipsis in original]. The revision reads like an embarrassed slide from effect to cause.) The symbolic death that the poet suffers subsequently magnifies this dissolution of the word along a final series of erotic displacements. As meted out by pure voice, by music as lover, death is experienced as a throttling, the crushing of the windpipe—that is, of the organ of speech, the source of all the "talk" that does not, says the poem elsewhere, "prove" the poet's ego:

Come now, I will not be tantalized, you conceive too much of articulation,

Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded? . . .

Writing and talk do not prove me. (569-70, 579)

Whitman's interim self is an ecstatic mute, "steep'd" in an erotic music of the spheres.

The finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is an especially resonant example of music's disarticulation of poetry because the composer, by common consent, overestimated his text—and ended by either outdoing it in spite of himself or, as one strain of the work's reception long maintained, being done in by it. The composer, "Beethoven, remarked in 1809, "must be able to rise far above the poet. Who can do that in the case of Schiller?"²³ Nietzsche was perhaps the first to argue that the finale of the Ninth was itself the answer to that question:

²³ Ludwig van Beethoven, 1809; quoted in *Beethoven, The Man and the Artist, as Revealed in His Own Words*. Compiled and annotated by Friedrich Kerst; translated by Henry Edward Krehbiel (1905; repr. New York: Dover Books, 1964), p. 22.

That Schiller's poem "To Joy" is totally incongruous with this dithyrambic world redemption jubilation and that it is inundated by this sea of flames as if it were pale moonlight—who would take away from me this most certain feeling? Indeed, who would be able to dispute my claim that the only reason why this feeling does not find overwhelming expression when we listen to this music is because the music blinds us totally to images and words and we simply do not hear anything of Schiller's poem?²⁴

A less "dithyrambic" but more contentious instance of outdoing appears in Schubert's song "An mein Herz," provided that the performers are willing to take the tempo suggested by the accompaniment.²⁵ The song is only a "minor" work but the distinction between "major" and "minor" is unimportant in this context. The text of "An mein Herz" is a poem by Ernst Schulze in which the speaker resigns himself to the loss of his beloved by laboring over a string of clichés. The poem adopts a tone of reasoned calm and develops at a slow, reflective pace, with pauses at the end of virtually every line until the last stanza. One might well suppose that the speaker doth protest too much (which would be true enough in relation to the poet, who was mentally unbalanced) but the text is nothing if not ruminative. It works toward a muted close through a series of conditional arguments, each of which divides a full stanza into an "if" couplet and a "then" couplet intertwined via an *a b a b* rhyme scheme:

Und gab auch dein junges Leben
dir nichts als Wahn und Pein:
hat's ihr nur Freude gegeben,
so mag's verloren sein!

Und wenn sie auch nie dein Lieben,

²⁴ Nietzsche, "On Music and Words," pp. 112-13.

²⁵ My model was the recording on *Schubert: Songs; Schoenberg: The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, Nonesuch H-71320, by Jan de Gaetani and Gilbert Kalish.

und nie dein' Leiden verstand,
 so bist du doch treu geblieben,
 und Gott hat's droben erkannt.

And if your life in youth
 Brought only illusion and pain,
 If only it gave her joy,
 Let all such loss remain!

And should she never grasp them,
 Your suffering and your love,
 You still kept true in loving
 And God knows it above.²⁶

Schubert's response to these features is to ignore them. The piano part of his song overrides the resignation of the poem with a continuous chain of agitated ostinato chords. *Forte* or *piano*, minor or major, the nervous throbbing of this accompaniment suggests an impasse of both thought and feeling and it leads the song (as it must) to an arbitrary, short-winded close: not a surrender of the heart's agitation, but an external rejection of it. Meanwhile, the voice sings the text too fast for comfort, with minimal pauses between the stanzas and awkward repetitions within them. Schulze's ruminations break down at this pace into a distraught patter; if the words were enunciated much faster, they would be garbled. It is as if the voice were frantically pretending to control the heart by keeping pace with it—only, of course, to echo its turmoil and to turn the pieties of the verse into nonsense. The song thus

²⁶ Schulze's text is drawn from the Breitkopf and Härtel Critical Edition of Schubert's Complete Works, edited by Eusebius Mandyczewski (1884-97; repr. New York: Dover Books, 1965), v. 16.

moves in a zone of feeling—manic, defensive, duplicitous—that may hover behind Schulze's text but that is simply inconceivable in terms of the text's tepid, idealizing rhetoric.

More subtle, almost subliminal forms of outdoing are possible as well. In the first aria of his Cantata No. 199, Bach faces an elaborate series of oxymorons: "Stumme Seufzer, stille Klagen, / Ihr mögt' meine Schmerzen sagen / Weil der Mund geschlossen ist" ("Mute sighs, silent laments, / You may utter my griefs / For my mouth is closed"). His response is to repeat the verses over and over with increasingly elaborate melismas on key words. This kneading of the text reaches its climax with a breathless melisma on "geschlossen" that persists over the whole second part of the shapely oboe melody that leads the accompaniment. The music erases the sighs and paradoxes of the words and dissolves them into a lyrical, almost purely melodic, gesture. Intonation replaces rhetoric in the singer's open mouth.

In the madrigal "Lamento d'Arianna" (one of several independent versions of an aria from his opera *L'Arianna*, with a libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini), Monteverdi anatomizes the grief of the mythological Ariadne at her abandonment by Theseus, the hero she had helped find his way through the Cretan Labyrinth. The music is something of a labyrinth itself. Monteverdi disperses the opening line of verse, "Lasciate mi morire" [Let me die] among five voices that rise, fall, overlap, and diverge across seven slow measures, often in discord, before joining in a perfect cadence on "morire." The identification of death with a deferred harmonic destination—home, rest, release—gives the music a psychological tension, a complex inwardness, not yet present in the text. The bare "Let me die," a familiar formula in the era's love poetry, may assume or promise that inwardness but not depict it. The depiction follows, but in a sense it has already occurred, compressed into its essence, in the music.

In an almost antithetical esthetic framework, Ravel's "La Flûte enchantée" refuses to follow the linear movement of its text from the "sweet shadow" of desire to the "mysterious kiss" of a lover's flute. Instead the song traces a circular movement back to the slow tempo and already enchanted flute melody of the initial scene of desire. After a brief allegro, the

tempo gradually lessens until the opening reemerges. Fragmented and varied forms of the flute melody intertwine with the voice in the middle section, but the melody appears intact only in isolation from the voice. The close, also ushered in by the flute, reaches the tonic triad without a cadence. Ravel thus presents as a frail, perpetually unsatisfied fantasy what the poet, the pseudonymous "Tristan Klingsor," presents as romantic magic. (Perhaps he shared his namesake's view of gardens.) But Klingsor declared that Ravel had been the servant of the text.

Poetry thought to be more substantial than Schulze's, Rinuccini's, or Klingsor's poses a greater difficulty for the music that attempts to outdo it. Of course history can be cruel in this department; texts that are masterpieces in one era may become embarrassments in another. And there is a great middle space where the status of the text is variable and uncertain. To some extent, decisions about the status of song texts are provisional acts of historical empathy. Nonetheless, there are rough cultural guidelines, observed partly from the ambition to produce canonical works. A composer who sets a work by Goethe or Shakespeare, Blake or Rilke, will not find it so easy to suggest an imaginative space that the text is unable to occupy.

