

## Fugue in B-flat Minor by Čiurlionis: Structural and Semantic Analysis

### Introduction

The activated interest in Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis' (1875–1911) creation phenomena in the beginning of the 21st century can be said to cause new observations of artist's work and define the modern methodologies of art criticism. Čiurlionis' music compositions mark the divide between the echoes of late romanticism somewhat more characteristic of this composer during his early period of creative activity and modernism of the beginning of the 20th century appearing and developed in his later creative work between 1904 and 1909, with original features of expressionism and constructivism, his constructive explorations in semantic cryptology and search for symbolic meaning of sound harmonies; here ethnic motifs are intertwined with serial technique and constructive use of ostinato. The largest part of Čiurlionis' creative music work is original pieces for piano<sup>1</sup>. Fugue in B-flat minor that is considered to be the last opus and one of the most significant works by Čiurlionis indicated in the catalogue under VL 345, was chosen as the subject of this article. According to Landsbergis, the fugue was written either in the autumn of 1908 or at the beginning of 1909, judging from the same black pencil used in the rough copy, then a chemical pencil and so on. Later the composition was improved, the composer returned to it again and again, and the final date of the copy was November 1909 (V. Landsbergis, 2008, see Example 1).

**Example 1.** Manuscript of Čiurlionis' Fugue in B-flat minor (sketchbook, M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, Kaunas)



<sup>1</sup> According to the catalogue compiled by Vytautas Landsbergis, the number of compositions for piano total about 240, VL 106–345, some of them are cyclic (Landsbergis, Vytautas. *Visas Čiurlionis*, Vilnius, 2008).



The analysis of Fugue displays the semantic and structural approaches that are divided into different aspects. First, the aesthetic / affective background of compositional process of Fugue with the reference to composer's inner elation of that period is portrayed. Second, the graphical allusions of music structure to the wave imagery are discussed. Third, the constructive aspects of the subject composition that concern the parameters of scale, keystroke and rhythm, and logic of the entries are investigated and the semantic interpretation of two emerged numerical signs of 11 and 22 is examined. The musicological research was made using the source of the score – the manuscript survived and preserved in the National museum in Kaunas.

#### Čiurlionis' letters. Aesthetic / affective background

In 1908 and 1909, Čiurlionis spent several months in Saint Petersburg each year. It was at that time that his pictures won him international recognition, his music was started to be performed at the *Soirées* (Evenings) of Contemporary Music. Thus Fugue in B-flat minor may be stated was a testifier of Čiurlionis' inner elation, his artistic satisfaction and great ambitions. From Čiurlionis' letters to his fiancée Sofija Kymantaitė<sup>2</sup> written in November 1908, the impression can be formed about the especially positive emotions experienced by the composer at the time of creating Fugue<sup>3</sup>, which were, first and foremost, related to the plans of his opera *Jūratė* (whose libretto was created by Sofija):

*Zosele, I received your letter and Jūratė! You know, my head is going round from happiness – this is the first such an interesting day in Petersburg. Zosyt, Zosyt, – I want you to know how grateful, how happy and how proud I am – and do you know who I have to thank for that – my Wife – her name is Zosė, and she looks like a spring, like the sea and the Sun. My dearest baby, I am unable to collect my thoughts – a radiant chaos, Jūratė, you, music, thousands of suns, your caresses, the sea, choruses – all that combine into a single symphony. [...] I would like to compose a symphony from the murmuring of waves, from the mysterious language of a hundred-year-old forest, from the twinkling of the stars, from our songs and from my boundless longing. [...] I am overfilled with your letter that arrived today and “Jūratė” for the rest of my life [...] Every time I like “Jūratė” more and more, and it is already today that **I heard some music in it.** [...] Zose, my dearest, you haven't got the faintest how much I like “Jūratė”.*

<sup>2</sup> According to: M. K. Čiurlionis. *Laiškai Sofijai*, Vilnius, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> However, in the composer's letters written to Sofija in December 1908 we read again about the gloomy thoughts, anxiety and troubles related to the exhibitions and pictures that beset Čiurlionis (it is really surprising that not a single word about *Jūratė* was found in the letters written in December). One can think that the libretto, which arrived by mail in November, became a strong impetus for Čiurlionis, and a real breakthrough of music creation that took place in November 1908 resulted in the emotional exhaustion in December. Čiurlionis was overcome by a physical and emotional exhaustion and depression. So it be could that the fugue became a signal of his future depression too.

