

---

 Elżbieta Rybicka
 

---

## The Anthropological and Communicative Aspects of Epistolographic Discourse

---

DOI: 10.18318/td.2016.en.2.4

During the writing of this article I benefited from a Foundation for Polish Science scholarship awarded within Professor Ryszard Nycz's grant.

---

### Introduction

I would like to begin with two statements. In his 1913 essay *Nieoficjalna literatura* [*Unofficial Literature*], Karol Irzykowski wrote the following about the art of correspondence and 19th-century letters:

They are lacking the true essence of letters, when two people communicate with another in writing – a highly distinctive and characteristic social form; these are mostly one-page diaries written day to day for another person, that is journals posing as letters, not a dialogue but a monologue.<sup>1</sup>

Vincent Kaufmann, writing in 1990, noted that as a scholar of contemporary literature he had learnt (incidentally like many of his peers) to scrupulously ignore the writer's biography, justifying this lack of attention with the well-known topos of the "death of the author." He thus excluded epistolography from his interests on account of such institutionalized norms on research. He wrote about this in the introduction to his book *L'équivoque épistolaire*,

**Elżbieta Rybicka** – works at the Faculty of Polish Studies of the Jagiellonian University. Her publications include *The Forms of the Labyrinth in the Polish Prose in the Twentieth Century* (2000), *Modernizing the City. Introduction to Urban Problematics in Modern Polish Literature* (2003), *Geopoetics. Space and Place in Contemporary Theories and Literary Practices* (2014). She specializes in the cultural and literary geography, urban culture and cultural memory.

---

<sup>1</sup> Karol Irzykowski, "Nieoficjalna literatura" [1913], in Irzykowski, *Pisma rozproszone 1897-1922* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1998), 206.

devoted to the letters of writers of the modernist canon including the correspondences of Baudelaire, Flaubert, Proust, Rilke, Kafka, and Mallarmé. Yet Kaufmann's book does not portend an easy return to forgotten categories – far from it. For him, letters become a “machine for producing distance,”<sup>2</sup> the absencing of the Other:

Letters appear to favour communication and proximity; in reality they disqualify every form of participation and generate the distance which allows a literary text to occur.<sup>3</sup>

And although Kaufmann begins by stressing the “ambiguity” of the letter, its final effects are rather unambiguous, as he emphasises only one of its two codes: the literary one. In other words, for literature to be born, the letter must die, and communication turn into auto-communication.

I would see in these two statements two testimonies of modern reflection on epistolography, which open and close a certain way of thinking about letters. Both speak of them as a monologue signalling an epistolary crisis of communication. And it is this problem – the communicative crisis – that I would like to make the “critical point” of this study.

### **Varieties of Letters**

My reason for starting with the “death” of the letter is to argue that this is not the case. The fact that life remains in this means of communication is made abundantly clear by the extremely intensive renaissance of epistolography research especially in Francophone science and culture – a phenomenon which has gone as far as epistolomania. Historians, sociologists, specialists in literary studies, researchers of styles, psychoanalysts and philosophers have all shown an interest in correspondences. With this attention towards epistolography come institutional ventures. In France at least two research institutions deal solely with letters – both searching for and publishing 19th- and 20th-century correspondences and launching research on them. These are the Centre Pluridisciplinaire de Recherche, d'Étude et d'Édition de Correspondances du XIX siècle, established at the Sorbonne in 1980, and the Association Interdisciplinaire de Recherche sur l'Épistolaire, which has brought together scholars from various disciplines since 1987. As something of a curious aside that says much not only about the French epistolomania, I will also mention

---

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Kaufmann, *L'Équivoque épistolaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

the epistolary festival *Les Nuits de la Correspondance*. Among the results of this “institution” has been the publication of a collection of readers’ letters to the writers who have changed their lives.

In France, it is not only the letters of artists that are published, but also those of anonymous witnesses and actors of history, soldiers of the First and Second World Wars, and love letters. Open letters and travelogues in letter form have also made a comeback, as has even the epistolary novel, joined by fictitious apocryphal letters and continuations such as a sequel to *Dangerous Liaisons*. In Polish literature, a sign of revival seems to be the return of the poetic letter. The letters of Jacek Podsiadło are an obvious and the most interesting example, but we can also cite those of Jarosław Mikołajewski, Artur Szlosarek and, of the younger generation, Tadeusz Dąbrowski.

On the one hand, this increased interest in epistolography seems obvious, in tune with the reorientations in the contemporary humanities. On the other hand – with the abrupt nature of this epistolomania – it arouses curiosity and provokes questions about both the causes and the potential consequences and uses. I will leave the answer to them to the end, but for now I would like to point to just a few problems by way of introductions to the areas I am interested in.