This problem is compounded by the listener's relationship to the text. A poem thought to be insignificant may be known only or mainly through its setting, so that a listener may regard it (may be encouraged to regard it) rather indifferently. A high-value text may be known in its own right, and many listeners will have internalized its status through various acts of interpretation. Valued texts tend to expand their suggestiveness by assimilating the network of interpretations that develops around them; a piece of vocal music based on a well-known poem necessarily risks unfavorable comparison.

A composer will not simply be able to break such a poem down. In order to violate the "language barrier" against its expressive priority, the music will have to grapple with the accumulated force of meaning lodged in the poem: to recognize and to overcome the listener's

hypothetical prior reading. Interpretation is the contested area; possession of the text—in this context a kind of incantation, a word-object that is numinous regardless of what it means—is the reward. "Appropriation" is not a casual term, as anyone who has ever read Heine's line "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai" by mentally hearing Schumann's music has demonstrated. Rilke's anxiety about "esthetic space" and Beethoven's worry over besting Schiller shows that poets and composers take the issue seriously. A song that masters a high-value text must generally do so by suggesting an interpretation that does not simply represent the text but rewrites it in some essential way.

In other words—slightly exaggerated but only slightly—in such a song the music becomes a deconstruction of the poem. (Perhaps it would be better to say, since the practice is far older than the term, "becomes what we now call a deconstruction.") Doing so is part of the art song's generic mandate. Beyond or apart from expressing, reimagining, or appropriating its otherwise independent text, the song gives voice to what remains unthought or unexpressed in the text alone. The song is an act of paraphrase that, like all paraphrase, reinvents what it recounts. Even songs in other genres, songs that have lyrics to be delivered rather than texts to be set, do something similar. The bending and stretching of words introduced by song produces a reversal: the song does not so much enunciate the words as it *precedes* them.

Among the techniques by which song rewrites poetry are three that I will call expressive revision, contrary imitation, and dissonant paraphrase. These techniques are obviously far from exclusive, but they are both frequent and typical.²⁷

²⁷ The three techniques were originally labeled "expressive revision," "imitation," and "structural dissonance." The change to "contrary imitation" seemed necessary to clarify the term's import; the change from "structural dissonance" to "dissonant paraphrase" reflects a growing disenchantment with the concept of structure, as opposed to process or event, as a means of understanding music or the arts in general. "Structure" too often serves as an encouragement, even as a means, to avoid a full encounter with the artwork's expressive force. On song as paraphrase, see my essay of that title in *New Literary History* 46 (2015): 573-593

Expressive revision occurs when the music and the text of a vocal composition are incongruous according to a fairly straightforward set of conventions. With song, this usually means music continuously at odds with the poetry, though the more operatic practice of creating commentary with leitmotifs is also possible. The effect of expressive revision is to suggest that the text is trying, naively or defensively, to suppress something, to inhibit the possibility of a reading that the song insists on pursuing. A latent discontinuity in the poetry becomes explicit in the form of an open tension between the poetry and the music. The exact nature of that tension depends on what kind of suppression is implied—a refusal, forgetting, disavowal, or some other mode of concealment.

This technique has the attractive knack of sounding simple while it charges the voice with ambivalence, splitting the vocal persona into competing halves or fragments. The fifth song of Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, for example, is based on this text by Heine:

Ich will meine Seele tauchen
 in den Kelch der Lilie hinein;
 die Lilie soll klingend hauchen
 ein Lied von den Liebsten mein.

Das Lied soll schauern und beben
 wie der Kuss von ihrem Mund,
 den sie mir einst gegeben
 in wunderbar süsser Stund'.

I'll plunge down with my soul,
 In the lily's cup it will dart;
 The lily shall ring and suspire
 With a song of my sweetheart.

The song shall thrill and tremble
 As her mouth did with that kiss,
 The one that once she gave me
 In an hour of marvelous bliss.

Heine's focus here is on a moment of arrest, a sexual awakening so poignant that the memory of it precludes any fulfillment other than an idealized repetition. By eroticizing his sensuous response to the lily cup, the speaker creates a synesthetic quivering in which sensation takes on the power of fantasy. The flower and its "singing" fragrance combine to form an afterimage of the speaker's beloved, or more exactly of her felt presence, from which he once again receives the agitated kiss that exposes her love. The kiss is a kind of archetypal gift. It acts as an epiphany of desire as a mutual, not a solitary, feeling, and at the same time it grants the speaker a new identity based on that mutuality—something confirmed by the return of this kiss to him as a song, the token of his power as a poet. It is not the implicit impulse behind the "schauern und beben" that provides his fulfillment, but the "flowering" of relatedness that the kiss embodies. And the fulfillment is inexhaustible, because when the desire awakened by the kiss re-emerges it immediately returns upon its origin in the "wunderbar süsster Stund." The poem is a little idyll that claims to be innocently content with Imaginary relationships; and this it tacitly justifies with its studied naiveté.

Instead of accepting this surplus of erotic security, Schumann distances it with rueful B-minor music and counters its emotional expansiveness with multiple constrictions. The music is cramped on every side, with the piano part, its texture unchanging, confined to two octaves and the voice bound within the compass of a minor sixth. The vocal line, moving almost entirely by step, does little more than repeat and oscillate around the first and third scale degrees apart from two isolated swipes at the fifth. The harmony chimes in by keeping within a narrow compass, ii-V-i for the first and third couplets and the same in the relative

major for the second and fourth. The close of the vocal line on “Stund” arrives with a cadence to B minor—so much for bliss. The piano postlude that follows turns decidedly to pathos by dwelling on a harmony held back thus far, the subdominant (G minor). If this is the song the poem foretells, it contradicts the teller by burdening recollection with regret.

This expressive revision by the music responds to a certain feeling of rigidity, something ritualized or charm-like, in the speaker's repetition of the images that link him to his privileged moment. The pleasure he seeks is, after all, not primary but substitutive. Its precondition is an absence, whether of his beloved herself or the freshness of their hour of initiation. His synesthetic fantasy offers compensation. It seeks to replace the singular focus and intensity of desire for the beloved with a multiplicity of sensuous pleasures that imitate erotic feeling and diffuse it along a chain of metonyms. But something is quietly amiss. The specifically genital implication of the first image, that of plunging into the lily cup, suggests an unappeased sexual longing that the speaker tries to displace onto a memory, and which the memory cannot help betraying by its emphasis on quickening and trembling. The feeling-tone of the music intrudes these features on the poem as an uneasy current of unacknowledged yearning. The song evokes regret over the diminished—constricted—power of substitutes for primary pleasure, while not quite renouncing their easily idealized allure.

The second deconstructive text-music relationship, contrary imitation, makes special use of a common technique: the creation of sonorous images that mimic the kinetic quality of a feeling or a natural process. In song, these images are nearly always based on the text, and it may seem odd at first to consider them “deconstructive.” It is just here, in fact, that the music openly seems to accept its expressive dependency. But even with imitation an interpretive contest is possible. The musical image is based on the referential aspect of the poetic image; it does not necessarily need to take over the connotative or the structural aspects. What is taken over is the figurative function of the poetic image. The imitative music acts like a trope—an

explicit site of connotative flexibility, of suggestion and signifying play. The musical image is only marginally dependent; it is perfectly free to support a reading of the poem that denies or emends the one "intended" by its poetic counterpart.

Schubert's "Erlkönig" offers a prime example. Goethe's poem presents a frantic night ride on which a father loses his son to what the son says is a supernatural force. Schubert's song responds with figuration that imitates both the hoofbeats of the father's horse and the heart-pounding emotions of both father and son. Ostinato triplets swing back and forth between insistent octaves and harmonically restless chains of chords in a pulse that saturates the accompaniment. The match in atmosphere—haunted, driven, cruel—is perfect. But in one respect, at least, Schubert's ostinatos rewrite what they express. They constitute a substitution of tragedy for irony.

