Rehearings

Romantic Meaning in Chopin's Prelude in A Minor

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As a touchstone for discussions of Romanticism in music, Chopin's notorious Prelude in A Minor, op. 28, no. 2, can hardly be bettered. The inner tensions of this piece are prototypical. While the melody and accompaniment figuration create a high degree of surface continuity, the underlying harmony is radically eccentric, extravagant even by Romantic standards, with unresolvable ambiguities at its core. In taking a fresh look at this pivotal piece, I should like to examine Chopin's unruly harmony in light of the expressive and cognitive processes that motivate it and give it life—this, rather than simply to specify the sense in which the harmony is peculiar; it is peculiar enough in any sense. Second, I want to connect what Chopin does in this piece to some recurrent patterns, again both expressive and cognitive, that first come to prominence in the music and literature of the early nineteenth century. The hyperbolically Romantic harmony of Chopin's A-Minor Prelude, I will suggest, implicates the music in some of the basic scenarios of Romantic subjectivity.

This is not, of course, an innocent claim. The old question of how purely musical patterns, the sort of thing constructed in musical analysis, can acquire "extramusical" meanings has lately taken on a vigorous new life, amid what

seems to be a growing feeling that to isolate musical form in a realm all its own is both futile and sterile.[1] It seems stranger now than it once did when Allen Forte, in a recent discussion of Brahms's Alto Rhapsody, pursues his analysis with no reference whatever to Goethe's text or to its possible role in shaping Brahms's musical design.[2] If anything, the issue is even more pressing in the case of purely instrumental music, where there is a clear need for productive methods of critical interpretation that are neither broadly analogical nor narrowly historicist. I cannot enter into a full discussion of these issues here, only illustrate one line of response to them. My analysis of Chopin's A-Minor Prelude is also a critical reading, in the sense that literary critics use the term, and I shall try to place the work, so interpreted, in its context: the loose association of cultural practices that constitutes Romanticism.

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[1]For recent discussions see Monroe Beardsley, "Understanding Music," and Joseph Kerman, "The State of Academic Music Criticism," both in On Criticizing Music: Five Philosophical Perspectives, ed. Kingsley Price (Baltimore and London, 1981); Edward T. Cone, "Schubert's Promissory Note," this journal 5 (1982), 233–41; and Anthony Newcomb, "Sound and Feeling," Critical Inquiry 10 (1984), 614–43.

[2]"Motive and Rhythmic Contour in the Alto Rhapsody," Journal of Music Theory 27 (1983), 255–71. The exception proves the rule: "This eloquent and profound work has a recondite character corresponding to that of the (un)usual poem chosen by the composer" (p. 255).

The means for this kind of musical criticism can be provided by what I shall call *structural tropes.* These are recurrent formal configurations that carry a distinctive expressive potential in music and that are understood rhetorically and figuratively in literary or speculative texts.[3] I do not regard these tropes semiologically, as codes, but as a loosely connected repertoire of expressive scenarios that require as much interpretation as the works that they inform. They are best thought of, perhaps, as miniature genres, typical structural patterns that normally apply on a limited scale—to brief works, to fragments, or to episodes in larger wholes.

A good example is furnished by the way that Romantic writers use self-citation as the occasion for a sudden, often consummatory reorientation of thought and feeling. At the close of *Adonais,* his elegy for Keats, Shelley tries to disentangle himself from "the web of being" and to fasten his desires on death. His success, if "success" is the word, turns on an allusion to his own *Ode to the West Wind:*

> The breath whose might I have invoked in song
> Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven
> Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
> Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
> The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!
> I am borne darkly, fearfully afar.[4]

Schubert's String Quartet in A Minor carries on its own elegiac argument in much the same way. After a first movement full of disquiet, the Andante seeks repose in an idealized Biedermeier melody borrowed from the incidental music to *Rosamunde.* A counter-quotation soon follows to proclaim the unhappy destiny of all Biedermeier innocence. The minuet, its form chosen with irony, begins by quoting the accompaniment to a line from Schubert's ear-

lier setting of Schiller's *Die Götter Griechenlands: "Schöne Welt, wo bist du!"*[5]

If this were another essay, I would try to connect these moments of allusion and quotation to Romantic representations of memory, and I would tangle up my argument with other works—say Wordsworth's *The Prelude,* Goethe's *Trilogie der Leidenschaft,* and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. For the present, though, there is Chopin to deal with, and some critical-analytical work to perform before his structural tropes can come within earshot.