Research on epistolography is subject to the same fashions and trends that are visible in other cases. Owing to the polymorphic and multifunctional nature of letters, the scale and dispersion of interests is huge. Perhaps the only common feature of the diverse research perspectives is the peculiar “democratisation” of the subject. Attention is paid not only to its literary aspects, although of course the problem of the relations between epistolography and literature frequently appears. A unique characteristic is the domination of historical and interdisciplinary research. The history of the letter as a socio-literary phenomenon and means of communication is interesting enough as to be placed between the history of artistic forms and social history, the history of mentality or changes in customs.<sup>4</sup> Epistolary practices are associated, for example, with the history of education of diverse social communities and their access to a postal service, or the history of private and family life. In Polish culture, epistolary practices and epistolary manuals participated in the formation and transformation of the national language. Finally, letters are associated with politics. Janet Altman makes a strong case for the relationship between epistolography and politics, arguing that the letter played a role in

---

4 Anne Chamayou, the author of one of the most interesting books on epistolography, notes that its history should take into account extremely diverse parameters, both more literary (for example discursive types) and socio-cultural ones. See Anne Chamayou, *L'esprit de la lettre (XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: PUF, 1999), 178.

“establishing the power of certain social groups.”<sup>5</sup> Altman claims that every epistolary manual assumes a certain conception of society, since in proposing linguistic and stylistic norms for a specific social group at a specific historical moment, it projects a picture of the groups conducting this practice. It therefore “stages – through its selection, orders and prohibitions – to an equal degree the politics and poetics of epistolary writing.”<sup>6</sup>

Brigitte Diaz proposes an interesting, albeit schematic ordering of the diverse research perspectives.<sup>7</sup> She lists four main forms in which letters can be considered:

1. document
2. text
3. discourse (in the narrow sense of a discussion<sup>8</sup>)
4. action.

Of course, in practice a letter is usually all of these at once. The first two varieties of the letter are fairly self-explanatory. A letter considered as a document constitutes evidence of a historical, social, political and literary reality. This type of understanding was perhaps the most widespread in the 19th century, but was limited at the time to the domination of formalistic and structuralistic methods. It

5 Janet Altman, “Pour une histoire culturelle de la lettre: l'épistolier et l'Etat sous l'Ancien Régime,” in *L'épistolarité à travers les siècles. Geste de communication et/ou d'écriture*, ed. Mireille Bossis (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990), 106. The relations between politics and epistolography are also covered by the edited collection *La lettre et la politique*, ed. Pierrette Lebrun-Périerat and Danielle Pouban (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996).

6 Altman, “Pour une histoire,” 107.

7 Brigitte Diaz, *L'épistolaire ou la pensée nomade. Formes et fonctions de la correspondance dans quelques parcours d'écrivains au XIX siècle* (Paris: PUF, 2002), 49–62. Another good introduction is Kazimierz Cysewski's article “Teoretyczne i metodologiczne problemy badań nad epistolografia,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1 (1997). We can make a simplified division of the research methods on epistolography into socio-cultural [e.g. Marie-Claire Grassi, *L'Art de la lettre autemps de La Nouvelle Héloïse et du Romantisme* (Genève: Slatkin, 1994); Marie-Claire Grassi, *Lire l'épistolaire* (Paris: Dunod, 1998); the collected work *La lettre à la croisée de l'individuel et du social*, ed. Mireille Bossis (Paris: Kimé, 1994); as well as Altman mentioned above], focusing on describing the process of the emergence of the discourse of privacy in 19th-century social systems; and the literary studies approach (the most extensive bibliographies of works can be found in Chamayou's and Diaz's books).

8 In this article I understand discourse more broadly – as a socially institutionalised type of practice that is both supra- and subgeneric, as well as having culturally specific rules and conditions and being markedly characterised by statements and situations. I follow the definition offered by Ryszard Nycz, “Literatura nowoczesna: cztery typy dyskursu,” *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2002): 41–42.

is also worth noting that its documentary value changed. Recently, for example in Małgorzata Szpakowska's 2003 book *Chcieć i mieć. Samowiedza obyczajowa w Polsce czasu przełomu* [*To Want and to Have: Polish Self-Knowledge About Customs in Times of Change*], the letter no longer proves informative about actual states of affairs, instead being evidence at the *doxa* level, at the level of convictions and beliefs, a document of self-knowledge.<sup>9</sup> However, although the analysed letters are in a way doubly restricted documents (in terms of both subject and object), with numerous reservations attached, Szpakowska's book remains an insightful diagnosis of changes in customs.

Yet a letter is also a *t e x t*, animated by more or less conscious aesthetic intentions. In some cases letters even become "great literary manoeuvres" – as with Schulz or Rilke.<sup>10</sup> This is such a self-evident matter, long present in the subject literature, that I will just add that the literary nature of a letter is of course a historical-cultural variable.

