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Chopin as Romantic narrator (in his youth)

ABSTRACT: One can find the same features in Chopin's correspondence as in his music. They share a wealth of emotions, expressivity and lightness, and also narrative and speech-like qualities. Far from programmicity and illustrative explicitness, Chopin the composer articulates musical content with an almost verbal force of transmission; his letters, meanwhile, bear the same distinct stamp of his personality that marks out his piano works. In both domains, Chopin may be called a narrator, but particularly interesting proves to be analysis of his correspondence, from the point of view of the narration of a Romantic ironical poem. Although one would be hard pressed to speak of an exact equivalence, it is worth taking into account the strong subjectivity, combined with irony and the writer's self-irony, but above all his affinity with Schlegelian Romantic irony. This notion is of fundamental significance for changes to the subject in Romantic poetry and for the emergence of the form of the ironical poem. The creativeness of the text, the exposure of the subject, digressions, humour, leaps of thought and style, and a variability and transformation of content – those are just some of the characteristics of the ironical narrator. Also crucial to these considerations is the Romantic aesthetic of the fragment.

KEYWORDS: Fryderyk Chopin, Romantic epistolography, Romantic narrator, Romantic irony, aesthetic of the fragment

In the musicology literature, the appropriateness of music as a means of expressing the artistic personality of Fryderyk Chopin has repeatedly been emphasised. In this respect, music is sometimes invoked in opposition to the spoken and the written word, although the latter has not been denied the right to convey crucial features of the composer's mental, intellectual or spiritual make-up.[1] Chopin himself apparently felt a greater freedom when playing the piano than when corresponding with anyone, and yet his letters provide an invaluable complement to the picture of his personality that we glean from his music. This may be due to the subjectivity of that music, which has also been emphasised, and its deeply personal character – properties that

[1] See, e.g. Ryszard Przybylski, *Cień jaskółki. Esej o myślach Chopina* [A swallow's shadow. An essay on Chopin's thoughts] (Kraków, 1995), 7.

are associated with epistolography and the epistolographic culture that surrounds it. On the other hand, a letter, as the conveyer of intimate, confidential content, and as a sign of a wish to be present in the life of a person located elsewhere, is bound by a deeply-rooted discretion: the confidentiality of correspondence and the faith that it will be respected is one of the most powerful manifestations of a person's trust in the society in which he or she lives.

But one is moved to examine his letters not just by the personal character of Chopin's music and the discretion he evinced in the domain of musical expression[2], since, in spite of their relative dearth and at times despite the composer neglecting to record a penetrating self-portrait, they contain something equally characteristic of Chopin as that which is conveyed by his music. Although some commentators deny that he displays any literary mastery[3], he does express in his letters something unique, something characteristically his own – and he does so with the same ability to absorb our attention with which he created his works for piano. Particularly salient in this respect is the privileged position in which he places the addressee: for any other reader, a letter by Chopin can be just as interesting as for its original addressee, and apply just as much. At the same time, one gains the impression not of a monologue, but of a dialogue – and a dialogue that is personal and exclusive, not open to others. This same characteristic is highlighted in relation to Chopin's music.[4] The importance of his letters is supported by two further properties: the narrative and speech-like qualities of his compositions. Far from any programmicity and illustrative concreteness, Chopin remains *suggestive* in an almost physiological sense, as well; that is, on account of his palpable intention of *articulating* some content. Be-

[2] See the "Chopin syndrome" outlined by Mieczysław Tomaszewski, who also provides a splendid account of one of the most conspicuous features of Chopin's music, namely the reconciling of opposites: "Mastering an excess of emotion through discretion, creating the impression of a peculiar, 'aristocratic' distance whilst preserving a high energy to the flow of the music"; Mieczysław Tomaszewski, *Chopin. Człowiek, dzieło, rezonans* [Chopin. The man, his work and its resonance] (Poznań, 1998), 684.

[3] "La lecture de ces textes [the journal and correspondence from Stuttgart – J.C.N.] exige d'ailleurs un certain effort d'imagination historique permettant de dégager des clichés qui sont devenus banals pour le lecteur contemporain des pensées et des émotions authentiques. Car le charme de l'art épistolier de Chopin ne doit pas cacher le fait que son auteur n'est pas le maître de la parole". Maria Janion and Maria Żmigrodzka, 'Frédéric Chopin parmi les héros de l'existence du romantisme polonais', *Chopin Studies* 3 (1990), 38.