Goethe's text consistently separates the father and the son from each other. The two speak at cross-purposes throughout, as if their voices were interfering echoes. The son can do nothing but ask questions until the Erlkönig seizes him; and all his questions are pleas for a sharing of perception, for an intersubjective unity with his father: "Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörst du nicht / Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?" ("My father, my father, and can't you hear / What the Erlkönig is whispering in my ear?") Three times, as his desperation mounts, the son addresses his father doubly; it is as if the man who is clasping him could confirm the bond of true fatherhood only by acknowledging (and so banishing?) the Erlkönig as a threatening false father. But this is just what the father is unable to do. His replies to his son's questions are reassurances in intention, but refusals of communion in effect:

"Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind, / In dürren blättern säuselt der Wind" ("My son, set your mind at peace, at peace; / the wind is just whistling in withered leaves"). The exclusion is systematic; the father can neither see (stanzas 2, 6), hear (st. 4), nor feel (st. 7) what his son does. As the son is drawn more and more into fantasy or vision, the father insists more and more on what he thinks of as real, impotent to question it on his son's behalf. When

the boy dies, the image of his body in the father's arms only repeats as narrative the separation already presented as voice.

This separation is something that the song will not let stand. Schubert's ostinato triplets, almost unrelievedly harsh, sound as a unifying pulse through both the son's questions and the father's replies, in opposition to deceptively lighthearted counterparts during the Erlkönig's lures. This rough seesaw (also encompassing major versus minor, loud versus very soft) creates a dramatic duality, with the natural, embodied by a parent and child, engaged in a tragic struggle against the fantastic. Such, of course, is the way the father sees things, so we might say that a latent impulse in the song is to lament the failure of paternal power. Certainly that is the role of Schubert's narrator, whose introduction of the father with a confident cadence to the relative major leads to an anguished, harmonically troubled ending. The bad end is already latent in the passage en route to the cadence, which introduces the word "Vater" over triplet chords on C minor. The song may even suggest that the loss of identification with the father is a death-blow to the self. Hence the Erlkönig's last statement, now a threat rather than a lure, appropriates the pulsating triplets, which continue into the child's final cry, "Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan" ("The Erlkönig's hurt me!"), with no answer from the father. One pair replaces another.

The poem hears things differently. Skeptical and indeed mistrustful of fatherhood, it presents the son as a middle term, a middle voice, between the natural and the fantastic. It suggests that what destroys the boy is the psychic stress of living between the two realms, which leaves him unable, as Geoffrey Hartman has remarked, of maintaining his separateness from either.²⁸ The boy can neither stop encountering the seductive Erlkönig nor stop dreading him.

²⁸ Geoffrey Hartman, "Wordsworth and Goethe in Literary History," in his *The Fate of Reading* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 179-202.

A second exemplary instance of contrary imitation appears in the sixth song of *Dichterliebe*, "Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome." Heine's poem begins with a massive reflection of Cologne and its great cathedral in the waters of the Rhine. The speaker then recalls how a picture of the Virgin in the interior of the actual cathedral had redeemed the "wilderness" of his life by presenting him with the features of his beloved. The sublimity of the cathedral contracts into the intimacy of an alcove.

Not so in the song. Schumann's setting of the first stanza uses deep bass octaves under an echoing figure in dotted rhythm to create an E-minor tone-image of cathedralesque weight and vastness. When the speaker turns his mind's eye to the picture in the second stanza, the music seems to follow his movement from sublimity to intimacy by withdrawing the octaves and working the dotted figure into a lyrical texture. But the change is deceptive—an unstable, ambivalent acceptance of the speaker's point of view that the rest of the song will reverse. As the music continues, it slowly reconstructs the solemn texture of the opening and in the process reduces the speaker's memories to gossamer. The visual imagery of the picture dissolves away before the more "substantial" sonorous image of the cathedral.

Schumann sets the second and third stanzas to music of increasing harmonic density, a tonal alcove built around the subdominant minor that gradually fills with chromatic inflections, first in the piano, then also in the voice. The space that houses the romantic transport of the interior—the interior of both the cathedral and the self—gradually stands revealed as a fantasy space, a scene as fragile as it is affecting. For the third and most intimate stanza, Schumann brings back the "cathedral" octaves in soft cross-accents, as if the sublime imagery of place were echoing unremittingly through the speaker's romantic reverie. A breaking point arrives with the highly charged image of the beloved's lips. The phrase "die Lippen" receives a stinging dissonant setting, and receives it twice, in the song's only act of verbal repetition. A few measures later, the vocal line fades away into uncertainty, deprived of internal closure by an ending on the dominant. The octaves of the opening then return with

an emphatic perfect cadence to the tonic—the first in the song—as the piano begins its lengthy postlude. As the dotted figure sinks gradually into the bass, the octaves resonate onward, increasingly prominent, like tolling bells.

In the poem, the transfer of feeling from sacred to profane love paradoxically dwarfs the gothic splendor of the Rhine riverscape. The music refuses the paradox. Its tone-painting turns the speaker's fantasy into an ephemeral, almost trivial side-effect of standing in a privileged place. The cathedral and its image in the river transcend and dispel all merely personal vision, much as the cathedral music does in the fourth movement of Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony.²⁹

A third way for the music of a song to deny interpretive authority to its text is to undercut the text's goal-directed or reiterative movement. The music and the poetry do not have to run parallel for this to happen; it is enough for the music to deny or withhold affiliation at a crucial moment or in a crucial way. The dissenting embrace often entails a disparity in one of the obvious formal features that music and poetry have in common: sectional division, repetition, parallelism, transition, climax, closure, and so forth. The special advantage of this dissonant paraphrase is that it can give full play to the mimetic dimension of song while still allowing the music to "re-read" a poem fully. Another piece by Schubert, "Gretchen am Spinnrade," can stand as a paradigmatic instance. The song, which Schubert wrote in a single October afternoon at the age of seventeen, is universally admired and often regarded as a turning point in the history of the Lied. In part, its accomplishment rests on its claim to interpretive autonomy. Although the song pays full tribute to the poem's expression

²⁹ Heine seems to have surmised that a reading like Schumann's was possible. In 1839, the year before Schumann wrote the song, Heine issued a third edition of his *Buch der Lieder* in which "heiligen" ("holy") in the first line of the poem is changed to "schönen" ("lovely"). The change trivializes the line but it effectively defends the poem against a reader more interested in the sacred than in romance. For more on the "cathedralesque" in the "Rhenish," see my later essay, "Schumann at Forty," *Musical Times* 148 (2007): 3-17.

of impassioned misery, its music nonetheless has something in mind that the poem doesn't. Where the two part ways, Schubert's attitude is unwavering: so much the worse for the poem.

As a poem, "Gretchen am Spinnrade" uses the relationship between its refrain and its non-repeating stanzas to expose a rising wave of passion within a lament that seems static, consumed by its own hopeless monotony. Though fairly long, the poem requires full quotation. For convenience, I have marked its division into three groups of stanzas:

Meine Ruh ist hin, (I)

Mein Herz ist schwer;

Ich finde sie nimmer

Und nimmermehr.

Wo ich ihn nicht hab,

Ist mir das Gab,

Die ganze Welt

Ist mir vergällt.

Mein armer Kopf

Ist mir verrückt,

Mein armer Sinn

Ist mir zerstückt.

