Chopin’s Thirst: Literary Reception and Bodily Expressiveness

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In 1900 the influential American critic James Huneker published Chopin: The Man and the Music, an impassioned plea on behalf of its subject disguised as a study of his life and works. The book is still in print today. It begins by linking Chopin to an acknowledged master of style: Gustave Flaubert, pessimist and master of cadenced lyric prose, urged young writers to lead ascetic lives that in their art they might be violent. Chopin’s violence was psychic, a travelling and groaning of the spirit; the bright roughness of adventure was missing from his quotidian existence. The tragedy was within. . . . He fought his battles within the walls of his soul—we may note and enjoy them in his music. . . . Chopin though not an anchorite resembled Flaubert, being both proud and timid; he led a detached life, hence his art was bold and violent.¹

It is not easy to say whether Huneker detected, recognized, discovered, or invented the violence and tragedy “within” Chopin’s music. His statement about it at the head of his text was meant in part to refute two adverse strands in the composer’s previous reception: the idea of Chopin as an excessively refined Salon composer, a genius of sensitivity and sickliness; and the idea of Chopin as a composer devoted to artifice, contrivance, even musical perversity. Odd though it seems today, some nineteenth-century critics condemned Chopin’s music as crude.
Comparison with Flaubert brushes that idea aside along with any association between stylistic refinement and timidity of subject matter. Huneker might just as well be saying, “Madame Bovary, c’est lui.” His description of Chopin asks listeners to go beyond the surface—refined or contrived, it doesn’t matter—in order to find the sublime truth where the nineteenth century had increasingly come to think that it was lurking: in a hidden depth.

This paper is about doing the exact opposite. Its topic is a series of literary representations that find the significance of Chopin and his music not below the surface, but in the breaking of the surface. In the history, or call it the genealogy, of this trope, Huneker’s equation of the man and the music persists, but what he identifies as the tragedy within proves to be irrepressible. From roughly the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, the trope takes the form of a simmering vehemence or violence that cannot keep itself from bursting out and does not try to.

More particularly, the trope takes the form of the expression in musical form of a powerful thirst, or else of its contrary, a traumatic outflow of voice, breath, or blood—the blood obviously linked to Chopin’s death from tuberculosis. In this context, the outflow is thirst turned inside-out; the urge to take something in mirrors itself in the pulsation that thrusts something out. The two sides of the trope are like the systole and diastole of heartbeat, another frequent image; the term “Chopin’s thirst” is meant to cover both. Both are captured by the British poet, man of letters, and Chopin fanatic Arthur Symons in a sonnet of 1903 entitled “The Chopin Player”:

The sounds torture me: I count them with my eyes,
I feel them like a thirst between my lips;
Is it my body or my soul that cries
With little coloured mouths of sound?²
Boris Pasternak would later ask much the same question. Pasternak was no less a Chopin fanatic than Symons. In an untitled poem, he describes Chopin’s music as bursting through windows into city streets, thundering and pounding and racing like a runaway carriage. (Pasternak’s imagery echoes and perhaps alludes to the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid’s famous “Chopin’s Piano” (1865), which culminates with the instrument being defenestrated.) But the climax of this tumult comes not in the street but in the mouth and the throat—perhaps those of some listener, but certainly those of the poet. The sounds of Chopin’s unconfined music “Chase, peal, clang again, and flog / soft flesh to blood. Again / give birth to sobs, yet never cry – / only not die, not die?”

T.S. Eliot, who had read both Symons and Huneker, produces the same trope in more muted and ironic form. The first four poems in his first book, Prufrock and Other Observations, form a sequence based on musical associations: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which closes with a famous image of mermaids singing; “Portrait of a Lady,” which despite its title depends mainly on musical metaphors; “Preludes,” a four-part sequence; and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” All subsequent collections preserve this sequence. Eliot’s “Preludes” are almost certainly modeled on the fragmentation and frequent darkness of Chopin’s, though the connection has rarely been recognized.