*I read it three times and each time I liked it even more – both the beginning, the **composition with “the fugue”**, and everything. Well, my dear natural composer. Now I am just waiting for music to grow somewhat quiet (it is rather late), and I shall think about Zosė and Jūratė, music will sound for me, the sea will murmur, and I shall read your letter.*

(Highlighted by the author – R. P.; letter from St. Petersburg, 19 November 1908; cited from: Čiurlionis, 1973<sup>4</sup>).

*I think and dream about “Jūratė”.*

(Letter from St. Petersburg, 22 November 1908; cited from: Čiurlionis, 1973<sup>5</sup>).

*And now I am running to Kelpša’s place because “Jūratė” would not leave me alone, since the day I received it I have felt like a man again and I am sincerely grateful to Zosė [...].*

(A postcard from St. Petersburg, 26 November 1908; cited from: Čiurlionis, 1973<sup>6</sup>).

*[...] now, since the time I received the parcel, I have been almost always cheerful. “Jūratė” – you have no idea of how much I love it and am constantly thinking of it [...] **I already have some music**, but not for anything would I play it to you because I feel terribly embarrassed. I would like to have at least the sketch of the prologue before we meet – only a month is left till that time! So short a time and so overwhelmingly long!*

(Highlighted by the author – R. P.; letter from St. Petersburg, 26 November 1908; cited from: Čiurlionis, 1973<sup>7</sup>).

Neither the sketch of the prologue nor the clavier has survived up to the present day, the libretto written by Sofija has not reached us either. However, the “fugue” mentioned in the above letters, and another letter cited in which Čiurlionis described his idea of the beginning of the opera in detail, enables the supposition to be made that Fugue in B-flat minor is exactly related to the prologue of the opera. In the following letter cited we undoubtedly find the description of the Fugue:

*And now let us speak about “Jūratė”. [...] I have in mind the Prologue. I want the introduction to the prologue, or the so-called “Ouverture” to be **dark, almost gloomy, strange and fantastic like the depth of the sea**. It can even be called “The Depth of the Sea”, and it (the introduction) should be **performed in a dark hall**. In the second part of this introduction **the curtain rises**, but it is dark and almost nothing can be seen. Little by little **the contours of the brightest accessories come to light**, first of all large, the contours of fantastic sea stats, strange plants, the amber palace, etc. Everything must appear gradually, **every time there should be more light** – the music follows light and grows quiet. Singing of a lullaby nature begins: “Šlama vilneliai” – Kastytis’ singing is repeated like an echo: “I love the Sea”, and again a lullaby, and then the chorus of the Water Maidens, which I imagined as follows: the **alts** start and appear, then **2nd sopranos** and they also appear, and later also **1st sopranos**.*

<sup>4</sup> Translation made from the Lithuanian version: Zosele, gavau tavo laišką ir Jūratę! Žinai, man net galva sukasi iš laimės – tai pirma tokia stebuklinga diena Peterburge. Zosyt, Zosyt, – kad Tu žinotum, koks aš dėkingas, koks laimingas, koks išdidus – o ar žinai, kieno dėka? – savo Žmonos dėka – ji vardu Zosė, o panaši į pavasarį, į jūrą ir į Saulę. Vaikeli mieliausias mano, negaliu minčių sukaupti – spindulingas chaosas, Jūratė, Tu, muzika, tūkstantis sauliu, Tavo glamonės, jūra, chorai – visa tai nuostabiai jungiasi į vieną simfoniją. [...] Norėčiau sudėti simfoniją iš bangų ošimo, iš šimtametės girios paslaptingos kalbos, iš žvaigždžių mirksėjimo, iš mūsų dainelių ir bekraščio mano ilgesio. [...] Taip aš esu perpildytas Tavo šios dienos laišku ir „Jūratė“ visam gyvenimui [...] „Jūratė“ man kaskart labiau patinka, ir jau šiandien girdėjau truputį muzikos joje. [...] Zose, mieliausia mano, neturi supratimo, kaip man patinka „Jūratė“. Perskaičiau ją tris kartus, ir kiekvieną kartą vis labiau – ir pradžia, ir **kombinacija su „fuga“**, ir viskas. Ak Tu, kompozitore mano prigimtoji. Dabar tik laukiu, kad kiek aptiltų (jau gana vėlu), galvosiu apie Zosę ir Jūratę, skambės man muzika, jūra oš, skaitysiu tavo laišką.