II

One way to hear Chopin's A-Minor Prelude is as a many-sided study in dialectic, taking the term in the precise sense of dynamic oppositions that involve a reversal of meaning or value. Romantic writers regularly associate dialectical reversals with states of both heightened and disturbed consciousness. Coleridge makes a typical connection:

> A little child, a limber elf,
> Singing, dancing to itself,
> A fairy thing with red round cheeks,
> That always finds, and never seeks,
> Makes such a vision to the sight
> As fills a father's eyes with light;
> And pleasures flow in so thick and fast
> Upon his heart, that he at last
> Must needs express his love's excess
> With words of unmeant bitterness.

In this passage from *Christabel* (ll. 656–65, the "words of unmeant bitterness" derive from a double twist of dialectic. Wrought to excess, the father's love expresses itself in the form of anger. Pleasure comes all too "thick and fast"; it turns into a feeling of suffocation that demands violent release. Meanwhile, the father's pleasure is vexed by more than its own excess. The child's self-sufficiency, as she sings and dances to herself, also elicits an unconscious envy from the adult who has lost the art of always finding and never seeking. Coleridge's term "unmeant bitterness" thus needs a certain Freudian revision. The bitterness is unmeant only by the fa-

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[3]I take the term "expressive potential" from Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), where it is defined as the "wide but not unrestricted range of possible expression" possessed by a work of music (p. 166; for fuller discussion, see pp. 165–75).
[4]The text for this and all other quotations from the English Romantics is *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period,* ed. William Heath (New York, 1973).

[5]The quotation in the minuet is identified by J. A. Westrup, "The Chamber Music," in *Music of Schubert,* ed. Gerald Abraham (1947; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y., 1969), p. 93.

ther's conscious ego, which represses his long-ing to become once more the "limber elf" of his own childhood.

A similar complication of feeling also seems to haunt the A-Minor Prelude. Given the emotional harshness of the piece, the quality of its persistent, grating dissonance, the dialectical reversals that permeate the music may tempt us to hear them as analogues to the psychological defense of undoing, the classical expression of powerful ambivalence.

On the largest scale, dialectical reversal appears in this prelude as a gradually unfolding antagonism between melody and harmony, a process that begins with the immediate contrast between the smooth, sinuous right-hand part and the square, abrasive accompaniment. Melodically, the work consists of two parallel statements of a slowly descending theme, which itself consists of two parallel strains. During the first statement (ex. 1, mm. 3–12), the melodic line is essentially made up of chord

Example 1:
Chopin: Prelude in A Minor, op. 28, no. 2.

tones, and the melodic cadence of the first strain coincides with the first harmonic cadence (m. 6). As the second strain concludes, however, the accompanying harmony suddenly vaporizes into ambiguity, just at the point where a cadence is expected (m. 11). After this, melody and harmony pull progressively apart. The second melodic statement (mm. 14–21) is essentially an elaboration of dissonances, which twice silences the previously implacable accompaniment. At first an articulation of the harmony, the melody evolves into the antithesis of the harmony.

This reversal rests on a group of important background processes.[6] In his analysis of the A-Minor Prelude, Leonard B. Meyer points out that the large-scale melodic design is based on the establishment, disruption, and resumption of a process—the linking of melodic phrases by common tones—while the harmonic design involves the "decisive" disruption of a pattern that is not resumed—the progression vi–I$^6_4$–V–I that occupies mm. 1–7.[7] Meyer calls this relationship between melody and harmony a parallelism, but it is more like an incongruity, and the work unfolds by turning it into a many-sided process of dissociation. Not only do the harmonic and melodic articulations of overall form follow different courses, but they are also asynchronous—asynchronous twice over. Melodically, the breakdown of common-tone linkage divides the prelude at m. 14^2, where the disruptive melody note, A, marks a large-scale structural downbeat.[8] By contrast, the original harmonic process breaks down at m. 11 during a melodic cadence, where the disruptive chord marks a large-scale structural upbeat. Similarly, the melodic shape of the work is defined by a pair of equal and parallel periods, mm. 1–12^2, 12^3–23. Each of these begins with bare accompaniment figuration and overlays it with the slowly descending melodic line, the two strains

of which are separated by a substantial rest. Harmonically, the piece divides into unequal and complementary segments at the junction of mm. 14 and 15, where the tonic-to-be materializes for the first time out of what has come to seem hopeless tonal ambiguity.

