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**Gesualdo's 'Moro Lasso' and the Freudian Repetition Compulsion**

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**Abstract**

In this presentation, we explore psychological aspects of the literary and musical first-person experiencing subject of the madrigal *Moro lasso*. We compare the textual and musical repetitions in *Moro lasso* to Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion, in which a person repeats a traumatic event over and over again, either in thoughts or actions, including dreams and hallucinations. Gesualdo's technique of repeating small elements many times in preparation for a larger structural repetition may perhaps represent or allegorize a version of the Freudian repetition compulsion, similar to the "uncanny" repetitive patterns Carolyn Abbate has identified in Paul Dukas's tone poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. We specifically do not address the possible psychoanalysis of Carlo Gesualdo, the historical man, but rather the first-person voice of the madrigal, similar in some ways to the subjective entity that Edward T. Cone described as the fictional persona of the "composer." We do not attempt in this presentation to provide a comparative or historical study of the Italian madrigal, nor do we attempt to trace the history of Gesualdo's many innovative musical techniques through the works of previous composers. Instead, we investigate the psychological qualities of repetition, especially complex and subtle forms of repetitive structure, as they appear in a single musical work, the madrigal *Moro lasso*. By examining the essential diegetic trajectory of the music, we retrieve something of significance about an important and distinctive expressive aspect of the madrigal *Moro lasso*, and also demonstrate that the composer's literary persona actively interacts with the creation of meaning in this work and occasionally suggests complex and potentially conflicting levels of discourse.

**Paper**

The psychiatrist Paul L. Russell (2006, 604-05) has described the repetition compulsion as Sigmund Freud's most important concept and suggests the following definition:

"The confusion of memory with perception. Something experienced as occurring in and totally determined by the present situation, but which, in the last resort, we can

only understand as determined by the past. In short, a memory which masquerades as a present-day event. The repetition compulsion operates functionally as a resistance to affect, to remembering with feeling.”

According to some interpretations of the concept, the repetition compulsion is created or set into motion by an “original or prototypic” trauma, something “painful... injurious... and assaultive,”<sup>1</sup> which the repetitive behavior is an ironic and unproductive effort to relive or to re-create, despite the cost in “time and energy that might have more profitably been directed elsewhere” (Russell 2006, 607).

For the composer Carlo Gesualdo, the Prince of Venosa, the original traumatic event might have occurred in October of 1590, when he murdered his wife, Donna Maria D’Avalos, and her adulterous associate Don Fabrizio Carafa, the Duke of Andria.<sup>2</sup> The madrigal *Moro lasso*, from Gesualdo’s sixth book of madrigals published in 1611, explicitly references “death,” “pain,” and disappointment. Perhaps more significantly, it describes these ideas through unusual and incongruous repetitive utterances, both at the

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<sup>1</sup> In attempting to consider Freud’s published case histories from the perspective of literary narrative theory, Peter Brooks (1984, 280) has observed that Freud began to question “whether one can, or need, claim that ‘in the beginning was the deed’—since the imagined can have the full originary force of the deed.” Brooks suggests that Freud developed an understanding that “causation can work backward as well as forward since the effect of event, or of phantasy, often comes only when it takes on meaning, usually when it takes on sexual significance, which may occur with considerable delay. Chronological sequence may not settle the issue of cause: events may gain traumatic significance by deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) or retroaction, action working in reverse sequence to create a meaning that did not previously exist.”

<sup>2</sup> The “original traumatic event,” if such a specific thing ever existed, could also have occurred long before October of 1590, the murders being a tragic and ironic repetition of a pathological pattern that had already been established. According to Van der Kolk (1989, 392), “The frequency with which abused children repeat aggressive interactions has suggested to Green [1980] a link between the compulsion to repeat and identification with the aggressor, which replaces fear and helplessness with a sense of omnipotence. There are significant sex differences in the way trauma victims incorporate the abuse experience. Studies by Carmen et al. [1984] [Jaffe 1986] and others indicate that abused men and boys tend to identify with the aggressor and later victimize others whereas abused women are prone to become attached to abusive men... [and] allow themselves and their offspring to be victimized further.” It should perhaps also be noted that the pattern of domestic violence that characterized Gesualdo’s second marriage, the composer’s masochistic tendencies, as well as his apparent long-term hyperarousal and his inability to successfully modulate strong affective states, are all consistent with behavior patterns that Van der Kolk (1989) has shown to be associated with male individuals who were the victims of abusive behavior as children. Watkins (2010, 13-96) provides a detailed summary of the relevant aspects of Gesualdo’s biography, especially from the time of his second marriage in 1594 until his death in 1613.

surface level of the text and its musical setting, as well as at more complex and hidden structural levels. Similar to an individual experiencing the repetition compulsion, the madrigal seems “drawn to some fatal flame, as if governed by some malignant attraction which one does not know and cannot comprehend or control.”<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Here are two contemporary descriptions of the double murder and its aftermath, followed by the text and translation of the madrigal *Moro lasso*:

“On hearing such grievous tidings [of his wife’s infidelity], Don Carlo [Gesualdo] did at first seem more dead than alive; but, lest he should place credence too lightly in the asseverations of others, he resolved to assure himself of the truth of the matter... The Prince [Gesualdo], having returned secretly to the palace at midnight... made his way rapidly to the bedchamber of the Princess, and with one blow broke open the door. Entering furiously he discovered the lovers in bed together; at which sight the state of mind of the unhappy prince can be imagined. But quickly shaking off the dejection into which this miserable spectacle had plunged him, he slew with innumerable dagger thrusts the sleepers before they had time to waken.” (Gray & Heseltine 1926, 15-18).<sup>4</sup>

“[The body of the] Duke of Andria was covered with blood and wounded in many places, as follows: an arquebus wound in the left arm passing from one side of the elbow to the other and also through the breast;... many and divers wounds in the chest made by sharp steel weapons, also in the arms, in the head, and in the face; and another arquebus wound in the temple above the left eye whence there was an abundant flow of blood... [The body of Maria D’Avalos lay] dead with her throat cut; also with a wound in the head, in the right temple, a dagger thrust in the face, more dagger wounds in the right hand and arm, and in the breast and flank two sword thrusts.” (Gray & Heseltine 1926, 21).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The quotation is a description of the repetition compulsion by Paul L. Russell (2006, 605).

