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*Fryderyk Chopin's correspondence
from the perspective of body studies.
The discovery of corporeality*

ABSTRACT: The author analyses Fryderyk Chopin's correspondence within the context of the new humanities field of body studies. The socio-cultural anthropology of the body has been an object of study since the 1980s. It has enabled the extraction of the picture of a cultural body inscribed in Chopin's correspondence, and it has also shown how his conception of his own *soma* and of the bodies of other people diverge from the Romantic convention of writing about corporeality. In the age of romanticism, sickness and physical weakness were glorified like a gift and a badge of spiritual aristocracy. A suffering and frail complexion became a value in the salons – a *laissez-passer* to the world of artistic sensitivity. Chopin never succumbed to that fashion. His record of his corporeal experience is strikingly un-Romantic, as can be seen, for example, when comparing it with the narration of sickness contained in the correspondence of Zygmunt Krasiński. The corporeal experience displayed by the great musician is striking in its modernity. Chopin rejects the Romantic lyricisation of sickness; his utterances are pithy, dominated by sarcasm and even physiological brutality, and the style of his description of corporeality employs grotesqueness, irony and absurdity. Human subjectivity sensed through the body paints a picture of a fragmentary, disharmonious self; people reveal themselves to the eyes of others not as a whole, but as an abbreviation, a representative detail. Visions of mechanised bodies, whose behaviour and actions are hyperbolised by the musician, bring us – especially during the last years of Chopin's life – into a world where corporeality is a source of strangeness, and even repugnance. In the conclusion of the article, the author denies that Chopin's music can be directly translated into a moving picture: she states that neither his illness nor any other experiences of his bodily existence can be treated in an illustrative way that purports to "illuminate" his music directly.

KEYWORDS: Chopin's correspondence, somatic studies, cultural body, sickness, irony, grotesque, fragmentary self, music and image

Body-studies are quite a new sphere of humanities. Although the discipline has its origins in the 1980s, the socio-cultural anthropology of the body became an important scientific field in the 1990s. One of the symptoms of a more serious treatment of the phenomena was a work *The Body and Society*. Its publication in 1995 showed the importance of the issue, while a se-

ries of new publications dealing with that sphere of interest demonstrated that studies of this kind became a regular branch of historical, sociological and cultural analyses.

Regardless of the perspective taken, there is one shared characteristic of the issue that links the different approaches towards the somatic: a focus on the body not only opens new scientific perspectives, but also forces scholars to show nuances and even to redefine many issues which seemed clear. The reason for that is simple: the awareness of the fact that the body is not only an “addition” to the mind and soul, nor the bothersome “coffin of the spirit”, as described by Juliusz Słowacki, completely changed the anthropological perspective. Zbigniew Libera claimed that, during the centuries of the development of the European culture, a human being was perceived as a person, but as a person almost bodiless, and analysed from the perspective of “Platonic and Cartesian angelism”¹. If, as scholars claim, opposition lies at the core of European thought, then the opposition of matter and spirit, of body and mind, is one of its main pillars. The result of this was that, as the vision of the world was being clarified, a judgement on the dualistic order of the universe was being passed at the same time. Not many European thinkers were able to avoid such a discourse, and even fewer of them accorded equal rights to the body or acknowledged its superiority over the spirit. Even if, for example, Saint Thomas Aquinas did not treat the body-spirit opposition in such a radical way as Saint Augustine had done, and even if he agreed that humans were corporeal and spiritual beings, it did not lead to a reflection that a body constituted an essential form of our existence in the world and that we could not go beyond its perspective. The cause of the contemporary philosophical career of Marquis de Sade’s writings was the fact that he was one of those few and ultra-radical “defenders” of the body. That enabled such philosophizing writers as Maurice Blanchote or George Bataille to look in Sade’s works for a written expression of corporeality that had been silent in the culture for so long.

The interest in somatic studies has been a consequence of the crisis in humanities, which gave rise to post-structuralism and postmodernism and led to the origins of new scientific spheres. A history of the body, as one of the forms of studies on corporeality, was born when historical studies came to be influenced by linguistic analysis. Taking this direction put a question mark over historians’ ability to access the facts and turned attention from (objective) facts as such to the narrative methods used to talk about them. The history of the body developed from remains of scientific history. It is an interdis-

¹ Zbigniew Libera, ‘Antropologia ciała’ [The anthropology of the body], in *Doświadczone, opisywane, symboliczne. Ciało w dyskursach kulturowych* [Experienced, described, symbolic. The body in cultural discourses], eds. Katarzyna Leńska-Bak and Magdalena Sztandara (Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2008).

ciplinary branch of humanities that includes such spheres of knowledge as the history of medicine, the history of mind, the history of gender and many others. Somatic studies conducted within the framework of sociology or cultural studies also have been influenced by the consequences of the changes in humanities in the twentieth century. However, the interest in corporeality as a cultural, historic or social fact had its own precursors. It is worth mentioning here such thinkers as Johan Huizinga, Marc Bloch, Norbert Elias, Michael Foucault and more recent Bryan Turner, Anthony Giddens, Gilles Deleuze and many others.

