Fiction, Truth, and Lies

The Nonassertion Theory, Quotation, and Music as Fiction

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4. Non-Literary Fiction and the Case of Music

1. No Truth, No Lies

Imagine opening a novel and reading this sentence:

The family of Dashwood had been long settled in Sussex.

You will guess with some confidence that it contains no factual information about certain inhabitants of Sussex. The conventions of fiction prescribe that when it says “Once upon a time there was …”, there probably wasn’t. It is a shocking and confusing state of affairs, that yet we’ve learned to master at a very young age.

Those conventions are at work the moment you know the book is a novel, which I simply assumed. Since novels do not always announce themselves as such (Sense and Sensibility does), it is an interesting question how we can tell the difference. If you open a book and the first sentence is: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”, it may be less obvious how it is to be classified. Wars have been fought over it.

Jane Austen’s matter-of-fact opening sentence seems to take for granted, in a casual manner, that there was a certain Dashwood family, once upon a time: it is implied in that tell-tale definite article, “the family of Dashwood”. Taken literally, the sentence has all the appearances of a factual claim; and yet none is made. By force of convention, fiction does not pretend to be true, even if it does (“This is a true story. The events depicted took place in ...”).

Fiction implies non-truth that is recognized as such. ‘Non-truth’ not in the sense of lying or deceit; but in the sense that no claim is made as to whether what is stated is true. As the renaissance poet Sir Philip Sidney put it in his most famous quote: “Now for the Poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth [...]” (Sidney 1912: 29). It is sometimes paired with an apparently similar observation by Ludwig Wittgenstein, that “a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information” (Wittgenstein 2007: 28e).

Monroe Beardsley has cited Sidney in his 1958 Aesthetics as an early representative of what he calls the Nonassertion Theory (Beardsley 1981: 447). Most noteworthy explanations of fiction are elaborations of this insight, itself not really a theory, merely a negative condition: for what does the poet do, and does what we call ‘fiction’ depend entirely upon her doing?
It is doubtful whether Sidney actually had the view attributed to him: that fiction is a peculiar way of not saying things. Sidney seems in fact not to have drawn any conclusions that may qualify him as a true nonassertivist. Poetry (we might say: literary fiction, in a broad sense), he argues, is not written “affirmatively”, but “allegorically and figuratively”. Rather than asserting (“affirming”) nothing, it does assert something, but non-literally. It gives us truth in fictional garb. Not some general plain truth, as the philosopher may do, but a “particular example” of it, dressed up as a “perfect picture”.

[...] for whatsoever the Philosopher saith should be done, he [the poet] giveth a perfect picture of it in some one, by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the generall notion with the particular example. (Sidney 1912: 14; cf. Abrams 1953: 323)

What should be done: it is not only factual truth, what exactly did or did not happen, but more particularly ‘moral truth’ that the poet is concerned with.

2. Poetic Truth

Justifying fiction as an oblique, illustrative way of articulating true generalities does not seem to be a promising basis for a theory. At the very least, it is too restrictive. It would imply that there is a moral in every story, a purpose to which it is told.

No doubt, Sense and Sensibility is, in part, a vehicle for moral critique (or a critique of ‘manners’); even the title suggests as much. Readers might find less satisfaction in the novel if there were not some wisdom to take home. We might read it as a fictionally concrete representation of true generalities about, among other things, family life. And no doubt much of the value of the greatest fiction resides in what it reveals about the world we live in. But the lessons that may be learned in reading fiction seem pale compared to the very particular experiences it affords us.

Sidney explains and justifies fiction as a rhetorical device: it belongs to the category of figurative speech, example, parable, and allegory. That is characteristic for the age of the liberal arts, in which all discourse, written and spoken, fictional and nonfictional, was under the governance of rhetoric.

Since the rhetorical apparatus has been constructed around the art of making public speeches (‘oratory’), the paradigmatic form of discourse is assertive monologue. The distinction fiction-nonfiction is of secondary interest; and this is reflected in the hierarchy of genres. In what is nowadays considered ‘literature’ in the ‘literary’ sense, the paradigmatic genres are no doubt narrative fiction (novels, short stories) and lyrical poetry. But before the romantic movement, ‘poetry’ included genres very different from what since has come to be seen as eminently ‘poetic’. Much poetry was didactic or philosophical, rather than lyrical and subjective. Narrative fiction or ‘romance’ is often at the bottom of the ladder.

Late in the eighteenth century, George Campbell still maintains that poetry “is properly no other than a particular mode or form of certain branches of oratory”.