Only in the last two-and-a-half measures are melody and harmony realigned, but here they are not so much reconciled as fused together, rendered indistinguishable from each other as the second melodic statement becomes the upper voice of the block-chord progression that acts as a coda. The arpeggios introduced at the last moment (mm. 22^3–23) dramatize this conflation of antithetical elements. After tearing melody and harmony further and further apart, the prelude closes by effacing the difference between them. It is suggestive that only at this point of expressive collapse do we get a tonic cadence,[9] so that in some sense the cadence completes the composition less than it negates it. This feeling of forced termination is heightened by the rather intrusive effect of the unembellished block chords, which usurp the place of the fantastically dissonant accompaniment figuration and thus call attention to the formulaic—in context, even archaic—quality of the closing cadential pattern.

The unresolvable clash between melody and harmony represents Chopin's way of staging a larger dialectic between Classical authority and Romantic innovation—a dialectic whose very definition prejudices it in favor of Romanticism. The melodic design of the prelude pays homage to the Classical demands for balance and resolution, particularly the symmetrical resolution that Charles Rosen sees as central to the Classical style.[10] The second melodic statement can be heard as a resolution of the first at two levels of structure. Ignoring a grace note in m. 10, the first statement uses only a single pitch, F♯, foreign to the eventual tonic, A minor. This F♯ becomes increasingly prominent, and the statement closes with four repetitions of it

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[6]The terms "background" and "foreground" are used throughout this essay in a generalized, not necessarily Schenkerian, way to mark off relative degrees of structure and ornament.

[7]Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago, 1956), pp. 93–97.

[8]Measure 14^2 indicates m. 14, beat 2. On the structural downbeat, see below, p. 149.

[9]*Pace* Meyer, who calls the ii$^{6♯}_3$–i$^6_4$ progression in A minor at mm. 14–15 a cadence (*Emotion and Meaning*, p. 96). Even if one were not to argue about the harmonies, there is no rhythmic articulation of a cadence at this point.

[10]Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York, 1972), p. 99.

after descending a fourth from A to E (mm. 10–11). When the second statement begins, it repeats the A–E descent and proceeds to F♮, pointedly resolving the previous F♯ (mm. 14–16). Pointedly, too, this F♮ is imposed as a dissonance on the I⁶₄ harmony at this point, where it marks the decisive separation of melody and harmony in the work.[11]

At a more background level, the resolution of one melodic statement by another depends on the structural use of the interval of the minor seventh. As Michael Rogers pointed out in an earlier issue of this journal, the first melodic statement articulates the descent of a minor seventh (E to F♯), and the second statement mirrors this descent (as A to B) through m. 21.[12] In the little block-chord coda to the piece, the second statement is resolvingly extended to a descent through the tonic octave, A–A. Given the tacked-on nature of this close, it is important to note that the octave resolution has already occurred, almost imperceptibly, at mm. 20–21, where an upbeat A is tied under the melodic goal, B. The force of this resolution is enhanced by the fact that the first descent of a seventh is structural rather than audible—the first melodic statement transposes its second strain from b to b¹, so that the structural seventh is composed of the sequences e¹–b, b¹–f♯¹—while the second descent is both audible and structural at once, an actual registral movement from a¹ to a.

In opposition to this melodic balancing act, the harmony of the piece is completely unclassical, or rather anticlassical.[13] In this department, Chopin's dialectical ironies proliferate

almost beyond control. The first thing to observe about the harmony here is that the only two keys in the prelude in which there is a full cadence, G major and A minor,[14] are presented in a thoroughly disjunctive way. These tonalities must be understood to be utterly unrelated to each other. In particular, G does not represent the flatted seventh degree of A, to be related to A via plagal movement through D major. Such a movement, initiated in mm. 9–10, is emphatically aborted by the harmonic mishap in m. 11, which begins with a D–D♯ alteration and evolves into a series of undecidably ambiguous chords.[15] The harmonic process is now driven implacably by the problematical D♯, which sounds on every beat in mm. 11–14. The harmonies are successively modified until the D♯ fits into a chord with directional value, the French sixth in m. 14. A minor then simply emerges from the morass and demands to be considered the tonic.

