

# Letter

A survey of theoretical statements concerning the letter in twentieth-century Polish literature studies discourse can help us bring into relief all of the elements of the transmutations in theory

whose continuation (but not culmination) is the so-called cultural turn and a variety of interpretative practices that together form the panorama twenty-first century literature studies. This opportunity does not arise from the cumulative, dialectic or procedural development of Polish humanities, but is a result of the paradoxical ontology of the letter (the first study of the letter in this light was written by Stefania Skwarczyńska,<sup>1</sup> 1975), which either generates problems by overstepping the boundaries of what is recognized by a particular theory as literary or undermines and demands the undermining of the theory's basic tools of understanding and interpretation. The very paradoxicality of the letter's ontology lends itself to description in the languages of various theories (from phenomenology through communications theory and structuralism to deconstruction or performativity), the problem of the letter interests many areas of literature studies (literary history, theory, the study of biography and documents, as well as literary scholarship), and parallel investigations of the letter's importance have also been made by various other knowledge disciplines (including the history of communications, media studies, and sociology). For this reason also, scholars interested in the letter have, as a rule, taken one of two approaches: either limiting their study to one particular story<sup>2</sup> (Trzynadłowski, 1977; Maciejewski, 2000) or demonstrated the multi-layered nature of the problem, complicating the existing knowledge<sup>3</sup> (Cysewski, 1997); some have also combined the two strategies<sup>4</sup> (Czermińska, 1975, 2000).

Skwarczyńska's 1937 *Teoria listu* (Theory of the Letter) represents an unprecedented attempt to probe the phenomenon in all of its complexity, and has become at least a point of reference, and often a conspicuous and weighty presence, in every work written on the problem of the letter since. The new 2006 edition of Skwarczyńska's monograph can be interpreted as expressing a need, running parallel (or perhaps in opposition) to the hermeneutics of suspicion and post-theory theory that dominates scholarly journals, to actualize or strengthen literary theory overall, overcoming the "weakening" alleged by Gianni Vattimo. A very different position from Skwarczyńska's is taken by Kazimierz Cysewski, who, in a series of publications on the theme of letters, argues that "the hope for a conflict-free transfer of the categories and tools of literature studies scholarship to the study of correspondence is illusory"<sup>5</sup> (Cysewski 1997). From the point of view of "post-poetics poetics" it is particularly interesting to bring into relief crucial problems of the letter that

<sup>1</sup> See Skwarczyńska, "Wokół teorii listu (Paradoksy)" (Concerning the Theory of the Letter [Paradoxes]), in Skwarczyńska, *Pomiędzy historią a teorią literatury* (In Between Literary Theory and History), Warszawa 1975.

<sup>2</sup> See Jan Trzynadłowski, "List i pamiętnik. Dwie formy wypowiedzi osobistej" (List and Diary. Two Forms of Personal Utterance) in: *Trzynadłowski, Małe formy literackie* (Small Literary Forms), Wrocław 1977; Janusz Maciejewski, "List jako forma literacka" (The Letter as a Literary Form) in: *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX*, Białystok 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See Kazimierz Cysewski, "Teoretyczne i metodologiczne problemy badań nad epistolografią" (Theoretical and Methodological Problems with the Study of Epistolography), *Pamiętnik Literacki* (Literary Diary) 1997, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Małgorzata Czermińska, "Pomiędzy listem a powieścią" (Between Letter and Novel) in *Teksty*, 1975, 4; *Autobiograficzny trójkąt: świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie* (Autobiographical Triangle: Testimony, Confession, Challenge), Kraków 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Kazimierz Cysewski, "Teoretyczne i metodologiczne problemy badań nad epistolografią," *Pamiętnik Literacki* (Literary Diary) 1997, 1.

particular scholars have dealt with, revealing areas that had been deemed peripheral, and the attempt to outline perspectives offered by inter- and transdisciplinary studies of the letter and new theoretical and interpretative proposals. For this reason, too, an article Skwarczyńska wrote thirty years after the publication of *The Theory of the Letter, Wokół teorii listu (paradoksy)* (On the Question of The Theory of the Letter [Paradoxes]) seems particularly inspiring, and the titular paradox reveals itself to be a singularly operative term for describing the phenomenon, while Kazimierz Cysewski's synthetically drawn map of essential (unresolved) problems relating to the letter should be acknowledged as a landmark in the work done on this category so far.