<sup>4</sup> This account of the murder of Gesualdo’s wife, Maria D’Avalos, and her lover, the Duke of Andria, is taken from a report of the events preserved in a document known as the Corona MS, as translated by Cecil Gray. It is generally believed, based upon the more reliable contemporary court testimony (Watkins 1991, 21-22), that Gesualdo actually committed the murders, in a clearly premeditated manner, with the assistance of four armed men, the Prince waiting just outside the bedchamber of the Princess until the Duke was killed or mortally wounded, and then murdering his wife by stabbing her multiple times, with enough force that deep gouges were left on the floor from the sword thrusts that passed entirely through the woman’s body.

<sup>5</sup> The description of the condition of the bodies may be found in the proceedings of the Grand Court of the Vicaria. The translation is by Cecil Gray.

Moro, lasso, al mio duolo  
E chi mi può dar vita,  
Ahi, che m'ancide  
e non vuol darmi aita!

O dolorosa sorte,  
Chi dar vita mi può,  
ahi, mi dà morte!

I die, alas! from my pain,  
And the one who can give me life,  
Alas, kills me  
and will not give me aid.

O grievous fate,  
The one who can give me life,  
alas, gives me death.<sup>6</sup>

In this presentation, we explore psychological aspects of the literary and musical first-person experiencing subject of the madrigal *Moro lasso*. We specifically do not address the possible psychoanalysis of Carlo Gesualdo, the historical man, despite the “strongly neurotic, even psychotic elements [of Gesualdo’s personality] which increased

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<sup>6</sup> The Italian text is taken from the collected works edition (Gesualdo 1957). The translation may be found in the second edition, and several subsequent editions, of Charles Burkhart’s (1972) *Anthology for Musical Analysis*. It is one of the few published translations that leaves unspecified the gender of the person whom the poet is describing or addressing and also avoids some of the textual mistakes that were included in older editions. We have altered the first stanza to include four lines rather than three, and the second stanza to include three lines rather than two, because this seems to better reflect the general syllabic organization and rhyme scheme of the late Italian madrigal. We also follow the Italian text of the critical edition (Gesualdo 1957), which eliminates the near repetition of the first stanza to create an almost identical second stanza, which is not provided here. Susan McClary (2004, 164) has suggested the following alternative translation:

I die, alas, in my sorrow,  
and who can give me life?  
Alas, the one who kills me will give me no help!  
O sorrowful fate,  
The one who could give me life, alas, gives me death.

in intensity throughout his life” (Watkins 1991, 169).<sup>7</sup> It is the first-person voice of the madrigal, similar in some ways to the subjective entity that Edward T. Cone (1974) described as the fictional persona of the “composer,” that falls most clearly into the legitimate study of the madrigal as a text from which a music-theoretical analysis can be derived.

Although Gesualdo’s unique musical style can only be adequately understood and appreciated in the context of the late Renaissance mannerist school of composition, we do not attempt in this presentation to provide a comparative or historical study of the Italian madrigal; nor do we attempt to trace the history of Gesualdo’s many innovative musical techniques through the works of previous composers.<sup>8</sup> Instead, we intend to investigate the psychological qualities of repetition, especially complex and subtle forms of repetitive structure, as they appear in a single musical work, the madrigal *Moro lasso*. Previous studies of Gesualdo’s music, which have focused on “contrapuntal usage, . . . unprepared dissonances, invertible counterpoint, cross-relations, unusual melodic intervals, suspension chains, degree inflections, chromatic non-functional harmony, and a rich modulatory vocabulary” have generally failed to explain the “spell-binding effect” of Gesualdo’s music (Watkins 1991, 169). By attempting to reconnect with the “essential spirit” of the music, we hope to retrieve something of significance about at least one expressive aspect of the madrigal *Moro lasso*, and perhaps also demonstrate that the composer’s literary persona actively interacts with the creation of meaning in this work and occasionally suggests complex and potentially conflicting levels of discourse.

### The Subjective Persona

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Glenn Watkins (1991, 169) seems to generally oppose the notion that Gesualdo’s mature musical style “must be viewed as the result of the last stages of a severe neurosis.” This conclusion is not required in order to accept the premise of the current presentation, that the first-person subjective persona of the madrigal *Moro lasso* is experiencing a pattern of thinking and feeling that is similar to Freud’s concept of the repetition compulsion.

<sup>8</sup> Gesualdo was strongly influenced by the mannerist composers associated with the Este court at Ferrara. The most important study of the late Italian Madrigal in relation to the mannerist school is Anthony Newcomb’s (1980) *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579-1597*. Studies related to the evolution of the mannerist style include John Turci-Escobar’s (1984) dissertation, “Gesualdo’s Harsh and Bitter Music: Expressive and Constructive Devices in the Six Books of Five-Voice Madrigals,” Carl Dahlhaus’s (1967) article “Zur chromatischen Technik Carlo Gesualdos,” and Ludwig Finscher’s (1972) article “Gesualdos ‘Atonalität’ und das Problem des musikalischen Manierismus.” The landmark survey of the development of the Italian madrigal remains Alfred Einstein’s (1949) *The Italian Madrigal*. By far the most thorough treatment of Gesualdo’s place in the history of the mannerist school, as well as the comparison of Gesualdo’s style to other late Italian madrigal composers may be found in Glenn Watkins’s (1991) *Gesualdo, the Man and His Music*.

