Chopin Fragments: Narrative Voice in the First Ballade

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Music cannot narrate. It lacks the words to do so. That much is clear. But the idea that narration in literature also lacks stability despite its enshrouding in words often escapes the long critique of music as narrative.\(^1\) Literary narration is fraught, fragmented, and populated with voices that come and go. Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, a classic in the study of narrative, is really an effort to understand all the contradictions and instabilities in the narration of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Genette’s reader (this reader) is left to wonder if the literary critic simply could not abide uncertainty. And Proust’s novel is not a special case. Why are there two narrators in Dickens’s *Bleak House*? What happens to the first narrator of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*? How is it that Nathan narrates his own death in David Mitchell’s *Slade House*? Narration is a problem in literature as well as music.

This article will consider the problem of narration in a collection of works gathered around Chopin’s Ballade in G Minor, op. 23: Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak*, Poe’s “The Raven,” Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod*, Dickens’s *The Chimes*, and Władysław Szpilman’s *The Pianist* along with its cinematic adaptation by Roman Polanski. Chopin’s Ballade is featured prominently in the two movies under consideration, while the remaining works are either influential for the composer (*Konrad Wallenrod*) or develop themes common to the Ballade. The intent, though, is not to interpret the Ballade

\(^1\)The literature around that long critique is too enormous to detail here. However, there are several summaries of the issues that readers may find helpful, including: Seth Monahan, *Mahler’s Symphonic Sonatas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 63–74; Michael L. Klein, “Musical Story” in *Music and Narrative since 1900*, ed. Michael L. Klein, and Nicholas Reyland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 3–28; and Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 11–37.

Thus lute strings, shuddering from a heavy stroke,
Vibrate and burst.
—Adam Mickiewicz, *Konrad Wallenrod*
through the false mirror of the surrounding works. The Ballade is not the lesser figure that receives its meaning only through reference to the imaginary of cinema or the symbolic of literature. It is an exemplary case that allows us to think through the problems of narration. Narrators come and go; they often have difficulty forming themselves; they fragment and disappear; and they serve as models for the unspoken problems of subjectivity itself.

The sections of the article do not proceed to a grand conclusion underscored by a plot-like arrangement. The article breaks Aristotle’s rule of poetics that a plot ought not be “episodic” but consist of a logical order of events. The inexorable logic of a plot is eschewed so that an imagined teleology will not take the place of thinking. Instead, each section illustrates or argues a difficulty around narration, returning again and again to Chopin’s Ballade either to extend that argument or to begin a new one. If there is a thesis that ties the sections together, it is that the problems of musical narration are not exclusive to music. Music is not reflective but performative; it does not show the world but makes it. And music makes the world in a performative dance that includes us, the listeners. A proper understanding of musical narration involves understanding that beyond its lack of words, music cannot narrate because narration itself cannot fulfill the tasks we have assigned to it. Chopin’s Ballade performs narration’s difficulties in the midst of its effort to produce a musical narrator capable of telling a tale.

**Crimson Peak**

Edith Cushing has come to a soirée in her hometown of Buffalo in 1901. Mr. Cushing, Edith’s father, is a successful businessman, and the party has a distinctly Victorian upper-class aura. At the piano is Lucille Sharpe, the sister of Thomas, a pale but dashing young man who will marry Edith later in the story. Lucille performs a cropped version of the final measures of Chopin’s Ballade No. 1 in G Minor. She is dressed in crimson, and her countenance is oddly detached for such ruinous music. The virtuoso descent into the low G is performed like a string of pearls, perfectly spaced, without passion. The chromatic scales in octaves are equally self-possessed, unwinding with a clockmaker’s perfection, commencing as if Lucille were practicing at half speed. Her hands are rigid, like her body at the piano. Nonetheless, after she plays the final well-placed note in the low register, the guests respond with approval. Perhaps they hear in her performance the ordered signs of Victorian dignity, polish, and restraint, admiring her playing not for what she adds to the music but for what she leaves out. Her cool exterior masks the fury that she releases much later in the movie when she murders Thomas, with whom she has had an incestuous relationship, before turning her rage on Edith. But Lucille does not find the revenge she seeks. Edith crushes her skull with a shovel, and Lucille, now a deathly black wraith, spends eternity making cold-blooded music at the piano. Her dark secret love harbors the madness arrested from the music and transmits it to Edith.

It would be easy to read Crimson Peak as a morality tale with twenty-first-century values refracted through the Victorian looking glass of decorum. But the figure of Lucille at the piano, both withheld and excessive (the crimson gown), suggests something more. Lucille resembles an otherworldly visitant, a ghost in the machine that regulates desire by its own peculiar inscrutability, drawing the fascination of the nameless men and igniting the fear of Edith. Throughout the movie, Lucille’s strangely cultivated but sober playing makes demands that cannot be answered because they cannot be understood. Since her music is so detached, it raises the possibility of one of those strange paradoxes of thought and agency: perhaps Lucille does not play the music but is played by it. Perhaps she is an effect fallen from the gap between Edith and the unfathomable music.

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3On the expanded vision of performativity to include makers, performers, audience members, and critics, see Lawrence Kramer, *The Thought of Music* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016], particularly chapter 6 ("Virtuosity, Reading, Authorship: A Genealogy"), and chapter 7 ("The Newer Musicology!: Context, Performance, and the Musical Work").
4*Crimson Peak* [Universal Pictures, 2015] was produced by Guillermo del Toro, Callum Green, Jon Jashni, and Thomas Tull.
One suspects already from the scene where Lucille plays the coda of Chopin's Ballade that she is more apparition than flesh. After Edith murders her, Lucille simply returns to her proper place within the realm of the dead, like some messenger from the Real who in the most unlikely of circumstances finds her way home. One suspects that Lucille will not stay put as the story comes to its improbable close. For the moment, though, she remains tucked away from the living, sending her dispassionate and inscrutable messages in the form of coolly elegant piano music. Like the final passages of Chopin's Ballade, Lucille is liminal, circulating between the living and dead, an observer and a character, a teller of the tale and the tale itself. *Crimson Peak* is impossible, not only because the tale is populated by ghosts but also because it tries to close its cycles of desire through a character who occupies a realm from which no tale can be told. Such narratives draw their authority precisely from the illusory domain of what has fallen out of the Symbolic, although no subject can really tell their tale while occupying this non-space of the Real. Like the Ballade, *Crimson Peak* occupies a space that is no space at all.

**A Narrative without a Story**

Because it borrows the title of a poetic genre, Chopin's Ballade in G Minor, op. 23 (1836), like its three younger siblings, asks listeners to seek the very words whose absence the music announces. Since the early twentieth century, critics have tended to find those words in the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, though there was already a strong connection between the Polish poet and Chopin in Paris's salon culture of the 1830s and 40s.\(^5\) The problem is not that we are uncertain if Chopin had Mickiewicz's poetry in mind when he composed his ballades but that the act of finding the missing text involves an ideology in which a poem is an interpretation of a ballade because words are more stable than music.\(^6\) Interpretation does not work that way; it does not seek a closed point.

An alternate strategy that eschews a particular poem as the correlative for the First Ballade involves developing a characterless and storyless narrative, although this hardly solves the problem. What could be more evident after so many have paid their respects than that the Ballade unfolds a tragic story in three acts?\(^7\) The first act (mm. 8–94) unveils a dire situation in the haunted rumination of a waltz-like theme, countered by a far-off vision bearing the aspect of a nocturne (mm. 68–82) and sealed to sleep by a berceuse (mm. 82–94). Act II launches a visceral action sequence, ignited by an urgent version of the waltz (mm. 94–106), opening into the exalted vista of the nocturne (mm.