Nay, even in those performances where truth, in regard to the individual facts related, is neither sought nor expected, as in some sorts of poetry, and in romance, truth still is an ob-
ject to the mind, the general truths regarding character, manners, and incidents. When these are preserved, the piece may justly be denominated true, considered as a picture of life; though false, considered as a narrative of particular events. (Campbell 1776 vol. 1: 14, 98)

As a ‘picture of life’, fiction should not depart from what could have been real. This commonplace goes back to the founding document of the theory of fiction, Aristotle’s Poetics. What distinguishes poetry (literary fiction) from history is that poetry does not relate actual events, but “the kinds of things that might occur”.

Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars. (Aristotle 1995: 59)

The poet is able to offer us a more coherent picture of the world by making patterns of actions and consequences transparent, in a way the historian, bound to the contingencies of real life, cannot do. In this way, fiction allows higher ‘philosophical’ generalities to transpire through the tangle of events.

Aristotle’s view is alien to modern literary aesthetics, which has grown to appreciate the qualities of particularity and imaginative detail as values in their own right. There is also a significant tension between Aristotle’s philosophical fiction and the view traditionally promoted by rhetoric, to which Sidney also subscribed when he argued for the value of poetry as providing particular examples of philosophical truth. The rhetorical appropriation of poetry has no basis in Aristotle, who treated poetry-fiction as a domain in its own right besides rhetoric. The temporary loss of the Poetics and ‘rhetoricization’ of poetry is one of history’s whims.1

3. Fiction as Quotation

If Jane Austen does not assert in her opening sentence that some Dashwood family had been long settled in Sussex, what does she do?

Aristotle’s answer is: she represents. What is common among several arts (poetry, painting, sculpture, acting, dance, even music) is the principle of representation or ‘mimesis’. This is the key concept which defines poetics as distinct from rhetoric. Aristotle has no exact equivalent for ‘fiction’; but fictionality is implied in his view of poetry as a representation of events that may not actually have occurred.2 And representation-mimesis is the principle that fundamentally distinguishes poetry from the rhetorical genres.

What does the poet represent?

In the age of rhetoric the favoured answer was: her subject. Literary fiction is like a picture of what it is about (ut pictura poesis).3 But if we go back to Aristotle, what drama represents is actions. If narrative is a representation of narration, and narration is the action if narrating, what narrative represents is that action. A narrative text does not represent what it is about; what we can represent directly and faithfully with words

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1 See Till on <Rhetoriserte> Poetik, in Ueding (2011: 144-145).
2 Halliwell (1987: 72): “[…] Ar. implies what can best be described as the fictional status of works of mimesis: their concern with images, representations, simulations or enactments of human life, rather than with direct claims or arguments about reality.”
3 On the history of this misquoted and misinterpreted idea from Horace’s Ars poetica, see Braider (1999).
are only words, as a manifestation of verbal behaviour. The sentence: *The family of Dashwood (etc.)* does not represent that family; it represents that statement. And because that statement is *represented*, it is not actually *made*.

This is the Nonassertion Theory enhanced with a theory of speech-as-action, or Speech Act Theory, which is a way of studying the pragmatics of language, the ‘things we do with words’ (Austin 1975). Some of those things are giving information, telling a story, requesting, joking, and so on; every speech act is done with a purpose, its ‘illocutionary force’.

The recourse to Speech Act Theory has allowed Beardsley in 1981 to define fiction as …

[…] the representation (i.e., depiction) of an illocutionary action, or series of them, in basically the same sense in which a painter depicts a cow, or an actor on the stage depicts an act of punching […] (Beardsley 1981: xlv).

One may have doubts about ‘basically the same’ (*ut pictura?*), but it makes sense that Jane Austen’s *apparent assertion* is in fact the *representation* of that assertion, as an actor speaking his lines represents a particular character speaking those same words. The character in this case is the narrator, who may remain nameless, and whose personality we can often only deduce from the way the story is told.

It is a matter of debate whether ‘narration’ necessarily implies this fictional narratorialship, or generally, whether all discourse is *somebody’s* discourse, no matter how abstract that ‘somebody’ may be. We are quite used to impersonal communications such as traffic signs, law books, weather forecasts, and commercial slogans. But even in such cases, we are still aware of the somewhat abstract corporate authorship of the message – in fact, it is crucial to recognizing them as messages, and accepting or not accepting them. (It makes sense to ask: *Says who?* when we encounter a *no entry* sign.) There is no truly self-speaking text; for it to be a text, and speak to us, it has to be human communication. It is possible however that the human presence that makes itself known *through* this text has no existence *outside* the text.⁴

From the author’s perspective, the narrator is created rather like an actor creates his role, if on paper only. The fact that her physical involvement is limited to the originary act of writing allows us to ignore whatever personal characteristics she may have had, as it has allowed her to adopt any role regardless of them. We may, of course, try to construct an image of the author through her writing, and have an interest in the nature of the author’s involvement in her story. Readers care about authors as spectators care about actors.

