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Narrative strategies of the Romantic ‘philosophical epics’ in the piano works of Franz Liszt (Analysis of Sposalizio, Ballade No. 2 and the Piano Sonata in B minor)

ABSTRACT: The article explains how ideas, characters and descriptions borrowed from literary works and of fine arts are represented in Liszt’s the piano works of (i.e. with the help of motives, themes and narrative strategies).

- I. The first level of analysis concerns the typology of basic elements in the new lisztian forms:
 - A. Four types of musical motives or figures and their signifieds (semes).
 - B. Sixteen types of musical themes with their signifieds (classemes).
 - C. Considering the great parts or sections of a piece we discovered seven types with their signifieds (isotopies).
- II. The second level of analysis consists in the presentation of three cases of narratives strategies. The narrative strategy would mean the conscious organization of concatenation of the above mentioned signifying elements.
 - A. The ‘figurative strategy’ refers to the formal variation [‘Formalvariation’ in German] of one theme, or of one ‘thematic complex’ (theme introduced and followed by expressive describing motives or refrain), for example: *Sposalizio*.
 - B. The ‘simple narrative strategy’ consists in a succession of character variations [‘Charaktervariation’], i.e. variation in the musical genre, in the signified of one musical theme (for example: *Vallée d’Obermann*).
 - C. The ‘complex narrative strategy’ describes the structures which combine sonata form, cyclical sonata in four movements and variation form. This strategy implies that a whole thematic complex is submitted to different stages of the character variation (for example: *Dante sonata*, *Sonata in B minor*, 2nd *Ballade in B minor*, etc.).

KEYWORDS: Musical signification, musical semiotics, narrative strategy, signifieds in music, character variation, formal variation, complex sonata form, narrative analysis

I. Introduction

Among his young Romantic contemporaries, Liszt was perhaps the only composer after the Paris Revolution of 1830 to persist in wanting to preserve and transmit the Beethovenian heritage and to safeguard Beethoven’s prophetic

role as a clairvoyant. In compositional terms, Liszt's ambition was to carry out a reform of established musical structures (we might even speak of an attempt at structural disintegration) and to express the ideals, thoughts and aspirations of the contemporary world.

Despite his Viennese roots, Beethoven found the inspiration for the narrative message of his piano and symphonic works in the 'liberating' operas and scenic works of the French Revolution. Beethoven's content-related sources of inspiration provided an important basis for consensus between his works and the Viennese public. Intent on reforming structures and renewing narrative messages, Liszt was forced to accept a compromise to ensure the continuity of the consensus. In particular, he found himself compelled to emphasize the expression of ideals, feelings and evils through direct reference to specific literary and art works. Liszt thus hoped to maintain contact with the contemporary public through the explicit use of literary titles, epigraphs and quotations.

It was also primarily from the literary realm that Liszt drew the basis of his reform of musical structures. Liszt referred to his models as 'philosophical epics' — namely the works of Byron, Goethe and Senancour, i.e. writers with a particular interest in exploring the contradictions of human character in the nineteenth century.

In devoting a musical work to Dante or Byron, or indeed to Senancour's novel or Goethe's Faust, Liszt was led to resort to musical elements as signs or axiomatic elements linked to a particular moment, character or thought drawn from a specific literary work. Endowed with a particular semantic function and a determinate signified, these elements were designed to maintain their characteristics throughout the entirety of the work.

It is important to note that the new literary-artistic components incorporated by Liszt could not be manipulated by using the musical techniques of previous eras, i.e. by the motivic-thematic work of the development of the sonata. Advancing and evolving the musical process required the variation of the vertical structure (i.e. the form of an element) or of its 'original meaning'. So it was that formal variation and character variation (i.e. *Charaktervariation*) began to dominate the musical structures of Liszt's work in the very first pieces for piano.

Before exploring the relation between the different variation strategies and their related literary models, the following pages will present the findings of structural and semantic analyses by using the vocabulary of technical musical analysis and the terminology of literary narrative semiotics drawn from the *Dictionnaire sémiotique* by Greimas and Courtès.¹ Let us first consider the elements upon which the variation forms are built.

¹ Algirdas Julien Greimas, Joseph Courtès, *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Paris: Hachette Université, 1979).

II. The elements of the new Lisztian form

The minimal units of signification that carry out functions and convey meanings operate at the level of motifs and musical figures. This group of elements includes Liszt's 'musical motto', an onomatopoeic or symbolic descriptive motif built on 3-4 notes or 3-4 bars, and figures illustrating accompaniments or transitions. The signifieds (i.e. the content) and the semantic value born by the minimal units of signification will be referred to as semes. A distinction is drawn between four groups of Lisztian semes: the pastoral seme, the fanfare 'eroico' seme, the storm seme and the macabre seme.