“Portrait of a Lady” gives the clue, together with the disenchanted tone: “We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole / Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.” Later the speaker says that he hears “a dull tom-tom” in his brain “Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own.” The tom-tom plays on Eliot’s first name, Thomas; it tugs at the mask of the poem’s speaker and points to the hammering prelude as Tom’s brainchild. The four preludes of the next poem show us how this sort of post-Chopin prelude sounds. The first one sounds like rain, a
“gusty shower.” But this is a rain that brings discomfort, not refreshment: “The showers beat / On broken blinds and chimney-pots,” making a kind of broken music.⁵ The poem, it seems fair to say, is Eliot’s “Raindrop” Prelude.

Refreshment comes within reach, or remains just out of reach, in first half of the second prelude, which is framed by thirst:

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

But consciousness of coffee is not a drink, and none is forthcoming. Two poems later, the sequence of Preludes ends with an ironic phantom of satisfaction, a familiar but here an empty gesture that most often occurs after someone has taken a large swallow:

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

It seems strange that a composer identified exclusively with the piano, and therefore with the hands, should provoke a response so closely linked to the mouth. Nonetheless, the translation of Chopin’s expressive medium from the piano to the voice, with emphasis on the mouth, is another persistent feature of the trope of Chopin’s thirst. In fact, if we add vocality to vehemence, fluids, and the breaking of surfaces, we have a good sketch of the whole. But it is necessary to add immediately that the trope of Chopin’s thirst, like most such cultural tropes, more often appears in incomplete than in complete form. The trope is the product of a series of
interlinked instances; it is not a fixed pattern. In other words, the trope of Chopin’s thirst, of
Chopin as thirst, “Chopin” as a thirst, is entirely genealogical in the now classic sense developed
by Foucault from a reading of Nietzsche:

[Genealogy] must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it
must seek them in the most unpromising places, not in order to trace the curve of their
gradual evolution, but to isolate the different scenes in which they engaged in different
roles. . .[and] resulted from substitutions, displacements, disguised conquests, and
systematic reversals. 6

In most cases, the writers surveyed here are not responding to each other. They are
responding to a cultural formation that comes to light only through their responses to it. The
discourse they compose postdates each of its elements.

A particularly forceful series of responses can be found between 1879 and 1919 in the
work of three American women writers. These instances form a kind of thickening or
concentration of the genealogical sequence, a little knot in the genealogical thread. The knot
binds Chopin to the writers as a surrogate self. The vehemence of the composer imprisoned by
his vulnerable body becomes a mirror of the predicament faced by women seeking to break the
bonds that limit their access to work, love, and cultural production.

The three women are Emma Lazarus, the aptly named Kate Chopin, and Amy Lowell.
Lazarus’s 1879 sonnet sequence, “Chopin,” and Kate Chopin’s 1899 novel The Awakening
introduce (Frederic) Chopin’s music as it breaks disruptively through the glittering social surface
of a salon. Both texts explicitly represent the sound of Chopin on the piano undergoing a
metamorphosis into voice—for Lazarus the voice of outcasts who would otherwise be mute, for
Kate Chopin the voice of Wagner’s Isolde as she sings her Transfiguration. Both texts connect
the sound of this voice to the surge of waters—for Lazarus deep ocean currents, for Kate Chopin a river whose run to the sea fuses with the flow of musical sound and a woman’s sobbing. Amy Lowell’s 1919 poem, “Chopin,” reiterates Symons’ and Eliot’s invocation of thirst and counterpoints it with images of blood. Lowell hears the blood in the music and uses fragmentary quotations to ventriloquize Chopin’s voice fused with her own:

Rain rattled on lead roofs . . . ,
And some one in the house [Chopin] screamed
"Ah, I knew that you were dead!" . . .