The Speech Act Theory of Fiction thus has the curious and unconventional implication of classifying narrative prose and poetry as semi-dramatic, rather than drama as semi-literary. Curious, but not unwelcome, because it guards us from treating the literary work as an abstract linguistic object in an ontological limbo, containing entities, fictional characters, with the mysterious metaphysical property of both existing and not existing. In the perspective of a history of actions, their problematic ‘existence’ is dissolved into a manifold of processes and acts that take place *outside* the world of fic-

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⁴ I slightly revised the position expressed in Muns (2019: 6).
tion, both in the physical world and in the minds of all those who take part in the work’s creation and appreciation. Speaking of the fictional Emma Dashwood, we are using a convenient and necessary abbreviation for our reading experiences with a particular printed text, which usually has many other physical instantiations and a rich reception history, at the origin of which is the author behind her writing desk. This is a boundless accumulation of facts, the totality of which is far beyond our knowledge and comprehension. Fortunately, we don’t need all the facts: only a vaguely defined selection is relevant at any one moment.

If we follow this argument, the opening sentence of *Sense and Sensibility* represents a specific speech act of asserting, by mimicking that assertion word for word. That means that the sentence is quoted. Penning down the narrator’s sentences, the author is quoting what he or she says. The whole of *Sense and Sensibility* is then one massive quotation; we could put quotation marks before the first, and after the last word. This is what the subtitle implies, *A Novel.*

The short answer to the question: *what does the poet do?* is therefore: she quotes.

Quotation is the particular linguistic form of representation or mimesis. It plays a part in making narrative and lyrical discourse fictional; but that is evidently not its only use, and not one that is usually recognized as such. Peculiar to quotation is that what is quoted is not merely represented, as something not ‘affirmed’ (‘used’, in the traditional analytical terminology), but ‘shown’ (or ‘mentioned’); it is also supposed to be a replication, mostly of something that has been said before by somebody else, but in any case, of words taken from another spoken or written discourse (Muns 2019). When there is no such original source, the quotation is made-up or fictional. Fictional discourse therefore creates its own creator, so to speak, by implication. That is what happens in novels and most poetry.

The small step from representation of speech acts to quotation, interpreting fictional discourse as quoted discourse, seems to have been avoided, maybe unnoticed, by both literary theorists and philosophers of fiction. When Clark and Gerrig (1990: 772), for instance, point out that “Quotations can even appear as complete narratives”, they only mean the story told by a character within the novel, the ‘inside’ of a narrative framework. They ignore the possibility that the framing story itself is quoted discourse.

The use of quoted direct speech within narrative goes back at least to the Homeric epics. It is only with the rise of the modern novel in the eighteenth century, with its increased psychological interest, variety of narrative perspectives and frequent changes between narration, direct speech, and inner speech or thought, that the device of quotation marks has become standardized. Once this practice was established, it became possible to use them also without a recognizable context in which the quotation is embedded. We find this mostly in odd cases, too easily dismissed by grammarians. For instance, the following notice (observed in a London hotel room) –

“Should you need a fresh towel – please leave used towel in your bedroom sink”
– suggests that its author realized that a piece of cardboard cannot *speak*, and that in order to make the request personal and convincing, it should have the appearance of being made *by someone*. The quotation marks highlight the fact that the text represents a speech act. They are equivalent to a speech balloon that points to no visible character: the ‘implied author’ or ‘persona’ of literary theory. In this instance, we have the special case of a *real* illocutionary act dressed up as fiction. (A literary purist might deny that the request is truly made.)

Kendall Walton (1990: 78), without speaking explicitly of quotation, thinks that writing down nonasserted sentences “is not necessarily to produce a work of fiction”.

One might compile a list of sentences for purposes of a grammar lesson or to test a microphone. Fiction is not just language stripped of some of its normal functions; it is something positive, something special. (Walton 1990: 78)

A microphone test is primarily a sound specimen, and as such irrelevant to the case. Are example sentences in grammar books – *The cat is on the mat* – fiction? Maybe not, if all we’re interested in is their grammatical structure. But if we consider it as a piece of unattributed quoted discourse, it is a piece of fiction, even if we don’t care much for the cat. It is ‘special’ enough, because our ability of stripping an object of some of its functions in order to contemplate its properties (grammatical, aesthetic, or otherwise) is not merely negative; it is, in fact, one of the factors that make art ‘art’. In that sense, grammatical examples are not unlike museum pieces.