Every effort to create a synthesizing definition of the letter conjures up a series of problems or requires numerous amendments, qualifiers, or reservations. The clay tablets from the era of cuneiform, the oldest remnants of human communication, prove that the history of letters is almost as ancient as that of writing itself, and generally has aided the long-distance exchange of information. The letter is a product of the existence of writing, the absence of the addressee, and the distance between correspondents, though these last two conditions are not obligatory (the redundancy of the actual addressee is shown by the practice of Oscar Wilde, who threw letters out the window of his London house onto the sidewalk, addressed to no one in particular; and the superfluity of distance between correspondents is proven by many letters such as Witkacy's famous letter to his wife, sent from one room to another<sup>6</sup>; see Degler 2009, Szmidt, 2014). The "substitutive" nature of the written utterance in relation to spoken communication elicits a number of reservations, however, beginning with the question of the division between voice and writing. The literary nature the letter appears unimpeachable as long as we recognize the advent of e-mail as the bookend closing off the history of the letter, closely linked to the culture of writing.

A general problem connected with the most basic attempt to define the letter is its parallel existence in several dimensions:

1. practical everyday circulation, understood very broadly, both in its public dimension (i.e. the open letter in the newspaper, the pastoral or diplomatic letter) and its private one (family correspondence, letters between friends);
2. literary worlds of representation (e.g. an epistolary novel or a letter in verse);
3. and, most interestingly of all from the theoretical perspective: when a letter from the first category functions as literature (a case in point would be Madame de Staël, who besides her letters, acknowledged to be distinguished works of literary art, created no other literary works; or the many literary artists who were also letter-writers).

### The Protean Ontology of the Letter

Scholarly studies have primarily focused on the third of those categories, and the conditions or complications of displacing the practical (the everyday) into the realm of the literary (and vice versa: the simultaneous introduction of the literary into the practical, conventional, everyday). In 1937 Skwarczyńska placed the letter within the field of applied literature (as opposed to pure literature), and systematically linked the aesthetic theory of the letter with a conception that privileges the utility and pragmatics of the letter over its literary properties, with at the same time

<sup>6</sup> Janusz Degler, *Witkacego portret wielokrotny. Szkice i materiały do biografii (1918-1939)* (A Multiple Portrait of Witkacy. Sketches and Biographical Materials [1918-1939]), Warszawa 2009; Olga Schmidt, *Korespondent Witkacy* (Witkacy as Correspondent), Kraków 2014.

the reservation that “the life that the letter grows into and that it creates, must form the point of departure for the aesthetic evaluation [...]”<sup>7</sup> (Skwarczyńska 2006, 29-30). The concept of “life,” in phenomenological terms understandably set in opposition to “literature,” rejected by the structuralists and communications theorists as inoperative, and treated by post-structuralists, especially constructivists, with distance, subject to critical analysis, is a pivotal one for Skwarczyńska:

A letter is a part of life. It comes into being in the area of life, joined directly to it. In this it differs from most other types of literature, which originate in a world spiritually detached, somehow removed from the “clatter” of immediate reality. [...] A letter has a line of living, practical purpose, [...] its ambition is to get results. [...] Literature accepts the letter only when it has fulfilled all of its tasks in relation to life. A letter against the background of life is not an end but a means. The relation between the letter and the life that flows through it can vary greatly. Sometimes it can be a receptor of life waves [...], or it can be an unequivocal life argument, a life act. (Skwarczyńska 2006, 332-333)

It is that very connection between the letter and life that engenders a whole set of methodological problems and calls for the distance of the scholar, who treats a literary work as an aesthetic object. Jan Trzynadłowski, interpreting the letter as a “literary small form,” and searching for the systematic properties of the letter and of correspondence, came to the conclusion that correspondence has no structure (a body of laws governing the formation of the whole), which in the case of the letter is conventional, incomplete, and if intentional, then not from the correspondents’ perspective, but thanks to the editor or publisher’s design. The letter’s connection with “life” destabilizes the structural framework of theory, and Trzynadłowski, evidently fascinated by the letter, defines it as a “form of personal utterance,” a “genre of literary output,” or a “diary in spite of itself,” whose structure is secondary wtórna (letter as treatise, letter as feuilleton, letter as compositional component of a novel). The primary aspect of the letter is its connection with life, though Trzynadłowski does nothing to problematize that theme: “a letter [...] as a literary reaction to certain actual states of affairs catches hold of them in their perceived or presumed continuation, but most of all in their ‘momentaneous condition’”<sup>8</sup> (Trzynadłowski, 1977, 82). This contact with the empirical means that as a usable text, the letter, close to all kinds of “personal papers,” is a literary phenomenon demanding to be considered in its social and historical aspects and has no existence outside of them. On the other hand, Trzynadłowski claims that the letter “is characterized by complete autonomy, in that it requires no other text, but only a certain causative situation”<sup>9</sup> (Trzynadłowski, 1977: 83) – which makes the letter one form of “personal utterance,” a rather imprecise category, but expressive of the desire to escape from the methodological impasse. Trzynadłowski’s reflections are accompanied by the suggestion that some of the problems relating to the letter should be dealt with by other areas than literary studies, namely sociology and history.