First this,
Then spitting blood.
Music quenched in blood,
Flights of arpeggios confused by blood,
Flute-showers of notes stung and arrested on a sharp chord,
Tangled in a web of blood. 7

The versions of Chopin’s thirst produced by Lazarus, Kate Chopin, and Lowell fall in the middle of a spectrum that runs from idolatry at one end to madness at the other. 8 The idolatry needs little comment. It was a common aesthetic attitude at the turn of the twentieth century. Symons’s “The Chopin Player” affirms it; Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady” satirizes it. For the madness, a far more complex matter, we can turn to works by two other authors: The Pelican, a “chamber play” written by August Strindberg in 1907-08, and “The Musician’s Wife,” a monologue by the American poet Weldon Kees, written sometime in the late 1940s or early 1950s.
Both *The Pelican* and “The Musician’s Wife” link Chopin’s thirst to a condition of subjectivity that is unendurable—unlivable, to take a term from Judith Butler to which we will return. The title of *The Pelican* refers to the myth that the mother bird, if necessary, will pierce her own breast to feed her young with her blood. The play is about a mother who does just the opposite.

The action begins with the agitated sound of Chopin’s Fantaisie-Impromptu in C# Minor. Played offstage, the music breaks out as a floating vehemence, an unexplained, acousmatic presence detached from any particular subject. We learn only through the dialogue between the player’s mother and his former nurse who he is and why he plays. The women speak as the music continues, the nurse accusing the mother, the mother defending herself. The nurse reveals that the mother had denied nourishment to her son, Frederick, in his infancy. Not only did she deny him the breast but she was also stingy when she bottle-fed him. Now she denies heat to the household, so that Frederick, having managed to grow up, must play Chopin to keep warm. The need for warmth thus shades into hunger, which, since the food involved is mother’s milk, shades into thirst. Primal hunger takes the form of thirst, and the infant’s cry becomes the young man’s playing of Chopin. The warmth that Frederick seeks, and can of course never find, is the warmth of the breast he was denied, and which his just-married sister is said to lack. Also deprived, she has never developed the body part her mother has somehow kept for herself—a kind of hoarding. In another of the chamber plays, *The Burned House*, the same music embodies the life that the emotionally mummified protagonist has lost: “My Impromptu,” as he murmurs to the muffled sound of the offstage playing. All he is capable of now (this is shown on stage) is a few random notes.
The notes are fuller in “The Musicians’ Wife” but the emptiness swallows them up as the title character speaks in absentia to her mad husband. The poem has a circular design in which the first two stanzas and the last recall music breaking a surface, while the two stanzas in between show the wife contemplating the landscape and listening to recordings in a hopeless effort to restore what has been shattered. The surface is that of normal consciousness, which both husband and wife have lost. Here are the second stanza and the last; the order of the statements in the second is important, involving a double meaning:

And all day long you played Chopin,
Badly and hauntingly, when you weren't
Screaming on the porch that looked
Like an enormous birdcage. Or sat
In your room and stared out at the sky . . . .

Now, sometimes I wake in the night
And hear the sound of dead leaves
Against the shutters. And then a distant
Music starts, a music out of an abyss,
And it is dawn before I sleep again.9

The musician’s obsessive playing of Chopin is to his hands what screaming is to his mouth. Each expresses the same thing, but with a fatal difference that produces an endless cycle. In the order of events, the playing of Chopin is the sublimation of the screaming that precedes it; the playing may be bad but it is also haunting. In the order of the text, the screaming is the truth of the playing of Chopin that precedes it; the playing cannot free the voice which is imprisoned
like a bird in a cage. At the end of the poem, the circular dilemma passes to the speaker, who at night hears a kind of playing, the rustle of dead leaves on the shutters (echoing the “withered leaves” that Eliot’s gusty shower whips up as it beats on the blinds), and then a music that, like her husband’s screaming, comes from an abyss whose sound she can hear but whose meaning she cannot fathom.