This Quotation Theory of Fiction may not be much of a theory (it doesn’t say anything about *why we read fiction* in the first place), but it is the only way I see of making sense of the Nonassertion Theory. It saves us from being led in circles by explaining fiction as a special kind of ‘fictive utterance’. Though by itself it is not a theory, at least it should be recognized that a theory of fiction cannot ignore the theory of quotation. Most important, maybe, is that it allows us to avoid the perplexities which arise when fiction is explained in terms of truth and falsity. Much of what is said in fiction may be true, or in accordance with reality. In fact, there was and is a place called Sussex, and there are families living there. Some of them may even be called Dashwood. Even if there weren’t, there are such things as places and human families. For any piece of fiction, there are innumerable elements we take for granted as true-to-the-world. This is not an issue when fiction is quoted discourse: what is quoted is simply attributed to another source, true or untrue. It leaves the reader free to make up her own mind.

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That fictional discourse is quoted discourse follows from the Speech Act Theory of Fiction. This theory (or set of theories) has been the object of a somewhat bad-hu-

5 “Fiction requires a fictive utterance, which requires in turn a fictive intent.” Currie (1990: 35).

6 See e.g. Walton (1990: 41-43, 70-75). It is hard to make sense of Walton’s stance on fiction vis à vis truth. Cf. Walton (1990: 73); (1990: 102) “We have seen that fictionality has nothing essentially to do with what is or is not real or true or factual [...]”; (1990: 101) “The notions of truth and reality [...] are surely inseparable from the subject matter of any investigation. [...] The subject of this study is the institution of representation, and an integral part of it is the difference between truth and fictionality [...]”.

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moured critique by Kendall Walton, whose *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) is sometimes referred to as the ‘standard theory’ of fiction (though it is doubtful that there is such a thing).\(^7\)

According to a definition quoted by Walton, what the Speech Act Theory proposes is this:

[…]

Walton has three objections. First, admitting that fictional works with narrators do represent the narrator’s speech acts, and that fictional discourse may be “parasitic on ‘serious’ discourse”,\(^8\) he doubts that literary works must always have a narrator, or (I would generalize) internal ‘voice’. I believe they do, for the reason given above (which may not convince the sceptic). Walton then attempts to cast doubt upon that notion of ‘serious discourse’ by proposing a thought experiment. He asks us to imagine a society that has no serious discourse (that is, no ordinary linguistic transactions such as asserting, asking, proposing, begging etc.), but does create works of fiction with a quasi-speech that only looks like English. He then asks whether these creations “are composed of language”, and whether they are “works of literature” (Walton 1990: 85). Walton seems to gamble for a ‘yes’, but it should obviously be ‘no’; meaningless gibberish only derivatively counts as literature in nonsense poetry (*Jabberwocky*, *Ursonate*), and a society without ‘serious discourse’ is a society without language, eo ipso without literature. The unpleasant terms ‘parasitic’ and ‘serious discourse’ are not helpful in this context; instead of ‘serious’, we might speak of ‘direct’ or ‘nonrepresented’ discourse. Ordinary, direct discourse is what it is, communication; fictional discourse is ‘parasitic’ in the sense that it is a representation of ordinary discourse.

Walton’s third objection is that the interpretation of fiction as represented discourse cannot be generalized to all fiction as he understands it – that is, to all representational (mimetic) art. Few people however follow his practice of calling statues and paintings ‘fiction’, and the assumption that all art must be explained by that unique principle is merely the a priori of his own theory, a curiously antiquarian *réduction à un même principe* in the manner of Batteux (1747). Even if we accept it, the representation of speech acts could very well be the specifically literary embodiment of a general principle of mimesis.

4. Non-Literary Fiction and the Case of Music

Music has traditionally been seen as the toughest case for a mimetic theory of the arts. However, it is the only non-literary artform to which the notion of fictionally quoted

\(^7\) The most extensive critique of Walton to my knowledge is Matravers (2014). As I understand him, he has three main objections: (1) Walton fails to distinguish fiction from representation generally; (2) use of the imagination is not peculiar to fiction; (3) the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is less fundamental than that between what is represented and what is concrete. The third distinction, trivial as such, is confounded with that between what is in our range of action (‘confrontations’) and what is outside it. Matravers seems not to accept that nonfictional representations (such as philosophy books) may be ‘confrontations’ in his sense.

\(^8\) The uncredited expression is taken from Austin (1975: 104).
discourse might be extrapolated, provided that music can be described as ‘discourse’.