Epistolography conceived as *d i s c o u r s e* is connected to two traditions: the older, classic one defines the letter as a "discussion between those who are not present;" while contemporary pragmatic analyses contributed to re-defining the relations between the letter and conversation in a strict sense, showing the differences between the two types of communication.<sup>11</sup> Here again we are faced with the thorny issue of the absent addressee of the letter, showing that the conversational model of epistolary communication is perhaps the most controversial area of contemporary research. This is because the dominant premise in the modern critical consciousness is the self-reflexivity of epistolography, meaning that letters are essentially written for themselves. It is clear that contemporary criticism, after unsuccessfully attempting to kill off the sender, set its sights on the addressee. Brigitte Diaz describes this making the addressee absent with the rather apt metaphor of "*e x - c o m m u n i c a t i o n*."<sup>12</sup> The receiver is thus ex-communicated in order to liberate the letter writer, allowing him to produce himself – his self-creation. At the same time, this metaphor speaks of a past state, a past and no longer functioning communication. (The "ex-communicating" model has limited scope and applicability, and furthermore the problem of the

9 Małgorzata Szpakowska, *Chcieć i mieć. Samowiedza obyczajowa w Polsce czasu przełomu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2003).

10 Elżbieta Neyman discusses this in her essay "A ciało słowem się stało," *Teksty Drugie* 4/5/6 (1993).

11 Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, "L'interaction épistolaire," in *La lettre entre réel et fiction*, ed. Jürgen Siess (Paris: SEDES, 1998).

12 Diaz, *L'épistolaire ou la pensée nomade*, 58.

“ex-communicated” addressee seems to a great extent to be a historical question, to which I shall return at the appropriate moment.)

Writing, addressing and sending a letter also means trying to act remotely, or at least believe in the performative power of epistolography. Letters are thus also a form of a c t i o n – this is an age-old concept, as, for example, Juliusz Słowacki ardently told Joanna Bobrowa: “this letter you hold before you is enchanted – by my will – my feeling – my truth – is bewitched – it has the strength and power to heal even a heart.”<sup>13</sup> A less poetic version was offered by Irzykowski, at the end of the essay cited above, where he says, “It is not by deeds alone that a man lives, indeed, by deeds he only lives little and seldom, as long as we regard fulfilling intentions as deeds. By far a greater role in life is played by announcements of deeds, that is gestures.” He then briefly outlines his theory of gestures as s y m b o l i c a c t s, referring to an economic metaphor:

In the circulation of interpersonal relations, d e e d s i n c a s h are only more glaring points in complicated sociological processes – this material is too hard and costly. Yet statements, threats, hopes, notes, manifestos, boasts, promises, fears, in sum thousands of symbolic a c t i o n s – this is the material from which the fabric of political life is spun – concluding with the two now inseparable cells of social life, love and friendship.

In this essay, Irzykowski outlined what today we might call a performative conception of epistolary communication as symbolic acts. The performative conception is one of the fundamental premises of Stefania Skwarczyńska’s theory of the letter:

A letter can be a distinct fragment of life, an a c t o f l i f e. It then moves it, shapes it, it is a moment of the action with which life moves its protagonists: the author and addressee of the letter. A letter with a proposal creates a whole in life with the fact of acceptance or refusal of this proposal, it is a moment woven into the life and the orders of the fortunes of two people; it m o v e s the action between them, rather than just being the passive receptor of it. [...]

In this way, a letter is a link in the dramatic action with which life is developed; [...]

Every letter is identical to the life event, the act, it pulls the act along, produces the event; [...] So we see that the relationship between

<sup>13</sup> Juliusz Słowacki, *Korespondencja*, vol. 1 (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1962), 489.

correspondence and the life it “produces” and that surrounds it is indeed dramatic, in the purest Greek sense of this word.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, this way of thinking about letters, as a form of action, often appears in critical situations and experiences – isolation, imprisonment, exile and lunacy. It also appears to be activated by a demiurgic dream which attributes a kind of omnipotence to words.<sup>15</sup> An example might be the letters written by Słowacki during the period when he belonged to the Circle of God’s Cause sect. This is interesting as this interpretation of letters is guided by the intention of using words to unify the symbolic sphere and reality. Yet the letter conceived as an action also plays a huge role in political, social and religious activity – all forms of open, political and apostolic letters therefore in a way reveal the dream of the entire epistolary practice, namely of writing that is action at the same time.<sup>16</sup> To conclude these remarks, I will just add that the performativity of the letter is also confirmed in the legal sphere – in credentials, for example.<sup>17</sup>

### The “Dangerous Liaisons” Between Epistolography and Autobiography

The history of the letter as a form of statement and means of communication is related to the history of autobiographical forms.<sup>18</sup> These relations were initially based on the principle of exclusion, or, to put it more mildly, replacement. Whereas the 18th century was the age of the letter, the beginning of the end of this era came with Rousseau’s *Confessions*; the 19th century is regarded as a period of intimate writing, diaries, autobiographies and autobiographical

14 Stefania Skwarczyńska, *Teoria listu* (Lwów: nakł. Towarzystwa Naukowego, 1937), 303, 313.

15 On critical experiences in epistolography see *Experiences limites de l'épistolaire. Lettres d'exil, d'enfermement, de folie*, ed. André Magnan (Paris: Champion, 1993).