But the abyss is not a place; it is the lack of one. Chopin’s thirst cannot be given a definite subjective location, even though it is understood to be transmitted by Chopin to and through a speaker, narrator, or character. Chopin’s thirst acts as if it were a diffuse object that saturates both internal and external space. It appears as a slight thickening of musical sound to the texture of wind or rain. This is most clearly true in the first moments of *The Pelican* and the closing lines of “The Musician’s Wife,” but it is even true in Symons’ “The Chopin Player”: what is it that the speaker feels as a thirst between his lips—the sound of the notes, their expressive import, or his desire for them? The thirst also withholds itself, in the sense that its meaning is never fully articulate and may even appear as a failure of articulation—a scream, a sob, a silence. The philosopher Graham Harman would say that such withholding is an ontological feature of any and every object. Objects are always in tension with their own qualities; they “withdraw from all human access” and our experience of them can only be “indirect or vicarious.” Harman’s view helps describe Chopin’s thirst and similar cultural tropes because in their case this core of opacity is not a privation. In them it becomes an active force. For those who feel it, Chopin’s thirst belongs to the force exerted by his music.

And force is of the essence. The emotions set free by the trope are not merely intense, but excessive; the trope serves nonconformity of feeling, indecorousness, luxuriance, indulgence. Symons describes the effect of ideal Chopin performance as what we today might call a feedback
loop of sensuous extremes. Caught in that loop, pleasure and pain, the sacred and the profane, become indistinguishable: “When Pachmann plays Chopin it is as if the soul of Chopin had returned to its divine body, the notes of this sinewy and feverish music, in which beauty becomes a torture and energy pierces to the centre and becomes grace, and languor swoons and is reborn a winged energy.”11 The music becomes a reverberant form of oxymoron, the trope that in its traditional poetic usage registers emotional states so extreme as to be unintelligible: “I fear and hope. I burn and freeze like ice.”12 Vladimir Pachmann becomes the preeminent Chopin pianist by effacing himself. He turns the “sinewy” body of the music he plays into the host, in every sense, of Chopin’s soul, which it had been once before when Chopin played it. The music thus becomes, returns to being, Chopin’s “feverish” (consumptive) body in a “divine” or sacramental, sacrificial form. But the resulting communion does not escape, but instead requires, the torture and languor that it endlessly sublimates.

Chopin was appointed to personify this circle of extremes because the era associated it with a surplus sensibility that the man and the music alike were felt to embody, and to embody quite literally. No doubt part of the reason is biographical; the senses sharpened by consumption drive the legend. But part of the reason is musical, consistent with Chopin’s tendency toward florid, quasi bel canto melody on the one hand and passages of extreme violence on the other. This conjunction may be epitomized by the “Raindrop” Prelude—the subject and probably the model of Amy Lowell’s poem. This is music that turns the equivalence of enharmonically related keys into a violent metamorphosis from gentle pulsation in the outer sections (in D-flat major) to violent throbbing in the central section (in C-sharp minor). The throbbing rises an octave above the pulsation and sounds in octaves like a kind of keening, almost a scream. The pitch of intensity is too high to permit of a real recovery. The Prelude cannot sustain a return to
the first segment of its three-part form, but instead breaks down mid-melody and dies away into a murmuring conclusion. Lowell echoes this collapse, perhaps, by concluding the middle section of her poem with a quotation from a letter by Chopin to his friend Julian Fontana in which Chopin describes the collapse, for the time being, anyway, of his work on the Preludes:

"I cannot send you the manuscripts, as they are not yet finished.

I have been ill as a dog.

My illness has had a pernicious effect on the Preludes

Which you will receive God knows when."

He bore it.

The tendency to associate of Chopin with feeling in excess, however, is not the cause of the trope of Chopin’s thirst, but something more like a rationale or even an excuse for it. And the reason for translating the medium of excess from the piano to the voice remains to be found. Is it because the poetry wants to translate the trope into its own medium, that of utterance and its sensory source, the mouth and throat? Or is it because another feature of the trope, the unusually strong confusion of Chopin’s music with his person, of Chopin with “Chopin,” enjoins us to hear the music as an utterance in a nearly literal sense?