Several dialectical determinations converge on this moment. The harmonically undecidable passage at mm. 11–14 represents a heightened form of the most conspicuous feature of the first ten measures, the grating non-harmonic dissonance of the accompaniment. The normal relationship of structure to ornament is dialectically reversed by the episode. The dissonance can no longer be rendered coherent by subordination to an underlying harmony, while the harmony of the piece as a whole is—in Classical terms—rendered incoherent by subordination to the dissonance. At best, the juxtaposition of tonalities that results might be understood, taking A as the tonic, as a harmonic articulation of the structural interval of the minor seventh that underpins the melodic design. The G-major cadence in mm. 5–6 can be heard to reach its long-term resolution, or at least un-

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[11] It is striking that the same F♯–F♮ resolution also occurs in the bass just six beats earlier to produce the augmented-sixth chord that stabilizes the disrupted harmony. The melody repeats and in effect appropriates the harmonic resolution to F♮, whereupon the F♮ becomes a source of harmonic tension.

[12] Michael Rogers, "Chopin, Prelude in A Minor," this journal 4 (1981), 244–49.

[13] Rogers ("Chopin Prelude") shows that the piece employs golden sections to articulate its form, and points out that golden sections are a common feature of Classical temporal designs (p. 249 and 249n). I would suggest that the role of these golden sections is almost vestigial in the A-Minor Prelude: the Classical proportions of the harmonies operate in the manner of unconscious memories.

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[14] The piece is sometimes said to begin in E minor, but it would be more accurate to say that it begins *as if* in E minor. The E-minor triads of mm. 1–3 form a static tonal level, not a key. Though they feint at marking a tonic, their only confirmed function is vi of G.

[15] Meyer (*Emotion and Meaning*, p. 95) identifies the D♯ as an alteration in D⁶₄. It should be noted, though, that this interpretation, which makes sense initially, is never confirmed, and so may be illusory. The alteration, if it is that, has no justification in the voice leading.

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doing, when its melody makes an essentially note-for-note return in mm. 20–21 in the context of A minor. In each case, the A–B step that introduces the melodic cadence also completes the large melodic descent of a minor seventh. The distribution of the harmonies would thus seem to be modeled on the intervallic design of the melodies without reference to the principles of Classical tonality. And this produces yet another dialectical irony, since it is the melodic design alone that links the piece to the Classical style.

As we would thoroughly expect by now, the presentation of the disjunctive harmonies conforms to the dialectical shaping spirit of the prelude. In fact, dialectical reversal here replaces symmetrical resolution as the dynamic principle of the music.

In its first ten measures, the piece follows what seems to be a cyclical harmonic process, more or less as described by Meyer:

$$G: \quad vi \quad I^6_4 \quad V \quad I \quad iii$$
$$D: \quad vi \quad I^6_4 \quad V$$

The submediant chords in this progression provoke uncertainty; the $^6_4$ chords impart clarity. The initial sonorities of G major and D major only assume their submediant function in the light of subsequent $^6_4$ harmony. The $^6_4$ chords, though unstable as local dissonances, orient and stabilize the larger harmonic structure.

Following the harmonic collapse of mm. 11–14, these values are reversed. Clarification now comes not from a $^6_4$ chord but from a fictitious submediant, namely the French sixth at m. 14^4, which stands in for the earlier submediant chords through the placement of its bass note on the sixth degree of the minor scale. The placement is emphasized by the important F♯–F♮ step in the bass at mm. $14^{2–3}$. A musical pun of sorts is at work here—Chopin reverts to it elsewhere in the Preludes—that conceives of a technically supertonic sonority as an intensified submediant.[16] The French sixth now acts exactly as the $^6_4$ chords did in mm. 4 and 9, that

is, as a dissonant structural downbeat in which the music finds its tonal bearings. Concurrently, the A-minor $^6_4$ chord of m. 15 surrenders that very same role: it joins the forces of destabilization by deferring the resolution of the French sixth.

This role reversal is subsequently compounded as the $^6_4$ harmony, which on both its earlier occurrences had resolved after only six beats, is subjected to a long and dissonant prolongation. Chopin now opens out the inherent instability of the chord and converts it to a source of such drastic tension that the newly achieved tonic quality of A minor is actually thrown into doubt.

III

What motivates this web of dialectical reversals, this self-interfering mesh of ironies? One answer lies in the position of the A-Minor Prelude in the cycle of Preludes as a whole. Part of Chopin's purpose in the cycle is to confront the foundations of musical coherence by putting them under stress from a wide variety of sources.[17] With the A-Minor Prelude, he does this to the main principle of coherence of the cycle itself, the arrangement of the pieces around a double circle of fifths that pairs each major key with its relative minor. The harmonic witchery of the A-Minor Prelude not only defers the recognition that the first two pieces form such a major-minor pair, but by suggesting G major as a tonic in its opening measures, the prelude even makes a feint at the *wrong* circle of fifths, a single movement along the major keys.