Table 1. Signifieds of musical motifs: the 4 Lisztian semes

– Musical		motto
Pastoral		
– Onomatopoeic figures,	} MUSICAL MOTIF → SEME	
Fanfare eroico		
Illustrating		accompaniments
Storm		
and		transitions
Macabre		

The second group of signifiers and signifieds operates at the level of the period or musical phrase. The various types of themes, such as the appassionato, pastoral, lagrimoso or bel canto types, constitute sixteen classemes, i.e. sixteen groups of Lisztian signifieds.

Table 2. The signifieds of musical themes: the 16 Lisztian classemes

– appassionato-agitado	– bel canto 'singing'
– march	– bel canto 'declaiming'
– heroic	– recitative
– scherzo	– elegiac-lamenting
– pastoral	– quotations
– religioso	– grandioso, trionfante
– folkloric	– lugubrious
– pantheist	– pathetic

The third level of structural and semantic units is the 'form section,' such as a sonata exposition or a 'thematic complex.' A thematic complex is a self-contained whole constituted by a motto or musical refrain, a transition and a musical theme.

Their order of succession and number may vary. The Greimasian term 'semantic isotopy' refers to the signified or content, insofar as it is 'the semantic

isotopy that enables the uniform reading of a narrative.² An isotopy can be based on one or several semes and classemes, the meaning of which it summarizes and encompasses. A structural and semantic analysis conducted at all levels of the macrostructure and on almost all of Liszt's piano works highlights 'seven isotopies' (i.e. seven signifieds of large units) representing 'the most important narrative functions.' The series of isotopies constructs the latent dramaturgy or underlying train of thought in the majority of Liszt's works.

Table 3. Different realizations of a thematic complex

THEMATIC COMPLEX			
Musical motto and/or musical refrain	Transition	Theme	Theme-variation
THEMATIC COMPLEX (second possibility)			
Musical motto and/or musical refrain	Motto-variation or refrain-variation	Transition	Theme
THEMATIC COMPLEX (next possibility)			
Musical motto and/or musical refrain	Transition	Theme	Motto-variation or Refrain-variation

An 'isotopy' may perform the role of a single determining narrative function for 'an entire piece' or for a 'section' of a piece. The isotopy category will be used to establish the three types of narrative strategies used by Liszt, i.e. the three types of narrative organization at the final and highest level of musical articulation.

The isotopy-based distinctions coincide precisely with the structural principles that follow the three degrees or levels of the Lisztian modernization of musical structures.

Table 4. Isotopies used by Liszt: the signifieds of the major sections

- | |
|---------------------------------|
| 1) Isotopy of the MACABRE QUEST |
| 2) HEROIC isotopy |
| 3) PASTORAL-AMOROSO isotopy |
| 4) Isotopy of the MACABRE FIGHT |
| 5) Isotopy of MOURNING |
| 6) RELIGIOUS isotopy |
| 7) PANTHEIST isotopy |

² Ibid., 188.

Table 5. The sequence of thematic complexes in some works with the corresponding isotopies (TC: thematic complex)

Isotopy	Macabre quest	Heroic	Pastoral [amoroso]	Macabre fight	Mourning	Religious	Pantheist
<i>Vallée d'Obermann</i>	TC/1		TC/2	TC/3			TC/4
<i>Pensée des morts</i>			TC/2		TC/1		
<i>St François de Paule marchant sur les flots</i>	TC/4	TC/3, TC/5	TC/1	TC/2			
<i>Sunt lacrimae rerum</i>		TC/3	TC/2		TC/1		
<i>Dante sonata</i>	TC/1/a	TC/1/b TC/4/b	TC/2	TC/3		TC/4/a	
<i>Tombez, larmes silencieuses</i>			T/2		T/1	T/2	
<i>Sonata in B minor</i>	TC/1/a TC/5/a TC/7	TC/1/b TC/5/b TC/6	TC/2	TC/3/a	TC/3/b	TC/4/a	TC/4/b

III. The three types of expressive strategies in Liszt

1. The figurative strategy

Only one isotopy is at the basis of the works illustrating the 'figurative strategy' corresponding to the traditional variation form. In structural terms, this is the 'formal' variation modifying the vertical structure, the texture and the instrumentation of a single theme or thematic complex. It is found in *Au bord d'une source*, *Tarantella*, *Vision*, *Sposalizio*, *Les cloches de Genève* and *La Notte* (among other works). In semantic terms, the narrative function (i.e. the isotopy of the first theme or thematic complex) is not replaced in the course of the piece, and is merely subject to the nuances of possible discoloration. For example, the first thematic complex with a pastoral isotopy in *Sposalizio* evolves in such a way that the second section becomes pastoral-religious, while the third complex increases in intensity to the point of embodying the pastoral-pantheist isotopy.

Since the work may deploy the same figures at any moment, the narrative function of the pastoral remains valid for the entire piece, despite the nuances of the variations (see tables 6a to 6d).