\(^6\)Such misunderstandings about interpretation are discussed in Lawrence Kramer, *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). An apt passage for Chopin's Ballade: "'Put concretely, it does not matter that *Hamlet* has an extensive substrate of declarative sentences and that Chopin's Ballade in G Minor, op. 23, does not. The fact that I can paraphrase the words 'To be or not to be, that is the question' does not mean that I can say unequivocally what the whole soliloquy is about, much less the whole play. The fact that I cannot say that the ballade's shifting between incongruous themes in third-related keys is 'about' a specific narrative does not mean that the music lacks narrative import" (70).

106–18) before wending its way to a manic fairy-waltz on a new theme (mm. 138–50). Virtuosic passagework manages to establish E♭ major, that alternate space and time in which the nocturne and berceuse first revealed themselves in the opening act. These paired themes now return in an apotheosis with a churning accompaniment in the new key (mm. 166–94). But E♭ fails us, as we knew it would. A peripeteia [one hesitates to claim the moment as an anagnorisis because it is so unclear that the music has been successful in constructing a main character] denudes the story of its success with an unprepared return to the home key in m. 190. The third and final act, led again by the waltz, brings to the fore the final conflagration (Presto con fuoco). The story ends as suspected through the Ballade’s first ponderous note: obliteration.

One could bolster this narrative by resorting to the vocabulary of a well-known machine. Each act of the Ballade is a rotation signaled by the waltz-like theme. The incipit of the waltz shares a contour-class with that of the berceuse, as if the latter has managed an alchemical transformation of the rumination in the former. The structure of promise in the exposition-cum-first-act, sealed by a perfect authentic cadence in the submediant (the essential expositional closure of m. 82), finds a false echo in the failed structure of accomplishment marked by another perfect authentic cadence near the end of the second rotation (m. 180). The structure of accomplishment is failed not because the music never reaches a perfect authentic cadence (it does), but because it does so in the wrong key, E♭. The return to G minor in m. 190, unprepared by any smooth modulation through a pivot chord and secondary dominant, is like a harsh awakening. The apparatuses of music analysis might continue to consume the features of the Ballade and expel them through the theory-as-narrative machine until they form a totalizing story that compels endorsement for its astonishing capacity to devour every observation.8 Where the first narrative [a poem by Mickiewicz] forecloses interpretation through an ideology of the word as more secure than music, the second narrative (music analysis as hermeneutics), which at first seems so tame and obvious, forestalls interpretation through an insistence that musical structure is actually more precise than words. In the second paradigm, the interpreter simply needs to set the structure in place and then find some signifier for every element of the edifice, as if one needed to diagram all the sentences of Hamlet’s third soliloquy before claiming that it’s about suicide (even if it is about both more and less than that).

Both approaches to the narrative of Chopin’s First Ballade have a way of pushing away the uncanny thought that we are told a story through a medium that cannot tell stories. A subject comes to life where there should be no subject. A narrator speaks where there are no words, and this storyteller gives an account of his death after the fact [yes, for Chopin, the narrator is a man]. Search through the structure of the Ballade forever; become familiar with every detail of its making; perform it early and often each day; you will not find the crucial material that brings the narrator to life. No animating substance accounts for the potency of its voice.

Poe’s “The Raven” [1845] is a poem that seems already read even on a first reading—read before it is read. A young man in his dark chamber ruminates over the name of his departed lover, Lenore. Hearing sounds outside his door, he first sees nothing until a raven enters, perches on a bust of Pallas, and begins to answer each of the poet’s questions with a single word, “Nevermore.” As Poe himself remarks on his most famous poem, it is not until the last stanza that a turn of the screw heightens the terror of the

8The allusion to Deleuze and Guattari’s machine metaphors is conscious. Frustratingly, defining a machine would be counter to the project of A Thousand Plateaus. Nonetheless, their first use of this language concerns a notion of a book: “A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of various formed matters, and very different dates and speeds . . . One side of a [book as] machinic assemblage faces the strata, which doubtless make it a kind of organism, or signifying totality, or determination attributable to a subject.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–4.
situation as the reader discovers that the raven still sits on the bust of Pallas, casting a shadow that will never be lifted. Common to its home genre of the ballad, “The Raven” withholds its secret until the end and moves with inexorable but excruciating momentum to that revelation. Also common to the genre are ruminations (“I pondered, weak and weary”), the legendary and tragic tone (“Once upon a midnight dreary,” “it was in the bleak December,” “And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling”), and the hypnotic assonances and repetitions, which Poe employs both within and across stanzas [dreary/weary, napping/tapping/rapping, nothing more/evermore/nevermore/Lenore]. The casting of the poem as dialogue is also basic to the genre, and to this poem’s treatment of it. “The Raven” is read in advance because we know from the first line that there will be no turning back, and that the bird has not come to spread good cheer.

One of Poe’s spins on these balladic conventions is that the dialogue begins with the poet muttering to himself rather than to another. The absence of an interlocutor suggests that when the raven enters the scene, it stands in for some piece of the Real in the poet’s ruminations. The poet’s speech seeks, and summons, an addressee other than the speaker. The horror of the poem lies not so much in the fact that the raven replies to every query with the same word, something many birds learn to do, but in the fact that the poet insists on asking more and more troubling questions in advance of what he realizes very well will be a single answer. Poe claims to have planned this circumstance from the beginning. “The student now guesses the state of the case, but is impelled, as I have before explained, by the human thirst for self-torture, and in part by superstition, to propound such queries to the bird as will bring him, the lover, the most of the luxury of sorrow, through the anticipated answer ‘Nevermore’.”11 In more modern terms, Poe’s reading suggests that the poet in “The Raven” engages in a Lacanian jouissance around the unfathomable kernel that prompts him to ask questions whose answers he already knows but whose meaning he cannot determine. If this reading still fails, it does remind us of a particular theme of America’s most embarrassing famous poet.12 Whether it is a set of teeth in “Bernice,” or a “vulture-eye” in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” or a black bird in “The Raven,” Poe’s antagonists are undone by the objects around them; their subjectivity is fractured by the things that they uncannily resemble.13

The poet’s experience with the raven is a prolonged moment of Lacanian tuché, an encounter with the Real that lies behind a phantasy propping up the subject.14 But in a frustratingly familiar twist in Lacanian thought, an encounter with the Real is also a missed encounter. The subject finds the Real where he does not seek it, and the subject seeks the Real where it cannot be found. The encounter is always by chance and only in retrospect does it take the aura of fate, as when a bird enters the chamber of a poet who is really expecting the

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9Poe writes, “It is not until the very last line of the very last stanza, that the intention of making him [the raven] emblematical of Mournful and Neverending Remembrance is permitted distinctly to be seen.” “The Philosophy of Composition,” in The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, vol. I (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), 21.
10For a discussion of the stylistic features of the poetic ballad, see Alan Bold, The Ballad [New York: Methuen, 1979], 20–38. For discussion of the poetic ballad as it relates to Chopin’s ballades, see Parakilas, Ballads, 31–48.
11Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” 19.
12Regarding Poe’s failing reputation within America, especially in comparison to the status he holds in France, Jonathan Culler writes, “nowhere else in world literature, so far as I know, has a writer been so scorned by the literati of his own language and so celebrated by the best minds of another culture and language”, “Baudelaire and Poe,” Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur 100 (1990): 61. In recent decades Poe reception has focused on his misogyny and racism, although the history of his reception is much more complex. See Scott Peeples, The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe (Rochester: Camden House, 2004).
The poet in “The Raven” is like the unfortunate father in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, who falls asleep in a room adjoining that of his deceased child. The father dreams that his child admonishes him, “Father, don’t you see I’m burning!,” only to awaken and find that a candle has fallen onto the arms of the poor child’s body.15 Freud’s interpretation of the dream is that it helped the father prolong his sleep and imagine that his child was still alive. Lacan’s twist on the interpretation is that the dream presents to the father a “missed reality—the reality that can no longer produce itself except by repeating itself endlessly.”16 The poet in “The Raven” confronts the bird as a missed encounter with Lenore, a missed encounter that he can produce only through a sublime repetition that animates the very object of his endless and unrelenting fascination and dread.