Within the piece itself, Chopin seems to be pondering the relationship between the listener, conceived of as an active subject, and the complex movement of musical time, which is to say of time as harmonized. By beginning *in medias res* with uncertain harmonies and employing $^6_4$ chords to resolve them, Chopin in mm. 1–7 highlights one of the distinct privileges of tonal music: the establishment of musical meaning through an integrative process that combines recollection and anticipation. The parallel design of mm. 7^3–9 confirms that this

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[16]Other instances are noted in my *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 94, 102.

[17]For a full discussion of this aspect of the Preludes, see my *Music and Poetry*, pp. 92–95, 99–104.

heightened shuttling before and after the imme-diate moment is, so to speak, the subtext of the G-major half of the piece. With the A-minor half, there is—what else?—a reversal, and per-haps the most potent one of all. Recollective movement shatters against the harmonic brick wall of mm. 11–14, and musical time now shapes itself by anticipation alone. The French sixth of m. 14 has no functional relationship to anything that precedes it. The chord can be rec-ognized at all only because of its distinctive whole-tone sonority, and its only role is to de-mand that A emerge as a tonic. The A-minor $^6_4$ chord that follows is, of course, equally prolep-tic; it arouses a harmonic expectation that rises in intensity to an almost anxiety-laden expect-ancy as the chord ceases to sound and the man-datory dominant resolution is deferred. The slowing of tempo that ensues as the first me-lodic strain leads *away* from the dominant (mm. 17–18) adds a notable turn of the screw. But the peak of tension, and the astonishing cli-max of the piece, comes in the full silence that occupies the second half of m. 19, a moment in which the musical fabric is constituted entirely by the listener's heightened anticipation of a dominant chord. The moment is so super-charged that more than one pianist has de-fended against it by holding the pedal down to the end of the measure.

Anticipation without recollection is a possi-ble definition of desire. Certainly, the structure of concentrated anticipation in this piece recre-ates the tonic of the Classical style in the image of desire. There is no longer a "home key" that is (or seems) intrinsic to the music; there is sim-ply what the ear wants to hear, what it cannot bear not to hear. And yet, in one last reversal, the closing cadential pattern is distinctly disap-pointing when it arrives, muffled by the mo-tionlessness of its upper voice and depreciated by the conventionality of its block chords. The silence in m. 19 ironically informs us that Keats was right: heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. Romantic desire always expects something . . . else.

IV

Having pushed so far, then, we find that Chopin's dialectical design in the A-Minor Prel-ude is meant to relocate the focus of harmonic action from the object to the subject. This is a reorientation that is characteristic of many Ro-mantic critiques of language and knowledge, a pattern epitomized by Wordsworth's claim that a world of objects uninvested by subjectivity constitutes "a universe of death" (*The Prelude*, 1850; XIV, 160). But other aspects of the design remain to be considered; we can go much fur-ther.

Why, in particular, does Chopin incorporate his multiple dialectical patterns within a single continuous texture? And why has he combined so many different structures, superimposing them on each other in a kind of loose conceptual polyphony? One answer lies in a structural trope that might be called the trope of the im-possible object—taking the term "object" to re-fer to the target of powerful feelings, as in the phrase "object of desire." Objects in this sense are usually symbolic representations of per-sons, in which form they figure prominently in psychoanalysis. What I call an impossible ob-ject is a self-image or self-expression possessed of an irrevocable strangeness, by means of which it attracts or fascinates the self that it represents.

Perhaps the best introduction to the impos-sible object is a little parable by Kafka called *A Crossbreed*, which tells of a "curious animal, half kitten, half lamb," who at times "insists al-most on being a dog as well," and may also have "the soul of a human being."[18] Among many re-markable things pertaining to his relationship with this animal, Kafka's narrator singles out one occasion

when, as may happen to anyone, I could see no way out of my business problems and all that they in-volved, and was ready to let everything go, and in this mood was lying in my rocking chair in my room, the beast on my knees[.] I happened to glance down and saw tears dropping from its huge whiskers. Were they mine, or were they the animal's?[19]

The presence of the animal, the impossible ob-ject, represents a surplus of the narrator's sub-jectivity, and this surplus returns something to

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[18]Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1976), p. 427.
[19]Ibid.

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the narrator that was alienated from him—here the self-regarding sadness that had been cast out by a self-condemning despair, and that enables the narrator to see himself with tearful eyes.

