Unconditioning Sound in German Romanticism

I. The Wind and the Clock

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The opening sentences of one of the paradigmatic novels of German Romanticism, Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), are infused with the rhythms of an unlikely dyad: the wind and the clock. The wind and the clock, working with and against one another, represent the initial conditions of a Romantic experiment in which a restless desire is awakened within the confines of the bourgeois household:

The parents were already sleeping, the clock on the wall beat its monotonous tact, before the rattling windows whistled the wind; and the chamber was lit in alternation from the shimmer of the moon. The youth lay restless in his bed and recalled the stranger [*des Fremden*] and his stories.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What follows is well known to readers of German Romantic literature: the walls of the room dissolve into a phantasmagoria of infinite distances, oceanic depths, caves and cliffs, death and rebirth, dreams within dreams, and somehow, impossibly, a peculiar clarity and distinction, and then: the erotic blue flower, simultaneously woman and plant, sexuated and hermaphroditic. This room is no mere room, but a womb, a matrix of emergence for a way of feeling and thinking that is fundamentally alien, at odds with the intelligibility of everyday life. Heinrich, pondering his attraction to the blue flower, declares: “No one can and no one will understand this.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Let us linger with the wind and the clock in the first sentence. Caught up in a narrative momentum driven towards the oneiric revelation of the blue flower, it is easy to overlook the function of these initial objects as figures in an acoustic drama, or rather, as indices of a metaphysical drama in acoustic form. One is tempted to reduce these two objects, in traditional terms, to the function of setting—to background conditions against which an event takes place. Not only are wind and clock not mere background conditions; rather, they indicate privileged points of entry into the very metaphysical matrix of becoming from which entities emerge, the domain the Romantics and post-Kantian philosophers called the *unconditioned* (*das Unbedingte*): the absolute as that to which no conditions can be attached. While the window is typically a privileged speculative site, the opening onto a space at once visual and visionary, the first sensory organ to register the drama of the unconditioned in this instance is the ear.

Material vibrations, waves, oscillations, collisions—all taking place below the threshold of conscious perception—can be amplified in Romantic thought into larger-scale domains: from language to the soul, from acoustics to physiology, from wave oscillations to the modification of human sensuous capacities. In the words of a fragment from Novalis’ *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia* (1799): “Couldn’t every sculptural formation, from crystals up until man, be explained in an *acoustic manner* by means of arrested motion?”[[3]](#footnote-3) Novalis bases these upward scaling chains of sound figuration on “chemical acoustics.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The designation is remarkable, not least because Novalis at times prioritizes chemical processes that tend toward form-dissolution, in line with the Romantic chemical quest for a universal solvent; the chemical principle “is contrary to the *figure-making* principle—it destroys figures.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Chemical acoustics, if it is to function as a model of formation or figuration, must therefore counteract the tendency toward dissolution. As Daniel Lancereau writes, unstructured force requires constraints—what Novalis calls “inhibited motion”[[6]](#footnote-6) (*gehemte Bewegung*)—in order to become productive, to generate forms.[[7]](#footnote-7) There nevertheless remains something intrinsically chaotic about processes of figuration grasped through chemical acoustics, where chaos is understood as the primordial (and non-sublatable) presence of unstructured force or non-directed motion.

The paradigm of acoustics thus elaborated indicates a vibrating and metastable ontological field—in the form of an oscillating material substratum—that can be scaled upward by Romantic thought and poetry as a symbolic resource to *uncondition* forms of life. Unconditioning sound embeds entities in an infinite process of emergence that knows neither limit nor bound, thereby disrupting the material and normative conditions of existence that govern the intelligibility of everyday life. This essay examines paradigmatic instances of Romantic thought experiments with unconditioning sound: in the intersection between acoustic phenomena and the operations of the unconditioned absolute in Novalis’ scientific and philosophical fragments; in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, where sound harnesses and sublimates violence and revolutionary energy while still maintaining a relation to the subterranean forces that constitute the source of this energy; in Schelling’s concept of sonority in the *Philosophy of Music*, which simultaneously celebrates the transgressive potential of rhythm just as it attempts to critique and delimit this potential; in naturephilosophical conceptions of sound as shock(Ørsted) and as an electrical virtuality of figuration (Ritter); in Eichendorff’s lyrical equation of contemplation with intoxication through the concept of rustling, *Rauschen*;[[8]](#footnote-8) and finally, in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s electrical-musical aesthetics that does not posit an ineffable ideal as the telos of Romantic poiesis, but seeks to permanently hold the ideal at bay, indeed, to ontologically secure the irreducible gap between real and ideal as the basis for a diabolic and extra-normative generativity.

In each of these instances, sound constitutes a privileged site in which the potentially agonistic forces of the unconditioned can be intensified, harnessed, and redirected. In his philosophical fragments, Novalis posits the unconditioned as the endpoint of an impossible desire. The first of his fragments in the collection *Pollen* (*Blüthenstaub*) reads: “We seek everywhere the unconditioned, and always find only things.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus, in the first sentence of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the wind and the clock are *only things*. At the same time, they are things of a special sort, as they disclose the desire for the unconditioned in their organization and disorganization of the sensible. The clock brings appearances into an acoustic schema of regularity and unity: it sounds in regular beats, in *tact*, and its acoustic-formal principle is uniformity (monotony), in German, *einförmig*. The acoustic-formal principle of the wind is stochastic; it does not beat, but swishes (*saust*), rattling against the speculative frame (the window). The two objects represent two opposing paradigms of acoustic organization, although to a certain extent, they depend on one another: the stochastic noise of the wind appears as a disruption of the order and regularity of the clock, just as the beat of the clock (as tact) allows the chaotic energy of the wind to be registered.

If there is something like an absolute, then, it is to be found not in a thing (wind or clock), but in a circulation of desire between things, in the *unconditioning* of symbolic bearers of ontological order, where unconditioning means: 1) the capacity to manifest a process of organization to which no condition or limit can be ascribed; 2) the incapacity of any singular thing to manifest this process absolutely. The clash or dissonance between these two percussive acoustic events, an oscillation between order and disorder, establishes the ontological field of the Romantic aesthetic experiment—an experiment that ultimately provides the framework in which the protagonist of the novel is propelled out of the normalizing constraints of bourgeois desire.