With this confusion in mind, it is revealing to consider some observations by Stanley Cavell about the way in which we care about works of art: “We are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them, and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people. . . They mean something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do.” Cavell suggests that this attitude reveals the motive for making and valuing art in general, independent of kind or content. A work of art “celebrates the fact . . . that [human] actions are coherent and effective at
all in the scene of indifferent nature and determined society." Perhaps so. But the trope of Chopin’s thirst seems to affirm within its large but limited historical horizon the exact opposite: not a riposte to indifferent nature but a desire for something other than indifference; not a will to cope with determined society but a demand for something impossible to determine.

The Preludes especially seem to have voiced—and I do mean voiced—this desire and this demand. Fragmentary, hasty, all over the map: the Preludes are thirsty. As a nameless character in Kate Chopin’s novel exclaims of the tumultuous D-minor number that closes the cycle, "That last Prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!" That is certainly the case in Gottfried Benn’s poem “Chopin” (1948), like Kees’ “Musician’s Wife” a late addition to the thirst corpus. Benn’s depiction recalls Pasternak’s image of “Chopin” bursting through windows and at the same time alludes to the association of music and tuberculosis in Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain:

Anyone hearing

certain Preludes from him,

be it in country houses or

at a high altitude,

or through open French windows

on for example the terrace of a sanatorium,

will find it hard to forget.

[Wer je bestimmte Präludien

von ihm hörte,

sei es in Landhäusern oder

in einem Höhengelände

oder aus offenen Terrassentüren
beispielsweise aus einem Sanatorium,
wird es schwer vergessen.\[14\]

Hard to forget, perhaps, because the composer’s suffering body becomes articulate as the
music is heard to speak or sing. The texts of the thirst corpus are insistent on this point. Thus in
his poem “Music,” Pasternak links the explosive force of Chopin’s music to the suffering of the
outcast and the doomed: “Life of the streets, fate of the lonely.” Here again, as in the untitled
poem quoted earlier, we find “Trees under downpour” and “rumbling wheels.” Lazarus similarly
hears in the music the voice of those “seat apart by Fate / Who, still misprized, must perish by
the way.”\[15\] Lowell explicitly fuses the emission of blood with the outpouring of music—which
her ears drink in as her cat laps milk.

For the most part, the images that portray this quasi-sacramental fusion of music and
(Chopin’s) body are not literary cross references, so the explanation for them must lie
elsewhere—perhaps in what one might call the culture of bodily expressiveness. Different eras
allow different bodily parts and actions to serve as permitted signifiers, bodily signifiers, somatic
extensions of language. For the period occupied by most of our corpus, throbbing, sobbing,
trembling, and vocalization are primary bodily signifiers. If one accepts Norbert Elias’s classic
concept of a civilizing process tied in the history of the West to increasing control of bodily acts
and functions,\[16\] this group of signifiers linked to blood and voice, rhythm and exhalation,
assumes a double significance felt in most of the texts in the corpus. On the one hand these
bodily expressions are restrained as to motion; they are primarily forms of intensity. On the
other hand, their rhythmic, wavelike form lends itself to a link with fluid ebbs and flows, from
the bloodstream to the sea, which threatens to overpower all constraint, as one sees most
explicitly in Kate Chopin, Strindberg, Pasternak, and Kees.
The screaming in Kees's poem provides a revealing extreme: screams are not part of the publicly expressive body in the era covered by most of these texts. One reason why the screams in Wagner's operas were, and still are, so disruptive is that they violate this prohibition, which lingered well into the twentieth century. Strindberg’s piano player is heard offstage at the keyboard before he comes onstage to speak. His playing—if I were staging the play I would make sure it is frenzied—is very close to the musical translation of a scream he cannot utter.

The poems by Lazarus, Symons, Lowell, and Kees confess to a similar dilemma by making their forms conspicuous: sonnets for Lazarus and Symons, five closed five-line stanzas for Kees, circular stanza form (A B A: Winky, a cat – Chopin in Majorca, where he was thought to have composed the “Raindrop” Prelude – Winky the cat) for Lowell. The poetic forms aim to limit the very outbreak of Chopin's thirst that they aim to invoke. Benn provides an intriguing exception; his poem consists of a loose metonymic chain suitable to a capsule biography. But the exception proves the rule by twice breaking its own surface.