Liszt's 'figurative strategies' are generally structured either around the pastoral isotopy or around the macabre and mourning isotopies. This type of strategy is found mainly in 'some early works' and in the 'late works.' Some works, including *Les cloches de Genève*, *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, *La Notte* and *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este*, realize the 'dis-colorations' of the pastoral or of the macabre in the subsequent thematic complexes.

This type of structural organization reflects the ancient principle of enumeration, a form taken up by Liszt under the influence of Romantic literature, particularly as a result of the renaissance of the classical *epos* under the impulse of Byron and Mickiewicz.

Table 6a. SPOSALIZIO/1

Syntagmatic axis	1 st thematic complex (introduction)				
Structural function	Motto ₁	Motto ₂	M ₁	M ₂	Transition (M ₁ figures)
Bars	1-2	2-4	5-6	7-8	9-29
Key	B myxol.	B myxol.	D # Phrygian	G # minor	G#major F#minor E minor C major A \flat major E major
Circle of fifths	0	0	+1	+1	+4 -1 -3 -4 -8 0
Tempo and expression indication	Andante	dolce	<i>mf</i>	<i>ppp</i> , dolciss.	poco più di moto molto rinforz.
Semes or classemes	pastoral (bell)	pastoral (gesture)	pastoral (bell, gesture)		pastoral figures →
SEMANTIC ISOTOPY	PASTORAL				

Table 6b. SPOSALIZIO/2

Syntagmatic axis	2 nd thematic complex (part one)				
Structural function	M ₂ + M ₁	M ₂ + M ₁	Theme	Theme, formal variation	Postlude (fragments of T + M ₁ figures)
Bars	30	34	38	52	60-67
Key	E major	E major.	G major	B \flat major D \flat major	E major
Circle of fifths	0	0	-3	-6 -9	0
Tempo and expression indication	Andante quieto	dolce	più lento, <i>ppp</i> , <i>dolciss.</i> una corda tre corde		stto voce, un poco marcato, rallentando
Semes or classemes	pastoral		religioso	religioso	religioso + macabre
SEMANTIC ISOTOPY	PASTORAL-RELIGIOUS				

Table 6c. SPOSALIZIO/3

Syntagmatic axis	3 rd thematic complex (part two)					
Structural function	Transition (M ₁)	M ₂ + M ₁	Theme; Formal variation	Theme, Formal variation	Transition	M ₂ + M ₁ formal variation (culminating point)
Bars	68	74	77	91	100	109-112
Key	Diminished seventh chords	E major	E major	G# major	E \flat min. C# major	C# major
Circle of fifths	In B	0	0	+1	-7	+3
Tempo and expression indication	cresc., stringendo, rinf. ed appassionato	<i>ff</i> , quasi allegretto	dolce, armonioso, con grazia	<i>ff</i>	rinforz. <i>sf</i> tutta forza	<i>fff</i>
Semes or classemes	appassionato	pastoral	religioso	pantheist	pathetic	grandioso
SEMANTIC ISOTOPY	PASTORAL-PANTHEIST					

Table 6d. SPOSALIZIO/4

Syntagmatic axis	4 th thematic complex (Coda)			
Structural function	M ₂ + M ₁	postlude of the theme	cadences (M ₁)	M ₂ + M ₁ formal variation
Bars	113	117	120	129-133
Key	C# major E major	F# minor E major	E major	E major
Circle of fifths	+3 0	0	0	0
Tempo and expression indication	ritenuto il tempo, dolce		<i>pp</i> , poco a poco riten., somz. poco a poco	Adagio <i>ppp</i>
Semes or classemes	solo pastoral	Pastoral	pastoral	religioso
SEMANTIC ISOTOPY	PASTORAL-RELIGIOUS			

Table 7 (Synthesis) Figurative narrative strategies: 'discolorations' of the same isotopy

	1st thematic complex	2nd thematic complex	3rd thematic complex
<i>Les cloches de Genève</i>	Pastoral	Pastoral-pantheist	
<i>Angelus</i>	Pastoral	Pastoral-religious	Pastoral-macabre
<i>Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este</i>	Pastoral	Pastoral-heroic	Pastoral-macabre
<i>Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este</i>	Macabre quest	Macabre fight	Pastoral-macabre
<i>La Notte</i>	Mourning	Pastoral macabre	Mourning
<i>Spozalizio</i>	Pastoral	Pastoral-religious	Pastoral-pantheist (+ coda)

2. Simple narrative strategy

The second group of strategies (the 'simple narrative strategy') is built on a succession of different isotopies developing on the basis of a single thematic topic or a thematic complex.

The change in narrative function of the semantic isotopy occurs through sudden transformations (in leaps and bounds), often suggested from the outside while following the chosen literary model.

Vallée d'Obermann involves a succession of four important isotopies, as shown by the indications in the score and the semes and classemes used by Liszt throughout the monothematic variation.