However, the most important thinker here seems to be Maurice Merleau-Ponty, because it was in his philosophical works that the dualism between the body and the soul was for the first time so firmly rejected. The philosopher placed emphasis on the fact that the body was an inseparable condition of existence and awareness; that it was an organ of perception, the fount of experience and an interpretative factor. A human being does not only have a body, but he or she is a body, which makes his or her view of reality subjective, while human knowledge is involved in corporeality and cannot be either omitted or overcome. The body was recognized, as language was earlier, as an inevitable filter of our way of perceiving the world, as well as of the way we have contact with it.

In this article I would like to consider how we can read Fryderyk Chopin's correspondence from the perspective of somatic studies. The interest in the corporeality problem alone is not new in that case. Numerous studies on the artist's illness and its influence on his music, as well as on his social behaviour and the social roles he played, have been published. However, the significance of those studies differs; for example the impressionistic "interpretations" of Chopin's music by Stanisław Przybyszewski are striking to us today not only because of their affective language and the attempt to create literature based on impressions gained from music, but foremost because of the naive genetics which ascribe the style of the brilliant artist directly to his illness. I do not want to follow the track of tracing such links and relationships. However, I do regard it as important to examine the question of the way the image of the cultural body, whose existence and aesthetics were closely linked to the spirit of the time, is revealed in his correspondence (both written and received by him). Although here it is also difficult to discover something new, there is a good reason for approaching the issue again. This is because, unlike his contemporaries' opinions on Chopin's physical appearance and its relation to his music, Chopin's own description of experiencing his body, as well as his way of perceiving the physicality of others, seem to be original and not shaped by romantic conventions. It is these observations, among other things, which make the composer's letters seem unromantic in their style.

Numerous biographers wrote about the “anti-romanticism” of Chopin as a man, since, as a musician, he undoubtedly was very romantic. Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz claimed that the musician’s father had an impact on Chopin’s “convention of being” and his epistolary and social style. Chopin’s father was a rationalist and Voltairian and Chopin, according to the novelist, belonged more to the eighteenth than the nineteenth century, while his home education made him resistant not only to mysticism, so popular in the époque of prophets, but also to the trappings of romantic affectation. It is said that towards the end of his life Chopin’s favourite writer was Voltaire, while perceptiveness and a lack of delusions, so characteristic of the French philosopher, can be found in the great Polish composer’s correspondence.

The style, used by Chopin to describe himself makes us tend to look for literary similarities not only in the past, but also to see in his epistolary record the anticipation of the future. In his correspondence, Chopin is surprisingly modern. Iwaszkiewicz quotes: “You live and you are lived, you are felt by others”². Does this not remind us of Witold Gombrowicz and his idea of “the inter-human church”, according to which we do not constitute a permanent existence, but we create ourselves in various interactions? Gombrowicz often came to my mind while I was reading Chopin’s correspondence, and I do not mean just the simple associations of the similarity of style, such as sarcasm, irony, the absurd and attention paid to the description of detail. In Chopin’s correspondence his sense of subjectivity, both his own and that of others, reminds one often of Gombrowicz’s treatment of “I”. It is not only the “I” that creates itself in various roles and “faces”³, but it is a “fragmentary I”, whose body has been divided into “calves and muzzles”. There is grotesque in Chopin’s somatic narration. The artist liked to draw caricatures and if one illustrated his way of perceiving corporeality, the brush stroke would use the grotesque style. Grotesque, in general, shows figures as monstrous, but it singles out those of mixed and incomplete form.⁴ Chopin’s images of human body are closer to the latter. A number of times in his correspondence he describes

² Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Chopin* (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1984), 92.

³ In one of his letters Chopin writes that one of his acquaintances could not believe that he had become “such a real man. I have let my whiskers grow on the right cheek – quite a lot to see. It doesn’t matter about the left side because I sit with my right side turned to the audience”. In *Selected Correspondence of Fryderyk Chopin*, collected by Bronisław E. Sydow, transl. Arthur Hedley (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), 87.

⁴ Anna Matuchniak-Krasuska, ‘Deformacja ciała w sztuce groteskowej’ [The deformation of the body in the art of grotesque], in *Ucieleśnienia. Ciało w zwierciadle współczesnej humanistyki: Myśl-praktyka-reprezentacja* [Embodiments. The body in the mirror of contemporary humanities], eds. Anna Wiczorkiewicz and Joanna Bator (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2007), 143. Incomplete monsters are shocking by their lack of proportions, unnatural number, size and order of their organs. Surrealism often used such a trick.

himself as a nose – a big nose that has been separated from the rest of the body and which lives its own life as in Gogol's short story. In one of his letters to Solange Chopin wrote: "The style is the man. My style is very stupid"⁵. He did not, however, have in mind stupidity, but the unconventionality of his writing, which proves that the man so tightly connected with the epoch deliberately "unstuck" himself from it.