The precise nature of the letter, call it “documentary” or “living,” but in any case definitely problematic for literary theory, is the result of among other things its parallel ties with such seemingly unrelated matters as print journalism (the institution of the post office and the courier who

<sup>7</sup> Stefania Skwarczyńska, *Teoria listu* (Theory of the Letter), Białystok 2006, pp. 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Trzynadłowski, “List i pamiętnik. Dwie formy wypowiedzi osobistej,” (Letter and Diary. Two Forms of Personal Utterance), in: Jan Trzynadłowski, *Małe formy literackie* (Small Literary Forms), Wrocław 1977, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Trzynadłowski, “List i pamiętnik. Dwie formy wypowiedzi osobistej,” in: Jan Trzynadłowski, *Małe formy literackie*, Wrocław 1977, p. 83.

was able to relate public information while delivering letters made it hard for the newspaper to succeed; see Mielcarek, 1999)<sup>10</sup> and autobiography. The interest in the letter (open letter, letter to the editor, etc.) as an element in the history of print journalism has been particularly great among linguists studying the rhetoric of letters, while the importance of letters to the formation of public attitudes, as an element of literary life (e.g. open letters from groups of authors and artists, joint letter 34), and that element's place within literature from this perspective have not been much touched on or disputed. That issue appears to be relevant, however: if the newspaper came into being as a collection of extracts from letters, then a letter is a kind of newspaper of which only one copy is printed, particularly in situations where political censorship is involved. This question can be considered from the perspective of a change of focus between statements about the world and self-expression, the domination of a particular function in a communicative situation; its context may be theoretical reappraisal, typical for the twentieth century, the "century of the document,"<sup>11</sup> (Ziątek 1999) of such genres derived from journalism as the reportage or the feuilleton. What is crucial is that the theoretical thought strikes rather at the letter's connection with "personal utterances," issuing from the importance of the authorial subject ("the causative instance"), and its connection with honoring intimate genres: the diary, journal, reminiscences, witness testimony, etc. If the letter has oscillated between the non-literary and the literary, this has coincided with the transformation of the private (personal and non-literary) into the public (literary), but that still leaves the issue of how what is public, already included within the understood framework of journalism, can complete the transition to literariness. Roman Ziemand, in his classic, influential work *Diarysta Stefan Ż.* (Diary-writer Stefan Z., 1990)<sup>12</sup> makes a gesture similar to Skwarczyńska's – he defines journals and diaries, but also letters with the umbrella term "literature of the personal document," which is "composed of two cosmoes: the world of writing directly about oneself and the world of eyewitness testimony" (Ziemand 1990, 17)<sup>13</sup> theoretically summarizing the publishing and interpretative accomplishments of the last century in this field, brought about in large measure by readers' demands.

From the perspective of what readers expect from documents, it seems that private letters that "document" the "life" of an individual or an individual and his or her circle, have greater potential for literariness or being read as literature. The narrative potential of correspondence has been brought out in Małgorzata Czermińska's articles, which, though they are by no means a continuation Trzynadłowski's thinking, are linked with it by a similar initial situation, the connection between the letter and autobiography; Czermińska then significantly develops the problematic of the letter as a pivotal context in introducing the novel. Czermińska does not seek to define the letter or its determinants, but focuses on the area where novel, letter and "intimate letters" overlap, which means that "the prototype of the epistolary novel [...] has not aged, that is, the block of letters, on the contrary, is attracting ever greater interest in a time where there is a search for the novel concealed outside the bounds of the novel and when autobiography can become the measure and guarantee of the practical value of literature's existence"<sup>14</sup> (Czermińska, 2000: 271). One expression of the "hunger for truth" and "authenticity" that Czermińska underscores, and

<sup>10</sup> Andrzej Mielcarek, *Historia łączności w zarysie* (Outline of the History of Communication), Szczecin 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Zygmunt Ziątek, *Wiek dokumentu* (Age of the Document), Warszawa 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Roman Ziemand, *Diarysta Stefan Ż.* (The Diarist Stefan Z.), Warszawa 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Małgorzata Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt: świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie*, Kraków 2000, p. 271.