16 An interesting analysis of the “violence” of correspondence based on the conception of a letter as action is given by Pierre de Gaulmyn’s essay “La violence apostolique de Paul Claudel (1904-1914),” in *Les lettres dans la Bible et dans la littérature*, ed. Louis Panier (Paris: Coll. Lectio Divina, 1999).

17 This is discussed by Chamayou in *L'esprit de la lettre*, 61. But we should also bear in mind that their performativity can make letters become the tool most repellent to manipulation and intrigue, while they are also susceptible to becoming a hermeneutic trap, producing a deceptive illusion of an apparent communicative community, or a potentially tragic projection.

18 The question of the relations between letters and autobiographical genres arises frequently. See e.g. Martine Reid, “Ecriture intime et destinataire,” in *L'Épistolarité à travers les siècles; Les écritures de l'intime. La correspondance et le journal*, ed. Pierre-Jean Dufief (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000).

novels. This is an attractive thesis, and we will not have much difficulty in confirming it. Sociologically oriented scholars link this domination of intimate genres with the development of the private space, “a room of one’s own.” In the 19th-century consciousness, one wrote a diary for oneself, to understand oneself. The appearance of the intimate diary and the autobiographical novel confirms the disappearance of the other person, and the “I – You” dialogue is lost.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the dominant force in modernity and modernism is the “narcissistic,” self-presenting “I” from *Confessions* – contemplative, realising itself not in action, but in self-analysis, and like Narcissus slowly disappearing, unable to recognise itself in its own image.

The domination of the autobiography is also accompanied by a process that we might call the *autobiographization of epistolography*. In other words, the history of the letter from the 18th to the 19th century is one of advancing *privatization*. It moved from the public space (and the related functions) to the private space, before becoming “autobiographized” and as a result able to participate in the construction of the private “I.” On the way, however, privacy gradually changed into a private format. Letter-writing became *deprivation*, absencing the other and the advancing change of the dialogical rule of the letter into a monological one and of communication into self- or ex-communication. This process of epistolography’s autobiographization culminated with the letters of modernist writers. Rilke professed in a letter to Lou, ““I write this, dear Lou, as in a diary, all of this, because I am not able to write a letter now and yet wanted to talk to you.”<sup>20</sup> Kafka too offered Felice excerpts from his diary as a substitute for letters.<sup>21</sup> Brzozowski suffered from a similar affliction, according to Irzykowski’s rebuke, which he puts in a letter:

You, sir, treat people as pawns, and live like a “wood grouse, which during its call becomes deaf to all!” I once read your letters to Perlmutter – these are not letters, but excerpts from a diary of thoughts.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the most expressive version is delivered in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, whose protagonist questions the very legitimacy of writing letters:

19 Chamayou, *L’esprit de la lettre*, 167.

20 *Rilke and Andreas-Salomé: A Love Story in Letters*, trans. Edward Snow and Michael Winkler (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), 92.

21 Elias Canetti, *Kafka’s Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, trans. James Stern and Elizabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 221.

22 Karol Irzykowski, *Listy 1847-1944* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 74-75.

I don't want to write any more letters either. Why should I tell someone that I am changing? If I change, I'm no longer the person I was, and if I'm something different from what I used to be, I plainly don't have any friends. And I can't possibly write to strangers, people who don't know me.<sup>23</sup>

The process of autobiographization of the letter also influenced the perception of epistolography in the critical consciousness, and above all on contemporary correspondence theory, resulting in a situation in which letters are usually described with the aid of categories developed in the analysis of autobiographical forms.<sup>24</sup> One consequence of this process seems to be a kind of tragicomedy of errors, that is the equation of the epistolary "I" with the autobiographical "I." The most emphatic example is the aforementioned book by Kaufmann, which perhaps most radically places epistolography in a narcissistic, self-reflexive gesture.

The two forms of expression have of course influenced each other during their development; every letter of course also has an autobiographical aspect, and in practice often takes the form a diaristic letter; the letter, of course, especially for artists, may be only an expression of concern for themselves (the case of Gombrowicz). Nevertheless, I think that substituting the autobiographical "I" for the epistolary "I" paints an incorrect picture.

The necessarily schematic history of the letter therefore led from the form of the letter as rhetorical speech to the letter as an autobiographical monologue via the conception of the letter as discussion. Yet time proves that this does not have to be the case, and makes a certain adjustment to the argument of the domination of autobiographism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Corrections are also suggested by successive publications of correspondences, along with more careful examinations of genres of intimate writing, diaries and autobiographies. Diaries replace the Other, and yet at the same time cannot function without a "you" – telling in this regard is the number of phrases addressed to an illusory you or personifications along the lines of "Dear Diary" (extremely characteristic here is Irzykowski's journal, which makes use of a comprehensive range of variations on "you" and ends with recorded letters to friends).

---

23 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Robert Vilain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

24 Many factors coincided to lead to the autobiographisation of epistolography, and editorial decisions – that is publishing not the entire correspondence, but a partial block of letters of one author – were not insignificant in this.