Music is most obviously mimetic when it imitates real life sounds: the ‘tone painting’ of birdsong, storms, galloping horses, rustling brooks, barking dogs, and so on. Such instances have often been discounted as eccentric, unmusical, and aesthetically suspect by those philosophers who think of music as an immaterial art that has emancipated itself from sound, and is debased by a return to its element of origin. Composers have not always held the same prejudice.

Musical mimesis also includes those ‘objects’ which we recognize in the sound stream as properly musical: melodies, themes and motifs, phrases and sentences, musical forms and sequences of events. These are to be distinguished from the acoustic properties of the sound stream as clearly as houses and trees from the brushstrokes of a painting; they exist only in our imagination. Moreover, they have borrowed many features from language and speech, which allow us to hear them as expressive in a speech-like manner.

Traditional theory of musical form distinguishes sentence, phrase, period, punctuation; question, exclamation, parenthesis; subordinate clauses are found everywhere, voices are raised and lowered, and in all of this music borrows its bearing from the voice that is speaking. (Adorno 1956: xxviii, my transl.)

Music may represent vocal expression as it is realized in speech. Instrumental music may represent vocal music. It may also represent movement and gesture, through elements such as speed and articulation, pitch register and ambitus, volume and intensity. These may be recognized as expressive through a sympathetic projection onto the listener’s body, outwardly or inwardly: singing along, wobbling the head, tapping toes. Indirectly, through the representation of such physical processes, music may represent states of mind. Instrumental music may also represent instrumental music. Marches and minuets are meant, primarily, to make us dance; as symphony or sonata movements they no longer have that function, but offer us a kind of picture-in-sound.

This is only the briefest and sketchiest outline of the mimetic potential of music. Some of it applies to a limited repertoire, typically instrumental music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the insight that musical mimesis and expression are interdependent goes back at least to Aristotle’s Poetics (Halliwell 2009: 30).

But, granted that music is mimetic in the way described, is it also fiction?

The clear intuitions most people seem to have about fiction and nonfiction tend to dissipate when we leave the field of literature. Is a map a fictitious island fiction in the same way as a description of that island? If a press photograph of an incident is non-fiction, is a pencil sketch after the same event fiction? Is Caspar David Friedrich’s vision of a Polar Sea, which he never visited, more fictional than the river scene of the Grosses Gehege (Fig. 1), a half-hour’s walk from his Dresden home?

9 “The musical representations that seem most childish, silly, unmusical appear to be those that represent, depict sounds.” (Walton 1990: 335)

10 This is what Young (2014: 7) calls the ‘resemblance theory’, which he considers commonplace and commonsense.
The question of the reality of what is represented is considered irrelevant by Walton when he deals with visual representation. Though for texts there is a crucial difference between fiction and nonfiction, “pictures are fiction by definition” (Walton 1990: 351), because they always involve a visual experience of what they represent, an experience of ‘make-believe’.¹¹

When we stand in front of Das Große Gehege, it is ‘make-believe’ fictional that we watch a sunset over a watery landscape, with a boat or barge floating towards the south; as it is fictional that we are witnesses to the interactions of certain early nineteenth-century individuals while reading Sense and Sensibility. Pictures may ‘draw us in’, and make us feel as if we were there, as Das Große Gehege does, its concave curves suggesting a space that expands beyond the surface of the painting, directing our gaze towards the glimmer of the setting sun.

Common sense allows us to say: I see a boat, even though we know we don’t. Maybe what we mean is: I can see that this represents a boat. We might try to analyse the process in terms like: broad horizontal, thin vertical: might be a boat. If we let ourselves be carried away, we may imagine standing on the muddy shore of the Elbe (or, actually, on an elevation above), watching the boat glide on in a moderate wind.

This, according to Walton, is not how we see pictures. There is one visual experi-

ence of imagining seeing a boat. The moment we see the object represented rather than the material surface, ‘make-believe’ is at work. Pictures may lack such enticing realist qualities as this painting has, but as long as they represent anything the act of recognition is one of ‘make-believe’.

That music is or may be mimetic is something Walton grants, for reasons similar to those I have sketched above. Music too may hand us the ‘props’ for playing the game of make-believe which defines fiction. There is some difficulty, however, in identifying those props.

It is fictional that the listener expects the tonic, regardless of what she actually expects, and it is fictional that she is surprised to hear the submediant or whatever occurs instead. (Walton 1990: 262)

Here the musical props are harmonic degrees (tonic, submediant), and one may wonder what they represent. As elements of musical syntax, they allow us to grasp the form of a musical sentence, follow its course and anticipate its conclusion. A tonic will follow a dominant with a certain probability. If this pattern of expectation is a matter of ‘make-believe’, even the patterns of linguistic grammar (predicate follows subject, etc.) might qualify as fiction; but these expectations are based on actual, well-grounded beliefs.