As an automaton, the raven brings in the complex nineteenth-century question of organic life and the mysterious force that animates it, or what Herder in the eighteenth century called “the inner genius of my being.”17 Like an experimenter in mesmerism, Poe vivifies a haunted form of life through the majesty of an empty repetition and a musicality of which he was aware without being aware. If we are to believe what Poe set down as his working method for “The Raven,” then he proceeded to write with bloodless calculation.18 His first consideration was the proper length, since “the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit . . . in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing.”19 Poe calculates that the intended effect would require a poem of about one hundred lines, while the completed poem has one hundred and eight.20 From length, Poe turns to province (beauty) and tone (sadness) before deciding that a refrain will provide the proper linchpin for the structure.21 He admits to no consideration about the meaning of that refrain but submits instead that it must be a single word “sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis,” and that such a word would need to include a long o, “as the most sonorous vowel.”22 Because the word must lend itself to melancholy, Poe fixes immediately on *nevermore*.

Who is Poe trying to kid here, if not himself? Did he really not know in advance that “nevermore” would be the perfect quilting point for a poem about a poem that creates a lifeless subject through repetition? From here, Poe takes great pleasure in describing the rhythm and meter he devised for the poem. We read of trochaic, octameter acatalectic, heptameter catalectic, and tetrameter catalectic before being told, “Nothing even remotely approaching this combination has ever been attempted.”23

The poet in the poem retraces these obsessional steps. What can be more obvious than that the narrator of “The Raven” embarks on the impossible task of setting down as poetry the very tale that led to a psychic loss from which there can be no recovery? Like the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” who insists that his cold calculations are proof of his sanity even after he has fallen into ruin, the poet of “The Raven” latches with ferocity onto a logical method for telling his story, in this case

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16The mechanical nature of Poe’s creative method dogged his reception after his death. For a consideration of this problem from shortly after Poe’s induction to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans, see Wightman F. Melton, “Poe’s Mechanical Poem,” *Texas Review* 3/2 (1918): 133–38. Melton discusses “The Bells” particularly, although it is clear that he is broadly interested in the difference between Poe’s “spontaneous, heart-made” poems [133] and the mechanical ones.
15Concerning the theme of the poem, Poe later lets out the most disturbing thought in his poetics: “The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (12).
22Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” 11.
21Ibid., 15.
23Ibid., 15.
with an overripe attention to the musical sounds of words:

Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore.24

The sibilant and iterative second line picks up the s from sought in the first, while the rs in surcease and sorrow reach back to morrow, and borrow while casting forward to Lenore, rare, radiant, here, and evermore. No single thread binds all the poetic lines; instead, the overlapping repetitions overdetermine the entire poem’s sound structure. It is as if the poet were hanging his sanity on each new tone in a melody, repeating it to ensure that he weaves himself together. But the tones are both too much and too little; they are rhythmic and expressive enough to remind us of music but not enough for us to catch the tune. In the gap, both the bird and the poet come to life, the bird as the effect of the monotonous repetitions in the poet’s poor attempt to master his uncanny encounter, and the poet as an effect of the raven’s automatic reply. The poet brings himself into fragile focus as an aftereffect of his desperate effort to discover what made him fall apart.

Tone of Voice

Modern commentary on Chopin’s First Ballade recognizes the narrative implications of the waltz oubliée that begins in m. 8 [ex. 1].25 Carl Dahlhaus points out that the theme has a “narrative ‘ballad tone,’” bolstering his argument that the second theme (the nocturne) is the true “main idea of the work”; presumably, the waltz functions as a narrator, while the later themes are dramatic.26 James Parakilas suggests that with the “winding phrase” of the first theme, “the telling of the tale begins.”27 And Lawrence Kramer writes that the first theme “sustains ballad mystique” and “asserts the presence of a narrative voice.”28 To miss the narrator in the first theme is really to miss the whole point of the Ballade: the musical construction of a character who tells.

The narrator is already fraught in literary works, often stepping forward, if at all, in impossible semblances. Since there is no narrator in music, its fabrication especially leaves marks. The waltz-like melody of the First Ballade is marked with uncertainty and emptiness. Downbeats, which might give the music an aura of presence, are missing in the left hand. The melody is little more than its opening motive followed by long-held notes that trail off before they can develop. An ingenious overlapping of harmonic and grouping structures results in the theme halting on half-diminished sonorities (mm. 8–21), as if the narrator were lingering over the situation before continuing the tale, consistent with balladic poetry.29 The opening motive of the waltz-as-narrator returns seven times in thirteen measures, marking the narration with the rumination of melancholia, compulsive in its inward gaze at the lost object. These signs point to a subjectivity without disclosing the alchemical process that brought the musical narrator to life in the first place. We have little more than the tone, mystique, and voice that modern critics hear in the Ballade’s opening theme.

The narrators in balladic poetry are often attenuated, if they announce their presence at all. The “Edward” ballad, for example, never

25The characterization of the first theme as a waltz oubliée comes from Eero Tarasti, who also calls the theme “somewhat estranged”; A Theory of Semiotics [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994], 154.
26Carl Dahlhaus, Nineteenth-Century Music, trans. J. Bradford Robinson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], 148. Dahlhaus points to three types of rhetoric in the ballad—lyric, epic, and dramatic—although he eschews anything as wooden as aligning each passage to one of these categories directly.
27Parakilas, Ballads, 60.
29Parakilas discusses the balladic characteristics of initiating “a sudden act” and then lingering “hypnotically” afterward, Ballads, 46.
reveals a narrator in the text, which instead unfolds completely via dialogue.

Quhy dois zour brand sae drop wi’ bluid,
Edward, Edward?
Quhy dois zour brand sae drop wi’ bluid,
And quhy sae sad gang ye, O?
O, I hae killed my hauke so guid
Mither, mither
O, I hae killed my hauke so guid
And I had nae mair bot hee, O30

[Why does your sword so drip with blood?
Edward, Edward
Why does your sword so drip with blood
And why so sad are ye, O?
O, I have killed my hawk so good,
Mother, mother
O, I have killed my hawk so good,
And I have no more but he, O.]

Any narrator one might seek here must reside in our awareness of the poem’s organization, which implies an agency other than that of the mother and her son in dialogue. Acknowledging this narrator involves a process similar to that found in cinema, where the viewer can recognize a self-conscious staging of events via the unseen camera.31 An excess in the narration of “Edward” manifests itself in the poem’s repeated words and phrases, which act like musical motives filling time. Through its musicality the ballad points to the forgotten bard singing the tale before us, the grain of his voice announced by its very absence in the text. Peculiarly, when Chopin’s First Ballade repeats its opening phrase during the first theme, it is as a double migration, a musical effusion through repetition that wends its way to poetry and then back to music: the Ballade migrates to and from a lost poem, losing its words in the process. The return carries out a reterritorialization that now includes the incorporeal whisper of an act of language whose words have evaporated.32


31For a fuller discussion of the cinematic narrator, see Seymour Chatman, Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990], 124–38.

32The term “reterritorialization” is from Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus. In their first use of the term, they describe a natural process in which a wasp is
In Mickiewicz’s *Konrad Wallenrod*, which putatively serves as Chopin’s model in the First Ballade, the poet slyly suggests that the narrator is a secondary character, Halban. In the sixth and final canto, as Konrad makes the fateful decision to commit suicide, Halban proclaims that he will make Wallenrod’s heroic deeds known to the Lithuanian people by singing of them:

“I would as yet remain to close thine eyes,
And live, so that the glory of thy deed,
I to the world may tell, to ages show.
I’ll traverse Litwa’s castles, hamlets, towns;
And where I pass not, there my songs shall fly.”