Glenn Watkins (2010, 52-53) takes issue, to some extent, with Susan McClary's (2004, 148) characterization that "Gesualdo may well have been a nut case, but he was an exceptionally talented artist as well—one capable of producing searing beauty and astute psychological insight in his music." Watkins asks the question "why should anyone want to claim that the issue of Selfhood, which is typically but a pose for other madrigalists, is genuine and inescapable with Gesualdo?" and answers the question with the observation that "the details of Gesualdo's life virtually demand it." A number of commentators have attempted to link the composer's admittedly troubled psychological condition to the strangeness of his innovative contrapuntal style.<sup>9</sup>

For the modern listener or critic, the *persona* of Gesualdo seems to interact with his music more directly than the actual historical person. As Susan McClary (2004) has impressively demonstrated, the Renaissance madrigal was always a genre dedicated almost entirely to the idea of the subjective persona. For that reason, it is perhaps not entirely accidental that Gesualdo's most frequently anthologized madrigal is *Moro lasso*, in which the subjective persona of the *fictional author* can so clearly be imagined. In considering this unusual madrigal, we can easily fall into the complexities described by Gérard Genette (1980) in his investigation of the multiple and conflicting layers of first-person diegetic levels created by Marcel Proust, through the process of narrating as a fictional "Marcel," a character who is himself attempting to write an autobiography. As Edward T. Cone (1974, 2) has observed, even prose fiction "is narrated not by the author directly but by his persona."

The nature of the authorial voice in musical diegesis may only slightly influence the perceived independence of the narrative persona from the narrative text. According to Genette's (1980, 228-48) idea of "diegetic levels," the *extra diegetic level*, or the telling of the narrative, which is similar though not identical to the *act of narrating*, is external to the diegesis itself. With respect to the subjective genre of the late Renaissance madrigal, the role of the authorial voice, though still influential, is perhaps minimized by the extra-diegetic nature of the madrigal's first-person narrative *persona*, who already inhabits and controls the temporal space of the extra-diegetic narrative voice.

Musical texts suggesting a complex or compound authorial voice, in terms of composer vs. narrator, evoke the illusive quality of inherently internal interpretation within the level of the narrative itself, or at least within the *act of narrating*, an idea which might be described as the reception or understanding of the narrative text by the narrator.<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Kramer (1990,

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<sup>9</sup> Significant studies that have focused on the connection between Gesualdo's art and his possible psychological abnormalities include Aldous Huxley's (1960 [1956]) essay "Gesualdo: Variations on a Musical Theme," Werner Herzog's (1995) film *Gesualdo: Death for Five Voices*, and William B. Ober's (1973) psychoanalytical article "Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa: Murder, Madrigals, and Masochism."

<sup>10</sup> "In his book *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man [1979, 3-19] suggests that language is literary to the extent that it acknowledges and confronts its own rhetorical

183) has characterized narrative as “an act of continual reinterpretation.” This line of reasoning assumes an independence of subjective *personae* within a single narrative text.<sup>11</sup>

The poetic text of Gesualdo’s madrigal *Moro lasso* is believed to have been written by the composer himself (Watkins 1991, 123). Like many of the short non-attributable poetic fragments that Gesualdo selected for his sixth book of madrigals, it is remarkable for its terse semantic structure and its total dependence on the idea of antithesis, in this case “life” and “death.” Also similar to many of the texts from Gesualdo’s sixth book of madrigals, the poem essentially relates to a pathological attachment between two people. This level of topical concentration seems to have developed across the span of Gesualdo’s compositional output, his earlier published collections of madrigals being comprised of musical settings of known literary texts, composed by important and recognized poets. By the time of his last published collections (the fifth and sixth books of madrigals), however, he almost exclusively selected very short and repetitive poetic fragments, which usually are not attributable to any known poets (Turci-Escobar 1984, 18) and which frequently relate to the idea of death or dying.

The text of *Moro lasso* seems to repeat, in multiple and incongruous ways, the idea of death as the result of unfairly and tragically being denied life by the person who is the poet’s fixation of interest and expectation. The possible biographical significance of these ideas for the composer speaks for itself and was well known to any informed listener at the time of the madrigal’s publication. Similar to other madrigals from Gesualdo’s late style period, the irregularities of the poetic structure, and perhaps the semantic structure as well, seem to be somewhat obscured by the frequent repetition of relatively short segments of the text within the musical setting.

The word “life” becomes an object of obsession in the madrigal and the center point around which the repetitive rotations are based. The psychoanalytic term *cathexis*, or Freud’s (1963 [1909], 38) original German word *Besetzung*, describes the process through which an object or idea is invested with intense personal meaning, a type of signification that has been described as an “occupation” or a “charge.” The poet of *Moro lasso* begins to see the world as entirely comprised of “life” and “death.”

The development of the distinctive Gesualdine poetic antithesis, originally similar to the kind of antithetical conceit that was characteristic of the late Italian madrigal, into

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(i.e., inescapably figurative) character. If de Man is right, then it should be characteristic of literary narrative to foreground the process of narration—to tell, in effect, two stories: one referential, the other a story about storytelling... The result is a certain dissonance between story and metastory” (Kramer 1990, 186).