Before we move on to that issue, let us focus on the romantic convention that gave birth to the nineteenth century cultural body, because it is against such a background that Chopin's extraordinary somatic narration becomes clearly apparent.

A beautiful illness and a transparent body

When we focus on how the artist and his music were perceived by his contemporaries and how he and his work were described later, we will be justified in claiming that the opposition of body and mind had been present in that reception for a long time. In the testimonies of his contemporaries one can find notes emphasizing the physical delicacy and "transparency" of the musician's body, which enabled the spirit of music to show through the ethereal body more easily than it would if his physical appearance had been stronger. That "melting body", which seemed to be fading away while giving place to music, serves as a central point in an excellent poem *Fortepian Szopena* [Chopin's Piano] by Cyprian Kamil Norwid. However, many others perceived the artist's body in a similar way. It even became a leitmotif of private impressions about Chopin's body. Sometimes they were quite humorous, for example Stefan Witwicki in 1840 called the musician: "My dear tiny and pale"⁶. One does not know whether Stefan Witwicki had in mind a kind of auto-irony or a straight-forward expression of an aesthetic convention, which during the Romantic period admired the physical effects of tuberculosis – thinness and paleness. Susan Sontag wrote about the nineteenth century tuberculosis' myth as a creative disease that attacked sensitive people, artists, the so-called "higher souls"⁷. It was that myth, which popularised the famous novel *La Dame aux Camélias* by Dumas, in which the novelist immortalised one of the most famous Parisian courtesans – Rose-Alphonsine Plessis under the name of Marguerite Gautier. She also served as a model for Violetta Valery in *La Traviata*. Rose-Alphonsine herself was closer to Émile Zola's *Nana*,

⁵ Since there is no complete publication of Chopin's correspondence, some of his letters are in my translation. Chopin's letter to Solange Clésinger from 30 June 1848.

⁶ Stefan Witwicki's letter to Chopin from 17 April 1840.

⁷ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor. AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador USA, 1988), 18.

taking into consideration her intellectual and spiritual values that became even more apparent when alcohol had loosened her tongue and revealed her lower-class background and a gutter childhood, from which the now “suave and sophisticated Marie Duplessis”⁸ had come. However, her appearance, that of “a pale and delicate creature with jet black hair”⁹, marked her out for the role of a romantic heroine. As one of her contemporaries recalled: “She was very slight [...], almost too thin; but oh, so refined looking; so marvelously graceful”¹⁰. The saying that “a woman cannot be too slim or too rich”, which is still applicable today, came from those times.

It should be remembered, however, that we are dealing with the nineteenth century aesthetic canon that linked ethereal appearance with spiritual nobleness. Since real life has its own rights and Chopin, being reluctant to follow romantic poses, rejected speculations about him getting married, claiming bluntly that a rich woman looks for an equally rich husband and even if she married a poor one he must not be “a feeble creature, but young and vigorous”¹¹. Hence, in real life choices physical strength was not disregarded, although, the attitudes of social elites and the ideals of romanticism extolled physical weakness, and not only such a “romantic” one as tuberculosis.¹² At that time, the notion that suffering was a ticket to a higher world was stronger than social convention. The funeral of famous Marie Duplessis was attended by social “lions” and even grand dames, although her reputation, surname, title and even marital status were doubtful. However, it did not matter in the face of the power of the myth (even today there are flowers on the grave of Alphonsine Plessis, honouring not her but Margaret Gautier, the symbolic *Dame aux Camélias*). Yet, Marie herself managed to create that myth during her life. Her statements that she had known that she would “die young” and that she “should live if she could find happiness”¹³ both sublimated and added elegance to a premature death (she died at the age of 23), which was a consequence of a genetic disease, childhood spent in poverty, an unhealthy life-style and finally tuberculosis, which was then an incurable illness.

Therefore, the physical consequences of Chopin’s lethal disease made him a person ideally suited to the aesthetics of Parisian salons. It was “inappropri-

⁸ William G. Atwood, *The Parisian Worlds of Frédéric Chopin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 237.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹¹ *Selected Correspondence*, 349.

¹² Sontag has claimed that the result of the cultural myth of TB was the image of it not only as a purifying and elevating disease, but also a disease practically painless. Death of a tubercular was to be elevated and free of suffering. The gradual weakening culminated in a moment in which a soul, in a sense, “was released” from the imprisoning body.