Meine Ruh ist hin, (II)

Mein Herz ist schwer;

Ich finde sie nimmer,

Und nimmermehr.

Nach ihm nur schau ich
Zum Fenster hinaus,
Nach ihm nur geh ich
Aus dem Haus.

Sein hoher Gang,
Sein edle Gestalt,
Seines Mundes Lächeln,
Seiner Augen Gewalt,

Und seiner Rede
Zauberfluss,
Sein Händedruck,
Und ach, sein Kuss!

Meine Ruh ist hin; (III)
Mein Herz is schwer;
Ich finde sie nimmer
Und nimmermehr

Mein Busen drängt
Sich nach ihm hin.
Auch dürf ich fassen
Und halten ihn,

Und küssen ihn,

So wie ich wollt,
An seinen Küssen
Vergehen sollt!

My peace is gone, (I)
My heart is sore,
Never will I find it,
Nevermore.

Wherever I lack him,
That place is my grave;
My whole world
Turns into gall.

My poor head
Is madly turned,
My poor mind
Is shattered.

My peace is gone, (II)
My heart is sore,
Never will I find it,
Nevermore.

Only for him
Do I gaze from the window,

Only for him

Do I go from the house.

His proud step,

His noble form,

The smile of his mouth,

The force of his eyes,

And his talk's

Magic stream,

The touch of his hand,

And ah! his kiss!

My peace is gone, (III)

My heart is sore,

Never will I find it,

Nevermore.

My bosom urges

Me after him,

Ah could I but clasp him

And hold him close

And kiss him

As my heart would choose,

In his kisses

To swoon, to die away!

Each group of stanzas begins with the refrain, Gretchen's cry of anguish, and then continues by spelling out the particulars of her situation. The refrain combines the specific sensation of an absence within the self ("Meine Ruh' ist hin") with a free-floating sense of emotional agitation. The continuations refer to both of these elements, first drawing out the equation between Gretchen's absent peace and the absent Faust, and then depicting the impact of that double absence on Gretchen's feelings. But this sequence is worked out with telling differences as the poem unfolds.

As the continuations succeed each other, they register the changing nature of Gretchen's agitation. In the first, she broods over self-conscious representations of inner emptiness—a world gone sour, a mind shattered, Faust's absence as a grave. In the second, this self-laceration gives way to a series of impassioned, alluring images of Faust that slowly accumulate an erotic charge. The third releases a more intense, more erotically explicit play of images that seems to absorb Gretchen completely. By the end, the agitation of grief has become indistinguishable from sexual desire, the imagery of mourning indistinguishable from sexual fantasy. The emergence of this ambivalence suggests an unacknowledged struggle in Gretchen between pain and desire, or more exactly between two kinds of pain: one redoubled by self-consciousness and one mitigated by desire (an antithesis: consciousness of the other). In the end, desire takes charge. It restores the absent Faust in imaginary form, so much so that he nearly takes over the poem; the upsurge of Gretchen's fantasy about him becomes a partial compensation for the absence that induces it. The detailed, arousing imagery that envelops the figure of Faust contradicts the insistence of the refrain that what is lost—really the part of Gretchen identified with Faust—can never be found again. Gretchen reintegrates her "shattered mind" by spontaneously internalizing the object of her love.

As the persistence of the refrain reminds us, Gretchen's passage from self-alienation to desire is a movement of reinterpretation, not one of difference. The desire serves as a

sublimation of the violent misery and ritualized searching—the trips to the window and into the street—by which her "poor head" is turned/maddened ("verrückt"). Where identity is concerned, sexuality appears as a sublimating, not the sublimated, force.

Goethe articulates this process by giving each continuation an influence on the recurrence of the refrain. The first continuation, barren of fantasy, fixed in the "grave" of Faust's absence, lasts for two stanzas, suggesting a norm that the third continuation subsequently observes. The second continuation, which imperceptibly crosses the threshold of fantasy, lasts for three stanzas, as if Gretchen were able to defer the outbreak of lament by spinning out the images in which her desire is beginning to find itself. The effect of a deferral is very specific; it is the extra, third stanza that makes the erotic element in the poem explicit for the first time. The climactic cry of this stanza, "Und ach, sein Kuss!" is the culmination of a series of images that re-creates Faust's body from scattered reminiscences of his gait, figure, smile, and so on. The movement of integration also reverses the imagery of fragmentation attached to Gretchen's mind and body in the first continuation.

But the final continuation does even better than this. Not only is it a violent and open expression of sexual fantasy, but it also defers the refrain indefinitely, so that the poem ends with an image of ecstasy, the "fading (Vergehen) of the subject" into the other that follows from the euphemistic "kisses," rather than with the abstract "nevermore" of barren despair.³⁰

Schubert's treatment of "Gretchen am Spinnrade" is based on an dissonant paraphrase that turns Goethe's pattern inside out. Goethe's lament—the refrain—becomes Schubert's mitigation, while Goethe's mitigation—the continuations—becomes the source of Schubert's lament. The curve of anguish traced by Schubert ascends with the curve of sexual desire, and

³⁰ "The fading of the subject" is Jacques Lacan's description of the consequence for the subject of its representation by a signifier, which in this case would be the (metonymic) kiss. "When the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as 'fading,' as disappearance." Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 218. Lacan's principle is consistent with Goethe's irony: Gretchen fantasizes fading as fulfillment to annul her experience of fading into a void.

finds respite only in the sense of isolation from the beloved that appears in the refrain. This affective rhythm leads Schubert to make a famous alteration, the quiet repetition of the refrain's first couplet at the end of the song. Schubert closes with a moment of release; like Goethe, he directs Gretchen's pain toward sublimation. But Goethe's sublimation is a spasm of desire, whereas Schubert's is a lapse into resignation. Where Goethe completes a continuous transformation of Gretchen's disturbed peace, Schubert posits an exhausted ebbing of passion. For better or worse, the song replaces Goethe's evocation of the mobility of intense emotion with a fierce emphasis on the pain in sexual longing.

The overall pattern of Schubert's song matches that of the poem, with three large-scale crescendos to parallel the three groups of stanzas, but the matched patterns move in opposite directions. Where Goethe starts with a cry of pain and dilutes it with the flow of images, Schubert starts with a sorrowful whisper and intensifies it almost to a scream. Each section of the music begins *pianissimo*, with the refrain sung over a D-minor "spinning" figure in the accompaniment. The crescendos mount through the continuations—to *forte* the first time, *fortissimo* thereafter—while the spinning figure exposes the self-torturing core of Gretchen's grief by imperceptibly shifting the imitative focus from her wheel to her wheeling emotions. The tumult proves self-consuming as pain outpaces desire at every step. In the second continuation, irony shadows the thought of emotional intimacy; the parallel phrases for "Seines Mundes Lächeln, / Seiner Augen Gewalt" put "Lächeln," smile, over a minor chord and "Gewalt," force, over a major one a semitone higher. This uneasiness prepares the way for the aggrieved *fortissimo* conclusion at the remembrance of physical intimacy—"Sein Händedruck / Und ach, sein Kuss!" ("Sein Händedruck" is sung as a D5-F5 oscillation, the melodic pattern that will later dominate the despairing D-minor vocal line of the last stanza.) For Schubert's Gretchen, imagery fails—and worse: it steadily heightens the consciousness of separation. Desire is present, certainly, but it is unable to internalize the images of Faust, impotent to convert the imagery into fantasy.