Significant is nevertheless that *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* opens with a sensorium operating at the level of base materiality: sound rather than sonority. The differentiation of sonority (*Klang*) from sound (*Schall*) is one of the central conditions in the construction of sound as an epistemic phenomenon at this time; in Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni’s *Discoveries in the Theory of Sound* (1784), sonority emerges “when an elastic body makes simultaneous and audible oscillations.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Through the simultaneity of oscillations, sound becomes sonority; in the case of the Chladni plate, drawing the bow of a violin makes dust particles strewn on surfaces settle into distinctive and multiple geometric patterns. The Chladni plate brings invisible processes of figuration into view: the figuration of figuration itself.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Oscillation, even within the mechanical (elastic) paradigm articulated by Chladni (rather than the dynamic, force-based paradigm that would become central to Romanticism), constitutes a foundational operation of Romantic thought, a paradigm of movement simultaneously material, conceptual, and ontological. Oscillatory movements suffuse both mind and matter, bringing these domains into a zone of indifferentiation (the establishment of such indifference points between mind and matter constitutes one of the main operations of Romantic *Naturphilosophie*). In his studies on Fichte, for example, Novalis characterizes the back-and-forth swaying motion (*Schweben*) between extremes—referring in this context to Fichte’s concept of the productive imagination—as “the source, the mother of all reality, reality itself.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Oscillation, either in material acoustic form, as *Schwingung*, or in its correlative form in consciousness, as *Schweben*, represents an operation of fundamental ontology in Romantic thought. To approach reality through oscillation between extremes—i.e. between subject and object, regularity and disorder, clock and wind—is thus to approach the real immanently. At the same time, the real is inconsistent with itself, turns back upon itself; the movement of oscillation indexes this inconsistency.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Sound as emergent from a field constituted by force and counterforce—dissolution and cohesion, for example—constitutes a domain that ramifies into other thought experiments with formation, both individual and collective.[[14]](#footnote-14) Novalis thus writes of an “acoustics of the soul,”[[15]](#footnote-15) of “harmonious—and disharmonious vibrations.”[[16]](#footnote-16) While Novalis (along with Johann Wilhelm Ritter) considers the word to be originally tone, he does not cast this primordial musicality of language as tantamount to a pure idealization of the word, linking it to something mystically ineffable or disembodied. On the contrary, primordial speech as tonesets into motion a physiological spiritualization: the surrounding air becomes a Chladni plate upon which the human breath calls forms (as words) into being. Novalis writes: “Vowels are strings of sound or *batons of air*. The lungs are a *bow in motion*.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Novalis often associates the vowel with poetry (openness, floating) and the consonant with prose (limitation, retardation); the two working in tandem generate a higher-order poetic figuration, the poetry of poetry and prose, already prefigured physiologically in the manner in which human beings articulate sound.

Novalis also includes the deformation of acoustic matter—sounds with a diminished capacity for figuration—within his horizon of inquiry; the “inflexion of sound”[[18]](#footnote-18) [*Inflexion des Schalls*] includes “*painful noise*—scratching on a plate etc. Piercing sound.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Such noise would not have been generative or figurative for Chladni, as it is not sonorous. Novalis is nevertheless attracted to the non-generative as an essential part of the aesthetic exercise; noise thus resurfaces at critical points in Romantic projects of transfiguration, and not merely as that which must be rejected, but as an expansion of aesthetic possibility. According to Bettine Menke, the Romantic paradigm destabilizes the dominant trajectories of western musical and poetic systems that ascend from sound to tone to speech, instead bringing hearers into a relation of “infinite approximation” to noise.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the initial encounter between wind and clock approaches acoustic phenomena in this manner, oscillating between an excess of regularity in differentiation (*tact*) and a stochastic and noisy material substratum (*swishing* and *rattling*). However, the Romantic experiment of the novel goes farther than merely foregrounding the metaphysical and ontological significance of acoustic phenomena; it *amplifies* this acoustic material, diffuses it in the very shape of the mythemes and forms of life in social and political experiments. As Jocelyn Holland shows in reference to the works of Romantic physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter, acoustic symbols that stand in for absolute material dynamics can be led back to a more primordial substratum, a form of silence, whose adequate representation would require “nothing less than the construction of the human.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Romantic authors that gravitate to dissipative structures undertake precisely this catastrophic, exponential jump—from microscopic oscillations, vibrations, and gaps to the construction of human lives and collectivities—in their acoustic thought experiments.

II. Novalis and the Tarantella of the Understanding

In a fragment written around the time of his work on *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis places acoustics in proximity to a branch of knowledge centered around touch (*Berührungskunde*).[[22]](#footnote-22) Touch, as Siarhei Biareishyk argues, lies at the center of Novalis’ concept of individuation, one in which the individual is a “composite unity in perpetual activity”[[23]](#footnote-23) whose power is measured “by its capacity to undergo encounters without dissolution and enter into complex relations with other individuals.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Acoustics, as a science of touch and hence as a zone that facilitates processes of individuation (albeit, as we have seen, in a manner that depends upon processes of dissolution), expands into sensuous, poetic, and mathematical domains, ultimately providing the material basis for the world-transfiguring scope of poetry. Poetry, as that field of activity through which the “world must be romanticized,”[[25]](#footnote-25) invokes a vibrating multiplicity of encounters as integral to the construction of reality. Novalis writes: “Poetry [*Poësie*] is the truly absolute real. This is the core of my philosophy.”[[26]](#footnote-26) A concept of the real—which includes acoustic fluctuations that disclose oscillation *as* fundamental ontology—underlies the operations of poetry and its disruptive, utopian energy. Novalis approaches oscillations, waves, and vibrations—which come into perceptual presence upon amplification—through a science of touch founded on the exploration of “active and passive tangents,”[[27]](#footnote-27) infinitely digressive and multiple lines that radiate outward from contact with a curve. This geometry can be translated into a poetic and existential mandate: follow a line of contact toward unexpected encounters, each of which in turn can generate their own tangential radiations.

*Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, as we have seen, begins with the acoustic problem of touch, of tact. The concept of tact (*Takt*), according to Anders Engberg-Pedersen, encompasses two different paradigms of order in the Romantic period: an order of regularity, of arrangement (tact as *taxis*); and a subjective inner sense deriving from the sense of touch (tact as *tangere*).[[28]](#footnote-28) The clock at the outset of the narrative—already an ironic anachronism for a tale that takes place in the Middle Ages (an *ana-chronistic* clock)—establishes a tact that monotonously individuates forms and thus is associated more with *taxis* than *tangere*. The ticking of the clock organizes acoustic material as something uni-form (*einförmig*). One of the central problems of the novel confronts initial conditions that are uniform and seeks to differentiate them, to individuate in a way that multiplies difference. The condition of the clock, of regular time, of uni-formity, must be *unconditioned*.

The novel disrupts the regularity of tact (*taxis*) by exploring tangential notions of rhythm (*tangere*), or rhythm as it spins off into unexpected directions in worldly encounters. It must be noted that Novalis sees the concept of world as imbricated with rhythm, as *essentially* rhythmical: “If we take away the rhythm of the world—then the world also disappears.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Poetry, which brings the world of thought into contact with “strange oscillations” (*sonderbare Schwingungen*),[[30]](#footnote-30) unsettles the uniformity of the world by excavating Orphic powers of figuration slumbering *in potentia* in subterranean depths; it is precisely this potential that Novalis locates in “the acoustic nature of the soul.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

The aestheticization of sound as *music* gives rise to strange oscillations, or sound catastrophically amplified into other mediated forms, ultimately encompassing the totality of social, erotic, and political relations. Novalis explores these oscillations as part of an aesthetic experiment: how can one *de-form* the world in such a way that new rhythms emerge? And where can one find an experimental space in which strange oscillations can reshape everyday life?

Novalis finds this space for the transfiguration of the rhythm of the world, and hence of the world itself, in the operations of the fairy tale.[[32]](#footnote-32) When embedded in novels or longer prose forms—as they are in Novalis’ works (in *The Novices at Sais* and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*)—the fairy tale punctuates the forward motion of narrative time, suspending the logic of the prosaic world and producing something dramatically different. In his theoretical writings, Novalis hints that the fairy tale can be approached acoustically. Novalis writes: “The fairy tale is entirely *musical*.”[[33]](#footnote-33) It is musical not merely thematically, as a form that privileges sound—when music is coaxed from a lyre and the fields of ice and the cliffs ring in resonant response (as happens in Klingohr’s fairy tale in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*)—but musical in its very being, in the way it establishes contact with the vibration of the real before organized differentiation imposes order on the world. The musicality of the fairy tale indicates a world “devoid of all coherence,”[[34]](#footnote-34) produces “an *ensemble*,”[[35]](#footnote-35) and translates “genuine natural anarchy”[[36]](#footnote-36) into sensuous form. Novalis writes: “Nothing is more contrary to the spirit of a fairy tale—than a moral destiny—a lawful relation.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The fairy tale functions as a source of romanticizing practices inasmuch as it participates in an anarchic freedom prior to the differentiation of law; it is this participation in anarchic primordiality that facilitates the emergence of a future both generative and unpredictable (chaotic) as well as rational (as it has passed *through* the law). The central function of the fairy tale is thus to establish a zone of indifference betweenreason and chaos that culminates in the potentiation of both domains (reason and chaos): “*rational* chaos—chaos suffused with itself—inside and outside of itself—*chaos*2 or ∞.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Such is the purpose of the fairy tale as described in Novalis’ *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia.* The examples of the genre written by Novalis, however, including the most complex and obscure fairy tale at the heart of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the fairy tale told by Klingsohr, seem to belie this theory. Commentators and critics have noted that the Klingsohr fairy tale in particular appears overdetermined, almost allegorical, consciously constructed and ultimately restorative in intent rather than anarchic and contingent.[[39]](#footnote-39) It seems to culminate in an order approximating a moral destiny.