By implication, then, Halban is the intradiegetic narrator who has compiled the poem, although his construction as a narrator is limited. Mickiewicz published the poem as if it were a recounting of historical events, but a Russian censor realized that a tale about an exiled hero who deliberately leads a hegemonic power to defeat was a thinly veiled call for treason against the Russian government. From this perspective, Mickiewicz’s subtly placed clue to a narrative survivor in the poem failed to close off the question of whose voice we really hear as the narrative one in *Konrad Wallenrod*. For its first audience, that voice was undoubtedly embodied in Mickiewicz himself, as the real-life counterpart to Konrad Wallenrod. For the aristocratic audiences in Russia, that embodiment included first-hand experience with the grain of the poet’s voice, since Mickiewicz was known to read his works aloud and even improvise poetry in salons. Befitting a tradition in which a narrative poem implies a bard who sings it, *Konrad Wallenrod* had a narrator in Russian salons who was both sensual and textual: grain and sign. If Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction between the aristocratic and the bourgeois modes of acquisition extends back far enough, then the first audience for *Konrad Wallenrod* enjoyed what it took to be “a sort of immediate communication between the listener’s body and the performer’s ‘inner body,’ present in ‘the grain of the voice,’” obscuring any sordid, bourgeois pretension to understand a meaning behind that voice. The poem lays out a dual aesthetic in which the body of the poet entwines itself with that of the listener through the voice, while its textuality points to a narrator who has arranged the various sections of the narrative to ignite a political aspiration that the sensual element aspires to gloss over, at least within aristocratic circles.

In its first moment, Chopin’s Ballade has a grain in the body of the composer at the piano, binding the heterogeneous material into a sensuous whole. The grain oddly accretes to the

deteriorialized by an orchid [that is, it flies to the orchid’s territory] only to reterritorialize the orchid by spreading pollen [the orchid takes root elsewhere]. Deleuze and Guattari rarely stick to one meaning for their terms, but generally reterritorialization is a process by which something that has been lost returns, or moves elsewhere.


That censor, Nikolai N. Novitsilov, the Russian plenipotentiary of Poland, wrote a report to the tsar that Mickiewicz’s poorly organized poem merely reflected the feelings of the Polish people. Publication of *Konrad Wallenrod* still proceeded in Russia, although mention of Mickiewicz was forbidden in the Polish press. Roman Robert Koropeckyj, *Adam Mickiewicz: The Life of a Romantic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 94–98.

Mickiewicz completed *Konrad Wallenrod* while in exile in Russia, where he made his way into the Polish expatriate community. In Russian salons he not only recited his own poetry but also improvised poetic lines, much as Chopin would later improvise musical tales of the suffering of Poland. On this period of exile in Mickiewicz’s life, see Koropeckyj, *Mickiewicz*, 56–118. On Chopin’s habit of improvising narrative music for the Polish expatriate community in Paris, see Goldberg, “Tale of Grief,” 63–74.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 76. Bourdieu’s unstable opposition between immediate, sensual participation [which he clearly understands as a cultural trope based on an early acquisition of culture among members of higher social classes], and studied possession [associated with middle social classes] has returned from the dead to be reterritorialized within academic circles as the gnostic/istic opposition. From this perspective, the drastic is the aristocratic response that looks down on the poor attempts of the bourgeois to understand music through a hermeneutic [gnostic] approach.

In Barthes’s extension of the “grain” metaphor to the piano, sensuality is focused particularly on the pads of fingers, “the only erotic part of a pianist’s body”, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 189. In the same passage, Barthes complains that modern pianists have negated
waltz-like theme in a tone that the pianist conjures, as if capturing a substance without substance. Where do we find that tone? Is it in the repeating intonation of the theme’s incipit, or is it made before it is made and only recognized in retrospect? A grain without a text. An erotic sensuality without an object of affection.

**Words and Music**

If it is true that we cannot think without thoughts, and learn to think through words, then language sets limits and outlines for the whole of human cognition. I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it as an object.

The idea that language constitutes thought is one of the principal discoveries of eighteenth-century empiricism, beginning with Condillac and including Rousseau and Lavoisier. Contradicting the rationalist view of Descartes and the later Port-Royal grammarians, who held that thought pre-existed language, Condillac’s most important thesis was that language is just as necessary for thought itself as it is for communicating thought. This first glimmer of subjectivity as the product of discourse is still distinct from the thesis that the subject disappears as an object in the Lacanian Symbolic. Conceptions of language in the eighteenth century left room for a vast interiority that was signaled generally by sound and particularly by music. If Herder’s objective in *Fragments* (1767–68) and in his later *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772) was to argue that language had its origins in nature, the ubiquitous master-signifier of the Enlightenment, then he also opened the possibility that hearing allowed for the quickest entryway to the soul. The subject becomes the product of a double system of sound: language as formative of thought, and music as a pathway to interiority.

This double system opens a space into thought, which expresses itself in sound apportioned through two channels: words and music. There are two kinds of thought: the thought of naming, legislating, arguing, and the thought of interiority. The first kind of thought is fraught, since the dream of the Enlightenment to create a “perfectly transparent language in which things themselves could be named without any penumbra of confusion” resulted in pushing the boundaries of that perfection in order to “perpetually maintain suspension of the Name.” And the second language says both too much and not enough. Even if the language of music is a direct expression of the subject’s interiority, explaining this communication among souls still requires the mediation of the first language, a problem that does not receive full recognition until much later. The first language [words], which is “treated as a totality of sounds emancipated from the letters that may be used to describe them,” migrates to the second language [music], lending it an ontology without which it cannot really communicate at all.

From our standpoint after the Lacanian revolution, we can see that the nineteenth century’s second language was really no

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43 Ibid., 286. The notion of words and music as migratory is adapted from an argument by Lawrence Kramer that music and narrative are migratory. See his “Music and the Rise of Narrative,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Music*, ed. Delia da Sousa Correa (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).
Music in the nineteenth century migrates from sound as interiority to sound as sign. Music appropriates what it needs to be understood, finding poetry, stories, epigraphs, programs, and critical discourse to bring itself in contact with language. It is curious, then, that when Chopin borrowed a poetic form to tell a musical story, he asked music to absorb the ballad in particular. If a ballad is a musical poem without music, then a Chopin ballade is a poetic music without poetry. The music absorbs the words so fully that we are sent looking for what is no longer there.

The opening of Chopin’s First Ballade announces its contact with language without using words (ex. 2). The signs of a narrator who speaks, of an “audible flight from the continuum that embeds it,” are evident from the first low C pronouncing a tale to come.45 The narrator, a rarity in instrumental music, is disruptive and idiosyncratic; it doffs musical regularity and the conventions of song as it approaches the uneven plainness of speech. This opening has a phatic function, even as it steps into the breach of its own failure with words: gather around, I have something to tell, though I find I cannot speak. As narrators sometimes do, this one first tries to construct itself, faltering twice before managing to raise the curtain on the opening scene. The frayed thread of the narration has unequal parts, like three different lines torn from a sacred text. The first part slowly unveils the prototypical index for recitative, a $6\over3$ chord with its prosaic implications, before a questioning $F\#$ stops the music short.46 In opposition to the stoic and ceremonial opening, the second part of the introduction has the chromatic wending of an arioso style, as if turning inward to a more personal form of expression. And the last part turns to the barest homophony, a Baroque gesture in a Phrygian-style move from a iv\(^3\) chord down to the dominant (a cadential $6\over4$ at first) with an unprepared ninth (E$\flat$) above the bass.

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44 Lawrence Kramer, The Thought of Music, 30.
The three parts of the narrator’s construction barely fit together, though each is a transformation of operatic conventions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first phrase is stoic and ceremonial. The second is personal. And the last is a pained effort to turn the narration to the story proper with the simplest of conventions that nonetheless cannot proceed without a failure. Our narrator—stoic, immersed, distanced, pained, authoritative—literally cannot find the words. And because we hear no supporting harmony until the last two measures of the introduction, it is not entirely clear what regulates these three sides of the narrator as a character. The parts follow one another on the barest thread of a tune: \# at the end of the first part is picked up in the beginning of the second part, while D at the end of the second part falls to C to begin the third. In between, though, the nothing shows through. The musical narrator conjures itself by revealing the impossibility of narration in music.