This pattern produces two crises in the music. The first comes at the close of the second crescendo, the setting of "Und ach, sein Kuss!" At this point the spinning figure, which has sounded continuously since the beginning, abruptly gives way to clamorous sforzando chords while the voice mounts to an overvocalized cry of pain on "Kuss," the erotic turning-point of the poem. The vocal line marks Gretchen's anguish with a wrenching leap from D5 to G5 on "sein Kuss." The high G of "Kuss" is the dissonant tone of the dominant-seventh chord that bursts forth in the accompaniment, and it turns the word into an almost inarticulate protest against frustration and rejection. The eruption of sexual feeling momentarily brings the song to a halt, producing a strong dissonant paraphrase by breaking continuity; in the poem, the quasi-incantatory rhythm that carries over from stanza to stanza presents Gretchen's emotional trajectory as a juggernaut—unstoppable. The impression of a sonorous void intensifies in the song as the dominant seventh chord under "Kuss" fails to resolve, transforming itself instead into a drawn-out diminished seventh (Ex. 5). The suspension of harmonic motion registers the paralysis of Gretchen's ego.

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's "Gretchen am Spinnrade". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major and 3/4 time, with the lyrics "Und ach, dein Kuss!". The piano accompaniment is in G major and 3/4 time, featuring a prominent spinning figure (a sixteenth-note pattern) that is abruptly replaced by a series of chords. The dynamic markings are *f₃*, *f*, and *pp*. The final chord is a diminished seventh chord, which is highlighted with a bracket and a double bar line.

EXAMPLE 5. Schubert, "Gretchen am Spinnrade": "Und ach, dein Kuss!"

Several measures of the spinning figure now follow *pianissimo*, echoing Gretchen's anguish with fragments of the diminished seventh chord that has consummated her cry. Twice

the figure breaks off after a painful dissonance, a bare minor ninth, as if the emotional and harmonic impasse reached in the second crescendo could admit of no recovery. Then the figure smooths itself out and the refrain returns, exchanging Faust's all-too-seductive image for the vacant shelter of Gretchen's heavy heart. The return is momentarily placating, the more so because its figuration now provides the deferred resolution of the climactic dominant-seventh chord. But the music rises inexorably into the third and most turbulent crescendo, this one marked by a thickened texture for the spinning figure and by prolonged *fortissimo* writing. At the climax, the voice makes three shrill outbursts on "Vergehen sollt," the last two from D5 to A5, overtopping the D5-G5 leap at "sein Kuss." The accompaniment for the whole passage is rife with *forzando* downbeats and the leaps to the high A come over a bare fifth; everything is raw.

At the same time, the text is successively condensed. First we hear the last two stanzas in full, then only the last stanza—revised by Schubert to incorporate a rhetorically intensified first line, "O könnt' ich ihm küssen" ("O if I could kiss him"). Finally, the death-driven closing couplet stands alone. The effect of this sequence is to root out the elements of pleasure and intimacy—the embracing, holding, uninhibited kissing—from Gretchen's sexuality until all that remains is a hopeless wish for oblivion. Where the "Vergehen" of Goethe's Gretchen unifies an evolving sexual fantasy with the image of a swoon, the increasingly shrill "Vergehen" of Schubert's Gretchen exposes a tormented consciousness trying to exhaust itself. Schubert's condensations and repetitions constitute Gretchen's attempt to blot out the seductive images that torture her awareness of separation beyond endurance.

With this new impasse, the song reaches its second crisis. Nothing is available to limit Gretchen's breakdown except the refrain, with its protective sense of imageless solitude. Yet to bring the refrain back at this point would close the song with a moment of calm, something without warrant in the relentlessly downward curve of feeling throughout. As we know, Schubert brings the refrain back anyway. His quiet ending contradicts the repeated "Meine

Ruh' ist hin," much as the rise of passion in the poem contradicts the impassivity of "Ich finde sie nimmer." But where Goethe's ending is the outcome of a process that shapes the whole poem, Schubert's is rootless. Its imposition suggests that, far more than Goethe, Schubert read "Gretchen am Spinnrade" as a study not merely of longing and despair but also of captivation by a fantasy.

A more concentrated instance of dissonant paraphrase, withheld to the point of closure and then sprung like a trap, appears in "Erlkönig." Goethe's poem is a ballad with a frame. It both begins and ends with a stanza assigned to an anonymous narrative voice; in between, the voices of the father, son, and Erlkönig switch from narrative to drama, alternating without transition (a typical ballad device) and without interruption by the narrator.³¹ The effect of this frame structure is to lure the reader into an empathetic response and then to cast a chill over it.

The narrator's scene-setting—an abrupt question and answer, then a breathlessly repetitive description, all in the present tense—begins the poem with a plunge into immediacy. The clash of voices that follows heightens the urgency by prolonging suspense over the boy's fate (unlike most ballads, this one is concerned to reveal, not what *has* happened, but what *will* happen). But after the son's climactic cry, "Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan," all feeling of immediacy vanishes. The return of the narrative voice for the final stanza takes the form of a self-conscious circularity, an artful symmetry that distances the death of the child through Romantic irony. The narrator resumes by paraphrasing his opening couplet at a higher pitch of intensity. He nominally continues the story but actually just withholds information from our aroused curiosity. Goethe makes the turn to formal self-reference especially prominent by not only recalling the images of the first stanza but also echoing the initial rhyme of "Wind" and "Kind":

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?

³¹ My account of the voices in the poem differs in several details from Cone's in *The Composer's Voice*, pp. 24-25.

Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
 Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
 Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

[st. 1]

Dem Vater grauset, er reitet geschwind,
 Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,
 Erreicht den Hof mit Müh' und Not;
 In seinem Armen das Kind war tot.

[st. 8]

Who rides so late through the windy night?
 It is a father, his son held tight.

He holds the boy closely in his arms,
 He holds him safely, he holds him warm.

[st. 1]

The father spurs quickly, beset with fright,
 His moaning son in his arms wound tight;
 He reaches the farm all panting and wild.
 His arms were wound tightly around his dead child.

[st. 8]

The distancing process reaches its goal in the last line, which moves from evocative narration to flat statement and from the present tense to the past.

Goethe's formalizing move distances more than the action it encircles. "Erlkönig" is not what it seems to be at first, a typically grim literary ballad, but an interrogation of the ballad genre. The poem is a nest of enigmas. Was the child really lost to supernatural forces or did he die of his own imagination—or, for that matter, of a fever? What does the ambiguity imply about imaginative processes and their origins? Is the father genuinely

rational, and why does he assume rationality as the burden of fatherhood? Why do his reassurances focus on increasingly withered forms as the Erlkönig's fatal lures grow more erotic? And why does the narrator tell this story in the first place? Why does he dwell on the fate of a child rather than on the more usual knight or lover, and why does he abandon his absorption in the narrative for an isolated last line so matter-of-fact that it is brutal?³²

Schubert's song does not resolve any of these questions; instead it breaks the frame that raises them. The music for the last stanza intensifies the narrator's empathetic absorption in the story at just the point where the poem retracts it. Tragedy prevails over Romantic irony. Like the poem, the song ends with a wrenching turn, but a turn in the opposite direction. The source of this dissonant paraphrase is the accompaniment, which, hectic throughout, at last reels out of control and carries the voice along with it.

The accompaniment in "Erlkönig" is relentless--and taxing enough for the pianist that Schubert was unable to perform it. The music (in G minor) opens *forte* with vehement octaves introducing the ostinato triplet pulse over a theme in the bass built from a rising scale and a falling triad. The heart of what follows is a projection of this basic texture over a wide range of keys. With two interruptions for the Erlkönig's light whispers, the process continues throughout the song. As the dramatic situation worsens, the harmony grows increasingly volatile, but there is no escape from the rigidity of expressive gesture. This clash underpins the song's signature feeling of constantly mounting urgency and anxiety. And it seems to respond to the dilemma of the father, who is in desperate flight from a figure who always looms *ahead* of him.