<sup>11</sup> “In principle, at least three distinct types of subject-position may operate within any literary narrative: that of the narrator(s), that of the person(s) whose experience or point of view focuses the narrative, and that of the fictive or projected author, who seeks (not always successfully) to integrate and interpret the others” (Kramer 1990, 186).

an object of pathological repetition and fixation seems to represent the clear assertion of an existential and subjective crises that overwhelms the genre's expected metaphor of "unrequited love." Through this transgressive insistence upon the reality of the proposed antithesis, "life or death," the subjective reality of the narrator tends to merge with that of the authorial persona.<sup>12</sup> Since the madrigal could essentially represent an interior monologue, the first-person voice never specifically addressing an individual listener, the meaning of the madrigal is ultimately determined by the subjective interpretation of its own *act of narrating*.

## Repetition

It is possible to compare the textual repetitions in *Moro lasso* to Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion, in which a person repeats a traumatic event over and over again, either in thoughts or actions, including dreams and hallucinations. Gesualdo's technique of repeating small elements many times in preparation for a larger structural repetition may perhaps represent or allegorize a version of the Freudian repetition compulsion, similar to the "uncanny" repetitive patterns Carolyn Abbate (1991, 56) has identified in Paul Dukas's tone poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, the incessant repetition of a few distinctive motivic patterns in *Moro lasso*, such as the descending half step motive, closely resembles the obsessive repetition of a similar descending half step motive in Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 23 (the *Appassionata*), which Lawrence Kramer (1984, 36) has described as "troublesome [and] omnipresent."

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<sup>12</sup> In his essay "Wordsworth and the Tears of Adam," Neil Hertz (2009 [1967], 21-38) suggests that both William Wordsworth and John Milton were able to compose highly metaphorical poetic language that seems to transcend the apparent voice of the fictional narrative persona and thus tends to express the emotional affect of the presumed authorial persona.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of associating the psychopathology of a composer, or the composer's persona, with the repetitive aspects of a musical work, especially the possible connection between the nineteenth-century mental disorder known as *monomania* and the musical structure called the *idée fixe*, has been explored in Francesca Brittan's (2006) article "Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic: Melancholy, Monomania, and Romantic Autobiography." The cultural association between disability and music is the subject of Joseph N. Straus's (2006) article "Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory." Other studies on this topic include Stephen Rodgers's (2006) "Mental Illness and Musical Metaphor in the First Movement of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*" and Adam Ockelford's (2006) "Using a Music-Theoretical Approach to Explore the Impact of Disability on Musical Development: A Case Study." The essays included in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, edited by Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus, provide a number of informative and insightful perspectives on the issue of the cultural concept of disability and its association to the understanding and perception of music.



Kramer (1984, 27) has compared this kind of “unnecessarily repetitive” structure to “a mental stammer, a sign that the normal operations of consciousness have been thwarted.”

One of the important connections between the obsessive and ubiquitous motivic repetitions in *Moro lasso* and Freud’s concept of the repetition compulsion, is the quality of idiosyncratic incongruity that dominates the formal structure of Gesualdo’s madrigal. Not only is the poetic text inherently repetitious, but its individual lines are repeated asymmetrically in the musical setting. The unexpected textual repetitions in the madrigal may be compared to Freud’s (1963 [1909], 76) case history of the “rat man,” in which the patient compulsively repeats a prayer to the woman who is the object of his obsession, except that instead of the supposedly intended line “may God protect her,” he often says, “may God *not* protect her.”<sup>14</sup> This aspect of the “rat man’s” case history exhibits two important elements of Freud’s concept of the repetition compulsion that may also be applied to an analysis of the madrigal *Moro lasso*: the Freudian principle of the *love-hate complex*, in which the idea of love is inappropriately conflated with the idea of hate, and the Freudian principle of *distortion*, in which an obsessive thought is understood to have already gone through an extensive process of transformation before it becomes available to the conscious mind, perhaps similar to the constantly developing motivic structures in Gesualdo’s madrigal.

The addition of musical repetition to the already repetitive poetic text of the madrigal not only functions as an expressive or topical signifier of the idea of *repetition* itself, but also as a dramatic or mimetic structure, conveying a sense of excessive emotional connection to the key words of repetition. Gesualdo has essentially created a

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<sup>14</sup> The asymmetrical pattern of textual repetition and the similarity to Freud’s case history of the “rat man” are perhaps perceived more emphatically in the version of the text provided in some older editions, such as Carl Parrish’s (1958) *A Treasury of Early Music*. In Parrish’s version, based on the first publication of 1611 (rather than the score edition of 1613), there are three short stanzas, the first two of which are identical except for the last word of each stanza. Parrish provides the Italian text as the following:

Moro lasso al mio duolo,  
e chi mi può dar vita,  
ahi, che m’ancide  
e non vuol darmi vita.

Moro lasso al mio duolo,  
e chi mi può dar vita,  
ahi, che m’ancide  
e non vuol darmi aita.

O dolorosa forte,  
chi dar vita mi può,  
ahi, mi dà morte.

structure of *romantic repetition* similar to certain works of the English and German romantic poets, a structure that usually expresses “distress, disturbance, or turbulence” (Kramer 1984, 27). An example of this kind of *romantic repetition* may be found in Heinrich Heine’s poem “Ich hab im Traum geweinet,” known to most musicians as part of Robert Schumann’s song cycle *Dichterliebe*. Here is the text and English translation of “Ich hab im Traum geweinet.”

Ich hab im Traum geweinet,  
mir träumte du lägest im Grab.  
Ich wachte auf und die Träne  
floss noch von der Wange herab.

Ich hab im Traum geweinet,  
mir träumte du verliessest mich..  
Ich wachte auf, und ich weinte  
noch lange bitterlich.

Ich hab im Traum geweinet,  
mir träumte du wärest mir noch gut.  
Ich wachte auf, und noch immer  
strömt meine Tränen flut.