In a later essay Walton finds it difficult to reconcile musical mimesis with what he feels is music’s abstract nature or “purity”, which distinguishes it fundamentally from other representational arts.12 Music “induces imaginings” (Walton 2015: 153), but these imaginings do no produce fictional worlds. There may be a ‘game world’ of our experience, but it lacks the determination of ‘work world’ rules. Obviously, music lacks the pictorial or referential concreteness that allow us to recognize a horse in painting and crime and passion in literature: what is pictured, or what it is about.

Our experiences of music seem shot through with imaginings, yet I, at least, continue to resist the idea that Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos and Brahms’s symphonies have fictional worlds, as Crime and Punishment and Hamlet do. (Walton 2015: 159)

Though we may feel that a piece of music has a definite character and is unmistakably expressive, it is often impossible to discover anything like a story when we try to discuss what it is about. If nevertheless there is a logic in the succession of one moment to another, this is of a specifically musical nature. Music combines formal coherence with a representational jumble (Walton 2015: 161).

Indeed, if it is a demand that a Brahms symphony must be ‘about’ something in the same sense Crime and Punishment is about something, it will obviously fail. But this would imply that whether something is fiction or not ultimately depends on our skills of verbalization.13 It is an odd demand that musical fictionality should match the standards of literature. Maybe this is a consequence of the fact that Walton thinks of make-believe as an imagining of propositions. As he uses it, the term seems to denote states of affairs rather than the content of beliefs or statements (propositions are to

13 One can always do better than interpreting the tenderly melancholy siciliano of Mozart’s A major concerto K. 488 as a story about some lady missing her train. (Walton 2015: 158).
be ‘imagined’); but these propositions typically take the form of a true or false statement that such-and-such is the case (there is a boat). Walton’s theory of make-believe is a theory of classification, which should tell us when we call something ‘fiction’, and how it differs from nonfiction. But by focusing on the consumer’s side, and putting imagination at the centre, the theory leans heavily towards psychology, without introducing actual psychological content. The void is filled with an analysis in terms of ‘propositions’ and ‘fictional truth’, resulting in an essentially verbal-linguistic determination of our experiences with fiction.

As for music, I do not think that what we are imaginatively hearing necessarily involves propositional truth. But we cannot understand how music may offer us coherent representations without a deeper insight into musical mimesis.

A second argument that Walton proposes to explain music’s reduced fictionality turns around the problem of the musical ‘persona’, similar to that of the implied narrator in literary fiction. If music is expressive, there should be something expressed as well as someone expressing it. Musical movement and gesture imply a moving and gesturing of someone.

Where there is behavior there is a behaver. If music represents an instance of behaving calmly or nervously or with determination, it represents, at least indirectly, someone so behaving. So the fictional world contains human beings, anonymous fictive agents, whether or not the sounds themselves are characters in it. (Walton 2015: 156-157)

But, Walton argues, these supposed agents have too little definition to be credible as such.

We might take the case of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata op. 110 as an example (discussed below, fig. 2). What we may see and hear is a pianistic representation of a vocal aria. But who’s singing, and does she also sing the following fugue? Does she split her voice in three? Or does a choir fall in? – Such questions make any attempt to understand music as something like discourse look silly. Since there is no musical ‘other’ than herself that allows the listener to relate the events to a particular perspective, it seems that the listener is left to her own ‘game’ of imagined feelings, which is only weakly prompted by the incoherent representations of the music.14

Under Walton’s premises, however, the persona problem is irrelevant. The ‘fictional’ world of a painted landscape does not contain a persona; at most it offers visual perspective. Maybe perspective implies a viewer, and maybe this implied viewer is a pictorial persona (in a sense, a painting allows us to see something through somebody else’s eyes). Even if this is true, there are countless images where the rules of pictorial perspective are not applied, and a pictorial persona is not required by Walton’s theory of visual fiction.

Instead of dismissing the musical persona altogether, I would reject the all too simplistic identification of the persona with a voice, melody, theme, or other musical element. The unity of discourse is not tied to a melodic voice, but to the act of bringing everything about. A novelistic narrator is not silent when the characters speak: she

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14 For Walton (1990: 335-336), not only the perceived expression is fictional, the listener’s own emotional responses are also make-believe.
makes them speak, by quoting them. Their dialogue is an event in the story, with the distinctive property that it can be represented directly, as speech in speech. In musical discourse, voices may echo in the mind, bits of inner dialogue pop up, memories come to the surface, and so on; what gives them unity, is the agency we experience through it all.