Schubert punctuates the question-and-answer pattern of the text with swerves to increasingly remote key areas. Approached and left abruptly, often with chromatic surges, the remoter tonalities are intrusions, trespasses, in keeping with the father's experience of the

³² See Hartman, "Wordsworth and Goethe," p. 192. The poem's self-interrogation owes something to its origin as a diegetic ballad in Goethe's 1782 Singspiel *Die Fischerin* (The Fisher Maid), where it is sung by the title character.

Erlkönig. Meanwhile, stabbing dissonances liable to break out and break off anywhere with equal abruptness sustain the mood of pervasive threat. As the father's control over the dramatic situation deteriorates in the final moments, the intrusions become longer and more elaborate, as if to anticipate the Erlkönig's inevitable triumph. Ironically, the only passages in the interior of the song that have any harmonic stability belong to the Erlkönig's lures. Overall, the lurching, dizzying quality of the music, its patchwork of stark juxtapositions, gives a vivid translation of Goethe's constant shifting of voices and desires. Yet by building so much volatility into the music, the translation itself becomes the rationale for Schubert's reworking of Goethe's design.

That reworking culminates soon after the boy's cry of pain sends the music back to the vehement G minor of its opening. The move sounds at first like an imitation, a consonance between music and text meant to mirror Goethe's frame structure. But the impression is a snare. After eight measures of recapitulation (the only ones in the song), the tonic veers into the subdominant. A turn to the dominant might be expected to follow, but instead a menacing bass rises by semitones onto a root-position A^b-major triad. Schubert insists strongly on this Neapolitan sonority, traditionally a mark of pathos; he cadences to it at once via a dominant substitute. The voice then embarks on a hushed A^b-major recitative to announce the death of the boy.

Unlike Goethe, Schubert wants the narrator's "In seinem Armen das Kind war tot" to sound heartbroken, and he asks the voice to falter movingly before declaiming the last two words. (In different versions of the song he hesitated over how to do this.) The most telling thing about this expressive pause is the initially unaccompanied note that precedes it, sung to "Kind." The note is G, the keynote of the song, and the voice responds to its pull here by treating it as a destination of sorts. But this particular G is a far cry from the keynote. It is nothing more than the Neapolitan leading-tone. Or it would be, were it not that Schubert halts the recitative on just this note, interrupting a smooth melodic cadence in A^b. The hesitation of

the exposed G over its tonal identity thus coincides with the narrator's reluctance to complete the fatal sentence. The note and the voice alike have been possessed by an intruder.

To compound the impasse, the piano adds a diminished seventh chord; fermatas sustain it through the pause that follows (Ex. 6). But the narrator must face facts, which he does by dropping a tritone to articulate the deferred "war tot" as C[#]-D. The D points to the dominant of G minor, but its proximity to A^b gives it a dissonant aura that is at once shocking, frightening, and poignant. The song then comes to an abrupt end with a ritualistic cadence formula on the piano, V⁷-i, which carries little conviction. The tonic has been estranged, largely depleted of its power to impart closure, in order to enact a tragic recognition. Like the father, the listener is confronted with the blank arbitrariness of final things.

The musical score shows the conclusion of Schubert's "Erlkönig". The vocal line is in a recitative style, marked "Recit.", and ends with a fermata. The piano accompaniment features a diminished seventh chord (F#-C-G-B) sustained by a fermata. The tempo changes from "Recit." to "Andante". Dynamics include "fz", "fp", "pp", and "f".

EXAMPLE 6. Schubert, "Erlkönig": conclusion.

Where Goethe moves in a tight circle to break the mood of his poem and focus on enigma rather than emotion, Schubert rejects an incipient circling movement to produce the most emotionally taxing measures in his song. The formal discontinuity of the music is not self-conscious, but naive in Schiller's sense of the term; what we hear is a dramatic repudiation of Romantic irony. Schubert does not accept the poem as an ambiguous text that raises questions about the power and danger of the imagination; he rewrites it as the terrified recognition of something elemental and malevolent, as if to compensate for the poet's seeming reluctance to confront what the narrator has overheard.

Schubert's *Erlkönig* is an objectified, alienated form of everything that inevitably fails in human love—the "ruin" that Shelley once called "Love's shadow," simultaneously its image and its sinister double. When the *Erlkönig*'s whisper turns from a lure to a lustful demand, his music loses its frolicsome, dancelike character and becomes an ominous version of the triplet ostinato associated with the father, son, and narrator. The harmony disintegrates to reveal the full otherness of the *Erlkönig* while the figuration identifies that otherness with the characters who resist it (Ex. 7). The *Erlkönig* seizes them all on behalf of a love that is indifferent to its object: "Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt; / Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch' ich Gewalt!" ("I love you, your youthful form is so fine; / Come! or I'll force you and make you mine!") At "Gewalt" (force, power, violence) Schubert calls for an *fff* outburst that binds the son's voice and the *Erlkönig*'s into a single measure—for at this point both the daemon lover and his beloved exclaim at the contact between them. And from here on, the triplet ostinato is not the sound of fear and flight, but of possession.

EXAMPLE 7. Schubert, "Erlkönig": "so brauch' ich Gewalt!"

A possible term for the esthetic of Schubert's "Erlkönig" might suggest a reversal rather than simply a rejection of Romantic irony. We might speak of a Romantic pathos that solicits an over-identification with the illusions of art. Like the child in the song, the artist is vulnerable to the objectified forms of his angers and desires. Unlike the father, the song's narrator accepts that there is no defense against that vulnerability other than to accept its consequences. The result is that the narrator takes the father's place as the bearer of grief, the

musical correlative of which is the wrenching harmony of the final measures. The narrator falls from the frame into the action, and the piano curtly abandons him there with the finality of its cadence.

Is the song “right” to break itself this way? Perhaps. In a sense the question is pointless; Schubert does one thing and Goethe another. But what Schubert does may nonetheless reveal an aspect of Goethe’s poem that might otherwise go unnoticed: a degree of authorial control that risks assuming some of the same blind paternal authority that it calls into question. Keats’s “La Belle dame sans merci,” also a ballad that asks what is and isn’t there in what the imagination sees, offers a suggestive parallel. “La Belle Dame” begins, like “Erlkönig,” with the voice of an external narrator who promises an inclusive frame. But the promise, as in Schubert, is not kept. Instead, Keats’s hapless protagonist, undone by a phantom seductress or by his own fantasy, closes the poem by echoing the questions put to him by the now silent narrator. Like Schubert, but unlike Goethe, Keats breaks the circle in which his ballad turns. He accepts the damage.

VI

In song cycles, specific instances of dissonant paraphrase may combine to produce a general instance. Schoenberg’s first fully atonal work, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* (The Book of the Hanging Gardens, 1908-09), to texts by Stefan George, both exemplifies this possibility and reflects on it.