of the narrative potential of autobiography, is the reading practice of Helena Zaworska: “Over time, life and career experience led me to keep some skeptical distance and understand that diary or epistolographic confessions also have their conventions, conscious and subconscious games, stylizations, and poses. They did not interest me any less because of that, but I began reading them differently and I knew that each one contained not only sincerity to the point of tears but also sincerity to the point of lies.”<sup>15</sup> (Zaworska 1998: 5). Similarly, Anna Pekaniec in her work on intimate works by women (autobiography and epistolography) asserts that “in terms of the letter’s dependence on life, women’s correspondence in particular is predestined to be a mirror or register of women’s experiences, not only related but interpreted [...] A distinctive feature of women’s epistolography is how it arises out of the feminine experience of the world and how it records – even in cases where the understanding of femininity is marked by a high degree of conventionality”<sup>16</sup> (Pekaniec 2012: 359-360). The title Pekaniec gives to the chapter dealing with the most frequent topics of women’s epistolography reads like a summary of her theoretical and interpretative approach: “The Letter and Existence – An Unbreakable Bond.” Letters can also be read as “documents of the era” or the “laboratory of the soul” of the writer when they are being used for purposes of biography (editions of poets’ love letters influenced the shape of the first literary monographs, for example, Antoni Małeck’s pioneering work *Juliusz Słowacki. Jego życie i dzieło w stosunku do współczesnej epoki, 1899-1867*, see Przybyła 2000,<sup>17</sup> but they in fact fulfill the same functions simultaneously, as in Hanna Malewska’s biography, see Głąb 2009,<sup>18</sup> or numerous studies in the volume *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX, 2000*)<sup>19</sup> or the reinterpretation of literary texts (such as the new reading of Maria Konopnicka’s poetry and prose through the prism of the author’s letters to her children; see Konopnicka 2010, Magnone 2011).<sup>20</sup>

The linkage between letter and life, literature and document, is being drawn out by studies of “imagined communities,” intellectual and social circles, and literary generation. In *Miłosz i rówieśnicy. Domknięcie formacji* (Wyka 2013)<sup>21</sup> Marta Wyka performs a gesture of “opening an archive of letters” that constitutes “the timber that builds the awareness of generation” (Wyka 2013, 218),<sup>22</sup> with the central figure of Czesław Miłosz, subject of heterogeneous epistolography, whose letters “stake out their own boundaries – the boundaries of the genre as well” (Wyka 2013, 277).<sup>23</sup> Jerzy Borowczyk, working on a new interpretation of the Philomaths’ correspondence, follows Roland Barthes in aligning “friendship practices” and

<sup>15</sup>Halina Zaworska, *Szczerść aż do bólu. O dziennikach i listach* (Painful Sincerity. On Journals and Letters), Warszawa 1998, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup>Anna Pekaniec, *Czy w tej autobiografii jest kobieta?* (Is There a Woman in This Autobiography?), Kraków 2012, pp. 359-360.

<sup>17</sup>Zbigniew Przybyła, “List w metodologii pozytywistycznego literaturoznawstwa” (The Letter in the Methodology of Positivist Literature Studies), in: *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX* (The Art of Writing. On the Polish Letter in the Nineteenth Century), Białystok 2000.

<sup>18</sup>Anna Głąb, *Ostryga i łaska. Rzecz o Hannie Malewskiej* (The Oyster and the Weasel. The Theme of Hanna Malewska), Kraków 2009.

<sup>19</sup>Zbigniew Przybyła, “List w metodologii pozytywistycznego literaturoznawstwa,” in: *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX* (The Letter in the Methodology of Positivist Literary Studies), Białystok 2000.

<sup>20</sup>Maria Konopnicka, *Listy do synów i córek* (Letters to Her Sons and Daughters), ed. L. Magnone, Żarnowiec 2010; Magnone Lena, *Maria Konopnicka: lustra i symptomy* (Maria Konopnicka: Mirrors and Symptoms), Gdańsk 2011.

<sup>21</sup>Marta Wyka, *Miłosz i rówieśnicy. Domknięcie formacji* (Miłosz and His Contemporaries. Closed Formation), Kraków 2013.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 277.