In my dream I wept,  
I dreamt — in your grave you lay.  
I woke, and still the tears  
Were running down my face.

In my dream I wept,  
I dreamt you abandoned me.  
I woke, and yet the tears  
Fell long and bitterly.

In my dream I wept,  
I dreamt you were still true.  
I woke, and still the tears  
All in a flood still flew.<sup>15</sup>

The poetic text of *Moro lasso* is, of course, even more saturated with repetition than Heine’s poem, but similar to the poem, the madrigal seems to progressively and irrationally destroy the possibility of redemption. The false and always weakened dialectic between “life” and “death” in the madrigal is obsessively negated by the sheer

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<sup>15</sup> This translation of “Ich hab im Traum geweinet” may be found in Lawrence Kramer’s (1984, 54) *Music and Poetry*.

repetition of the words “death,” and “dying,” including both the first and last words of the madrigal. Lawrence Kramer (1984, 54) described the semantic journey of Heine’s poem as “the defeat of wish-fulfillment by obsession.”

### *Grundgestalt*

The formal design of *Moro lasso* presents an unusually powerful display of successive or continual iteration as a method for the generation of form. Not only is the repeat of the first stanza (mm. 16-29) an almost exact thematic repetition of its original first rotation (mm. 1-15), but the concluding two lines of the second stanza (mm. 29-42) are also asymmetrically repeated.<sup>16</sup> Considered together with the developmental treatment of several important motives and referential sonorities, the madrigal represents a nearly continuous process of variation structure, similar to the concept described by Arnold Schoenberg as *developing variation*,<sup>17</sup> but in this case expressed primarily at relatively deep levels of the structure. The complete madrigal is provided as Example 1<sup>18</sup> and a formal diagram is shown in Example 2.

According to Kofi Agawu (1991, 74) “one of the invariant characteristics of beginning is a composing of the global progression in miniature.” In the madrigal *Moro lasso* the distinctive motivic, harmonic, and intervallic content of mm. 1-2 may function as an indication of the most significant structural aspects of the work as a whole.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> “Musical repetition can also be understood as a consequence of behaviors related to composing. According to this perspective, in-score repetitions are traces of a compositional act, artifacts of a composer’s conscious or unconscious choice to use repetitive structures” (Margulis 2014, 55).

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the best explanation and summary of Schoenberg’s concept of *developing variation* may be found in the first chapter of Walter Frisch’s (1984, 1-34) book *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*. Frisch provides the following quotation from Schoenberg (2010 [1975] [1931], 397), “Music of the homophonic-melodic style of composition, that is, music with a main theme, accompanied by and based on harmony, produces its material by, as I call it, *developing variation*. This means that variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand—thus elaborating the *idea* of the piece.”

<sup>18</sup> Example 1 is taken from the critical works collection (Gesualdo 1957), which is derived from the score edition of 1613.

<sup>19</sup> In a description of his concept of *Grundgestalt*, Arnold Schoenberg (2010 [1975] [1931], 290) observed that “whatever happens in a piece of music is nothing but the endless reshaping of a basic shape... there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more

gradual development of the motivic-intervallic content of mm. 1-2 into a “controlling motive” for the entire madrigal, perhaps similar to Schoenberg’s idea of the *Grundgestalt*, may be discovered through an investigation of the repetition of this controlling motive at various levels of the madrigal’s voice leading structure. In many musical works the structural voice leading of an opening motivic gesture will resemble the large scale voice leading reduction of an entire movement.<sup>20</sup> The controlling motive of the madrigal (E♯ moving down to D♮ by half steps) first appears in mm. 1-2 and is repeated at many deeper levels, usually in some way referencing or directly recalling the first words of the text, “moro, lasso.”<sup>21</sup>

As Watkins (1991, 142) has observed, Gesualdo possessed a “remarkable capacity... for motivic unification and development.” In Example 1, we find the initial appearance of the “controlling motive” in the upper voice in mm. 1-2. The motive is repeated in the bass voice through parallel motion at the interval of a major third.<sup>22</sup> Motive B (see Example 3) is also presented for the first time in mm. 1-2, occurring in the tenor voice and repeated through parallel motion at the interval of a perfect fourth in the alto. A student of the score may observe that, through this process, four voices are created

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severely, nothing but the theme itself... all the shapes appearing in a piece of music are *foreseen* in the ‘theme.’”

<sup>20</sup> Charles Burkhart (1978) provides an explanation of multi-level motivic repetition in his article “Schenker’s ‘Motivic Parallelisms;’” also see Allen Cadwallader’s (1982) dissertation “Multileveled Motivic Repetition in Selected Intermezzi for Piano of Johannes Brahms.” A very similar pattern of translation between small and large scale tonal progressions is the subject of Irene Montefiore Levenson’s (1981) dissertation “Motivic-Harmonic Transference in the Late Works of Schubert: Chromaticism in Large and Small Spans.”

<sup>21</sup> The first two sonorities of the madrigal, a C♯ Major triad followed directly by an A Minor triad in first inversion, represent a doubly-chromatic mediant relationship, which most listeners who are familiar with the harmonic language of western classical music (WCM) tend to associate with the work of composers from the late romantic style period, especially the music of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss. A comparison between the doubly-chromatic mediant relationship and Freud’s concept of the “uncanny” (*das Unheimliche*) has been suggested by Richard Cohn (2004), who makes use of the neo-Riemannian term *hexatonic pole* to describe the doubly-chromatic mediant relationship. It was in Freud’s (1963 [1919]) essay on the “uncanny” in which he first described in detail his concept of the repetition compulsion.