**Unnatural Narrative**

In the final paragraph of Charles Dickens’s novella *The Chimes* [1844], the narrator turns directly to the reader and questions his own reality. The tale concerns a messenger named Trotty (an aptronym referring to his habit of trotting to deliver messages) who is visited by goblins with a message of their own. They reveal to him the dysphoric future to come to his family if he should commit suicide. In this closing passage, the narrator appears disturbed by the fantastical elements of the story and offers a rationale for them:

> Had Trotty dreamed? Or are his joys and sorrows, and the actors in them, but a dream, himself a dream, the teller of this tale a dreamer, waking but now? If it be so, O listener, dear to him in all his visions, try to bear in mind the stern realities from which these shadows come; and in your sphere—none is too wide, and none too limited for such an end—endeavor to correct, improve, and soften them.\(^47\)

What begins as a life-is-but-a-dream philosophy makes an impossible turn when the extradiegetic narrator wonders if he himself has dreamed the tale and is waking only now. The difficulty of imagining a narrator who awakens from a dream in the midst of telling about it has an added complication because Dickens was in the habit of reading his fiction aloud to friends prior to publication of his works.\(^48\) His body and voice served as the real-life narrator of *The Chimes* in its first moment, punctuating the impossibility of a dreamer who tells of a dream while dreaming. Among the main character (Trotty), the narrator, and the listener, only the listener has a reality that is left unquestioned in the passage.

The narrator’s doubt about his own status marks *The Chimes* as an unnatural narrative, a tale that includes “physically, logically, and humanly impossible events.”\(^49\) Unnatural narratives involve logical problems around characters, scenes, temporalities, narrators, etc., challenging our conception of how the real world works, as when Gregor Samsa awakens to find that he has become a giant insect. As a subfield of narratology, the study of unnatural narratives began with a motivation to understand the contradictions foregrounded in postmodern and avant-garde literature, especially the “creation, fragmentation, and reconstitution of narrative voices,” although with a bit of thought one finds that these problems accrue even to the most realist of narratives.\(^50\) Readers take these contradictions or unrealistic situations in stride, for example when animals talk in children’s literature or when characters unaccountably access the thoughts of others. It is difficult to believe, for example, that Marcel

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\(^{48}\)Dickens read *The Chimes* aloud to friends early in December 1844, just prior to its publication; Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], 231.

\(^{49}\)Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016], 25.

\(^{50}\)Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006], ix. Richardson focuses primarily on postmodern literature, though he does remark on narrative contradictions in the nineteenth century (Gogol, Dickens, Flaubert), and as far back as Chaucer and Dante.
knew the intimate details of Swann’s thoughts about Odette, but the author Proust uses Marcel as the homodiegetic narrator of precisely those thoughts. The study of unnatural narratives asks us to confront these contradictions as invitations to interpretation rather than wish them away through an appeal to structure or a taxonomy of discourses.

In the case of The Chimes and the other so-called Christmas stories, Dickens worried over his use of the supernatural in what was otherwise a realist approach to literature. In a letter of 2 January 1849, he explains to the Earl of Carlisle,

As the inventor of this sort of story, I may be allowed to plead that I think a little dreaminess and vagueness essential to its effect. I am greatly mistaken if the points that do tell, as they stand, would not be weakened without it... People will take anything for granted, in the Arabian Nights or the Persian Tales, but they won’t walk out of Oxford Street, or the marketplace of the county town, directly into the presence of the Phantom, albeit an allegorical one. And I believe it to be essential that they come at that spectre through such a preparation of gathering gloom and darkness, as it would be for them to go through some such ordeal, in reality, before they could get up some private Ghost of their own.

Dickens realizes that readers will take impossibilities for granted, especially in certain genres and settings. Such fantastical elements become conventionalized within the project of realism because, unremarked and probably unrealized by Dickens, they respond to cultural concerns. When he argues that the ghostly would be acceptable if set in former Arabia or Persia, he expresses an ideology of nineteenth-century taxonomy in which the east included the supernatural as an exotic other outside the category of European rationalism.

Dickens’s attempts to fold the paranormal into the normal in The Chimes can be read under the aegis of material, hardheaded, bourgeois subjectivity and the specter of its other, labor. The peculiar questioning of the characters and narrator as the products of a dream recalls the capacity of capital to hide the means of production. Dickens’s dream-actors and dream-narrator have the same unreality as labor itself, hidden from the view of a buyer, a reader, who has the only reality that counts. The Chimes adheres particularly to Dickens’s favorite themes of class and labor, especially in the idea that even the humblest members of society [in this case, a messenger] are capable of unveiling its contradictions and thereby overcoming them. Trotty has lost hope for himself and his daughter, but before he can commit suicide, goblins teach him a lesson that prompts his return to his family to complete his life’s work. The Chimes is precisely the companion to A Christmas Carol that Dickens hoped it to be. In one case, it is the bourgeois figure of accumulation itself, a miser, who learns the lesson that labor must be seen and treated humanely. In the other case, it is labor in its most hidden form—Trotty plies his trade from a niche of a church—who learns the lesson of human-

52Gérard Genette considers the problem of Marcel’s unlikely knowledge of Swann’s thought in his Narrative Discourse, 237-52. Genette’s first answer to this problem is that the character of Marcel must have heard the tale of Swann’s love from other undetermined narrators, from whom he “gathers up the whole kitty and in his own name tells this whole story that took place before he was born” (242). Later, Genette considers the possibility that the real-life author Proust experienced such a narrative, and simply placed these experiences in the various characters to be related by Marcel alone in a contradiction of “the very logic of discourse” (252). Genette is focused on legislating narrative contradictions and seems unwilling to entertain the notion that they might point to problems in our models of subjectivity, action, and time itself.

54The capacity of capital to hide labor is evident already in the opening section of Marx’s Capital: “Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it” [emphasis added]. Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes [London: Penguin Books], 166–67.
kind’s capacity for good. That Trotty learns this lesson from disfigured figments (the goblins are precursors to the Morlocks in H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*) compounds the theme of a hidden labor force that must be brought to light. The irony of *The Chimes*, then, is that the narrator fails to understand the reality that must be granted precisely to the goblins as the sign for the very labor that Dickens hoped to uplift.

These figments and quasi-stabilities suggest a problem running parallel to the daily grind of labor and its discontents. To uncover that problem, we might reconfigure the famous Lacanian joke: why does the narrator of *The Chimes* lie to us in questioning his own reality to make us believe he’s concerned about the supernatural, when in reality he is questioning his own reality?55 As the narrator of *The Chimes* poses an existential question in the final moments of the tale, the mode of address conjures an unspecified addressee triangulated with the living audience to whom Dickens first spoke and the imagined readership whom he sought to reach. That addressee was the Symbolic, which Dickens brought to life by treating it as the only stable element in a relation between the character, the narrator, the listener, and himself. Like his more mortal semblable, the narrator of *The Chimes* can only enter the Symbolic as a subject “by passing through the radical defile of speech,” an act that is “reproduced each time the subject addresses the Other as absolute, that is, as the Other who can annul him himself.”56 The narrator constitutes himself through the language of the Other, allowing him to address the Other in search of confirmation that he, the narrator, is real. Paradoxically, by this address, the narrator gives to the Other the power to withhold the fullest acknowledgment of his existence.

This fretful doubt about one’s nature echoes the primal scene of the story, wherein Trotty contemplates suicide only to conjure spectral goblins who show him the dark future precipitated by his absence. On one side, there is a character who attempts a fateful jump only to confront the symbolic-as-phantasm; on the other, there is a narrator who jumps into the story in order to confront the symbolic-as-addressee. The narrator falls headlong into a repetition automatism (*Wiederholungszwang*) that constitutes the subject by the very act of that subject’s fearful questioning. The doubling of the drama’s primal scene, produced by the sudden conjuring of a narrator who speaks against his own possibility, guarantees an understanding that the message of the tale “truly belongs to the dimension of language.”57 The story gives us answers that are really questions, summoned by its insistent repetition in the form of the narrator. What animates us? What keeps us from flying apart?