The first break comes in the description of Chopin’s illness, which replicates Lowell’s but in clinical form:

Tuberculosis in that form
with bleeding and scarring
long drawn out;
quiet death
in contrast to one
in agonized convulsions
or by gunfire.

[Brustkrank in jener Form]
mit Blutungen und Narbenbildung,
die sich lange hinzieht;
stiller Tod
im Gegensatz zu einem
mit Schmerzparoxysmen
oder durch Gewehrsalven.¹⁷]

These lines work by inversion. The dreary cycle of bleeding and scarring becomes convulsive, explosive, via the classic rhetorical device of inclusion by exclusion: the denial of convulsions and gunfire installs them in the text.

The second break is a recollection, in lightly fictionalized form, of the occasion on which Chopin's friend and perhaps lover, Delphine Potocka, sang to him at his deathbed. Potocka's singing is presented so as to exemplify the conversion of piano to voice. The poem is careful to linger on the piano and on the hands, detailing Chopin's conception of proper fingering. But it is also careful to mention that when Potocka sang, the piano was moved to the door. The voice fills the silence of the instrument, now useless except as a "No Exit" sign. Benn also makes the mysterious statement that Potocka sang "a violet song" (ein Veilchenlied). The reference is almost certainly to Mozart's song "Das Veilchen," his only setting of a poem by Goethe. The song is again almost certainly not what Potocka sang, but its text forms a gloss on the cruelty of Chopin's death. Goethe's poem describes a violet which longs to be plucked by a certain young woman to adorn her bosom. But she does not see the flower and carelessly crushes it underfoot.

The deathbed singing brings us back to the question of why Chopin’s thirst so often involves the transfer of expressiveness from piano to voice. The emphasis on orality has a Freudian ring; how psychoanalytic should one be about it in an anti-Freudian age? The
persistence of the images of thirst, blood, water, and the mouth does suggest something like a symptom, but it is not easy to say a symptom of what. What do we make of the oscillation between greedy intake and convulsive emission? Perhaps the turn to bodily imagery simply provides a vehicle for emotional freedom an emotional freedom otherwise hard to find and to exercise in public. The imagery, which is partly euphemistic, justifies itself under the guise of something required by an approved form, musical hagiography, the sanctification of musical genius. The violence and vehemence of Chopin’s thirst has permission to be physical because, so to speak, it is first metaphysical. Or perhaps the trope of Chopin’s thirst, of Chopin as a thirst (with blood as milk, with music as the liquid pulsation that feeds the listener) responds to the need for what Judith Butler calls livability—the mark of a form of life that may be publicly affirmed.

For Butler the test of a livable life is the ability to mourn those who share its form. For the writers who invoke Chopin’s thirst, the test is the ability to bear witness to intense need or desire. In this connection, the wrenching vehemence in Chopin’s thirst, and in the thirst for Chopin, becomes in general what Lowell’s poem makes of it in particular: a vehicle for the familiar modern experience of being denied the mental or spiritual nourishment necessary to make one’s form of life livable. Lowell describes the only available response in three words: “He bore it.” The implication, carried through the thirst corpus by the frequent references to Chopin’s illness and early death, is that this denial can be resisted but not overcome. The thirst cannot be quenched. We all have to play such music to keep warm.

Summary.
The literary representation of Chopin in the period leading to and through early 20th-century modernism shows a contradiction between two expressive identities: a compound of refinement, delicacy, and sensitivity, the expression of a beautiful soul too good for this world, and a ravenous, violent force of desire that sooner or later takes the form of oral greed, that is, of thirst, sometimes direct, sometimes displaced. The thirst is also expressed as a figurative preoccupation with fluids, especially rhythmic fluids—blood and ocean waves. The outward surge of the fluids forms a mirror image of the wish to gulp or swallow; a small symbolic system emerges that balances immersion with absorption.


5 Ibid, 13; subsequent quotations, 15, 17.


8 For a fuller account of this trio of texts, my *The Hum of the World* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2019).