We can find a somewhat paradoxical and direct testimony to the transformed relations between letters and intimate writings in the next, and, I would argue, highly characteristic phase of the evolution of Philippe Lejeune's reflection on autobiography. In this stage, Lejeune treats this genre – narcissistic and egocentric in the manner and tradition of Rousseau – as dialogical and communicative. In his 1999 essay *Is It Possible to Define Autobiography?* he writes:

Autobiographies are not objects of aesthetic consumption, but a social means of interpersonal *understanding*. This understanding has several dimensions: ethical, emotional, referential. The autobiography was created to pass on universal values, sensitivity to the world, unknown experiences – and this within the framework of personal relations, perceived as authentic and non-fictional.<sup>25</sup> [*Italics denote original emphasis; letter-spacing my emphasis.*]

One cannot fail to notice that this definition of autobiography as, I repeat, a “social means of interpersonal *understanding*,” gives it the status of a letter.

Similarly telling in this sense are the changes in the views of Małgorzata Czermińska. In her essay “Między listem a powieścią” [“Between Letter and Novel”], published in 1975, she treats a collection of letters as an “autobiographical novel,” so she at once “literarizes” and “autobiographizes” epistolography.<sup>26</sup> In her later works, Czermińska notes that even the most narcissistic autobiographical narrative contains some traces of the Other and implements a strategy of challenge that emphasises the presence of the “you” in autobiography.

This leads me to the conclusion that, first, the relations between epistolography and autobiography are not one-directional, and second, albeit obvious, the nature of these relations is dependent on cultural and historical concerns. Letters and diaries are linked by a peculiar connection, almost as if one could

<sup>25</sup> Philippe Lejeune, “Czy można zdefiniować autobiografię?,” trans. Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, in *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii*, ed. Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 18. Lejeune made similar comments in his conversation with Paweł Rodak (“Nie istnieje tu nic, zanim nie zostanie wypowiedziane”. Rozmowa z Philipppem Lejeune’em,” *Teksty Drugie* 2/3 (2003): 221-222) [Translator’s note: in English, the question “Is it possible define autobiography?” opens Lejeune’s collection of essays *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary, ed. Paul Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)].

<sup>26</sup> Małgorzata Czermińska, “Między listem a powieścią,” in *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie i wyzwanie* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000).

not exist without the other. A spectacular example of this epistolographic-autobiographic hybridisation is Derrida's *Envois*, as a peculiar variant of the chiasmatic relationship between the letter and the diary, the epistolary "I" and the autobiographical "I."

The latest trends would therefore suggest, to paraphrase a classic saying, that without You there is nothing. And when the Other appears, one can begin talking about communication.

### **Epistolography in a Communicative Perspective – Discovering Oneself and through the Other**

Lejeune summed up the communicative situation of epistolography concisely and accurately: "There is no eternal essence of the letter, but the fluctuating and contingent existence of a certain mode of written communication."<sup>27</sup> Following this assertion, and without going into further details, the centrepiece of 18th-century epistolography would be social communication, which is defined by problems such as the dissemination and confrontation of philosophical ideas in the microcosm of epistolary circles, as well as the shaping of the sphere of public debate in accordance with the spirit of reciprocity and participation. Salon culture, meanwhile, legitimised the "social" and community-building function, forming meaning and maintaining social ties. The 19th century was dominated rather by private communication, and therefore a preponderance of problems related to the constitution or expression of subjectivity – questions of identity, self-analysis, self-creation, self-presentation, self-reference and the like.

In the 20th century, on the other hand, at least at first glance, the distinctive feature appears to be a general sense of a communicative crisis, and thus the auto-communication or ex-communication mentioned above. The context for this is certainly the modernistic linguistic crisis,<sup>28</sup> as it was not only a crisis of representation and expression, but also, consequently, a communicative crisis. This therefore means a process of alienation concerning words, their non-adjacency to emotions and thus to known questions connected to the problem of expressing the inexpressible. Kafka noticed this with regard to letters, writing in his diary that "if our letters cannot match our own feelings – naturally, there are varying degrees of this, passing imperceptibly into one another in both directions... even at our best, expressions like

<sup>27</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> On the modernist crisis in language see Ryszard Nycz, "Język modernizmu: doświadczenie wyobcowania i jego konsekwencje," in Nycz, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historyczno-literackie* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1997).

'indescribable,' 'inexpressible,' or 'so sad,' or 'so beautiful,' followed by a rapidly collapsing 'that' clause, must perpetually come to our assistance [...]."<sup>29</sup> The consequence of the double alienation of words was an increase in the communicative distance and alienation.<sup>30</sup>

Yet we must make two remarks to bear in mind regarding the communicative vicissitudes of the letter. Firstly, we ought to include phenomena from more local cultures, disturbing the schematic order of this very general outline. I am thinking in particular of Polish emigrations, which bring quite some confusion to the letter's historic tribulations. In both cases – the 19th and 20th centuries – the émigré communicative system was conducive to integrative and community-forming functions, as letter-writing to a great extent replaced the public forum – Jerzy Giedroyc and Jerzy Stempowski are two good examples here.<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, then, emigration, distance, estrangement and absence were creative factors. We might also very well bear in mind the correspondence of Czesław Miłosz, which refers to the pragmatism of Enlightenment culture, clearly fulfilling the function of the exchange of ideas, intellectual dialogue, and public debate.