**A Surviving Narrator**

The surviving narrator steps forth at the end of Chopin’s First Ballade, although pinpointing the moment of his arrival is impossible (ex. 3). Do we witness the narrator struggling to reach us in the frenzied coda (m. 208)? Harmonic implications from the narrating introduction do come to the fore here with the repeating Neapolitan and its telltale A♭ in the right hand, descending inevitably to F (mm. 216–19, and mm. 224–27). The dispassionate demeanor of the opening measures is swept away in this first coda with “ramping energy [that] feeds on itself, lurching from one impassioned outburst to another with no promise to end.”58 If this is the voice of the narrator, then it enacts its audible flight not through the emptying of musical forces that happens when music appropriates narration but through a gathering of force that is destructive, like a self-immolation scene where the ritual sacrifice traumatizes our

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55Jacques Lacan, “Séminaire sur ‘The Purloined Letter,’” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: London, 2002), 13. Lacan’s original, which he invokes as an example of “the relation between the signifier and speech,” reads: “Why are you lying to me by saying you’re going to Cracow in order to make me believe you’re going to Lemberg, when in reality you are going to Cracow?”


57Ibid., 12.

attempt to distinguish tale and teller. When this narrative object makes its precipitous approach to a close at m. 246, it falls into a low G that can barely withstand the unleashed energy, recoiling with a screaming scale (ex. 4). The threatened identity of the narrator is so unbearable that, in Kristeva’s terms for the abject, it can no longer narrate but must proceed by "flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness, tangles, and cuts." The narrator’s recourse is not via language but via a cry that falls in the boundary between subject and object, message and messenger, self and other.

From this scream of the abject, a narrating grain emerges (mm. 252–end), although it is emptied of music’s usual binding thread (ex. 5). If this is the framing narrator returning for a final malediction, then it (precisely it, not he, not she) has just as much difficulty holding together as it did constituting itself when the telling began. Four primal objects toss themselves out as the detritus of the tale: a harmony, a motive, silence, and a scale in two guises, minor and chromatic. The harmony first.

In the distance, a funeral march, shorn of embellishment but ceremonial and sober, rustles

59Abbate, Unsung Voices, 29.
A motive. The incipit of the waltz theme, emblem of the balladic tone and narrative voice, makes a stentorian pronouncement in monophonic octaves (mm. 253–54). This texture and tessitura has also marked the narrator at the opening of the ballade, so that the motive here combines the two narrators (introduction and waltz) into a single gesture. Silence (mm. 254 and 256). Is this emptiness figure or ground? Is this the nothingness that shows through? Scales. The first is an aftershock of the scream in mm. 250–52, now more fully voiced in tenths. The second is the final virtuosic gesture of the ballade: a chromatic scale in contrary motion and then in lock-step descent sets the piano aflame. In these final thirteen measures, the narrator is a curious amalgam of speech-like declaration, emptiness, and angry gesture.

With the narrator’s return, wherever it is, music has become strange and fragmented, reduced to the barest essentials. In the end, the ballade annihilates the narrating voice and itself with the gamut of the piano’s primal resource: a chromatic scale. Chopin sets up the chromatic scale with the harshest of schisms in the E/B♭ tritone placed in the farthest reaches of the instrument’s sonic realm. The grace notes add pulses of angry spasms to this tearing up of the musical sphere. A narrating voice cannot tell this tale, but neither can music, and not because music cannot tell but because telling is impossible, a task that we undertake by acknowledging or forgetting that it cannot be undertaken.

**The Pianist**

In the crucial scene of Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist* (2002), the most unlikely of heroes, a pianist named Władysław Szpilman, is confronted by a German officer, Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, in a ruined home amidst the rubble...
of Warsaw. Loosely based on Szpilman’s memoire of his wartime experiences, this scene in the movie is an impossible variation of the pianist’s written account.\footnote{Wladislaw Szpilman, \textit{The Pianist}, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Picador, 1999). In a foreword, Szpilman’s son, Andrzej, explains that his father wrote the memoire in 1945, although it was never reprinted after its first Polish edition (8–9).} As Szpilman tells it, when the German officer discovered him, he replied with feelings of defeat and disdain, “Do what you like to me. I’m not moving from here.”\footnote{Ibid., 177.} In response, Captain Hosenfeld simply asks what Szpilman does for a living and then bids him to play something in a room with a piano. “When I placed my fingers on the keyboard they shook. So this time, for a change, I had to buy my life by playing the piano!”\footnote{Ibid., 177–78.} But Szpilman hasn’t practiced in over two years, his nails are too long, and the piano is badly damaged. Still, he plays Chopin’s Nocturne in C\# Minor, a work of juvenilia that, as Lawrence Kramer reminds us, was the composer’s last composition before leaving Warsaw; as such, it is “his most acutely Polish piece.”\footnote{Kramer, “Melodic Trains,” 73. Curiously, the Polish concert pianist Natalia Karp (née Weissman) saved her own life during the war by playing the same nocturne for Captain Amon Göth. Anne Karpe, \textit{The War After: Living with the Holocaust} (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 81.}\footnote{Szpilman, \textit{Pianist}, 178.}

Szpilman’s account of his performance is lapidary and matter-of-fact.

I played Chopin’s Nocturne in C sharp minor. The glassy, tinkling sound of the untuned strings rang through the empty flat and the stairway, floated through the ruins of the villa on the other side of the street and returned as a muted, melancholy echo. When I had finished, the silence seemed even gloomier and more eerie than before. A cat mewed in a street somewhere. I heard a shot down below outside the building—a harsh, loud German noise.

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Example 5: Final Narration in the First Ballade.
The sonic opposition in Szpilman’s brief account—Chopin (Polish, refined, aristocratic) and a gunshot (German, loud, harsh)—is mediated by the other sounds he recalls. The piano is untuned (unrefined) and echoes across the ruins of the city (the fall of the Symbolic). This Chopin is disfigured and refracted by history, circumstance, and surroundings; the nocturne becomes an uncanny double of itself, alienated and unreal. The music must make a transaction (Szpilman performs for his life), which music cannot do because it is mute, announcing its appropriation of life yet silent about the words it aspires to capture. Even so, a nocturne is not a narrative form but a poetic one; its lustrous surface lulls us, civilizes us. But Szpilman’s strange rendition can neither speak nor lull; it is music deprived of music, empty sounds that can only make mud-cracked noises in the unreal city. After the nocturne is over, Szpilman hears a cat, a familiar from the uncanny world; the sound is liminal, a conduit from the uncanny world to the real one, which is no less uncanny in the city’s ruins. The German gunshot interprets itself. It is not Schumann, nor Brahms, nor anything musical. The sonic self-formation before telling was already written into the scene of address in which the officer discovered the pianist in the first place. The officer initiates the address with a number of questions that embed accusation despite his calm demeanor. What are you doing here? Who are you? Do you understand me? Do you live here? The pianist is mute in response to the questions that embed accusation despite his calm demeanor. What are you doing here? Who are you? Do you understand me? Do you live here? The pianist is mute in response to the

67Kramer discusses this opposition in the movie with attention to the use of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata in the soundtrack. Thus the German/Polish confrontation has a musical counterpart in which Beethoven’s music is like another survivor of wartime violence. Kramer, “Melodic Trains,” 72–73.

68Michel Chion discusses what he calls the “twice mute” property of music in his own essay on The Pianist. He argues that nineteenth-century music evokes real-world sounds or “imaginary words,” the latter of which it could not possibly utter. Yet “the title of the work was often mute regarding its own muteness.” “Mute Music: Polanski’s The Pianist and Campion’s The Piano,” in Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 88–89.