“friendship writing,” through which he finds discovers in the letters “a tool that enables the image and feeling of a generational community to be maintained in their minds. The group of contemporaries became a small imagined community, and the experience of friendship and love (and reflections on those experiences) provided the raw material for creating an imaginarium of epistolary and poetic artifacts of the Philomath collective.”<sup>24</sup> (Borowczyk, 2014: 110). Collective correspondence (e.g. of a literary generation), even more than letters between two correspondents, problematizes the letter as a form of the “technology of presence”<sup>25</sup> (Milne 2010): both the Philomaths and the Parisian Kultura circle successfully functioned for years purely by means of letters, “on the page,” limiting the material aspect of their relationship to paper and ink. The problem of presence and absence emerges as a theme not only of collective correspondence, but is also played upon in analyses of widely read love letters such as those of Abelard and Heloise, Chopin and George Sand, Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, or the conspicuous case of Franz Kafka’s letters to Milena Jesenska, the translator but also the epistolary beloved of the author of *The Castle*; the compositional frame of their romance consisted of two meetings in person, the first leading into and the second breaking off the sequence of their love letters. Reading the rich correspondence of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, or of the famously solitary Emily Dickinson, complicates the question of “participation in culture” or the “community of experience.” The paradox of presence and absence of correspondents can be formulated in the categories of Derridean deconstruction: a letter is something more than absence, but something less than presence (Derrida, 1980, 1987);<sup>26</sup> the category of experience itself (generational, editorial, political), however, can be decisively revealed to be just as protean as that of the letter (Nycz 2012).<sup>27</sup>

In recent years “life” and “reality” have been invoked with increasing frequency by scholars of “impure” literature. Paweł Rodak on the writer’s diary as a daily literary practice or recording, opposing this autobiographical form to literature as the autonomized art of the decontextualized word written; and Rodak’s diagnosis can be applied to describe the letter, which is also “action through the help of the word”<sup>28</sup> (see Rodak 2011). Likewise, Elżbieta Rybicka, relying on Skwarczyńska’s conception, redirects the question of the letter’s utilitarian and teleological nature toward the concepts of performativity and communication with the Other (Rybicka 2004).<sup>29</sup> The letter (whether literary or non-literary) acts in many different ways, and the performative practices of correspondents have a personal and private dimension as well as, in terms of the existence of a receiver a social and communicative one, equal in potency to John Austin’s performative acts. Sylwia Panek, in her discussion of the complicated relationship between Karol Irzykowski and Zofia Nałkowska, which centered around the letters they exchanged, not only demonstrates how close Austins’s popular theories were to Irzykowski’s (the theorectician

<sup>24</sup>Jerzy Borowczyk, *Zesłane pokolenie. Filomaci w Rosji (1824-1870)* (Heaven-Sent Generation. The Philomaths in Russia, 1824-1870), Poznań 2014, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup>Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email. Technologies of Presence*, New York - London 2010.

<sup>26</sup>Derrida Jacques, *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* 1980 Paris 1980; *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. A. Bass, 1987.

<sup>27</sup>Nycz Ryszard, *Poetyka doświadczenia: teoria, nowoczesność, literatura* (The Poetics of Experience: Theory, Modernity, Literature), Warszawa 2012.

<sup>28</sup>Rodak Paweł, *Między zapisem a literaturą. Dziennik polskiego pisarza w XX wieku* (Between Record and Literature. Journal of a Polish Writer in the Twentieth Century), Warszawa 2011.

<sup>29</sup>Rybicka Elżbieta, “Antropologiczne i komunikacyjne aspekty dyskursu epistolograficznego” (Anthropological and Communicative Aspects of Epistolographical Discourse), in: *Teksty Drugie* 2004, 4.

of “unofficial literature” and “the letter as action”) discussions<sup>30</sup> (Irzykowski, 1999) but above all shows the close connection between the vision of correspondence as a “dramatic social form” and Irzykowski’s practices as a correspondent, in which equal importance alongside letter-writing was held by gestures demanding the return or destruction of letters (Panek, 2015)<sup>31</sup>. Rybicka, for her part, demonstrates that the practice of writing letters in the twentieth century is expressive both of the crisis in communication and the means to remedy and repair it: action, turned toward the Other and “the discovery of self and/through the Other”<sup>32</sup> (Rybicka 2004, 50).