<sup>22</sup> Zarlino (1998 [1558], 442) recommended that composers avoid consecutive parallel major thirds: “the composer ought not to use two or more imperfect consonances one after another, ascending or descending together... such as two major or minor thirds, or two major or minor sixths... for not only do these offend... but their procedure causes a certain bitterness to be heard.”

from two motives at the beginning of the madrigal. Motive B may possess a similarity to the protestant chorale melody *Aus tiefer Not*, a setting of the penitential Psalm 130.

Each line of the poetic text is set to a distinctive motivic figure that may be understood as a version of motive A or motive B. The initial appearance of the “controlling motive,” or motive A, is shown in Example 3-1 and a partial repetition of the motive appears in Example 3-3. Inverted forms of the motive are shown in Examples 3-2 and 3-4. Example 3-5 describes the very dissonant form of the motive that creates the complex pattern of imitative counterpoint that concludes the madrigal.

The initial appearance of motive B is shown in example 3-6 and repetitions of motive B are described in Examples 3-7, 3-8, and 3-9. In Example 3-10 an inverted form of motive B is described, which resembles the original form of the “controlling motive,” or motive A, beginning with motion from F to E that references the original motion from E $\sharp$  to E $\flat$ . The initial appearance of motive C, which consists of a descending tritone, is shown in Example 3-11 and a repetition of this motive is described in Example 3-12. Forms of motive C, which are either expanded to a descending perfect fifth or contracted to a descending perfect fourth, are shown in Examples 3-13 and 3-15. A form of motive C, which is an inverted version of Example 3-12, is shown in Example 3-14.

Expressions of multi-level motivic repetition related to the “controlling motive” are shown in Example 4. The initial appearance of the “controlling motive” in mm. 1-2 and its continuation into a cadence on A minor in m. 3 is described in Example 4-1. In Example 4-2 the florid contrapuntal section in mm. 3-10 is represented as a prolongation of C major harmony, with an E in the upper voice and a C in the bass, this passage functioning as a continuation to the C $\sharp$  major chord in m. 1, which included an E $\sharp$  in the upper voice, thereby constituting a partial statement of the “controlling motive” at a deeper level of structure. Example 4-3 provides a voice leading reduction of mm. 10-12, in which there are two motives that are shown to be set against each other contrapuntally and canonically, a motive consisting of two successive minor thirds, thereby outlining the interval of a diminished fifth (G-E-C $\sharp$ ), and a motive that consists of a rising half step line, the inverse form of the “controlling motive,” all these motivic statements ending on the referential C $\sharp$  major triad in m. 12.

In Example 4-4 the madrigal’s initial E $\sharp$  over C $\sharp$  is shown to move to the E $\flat$  over C $\flat$  in m. 3, and then to the D $\sharp$  over B $\flat$  in m. 12. This motion describes the course of the “controlling motive” as it is heard during the entire first rotation of the madrigal’s first stanza, creating an important level of hidden motivic repetition, a version of the “controlling motive” (G $\sharp$ -G-F $\sharp$ ) even being shown to create the 4-3 suspension at the conclusion of the first rotation of the first stanza in m. 15. Example 4-5 describes the initial appearance of the “controlling motive” at the beginning of the second rotation of the first stanza in mm. 16-18, this time transposed to the level of F $\sharp$  major, also showing the voice-leading connection between this appearance of the “controlling motive” and the original C $\sharp$  referential sonority and the eventual prolongation of the previous D major harmony.

Example 4-6 represents the F major harmony in mm. 18-24 as a background level motivic continuation of the D major harmony that is achieved in m. 15 and picked up again in m. 18. Example 4-7 is a graph of mm. 24-26 and is directly analogous to Example 2-3 (mm. 10-12), this time cadencing on B major rather than C# major. Example 4-8 is a graph of the ending of the second rotation of the madrigal's first stanza (mm. 26-29), showing that two partial statements of the "controlling motive" (C#-C in the bass and (E#)F-E in an inner voice) are set against an inversion of the minor-thirds motive that outlines a tritone from Examples 4-3 and 4-7, this analysis including the initial referential C# major sonority from m. 1.

Example 4-9 describes the point of imitation on the words "O dolorosa sorte" in mm. 29-33, cadencing on E major in m. 31 and B major in m. 33, this passage helps to demonstrate a partial level of hidden repetition, with the upper voice moving to E in m. 31 and D# in m. 33. Example 4-10 describes the background voice leading of the entire madrigal, which centers around the E major harmony achieved in m. 34 as the functioning dominate of the entire structure. Example 4-11 is a graph of the setting of the last poetic line of the madrigal, mm. 35-42, the bass essentially maintaining a prolongation of the dominant during this section, despite extremely complex dissonant contrapuntal elements and the reappearance of the chromatic "controlling motive" and its inversion at a number of structural levels. In Example 4-12, the full presentation of the "controlling motive" is shown to consist of the foreground elements previously identified in mm. 1-2 and the madrigal's last harmonic sonority in m. 42, an A major chord with C# in the upper voice.

As Glenn Watkins (1991, 109) has observed, "the fervor of the late madrigal is increasingly measured not only by the temperature of favoured sentiments but also by their compulsive repetition." In this kind of repetitive texture, we may "hear the intrinsic meaning of each theme as colored by what it has been" (Newcomb 1984, 240). Edward T. Cone (1982, 240) has even described "formal repetition..." as a "representation... of events rehearsed in memory." Consistent with the idea of the repetition compulsion, the first-person experiencing subject of *Moro lasso* seems to be unable to progress beyond a tortured pattern of ironic repetition, including the repetition of hidden and distorted layers of its own narrative text, or perhaps its own *act of narrating*.