The narrative pattern is based on a macabre questioning, a Faustian quest, initially answered by the 'pastoral-amoroso' theme, then by the 'macabre-heroic struggle' theme, and finally by the 'pantheist-glorified' theme, eventually challenged by the coda (see table 8).

The majority of Liszt's early works (revised in Weimar), including pieces in *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* and *Années de pèlerinage*, follow an identical narrative pattern based on a series of two, three or four isotopies.

Completed in the 1840s or 1850s, these pieces almost always involve a positive dramaturgy ending on the ambiguity of a questioning coda. They often open with the isotopy of mourning or of the macabre quest, before ranging through the pastoral and heroic stages and eventually reaching a pantheist or religious solution. Only the pieces of the 'final volume' of *Années de pèlerinage* make use of a macabre tone or the isotopy of mourning to conclude the narrative (see table 9).

Table 8. Simple narrative strategy: *Vallée d'Obermann*

Syntagmatic axis	1st thematic complex	2nd thematic complex	3rd thematic complex	4th thematic complex
Structural function	Theme and its rhetorical development	Theme and its formal variations	Motto and its 'development'	Theme and its formal variations
Bars	1-74	75-118	119-169	170-216
Key	Opposition between the tonic axis (E-G-B \flat -D \flat) and the sub-dominant axis (A-C-E \flat -F \sharp)	C major and modulation	C \sharp , D, E and modulation	E major
Tempo and expression indication	Lento assai, espressivo; then: Più lento, dolcissimo	Un poco più di moto ma sempre lento, <i>pp</i> , dolcissimo	Recitativo, <i>pp</i> , trem. appassionato <i>ff</i> ; agitato molto; Presto <i>ff</i> tempestuoso	Lento, dolce, una corda, dolce armonioso; sempre animando sin'al fine <i>fff</i>
Semes or classemes	Lamenting-solo and mournful	pastoral-amoroso, bel canto/fragments	storm semes, macabre semes, fanfare semes	bel canto, pathetic, pastoral-pantheist semes
ISOTOPY	MACABRE QUEST	PASTORAL-AMOROSO	MACABRE FIGHT	PANTHEIST

These works owe their originality to the fact that they eschew all historically established musical forms or structures. However, by virtue of their signifying elements, they do include a specific narrative content. Even the changes in tonal levels were conceived based on the various stages of narration. The meaning or goal of these structures is evolution itself. In other words, the itinerary followed by the hero or by the composer guides the transition from the initial stage to a higher plane of action. The musical material remains the same. It is only the specific uses to which it is put, the adjustments made to it and its ever-evolving surface appearance that change in the course of the imaginary voyage and that develop and blossom, resulting in a complete elaboration of the various materials.

So it is that the so-called 'changing' form is born from the hand of Liszt, i.e. the *Entfaltungsform* (form of deployment), under the influence of contemporary literature.

Table 9. Recapitulative table: simple narrative strategies

WORKS WITH 3 ISOTOPIES				
	1st thematic complex	2nd thematic complex	3rd thematic complex	4th thematic complex
<i>Tombez, larmes silencieuses</i>	Mourning	Pastoral	Pastoral-pantheist	Religious
<i>Pensée des morts</i>	Macabre quest (mourning)	Religious-pantheist		
<i>Sunt lacrimae rerum</i>	Mourning	Pastoral-amoroso	Pantheist-heroic	
<i>Orage</i>	Macabre quest	Heroic	Macabre quest	Mourning
WORKS WITH 4 ISOTOPIES				
<i>Vallée d'Obermann</i>	Macabre quest	Pastoral-amoroso	Macabre fight	Pantheist
<i>St François de Paule marchant sur les flots</i>	Pastoral-religious	Macabre-heroic fight	Heroic-religious (+quest)	Pantheist
<i>Aux cyprès de la villa d'Este-II</i>	Macabre quest Heroic Mourning	Mourning	Pastoral-macabre	

3. The complex narrative strategy

In the third group of Lisztian works, a struggle or conflict between two important and contrasting isotopies constitutes the basis of change and evolution and of a slow and gradual transformation of musical thoughts. In the Weimar works created around the *Sonata in B minor* (i.e. the *Dante Sonata*, Ballade no.2 and the *Concerto pathétique*), Liszt used a sonata exposition as a starting point usually involving a confrontation between a macabre quest and a heroic response. The variation of the exposition, i.e. the second episode, is generally governed by the 'pastoral-amoroso'. The third episode renews the semes of the heroic or macabre struggle, while the fourth or final episodes use the mourning, heroic or religious-pantheist narrative functions as the final outcome or conclusion.

Four important narrative functions are used in *Chapelle de Guillaume Tell*, *Invocation*, *Concerto pathétique*, and Ballade in B minor. Ballade in B minor is based on an exceptional narrative pattern. The heroic isotopy followed by the pantheist isotopy of the final episodes are borne of the increasingly amplified and exalted conflict between the macabre struggle (storm semes) and the pastoral. The

analysis given below in three tables shows the organizational sequence of the five thematic complexes (see tables 10/a, b, c).