Schoenberg’s selection of poems from George’s larger cycle constitutes a tragic quest romance. The speaker finds himself in a phantasmagorical garden-world identified with the hanging gardens of Babylon, where he courts, wins, and loses a mysterious priestess. The love affair rouses extreme but passive hungers in him that repeatedly emerge into open masochism. The garden-world itself, supposedly a paradise, is as ambivalent as the love that it sanctions. It is lush, ponderously sensuous, smothering, ruined, full of alluring surfaces and castrating

edges—a mingling of golden reeds and crooked ridges, shimmering fishponds and fans with knifelike points. Schoenberg's music mirrors the sensuous and erotic ambivalence of the gardens. His songs are steeped in a lush chromaticism that has cut its ties to tonal centers, but many of the songs nonetheless seek analogues to tonal procedures. Motivic repetition and transposition, imitative counterpoint, melodic sequences, and circular harmonies all work to naturalize the strange "osmosis of tones" that gives the songs their distinctive texture.³³ The fourth song, for example, begins with groups of descending steps and half-steps in the melody which allude to the chromatic form of a Baroque lament bass without ever quite conforming to the type. "Now that my lips are motionless and burn," the speaker says, "I first observe where my foot has fallen." The text momentarily becomes an allegory for the music—something that will happen again.

Given that these songs are in the process of moving from a familiar sound world to one still largely unknown, and that they are in part about this very movement, it makes good descriptive sense to echo the music's own ambiguity rather than to subsume it under one of the analytical systems designed to account for (or ascribe "structure" to) non-tonal music.³⁴

The focus of dissonant paraphrase in the cycle is friction between tonal reminiscence and the force of desire. With surprising consistency for so varied a work, *Das Buch* associates heightened moments of erotic passivity with the vestigial appearance of tonal harmonies, usually by means of quasi-cadential movement. The eighth song, for example, begins by stating the augmented triad F-A-C# in both voice and piano; the piano subsequently restates it twice, spelling it out deep in the bass, the second time in octaves. Amid a luxuriant variety of

³³ "Osmosis": Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1951), p. 35.

³⁴ In its original form, starting in the paragraph after next, this chapter contained an extended defense of using a tonally-oriented vocabulary to describe the music of *Das Buch*. The passage has been cut here. From my present perspective, the core issues are historical and phenomenological. Historically, the proximity of a non- or post-tonal work to tonal idioms should affect one's sense of how what used to be called "tonal associations" should be heard. Phenomenologically, the presence of familiar chords and gestures that "sound" tonal gives them a second-order tonality that deserves recognition, and that may be obscured by the language of post-tonal theory.

sonorities, this particular augmented triad remains the most recognizable element.

Something, it seems, is latent within it.

Just what that something might be begins to emerge with the word "fieberheissen"—fever-heat—in m. 17, where the piano brings back the augmented chord yet again, crescendo, to accompany its own arpeggiation while the voice oscillates chromatically around F. The same measure concludes with a chord change in which the augmented triad's C-sharp moves to C-natural. The immediate reason is the transformation of one augmented triad into another, but the C-natural, doubled at both the upper octave and the octave above that, precipitates an extended resolution of the augmented triad on F into a triad of F minor with the leading tone superimposed (Ex. 8a). The song closes with the piano attacking this F-minor-like chord five times in the bass under strongly accented resolutions of the flat to the raised leading-tone in the middle voice (Ex. 8b). Contradictory sonorities pull away in the upper voices, but a

a.

Fie - ber heis - sen, der ich wank - end drauz - sen

ff

linke Hand immer gleich stark bis zum Schluss

b.

leh - ne.

ff

EXAMPLE 8. Schoenberg, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, no. 8.

written instruction tells the left hand to remain evenly strong through the close, and the voice meanwhile concludes its part on a C that the piano's right hand doubles in octaves. Desperate erotic longing thus blends into a tonal aspiration that is partially satisfied, partially denied, as the text supplicates: "Sprinkle coolness on me, hot with fever, / I who, tottering, lean outside."

The tonal motifs in *Das Buch* tend to focus on the related "keys" of G and D, a disposition introduced in the second and third songs, which initiate the speaker's erotic quest and establish its passive character. The second song begins with a sustained D-minor triad with added leading tone; the same sonority returns just before the close as the speaker singles out the object of his desire amid many alluring forms—"But my dream pursues just one"—and the voice concludes on the rising interval G-D.

The text of the third song begins with a plea for the priestess of the gardens to elect the quester "to [the ranks of] those who serve" her, and ends with a plea for pity and patience "for one who stumbles in so strange a path." (The strange path is obviously aesthetic as well as erotic.) The music responds to the quester's tremulous humility with a rhythmically urgent texture crisscrossed by clashing sonorities. Each of measures 1-3 unfolds over an oscillating bass that swings from a solitary low D to a G in octaves to the fifth C-G; from there, measures 1 and 2 reintroduce the octave G which forms an upbeat to the D at the start of the following measure. A D-minor feeling emerges as the accompaniment forms accents on the third beat of each measure, where a chord resembling a D-minor triad is attacked over the C-G fifth. ("Resembling" because the chord is in second inversion without proper doubling; the point is to affirm a trace of the chord rather than the chord itself.) At the same time, the voice adds its own extended articulation of the D-minor triad via the accentual pattern of its tightly constricted melody. D minor is everywhere and nowhere. (Ex. 9).

ca. 80

Als Neu-ling trat ich ein in dein Ge - he - ge; kein Stau-nen war vor-her in mei-nem

pp

EXAMPLE 9. Schoenberg, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, No. 3, opening.

This D-minor aura disintegrates after measure 3, but it returns, attenuated, near the end. As the voice intones "staubelt auf so fremden Stege" ("stumbles in so strange a path") in tortured melisma, the piano recalls the D-G-C octave movement deep in the bass. Another recollection follows, this time of the earlier "osmosis" toward fictitious D-minor triads on the third beat, but now without a pedal tone to veil the sonority. A brief coda follows to confirm the futility of the speaker's plea. The last two measures dwell on the whole-tone descent in thirds, Eb-G to Db-F, which begins the right-hand piano part in measure 1. But the former touches of D minor have disappeared. The concluding sonority is a kind of cancellation: a chord resembling the second inversion triad of D-flat.

The basis of Schoenberg's antithetical association between the primary rhythm of fulfillment in musical tradition and a recurrent moment of personal depletion is the fact that tonal cadences and resolutions are regressive elements in the atonal sound-world of the cycle. For that reason, perhaps, they typically appear in one layer of the music against contradictory sonorities in another. The cadential allusions resemble the perfect cadence in Monteverdi's "Lamento d'Arianna" in their suggestion of withdrawal and enervation, only here the suggestion has, so to speak, been psychoanalyzed. Schoenberg's design reduces the tonal cadence to its etymological root; it is a fall, a false step on the "strange path" that leads to

sexual love. The quester's erotic will is frail and secondary; his real object is the peace of separation, as the twelfth poem can be read to affirm:

When in holy rest in deep-slung hammocks
 Across our sleep our hands nestle
 Devotion damps the burning in our limbs.

The projected form of the quester's passive, self-denying eroticism is the destruction of the garden, which is inevitably realized as he subtly resists and degrades the woman's yielding to him. The last song submerges the quester's voice in the "overcast, stifling night" of the longest piano prelude and postlude in the cycle—longest by far. The postlude in particular stands out because of its resemblance, in position though not in mood, of the postlude to Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, a lyrical reminiscence to which the postlude of *Das Buch* stands as a revocation.

Schoenberg's harsh reading of George's texts is consistent with the relentlessly tragic view of sexuality that shapes his other expressionist vocal works, *Erwartung*, *Die glückliche Hand*, and *Pierrot lunaire*. What we hear, as Carl Schorske puts it, is a conversion of the Wagnerian *Liebestod* to a *Liebestöten*.³⁵ The link made by Tristan between the flow of desire and the prolongation of tonal uncertainty finds its mirror-image in *Das Buch*, where tonal intimation marks the failure of desire. Like Schubert's Gretchen, Schoenberg's quester is in flight from desire, but his flight is an act of destruction, not of sublimation. In Freudian terms, the song-cycle acts out an unconscious rejection of the ego, the "I" in whom genital sexuality is articulated.