[4] See Tomaszewski's remarks on the universality of Chopin's artistic communication, as well as its national, lyrical and personal qualities. Tomaszewski, *Chopin*, 684.

It is significant that Tomaszewski employs notions from linguistics and literary studies devised by Roman Jakobson: "[...] adopting the terminology of Roman Jakobson, one may state that in Chopin that expressive function, the function of 'expressing oneself', is linked to the appellative function: the listener whom the composer's musically expressed 'message' is supposed to reach does not belong to an anonymous, nameless mass, but is treated in an equally intensive, subjective way". Ibid., 612.

sides the semantic and eloquent qualities of his music and its quasi-verbal distinctness, Chopin seems to understand the importance of the flow to his speech; hence one may speak of its narrative quality. And that is another reason for associating his work as musical and textual narrator with the literary figure of the Romantic narrator. The best point of reference here will be the narrator of the ironical poem, since it is in this poetical genre that changes in narrator (irrespective of changes in lyrical subject) were most richly reflected and reached a true climax. The ironical poem is characteristic of mature (and also manneristic) romanticism, and so it affords us an insight into all the achievements of the Romantics within the area of interest to us here, and it also expresses the self-awareness of the narrator as an individual who not only observes and is familiar with the reality which he relates, but also consciously takes on the role of the teller and imparts a temporal flow and order to the content – however perverse that order may be.

In Polish literature, the prime example of this genre is Juliusz Slowacki's *Beniowski* (pub. 1841). From the point of view of narration and narrator, *Beniowski* presents a range of features that cannot be transferred wholesale to the sphere of Chopin's epistolography. Yet it should be characterised from this perspective, in order to bring out the composer's distinctive features as a Romantic narrator.

First and foremost, one must stress the position of the narrator of an ironical poem as the sole and unconstrained disposer of the work, who ostentatiously manages the plot, action and narrative discourse and just as ostentatiously accentuates his/her presence in the work. This can be seen from the use of digressions, which underscore the arbitrary way in which the plot is led (their participation in the text is by no means of secondary or merely complementary importance) and at the same time, somewhat paradoxically – being a deviation from the primary thread of the narrative – help the narrator to forge a homogeneous whole, cemented by his/her overriding presence in the text, since mental homogeneity and intellectual unity are characteristic of every set of epistolographic correspondence treated as a whole; at least, in the case of Chopin, this seems to be particularly pronounced.

The ironical poem possesses a number of features identical or analogous to the letter, in respect to the relationship between narrator and reader. For example, we have declaration and polemic; in spite of its inevitably monological and – as a written form of expression – closed character, the utterance in this genre is strongly orientated towards the reader and towards building a dialogue; we also have an invitation to joint action, addressing the reader directly, open parabasis and the seeking/establishing of solidarity with the

reader, often based on the premises of common cultural experience (as in the Old Polish *gawęda*, nota bene an oral form[5]).

Another significant and specific feature of the ironical poem and its narrator is, of course, irony, which besides its widely familiar rhetorical form also takes on the form of self-irony. In both variants, the irony is particularly strong, and in light of the premises of the genre, it takes on the qualities of an immanent feature. From this point of view, Chopin provides us with numerous sentences and passages in a humorous tone, at times slightly malicious and always exuberantly ludic. Occasionally, his maliciousness is mollified by sentiment or friendship, or even wittingly and cunningly concealed beneath a semblance of self-irony. But that does not mean that it loses its bite or its premeditation:

> Ah! Mrs Sévigné could not describe to you my joy at the letter I so unexpectedly received from you, since I might have anticipated death sooner than such a surprise; the idea never even entered my head that this inveterate scribbler, this philologist who sits solely in Schiller, would take up his pen with the intention of writing a letter to an undisciplined bumpkin; to someone who had not previously read a single page in Latin; to that piglet which, growing stouter on brew [at a sanatorium – J.C.N.], brews the gaining of at least one-tenth of your lard.[6]