¹³ Atwood, *The Parisian Worlds of Frédéric Chopin*, 240.

ate” for a romantic artist or for a romantic spirit in general, to be healthy. Atwood claims that also

Other forms of psychological malaise (*ennui* in particular) and even physical suffering also served as lesser proofs of divine inspiration. For example “a diseased liver, a heart complaint, a hectic cough or chronic dyspepsia” sometimes passed for an infallible mark of genius. Pain for the Romantics was the raw material of ecstasy. It provided a psychological purge that ennobled the soul by ridding it of emotional imperfections. Tranquillity, on the other hand, symbolized the complacency of the bourgeoisie, who never experienced the purifying effects of pain.¹⁴

While generally agreeing with that opinion, it is worth mentioning that Atwood does not clarify one aspect of the problem: he does not distinguish the aesthetic norms and the fashion which approved of the model of “suffering man,” from the important issue that is suffering itself as an element of life at that time. Pain constituted an inseparable part of existence in the nineteenth century. Various plagues caused by both serious and lighter diseases, which today are entirely curable, were present all the time, while fate divided suffering fairly between poor and rich people. Medicine at the time did not use such painkillers that nowadays are widely taken even to cure less serious complaints. At that time the only way to relieve the pain was to take a drug, especially opium, but Chopin complained that opium made him sleepy and caused stupor. Hence, lighter pain just had to be borne, since curative methods were more ingenious than effective. As it happens, those who could not afford a physician had more chance of surviving, or at least of dying in peace than the rich, because the “treatment” was often more like senseless torture. It is likely that a self-preservation instinct, or traumatic recollections of his younger sister Emilia’s suffering when she was “being saved” by physicians¹⁵, made Chopin decide not to go beyond homeopathy. For this reason, he avoided blood-letting,

[...] the production of painful blisters (by means of suction cups, hot irons or irritating chemicals), the use of clystopumps [...], strychnine-laced sialagogues to promote salivation, and foul-smelling “nauseabonds” to induce vomiting.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁵ In a letter from 1827 the seventeen-year-old Chopin wrote: “We have illness in the house. Emilia has been in bed for the last month. She started to cough and spit blood, and Mamma became frightened. Dr Malcz ordered blood-letting. She was bled once – twice; then countless leeches, blisters, synapisms, herbal remedies, all sorts of nonsense. During the whole time she ate nothing; she got so thin that you would not have known her, and only now is she beginning to recover somewhat. You can imagine what a state things have been in. Imagine it if you can, for I am not equal to describing it.” *Selected Correspondence*, 11-12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

Debilitated by bleedings, the musician preferred ice-cream and bed; and while the devastating disease worsened his dyspnoeic attacks he demanded bunches of violas that he liked so much. It is also likely that his choice was directed by his sense of observation and criticism that enabled him to see the cunning in the physicians' behaviour. Except for doctor Molin and two or three other doctors that he trusted, portraits of other physicians, which Chopin drew as a young man, were somewhat contemptuous or even sarcastic. When he was sixteen years old, he wrote:

Yesterday, we had a visit of an honourable man, Mr Kozicki, he leeches one of the nippers and he talked a lot about carrying [!], ruminant and laryngeal prominence's channels; he came out with Adam's apple, because he used to perform an operation for laryngeal prominence. He wore colourful stockings, shoes *et caetera* dirty as usual, ordinary vest, but a new hat or a rather refreshed hat.¹⁷

Twelve years later during his stay on Majorca, when his condition had suddenly worsened, he wrote about physicians that treated him with an undisguised impatience:

[...] one sniffed at what I spat, the second tapped where I spat from, and the third sounded me and listened as I spat. The first said I was dead, the second that I am dying and the third that I am going to die.¹⁸

Although, in Paris, he consulted the most acknowledged physicians, his trust in their art was rather limited. From the time-perspective we know that he was right – the popular methods at the time could not have helped him, while avoiding the most drastic ones spared him suffering and physical humiliation.

Due to the omnipresence of the feeling of pain, people unashamedly talked about their physical complaints and details of the treatment. In the nineteenth century memoirs and correspondence we find a lot of details about stomach problems, vomit and other complaints, that today we would consider embarrassing. The perspective, however, was different then and even the life of quite a healthy person included suffering, let alone that of an ill person. Atwood does not distinguish the so-called cultural pain, which constituted an element of a romantic man's discourse, from the real suffering that people tried to avoid and which became a part of the narration only out of necessity.

What does strike us in Chopin's correspondence where his well-being, disease and suffering are concerned? It is the way in which the musician described such experiences. His descriptions visibly differ from the narrative style common at the time. Undoubtedly, his correspondence can be distin-

¹⁷ Chopin's letter to Jan Białobłocki from 12 March 1826.

¹⁸ *Selected Correspondence*, 164.

guished from the letters of other great Polish artists of the time, and especially from those of Zygmunt Krasiński. One might hesitate when deciding whether such a juxtaposition of those two artists is reasonable. Is it right to compare the letters of a writer, for whom they were a continuation of literary activity and were the best way to create his own image of the artistic "I", with the letters of a man who, although he had a gift of observation and a talent for writing, was first of all a composer? I believe, however, that such a comparison can be justified. Both artists were conscious of the epoch; they were aware of the norms and cultural models that functioned in the nineteenth century. They both were members of the elite and their social success was a result of their perfect ability to function in that milieu. In other words, they knew how to be "fashionable"¹⁹, how to arouse others' interest and even attentiveness, however superficial it was. In both cases their physical condition was an issue and a cause of anxiety for "the society." They both, however, treated their diseases differently.