Secondly, there are signs that thinking of letters solely as a form of auto-communication may be becoming a thing of the past. This does not mean, of course, that the latest works announce a communicative ecstasy, a problem-free borderless understanding and undisturbed harmony of contact. On the contrary, the lesson of modernity, its writers and theoreticians, was so acute that all forms of unproblematic views of communication now seem impossible.

This is because, on the one hand, as Erazm Kuźma puts it, "communication is the result of lack, [...], a surrogate means, an attempt to heal the wounds of division, [...] it is a sign of a desire that cannot be fulfilled."<sup>32</sup> On the other,

29 Franz Kafka, *Diaries, 1910-1923*, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 135.

30 As an example of the modern creation of distance we can take the unpublished letters of Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer. These are summarised by Katarzyna Fazan as follows: "the need to transform the convention of understanding through the letter into a convention of misunderstanding, estrangement, creating distance and finally eliminating the addressee becomes a strong letter-writing impulse... The letter becomes a conversation with its own language or individual conception of the internal world." Katarzyna Fazan, *Szczerza poza dekadenta. Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer: między epistolografią a sztuką* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Naukowe "Societas Vistulana," 2001), 71, 86-87.

31 See Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, *Nieśpieszny przechodzień i paradoksy. Rzecz o Jerzym Stempowskim* (Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej, 1997), 96-154.

32 Erazm Kuźma, "Modele komunikacji literackiej we współczesnych doktrynach literaturoznawczych," in *Sporne i bezsporne problemy współczesnej wiedzy o literaturze*, ed.

communicative distance can, at least in some cases, be a creative principle as, thanks to remoteness and absence, correspondence becomes possible. And just as every border crossed at the same time confirms it, every sending of a letter seeks to remove this distance, while also acting as a reminder of it. Perhaps, then, we should not be too hasty in rejecting the communicative dimension of literature, and if anything reformulate it.

The most important thing in these communicative dilemmas, however, would seem to be the return of the epistolary “You.” And the main reason that makes it indispensable in the communicative scenario is the fact that correspondence is, to put it as briefly as possible, *discovering oneself and through the Other*. As a result, epistolary communication becomes a medium of anthropological issues.

### **Epistolography from the Point of View of the Anthropology of Writing**

The oldest tradition views the letter as *speculum animi*. Another tradition says, like Mallarmé in a letter to Cazalis, that “one is all too much of a comedian when one writes.”<sup>33</sup> Although the communicative aspects of epistolographical discourse cannot be separated from anthropological ones, the following quotation by Brigitte Diaz seems to characterise contemporary thinking on the anthropological problems of epistolography: “more than the agent of communication, the letter is a necessary relay in the constitution of the subject, and the epistolary exchange – which in reality often functions as an exchange «from and to oneself» – becomes the site of a true ontogenesis.”<sup>34</sup> This is why I would once again like to refer to the letter’s historical vicissitudes, as they confirm the importance of epistolography in performative identity formation.

At the turn of the 19th century, both epistolary manuals and epistolary practice combined with the introduction and popularisation of writing “one’s own way.”<sup>35</sup> Owing to the potential consequences, this is an extremely

---

Włodzimierz Bolecki and Ryszard Nycz (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2003), 208.

33 *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 38.

34 Diaz, *L'Épistolaire ou la pensée nomade*, 61. Researchers do indeed concentrate on the problem of the epistolary “I.” See e.g. *Les Lettres ou la règle du jeu*, ed. Anne Chamayou (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 1999).

35 The best Polish example is Szymański’s letter book. See on this topic: Przemysława Matuszewska, “Pod hasłem naturalności. O listowniku Stanisława Szymańskiego,” in Matuszewska, *Gry z adresatem. Studia o poezji i epistolografii wieku oświeceniowego* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1999), 131.

interesting question. It is not only about the popularisation of a new, simple epistolary style, as we can consider the anti-normativism of a letter book not just in stylistic terms, but also from an anthropological or social perspective. In this sense the improvisational and personal epistolary practice proposed by Szymański, for example, can be seen as an action towards modern subjectivity of someone who at this stage was still a spontaneous, free individual expressing himself in his own way. In other words, it advances the conception founded on the notion of “human nature,”<sup>36</sup> which incidentally points to its cultural determinant, the Enlightenment naturalism of Rousseau.<sup>37</sup>

Another testimony is the fact that, starting in the 18th century, the changing form of the letter as confession also participated in the changing meaning of the concept of intimacy. Whereas initially it served to describe the sensual relationship between two people, in the 1840s as much as “inner and profound,” “intimate” now meant “what constitutes the essence of things.” So it was no longer associated with relations between people and the emotional realm, but rather with self-reference and self-analysis.<sup>38</sup>

According to this epistolary practice, there is a school educating the subject and his social relations. We should bear in mind, of course, that the “constitution” of the subject in a letter in fact involves staging a *persona* in the place of the person, discovering oneself by inventing oneself.<sup>39</sup> In this case, however, it focuses on the identity of a subject isolated from interpersonal relations. This is the dominant perspective in research on epistolography.