It is worth emphasising that in Chopin's correspondence the ludic aspect sometimes combines with genre. Thanks to his keen eye and fondness for anecdote, the composer instantly creates sketches that are reminiscent of genre scenes, in the sense in which they came to exist somewhat later in realist prose. Among such examples are his mentions of Wojciech Żywny, comprising a description of his teacher's dress and comportment and imitating his foreign accent: "Żywny, having smacked his tongue, wiped his nose, rolled up his handkerchief and thrust it into the pocket of his thickly vodded kreen wrock-coat, begins, adjusting his wig, to ask himself: 'But to whom does he write this letter?'"[7] In these passages, the ludic prevails over the ironic; Cho-

[5] The *gawęda* – a genre of prose characteristic of the Polish noble culture from the sixteenth century onwards, originally oral, later also written. Linked with social life, feasting, hunting and so on, its subject matter also treats of the life of the nobility. Whilst the action of a *gawęda* often takes place within the limited space of a home, commune or district, some works, such as Adam Mickiewicz's *gawęda*-inspired national epos *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), create a truly epic picture. One characteristic feature of the *gawęda* is its narrative style, in which the listener or reader is often addressed, and which is full of devices maintaining the narrator's relationship with his audience, as well as digressions, sayings, etc.

[6] Letter from Chopin to Jan Matuszyński in Puławy [Szafarnia, first half of September 1825], in *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina* [The correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin], 1816-1831, ed. Zofia Helman, Zbigniew Skowron and Hanna Wróblewska-Strauss, i (Warszawa, 2010), 119.

[7] Letter from Chopin to Jan Białoblocki [Warsaw, 30 October 1825], in ibid., 132.

pin's wit is as kind-hearted as it is cutting. It takes on a somewhat different character, for example, in his description of the sanatorium at Duszniki:

> In the morning, 6 o'clock at the latest, all the ailing at the spring; here, wretched brass music compiled from a dozen or so caricatures in various tastes, at the head of which a bassoonist, thin, with a saddled, snuffy nose, scares all the ladies who are afraid of horses, is played to the slowly perambulating Kur-gästs; and here there's a sort of masked ball, or rather masquerade, as not everyone is in masks, although the latter are few in number, as they comprise only those who have allowed themselves to hang for the company.[8]

Quite similar in vein is a description from another letter, sent from Warsaw, of a visit from a doctor, who "placed leeches upon one of the little ones and talked a lot about the canals of cleansing and rumination and the Adam's apple, because he carried out operations on the Adam's apple. He was in colourful stockings, shoes et cetera dirty as ever, an ordinary waistcoat, but a new, or rather renovated, hat"[9]. Incidentally, it would not be particularly surprising if the composition of "the canals of cleansing and rumination and the Adam's apple" was an imitative allusion to the doctor's pronunciation, caused by the misconstitution of his organs of articulation.

Chopin's irony contains a dose of good cheer, and especially a great bonhomie for his friends. He also treats himself in an ironical way, naturally and without pause: "it's not just you that rides a horse, for I too can sit upon one. Ask not if well, but I can; at least to the extent that the horse slowly proceeds whithersoever it will and I, like a monkey on a bear, sit atop him with fear"[10]. Or this, in a letter from Duszniki: "I've been drinking the local whey and water for two weeks already; and apparently, so they say, I am supposed to look a bit better, I am supposed to put on weight, and thereby laze around, to which you may ascribe such a lengthy repose on the part of my pen"[11].

Besides irony in the rhetorical sense, the ironical poem as a genre is associated par excellence with Romantic irony. This category is of the utmost significance for defining the position of the narrator among the other elements of the work. It gives him the right to make the rules and annul them as he sees fit – in respect to the reader's knowledge and his own knowledge about the protagonists, for instance. When giving certain information, to take one example, the narrator may suddenly undermine the credibility of that information or relinquish his status as an omniscient narrator. In respect to the plot, a strand barely taken up may be broken without warning, and with no hope of

[8] Letter from Chopin to Wilhelm Kolberg in Warsaw [Reinerz, 18 August 1826], in ibid., 185.