Uncovering the chaotic substratum of the fairy tale demands an attentive ear, an ear attuned to conditions of emergence that fold the stability of an apparent *telos* into a vortex of becoming. Attending to the musicality of the fairy tale can bring its latent anarchic dynamics into presence; submerged acoustic fields destabilize the operations of political restoration at the very moment in which they seem to reach their apotheosis. An exoteric (outwardly directed) reparation of the wounded political body is thus accompanied by an esoteric (internally present) process of unconditioning.

If the fairy tale is “entirely musical,” then the final note of Klingsohr’s fairy tale—and along with it, the telos of acoustic figuration—seems to re-establish the stability of monarchical governance after an explosion of revolutionary violence. The notoriously complex fairy tale unfolds through a series of crises that overturn domestic (familial) and political (monarchical) orders in an upheaval unleashed by subterranean forces, led by a figure known only as the Writer: a paradoxical figure inasmuch as he is equated in Novalis’ notes with the understanding (*der Verstand*), although his revolutionary energy is conspicuously fueled by resentment and hatred (or perhaps this is not paradoxical, but historical: the sleep of reason produces monsters). The power of Fable, personified as the ostensible protagonist of the tale, overwhelms the subterranean forces (the Fates) led by the Writer and brings the tale to a close by weaving the previously wounded community together in a spinning song. The fairy tale ends with a scene of political rapprochement between a newly crowned monarchical pair and the multitude, each reconciled to the other through sympathetic resonance: after the king embraces [*umarmt*] the queen, “one heard nothing except tender names and the whispering of kisses”[[40]](#footnote-40) circulate among the crowd. This scene of erotic reconciliation nevertheless conceals an esoteric symbolic and political revolution; the dynastic continuity of the monarchy has been contaminated by integrating a member of a lower order (*Eros*, born from the domestic realm and transplanted into the astral, monarchical realm) into its chain of succession. Any political restoration is thus fundamentally impure.

The impurity of the final scene can also be deduced from its acoustic conditions; the purported symbolic fulfillment takes place in contact with sonic material that is more erotic noise than intelligible *logos*. The emergence of the new political-social regime culminates in two different sonic modes at the end of the fairy tale: erotic whispering(*Kußgeflüster*) and the spinning song. The disindividuated crowd is bound together by noise on the threshold of audibility (*Geflüster*), while individuated symbolic figures (Fable, Sophie, Phoenix) stand out against this thrumming ground—in Fable’s case, as *song* (organized sound) rather than *murmur* (undifferentiated noise).[[41]](#footnote-41) Sonic modes at the end of the fairy tale thus correspond to a relation between individuated figure and a non-differentiated ground. However, Fable is not merely singing; she is also *spinning*, generating social-symbolic threads. The threads that she spins are drawn from her own body; when a hero (Perseus) gives her the gift of a spindle in gratitude for this restoration of order, he exclaims: “In your hands this spindle shall make us eternally rejoice, and out of yourself you shall spin an unbreakable golden thread.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Fable’s own being constitutes an inexhaustible energetic resource, ultimately realized in song.

Fable’s song sings of eternity and eternalization, of grounding, reconciliation, and an overcoming of the ephemerality of pain. However, at the moment of its enunciation, the song is accompanied by the rotary motion of the spindle:

Fable spun diligently and sang with a clear voice:

Founded (*gegründet*) is the realm of eternity,

In love and peace conflict ends,

Gone the long dream of pain,

Sophie is eternally priestess of hearts.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The promise of reconciliation that takes place within the song cannot be isolated from the spinning source of its genesis, a source that folds all stabilizing operations of grounding into the gyrations of becoming. Spinning is, in a certain sense, Fable’s basic operation, and this final gesture must be considered motivically in relation to other instances of rotary motion, as repetitions or resignifications of these instances; earlier in the tale, Fable draws upon the spinning song as a source of (counter-) revolutionary violence, in the musical form of the tarantella: “During [Fable’s] song, from all sides, tarantulas appeared, they drew a shining net over the blades of grass, and they moved themselves to the beat [*nach dem Takte*] on their threads.... Her strings never rested, and the tarantulas followed the enchanting sounds on fast-woven threads.”[[44]](#footnote-44) In this instance, Fable’s song summons threads that transmit rhythms and micro-oscillations, making the world into a resonance chamber, one in which the slightest movement can be detected by the sensitive organs of the spider: the monotonous *tact* of the clock at the beginning of the novel is thus transformed into a different regime of acoustic transmission in the fairy tale (the only other appearance of *Takt* in the novel). This form of tact becomes a channel for a release of energy: a destructive tendency that must either exhaust itself (dissipate) or be sublimated into form. It is this latter function that Fable’s song seeks to realize.

In the discourse of tarantism, which was the subject of extensive debate in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, for example, music played the role of a physiological cure.[[45]](#footnote-45) According to the account as popularized by Athanasius Kircher, the musical notes and the whirling bodies in the dance are supposed to counteract the poison coursing through the body. The tarantella of Fable’s song positions itself obliquely to this tradition. Fable’s spinning song does not seek to expel or dispel poison, but to conjure it forth and harness its power; Fable’s poetic activity revolves around an acoustically generated pharmakon that simultaneously wounds and heals.

Fable’s song ensnares the agents of revolutionary violence (the Fates, the Writer) in a web that they themselves bring about (it is in fact the Writer who demands the oil of the tarantulas in the first place as fuel for his revolutionary ambitions). Fable disarms the subterranean revolt by overwhelming them in the orgiastic rhythms of the tarantella: “[Fable’s] pursuers rushed impetuously into the web of the tarantulas, which took vengeance on them with innumerable bites. The whole crowd began to dance frantically, to which Fable played a merry tune.”[[46]](#footnote-46) It is implied that the Writer is among these pursuers, or at least that the pursuers are his representatives; in any case, the Writer has become dis-individuated in the spinning of the dance.

Fable is thus responsible for two forms of spinning songs: the orgiastic-destructive song of tarantism, and the restorative song of the weaver. These songs are not oppositional, but complementary (or at least complementary in their oppositionality, a problem that Nietzsche would later seek to solve in *The Birth of Tragedy* by reconciling Apollonian figuration with Dionysian dissolution). Novalis frames Romantic writing—a form of writing indicated by the ultimate fate of the Writer—in relation to these two primordial musical paradigms. It is significant that precisely at the moment in which Romantic writing fulfills its highest ambitions—as unconditioning writing—the Writer simply disappears (or seems to disappear) from the tale, a detail emphasized by Friedrich Kittler.[[47]](#footnote-47) Kittler calls this disappearance “the trace of a repression.”[[48]](#footnote-48) There is, however, another possibility: a transformation of writing has taken place, but it has become ubiquitous, absolute, atmospheric, everywhere visible and non-localizable. Indeed, the Writer has not been repressed, but unconditioned and *amplified* into absolute song; the dissipation of revolutionary violence and the dis-individuation of its central figure (the figure of the Writer) becomes form-generating in the “merry tune” of Fable itself, woven by her spindle (rather than a weaving loom, which the Writer was supposed to become in Novalis’ notes). This possibility coheres with a central feature of Romantic poiesis: to extract a generative emergence from tendencies toward disindividuation and to channel chaotic energy back into form.