There is yet another angle from which we can examine the epistolary “I,” which is the way followed by Irzykowski when speaking about the highly dramatic and at the same time dialogical staging in ideal correspondence:

True correspondence is the dialogue not of two people, but two spirits, when any hint of casualness is to be excluded, and the encounter is to take place in as deep and ever deepening a sphere as is possible. So this is not an “exchange” of thoughts and feelings, compliments or jokes, but a living drama, that one must not play out, but act out with a *sense* of

36 Ibid., 132.

37 On Enlightenment naturalism see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 355-367.

38 On the changing notion of intimacy see Jean Beauverd, “Problématique de l’intime,” in *Intime, intimité, intimisme* (Lille: Société d’Etudes Romantiques de l’Université de Lille III, 1976), 15-16; Daniel Madelénat, *L’Intimisme* (Paris: PUF, 1989). See also Diaz, *L’Epistolaire ou la pensée nomade*, 31-32.

39 See e.g. Bernard Beugnot, “De l’invention épistolaire: à la manière de soi,” in *L’Epistolarité*, 35.

theatricality. And one may lament how undramatic the raising of today's man is, how little a sense of theatricality he has, how he cares not for the troupe, but is only a better or worse soloist. The true letter player, then, will not write blindly, regarding his partner only as a vessel of his effusions, but will mind the consequences of his words and his silences, will be interested in the other person, his character and being, and activate his whole finesse and invention to conquer the other soul, because he knows that the stakes are the highest being a person for a person.<sup>40</sup>

I see in Irzykowi's ideas a conception competing with the dominant one in the modern theory of epistolography, borrowed from autobiographical forms. It is an interesting one owing to its dramatic nature, accentuating both the dialogicality and the realization of the epistolary "I" in action, that is in the symbolic gestures of the letter. The epistolary "I" is an interactive, relational and acting persona, in particular because the epistolary gesture and communication mean discovering oneself and the other and at the same time oneself through the other. By analogy to narrative identity, we can therefore call this the communicative identity. I distinguish it mostly because, owing to their self-narrative character, the currently dominant models of narrative identity are closest to the autobiographic "I," in laboratorial isolation from interpersonal relations. The communicative identity proposed here would be closest to the conception of Hannah Arendt, as it links speech with action, and they in turn with realisation in the network of interpersonal relationships.<sup>41</sup>

The range of possible correspondence relationships demonstrating various ways of forming communicative identities seems vast, so I shall only give a few example scenarios. The relations between the epistolary "I" and "you" might be founded on the myth of Pygmalion – this was how Słowacki thought of his correspondence in the mystic period, writing to his mother: "with some despair I am throwing myself onto paper, with the desire to throw handfuls of my soul at people, transforming them into themselves, nibbling at their bodies, until I make what is familiar into the most beautiful of mortals."<sup>42</sup> Irzykowski wrote that he wanted to use correspondence to "cause souls to stir, that is to stir them up" – and a particular example is his letters

40 Irzykowski, "Nieoficjalna literatura," 208.

41 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Julia Kristeva recalled Arendt's conception in her book *Life: Hannah Arendt – or Action as Birth and Estrangement*, trans. Ross Guberman, vol. 1 of *Female Genius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

42 Juliusz Słowacki, *Korespondencja*, vol. 2 (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1962), 25.

to Erna Brandówna: we can find a similar motif too in the relations between Stanisław Wyspiański and Lucjan Rydel.

Cyprian Norwid depicted the ideal communicative system differently in a letter to Maria Trębicka: "How many times instead of an optical reflection have I longed for a second lamp, burning no less watchfully."<sup>43</sup> A good example of such relations seems to be the correspondence of Miłosz and Thomas Merton or Giedroyc and Stempowski.

Letters, then, discover and act out themselves and the Other in a chiasmatic relationship, one that is co-formed based on a bilateral interaction. And this is the reason why I see epistolography as such an important practice of writing, or a "social form," as Irzykowski said, that is important for our communicative identity.

### **Instead of a Conclusion: a Few Proposals**

To close, I would like first to return to the question about the causes and consequences of contemporary epistolomania. The increase in research on epistolography of course matches the general trends, the popularity of personal documents. As in similar cases, it is explained by the interest not just of experts, but also of a wider readership, with the past experienced, perceived and recorded in its everyday life. A further stimulus in France is the long-present tendency in historiography to trace rather the intimate and private history of humanity than political events. Epistolography is therefore appreciated for its cognitive value – as a personal document.