Marek Bieńczyk in his monograph on Krasiński calls him "the great patient of Polish literature"²⁰. Both his own and his relatives' (for whom, according to the romantic convention, it was obligatory to suffer) illnesses became not only great narrative themes, but also a way for a writer to exist in the world, as well as a manner of negating that world. The illness was a form of auto-creation and a means to building his artistic image. Krasiński develops a wide, metaphoric discourse of a suffering person. It is also a discourse of being trapped in a body that underwent various forms of disintegration and decay. Bieńczyk writes about "body's plots"²¹, which can be found in the poet's correspondence. It is also worth mentioning that those plots are incredibly developed, dramatic, full of rapture and even exaggeration. According to Bieńczyk Krasiński's acquaintances were submitted to the terror of that disease.

Everyone asks him about his physical condition. Everyone takes part in that game, no matter if they believe him or not; the few remnants of the correspondence about Krasiński that have survived also include information about his health [...] even the Vatican sends its blessings and wishes for getting better.²²

¹⁹ I do not mention the fact that Zygmunt Krasiński was an aristocrat, a well-off and well connected person and "also" an artist. The milieu in which he functioned was naturally given to him, while Chopin had to "enrol" to that milieu using his genius talent and great social awareness. Despite his success, Chopin's belonging to Parisian social elite was not so obvious.

²⁰ Marek Bieńczyk, *Czarny człowiek. Krasiński wobec śmierci* [A black man. Krasiński and the question of death] (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 1990), 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80-99.

²² *Ibid.*, 98.

Chopin's physical condition also aroused social anxiety. Astolf de Custine took care of the composer on many occasions, but his remarks on the musician fit in with the romantic vision that linked pain and art, with important consequences.

You have reached the pinnacle of suffering and poetry; the melancholy of your works goes further to hearts, a listener is alone with You even among a crowd; that is no longer a piano, that is – a soul, and what a soul!²³

It is not clear whether he is expressing a greater concern or warning the pianist with a subconscious satisfaction when he writes: "You are ill: what is worse, your illness might become really serious. You have reached the limit of physical and spiritual suffering. [...]"²⁴. A year later, when Chopin had returned from his unfortunate stay on Majorca, de Custine wrote: "Tuberculosis is reflected in his face, which resembles a spirit without a body". He went on to add: "What has Madame Sand done to him in the course of a single summer [...] He appears to be departing for the other world"²⁵.

However, the weakness of Chopin's physique, according to the taste of the time, seemed to be elegant and ideally harmonised with his music. Even when his art was criticised it was emphasized that his music freed listeners from the fetters of vulgar corporeality. For example, Słowacki, who did not acknowledge the impact of Chopin's music on its audience after turning to mysticism as a result of meeting his maestro Andrzej Towiański, saw in music a tool that freed people from the narrow material world. He wrote in a letter to his mother:

It is a custom of the English, especially among the class of brewers and people of thick, bloody constitution, that once a month they use an emetic, because without it they would be overcome by blood, grow fat and lose their ability to think and their energy. A long time ago God created emetic for these people, and now he has sent a better medicine, that is the emnervating music of Chopin.²⁶

While taking into account the background of the epoch, which – using Słowacki's neologism – liked to emnervate itself, i.e., to feel "by nerves, not by heart" as the author of *Anhelli* imputed to his contemporaries, and which liked to impress by suffering as evidence of sensitivity and initiation into the sphere of transcendence, Chopin's style of correspondence is not influenced

²³ Astolf de Custine's undated [1837?] letter to Chopin.

²⁴ *Selected Correspondence*, 146.

²⁵ Quoting after David Kasunic, 'Chopin's Musical Disease: Tuberculosis, Music and Diagnostic Pathology in 1840s France,' in *Chopin's musical worlds the 1840s*, eds. Magdalena Chylińska, John Comber, Artur Szklener, (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, 2007), 115.

²⁶ Juliusz Słowacki's letter to his mother from February 1845.

by a celebration of disease and suffering to any great extent. For him, illness is not the ticket to a higher world of spirits, but an obstacle. Reticent as he was in expressing his feelings, the artist wrote about his health problems rather unwillingly, although since childhood he had been used to paying attention to his delicate condition. Although with the development of tuberculosis his remarks on blood-spitting, debility and suffocation appear more often, his style is still referential and laconic. In Chopin's description of the disease one can see sarcasm, not loftiness, sometimes even brutal bluntness, which lacks any lyricism. It was very unromantic.