69Music’s capacity to civilize, a particularly aristocratic notion, is one of the themes of Vladimir Jankélévitch’s Music and the Ineffable, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). The first such reference appears early in the first chapter: “Real music humanizes and civilizes.”

70Kramer comments on the strange version of the Ballade in The Pianist: “Its very identity is self-divided, for the music we hear in this scene is neither a brief extract nor the whole Ballade but an abridged version: a whole that is not whole”; “Melodic Trains,” 74.

71Chion, “Mute Music,” 95.
first two questions, as if in appalled but frightened astonishment that the officer can be so oblivious to their relationship formed by war. In Judith Butler’s terms, the pianist has become accountable because he has been addressed as such by an other in power.72 The call to give an account resonates through several subjects marked by the position that the pianist holds as an unlikely symptom of the very war in which he and the officer find themselves. First, the officer addresses the pianist as the thief who has stolen canned cucumbers (can there be any form of larceny more petit than the theft of a canned vegetable?), in an ironic upholding of an order in the face of its annihilation. And the officer’s privileged place in that order is marked by his clean and pressed uniform, the only undamaged item in the ruined home and surrounding cityscape. Second, the officer’s address replays in metonymy the Jewish Question in the Third Reich, although this reading is held in abeyance until the end of the pianist’s performance, when the officer finally recognizes the pianist as a Jew. Third, the officer’s address is to an other so far removed from the Symbolic that the pianist can be nothing but a particle of the Real, something that has fallen out, or fallen in to the ragged remainders of body and clothing holding the can of cucumbers.

These subjective possibilities between an officer as stand-in for German culture and a victim-as-thief, thief-as-other, and other-as-Real find their counterparts on the piano when the pianist begins to play. Before sitting down at the keyboard, the pianist places the can of cucumbers to the left on the piano lid, next to a position on the right where the officer has already laid his field cap and jacket. The pianist’s performance, then, resets in inverted form the scene of address that lead to this musical moment in the first place. The officer has asked the pianist to give an account of himself, to which the pianist at first remains mute. Now, the First Ballade makes a counter accusation, calling the officer to give an account to which he is at first mute, as well. A loss of the word in response to both accusations (officer to pianist, music to officer) characterizes the various scenes leading up to this encounter, which showed the pianist escaping from an apartment, seeking refuge in an abandoned hospital, and rummaging for food in the ruined home, all without dialogue. Prior to the officer’s discovery and questioning of the pianist, there has been no dialogue in the movie for fifteen minutes, as if traumatically highlighting the adage that words are inadequate.

Music turns out to be inadequate, too, although its illocutionary force does silence the officer. The pianist has been called to give an account, but before he can do so, he must offer up an “I” that can be the center of certain deeds.73 The pianist forms that “I” in the opening measures of the Ballade. But something goes wrong at the F#. When the pianist reaches it, he stops short as if having ventured onto a wrong note, or started an improvisation that has gone astray too soon. Although we can interpret his reaction as narrating the music’s first quandary, a reversal is equally possible. The music has found the pianist’s first quandary in a failed capacity to conjure himself except through bereft fragments of sonorous materiality. Neither the pianist nor the officer comments that the music is by Chopin either before or after the performance. “The cinematic reality is that he plays a nameless fragment, made up of notes that are seeking a theme, a center.”74 Kramer frames the performance as if the tortured version of the Ballade reenacts one of the few lines that the pianist utters during the first dialogue of the scene. When the officer asks what the pianist does, his reply speaks of

72Butler’s passage on the creation of an “I” resonates with the scene: “So I start to give an account, if Nietzsche is right, because someone has asked me to, and that someone has power delegated from an established system of justice. I have been addressed, even perhaps had an act attributed to me, and a certain threat of punishment backs up this interrogation. And so, in fearful response, I offer myself as an ‘I’ and try to reconstruct my deeds, showing that the deed attributed to me was or was not, in fact, among them”, Giving an Account, 11.
74Chion, “Mute Music,” 96.
his radical loss: “Ich bin—ich war—pianist.” Because the music, too, is a lost and broken version of itself, Kramer writes that if it could speak, the music might say, “I am—I was—the G-minor Ballade.” 75 Nothing is as it should be. The pianist must form himself to play the music, but the music must form itself so that the pianist can play it. Neither is possible, but both somehow come about.

The fragmented whole of a fragmented whole that the pianist plays includes only the framing sections where a narrator tries to step forth: the introduction, the waltz, a string of sighs, and the burning coda. After the failure on the F♯, the officer continues to hover at the right side of the keyboard before stepping away. A close up of the officer’s face during the third portion of the introduction gives the impression that he already knows he will be unable to answer whatever question the music is forming. The camera stays with the officer through the first three subphrases of the waltz, and when he looks down in resignation, there is an impression that the music’s rumination is his rumination. The camera cuts to an impossibly romantic shot of the pianist in full with a slanted, mote-filled (snow-filled?) shaft of light. Another cut back to the officer shows him in full as well (only his feet are missing from the shot); from its repetitive first motive, the waltz has formed itself, the pianist, and the officer. The moment of full construction is a brief one. For the remainder of the performance, shots of the pianist’s face or hands predominate. Often the pianist stares at the piano as if he witnesses the performance rather than maintaining it.

By the end, the camera focuses on the hands, which have transformed themselves from their formerly crippled state into a preternatural agility that negotiates the destructive virtuosity of the coda. The funereal chords are uncommonly slow, and the final tearing up of the piano in the chromatic octaves makes no room for aristocratic expression. Things fall apart. The final octave G in the low register is marred by a misplaced thumb in the left hand, as if the music and the pianist have returned to their formerly fractured selves. The Ballade’s uncanny double managed to pull everything together for only a moment before it used its own voice to tear itself apart. Of the three subjective positions that the officer’s questions conjured in the first scene of address, the music has chosen only one; it constitutes and disintegrates itself as some unutterable remainder whose account is also a furious rejoinder, and whose narrative is a scream from a barely recognizable narrator [almost nothing could be more Real in the Lacanian sense]. In the music’s wake, the officer remains mute for some time before returning to his strangely methodical questions: Are you hiding here? Jew? Where are you hiding? The pianist remains mute, nodding to the first question, staring with hollowed eyes in the face of the second one, before finally responding to the third question: in the attic. The music’s accusation was one in which a disembodied narrative voice has virtually nothing comprehensible to say and so hurls its broken incapacity at the officer in the form of a brief but strained formation and dissolution.

**Tamka Street**

In Warszawa, the Starbucks on Nowy Świat is frequented by students only too happy to practice their English with you. Exit the coffee shop and turn left. Less than a block away, turn left again on Ordynacka, where friendly storefronts greet you on either side of a modest stone street. Shortly, you will come to Kopernika, where you will turn left going slightly downhill. Keep to the right on Kopernika through a small roundabout that takes you to Tamka on the right. It’s not far now. Shortly on your right you’ll see a clean, stone building with Lech’s Hairdresser (Fryzek Leszek), a computer-repair shop (Laptopy Serwis), and the TamKafe. Past the café is a more modern building with an unmarked business entrance to the Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina. Just enter the first door, which is often open, walk past the security officer [who will pay no attention to you if you act like you know where you’re going] and take the elevator up to the main hall. You’re there. A crisp conference-room/recital-hall with a beautiful grand piano and tall windows looking out on . . . . Wait. You should exit right.

75Kramer, “Melodic Trains,” 75.
away and continue down Tamka. Yes. There on the right is a courtyard with tables and umbrellas. And to the right of the courtyard is a glass front with a neon sign that reads Chopin Store, and black and red lettering that reads Tamka 43 restaurant. café. wine bar. Turn around now and you’ll see at the other end of the courtyard the Palac Ostrogskich, a fine specimen of Baroque architecture that now houses the Muzeum Fryderyka Chopina. You can rush through a glass door on your right to purchase a modestly priced ticket before you return to the courtyard and walk up the broad stone stairs to the entrance of the museum. You’ve found it: a modern shrine to Poland’s national hero.