### *Todestrieb*

Robert S. Hatten (1991, 76) has suggested that a musical work may be characterized by an *expressive trajectory*, such as the "tragic-to-triumphant" trajectory of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, or the "relentlessly tragic" finale of the *Appassionata*. These expressive trajectories are understood to be similar to the idea of paradigmatic plot archetypes, but comprised of a succession of esthetically warranted expressive states. The stylistic competency of the listener allows the various *topoi* and musical codes to reliably communicate each expressive state, thus producing an expressive trajectory from the temporal arrangement of these more basic elements.

In the case of Gesualdo's madrigal *Moro lasso*, the expressive trajectory traces the poet's ideological progression from agony ("Moro, lasso, al mio duolo"), to the expectation of help ("aita"), to the final acceptance of death ("morte"). This expressive trajectory also emphasizes the process of repetition itself, as both formal and internal repetition continually characterizes the poet's manner of discourse. Both the literary text of the poem and the musical text may be understood to converge upon the same *expressive trajectory*, which seems to point towards its ultimate conclusion on the word "morte." Similar to Freud's death drive or *Todestrieb* the madrigal is not motivated by the pleasure principle, but rather is seeking its own conclusion in death. As Carolyn Abbate (1991, 56) has observed, "when music ends, it ends absolutely, in the cessation of passing time and movement, in death."

The expressive trajectory of *Moro lasso* essentially subsumes the concept of Freud's *Todestrieb*. As the madrigal moves towards its conclusion on the word "morte,"<sup>23</sup> its vital energy and its formal structure seem to expire in a complex and dissonant culmination that is, perhaps ironically, not entirely convincing in terms of harmonic or tonal closure. Freud's concept of the *Todestrieb* explains the repetition compulsion as an instinct that compels an individual to behave in a hopeless and self-defeating manner, because of some actual or theoretical trauma, that renders happiness and realistic goal-seeking impossible. As described by Paul Russell (2006, 611-12):

"The compulsion to repeat was, in fact, for him [Freud] *the major piece of evidence that there is a powerful, self-destructive force at work within us, which is, at all times, re-traumatizing, pulling apart, tearing asunder, killing...* To the extent that we experience the present in terms only of the past, to the degree that we murder present time and opportunity by persistently, malignantly demonstrating that there is no possible difference between the past and the present, to that degree we cease to live... To the extent that we intend our traumatizing repetitions, to that extent we intend not to live or to grow, we intend to die... The repetition compulsion is paradoxically both an invitation to a relationship *and* an invitation to repeat the interruption of some important earlier relationship. It is both adaptive and suicidal because, in this context, relatedness is what the person most needs and cannot yet feel."

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<sup>23</sup> It is, of course, possible that Gesualdo references the poetic conceit known as *la petite mort* with the final word, if not all of the instances of the words "death" or "dying" within the text of *Moro lasso*. Susan McClary (2004, 59-61) has suggested that the overt use of the metaphor in Arcadelt's *Il bianco e dolce cigno* "produces something far more significant... than just a dirty joke" and that the madrigal "presents an extraordinarily complex model of Selfhood," in relation to "anxiety over the loss of control entailed in passionate transport... and the mysterious mechanism of desire, which fuels a sense of agency even as it seems to come unbidden from a source nonidentical with the Self." The sexual metaphor related to "death" may be more plainly observed in Gesualdo's "*Mercè*," *grido piangendo* (from the fifth book of madrigals), another madrigal that makes prominent use of both the C# major triad and the descending half step motive. As Susan McClary (2004, 161) has observed regarding "*Mercè*," *grido piangendo*, death "is not really the goal of this game, but rather manipulation of the Beloved."

Clearly the madrigal *Moro lasso* is an attempt to express, or possibly to re-create, a powerful emotional response that was, at least theoretically, felt by a real person, or at least a fictional persona. Although many of the late Italian madrigal composers, especially those of the *nuova maniera* style, attempted to directly and mimetically express very intense emotional states with their music, Gesualdo seems to surpass his contemporaries in terms of both the intensity of the expressed subjectivity of feeling and the obsessive qualities of the musical forms. As Igor Stravinsky (or possibly Robert Craft) has observed (Watkins 1991, vii-viii), Gesualdo “weights the traditional madrigal of poised sentiments and conceits, of amorous delicacies and indelicacies, with a heavy load.”

### Conclusion

Although we must take seriously the admonition offered by Glenn Watkins (1991, 149) that “the temptation to consider the traumatic events of Gesualdo’s first marriage as largely responsible for the later developments of his art is specious,” there are a number of facts about the biography of Carlo Gesualdo that seem to correlate with his unusually expressive musical style. Firstly, we know from several accounts that he was capable of an almost manic level of obsessive interest in musical composition and in discussing his own innovative technique.<sup>24</sup> We also know that he was susceptible to lengthy periods of almost total withdrawal from social contact and that closely associated with these periods of isolation were intense expressions of guilt and contrition.<sup>25</sup> We also know that his second marriage was characterized by some type of manifestly dysfunctional behavior that caused the two brothers of his wife, Leonara d’Este, to constantly express their concern for the physical safety of their sister.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> We know this mainly from the detailed descriptions of Gesualdo’s character and personal habits sent to Alfonso II, the Duke of Ferrara, by Count Alfonso Fontanelli in 1594, when Gesualdo was traveling from southern Italy to Ferrara for his marriage to Leonora d’Este, the cousin of Duke Alfonso II. For a portion of the journey he was accompanied by Fontanelli, who sent at least eight lengthy reports to the Duke concerning Gesualdo’s demeanor and general attributes. We may speculate that the Duke had concerns regarding Gesualdo’s temperament and mental stability. Selected translations from Fontanelli’s letters to the Duke relating to Gesualdo have been published by Anthony Newcomb (1968) and Glenn Watkins (1991, 37-48).