This pattern is ubiquitous in Romantic literature; two bare examples will have to suffice for it here. In Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*, a speaker beset with anxiety—"the fear that kills; / And hope that is unwilling to be fed"—is restored to an earlier state of joy through his encounter with an impossible object, an old leech gatherer who seems "not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep":

> Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
> That heareth not the loud winds when they call;
> And moveth all together, if it move at all.

The subsequent dialectic of the poem dramatizes the speaker's resistance to having his "human strength" restored by this strange figure, a resistance signified by the speaker's repeated inability to hear the old man's answers to his questions. (It is noteworthy that when Lewis Carroll parodied this poem in *Through the Looking Glass*, it is just this psychological deafness that he picked on.)

A second example can be taken from E. T. A. Hoffmann's story *A New Year's Eve Adventure*, in which Erasmus Spikher, a man who has lost his mirror image because of his infatuation with a demonic mistress, appears to have two faces, one young, one old. Spikher is both a real person and a phantasmal mirror image for the narrator, the Traveling Enthusiast. A victim of erotic delirium, Spikher embodies the Enthusiast's own supercharged and transgressive sexuality, and when the Enthusiast looks into a mirror with Spikher at his side, he sees only his own reflection looking back at him.

Impossible objects mitigate, by absorbing, some of the conflicting impulses of an over-full consciousness, the restless activity of a mind that, as Wordsworth said, is "beset / With images, and haunted by itself" (*The Prelude*, 1850; VI, 159–60). The strength of this subjectivity is such that it threatens to sever the ego from the outer world. The impossible object is, in part, a projected fragment of the self's incoherence, and in that form it takes on an ambivalent fascination that—at best—reanchors the self to the world. The ego, to borrow a formula from Freud,

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creates in order to avoid falling ill. Freud quotes Heine:

> Krankheit ist wohl der letzte Grund
> Des ganzen Schöpferdrangs gewesen;
> Erschaffend konnte ich genesen,
> Erschaffend wurde ich gesund.

> (Sickness provides the final basis
> For all creative urgency;
> Creating restored me to enjoyment,
> Creating restored my health to me.[20])

Impossible objects often appear, at least in the ego's fantasy, as the reward of such desperate creation; they have a way of turning up when needed, by a "peculiar grace," a "something given" (*Resolution and Independence*). That is why, uncanny though they are, the lamb/kitten, the leech gatherer, and Erasmus Spikher all possess a certain healing power. The leech gatherer, the very embodiment of Wordsworth's fear, is also the very figure who allays that fear. Not that all impossible objects are like that. Sometimes they just don't work—and sometimes, like the doll Olympia in Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, they work all too well.

Turning to music, we find impossible objects in their most familiar form not as works problematical in harmony but as works problematical in performance. The "transcendental" aspect of Romantic virtuosity, the demonic mystique of Paganini and the demonic/erotic aura surrounding Liszt, derived in part from the sense that these musicians were driven to create works of superhuman difficulty—objects impossible to anyone but them. This makes the identification of the performer as a charismatic, all-but-indescribable presence essential to the expressive situation. Schumann recognizes this when he remarks that "the Viennese, especially, have tried to catch the eagle [Liszt] in every way—through pursuits, snares, pitchforks, and poems. But he must be heard—and also seen; for if Liszt played behind the screen, a

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[20]"On Narcissism: An Introduction," in Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Phillip Rieff (New York, 1963), p. 67. The translation of the Heine quatrain is my own.

great deal of poetry would be lost."[21] The solo, virtuoso performance of works like Liszt's "Transcendental" and "Paganini" Etudes thus becomes a scenario in which the performer exorcises the burden of his excessive passion or self-consciousness. Schumann describes Chopin's own playing in just these terms: "I [w]ould never forget how I had seen him sitting at the pianoforte like a dreaming seer, and how one seemed to become the dream created by him while he played, and how it was his terrible habit, at the close of every piece, to travel over the whistling keyboard with one finger as if to tear himself forcibly from his dream."[22] Even Brahms felt the allure of this charismatic scenario. Clara Schumann called his "Paganini" Variations "Witches'" variations for more reasons than one; she knew what their difficulty signified.