This pattern of Romantic poiesis can be found in other episodes in the fairy tale, for example, when the subterranean Fates, operating in league with the Writer, find themselves caught in the throes of the tarentella. The Fates are degraded to buzzing flies and finally consumed by the tarantulas; they are “sucked to the marrow.”[[49]](#footnote-49) The Fates, however, do not dissipate into song, but crystallize, transforming into statues that appear at the end of the fairy tale as “caryatides of dark porphyry.”[[50]](#footnote-50) In the words of the fairy tale, the “lifeless” Fates have been once again “ent-souled”;[[51]](#footnote-51) they have been de-potentiated into inorganic matter. The depotentiation of something already depotentiated (the Fates as sheer non-productive, revolutionary rage) becomes the source of a genesis (negation of the negative as positive). The subterranean powers, now stabilizing structures, support the head of the marriage bed that will mark the consummation of the utopian scene of social and political reconciliation. However, the caryatides are not merely figures of stabilization; they integrate their previously chaotic power in such a way that the erotic stage is uplifted, now swaying in the air. The statues of the Fates, whose revolutionary energy has been brought to a standstill, set the erogenous zone of reconciliation (the bed) into relation with the ground, but in such a way that the ground itself is made to hover: “so that the earth floats once again and does not lie on chaos.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

The Romantic unconditioning of the world—making the solidity of the earth sway in relation to chaotic forces of disruption held at a distance—takes place through the transformation of acoustic phenomena. Recall Novalis’ dictum that “sculpture is nothing else but the figuristics of music.”[[53]](#footnote-53) In this transformation of subterranean and anarchic entities into sculptural figures, the solidity of the base is constructed by the waves, oscillations, and vibrations from which it grew. The movement of these originally acoustic vibrations has been arrested only partially, frozen in order to better bring the world into a hovering relation to the ground. Although the transformation of the Writer into a loom does not take place explicitly in the fairy tale, there remains nevertheless the spindle that gathers the threads of Fable’s own being as part of a new collective order. In the self-generation of this order, the spindle (*Spindel*) spins, repeats the whirling dance, duplicates its movements. The Writer, if he is still a latent and invisible presence, has become a pure spinning movement—a tarantella of the understanding—accompanied by the song of a fable that holds itself swaying at a distance from the now subdued chaotic source, still drawing on its ineliminable and disruptive energy.

III. Schelling and the Repercussions of a Naturephilosophy of Sound

A significant source for the Romantic ontology of sound in relation to operations of absolute unconditioning can be found in Schelling’s *Philosophy of Art*. Based on notes from lectures that Schelling held twice (1802/3 and 1804/5), the *Philosophy of Art* formulates its central task as follows: “*the presentation in the ideal medium of the real element inherent in art*.”[[54]](#footnote-54) What Schelling describes as presentation in an “ideal medium” is nothing other than the generic definition of philosophy itself, one in which the absolute must be constructed. Construction—the name of the philosophical method Schelling utilizes in the *Philosophy of Art*—brings what would otherwise remain as latent archetypal patterns into discursive presence.[[55]](#footnote-55) More importantly, to construct is not merely to represent, but to transform and transfigure the real; it produces a way of looking at entities (the real) as products of an infinite, absolute process, subject to a becoming without conditions. When regarded as such, objects are extracted from their local contexts of significance and recast as paradigms of ontological and cosmological form-generation: the philosophy of art does not analyze this or that work, but “*the universe in the form of art*.”[[56]](#footnote-56) A physics of art comes to light in philosophical construction: art as cosmogenesis.

What Schelling calls the “first dimension”[[57]](#footnote-57)—indeed, the beginning of the entire construction of the philosophy of art through which the materiality of the real expresses itself in the ideality of form—is that of *sonority* (*Klang*). If music represents the “lowest” of the arts in the architectonics of Schelling’s construction, it is also closest to nature in its primordial state, to that first event through which “art breaks through into the world of representation.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

Schelling accordingly describes sonority as the maximal presentation of the real, of non-conscious matter, as registered within the world of sense and sentience: an exteriority that lies at the core of interiority, approximating what Lacan would call *extimacy*. Schelling describes this concept of sonority, one in which the body/mind (real/ideal) distinction is simultaneously produced and suspended (in-differentiated), as the “intuition of the soul of the body itself.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Sonority is the form through which the body manifests itself as a necessary ontological zone of emergence, hence as *soul* of the body.

The soul here does not belong to a subject, but designates an impersonal process of idealization. As such, music, which emerges from sonority, is not an art particular to human beings; indeed, music does not require humanity for its realization. Music belongs to the cosmos, even in its inorganic forms. The ear, then, becomes a privileged (and paradoxical) organ of the inorganic, or that part of the human being most consonant with inorganic modes of appearance. Schelling writes: “the roots of the sense of hearing reside within anorganic nature, within magnetism. The hearing organ itself is merely magnetism that has developed to organic perfection.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Schelling’s notion of the ear as a magnetic organ is predicated upon a paradigm shift from mechanistic to dynamic theories of hearing; Chladni, for example, linked the form-generation made visible on plates to oscillating elasticity (and hence mechanics) rather than the play of forces (dynamics). The dynamic theory of hearing as it surfaces in the *Philosophy of Art* had been prepared by Schelling’s earlier works of naturephilosophy (*Naturphilosophie*).[[61]](#footnote-61) For example, in the *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, magnetism appears as the first category in the construction of matter (followed by electricity and chemical processes[[62]](#footnote-62)); magnetism “brought the first opposition into the universal identity of nature.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Magnetism discloses oppositionality as an ontological structure operative at the inorganic level that is reticulated at different levels of organization (potencies that move from the inorganic to the organic to consciousness).

The residual inorganic structure of the organ of hearing brings it into contact with the central problem of nature itself: nature as it steps out of static equilibrium, out of a condition of absolute rest, and into movement and productivity. Ian Biddle, drawing on Schelling’s earlier naturephilosophical texts, ascribes a disruptive and ungrounding force to the magnetism of the ear in this section of the *Philosophy of Art*, since magnetism occupies a “dark corner of the system” of naturephilosophy that Schelling sometimes seems to approach with uncertainty.[[64]](#footnote-64)

However, if there is a dissonance or a darkness in sonority, in *The Philosophy of Art* Schelling represses this dissonance in favor of an affirmative notion of ontological order. According to Schelling: “Within sonority we do not merely hear the simple tone itself. Rather, we hear clothed, as it were, or imbedded in it a whole array of tones, and we hear them such that the consonant ones predominate, instead of the dissonant ones.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Underlying this account of sound is a process of individuation that tips towards the balance of the self-affirmation of nature as an infinite process; the oppositional account of individuation characteristic of Schelling’s earlier naturephilosophy (individuated forms as emergent from a disequilibrium in a conflict of forces, or form as indexing the aberrant nature of appearances) has been supplanted in favor of the affirmative account of individuation characteristic of his later identity philosophy (individuated forms as emergent from the desire of nature to affirm itself).[[66]](#footnote-66) Sound constitutes the primordial ontological field in which this shift is registered.