[9] Letter from Chopin to Jan Białobłocki [Warsaw, 20 June 1826], in ibid., 178.

[10] Letter from Chopin to Wilhelm Kolberg [Szafarnia, 19 August 1824], in ibid., 76.

[11] Letter from Chopin to Wilhelm Kolberg [Reinerz, 18 August 1826], in ibid., 185.

it being resumed any time soon, and the digression that interrupts it may accumulate many layers. The narrators of ironical poems are fond of building up an image or mood or some meaning to events, only to demolish it straight away. These are just three examples from the vast array of procedures that is created for a narrator by Romantic irony – a category that plays a substantial part in making the ironical poem a work in constant flux.

According to Friedrich Schlegel, a narrator "soars" above his work. Romantic irony is the framework for his aesthetic doings, as is manifest in such things as the distance he establishes between himself and the represented world. The narrator not only determines the position and significance of the elements of the represented world, but also has unlimited scope to intervene in that world, even completely unmasked.

Naturally, it is hard to discern the whole of this apparatus of irony in Chopin's letters. However, if I cite quite a number of its aspects here, it is because Chopin displays both an ironic and a self-ironic approach to reality, as well as a "soaring" above the text. Even if he does not perceive the letter as a literary work or wish to create a specific vision of the world by means of language, his epistolography does contain an ironic Romantic subjectivity, a sense of the narrator's distinction from the represented world (here: the world in the process of being represented).

At this point, I would like to dwell on Chopin's self-irony, since one can discern within it a crossing of the boundary of the purely rhetorical and even, taking into account the psychological implications of irony and self-irony, a crossing of the boundary of distance in respect to himself. Chopin is naturally sharp-tongued about himself and, adopting what one might term a Socratic modesty, he belittles the importance of his own person. This occurs without the slightest detriment to his own subjectivity, which I would suggest is due not to Romantic individualism, but to that attitude of self-irony. The relinquishing of the affirmative in his expression of his "I" leads paradoxically to its affirmation. Thus self-ironic personalities, insofar as that nature is not a pose or a response to the prevailing style of the times, are strong personalities.

So Chopin is inclined to diminish himself and to deprive himself of the central position in a discourse, to counteract the weight which the role of the sender of an epistle gives him. However, irony is also present in his letters in its Romantic variety. The narrator extrapolates the diminishing, expunging, obscuring or blotting out of his self to the world around him. Here is what we read in a telling letter to Wilhelm Kolberg:

> Thank you for remembering about me, but on the other hand I am angry at you for being so despicable, wicked, bla, *in fine* that you are et cetera and *wrote to me half-quill*. Were you stinting on *paper*, or *pen*, or *ink*? Perhaps you were *short of*

> *time*? [...] Flies often land on my lofty nose, *but never mind*, since that is quite the custom with those irksome creatures. Mosquitoes bite me, *but never mind*, since it's not on my nose. – I run about the garden, and sometimes walk. I walk around the field, and sometimes ride, nota bene not on a horse, but in a britzka, or in a carriage, *but with the honour of always sitting behind*, and never in front [...].[12]

and, to close:

> Fare thee well, dear Wilus, and please *write* to me, and don't just *gloss*.[13]

These quotations come from the same letter in which Chopin compares his equestrian skills to the fearful riding of "a monkey on a bear". The facts and phenomena referred to in this shortish text are prone to dwindling, to a gradual reduction, in relation to some invoked, but absent, whole: the lack of a letter as the lack of a pen, ink or time; bothersome insects that immediately lose significance; *writing* and not *writing half-quill*; finally, *writing* and not just *glossing*. Besides their situation in the relationship between parts and whole, these facts and phenomena are subjected to discussion and inspection from two sides; this brief letter abounds in opposites, as is evidenced by the frequency of such terms as *but*, *yet* and *on the other hand*.

I analyse the character of this letter to Kolberg because I see it as a complement to that which we will soon detect in Chopin's correspondence: a lightness of thinking and style, and then their fluency and spontaneity, a momentum to his thoughts, concealed and always to hand, and also their volatility. This last characteristic is not exclusively a linguistic feature; it translates into a qualitative perceiving and representing of reality. And this is all connected with the category of Romantic irony and with the idea and the aesthetic of the fragment.