The *Dante Sonata* uses five isotopies, while the Sonata in B minor uses the full range of known Lisztian isotopies (i.e. seven). In the same way as the previous group, the works in this group are articulated around a quest-and-answer structure, although they differ in terms of realization. In this group, the renewed contrast gradually intensifies and amplifies to emphasize one or several definitive answers or to underline the expression of doubt itself. In traditional musical analytical terms, these works may be said to involve a complex structure that draws simultaneously on the sonata-form, the cyclical form and the changing variation form. The form and complex narrative pattern illustrated by these works apply exclusively to the Weimar period (see tables 11/a, b).

Table 10a. *BALLADE IN B MINOR*, ANALYSIS TABLE/1

NP ₁							
Structural function	T ₁	Motto	Refrain	T ₁	Motto	Refrain	Transition
Bars	1	20	24	36	54	58	70
Syntagmatic axis	1 st thematic complex – decompositional						
Key	B minor	B minor	F # major	B ♭ minor	B ♭ minor	F major	A-D major
Circle of fifths	0	0	+4	-7	-7	-3	0
Tempo and expression indication	Allegro moderato	Lento assai	Allegro dolce	Allegro moderato (tempo I)	Lento assai	Allegretto dolce	Allegro deciso
Semes or classemes	storm (macabre)	Bell	pastoral	storm	bell	pastoral	eroico
Semantic isotopies	STORM↔PASTORAL STORM↔PASTOAL						

Table 10b. *BALLADE IN B MINOR*, ANALYSIS TABLE/2

NP ₂					NP ₃					
Structural function	T ₁ formal variation	Motto character variation	T ₂	Repeated refrain	T ₁	T ₁ formal variation	Transition	Motto	T ₂ formal variation	Repeated refrain
Bars	95	128	134	142	161	180	194	214	224	233
Syntagmatic axis	2 nd thematic complex – rhetorical				3 rd thematic complex - rhetorical					
Key	D major	B \flat minor	D/E \flat – D major	D major G major	G # minor	C minor	E \flat D major minor	G minor	G (C) B major	B; E \flat
Circle of fifths	0	-7	0 – 5, 0	0-1	+3	-5	-3	-4	+3	+3; - 5
Tempo and expression indication	In tempo, agitato, tempestuoso	espressivo	A piacere cantando	allegretto, dolce	(<i>mf</i>)	(<i>mf</i>) tempestuoso	Stringendo cresc. molto	(<i>mf</i>)	appassionato	Dolce placido (legato)
Semes or classemes	Storm (intensified)	solo	Italian bel canto	bell	storm	Storm (intensified)	eroico	Bell (solo)	Bel canto	bell
Semantic isotopies	STORM ↔ PASTORAL-AMOROSO				STORM ↔ PASTORAL-AMOROSO					

Table 10c. *BALLADE IN B MINOR*, ANALYSIS TABLE/3

NP ₄					NP ₅			
Structural function	T ₁ character variation	T ₁ formal variation	T ₂ formal variation	Transition	T ₁ character variation	T ₁ formal variation	Transition	Refrain
Bars	253	261	268	278	283	291	297	304
Syntag-matic axis	4 th thematic complex				5 th thematic complex – teleological			
Key	B major	B major	D major	D, B major	B major	B major	C#, B	B major
Circle of fifths	+3	+3	0		+3	+3		+3
Tempo and ex-pression indication	Allegro moderato, cantabile	a tempo	un poco più mosso	Rinforzando	<i>ff</i> grandioso	<i>fff</i> grandioso		Andantino dolce espressivo smorzando
Semes or classemes	eroico	eroico (intensified)	bel canto Franco-Italian	Storm	pantheist	pantheist	eroico	bell
Semantic isotopies	→HEROIC ↔PASTORAL-AMOROSO				→PANTHEIST			

Table 11a. Recapitulative table: complex narrative strategies/1

COMPLEX WORKS WITH 4 ISOTOPIES
<p><i>La Chapelle de Guillaume Tell</i> NP 1: Religious → Heroic NP 2: Macabre fight → Heroic NP 3: Mourning Coda: Heroic-Macabre</p>
<p><i>Invocation</i> NP 1: Pastoral ↔ Macabre quest → Religious NP 2: Pastoral ↔ Macabre quest → Pantheist Coda: Pantheist-macabre</p>
<p><i>Ballade in B minor</i> NP 1: Storm ↔ Pastoral NP 2: Storm ↔ Pastoral-amoroso NP 3: Storm ↔ Pastoral-amoroso NP 4: Heroic ↔ Pastoral-amoroso NP 5: → Pantheist</p>
<p><i>Concerto pathétique</i> NP 1: Macabre quest → Heroic NP 2: Pastoral-amoroso NP 3: Heroic NP 4: Macabre quest → Mourning → Heroic NP 5: Heroic</p>