The residue of an agonistic and dissonant ontology of individuation can nevertheless still be detected in Schelling’s account of sound. Uncovering this residue requires a closer examination of the distinction between two concepts of sound used by Schelling: *resonance* (*Schall*) and *sonority* (*Klang*). Resonance (*Schall*) designates the generic operation of sound generation, and dissonance belongs essentially to one of its possibilities. A body resonates when it conducts (“all resonance... is conduction”[[67]](#footnote-67)). Resonance [*Schall*] manifests itself as noise when it generates acoustic data that disintegrate into incoherence, when “sound does not allow the unity in multiplicity to be recognized clearly.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Sonority supersedes this entropic pull toward disintegration through its power of internal coherence, in which case multiplicity discloses itself as “a multiplicity that affirms itself.”[[69]](#footnote-69) However, at the most primordial level of individuation, resonance—or the power by which sound can reach out and touch each thing (as something *conducted*)—constitutes a field in which both dissonance and affirmation, incommensurable multiplicity and harmonious cohesion, are contained as latent possibilities.

Starting from sound as the presentation of the inorganic within the organic, Schelling constructs a series of bifurcations in which the dissonance of the real is progressively filtered out: from resonance (in which dissonance still inheres as a possibility); to sonority (in which consonance is generated and overcomes a still-present dissonance); to music (in which consonance becomes a symbolic generator, “potence and symbol”[[70]](#footnote-70) of the absolute producing itself through rhythm, harmony, and melody). Music, as symbol of the absolute, becomes that form in which the generative dynamic of the absolute in the modality of the real—productive material unconditioning—is brought into sensuous presence. The progressive transfiguration of sound into sonority and then music corresponds to an increase in the mythopoetic generativity of sound, or sound as a thought experiment connected to other domains of existence: cosmological, religious, political.

Absolute sound, in the form of music, is propulsive; in its most basic symbolic form, it is more rhythmic than harmonious. Schelling thus describes rhythm as “the music within music,”[[71]](#footnote-71) calling rhythm the “predominating potence in music,”[[72]](#footnote-72) which distills the function of music to its fundamental operation: to generate enough regularity to recognize units, or discrete elements appearing *as* discrete elements; but also to generate enough multiplicity and variety such that these units of sound never become monotonous and are constantly producing difference. As the sensuous manifestation that most closely brushes up against the contingency of sheer givenness, rhythm models the breakthrough of sense from non-sense, “the transformation of an essentially meaningless succession into a meaningful one.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

A close examination of the specifically naturephilosophical aesthetics of music, however, reveals that the symbolic dimension of music—or music as *unconditioning* sound—is more expansive than stabilizing, more productive of difference than of unity. Music is not limited to the human arts; drawing on Pythagoras, Schelling notes that cosmic bodies (planets, stars) are ontologically homologous with music: not inasmuch as they produce music in their spinning, but inasmuch as they *are* music in their very manner of being, in the forces with which they are identical. Schelling writes: “The cosmic bodies float on the wings of harmony and rhythm. That which one calls centripetal and centrifugal force is nothing other than harmony and rhythm, respectively. Elevated by the same wings, music floats in space to weave an audible universe from the transparent body of sound and tone.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Rhythm is thus *naturalized*—belonging to nature as self-producing process (rather than in the sense of being taken as self-evident)—as force. Schelling associates rhythm in particular with centrifugal force, or an expansiveness that in naturephilosophical terms corresponds to an overcoming of boundaries. Schelling correlates harmony with centripetal force, or the yearning for coherence, translated into sound. When Schelling claims that the predominating potence of music is rhythm—that rhythm is the music within music—he thus locates the specific force of music in a propulsive energetics.

Music—its generative and propulsive force—will be everywhere present, latent in every being, in every form of art and in every movement of discourse. Music also inheres in political and collective bodies; or rather, collective bodies disclose their internal tendencies musically. Every gathering of human beings produces a musical form that expresses its inner tendencies. Music that is predominantly harmonic rather than rhythmic, as the “expression of striving and yearning,”[[75]](#footnote-75) tends toward restorative collective forms, exemplified above all by the Church, which produces a “striving to view oneself within the absolute as one with everyone else.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Schelling associates harmonic tendencies—best exemplified in polyphonic sacred music—with a yearning for coherence that can be devitalizing and contractive. In contrast to the music of the Church, that of the Greek polis is rhythmical and expansive: “one in which a pure collectivity, the species or type itself, had developed completely into a particular unto itself and *was* that particular.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Far from classicizing impulses that equate the Greek world, in Winckelmann’s phrase, with “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,”[[78]](#footnote-78) the *music* of the Greek polis is expressed as energetic, daring, productive of multiplicity, as “the expression of satisfaction and of vigorous passion.”[[79]](#footnote-79) In a culture of modernity predominantly characterized by harmony (which seeks the center and is restorative), Schelling seeks to cultivate an ear attuned to the rhythms of antiquity (which flees the center and is energetic) to awaken a countertendency of expansive force in musical form.

Schelling’s philosophy of music thereby harnesses a primordial tendency toward difference and multiplicity in a form of art (music) that stands in for the event of art itself, for the breakthrough of meaning against a background of meaninglessness. The emergence of art is characterized by a fundamental ambivalence. It brings to the surface a dissonant and incomprehensible real only to suppress this form of the real through progressive potentiation (resonance, sonority, music). At the same time, sound comprises the central medium through which the momentum of centrifugality—a transgressive and difference-generating expansion—achieves symbolic elevation, seeping into material and discursive forms. Philosophical construction itself, in its production of the absolute, must also be rhythmic in this manner. Novalis writes in reference to Fichte: “Fichte has done nothing else than discover the rhythm of philosophy, and expressed it in a verbal acoustic manner.”[[80]](#footnote-80) While the expansive momentum of rhythmic antiquity could function as an antidote to the overwhelmingly stabilizing harmonic collective forms of modernity (the *polis* as counterforce to the Church; Nietzsche would take this insight further in *The Birth of Tragedy*), another speculative possibility can be drawn from Schelling’s philosophy of music: a collective form whose musical expression would produce a harmonic and centripetal counterforce capable of counteracting the violent potential in the expansive and assimilative propulsion of rhythm, but without producing an overcontraction into homogeneous communal groupings. The form of the collective that could or would produce such music as an ontological expression of its internal tendencies remains unthematized by Schelling. Such would be the unspoken melodic (equally rhythmic *and* harmonic) utopian form of Schelling’s philosophy of music.

IV. Amplifications of Unconditioning Sound in Romantic Science and Literature

The shift from a mechanical to a dynamic concept of sound—from wave oscillation produced through the collision and elasticity of bodies (Chladni) to oscillation as a result of magnetic or electrical forces (Ritter and Ørsted)—enlarges the field of auditory sensibility as well as the discursive and aesthetic potentiality of sound. Central to this expansion of possibilities in the idea of electrical acoustics is the phenomenon of shock. For Hans Christian Ørsted, sound generated by contact gives rise to a mechanical-dynamic feedback loop of shock intensification through electricity:

The compression and the consequent expansion which take place in every soundwave produce ... [an] electrical alternation. Such an al­ternation between electrical states must also take place in the ear, but each transi­tion from one electrical state to another produces a shock, however weak it may be. Each sound is accompanied by a great many such shocks one following the other.[[81]](#footnote-81)