To return to the ironical poem, it is also distinguished by its self-thematic and metaliterary character. In this respect, Chopin's correspondence cannot be its exact equivalent, but it is worth emphasising the composer's literary awareness, combined with a sense of convention, which are palpable already in his early youth. The creation of the *Kuryer Szafarski* [Szafarnia Courier] in his letters from the summer holidays of 1824, apart from its essentially playful character, is indicative of the sender's literary facility and his familiarity with different styles of writing. With the *Kuryer Szafarski*, the young Chopin takes one literary genre (the daily newspaper) as the means of expression of another (the letter), thereby giving rein to his already distinct fondness for a multiplicity, diversity, fluency and levity of content. The *Kuryer Szafarski* is a sort of potpourri, in which the contrast between the official character of the

[12] Letter from Chopin to Wilhelm Kolberg [Szafarnia, 19 August 1824], in ibid., 76 [my italics – J.C.N.].

[13] Ibid.

newspaper convention (the authority of the written word?) and the triviality of the news – a contrast fully intended by Chopin – is hugely significant. The wit of these reports, albeit somewhat forced, betrays two of the numerous features of the composer's sense of humour: playfulness and discretion; that is, not flaunting his ideas in anticipation of a reaction from the reader. I would stress that even here, where he may be accused of straining for effect and of an overly cliched schoolboy humour, thanks to the swiftness with which he passes from one *fait divers* to another, one discerns in the *Kuryer Szafarski* the features of the later Chopin, who with his subtlety and hint of malicious *perpetuum mobile* reminds one of Juliusz Słowacki – including, of course, the Słowacki of *Beniowski*.

That irony and familiarity with literary conventions are evident in a report from the *Kuryer Szafarski* on a fight between a dog and a cat over a piece of meat on a country road. For this piece, the narrator chose the style of the epic poem, calling his heroes "men" and describing their "clash" appropriately: "Both fought manfully with intrepid minds; the smell of the meat roused their valour, and a mutual jealousy, their appetite; long they valiantly clashed; long their unresolved fate absorbed the spectators with trepidation"[14]. This passage is vividly reminiscent of an eighteenth-century heroicomic poem – a fact that is particularly striking in that this genre is one of the more important sources for the Romantic ironical poem. Of course, it is not my intention to draw any over-reaching conclusions from this, but in respect to the poetic of the latter genre, yet to come into being in Poland (let us remember that *Beniowski* was published in 1841), and so the Poland of the 1820s, with the reception of George Byron's *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* perhaps already being transformed in the Polish awareness into the beginnings of subsequent literary work, it is worth bearing in mind that the resources of the fourteen-year-old Chopin's literary culture included the linguistic and, above all, aesthetic convention of the heroicomic poem.[15]

While speaking of the *Kuryer Szafarski*, one cannot overlook the fact that Chopin created for the purpose an alter ego, Mr Pichon, whom, in order to heighten the irony and comedy, he calls His Lordship. The news from the life of Mr Pichon is given with a dispassion that would characterise a humorist employing the technique of *in medias res*: with no preamble or superfluous explanations, and with an arbitrariness that is highly characteristic of the Romantic narrator. The narratological career of Mr Pichon peaks in the letter written on 3 September 1824. The edition of the newspaper contained in that

[14] To his family in Warsaw, Szafarnia, 3 September 1824, in ibid., 97.

[15] Another example appears in the letter of 20 June 1826 written from Warsaw to Jan Białobłocki: "If you see Szafarnia [...] mention my name, look at the potatoes and say sadly: 'here, he once ventured bravely with his horse'". In ibid., 180.

letter brings news of a wedding that is to be held in the neighbourhood, which Pichon – and the editor of the *Kuryer Szafarski* – is to attend: "Among others, Mr Pichon received an invitation, at which he is inexpressibly pleased, together with the Editor of the *Kuryer*, who in the next number will not fail to relate the more important scenes and incidents from that wedding"[16]. Chopin treats the person appearing in his posts from Szafarnia as a *character*; that is, as a literary entity. This entity is treated with a ludic distance, and he himself introduces a distance between the narrator and the matters he describes (which concern Chopin, but through the intermediary of Pichon).