Quoting a protagonist of Friedrich Schlegel short story, Bieńczyk repeats after the German writer:

I liked my disease and even suffering I welcomed with pleasure [...]. It became for me a symbol of living in the universe, it seemed that I saw in it an eternal disagreement, thanks to which everything becomes and exists [...]. That bizarre feeling created the illness's own world, that had its own perfection and form. I felt that its mysterious life was fuller and richer than ordinary health.²⁷

Such a romantic statement of disease adoration is summed up by Bieńczyk with Krasiński's confession: "I'm weak again [...] – I feel good with it, I prefer to be weak than to be healthy"²⁸. Such a point of view, though, was entirely alien to Chopin.

The grotesque body

Chopin's indifference to the romantic lyricism view of illness was caused not only by the fact that he had to earn money. For him, disease did not translate into pages of literary expression of one's weakness, but into cancelled lessons and expensive medical consultations. Undoubtedly, it was an important reason for his attitude towards health problems, but I think that there were also other reasons caused purely by his attitude to corporeality. The disease portrayed by Chopin is not spoken of by the soul, but by physiology. The experience of corporal suffering does not sublimate anything, but makes the way of perceiving one's *soma* vulgar. In 1842 he writes in a letter to Wojciech Grzymała: "I must stay in bed all day, I have so much pain in my beastly face and glands"²⁹, while in 1845, when the tuberculosis became more devastating, he describes his morning chores in a crude way: "I would visit you, but it is possible only in the morning and before I cough up in the morn-

²⁷ Bieńczyk, *Czarny człowiek*, 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Chopin's Letters*, collected by Henryk Opieński, transl. Ethel L. Voynich (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1931), 253.

ing it is 10.00”³⁰. In that cautious, but highly suggestive remark we almost hear that terrible and disgusting tubercular cough. Chopin, clever though he is, does not try to make the disease elegant or lofty. It is clear that the breakdown of his health opened the artist more to what Bakhtin called the “material bodily lower stratum” than to the spiritual world. The juvenile Chopin’s letters that were not filtered by the correctness of the salon show that the young but mature artist did not shut his eyes to the dullness of matter. As a 15-year-old he juxtaposed a sentimental image of objects in a museum in Puławy with the source of their origin. He wrote to his friend Jan Matuszyński:

What did you see in Puławy? What? You saw only a tiny part of what my eyes rested on in full. Did you see at Sybillie a brick taken from the house of Copernicus, from his birth-place? I have seen the whole house, the whole place, certainly a little profaned at present. Imagine, Jasio, in that corner, in that very room, where the famous astronomer received the gift of life, stands now the bed of some German, who probably, after eating too many potatoes, often emits many zephyrs; and on those bricks, of which one was sent with great ceremony to Puławy, crawl many bedbugs. Yes, Brother! The German does not care who lived in that house; he treats the whole wall as Princess Czartoryska would not treat a single brick.³¹

Sentimental and romantic images of reality that were to be exemplified by Puławy along with its idea of a lofty life turn out to be incomplete in the teenage Chopin’s view. Because the world is not only patriotic elation and elegant sublimation of everything that is dull, but it is also those “zephyrs”, bedbugs and a clear reference to urinating that the young artist writes about. In Chopin’s letters, written when he was very young, almost a child, the images in which natural literality is melded with the absurd appear quite often. His description of a lethal fight for a scrap of meat between a dog and a cat serves as a good example of young Chopin’s style. The fight ended when the cat throttled the dog, but eventually it died of exhaustion in the moment of triumph.³² Another good example is a sarcastic image of yet another unhappy cat that went crazy: “Fortunately, it did not bite anyone, but it was running and jumping in the field until it was shot, because after the shot it stopped and did not go crazy anymore”³³.

Someone, who writes like that at the age of fourteen does not need Voltaire’s training to look at reality with cold, piercing eyes. Those “pages” from Chopin’s holiday show his extraordinary view of the world. Undoubtedly, it was not the result of juvenile misbehaviour. Accustomed to performing in

³⁰ Chopin’s letter to Wojciech Grzymała from December 1845.

³¹ *Chopin’s Letters*, 12.

³² Chopin’s letter to Mikołaj Chopin dated 3 September 1824.

³³ Chopin’s letter to Mikołaj Chopin dated 31 August 1824.

salons from an early childhood, Fryderyk was perfectly well acquainted with the generally accepted tone that should have been used to talk about reality, but he clearly did not perceive it as sufficient to describe that reality.

Would such a type of perception disappear when Chopin grew up, left the country and lost contact with a reality in which cats bit dogs to death and countrywomen hit each other with forks? I doubt it. I think that only the style of description would change, becoming more grotesque. Let us look at such an image:

Yesterday they danced mazurkas at the Bayers'. Slavik lay on the floor like a sheep, and there was a certain old German countess with a long nose and pock-marked face who skilfully held up her dress with two fingers (as they did in olden times) and kept her head turned stiffly towards her partner so that the bones of her neck stuck out. With her long skinny legs she somehow performed a strange kind of *pas de valse*. And yet she is a dignified creature, serious, well-educated who talks a lot and knows the manners of good society.³⁴

Is it a kind of romantic grotesque? Not really. There is too little of fiction and too many associations with the human body being a machine, an automaton and a macabre doll. In other words – all that shakes deeply the ontological status of a human and which we link to the grotesque of somewhat later epochs. Let us pay attention to the expression “pock-marked face” – it is characteristic of Chopin to use phrases that suggest a fragmentation of the human body, its incompleteness and defects as well as some disharmonic additions.