The constant intensification of shock infinitely stimulates the ear; the ear expands the domain of sensibility by virtue of the imperceptible shocks that it constantly receives, as “frequent alternation increases the sensitivity of the ear even more.”[[82]](#footnote-82) Ultimately, Ørsted converts the reception of shock and the potentially traumatic electric collisions that bombard the human sensory apparatus into the training ground for an ecstatic askesis. The barrage of electrical shocks pushes the capacities of the organ toward transcendence. Oscillations become so fast that “the speed of vibrations becomes too great to be perceived by the ear.”[[83]](#footnote-83) The vibrations increase to such an extent that they break through into another sensory domain, becoming synaesthetic: they “will rise to the production of the deepest colour.”[[84]](#footnote-84) The smallest possible oscillation jolts the human sensuous apparatus towards the unlimited cosmos. Ørsted writes: “Let us imagine an acoustic figure,”[[85]](#footnote-85) an imagination that amplifies, ramifies, and never ends—in the “deep, infinite, incomprehensible Reason of Nature.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

Johann Wilhelm Ritter, in dialogue with Ørsted, brings the expansion of electrical-acoustic shock—and its utopian, absolute character—into continuity with form-generating functions ascribed to writing, with technologies of inscription. Every tone, because it oscillates, generates figures, inscribes itself in the real:

All oscillation however yields tone and thereby word. But the excited electricity projects itself everywhere at once as *shape-forming*, indeed the shape *precedes* the electricity and is already present at its *excitation*; [electricity] acquires [shape] in the measure that the electrical excitement occurs.[[87]](#footnote-87)

The figure-generating potentiality of tone—which locates the generation of form at the event of excitation itself rather than as the result of an excitation—becomes at one and the same time a natural ontological ground as well as a domain to which the human being can relate itself as it would to a foreign daemonic power. The figurative power of tone, once it is scaled upwards into other domains, enters into proximity (if not identity) with human beings themselves and simultaneously indicates a power external to them: as human consciousness (“*tone* [is] *consciousness*”[[88]](#footnote-88)), “entire histories of peoples,”[[89]](#footnote-89) and finally “the *absolute* complement of the human race.”[[90]](#footnote-90) No longer a scientific datum like any other, tone becomes an intimate acquaintance—“in tone we associate with our own kind”[[91]](#footnote-91)—and a source of idealizations and temptations (“the *spirit of the tone* can be good and evil”[[92]](#footnote-92)). By amplifying the acoustic domain into speculative horizons of subjective, erotic, political and religious experimentation, Ritter and Ørsted transform the nature of hearing itself, which thenceforth exposes the human being to capacious and experimental ways of being in the world: as the transcendence of shock for Ørsted, or as the continuous electrical production of shapes and figures for Ritter.

Romantic lyric and narrative forms, albeit with different resources at their disposal, equally explore the ramifications of unconditioning sound. One of the most prominent examples of this experimental practice can be found in the lyric of Joseph von Eichendorff. An early poem composed by Eichendorff in 1808 (“Sestime”) constructs a conceptual Romantic sixfold—flowing, rustling, dreams, sky, stars, songs—in the repeating, shifting constellation dictated by the form of the sestina. Eichendorff’s “Sestime” is modeled on the medieval sestina, a form in which words at the ends of lines are repeated according to a system of rules (the last end-word of one stanza becomes the first end-word of the following one; the first end-word becomes the second end-word in the next stanza; and so forth). In a reading of Arnaut Daniel’s sestina “Lo ferm voler qu’el cor m’intra,” Giorgio Agamben claims that the sestina (and lyric more generally) discloses a different form of temporality than that of everyday succession or progression: messianic time, “the *time that the poem takes to come to an end*,”[[93]](#footnote-93) as manifested in the particular temporal lyric constellations structured by recall and anticipation.

If Eichendorff’s sestina, like Arnaut’s, participates in this constellated temporality, it nevertheless virtualizes the nesting of temporal echoes such that the very notion of an *end* is retemporalized, or temporalized beyond its internal system of correspondences, beyond the resonant unfolding of end-words in anticipation and remembrance. In Eichendorff’s sestina, lyric temporality oscillates between a singular punctuation of time, the repetition of a succession, and the index of an eternal *nunc stans*: “Always will I be kneeling under this sky / That with eternal Lent seeks to flow to me.”[[94]](#footnote-94) The sliding of temporal frames between one another is coordinated with the acoustic amplification of sonic materiality.[[95]](#footnote-95) At the precise moment when the most sonically overdetermined end-word of Eichendorff’s poem—the sheer noise of rustling (*Rauschen*), which already implicitly includes intoxication (*Rausch*) within it—becomes more explicitly associated with inebriation (*Berauschen*), Eichendorff collapses the abstract contemplation of beauty and ecstatic unknowing:

Contemplating of such beauty the sweet intoxication,

Beauty that only seems of flowers and stars to dream,

I say often: such charm must from the sky

In still night from golden stars flow,

There, as if divested from the earth my songs

Now speak with you: moons, stars.[[96]](#footnote-96)

[Betrachtend solcher Schöne süß’ Berauschen,

Die nur von Blumen, Sternen scheint zu träumen,

Sag’ ich gar oft: Solch Liebreiz mußt’ vom Himmel

In stiller Nacht von goldnen Sternen fließen,

Da, wie der Erd’ enthoben meine Lieder

Nun sich besprechen mit euch, Monden, Sterne.]

Eichendorff, often accused of using formulas, repetitions and generalities to the point where meaning becomes incidental to the lyric act, does not so much evacuate semantic and conceptual determinacy as place it on a continuum with the musical rustling of things.[[97]](#footnote-97) If, however, for Schelling, music (qua rhythm) represents the “transformation of an essentially meaningless succession into a meaningful one,”[[98]](#footnote-98) Eichendorff makes sonorous transformation in the context of the lyric into a reversible oscillation, one in which the lyric act can be rhythmically de-semanticized and conceptually re-semanticized.

Eichendorff’s lyric semantically potentiates and depotentiates itself at every moment: stars, moons, and flowers can be imaginatively called forth in their conceptual referentiality, just as they can tend toward rhythm—although never *pure* rhythm, since some conceptuality will remain, at least as a residue. In a peculiar inversion, it is the *concept* that constitutes the ineliminable remainder of Eichendroff’s lyric rather than noise; the concept (or semantic determinacy) forms the background against which noise emerges, rather than the other way around. In the sestina, Eichendorff couples the philosophical ideal of the concept (i.e. the intellectual contemplation of forms) with an ecstatic loss of awareness—bringing contemplation and rapture into a zone of indistinction—at the precise instance in which the strict identity of the sestina’s form is loosened, when intoxication (*Berauschen*: more precisely, the infinitive as substantive, and thus the act of *intoxicating* made into a concept) supplants rustling (*rauschen*): *gazing at the sweet intoxication of such beauty* (*Betrachtend solcher Schöne süß’* ***Berauschen***). When rustling becomes inebriation, *rauschen* becomes *Berauschen*, it is not beauty in its eternal form that is contemplated, but rather, its intoxicating effect. The purely formal-intellectual nature of beauty is thus unconditioned by sensuous, semantic and phonic displacements in the shift from *rauschen* to *berauschen*.