The revolution of romanticism was based, among other things, on breaking up the rigidity and normativity of generic and aesthetic divisions. Uniform rules for such things as composition, stylistic conventions and the principle of decorum all ceased to be binding. The ironical poem is valuable proof of this, since it summarises the changes that occurred in both lyric and epic output of that period. For this reason, I consider it to be a good reference point for analysis of the letter, which, treated as a literary product, bears certain features of all three literary genres: lyric, epic and drama. The mixture of genres and the programmatic impurity of literature encourage one to treat epistolography as a source that is all the more valuable in that the letter's spontaneity and – most frequently – lack of clear literary intentions allow us to capture features both fixed and not realised. Consequently, the ironical poem and its narrator seem to be more than valid as a catalogue and emblem of Romantic changes.

Yet the aesthetic changes to the letter were not sudden. In this respect, an important – indeed pivotal – stage was the eighteenth century and sentimentalism, in which correspondence departed from pure functionality and became more intimate.[17] Euzebiusz Słowacki, a generation older than Juliusz, writes in his *Prawidła wymowy i poezji* (1826) [Rules of Eloquence and Poetry] that "the letter, properly speaking, is a conversation between persons separated from one another"[18]. Romanticism brings a grand ennoblement of content, to the detriment of convention and of the limitations connected with form: for example, the organisation of an utterance according to set parts, such as greeting and farewell, begins to disappear.[19] That which is dictated by the notion of taste also loses significance.[20] Romantic epistolography comes to resemble improvisation. It can have many themes and many strands, and the succession of the questions it addresses can be governed by the principle of a

[16] To his family, Szafarnia, 3 September 1824, in ibid., 97.

[17] See Zdzisław Sudolski, 'Korespondencja' [Correspondence], in Józef Bachórz and Alina Kowalczykowa (eds.), *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX w.* [Dictionary of Polish literature of the nineteenth century] (Wrocław, 2002), 432.

[18] See Marek Piechota, 'List' [Letter], in ibid., 483.

[19] Sudolski, 'Korespondencja', 433.

[20] Piechota, 'List', 484.

chain of free associations, issuing one from another. This trait to the organisation of the Romantic letter stands in clear opposition to classicist praxis, in which associations were of a rational character. At the same time, the reader becomes more important; together with the narrator, he exerts an influence over the content and tone of the utterance (here also the problem of the "Siamese" twins of narrator and reader).[21]

In connection with its multi-thematicity, the Romantic letter abounds in leaps of thought and time, as well as style, and in this respect it displays a great similarity to the narration of the ironical poem. The mixing and juxtaposing of styles – a great achievement of the Romantics – in particular lends correspondence a new tone, less compulsory and more private. The narrator's voice, with a broader range of styles at its disposal, spreads a sort of unity over the letter's material, but far from the normative unity deriving from the rules of harmony, symmetry or decorum. That same unity also brings a paradoxical continuity to the letter; I have in mind here a continuity of the presence and subjectivity of the author-narrator and of his relationship with the represented world and with the reader. When reading letters by the Romantics according to this key, we find in their characteristic principle of unity an affinity with the principle that governs the narration of the ironical poem.

The ironical poem is an open genre – here, the affinity with the letter can be noted on the level of a single missive, which is most often not entirely realised without the participation of the reader. Even if that reader is imagined, then it is essential that he be assumed, and by the same stroke the openness of the text proves to be a *sine qua non*: the narrator deliberately leaves it open-ended, and there is no cause-effect conclusion or resolution of its tangle of strands. The most important category-condition of the functioning of a letter in respect to its communicative completeness/incompleteness appears to be the mutual and enduring nature of the exchange between narrator and reader. Consequently, I would suggest applying the notion of the open composition or of fragmentation – taken from literary studies and characteristic of romanticism – to the pragmatics of the letter, particularly on account of the typically Romantic *I – you* relationship, based on an unshakeable faith in the objective existence of *you*.[22] Such a starting point for Romantic epistolography allows one to shed some light on the ironical poem, or more specifically on the individualism and strongly accentuated autonomy of its narrator, which, appreciating the role of the receiver, elude all suspicion of solipsism.