What will you see here? On the zero floor, there is an area where you can step on special tiles that play snippets of Chopin’s music. Jump from tile to tile to create your own Chopin narrative. In one room, you can view sketches through glass drawers, and if you pull a drawer out, a recording of the sketch begins to play. One room is devoted to a replica of a Parisian salon, complete with the composer’s last piano, a Pleyel. There are rooms devoted to women in Chopin’s life, to his work as a pianist, to his family and friends, to his personal items, his sketches, his diaries, and on and on. Among the items on display: his visiting card (Frédéric Chopin, 38 rue de la Chausée d’Antin), his calligraphy book, a gold pocket watch, a small diary, a lock of hair, a cast of his right hand, a portrait of his last moments (by Teofil Kwiatkowski), his death mask. So many totems waiting to lend their authority to a storyteller claiming a lost object that adds the finishing touch to Chopin’s tale.

The Illusion of an End

A tale from a storyteller is not a totalizing arrangement of facts. The grain of the teller’s voice will be enough to carry us along the fractured plot lines. Or the listener will lend the narrative “an amplitude that information lacks.” The authority of the storyteller comes from far away. Deleuze and Guattari, attributing this motto to Henry James, turn it into a necessity of storytelling: “Begin far away, as far away as possible.” Chopin seems to have known this rule in advance, beginning the Ballade with an archaic style in lieu of a “once upon a time.” But James was not uttering a truth of all storytelling, he was creating a reader for his The Wings of the Dove and explaining to that reader the strangeness of writing a novel in which the main character waits so long for an entrance. “I scarce remember perhaps a case . . . in which the curiosity of ‘beginning far back,’ as far back as possible, and even going, to the same tune, far ‘behind,’ that is behind the face of the subject, was to assert itself with less scruple.” James’s anxiety about starting too far away does resonate with the more famous principle that Walter Benjamin set down three decades later. “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.” The passage picks up a thread from the previous portion of Benjamin’s argument, where he concludes, “A man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life . . . first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.” From the storyteller’s point of view, a composer who dies at the age of thirty nine is at every moment of his life a composer who dies at the age of thirty nine. We see it written into the fabric of the story from its first moment, even though the real-life composer who lived that life knew nothing of this fact until the moment of his death. The storyteller does not

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79 Many of Chopin’s possessions were sold at auction after his death. His Pleyel piano and other items were bought by his former pupil Jane Stirling, who willed the items to Chopin’s sister, Ludwika Jędrzejewicz; Moritz [Maurycey] Karasowski. Frederich Chopin: His Life and Letters, vol. 1, trans. Emily Hill [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906], 224–28.

77 The authority of the storyteller comes from far away. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 329.

78 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 329.

76 Chopin seems to have known this rule in advance, beginning the Ballade with an archaic style in lieu of a “once upon a time.” But James was not uttering a truth of all storytelling, he was creating a reader for his The Wings of the Dove and explaining to that reader the strangeness of writing a novel in which the main character waits so long for an entrance. “I scarce remember perhaps a case . . . in which the curiosity of ‘beginning far back,’ as far back as possible, and even going, to the same tune, far ‘behind,’ that is behind the face of the subject, was to assert itself with less scruple.”79 James’s anxiety about starting too far away does resonate with the more famous principle that Walter Benjamin set down three decades later. “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.”80 The passage picks up a thread from the previous portion of Benjamin’s argument, where he concludes, “A man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life . . . first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.”81 From the storyteller’s point of view, a composer who dies at the age of thirty nine is at every moment of his life a composer who dies at the age of thirty nine. We see it written into the fabric of the story from its first moment, even though the real-life composer who lived that life knew nothing of this fact until the moment of his death. The storyteller does not
gain authority from an ability to include all of the facts but from an endpoint that irrevocably sets the final act and utterance of an other. If the endpoint is a frame that lends the storyteller power, then James’s remarks about starting “far back” remind us of that other endpoint, a beginning. Here, too, as Judith Butler argues, a subject cannot know what brings him or her into being. “The ‘I’ can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one’s own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge.”

The “I” looks back to find the moment of its arrival, but it cannot look back far enough, because that moment of the “I” is already too late, after the fact. The primal scene is out of reach to the subject formed within it. “I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabricate origins I cannot know.”

Fabulate: to relate invented stories. A beginning is a fiction, a fabulation. To the extent that the subject tells his or her own story, it is a fabulation, either because it pretends to know the moment of formation, or because it lacks an authority to relate in fully transmissible form a story whose end cannot yet be complete.

An account must begin and end in media res, unless it is given by an other for an other. What if the narrator of an account begins to realize that he too has an unrecov erable origin and unknown end? What if her authority to tell melts into air, not because the account fails the test of a fully transmissible form but because the narrator-as-subject fails that test? A narrator tries to give an account of an other, but because a narrator can neither recover their own becoming nor see their own end, the account must fabricate experiences that are both after and before the fact. There is no metalanguage. An account cannot be given in the fullness of its measure and authority either from inside or from outside, from the self or from the other. If a subject could cast back to a formation before full formation and narrate a becoming in the midst of a becoming, if the narrator could cast forward to an unknown end and tell that end in the midst of it, what would that story be like? How would it sound? We cannot know, and it would be a romantic conceit to claim that Chopin’s Ballade narrates in music what cannot be imagined in words. Music cannot narrate. It literally lacks the words.

But Chopin’s Ballade can help us think through the problems of narration because the struggle to create a musical narrator becomes the exemplary case of the impossibility of narration itself. Creating a narrator brings the fraught nature of subjectivity within the orbit of storytelling. Every problem of the subject, from the mystery of its origin to the veil at its end to its tendency to fall apart follows like an uncanny double from the writer [poet, composer] to the narrator of the story. It is only by sleight of hand that the narrator pretends to be in control. When the gestures of a narrator bring themselves together in the Ballade only to merge into the story itself, reappear, disappear, and finally disintegrate during the telling of that disintegration, the task is not to resolve the contradictions or to make all the parts fit. The task is to wonder if music has made a discovery that we can think through by considering other troubled narrators. We don’t have far to look. How does the madness in Poe manage to narrate itself? Why does Dickens the storyteller begin to question his own existence? How does the fragmented survivor of Warsaw manage to speak at the piano? Whom does the narrator address, and who responds to its questions? The answer since at least the nineteenth century is that the narrator addresses an other who can answer the riddle of its emergence and placate the dread of its coming end. We can think through the problems of narration with the Ballade, but we cannot reach a fixed point that resolves those problems. And we cannot answer the question of narration because we cannot answer the question of ourselves, a problem peculiar to a time when the post-Enlightenment subject has a once-upon-a-time that it cannot reach and an end that it does not survive to tell.

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82Butler, Giving an Account, 37.
83Ibid., 39.
Abstract.
This article considers the problem of narration in a collection of works gathered around Chopin’s Ballade in G Minor, op. 23: Guillermo del Toro’s Crimson Peak, Poe’s “The Raven,” Mickiewicz’s Konrad Wallenrod, Dickens’s The Chimes, and Wladyslaw Szpilman’s The Pianist along with its cinematic adaptation by Roman Polanski. Chopin’s Ballade is featured prominently in the two movies under consideration, while the remaining works are either influential for the composer (Konrad Wallenrod) or develop themes common to the Ballade. Study of narration in these works reveals that the narrator can be just as unstable in literary texts as in musical ones. The problems of narration that have been imputed to music are problems of narration itself. Regarding the era of Chopin’s Ballade, these problems also point to unstable models of subjectivity, which the logic of narrative glosses over. Keywords: Chopin, ballade, narrative, subjectivity, fragmentation