Table 11b. Recapitulative table: complex narrative strategies/2

COMPLEX WORKS WITH 5 ISOTOPIES
<p><i>Dante Sonata</i> (Après une lecture du Dante — Fantasia quasi Sonata) NP 1: Macabre quest — Macabre fight → Heroic NP 2: Pastoral-amoroso NP 3: Macabre fight, macabre quest NP 4: Religious-Heroic → Macabre quest Coda: Heroic-macabre</p>
COMPLEX WORKS WITH 7 ISOTOPIES
<p><i>Sonata in B minor</i> NP 1: Macabre quest ↔ Macabre fight → Heroic NP 2: Pastoral-amoroso NP 3: Heroic ↔ Heroic-Macabre fight → Mourning, macabre quest NP 4: Religious-pantheist NP 5: Macabre quest ↔ Macabre fight → Heroic NP 6: Macabre-heroic quest ↔ Pastoral → Heroic NP 7: Religious ↔ Macabre quest Coda: Pantheist-macabre</p>

IV. The three types of Lisztian ‘philosophical epic’ and the three Lisztian narrative strategies

Based on the findings of the analyses conducted as part of this research, *Vallée d’Obermann* appears to be the archetypal work of semantic and structural innovation — hence the decision to examine the place of Senancour’s novel *Obermann* in the ‘philosophical’ epics. In 1855, in his *La Symphonie Harold de Berlioz*, Liszt referred to Byron’s *Cain*, *Manfred* and *Childe Harold*, to Goethe’s *Faust*, and to Mickiewicz’s *Ancêtres* as key sources of inspiration. Based on research conducted on the different genre characteristics found in these six literary works, they appear to be indicative of the beginnings of a new era and to highlight the three narrative strategies identified in Liszt.

After 1830, the break between the destiny of the individual and the destiny of society became clear for all to see and emerged as the primary subject of modern literature. It is the historical moment in which the subject of the drama of previous eras — in particular the collision between the individual and the outside world — is replaced by the paradigm of travel and voyage, the pilgrimage of a hero approaching or fleeing society.

1. In Goethe, there is again the attempt at a rapprochement between the two poles. Even Goethe’s *Faust* in two parts may be interpreted as a novel about human evolution, a majestic conception in the style of Wilhelm Meister. As György Lukács put it: ‘Faust’s Odyssey — from damnation to redemption — is destined to represent the evolution of humanity itself.’³

The first variation of the philosophical epic is driven solely by a tense and heroic effort to reconcile the aesthetic ideals of the classical and modern eras. In Goethe’s *Faust* — as in Liszt’s ‘complex narrative strategies’ — the struggle or conflict results in the rallying of drama (respectively: of the sonata form) and poetry (respectively: with the ‘changing’ variation), thereby foreshadowing twentieth-century art.

2. The other creator of the philosophical epic, Byron, emphasized the sense of solitude, exile and alienation to the extreme. The main trait of the new Romantic personality is the malaise of the century. While the paradigm of the pilgrimage remains valid, the motif of the voyage is no longer governed by a quest, but is driven instead by a desire for escape. *Childe Harold* and *Manfred* flee their destiny because of a sin committed in their past. In *Childe Harold*, the purpose of the pilgrimage is the pantheist exaltation of the hero in nature. Manfred sets out on an explicit quest for death by invoking the fairy of the Alps: the good news for him is the negative redemption earned through supernatural forces. The tendency of the pilgrimage to descend into a passive subjectivity reinforces the epic nature of the genre: the changing Goethe-style succession is replaced by the repetition of the main motifs of the content. *Childe Harold* contains all of the traditional

³ György Lukács, ‘Goethe: Faust’, in *Világirodalom I* (Écrits sur la Littérature I) (Budapest :Gondolat, 1970), 89 (quotation translated from the French).

indications of the classical epos. The initial invocation of the muse is followed by the enumeration of reiterated and developed phenomena from the external world to autonomy, before culminating in independence.

The attempt to establish the links between Byron's *epos* and Liszt's narrative strategies highlights the monothematic subject underlining the macabre quest, but also an enumerative structure based on the 'formal' or 'figurative' *variation* of identical elements.

3. Taking the form of an epistolary novel, Senancour's *Obermann* reinforces ancient epic features even more radically.⁴ The third and final type of philosophical epic definitively relinquishes the two traditional poles of the classical-romantic novel — i.e. the standard confrontation between objectivism and subjectivism, between realism and idealism, and between society and the individual. The image of Senancour's world is marked by extreme subjectivism, to the point of almost foreshadowing existentialism, a philosophy in which the individual is only able to preserve a degree of integrity by leaving society definitively and leading an internal life. The theme of the work is idle passion, the hatred of the reality to which an isolated man is subject, and his macabre judgement of the world.