So a single letter is not a one-off phenomenon: from the perspective of the entire life of the sender or his entire relationship with the receiver, it appears to hold the prospect of further communication.

[21] Sudolski, 'Korespondencja', 432.

[22] Ryszard Przybylski writes most suggestively about this in *Cień jaskółki*, 25.

The broken character of the narration is linked to Romantic epistolography, which proclaimed that the world is only partly accessible to human cognition. Hence the role of the fragment as an aesthetic phenomenon during that era: the fragment appears as a fitting expression of man's contact with the world and as a reliable expression of its incomplete perception. For this reason, in Romantic output, the open form and the fragment become fully-fledged forms, something which affects not only literature, but also music, if not other domains besides.[23] On the micro scale, the intentional incompleteness of the musical work is manifest in such things as the abandoning of resolution on the tonic; on the macro scale – in the suggestiveness of a work being moulded in the direction of semantic open-endedness.

In light of this, one wonders about the letter as a fragmentary genre. Its immanent autobiographical nature appears to counter such a premise entirely. The constant and irremovable presence of the subject appears to suggest the existence of a whole.

However, one is moved to reflect by the remarks of Ryszard Przybylski, who in his essay *Cień jaskółki* [A Swallow's Shadow] writes of Chopin's views on the letter as of something imperfect, incapable of conveying the thoughts and – in more general terms – the life of the narrator: "Chopin knew that a letter is merely a pitiful shadow of our existence, and at times it is not worth picking up a pen to record the mist of our thoughts". This stance is the complete opposite of the view represented by Zygmunt Krasiński, whose voluminous and continuous correspondence represents a summation of the existence of Romantic man.[24]

But one can say more about the letter's imperfection: it is defective not just in quality, but also in quantity. It is unable to give us an idea of the character, number and diversity of human affairs. Chopin himself states that at times one should write either at great length or else not at all.[25] The letter is characterised by a relative brevity or transience compared to the temporal dimensions of the existential situation which it endeavours to depict. Despite this, it could have the significance and discharge the function of a *pars pro toto*: a partial picture of a whole, which is representative of that whole. In light of Przybylski's words and of the words of Chopin that he quotes, the composer was characterised by a kind of scepticism, but above all a helplessness in respect to the letter. This is because the fact, event or (in particular) circumstance, as broadly understood, of a person's life (in the sense in which

[23] As Jeffrey Kallberg writes, in Chopin one can find fragments in the Romantic sense in finished works; Jeffrey Kallberg, 'Chopin and the Fragment', in *Chopin's work. His inspirations and creative process in the light of the sources*, ed. Artur Szklener (Warszawa, 2002), 138.

[24] See Przybylski, *Cień jaskółki*, 16.

[25] Ibid., 17.

José Ortega y Gasset speaks of it) is an entity composed of many elements. Sometimes, it is difficult to relate a single fact, on account of the size and the multidimensional nature of its context. Hence Chopin's stated helplessness and the fact that – to quote Przybylski once more – "in his letters he 'showed' his thoughts spun around by the mill of life"[26].

Yet Chopin is not a static mind. Neither, in spite of what was said above, is he a sceptic. Despite all the reservations that may be levelled at the written word and at the form of the letter in particular, Chopin's epistolography appears to issue from a certain fundamental statement of a positive character. I do not have in mind here any concrete premise and do not ascribe to it any specific features of personality, such as kind-heartedness, scrupulousness, constancy or remembering about friends. In my opinion, the cause is spontaneous, and our subject is not aware of it; it is the aforementioned faith in the objective and evident existence of "you". As Przybylski writes:

> Romantic friendship was based on the conviction that the existence of "you" was a priori self-evident. It would never have occurred to young people living in that era that this existence should first be proven. It is our sad century that likes to dabble in such subtleties. Thanks to that conviction, the Romantics succeeded in overcoming the loneliness of the Cartesian *cogito*. The spirit of Tytus [Woyciechowski – J.C.N.] was for Chopin just as real as the tree growing outside his window, since he lived in Chopin's "I" with his most intimate secret [love, of which he made Chopin the confidant – J.C.N.].[27]