Beyond the matter of performance lies the question of musical design: of works that are "impossible" not because they are hard to play but because they are hard to hear. Chopin's A-Minor Prelude is a full-fledged impossible object in this sense, and like the poetic instances I have cited, it seems to be implicated in the predicament of an ego whose subjectivity is so powerful as to become a source of dread. The multiple, overlapping, dialectically related structures that thread the work—and with such transparency—spell out the self-haunting incoherence that needs to be externalized in order for the subject to regain stability. Chopin evokes the presence of a Romantic subject by making sure that the authority of the Classical style hovers like a memory that the prelude is trying to banish, but that triumphs in the final cadence formula. He characterizes that subject by the plethora of dialectical reversals in the piece, the hallmark of ironic, disturbed self-consciousness in Romantic literature. Going further, we can say that the subjectively motivated incoherence that becomes articulate within the impossible object comes to the fore in the insistent dissonance of large open intervals that permeates the accompaniment, made all the more

disturbing for rarely rising above *piano*. From this point of view, the impetus of the work is the working-through and negation of that dissonance, something that is accomplished placatingly in the places where the accompaniment falls silent, and that reaches its fulfillment in the block-chord coda. What becomes satisfying at the close is not the harmonic resolution, which as we know has been dialectically subverted, but rather the warm sound—previously withheld—of full close-position triads in the dominant progression that precedes the final full cadence.

<center>V</center>

A further aspect of the dissonance in this work deserves some commentary. During its harshest passage, where it ceases to make harmonic sense, the dissonant accompaniment of the A-Minor Prelude can be heard as a disruptive interlude between two symmetrical statements of the music's melodic descent. Similar disruptive interludes, both brief and extended, are frequent in music between Beethoven and Mahler, and probably trace their lineage to the Romanze of Mozart's D-Minor Piano Concerto. Their presence destabilizes the material that is recapitulated, in feeling or texture if not in structure. Even the Cavatina of Beethoven's String Quartet in B♭ Major, op. 130, subtly heightens the dissonance of its voice-leading after it emerges from the weird passage marked *beklemmt* that intrudes on the movement near the close.

Thus in the Andantino of Schubert's late Piano Sonata in A Major, the plaintive opening gives way to a middle section that mounts inexorably to a climax of scarifying violence. The violence gradually ebbs away, but when the opening returns its melody is doubly disturbed: by a stabbing counterpoint above and a new, uneasily rocking accompaniment below. The closing measures avoid, or more exactly dispel, a cadence, and die away deep in the bass on a nerveless plagal progression, iv–i (prolonged)–i. The harmony forms an intimation that the seemingly bygone violence is cyclical, unexhausted. The plagal progression, right down to its voice-leading, is identical to the earlier progression that forms the transition to the disruptive interlude (mm. 65–68).

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[21]Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld (New York, 1969), p. 156.
[22]*On Music and Musicians*, p. 135.

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Perhaps the most extravagant instance of this structural pattern occurs in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, where the body of the entire third movement forms a disruptive interlude between the English horn solos that frame it. As Schumann notes, the climax of the movement comes as the *idée fixe* "undertakes to express the most fearful passion, up to the shrill A♭ [mm. 96–109], where it seems to collapse in a swoon."[23] The alienating difference made by the fearful passion is then dramatized by the muttering chorus of four timpani that envelops the closing solo, replacing the earlier answers of an off-stage oboe.

The structural trope that works itself out temporally in music as disruptive interlude and reinterpreted recapitulation appears in literary texts as a disturbed or potentially disturbed reflection, usually some kind of mirror image that is distorted when the surface in which it appears is approached or breached. In most cases, the original sight of the image is idealized by the spectator, but the disturbance brings about a change in value, so that the image afterward comes to evoke loss or frustrated desire. The disrupted image has the potential to grow increasingly seductive, and even persecutory, as the desire that it elicits becomes insatiable. Its role, however, is complicated by the fact that the subject of Romantic literature often shows a compulsion to disrupt idealized reflections precisely in order to set its own desire beyond all limits.

As with the impossible object, literary versions of this structural trope are legion. The prototype is probably the image of the eternal feminine that Goethe's Faust sees in the Witch's Kitchen scene of *Faust* I:

What do I see? A form from heaven above
Appears to me within this magic mirror!
Lend me the swiftest of your wings, O love,
And lead me nearer to her, nearer!
Alas! but when I fail to keep my distance,
And venture closer up to gaze,
I see her image dimmed as through a haze!
(2429–35)[24]

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[23]Robert Schumann, "A Symphony by Berlioz," trans. Edward T. Cone, in Berlioz, *Fantastic Symphony*, ed. Edward T. Cone, Norton Critical Score (New York, 1971), p. 237.
[24]Goethe, *Faust*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin, trans. Walter Arndt (New York, 1976), p. 59.