Grotesque is “the world upside down”, the world that mocks our expectations, that violates the order we expect. It is such a world that Chopin sees. During his last year of life, when he suffered in Scotland, the increasingly devastating disease caused the artist to have a stronger perception of a “twisted” reality. Thus he writes about the outskirts of Edinburgh:

The population here is ugly, but apparently good-natured. On the other hand the cows are magnificent, but apparently inclined to gore people. The milk, butter and eggs are irreproachable, and so are their usual companions the cheeses and chickens.³⁵

Maladjustment and disharmony – these are the dominant features of material reality in Chopin's descriptions. He himself feels as “a fiddle's E string on a bass viol”³⁶. The “twisted” world evokes puzzlement and daze: Chopin

³⁴ *Selected Correspondence*, 72.

³⁵ *Chopin's Letters*, 366.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 365.

would like to become a part of that universe, to “become a machine” and give concerts, but – as he puts it – “it’s difficult for me to begin now”³⁷.

Norwid writing about the maladjustment of a genius to an average society, used the image of clay that always joins with clay, while contradictory things have to be put together with nails. There is a hint of Christ’s martyrdom in his vision. The “fourth Romantic” perceived the fate of eminent people in such a way. In contrast, Chopin does not describe his strangeness in such a lofty tone, he again uses the grotesque. He draws an image of a party during which, since he cannot speak English, he feels doubly excluded. He presents the situation in such a way: “[...] I have to remain at the table with menfolk, *watching* them talk and *listening* to them drinking”³⁸. These words show clearly Chopin’s acoustic hypersensitivity: simultaneously he is deaf (because he sees the movement of speakers’ lips and seems to hear the sound, but does not understand anything) and ... he hears how they drink. The consequences of the English custom that towards the end of a dinner the ladies have to leave the men in order to enable them to drink freely, before everyone reunites in the living room, are easy to imagine. One does not need a great deal of imagination to guess what those moments of freedom of the tipsy men must have looked like... Švankmajer, the controversial Czech film director, in his iconoclastic film *Šileni* (Lunacy) created a scene that gives an impression of Chopin’s torment: during a feast (*nota bene* stylised as the Last Supper) the sense of the words uttered by the participants is blurred and unclear while the physiological sounds that accompany drinking, biting and swallowing are exaggerated. The movements of lips, tongue and larynx are also exaggerated, since not understanding the conversation automatically makes one move one’s eyes to the speaker’s lips, the way that deaf people usually do.

And yet another picture of society taken from Chopin’s letters:

[...] people – some very beautiful, some very witty, very eccentric, some very deaf and even a famous name (sir Walpole) who is blind. There are fine dresses, diamonds, pimply noses, lovely heads of hair, marvellous figures, the beauty of the devil himself and the devil minus the beauty! This last category is the commonest to be found.³⁹

Details, cuts, single elements – in Chopin’s view people seldom appear as “wholes”. Such an enumerative description was also used when the musician had no intention to mock anyone. In his comparisons one can find George

³⁷ *Selected Correspondence*, 339.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 346.

Sand's hair, Solange's hands or Maurice's teeth⁴⁰. There is seldom a description that does not use the poetics of a fragment.

It is characteristic of Chopin that fragmentation also appears when he speaks about experiencing his own corporeality. Apart from quite frequent references to emaciation, the image of the nose, which I have already mentioned, often returns in Chopin's self-characterisation. However, the most incredible record of the composer's somatic sensitivity appears in his Album-Diary. His notes from September 1831, when he was in Stuttgart, worrying about his family and friends who were taking part in the Resurrection, give one pause for thought.

Stuttgart. How strange! This bed on which I shall lie has been slept on by more than one dying man, but today it does not repel me! Who knows what corpses have lain on it and for how long? But is a corpse any worse than I? A corpse too knows nothing of father, mother or sisters or Titus. Nor has a corpse a sweetheart. It cannot speak in its own language to those around it. A corpse too is pale, like me. A corpse is cold, just as I am cold and indifferent to everything. A corpse has ceased to live, and I too have had enough of life – enough? But can a corpse have had enough of life? If it were sated with life it would look well; but it looks miserable – can life have so little influence on the features, the facial expression and the physiognomy of man? Why do we live on through this wretched life which devours us and only serves to turn us into corpses? [...] So it seems that to die is man's finest action – and what might be his worst? To be born, since that is the exact opposite of his best deed. I am therefore right in being angry that I was ever born into this world! – Why was I not prevented from remaining in a world where I am useless? For I am indeed a useless creature. What good can my existence bring to anyone? I can't help mankind. I have neither strong legs nor a brazen face. And even if I had, would I have anything else? Supposing I had strong legs – you have to have them – but what about a corpse? No, it has not got them, no more than I have: and that's one more point of resemblance. Thus I have almost everything to enable me to establish an exact comparison with Death.⁴¹