Rybicka’s and Rodak’s reflections take place in the context of the symptomatic “return of the author,” understood as author and person, to theoretical thought. Magdalena Popiel, in discussing the letters of Stanisław Wyspiański, states that “in epistolary communication the dialogue with a concrete recipient renders the entire situation fundamentally different from a journal, diary, or autobiography; it is a specific kind of provocation for the artist’s creative identity”<sup>33</sup> (Popiel 2004, 116). However, she recognizes the “artist’s letter as a genre of epistolographic narration” and indicates that Wyspiański’s letters can be defined as “the greatest novel of Polish early modernism”; for her, Wyspiański is the central figure, as an artist-author in communicative relation to his addressee, rather than the narrativity of the letter (Popiel 2008).<sup>34</sup> Olga Schmidt, thinking along similar lines, interprets Witkacy’s letters to his wife as an “unconscious Hauptwerk (...) [which] for Witkacy became the basis of his subjectivity”<sup>35</sup> (Schmidt 2014, 10): the work of life, which the artist had dreamed of, and which simultaneously shaped his subjectivity, not seen in this reading as a communicative or relational kind of subjectivity. Incidental theories formed using particular interpretations show that the study of the history of the letter enables us to trace the transformations of modern subjectivity with its extreme forms: from the reflexive “I” who requires the letter in order to take shape and reveal his form to others, to the I who becomes with the other, who requires above all an addressee and the addressee’s reply to his letter.

The dominant status of the readerly perspective can, however, lead to completely different conclusions the letter’s exclusion from the documentary sphere and full inclusion within literature, as Janusz Maciejewski has done: “I see the letter as entirely within the area of literature. Literature, and not mere writing, although its literariness is often not entirely embodied, it remains in an embryonic state. Yet inside the material of the letter always exists its peculiar potentiality. If certain conditions are met [...] each letter can become literature in the full sense of the term”<sup>36</sup> (Maciejewski 2000, 213). The most important condition for making a letter literature is the concrete communicative situation (the interaction between sender and receiver, who, for the reader of the letter, become

<sup>30</sup>Irzykowski Karol, *Pisma rozproszone* (Vagabond Writings), vol.4, 1936-39, ed. J. Bahr, Kraków 1999.

<sup>31</sup>Panek Sylwia, “Gesty nie tylko niepozorne. Irzykowski – Nałkowska” (Gestures, Inconspicuous and Not Only. Irzykowski – Nałkowska) in: *Twórczość niepozorna* (Inconspicuous Work), Poznań 2015 (manuscript).

<sup>32</sup>Rybicka Elżbieta, “Antropologiczne i komunikacyjne aspekty dyskursu epistolograficznego,” (Anthropological and Communicative Aspects of Epistolographical Discourse), in: *Teksty Drugie* 2004, 4, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup>Magdalena Popiel, “List artysty jako gatunek narracji epistolograficznej. O listach Stanisława Wyspiańskiego” (The Artist’s Letter as a Genre of Epistolographical Narration. On Stanisław Wyspiański’s Letters) in: *Teksty Drugie* (Alternate Texts) 2004, 4, p. 116.

<sup>34</sup>Magdalena Popiel, *Wyspiański. Mitologia nowoczesnego artysty* (Wyspiański. Mythology of the Modern Artist), Kraków 2008.

<sup>35</sup>Olga Schmidt, *Korespondent Witkacy* (Witkacy as Correspondent), Kraków 2014, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup>Janusz Maciejewski, “List jako forma literacka,” (The Letter as a Literary Form), in: *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX*, Białystok 2000, p. 213.

characters), and next to that, the cultural context. In his search for the most appropriate term for the letter, Maciejewski chooses “a genre of correspondence distinctly possessing separate genre forms, at the same time using the structures of all genres of literature”<sup>37</sup> (Maciejewski 2000, 215) and rules out placing the letter in the area of “practical literature.” The complete transfer of the letter into the field of literature stifles the problem of its connection with “life” and cultural and historical conditions, while bringing out parallel theoretical difficulties, this time to do with genre theory. The letter, according to Maciejewski, is a transitive, hybrid genre, not belonging to any literary genre, not precisely defined in relation to other genres, though it has relationships with them. It seems, however, that the letter, a protean genre, demands the language of a new theory of genres, unrelated to typological classifications and evaluation of genres and that makes use of the cognitive tools of genre theory for descriptive and identificative purposes (Sendyka 2006),<sup>38</sup> in which “life” (the social, cultural, historical, and ideological aspects of the letter genre) will be next to the linguistic (rhetorical) and literary, treated as coordinate, and not separate languages of description.

### The literature-creating power of the letter

The problem of the letter’s existence in the world it depicts has been recognized as a separate, less controversial and theoretically intricate one, but it is difficult now to reduce it to a question of stylization and formal mimesis. The letter has simultaneously the power to generate literature and the ability to absorb literary conventions, strategies, and styles. The literature-creating power of the letter springs from its status as a protean, paradoxical oddity: it is grounded in a basic communicative situation (someone wants to convey something to somebody in writing), and yet continually undermines and transforms these communicative conditions (as in the earlier-mentioned cases of Oscar Wilde and Witkacy), giving them different degrees of importance, changing their context and status. If, then, the first (practical) dimension of the letter can be presented within the categories of the art of letter-writing, i.e. epistolography, developed in antiquity, and belonging to concepts of rhetoric, that can only be done through certain historical over-simplifications and the subordination of other areas of the question.