The many features of Chopin's style enumerated here still do not exhaust the wealth of properties that are manifest in his correspondence, of which I shall just signal a few more. For example, his letters display a fluency of utterance that goes hand in hand with a sequencing, adding or transforming of the elements he enumerates. This is manifest in most concentrated form in a name-day letter to Jan Bialobłocki:

> Dear Jasiu! Do not expect in this letter the usual name-day compliments, those sentiments, dreams, exclamations, apostrophes, exalted passages and other such nonsense, balderdash, claptrap and bunkum; that is good for those heads who in their lack of attachment are not wanting for trivial expressions; but someone who is bound by eleven years of friendship, who has counted together 132 months, begun 468 weeks and breathed together 3,960 days, 95,040 hours, 5,702,400 minutes and 342,144,000 seconds does not even need to mention himself, does not need to write letters with compliments, since he will never write what he would

[26] Ibid., 19.
[27] Ibid., 25.

wish. [...] The honourable gentleman has not written to me for several months. – Wherefore? Why? cur? warum? pourquoi?[28]

Mieczysław Tomaszewski, writing about the poetic of Chopin's compositional output, distinguishes "swapping and refashioning" as one of the principles behind the shaping of the musical material. He also uses such notions as "transformation" and "passing into its own opposite"[29]. Chopin's correspondence bids us opine that these properties are characteristic of his personality in general, of his intellect and character. The fluidity of the composer's musical and literary utterance is at times paradoxical, bearing in mind the wealth of elements that shape it. This can be elucidated through such mechanisms as transformation.

Another feature – or rather a pair or set of features – that I wish to signal is discursivity, combined with fantasy and coloured with absurdity. In the letter to Jan Białoblocki of 20 June 1826, already quoted several times here, Chopin performs some deft acrobatics, which over the space of a handful of lines completely transforms the relationship between himself and his reader – before ultimately restoring that relationship to its initial state: "don't think that I wrote that last comma in the spirit of Pliny [panegyrically], it has much to do with habit, and a dog sometimes seems beautiful to its master... Hahaha... what a metamorphosis, the master becomes the dog; the dog, the master!... but just for a moment, as there is no dog more faithful than I"[30]. This thread is then immediately dropped, with an entirely different subject taken up. Chopin develops his idea casually and incorporates it into the flow of the speech, which again comes across as heterogenic, but coherent. For this circumstance, we again find analogy in the structure of his piano compositions; Tomaszewski, writing about his variation technique and changes in his style around 1830, notes the emergence of "a [musical – J.C.N.] theme of a new kind, built admittedly from separate motifs, yet from motifs that were freed from conventional ties, forging a cohesive, but at the same time unfettered, stream of sonority"[31].

The issues relating to Chopin as epistolographer are naturally more numerous. It is striking that even forgoing analysis and without establishing any linguistic-musical parallels, one can sense an affinity between his musical output and his correspondence. The reason for this doubtless lies in the strong creative personality of Chopin, who was far from any monumentalising of his own person, but was ironic, in the ancient sense, and at the same time decidedly Romantic, be it only in the course of his thinking, in the way in

[28] Letter to Jan Białobłocki [Warsaw, 20 June 1826], in *Korespondencja*, 178.
[29] Tomaszewski, *Chopin*, 620–623.
[30] Letter to Jan Białobłocki [Warsaw, 20 June 1826], in *Korespondencja*, 180.
[31] Tomaszewski, *Chopin*, 324.

which it emerges and unfolds. Tomaszewski, bringing terms from literary studies to his analysis of Chopin's music, ponders the legitimacy of the term *rhetoric* in this context:

> If one may use at all in relation to Chopin's music the word "rhetoric", then it is solely with the qualifiers "natural", "spontaneous" or "organic", resulting from the overriding principle of treating music like the speech of sounds, extra-conventional and anti-conventional.[32]

Finally, summing this all up with the term "natural rhetoric", he juxtaposes and brings towards one another the musical and the linguistic expression of this composer for whom a wealth of content and means never stood in the way of simplicity, and force of expression did not oppose naturalness and spontaneity.

Translated by John Comber

[32] Ibid., 623.