The pilgrimage is replaced by episodes of an exodus lasting nine years. The cult of nature makes way for the cult of solitude and the 'nostalgia of the abyss' symbolized by the valley.

In structural terms, the subject of the novel, thus impoverished, results in the destruction of the traditional type of the genre and creates a purely additive structure. The individual nature of action supersedes the historical and collective nature of action, thereby excluding the contrast of functions: what remains is enumeration without dialectics, a monothematic and linear sequence.

To summarize the results of the comparative analysis, the influence of Byron and (above all) of Senancour is evident in Liszt's use of variation, which creates a 'changing' or 'deployment' form by using the established enumerative form. Based on an enumeration of independent episodes, the monothematic form appears for the first time in *Vallée d'Obermann* and is further developed in later works based on a simple narrative strategy.

V. Analysis of the narrative structure of the *Piano Sonata in B minor*

The works that aim to reconcile the principle of the sonata and the new principle of evolution are reminiscent of Goethe's philosophical epic in their attempt to combine dramatic and epic genres.

⁴ On this issue, see my paper 'Renaissance de la forme énumérative sous l'influence du modèle épique dans les œuvres pour piano de Liszt. Facteur de l'analyse structurale et sémantique', *Studia Musicologica* 26 (1984), 199–218.

A structural and semantic analysis highlights the recurrence of the macabre-heroic quest and the macabre-heroic fight in the Sonata in B minor. The first quest and the first fight are given a 'heroic response' at the beginning of the second thematic complex, completed by a series of 'pastoral responses' — 'amoroso' (see tables 12a and 12b). The third thematic complex underlines the macabre-heroic quest and fight by introducing the 'isotopy of mourning' and the 'desperate Recitativo questioning' (see table 12c). The fourth thematic complex further intensifies the response of the 'pastoral-amoroso isotopy' by adding the 'religious-pantheist isotopy' (see table 12d).

The third 'macabre-heroic quest and struggle' is presented in a new form in the fifth thematic complex, by using various elements of the heroic-macabre-giocoso fugue and variations of the motto (see table 12e). The sixth thematic complex responds positively to the introduction of this novelty: the 'pastoral-pantheist isotopy' is followed by the affirmative 'heroic isotopy' and its emphasized form, i.e. '*pathetic*' (see table 12f). The macabre quests are revived in the seventh thematic complex with the 'interrupted religious response.' The final responses maintain the ambiguity by incorporating the 'pantheist-religious isotopy' and the 'macabre isotopy' (see table 12g).

To conclude, rather than pursuing the comparison between literature and music in greater depth, it seems important instead to draw the attention to a particularly striking contradiction. Despite immediately using the achievements of the modern epic at a structural level, at a semantic level Liszt long maintained Goethe's narrative pattern, i.e. a succession of different states of consciousness. How might the gap between classical content and romantic structure be explained? Further interdisciplinary analyses are needed to lift the veil on the secrets of Liszt's workroom.

Table 12a. Piano Sonata in B minor, first thematic complex: Introduction (Refrain and Mottos)

Structural function	Refrain	Motto 1	Motto 2	Transition	M1 + M2	M1 character variation and sequences	M1 formal variation and sequences	Refrain
Bars	1	7	14	18	25-54	55	67	84-100
Key	G Phrygian (Gipsy scale in G)	Diminished seventh in B	B minor	Modulation	E ♭ Major (- B minor) – modulations	B ♭ major G minor	E ♭ major	D minor
Tempo and expression indication	Lento assai, P sotto voce	Allegro energico <i>f</i>	<i>f</i> marcato	<i>p</i> agitato	<i>ff</i> rinforzando sempre <i>f</i> ed agitato	<i>ff</i> Marcatissimo rinforz.		pesante
Semes or classemes	Lugubrious	Macabre, agitato	Eroico	Storm semes	Macabre semes, storm semes	Fanfare eroico semes	Eroico	Agitado
Semantic isotopy	MACABRE QUEST →			MACABRE FIGHT				

Table 12b. Piano Sonata in B minor, second thematic complex: Exposition (arrival of the first theme)

Structural function	Refrain Character variation	Theme₁ and cadences	M₁ character variation in the form of a theme	M₂ character variation then formal variation	Transition (M ₁ + M ₂)	M₁ character variation
Bars	101	105	125	153	179	197-204
Key	In D	D major and A \flat major	F major D major	D major	B minor and modulation	F # major (G minor)
Tempo and expression indication	Molto crescendo; marcato	Grandioso, <i>ff</i> ; <i>fff</i>	<i>pp</i> , dolce con grazia	Cantando espressivo <i>p</i>	Sempre <i>pp</i> poco marcato	<i>p dolce</i>
Semes or classemes	Heroic	Grandioso (then gestures of the lamenting quest)	Singing bel canto	Singing bel canto	Pastoral semes	Pastoral-recitative
Semantic isotopy	HEROIC ↔ PASTORAL-AMOROSO					