In a third argument, Walton attempts to complement the supposed lack of narrative perspective with a lack of spatial perspective. The listener has no clear position vis-à-vis the musical events, which do not take place in any defined space or among defined agents, as is the case in literary and pictorial fiction (Walton 2015: 153).

It is odd that the spatiality of music should be in doubt. In painting it is only the use of perspective which gives us a definite viewpoint. With music, we are physically in a musically filled space, with a definite location and acoustical perspective. This real acoustic space may enter into complex relations with the imaginary space that is ‘composed into’ the music: the foreground and background of layered events, the near and far that is suggested by the art of instrumentation. Even when an auditory spatial perspective is absent – one might have ‘oceanic’ experiences during the Tristan prelude, maybe, or with La mer – this in no way reduces the imaginative experience: it consists precisely in this loss of any sense of here and elsewhere.

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The question remains whether music that is in some way representational (or in several ways at the same time), is or can be fiction. According to Mimesis as Make-Believe, one implies the other: make-believe is the recognition of what is represented. If we abandon that theory, not all representation is fictional.

The funeral march in Chopin’s Sonata in B-flat minor, op. 35 (or any other funeral march in the concert repertoire) might plausibly be said to represent a funeral march; it is not meant to be played at funerals (though that has often been done, with unintentionally grotesque effect). Grieg’s suite Fra Holbergs tid (From the Days of Holberg) is an evocation of the period of Bach and Handel through a kind of romantic neobaroque style. Ives’ Central Park in the Dark has the stated purpose of being an aural evocation of that scenery as it had been thirty years earlier.

Are these examples of musical fiction?

If our intuition balks at the suggestion (as I feel mine does), it is presumably because ‘representation’ or ‘mimesis’ seems to cover it adequately; this music is not about funeral marches, the late baroque, or life in New York City around 1880. As with pictures, there is no discourse involved, nothing said that might be unasserted or quoted, as the Nonassertion Theory has it.

But maybe not all music is in this way disqualified from being fictional. It could be that the quasi-linguistic, discursive nature of some music allows it to ‘say something’, in the poetic nonassertive way.

15 It seems that Walton (2015: 62) associates musical space mainly with the high and low of pitch (his argument is rather vague).

16 Why do crescendos rarely give the impression of approaching? Walton (2015: 162) seems to be unaware of the role of timbre in dynamics. A trumpet played softly nearby does not sound like a loud trumpet that is far away.
The *Arioso dolente* of Beethoven’s Sonata op. 110 in A-flat major (third movement) represents what the words indicate, a mournful arioso. It is prepared by a dramatic recitative, and the listener will easily recognize its quasi-vocal qualities without help from the score.

![Arioso dolente](image)

Fig. 2 Beethoven, Sonata in A-flat major op. 110, third movement (first Viennese edition, 1822)

The presence of a vocal model brings along the notion of a text that is sung. We don’t have to find words for it to make sense of the music, but we couldn’t understand it as mimetically *vocal* without being mimetically the singing of a *text*. ‘Mimetically vocal’ implies ‘mimetically poetic’.

We could (in a musical ‘game of make-believe’) suppose that the text might run something like: *Zum Leiden bin ich geboren, und der Schmerz geht mir voran* (I was born to suffer and pain precedes me, after Psalm 38).\(^{17}\) As poetry, this is the fictional discourse of a lyric persona (for modern readers; in biblical times perception may have been different). The text contains assertions (that *I was born to suffer*, etc.); but this surface meaning of the words does not exhaust its poetic meaning, which is not a statement of fact, but an attitude and the expression of a state of mind, a sense of fatefulness maybe. We may interpret it as a particular kind of speech act regardless of the exact wording. Only a hard-core formalist will deny that music can convey similar pragmatic attitudes, that it can complain, assuage, incite, alarm, and so on; and that without thinking of any specific text, the listener may respond to Beethoven’s arioso as to a heart-breaking and tender lament.

If this is a *representation* of dramatic-poetic discourse, one may still deny that the music *itself* is discursive. Obviously, a picture of a horse is not a horse. But a picture of a picture is a picture; music that represents music is music; and a quotation of a sentence is a sentence. In such cases the representation inherits some or all of the properties of its original. In this case we have *piano music* representing *vocal music* representing a *vocal-poetic utterance* that represents, or gives expression to a state of mind. Each level of representation borrows features of what is represented: poetic phrase building, vocal inflections and contours, the dynamics of expressive delivery; features that belong to discourse.