If Eichendorff’s lyric experimentation with unconditioning sound nevertheless maintains itself in orbit around the ideal, a divergent and more perverse form of acoustic unconditioning can be found in the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann, himself a composer and known for his characterization of Beethoven’s music as the “the realm of the tragic and illimitable.”[[99]](#footnote-99) The final paradigm of unconditioning sound considered here concerns his novella *The Fermata*, a work in which Hoffmann does not ascend to the ineffability of music, but descends into its molecular and material basis in order to conjure forth its deviant power. The narrative experiment begins, as in Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in a sort of crucible, in the confinement of a provincial town, where every “foreign appearance”[[100]](#footnote-100) has an “electric effect”[[101]](#footnote-101) on a young man, the narrator of the story. The main electrical event of the tale is occasioned by the appearance of two Italian female singers who strike the narrator with the force of a “magical spell”[[102]](#footnote-102) (*Zauberschlag*), using musical polarities to jolt him out of a complacent fit with his normative system up until that point. The two musicians make the narrator into a conductor for an electrical (simultaneously musical and erotic) current passing back and forth, alternating between aesthetic paradigms as if between the plus and minus of a voltaic pile: Lauretta and Teresina (the two musicians), representing respectively artifice and nature, ornament and simplicity, surface and depth, opera buffa and tragic opera. Each of these will, and each in their turn, embody an ideal that produces an aesthetic attunement to the world for the narrator. However, the story does not establish the ideal and fix it in place. On the contrary, it describes the means whereby the ideal (or the vacillation between multiple ideals) is perpetually dislodged; it *discharges* singular entities or beings as bearers of symbolic significance. What comes to light in Hoffmann’s tale, then, is the disruption *of* the ideal as a new, second-order concept of ontological order.

The discharging of the ideal takes place at a moment of particular temporal significance in the story indicated by the title: in the fermata. The fermata is not just a motif, but an ontological operation, indeed, a space of religious redemption; in the fermata, a woman is represented as singing a cadenza “with a gaze directed towards the heavens.”[[103]](#footnote-103) Following Agamben’s suggestion in his analysis of the sestina’s messianic time, the thrust of time in the fermata seems teleologically laden as it moves towards its end, a moment of fulfillment when regular temporality, *a tempo*, is restored and the orchestra—the *tutti*, all individuals as a collective form—rejoins the individual.

However, in the redemptive momentum of the fermata there lies a significant potential for deviation, and it is this disruptive power that fascinates Hoffmann. If, for Schelling, rhythm is the music of music and hence the means by which it produces itself *as* the absolute, the function of the fermata is to suspend rhythmic regularity and predictability: it places the beat (tact) in abeyance, pausing and extending the flow of time in such a way that unexpected sound figures come into appearance. The fermata—above all in the context of the narrative—makes possible a space of individuation outside the dictates of the collective (the orchestral *tutti*) and a temporality outside universal time (it is not *a tempo*). Drawing on the etymology of the fermata from *fermare*: it stops the beat.

The threshold signaling the restoration of temporal and collective order is generally marked by the trill of the soloist, at which point the conductor must guide the orchestra to enter at precisely the right moment, in the *kairos* of a temporal suspension brought to fulfillment. Hoffmann’s narrative reflects this logic: the trill anticipating the end of the fermata is described as the “highest moment,” the one “that would set everyone into amazement [*staunen*].”[[104]](#footnote-104) The trill is a significant symbolic operator; in the context of the naturephilosophical materialism of sound, the trill is nothing other than the explicit enactment of the structure of sound itself as oscillation. The latent ontological dynamic of sound—what Ørsted grasped as continually alternating electrical shocks in rapid succession between polarities—finds its most apt representational form in the trill. The restoration of order, the moment when suspended time is supposed to rejoin regular time, occurs in tandem with the symbolization of sound in its basic ontological structure.

In the work of Hoffmann, however, it is messianic time that must be disrupted at all costs. Everything must go wrong. The scene is described as follows, described from the perspective of the narrator who is accompanying the soloist (Lauretta) as she intends to bring her cadenza to a conclusion in the fermata:

We came to the last *fermata*. Lauretta exerted all her skill and art; she warbled trill after trill like a nightingale, executed sustained notes, then long elaborate roulades—a whole *solfeggio*. In fact, I thought she was almost carrying the thing too far this time; I felt a soft breath on my cheek; Teresina stood behind me. At this moment Lauretta took a good start with the intention of swelling up to a ‘harmonic shake’ and so passing back into *a tempo.* The devil entered into me; I jammed down the keys with both hands; the orchestra followed suit; and it was all over with Lauretta’s trill, just at the supreme moment when she was to excite everyone’s astonishment.[[105]](#footnote-105)

If the trill is nothing other than the order of sound made explicit, another type of oscillation comes to the foreground in this scene: the moment at which one figure of symbolic mediation falls out of ideality and is transferred to another. In the wake of this event, an erotic and aesthetic transference takes place in the narrator from Lauretta to Teresina; Teresina appears at the precise moment of disruption and is thus correlated with the interruption of the auspicious moment, the misfire of the *kairos*. What is eternalized and made generative in Hoffmann’s tale is precisely not the restoration of order as the supreme aesthetic moment, but the interruption that makes this second-order deviant oscillation of things into the very source of aesthetic power. In accordance with an ontology in which the ideal itself must be made present only in order to be deposed—discharged so that another charge can take its place—Teresina too will fall out of ideality, as will, perhaps, the narrator himself.

The fermata—and its disruption—repeats itself in different forms, different mediated channels, throughout the narrative. It becomes its own aesthetic-ontological archetype and is infinitely generative, disclosing an absolute process of signification. It can be found in the painting *The Fermata* (1814) by Johann Erdmann Hummel, the viewing of which is the occasion for telling the tale itself (the fermata thus produces the tale of its own production, *ad infinitum*).[[106]](#footnote-106) Moreover, the paining, through the representation of yet *another* fermata diabolically ruined, fixes this failure in place—making the interruption of the fermata into a second-order fermata by extending its temporal scope into eternity. Visually fixed in place, the fermata can never be brought to completion. When the painting appears in the story, it too conducts an electrical charge, striking its viewer with yet another magic blow, a *Zauberschlag*. The electrical conduction of this charge is the primary purpose of Hoffmann’s fermata, both within the story and as the story itself. The burst of energy released in the failure of the redemptive moment is not traumatic, but the condition itself of a form of unconditioning art—an art that nourishes itself not from the presence of the ideal, but from its malfunction.

For significant strands of the German Romantic tradition, sound discloses fundamental ontology as an oscillation of the real, the real *as* oscillation: a trembling of things that moves through all individuated forms, material and spiritual. In their speculative philosophical and aesthetic experiments with sound, the most intimate experiences of the world become the most alien. It is not just that sound indicates the absolute as that which is unconditioned, but that it constructs the real as a material-ideal system in the process of turning against itself, moving amidst the peaks and troughs of waves, perpetually unconditioning itself and carrying all beings along in its wake. When Novalis develops chemical acoustics as a power of figuration dependent upon the inhibition of the tendency toward dissolution; when he seeks in the music of the fairy tale a vertiginous art capable of creating a semi-stable, hovering relation to a chaotic ground; when Schelling claims a power of affirmation over negation in the potentiation of sound from noise to sonority to music, culminating in the manner in which collectives produce musical forms—*are* themselves musical forms—that reveal their internal developmental tendencies; when Ørsted grasps sound as the perpetuation of a continually intensifying shock; when Ritter understands tone as electrical figuration (nature writing itself) moving through human consciousness in a manner that is foreign to it; when Eichendorff posits a field of rustling intoxication (*Rauschen* / *Berauschen*) that oscillates between noise and concept, intoxication and intellection; and when Hoffmann develops an electrical aesthetics to maintain beings in a constant state of perverse non-identity with the ideal—we see that it is not sufficient for the German Romantics to describe sound and its material or ideal basis; rather, the latent dynamics emergent from the speculative and aesthetic encounter with sound must be redirected back into the world: as an art of unconditioning.