Table 12c. Piano Sonata in B minor, third thematic complex: Development₁ (T₁, Refrain, Mottos)

Structural function	M₁ and development/1	M₁ + M₂ variation and development/2	Refrain variation	M₁ variation	T₁ + M₁ (with dialogue variations)	M₂ + M₁
Bars	205	239	278	286	297	311-318
Key	C major, B major and modulation	D major and modulation	D ♭ major	Around F minor	C # minor F # minor	F minor and modulation
Tempo and expression indication	<i>ff</i> rinforz. stringendo	<i>p</i> non legato, incalzando	Marcatissimo	Deciso	<i>fff</i> pesante + recitativo	<i>f</i> marcato
Semes or classemes	Eroico storm	Scherzo, eroico	Grandioso	Eroico semes	Funeral march + recitative	Agitato, macabre
Semantic isotopy	HEROIC FIGHT		MOURNING ↔ MACABRE QUEST			

Table 12d. Piano Sonata in B minor, fourth thematic complex: Exposition₂
(arrival of the second theme)

Structural function	M ₁ and M ₂	T ₂	M ₂ character variation	T ₁ character variation	T ₂ + M ₁ formal variation and postlude	Refrain	M ₂
Bars	319	331	342	363	393	415	433-452
Key	Around E, B	F # major	A major	F # major then g minor	F # major	modulation	G # minor
Tempo and expression indication	<i>f</i> – <i>ppp</i> poco a poco diminuendo	Andante sostenuto, Dolce	Dolcissimo con intimo sentimento	<i>mf</i> ; con passione; <i>ff</i> marcatis.	Molto sostenuto <i>fff</i> → <i>pp</i>	<i>ppp</i>	Espressivo; <i>dolciss.</i> ; <i>perdendosi</i>
Semes or classemes	Pastoral, macabre	Pastoral, religioso	Pastoral, bel canto	Grandioso, declaiming bel canto	Pathetic bel canto, pantheist	Smorzando	Pastoral, recitative, campanella
Semantic isotopy	PASTORAL-RELIGIOSO				PANTHEIST		

Table 12e. Piano Sonata in B minor, fifth thematic complex: Development₂
(Refrain and Mottos: fugue and stretto)

Structural function	Refrain	M ₁ + M ₂ (fugue)	M ₁ variation and development	Refrain and sequences	M ₁ and M ₂
Bars	453	460	509	555	582-599
Key	Phrygian and gypsy scale in F ♭	B ♭ minor and modulation	F #, B minor and modulation	A ♭ minor; A minor	B minor
Tempo and expression indication	<i>ppp</i>	Allegro energico (sotto voce, <i>p</i>)	<i>f</i> energico; sempre forte ed agitato; più agitato	Più mosso, pesante; marcato	Stringendo; <i>ff</i> , precipitato; <i>fff</i>
Semes or classemes	Recitative	Eroico, scherzo	Storm semes, eroico semes	Macabre semes, storm semes	Stretto, scherzo
Semantic isotopy	HEROIC FIGHT ↔		MACABRE QUEST AND FIGHT		

Table 12f. Piano Sonata in B minor, sixth thematic complex:
Character variation of Exposition₁ (or 'Re-exposition₁', with T₁)

Structural function	T₁ formal variation	M₂ character variation; formal variation	M₂ formal variation	Refrain character variation	M₁ character variation	T₁ formal variation
Bars	600	616	650	673	682	700
Key	B major	B major	B major	B major	B major	B major
Tempo and expression indication	<i>mf</i> accantuato il canto	Cantando espressivo piano; dolce	stretta qua presto; <i>f</i> con strepito	Presto	Prestissimo <i>ff</i> fuocoso assai	<i>fff</i>
Semes or classemes	Grandioso pathetic	Singing bel canto, pastoral seme	Scherzo	Eroico	Trionfante, eroico	Grandioso, trionfante
Semantic isotopy	PANTHEIST- PASTORAL →		PANTHEIST-HEROIC			

Table 12g. Piano Sonata in B minor, seventh thematic complex: Coda
(or 'Re-exposition₂', with the second theme)

Structural function	T₂	M₂ variation	M₁ variation	Cadences	Refrain	Cadences
Bars	711	729	737	744	750	755-760
Key	B major	(B)	B major	B major	B Phrygian scale	B major
Tempo and expression indication	Andante sostenuto <i>p</i>	Allegro moderato <i>p</i> , sotto voce	<i>pp</i> ed un poco rall.	<i>pp</i>	Lento assai (un poco marcato)	<i>pp</i> ; <i>ppp</i>
Semes or classemes	Recitative religioso	Macabre semes	Macabre, recitative (= lugubrious quest)	Religioso- macabre	Recitative (quest) lugubrious	Pantheist and macabre
Semantic isotopy	RELIGIOSO		MACABRE QUEST			