This is the cause that stands out first and foremost, but I would view others as being no less important. These are in part suggested by the cultural context, especially the communicative one. Both the anarchic development of means and carriers of communication and the unprecedented thriving of communications theory lend themselves to a renewed examination of the oldest medium.

What do we learn and what do we look for when reading letters from the past? One might say that we look for communicative and social models. We therefore celebrate 17th- and 18th-century social forms, the significance of the exchange, the value of common life. Of course, there is an element of nostalgia for the lost sense of community, the creative word and changing reality. This is a paradox of contemporary culture – the communicative crisis triggers a reaction in the form of heightened interest in communication.

It is also important to note that interest in epistolography dovetails with the sociological, philosophical and psychological conceptions of the relational

43 Cyprian Kamil Norwid, "Listy," in *Pisma wybrane*, ed. Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki (Warszawa: PIW, 1968), 368.

subject, realised in interactions, or, in more ceremonial terms, in the encounter with the Other. An undoubted merit of contemporary epistolary research seems to be the hypothesis/conclusion that “without You there is nothing,” that is the reformulation of the problem of the Other as the communicative you. I would therefore see in epistolography a particularly legitimate field of research on subjectivity not only in its “separation” and isolation, but in its relations with others. These might lead not only to a reflection on relational identity, but also to historical-cultural communicative models, the interpersonal drama of which Irzykowski and Skwarczyńska wrote.

Correspondence also appears to be an attractive place for cultural analysis of feelings. But first a brief digression on the modern literary criticism project. In his 1920 essay “The Perfect Critic,” T. S. Eliot claimed that “a literary critic should have no emotions except those immediately provoked by a work of art – and these [...] are, when valid, perhaps not to be called emotions at all.”<sup>44</sup> Thus excluding the expression of emotions from literature, one of the foundations of the canonical stream of modernism, equally emphatically stated by Eliot (“poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion”), and the escape from the person (“it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”) go hand in hand with the programme of literary criticism. Institutional education disseminated this aestheticizing mode and idea, and in so doing labelling as “affective fallacy,” “simple-mindedness” or “naive” reception the style of reading that searches for expression and emotion in literature and art. The consequences are well-known, since narcissistic modern aestheticism, as Richard Shusterman puts it, “rather than opening us up to real moral feeling and human sympathy, indurates us into an aesthetically refined but morally insensitive attitude, where we tend to regard everything, even people, as objects for aesthetic use.”<sup>45</sup> From the internal, that is modern, perspective, Ortega y Gasset makes a similar diagnosis in his essay “The Dehumanization of Art,” frequently cited as one of the most insightful testimonies of the era.

We also know that this situation is changing, and emotions are slowly beginning to occupy researchers, examples being the interest in nostalgia or empathy.<sup>46</sup> By way of reassurance, I will add that speaking about cultural

---

44 Thomas Stearns Eliot, “The Perfect Critic,” in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 56.

45 Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living, Beauty, Rethinking Art* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 165.

46 See Anna Łebkowska, “Pragnienie empatii,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2002); Jarosław Płuciennik, *Literackie identyfikacje i oddźwięki. Poetyka a empatia* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004).

analysis of emotions does not nullify their linguistic dimension as Clifford Geertz clearly underlined:

Words, images, gestures, body-marks, and terminologies, stories, rites, customs, harangues, melodies, and conversations, are not mere vehicles of feelings lodged elsewhere, so many reflections, symptoms, and transpirations. They are the locus and machinery of the thing itself.<sup>47</sup>

I would of course add letters to this list of “media;” in them the cultural formation of emotions has both a privileged and peculiar place. They are after all a sphere of circulation, a “relay” between culture and the nature of emotions.

Many dangers arise from the cultural analysis of emotions (and of ethical criticism too), especially the problem of the language of description. I think that two proposals might be promising. The first is that of the still relevant Stefania Skwarczyńska, analysing for example the letters of king John III Sobieski from the perspective of the court culture of expressing emotions. The second is Niklas Luhman’s sociocultural research on coding intimacy and the semantics of love. Both of these, I feel, deliver a credible language for describing the language of the formation and functioning of emotions in culture.

The third and final field of research on letters might be the historical “norms of intimacy” and relations between the public and private sphere which epistolography provides testimony for.

These three example fields of interest might give an impulse and the foundations for the anthropology of writing and sociology of literature,<sup>48</sup> the centre of which would be the emotional person communicating with others.

*Translation: Benjamin Koschalka*

<sup>47</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Culture, Mind, Brain/Brain, Mind, Culture,” in Geertz, *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 206.

<sup>48</sup> The sociology of literature does not appear here by chance. It is the consequence of both the definitions of epistolography accepted in this article (not only the forms of expression but the way of communication) and general convictions on literature (its sociocultural circumstances). This perspective leads to reformulating the problem, or rather the question, about a possible sociology of literature. Yannick Séité referred to this in his interesting essay “La théorie littéraire questionnée par l’histoire,” in *Textuel* 37 (2000), “Où en est la théorie littéraire,” ed. Julia Kristeva and Evelyann Grossman (Paris, 2000).