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1. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, 6 vols., ed. Richard Samuel et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1977), 1:195. Translations from the German are mine, unless indicated otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1:195. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia (Das allgemeine Brouillon*), trans. and ed. David W. Wood (Albany: SUNY P, 2007), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Novalis, *Notes*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Novalis, *Notes*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Novalis, *Schriften*, 3:308. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lancereau, Daniel B., “Leibniz, Novalis, Gödel. Balistique du romantisme allemande,” in *Arts et sciences du romantisme allemande*, eds. Daniel Lancereau and Andre Stanguennec (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018), 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The concept of rustling, *Rauschen*, has been a central focus of research on Eichendorff; already Theodor Adorno had philosophically interpreted rustling as indicative of a distance from meaning—thus non-musical (in the idealistic sense of *meaningful* tone)—and desubjectivized. See Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Novalis, *Schriften*, 2:413. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni, *Entdeckungen über die Theorie des Klanges* (Leipzig: Erdmann, 1787), 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See the *Germanic Review* issue edited by Anders Engberg-Pedersen and Oliver Simons, above all their introduction to the issue: Anders Engberg-Pedersen and Oliver Simons, “Sound Figures: Between Physics and Aesthetics,” *The Germanic Review* 93:4 (2018): 329-333. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, ed. and trans. Jane Keller (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. An important strand in scholarship on Novalis is dedicated to the question of whether or not his concept of the real is constitutive or merely regulative (a Kantian “idea of reason”); the latter has been cogently defended in Manfred Frank, *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989). In my view, the effect of this neo-Kantian reading is to downplay rather than intensify the constitutive tensions in Novalis’ discourse, thereby diminishing the effects of its own oscillations. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For an extensive historical account of how acoustics shaped and was shaped by new accounts of subjectivity, see Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Novalis, *Notes*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Novalis, *Notes*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Novalis, *Notes*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Novalis, *Notes*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Novalis, *Notes,* 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bettine Menke, “Töne – Hören,” in *Poetologien des Wissens um 1800*, ed. Joseph Vogl (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1999), 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Jocelyn Holland, “The Silence of Ritter’s Symbol ⊗,” *The Germanic Review* 92:4 (2017): 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Novalis, *Schriften*, 2: 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Siarhei Biareishyk, “Rethinking Romanticism with Spinoza: Encounter and Individuation in Novalis, Ritter, and Baader,” *The Germanic Review* 94:4 (2019): 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Siarhei Biareishyk, “Rethinking Romanticism with Spinoza,” 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Novalis, *Schriften*, 2: 545. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Novalis, *Schriften*, 2: 647. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Novalis, *Schriften*, 2: 643. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Anders, Engberg-Pedersen. “The Sense of Tact: Hoffmann, Maelzel, and Mechanical Music,” *The Germanic Review* 93:4 (2018): 354-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Novalis, *Notes,* 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Novalis, *Schriften*, 3: 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Novalis, *Schriften*, 3: 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For Novalis’ fairy tale politics (*Märchenpolitik*), see John Gill, *Wild Politics: Political Imagination in German Romanticism*, (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020), 46-135. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Novalis, *Notes,* 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Novalis, *Notes,* 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Novalis, *Notes,* 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Novalis, *Notes,* 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Novalis, *Notes,* 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Novalis, *Notes,* 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Benjamin Specht, *Physik als Kunst: Die Poetisierung der Elektrizität um 1800* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The whispering or murmuring of the crowd represents an acoustic event appropriate to the transient appearance of an undifferentiated mass, gathered together (*Ge-flüster*) momentarily in political-erotic union; while thus different in tonality than the romantic *murmur* of English lyric—which, as Michele Speitz has argued in reference to Wordsworth’s poetry, indexes transience and loss even in its most purportedly ideal forms—the affect and its corresponding acoustic form captures and seeks to arrest a form of communal organization on the verge of transition into noise (chaos). See Michele Speitz, “The Wordsworthian Acoustic Imagination, Sonic Recursions, and ‘that dying murmur,’” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, *55:3* (2015): 621-646. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone, 2010), 133-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Friedrich A. Kittler, “Die Irrwege des Eros und die ‘absolute Familie’: Psychoanalytischer und diskursanalytischer Kommentar zu Klingsohrs Marchen in Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*,” in *Psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Literaturinterpretation*, eds. Bernd Urban and Winfried Kudszus (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Kittler, “Die Irrwege des Eros und die ‘absolute Familie’,” 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Novalis, *Schriften*, 1: 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Novalis, *Notes*, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Friedrich Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. and trans. Douglas Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See Daniel Breazeale, “‘Exhibiting the Particular in the Universal.’ Construction and Intuition in Schelling’s Philosophy of Identity (1801-1804),” in *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays*, ed. Lara Ostaric (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), 91-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For Schelling as an innovator in the conceptualization of sound through dynamics rather than mechanics, see Steven P. Lydon, “Signatura rerum: Chladni’s Sound Figures in Schelling, August Schlegel, and Brentano,” *The Germanic Review* 93:4 (2018): 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Friedrich Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Schelling, *First Outline*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ian Biddle, *Music, Masculinity and the Claims of History: The Austro-German Tradition from Hegel to Freud* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. See Daniel Whistler, “Schelling on Individuation,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 8:3 (2016): 329-344. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften. Vorreden. Entwürfe*, ed. Walter Rehm (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1968), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Novalis, *Notes*, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Hans Christian Ørsted, “Experiments on Acoustic Figures (1810),” in *Selected Scientific Works of Hans Christian Orsted*, trans. and eds. Karen Jelved, Andrew D. Jackson, and Ole Knudsen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ørsted, “Experiments on Acoustic Figures (1810),” 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ørsted, “Experiments on Acoustic Figures (1810),” 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ørsted, “Experiments on Acoustic Figures (1810),” 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Ørsted, “Experiments on Acoustic Figures (1810),” 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ørsted, “Experiments on Acoustic Figures (1810),” 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Johann Wilhelm Ritter, *Key Texts of Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776-1810 on the Science and Art of Nature*, ed. and trans. Jocelyn Holland (Leiden: Brill 2010), 475. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ritter, *Key Texts*, 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ritter, *Key Texts*, 477-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ritter, *Key Texts*, 479. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Ritter, *Key Texts*, 479. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Ritter, *Key Texts*, 479. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. “Stets werd ich knieen unter diesem Himmel, / Der so mit ewigem Lenz will auf mich fließen.” Joseph von Eichendorff, *Werke in sechs Bänden: Gedichte/Versepen*, vol. 1, ed. Hartwig Schultz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. As Thomas Pfau notes, in Eichendorff’s lyric, it is the “materiality of sound—not sound itself—that is represented.” Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Eichendorff, *Werke*, 1: 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Eichendorff’s lyric thus approaches what Barthes describes as follows: “language would not thereby abandon a horizon of meaning: meaning, undivided, impenetrable, unnamable, would however be posited in the distance like a mirage, making the vocal exercise into a double landscape, furnished with a ‘background’; but instead of the music of the phonemes being the ‘background’ of our messages (as happens in our poetry), meaning would now be the vanishing point of delectation.” Roland Barthes, “The Rustle of Language,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. E.T.A. Hoffmann, “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music,” trans. Arthur Ware Locke, *The Musical Quarterly* 3.1 (1917): 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Die Serapions-Brüder*, *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 4, ed. Wulf Segebrecht et al (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Hoffmann, *Die Serapions-Brüder*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Hoffmann, *Die Serapions-Brüder*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Hoffmann, *Die Serapions-Brüder*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Hoffmann, *Die Serapions-Brüder*, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. E.T.A. Hoffmann, “The Fermata,” *Weird Tales by E.T.A. Hoffmann*, vol. 1, trans. J. T. Bealby (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1885), 48-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. The narrator sees the painting and recognizes in the representation a scene that took place in his own life. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)