Perhaps an attempt to create a history of the letter (or at least of the letter in a given culture or linguistic sphere) that would bring into relief the ways, conditions and contexts of chronologically successive, reciprocal shifts of the letter between the rhetorical *ars epistolandi*, the practical guide to writing letters used in homes and offices, and the letter as an element of the literary text, could provide more inspiration for the theory of letters than simply tracing changes in theory over time. As an example, one of the crucial points in that story is undoubtedly *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782), chiasmatically linked with its conditioning setting and substratum, the *Respublica literaria*; a second is comprised by the origins of the nineteenth-century travel letter, inseparably linked with the influence and development of journalistic writing (Sienkiewicz’s *Letters from America*, apart from which the author wrote abundant private letters to friends; he also used the letter format in his novel *Without Dogma*, see Rólkowska, Sztachelska, Bujnicki 2000).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>38</sup>Roma Sendyka, “W stronę kulturowej teorii gatunku” (Toward a Cultural Theory of Genre), in: *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy* (Cultural Theory of Literature. Main Concepts and Problems), ed. M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Kraków 2006.

<sup>39</sup>See articles of Maria Rólkowska, Jolanta Sztachelska and Tadeusz Bujnicki in *Sztuka pisania. O liście polskim w wieku XIX* (The art of writing. Polish letter in the nineteenth century), Białystok 2000.



It appears that the letter owes its age-old power over the imagination and creative expression to its heterogeneous origins and use. Jerzy Schnayder, without intending to create a theory, wrote from the perspective of a historian of ancient epistolography and classical philology on the impossibility of drawing a boundary between private and literary letters, because no such boundary was marked in antiquity: an educated person, writing letters, stylized them, and “the letters of well-known persons became a kind of literature, regardless of whether their authors had any literary intentions,” see Schnayder 1959, 2006, XXXII),<sup>40</sup> and his *List antyczny. Antologia* (The Letter in Antiquity. An Anthology) discusses and reprints private, official, scholarly, poetic, and fictional letters. Schnayder divides the letters in terms of thematic and contextual categories, including in the fiction “insertions in the works of historians and poets,” such as for example the letters of the rulers in Herodotus’s *Histories*, whose genesis can be found not only in the ancient historian’s narrative strategies, but also in a cultural atmosphere which had no copyright and was characterized by many publications of falsified works created by fictional authors.

In making a list of the paradoxes inherent in the letter, Stefania Skwarczyńska marked, in addition to the seemingly unavoidable problem of whether or not the letter belongs to literature, the following characteristics: oscillation between dialogue and monologue, stylistic hesitation between formal registers typical of written language and other aspects typical of colloquial speech; the ephemeral nature of the letter (of its content) vs. its preservation through writing; the ambiguous role of the “document of the era,” given clear cases of disinformation purveyed through correspondence; the difficulty of separating the “subject,” “narrator,” and “author”; the tension between the writer’s individual self-expression and the epistolographic convention of a given time period (Skwarczyńska, 1977).<sup>41</sup> Though Skwarczyńska’s aim was to overcome these paradoxes of what she calls the *montrecéleste* (celestial time-piece), it is those very paradoxes that give shape to the epistolary novel (from the path-breaking *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* to Richardson’s *Pamela* to Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, to stop at this representative case of “life” and “literature”-mutual interpenetration – this work of fiction, using the letter’s conventions, became the model of real-life personal romantic epistolography) and guarantee its success (to a great extent based on the “impression of authenticity,” which can lead to theoretical reflection on the problem of mimesis, as well as the question of the psychology of reception, and studies inspired by theories of affect). This same group of paradoxical features of the letter has also stimulated activity in the reverse direction: the use by letter-writers of everything belonging to literature (in a given culture and period) in their everyday epistolography (as in e.g. pre-Romantic epistolography, see Aleksandrowicz 1993;<sup>42</sup> or the “Sternean” letters of Tomasz Zan, see Sudolski, 1999;<sup>43</sup> as well as the letters of Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska); it also gives validity to the parallel action of the everyday letter’s “absorption” into the area of literature (for example, Krasiński’s letters to Delfina have been characterized by Jan Kott as the greatest novel of Polish Romanticism; Kott compares them with the novels of Balzac, Stendhal, George Sand and Proust; see Kott 1966).<sup>44</sup> The transferability and transitivity of the letter between different systems of discourse or forms

<sup>40</sup>*List antyczny. Antologia* (The Letter in Antiquity. Anthology), ed. Jerzy Schnayder, Wrocław 1959; Wrocław 2006.