In keeping with what might be called his Romantic desire for desire, Faust cannot subsequently tear himself away from the mirror even though it makes him "crazy" ("*verrückt*"—literally "turned backwards") and arouses an impulse to flee.

A similar pattern appears in Coleridge's painfully embarrassing poem, *The Picture*, whose best lines recount the disruption of the image of the speaker's beloved in a pool:

Then all the charm
Is broken—all that phantom world so fair
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
And each mis-shapes the other. Stay awhile,
Poor youth, who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes!
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon
The visions will return! And lo! he stays:
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more
The pool becomes a mirror. (91–100)

When the mirroring surface restores itself, however, the idealized image is gone, and the speaker exhorts himself to intensify his misery until it becomes a madness that will reinstate the image:

Ill fated youth!
Go, day by day, and waste thy manly prime
In mad love-yearning by the vacant brook,
Till sickly thoughts bewitch thine eyes, and thou
Behold'st her shadow still abiding there,
The Naiad of the mirror! (106–11)

Desire is prized here to the exact measure that it consumes the desiring ego. It is worth noting in this connection that when Wordsworth, in *Yarrow Unvisited*, is intent upon preventing an idealized image from being "undone" by reality, he specifically calls for the persistence of an undisturbed reflection: "Let . . .

The swan on still St. Mary's Lake
Float double, swan and shadow! (47–48)

Like these episodes from Goethe and Coleridge, Chopin's A-Minor Prelude makes a disintegrating image the sign of subjective extravagance. The structural symmetry of the melodic statements highlights the role of the second as a disturbed reflection—a dissonant, tonally disjunct version—of the first. Between the two statements, the disruptive interlude invests

Chopin's fictive subject with something of the unqualified longing that exalts Faust and vexes Coleridge's lovesick youth. Sweeping aside the cadential process of the opening, the interlude calls forth the all-too-prolonged $^6_4$ climax, with its purely expectant, purely desiring character. The harmonic mis-shapings of the interlude thus carry the sound of willful self-alienation, the tone of voice of an ego impatient to establish itself as transcendental, as incapable of final satisfaction or embodiment.

This suggestion is greatly enhanced by Chopin's management of expectancy-laden harmonies once the interlude has reached its all-important French sixth. Since the normal resolution of the French sixth is to the dominant, the $^6_4$ harmony that follows—and that haunts the second melodic statement—has its own impetus toward a dominant resolution powerfully reinforced. As I noted earlier, this impetus reaches its peak in the silent half of m. 19, where heightened expectancy alone literally becomes the music. The failure of m. 20 to provide a resolution is thus particularly cruel, and exacerbates desire past the point of satiability. The distorted image constituted by the melody of this passage, like the feminine images in Faust's mirror and Coleridge's pool, appears only in order to cheat the desire that it sustains.

VI

Perhaps the most pervasive feature of nineteenth-century representations of subjectivity is that they are representations of subjectivity in *action*. The Romantic ego is always conceived dynamically, even to the point of dissolution; it is, as Wordsworth claims, "ever on the watch, / Willing to work and to be wrought upon" (*The Prelude*, 1850; XIV, 102–03). In this essay, I have been concerned to show how the musical processes of Chopin's A-Minor Prelude mimic this hyperbolical dynamism—which is not, I should add, to affirm that the prelude *means* something about the Romantic ego, or refers to one. But what kind of discourse, then, does this produce?—a question one might especially expect from an analytically-minded reader.

Cognitively, my statements about the A-Minor Prelude have the status of claims that music shares in certain human qualities. This is a kind of statement that has recently been given a cogent defense by Monroe Beardsley.[25] Normally, such statements have the value of an *aperçu*— as when Schumann remarks that Chopin's Impromptu in A♭ resembles a Byron poem in its emotional multiplicity, or David Epstein sees a Mahler scherzo as an analogue to a psychotic state.[26] I have tried to advance from this sort of improvisatory insight to a full-fledged, disciplinary criticism by grounding human-quality descriptions in a recognition of several small-scale generic patterns of subjective action—structural tropes—that are exemplified in the literature and music of the early nineteenth century. Chopin's prelude thus enters into an extensive Romantic nexus of representational practices, an ever-expanding network of affiliations that criticism constitutes as the discourse of Romanticism.

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[25]"Understanding Music."
[26]Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, p. 138; Epstein, *Beyond Orpheus: Studies in Musical Structure* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), p. 203 (quoted by Beardsley, "Understanding Music," p. 58).

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