<sup>25</sup> Glenn Watkins (1991, 252) has observed that the nearest Gesualdo may have come to composing in a true first-person subjective voice might have occurred in his late-period penitential sacred music. “The choice of texts in the volumes of *Sacrae Cantiones* is revealing. Just as his madrigals continually emphasize the images of despair, suffering, and death... the motets stress their Latin counterparts. Anyone inclined to connect Gesualdo’s texts, which as Einstein [1949, 692] says, ‘consist of nothing but cries of anguish, self-accusation, and repentance,’ with his life will find ample evidence here.”

<sup>26</sup> Watkins (2010, 13-96) provides a thorough review of the issue of domestic violence in Gesualdo’s second marriage. It is reported that Pope Paul V consented to



Despite the personal traumas suffered and inflicted by Don Carlo Gesualdo, as an actual historical man,<sup>27</sup> what may be of genuine concern for the music theorist is the *persona* of Gesualdo, who informs and interacts with the musical text of the madrigal *Moro lasso* almost in the manner of a dramatic character.<sup>28</sup> Similar to Edward T. Cone's (1982) notion of the composer as *musical persona*, a fictive "Gesualdo" may be constructed as a dialectical partner to the experiencing subject of *Moro lasso*. This would be similar to the fictional "Berlioz" who may interact with the "young musician" who is the programmatic hero of the *Symphonie fantastique*, or the fictional "Beethoven" who is in dialogue with whatever subjective entity is "experiencing happy feelings on arriving in the country" in the Sixth Symphony.<sup>29</sup>

It is easy to imagine the persona of "Gesualdo" as the first-person subjective voice of *Moro lasso*, hopelessly and ironically seeking "help" but instead receiving death; however, we must ask who is really speaking in this madrigal.<sup>30</sup> According to Freud (Russell 2006, 614), "the repetition compulsion is a repeat of something which may not have actually happened." The voice of the madrigal could be interpreted as either the first or second wife of the composer speaking in the first person, seeking "help," but only receiving the pathological behavior of their obsessive husband. The first person of the madrigal could also represent Gesualdo's ill-fated mistress of his later years,<sup>31</sup> or either of

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grant Leonora d'Este a divorce in 1609 on the grounds of "excesses and prodigalities," but the divorce was never officially enacted (Watkins 1991, 80-81).

<sup>27</sup> "Given the evidence of a life riddled with guilt, betrayal, murder, ill health, and perhaps a search for sexual identity, Gesualdo clearly suffered under various degrees of mental distress for most of his mature life" (Watkins 2010, 62).

<sup>28</sup> L. Poundie Burstein (2006, 187-98) has suggested that the general perception of the French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) as being "mad" has significantly influenced the popular reception and interpretation of his unusual "modernist" style of musical composition.

<sup>29</sup> In his essay "Dr. Johnson's Forgetfulness, Descartes' Piece of Wax," Neil Hertz (2009 [1992], 76-79) suggests that for readers who are aware of the "actual" disfigurement suffered by the body of the English romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, after his drowning near the coast of Lerici in Italy, the meaning of Shelley's highly metaphorical poem *The Triumph of Life* is significantly altered by the ironic fate of the poet's "actual" body. The distortion and defacement of Shelley's physical body is also a central topic in Paul de Man's (1984, 93-123) essay "Shelley Disfigured."

<sup>30</sup> As Roland Barthes (1974, 151) has observed, "what we hear, therefore, is the *displaced* voice which the reader lends, by proxy, to the discourse... we see that writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice of reading itself: *in the text, only the reader speaks.*"

<sup>31</sup> Watkins (2010, 26-30) provides a thorough review of the historical information regarding Gesualdo's mistress during his second marriage, Aurelia d'Errico, who was

his two sons (who both preceded the composer in death).<sup>32</sup> More abstractly, the experiencing subject of the madrigal might be *life* itself, or more specifically the ability to lead a productive and fulfilling life that is being denied that opportunity by “Gesualdo” and his compulsive disorder.

In *Sento che nel partire* from Gesualdo’s second book of madrigals, the poetic text,<sup>33</sup> expresses the pleasant momentary distress that is experienced when parting with a loved one. This same poem is set by Cipriano de Rore with a gentle effect derived from various madrigalisms for words such as “parting” or “joy.” In Gesualdo’s setting of the text, however, the meaning is reversed and the “momentary anguish upon departure which turns to joy upon the thought of return becomes... an unrelieved cry of distress” (Watkins 1991, 129). It is never certain whether the trauma creates the repetition, or the compulsion creates the pattern of behavior that causes the trauma. As Sigmund Freud (1997 [1900], 160) described the association between Shakespeare and his obsessively traumatized character Hamlet, “Every genuine poetical creation must have proceeded from more than one motive, more than one impulse in the mind of the poet, and must admit of more than one interpretation.”

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tried and convicted of witchcraft after confessing to her crimes under torture. Gesualdo’s attorney requested that she receive the death penalty (although the court did not impose that punishment), perhaps suggesting the final two lines of the madrigal, “the one who can give me life, alas, gives me death.”

<sup>32</sup> Gesualdo’s son from his second marriage, “Alfonsino,” died as an infant in October of 1600 (Watkins 2010, 25). The adult son from Gesualdo’s first marriage, Don Emmanuele, “who hated his father and had longed for his death,” was killed in a riding accident, only two weeks prior to the death of his father in 1613. The quotation is taken from a report by Don Ferrante della Marra, as quoted by Watkins (2010, 35).

<sup>33</sup> The literary text was composed by Alfonso d’Avalos, Marchese del Vasto, who was the grandfather of Gesualdo’s first wife Donna Maria d’Avalos (Watkins 1991, 129).

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