<sup>41</sup>See Skwarczyńska, “Wokół teorii listu (Paradoksy)” (Concerning the Theory of the Letter [Paradoxes]), in Skwarczyńska, *Pomiędzy historią a teorią literatury* (In Between Literary Theory and History), Warszawa 1975.

<sup>42</sup>A. Aleksandrowicz, “Preromantyczne listowanie jako forma ekspresji uczuć” (Pre-Romantic Letter Correspondence as a Form of Emotional Expression), *Pamiętnik Literacki* (Literary Diary) 1993, 2, pp. 66–83.

<sup>43</sup>*Korespondencja filomatów. Wybór* (Selected Correspondence of the Philomaths), ed. Zbigniew Sudolski, Wrocław 1999.

<sup>44</sup>Zygmunt Krasiński, *Sto listów do Delfiny* (100 Letters to Delfina), ed. Jan Kott, Warszawa 1966.

of narration (including both grand narratives and micronarratives) appears to be one of its essential properties.

Formulating the problem in this way brings us closer (but not all the way) toward thinking about the letter in terms of a concept from outside literary studies, namely: the medium, understood and interpreted similarly to W.J.T. Mitchell's discussion of pictures (Mitchell, 2013),<sup>45</sup> in which he poses the question in terms of what pictures want, what needs and expectations they have. The letter is similar to a medium in many ways it is an "embodied messenger, not the message itself," it is a material means of intercommunication, a historically and spatially specific "social practice," materially heterogeneous, (the letter, in addition to recording someone's writing, also contains drawings, stickers, etc., and can be engraved on a wooden board, inscribed on a servant's body, written on paper by hand or typed on a typewriter or computer keyboard) and institutionalized (by the post office, archive, and book), can take on the form of art, but by no means must do so. The letter has causative power on many levels: "as a branch of literary genres" (in Skwarczyńska's term, frequently repeated by other scholars), as an "action" and "gesture" in building a communicative (interpretative) community, but also when it does not reach its addressee(s), when it has results, when it motivates action. Even if the letter does not perfectly meet all the conditions of the medium that figure in Mitchell's discussion of pictures, by virtue of its transferability and paradoxicality it invites us to ask, in a similar spirit, what do letters want? How do they express desire and in what way do they summon desire? Roland Barthes pursued this line of thinking when he wrote, in *A Lover's Discourse*, that "Like desire, the love letter waits for an answer; it implicitly enjoins the other to reply"<sup>46</sup> (Barthes 1978, 158; see also Ganszyniec, *Polskie listy miłosne dawnych czasów*, 1925).<sup>47</sup> Every letter expects an answer (a reaction), even farewell letters (like Virginia Woolf's frequently reprinted farewell letter to her husband), lost letters, or those sent to a non-existent addressee (letters to Saint Nicholas) from a sender who has since died (i.e. Witkacy's letters received by those close to him years after his death). Each official, apostolic, anonymous or denunciatory letter also hopes for some reaction.

What else do letters want? They want to be re-read many times, they hope to be saved, preserved and made public (in spite of demands from the source that they be destroyed) and they want to provoke emotion from and leave a trace on their readers (the receiver and the broader audience), creating an effect of "life" (see the eclectic anthology of letters, e.g. *Letters of Note. Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*, see Usher 2013<sup>48</sup> or original histories of the letter, such as Simon Garfield's *To the Letter: A Curious History of Correspondence*, Garfield 2014)<sup>49</sup>. They want to disturb the stab dichotomy of presence and absence and neat divisions into art (literature) and everyday practice. They definitely cry out for inter- and transdisciplinary study, to create a comprehensive and satisfying theory that does justice to their complexity.

<sup>45</sup>W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images?* Chicago 2013.

<sup>46</sup>Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, 1978.

<sup>47</sup>Ryszard Ganszyniec, *Polskie listy miłosne dawnych czasów* (Polish Love Letters of Times Long Past), Warszawa 1925.

<sup>48</sup>Shaun Usher, *Letters of Note. Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*, 2013.

<sup>49</sup>Garfield Simon, *To the Letter: A Curious History of Correspondence*, 2014.