The centers of cadential anguish in *Das Buch* are the fifth and tenth songs, which the music takes as a pair against the grain of the poetry. The fifth song begins with the speaker asking on what path the beloved is going to walk, and ends with his masochistic wish to make

³⁵ Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 354; Schorske's whole discussion, pp. 344-64, is illuminating. See also my "Schorske's Ring Cycle, Schoenberg's *Liebestod*," *19th Century Music* 5 (1981): 76-81.

his face her footstool. As the voice intones the wish, the bass embarks on a series of three leaps down from D to G in octaves, upbeat to downbeat--the skeleton of a V-I cadence (Ex. 10). The repeated gesture endows the song with a tonal memory that just one instance could not have enforced—although the tenth song will demonstrate how forceful a single tonal allusion can be. At first the upper voices on the piano pay no heed to the bass, but in the last measure they close on a chord can be heard as a G-major triad colored by a non-resolving appoggiatura (E^b) to the fifth degree (D). The withheld resolution, however, has in a sense already taken place. Just before the first of the three D octaves appears, the voice (at “breite”) makes a melodic cadence on the step E^b-D, which hovers as the “correct,” if phantasmal, version of the voice’s similarly phrased last word on the leap E^b-A. The speaker’s humiliating wish thus emerges in an atmosphere haunted by the tonal memory that intimates the death of desire.

EXAMPLE 10. Schoenberg, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, No. 5: conclusion.

The text of the tenth song reads like an effort to grant the speaker’s erotic wishes; the music aims to thwart them. The poem unfolds in an overripe atmosphere of wetness, roundness, and softness; sexual expectancy is all-pervasive. At first the speaker perceives the garden scene as a thinly veiled allegory for the beloved's body, but the erotic idyll immediately merges with a nearly explicit show of castration anxiety; the "lovely [flower]

bed" ("schöne beet") over which the speaker lingers turns out to be rimmed by "purple-black thorns [*Dorne*; also spines, spikes] / in which thrust flower cups with mottled [*geflecktem*: stained, blotchy] spurs." The closing lines retreat into idealized sexual fantasy: "her moist mouth [is] / like sweet fruit from heaven's fields."

Schoenberg uses a strikingly candid atmosphere of D major/minor to depict the fantasy as more abject than ideal. The first three measures of the piano prelude (following a three-beat pickup) are primarily concerned with the smooth resolution of something like passing tones into triads of D major and minor. After this tonal aura, characteristically, melts away, the passage returns with a vocal overlay that embroiders and extends the triadic resolutions. Another melting away follows and takes up the main body of the song. But the end remembers the beginning very well. The concluding passage deprecates the speaker's turn from fleshly lips to metaphorical fruit by echoing the degraded close of the fifth song. The turning point arrives when a fourth chord coincides with the voice's last syllable three measures from the end. On the downbeat of the next measure, the fourth chord resolves into a D-major triad. The triad supports itself on a D octave in the bass, which in turn falls as if cadentially to a G octave. Just one such fall, not three as in the fifth song—but the one is enough. Over its G, the upper voices fall just short of a G-major resolution. The same formula of something akin to tonal satisfaction thus comes to link the sexualized urge for abjection with an edgy evasion of sexuality, a kind of corrupt modesty. The prevailing ethos is not unlike the one suggested by Schumann in "Ich will meine Seele tauchen," except that Schoenberg has stripped away the glossy, idealizing flora that Schumann works to preserve. No wonder, then, that the ensuing song isolates the voice to ask whether the sexual union that eventually took place was really the occasion of bliss that the lovers had imagined. Where consummation ought to spring, Schoenberg inserts an abyss.

VII

Schoenberg's vocal style in *Das Buch* generalizes the impression of continuous intensity and erotic disturbance by vacillating between chromatic oscillation and the kind of disjunctive contour that some later composers would turn into a mannerism. The musical gestures of the voice are almost too fluid, too autonomous, to be reconciled with utterance—enough so that Schoenberg later felt called on to defend his songwriting practice, with some help from Schubert. "Even Schubert," he wrote, "does not set off words singly in any marked fashion according to the weight of their meaning. Rather, by means of a comprehensive melody, he may pass over a salient textual feature, even when it is most important in regard to poetic content and poetic substance. It should not be surprising, then, that a genuine melody will arise relatively seldom from a procedure which strongly emphasizes the text."³⁶

Schoenberg identified his own "comprehensive melody" with the continuous variation that he tried to make the basis of musical form. To appropriate the language and meaning of a text much further than his Expressionist style does, one would have to warp them beyond recognition.

Some later styles, of course, have done just that. The avant-garde composers who came to maturity after the Second World War were at times openly, even extravagantly, anti-textual. Luciano Berio's *Sequenza III*, for instance, written in 1966, instructs the singer to maul the text with breath tones, spoken pitches, sounds of minimal duration, laughter, mouth clicks, coughing, closed-mouth vocalization, and vocalization with hands muting the mouth. Milton Babbitt's 1974 "Phonemena" dispenses with a text altogether in favor of abstract strings of phonemes. Such avant-garde vocalism represents an attempt to get beyond the expressive tradition that begins with the text-centered styles of the Renaissance and their

³⁶ Schoenberg, "Analysis," p. 27.

imperative "to express and paint in tones the outer world of nature and the inner reality of man."³⁷

Nonetheless, expressive song has harbored anti-textual elements throughout its history. The now venerable avant-garde version sounds in retrospect like a forceful change of emphasis. What animates the vocal style in both Monteverdi's "Lamento d'Arianna" and, say, Geogre Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children* (1974), which uses plenty of advanced vocal (and instrumental) techniques, is the demand that the anti-textuality of the music must be part of a response to the poetry rather than merely an exploitation of it. That the response "opens," rewrites, even defaces the text is only to be expected; the music adopts the poetry as an origin, and then treats it the way all origins are treated, by departing from it. Most composers in the expressive tradition would agree with Schoenberg, in practice if not in theory, that song brings poetry to life not by resembling it, but precisely by being different.

No matter, then, how silken it is, song is always a transmemberment of speech. At a primary phenomenological level, the unfolding of a song is a volatile interplay between two attempts to be heard—that of the music and that of the poem. To the extent that the language of the poem is heard *as* language, it is likely to prevail. To cause that language to be heard as music, and thus to transform it both phonetically and semantically, song must call on the unique power of music to bring a fluctuating movement of intuition and sensation to expressive life, to project a play of possibilities like Wordsworth's improvisation in "The Solitary Reaper," but one built on auditory processes that cohere without help from speech or seem intelligible even if they do not cohere. Instrumental music depends heavily on those processes, which, however, accumulate meaning not by repelling speech but by offering to defer it, especially while the music lasts. The deferral is also an invitation, and its results require separate study. But its presence in virtually any music can help us locate one source

³⁷ Edward E. Lowinsky, "Music in the Culture of the Renaissance," in *Renaissance Essays*, edited by Paul O. Kristeller and Philip P. Wiener (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 380.

of song's specific power. Song makes it possible to experience the deferral of speech and the presence of speech simultaneously. By producing a continuous tension between the flow of music and the enunciation of words, song changes both in ways that neither could anticipate on its own. In song, music almost says what it means while words almost hear how they sound.