Although the world as a *dance macabre*, as well as the comparison to a corpse, created by the imagination of Chopin, who was at the time terrified about the fate of his relatives in Poland, fits well within the framework of the romantic convention, the style (those corpse's strong legs and brazen face) is different and shifts the romantic gothic corpse to Gombrowicz's world of the absurd with the reference to the corpse's calves. In his descriptions of a slow death, of a shrivelling life, Chopin again does not go beyond the romantic imagination. However the material realization of those images, the anatomi-

⁴⁰ Ibid., 243.

⁴¹ Ibid., 89.

cal details and even the “dissecting examination” produce a shift from romantic drama to irony, to the absurd or grotesque, which has been mentioned here so frequently. It is apparent, for example, when he juxtaposes his “yellow body” with a rosy-cheeked son of his acquaintance. The artist noted that he dined dressed in a heavy frock-coat and sitting next to a fat boy who

[...] was rosy-cheeked, fresh and warm with bare knees. I was yellow, shrivelled and cold with three layers of flannel underwear beneath my trousers. I’ve promised him some chocolate in your name. Your name and “chocolate” are synonyms for him now. He used to say your hair was so black – but now I think it has turned chocolate-colour in his memory. He is a real laugh and I am especially fond of him.⁴²

The flannelette that Chopin mentions does not make the “yellow body” more serious. When Krasiński wore flannel underwear he refused to make an appointment with Delfina Potocka, claiming that it did not suit the poetry of their feeling and souls. Słowacki, when he was writing about his own “yellow body”, a synonym for a tubercular body, wanted it to curse the heavens and to stand as clear evidence of divine injustice. The yellow and emaciated Chopin, however, avoids either romantic poetics or metaphysics. As a young man, he already has the feeling that he was made of the “clay that has fallen to pieces”⁴³. Does he react “romantically”, shaking his fist at the unlistening heavens, to the weakness of his body that he experienced from an early childhood? Not at all. His associations follow the traces of grotesque images. From that “clay” which is Chopin’s body only a “a rabbit-hutch”⁴⁴ can be made.

In his letters, the manner of experiencing one’s corporeality which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not divided into a body and a soul, shows how the artist felt reality in general, and gives a better understanding of the composer’s alienation, despite his social success; the alienation that has been described many times. Metaphors of maladjustment increase with Chopin’s approaching death. In 1848 he writes in a letter to Julian Fontana:

We are a couple of old *cembalos* on which time and circumstances have played out their miserable trills. Yes, old *cembalos*, even if you protest against being associated with me in such a way. That means no disparagement of your beauty or respectability: the sound-board is perfect, only the strings have snapped and a few pegs have jumped out. But the only real trouble is this: we are the creation of some famous maker, in his way a kind of Stradivarius, who is no longer there to mend us. In clumsy hands we cannot give forth new sounds and we stifle within ourselves those things which no one will ever draw from us, and all for lack of a

⁴² Ibid., 244-245.

⁴³ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 65.

repairer. I can scarcely breathe: I am just about ready to give up the ghost. And you, I am sure, are growing bald: you will hang over my tombstone like one of those willows at home – do you remember? – which show their bald pates.⁴⁵

Chopin is suffocating physically, but he also suffocates in the world. And characteristically, he identifies the physical condition of a seriously ill person with his feeling of being a part of the social universe, and maybe of the universe itself.

Is it possible to “translate” the feeling of reality recorded in Chopin’s letters to his music? to look for its origin in those miserable willows or in the artist’s disease and make a soundtrack to films devoted to Chopin? In my opinion it is not. Both, the most recent biographical film about Chopin and a previous one directed by Andrzej Żuławski, are – in my opinion – examples of misunderstanding the relationship between an image and music. That relationship was intended to suggest the origin of Chopin’s music. However, his music is not illustrative. If it was it would have illustrated a world full of disharmony, dissonance and twists. We still do not know what Aristotle’s mimesis was, but referring any form of reality-imitation to Chopin’s music would not make it become a direct, photographic imitation. It would rather be a quest beyond reality, which so often was perceived by Chopin as a grotesque twist of order and harmony that are not from the real world. They come from divine or intellectual worlds. I opt for the intellectual one and that is the reason why I am so annoyed by those miserable willows that have become the everlasting attribute of all illustrations to Chopin’s music. After all, Chopin did say clearly said that he associated the willow with the “bold pate” of his friend Fontana.

Translated by Zuzanna Kołodziejaska

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 330.