This is narrative stripped bare. Something is making a nameless woman angry and upset, and she takes the score of JS Bach’s Goldberg Variations, determined to study them thoroughly. ‘For her, practising the piano was more a narcotic than anything else.’ Each of the movements has its own chapter, as she contemplates the music and remembers episodes in the life of her daughter. Then she tackles the technical, intellectual and emotional challenges of playing each variation on her grand piano, one by one, day by day.

Even if you’re familiar with the Goldberg Variations, you’ll find it frustrating reading this novel without listening to them as you read. Glenn Gould’s 1955 performance is a constant point of reference. The question of period authenticity arises: ‘Many present-day musicians seemed to think that an authentic performance was one played on the rickety set of instruments from the time when the composer lived. Anyone who doubted that, no longer counted. But didn’t it show more respect if you linked the notion of authenticity to the intentions of the composer and not to the wood or the strings to which his period condemned him?’ But how to work out the intentions of someone who died 260 years ago? This woman concludes that this monumental work was written ‘to preserve their creator from insanity’ after the death of his son Bernard. This, of course, may be projection on her part.

*Counterpoint* has a certain power but it would have worked better if we knew from the beginning why this woman was so disturbed. Of course the suspicion is there all along but the news comes shockingly late, after we have been privy to her thoughts and memories without knowing the cause, ready to accuse her of overreacting, for almost the whole book.