However, it is not in single representations that music is most convincingly discursive; it is rather in the succession of various contrasting events that something like the presence of a discoursing subject is felt. A formally conventional transition or

\(^{17}\) There is an often noted similarity with *Es ist vollbracht* from Bach’s St. John’s Passion, evidence of a common schema. This is also found in Beethoven’s cello sonata op. 69.
contrast can easily be explained by convention alone: in the absence of surprise, we do not tend to look for an explanation. Unexpected, ‘dramatic’ transitions suggest action, which implies an actor. When the arioso comes to an inconclusively subdued halt, and its contour is inverted to become the subject of a three-part fugue, which is again interrupted by a reprise of the arioso, we cannot rely on a formal model that predetermines the course of events; we may feel that there is a kind of expressive-dramatic logic at work, that not only wilfully transcends formal convention, but also may create shifts from one mimetic domain to another, from other music (vocal), to gesture (in the recitative), to polyphonic forms, in ways that defy verbal paraphrase. When we describe it, it may seem incoherent and arbitrary. If it makes sense to us musically, it is because music may be imbued with a sense of action, volition, intention, human agency and thought.

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It is rare that we can ascribe a specifically narrative mode to music, and maybe it is impossible. Narrative implies, apart from a narrator (no matter how impersonal), the action of narrating or telling, and events told, events that as told belong to the past, in relation to the present of the telling (even if past and present almost fall together, as in a sports commentary). This requires the linguistic semantics of reference and tense.

Not really narration, but a narrative ‘tone’ is suggested by Robert Schumann’s inscription *Im Legendenton* over a recurring section in his C Major *Fantasie* op. 17. The unusual prescription poses a riddle to the pianist and analyst: what kind of tone is that, and how it should be realized? Two facts at least seem to be implied: legends are about a distant, fictive past; and telling a legend calls for a special setting of intimacy and leisure. What it seems to say is, among other things: *this will take time; relax; dream away.* Though there can be no actual narrating in the music, it can adopt some of the characteristics of a narrative attitude.

If the title of Chopin’s four *Ballades* is more than a fashionably suggestive label, there must be either something like a narrative tone (*Balladenton*) to justify it, or a plot, or both. The ‘tone’ of the traditional vocal-poetic ballade is related to its repetitive strophic form, which serves as a kind of uniform grid for the narrative and the dialogue that is frequently contained in it. But in Chopin’s *Ballades* the form itself and its contrasting themes carry much of the drama; if there is a narrative tone it is in the sustained 6/8 or 6/4 metre (common in the vocal ballade).

In drama there may be an authorial perspective or manipulating presence in the way the events are presented. But there is no actual narration, a speech act that calls it into being – a speech act that can be ‘quoted’, as in narrative fiction (one might say that the actors are quoting the characters). If drama is fiction (as I suppose it is), it is
as ‘mimesis of actions’, as fictional narrative is mimesis of the act of narrating. It may be helpful to think of music such as the Ballades as a kind of audio play, or music for a silent and invisible film, where all the events have been absorbed in the musical medium (The Music That Ate The Movie – it could be an interesting script). Fictional music is a kind of cinematography avant le cinéma. The comparison with film is suggestive, because photography and montage may show events in a very particular and personal perspective, in a consistent act of ‘showing’ that may take on discursive (diegetic) qualities, but crucially without narrative distance. Due to its pervasive speech-like features, music typically is more explicitly discursive; but just as with film or audio plays, the underlying plot is not bound to one mode of representation, such as narrative, soliloquy, dialogue, or gesture.

‘Fiction’, applied outside literature and drama, is a concept on loan, and such borrowed concepts often distort what they are applied to. We can, however, not appreciate a large part of the musical repertoire if we ignore the fact that music itself has borrowed extensively from language and literature. The mimetic qualities with which music has been enriched in the European tradition allow us to perceive it as a kind of discourse, though without the semantic content which is contained in actual speech. It is the mimetically discursive features which give a sense of subjectivity to the plot of events. This possibility of hearing music as discursive and evolving along plot lines justifies thinking of music as fiction.

To think of (some) music as fiction has an advantage: it allows us to escape from the hopelessly inadequate opposition between ‘pure music’ and ‘programme music’. Most music in the classical-romantic repertoire is neither. A programme is given alongside the music as a verbal guide to interpretation. We can appreciate the fictionality of music without guidelines and without specifying our experiences in verbal paraphrase. But as we may try to describe anything, and often fail, nothing forbids the attempt to describe our musical-fictional adventures.

References


21 “[...] the poet should be more a maker of plots than of verses, in so far as he is a poet by virtue of mimesis, and his mimesis is of actions.” (Aristotle 1995: 61). Aristotle however did not think of poetic narration as a mimetic speech act; in narration the poet speaks “in his own voice”, and that is not mimesis (Aristotle 1995: 123). He praises Homer for minimizing his own voice.