<sup>5</sup> Translation made from the Lithuanian version: Galvoju ir sapnuoju apie Jūratę.

<sup>6</sup> Translation made from the Lithuanian version: O dabar lekiu pas Kelpšą skambinti, nes „Jūratė“ neduoda man ramybės, nuo tada, kai ją gavau, jaučiuosi vėl žmogus ir be galo esu Zosėi dėkingas [...].

<sup>7</sup> Translation made from the Lithuanian version: [...] dabar nuo to laiko, kai gavau siuntinį, esu beveik visados linksmas. Jūratė – neturi supratimo, kaip ją myliu ir nuolat apie ją galvoju [...] **jau turiu net truputį muzikos**, bet nė už ką Tau nepaskambinčiau, nes baisiai droviuosi. Norėčiau turėti bent prologo eskizą iki mūsų pasimatymo – mėnuo laiko! Taip mažai ir taip neaprepiamai ilgai!

“The Queen must be informed” is a **subject of the three-part fugue**, and the entry of the subject and at the same the appearance of (groups of choruses) should make a good impression, and this seems to be a good idea. (Highlighted by the author – R. P.; letter from St. Petersburg, 28 November 1908; cited from: Čiurlionis, 1973<sup>8</sup>).

The descriptions of music visions presented in Čiurlionis’ letters define the relief and graphics of music being created and improvised in the composer’s mind in a really picturesque way – a constant going from *The Depth of the Sea, a dark, gloomy introduction, and a dark hall* upwards because the *contours come to light gradually, every time there is more and more light*. In music these images are respectively embodied by “increasing” the chorus voices from lower timbres to 1st sopranos, and then the three-part fugue sounds, which can be understood from Čiurlionis’ thoughts as the culmination (see Example 2).

**Example 2.** Descriptions of music visions transposed into the graphics of constant going upwards



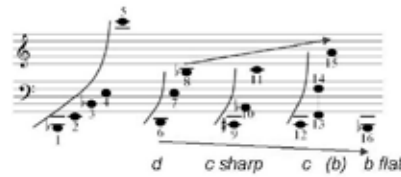
### Graphical analogies in the structure of Fugue

Since in these letters Čiurlionis mentions the fugue as a section at the beginning of the opera, the supposition is made that piano Fugue in B-flat minor was directly related to these visions. It is tried to improve with this in the following graphical and structural analysis of Fugue.

The Fugue in B-flat minor may be treated as the analogue of the creation of the world, and its musical relief as the symbolic rise from darkness to light – visual abstractions of the process of the Creation, even those of the “Creation of the World”. We should think that this is confirmed by a graphic analysis of the elements of the Fugue. For example, the same graphics of the upward curve (or wave) is characteristic of the subject of Fugue in B-flat minor, as well as the entry of the subject, that is, of the first notes of the subject introduced each time. For example, we see 4 upward going curves in the graphics of the entry of the subject (on the whole the subject is introduced 16 times, with their first sounds marked in the scheme), which we could relate to the waves of the sea, as though the allusion to the image of the depths of the sea described by Čiurlionis (see Example 3): following the first entry of the subject (1st octave *b-flat*) everything goes upwards: the second entry of the subject – *e* of the 2nd octave, the third entry of the subject – *b-flat*, the fourth entry of the subject – *e* of the 3rd octave until the pass of the fifth subject sounding in the inverse form – it starts going downwards from *c* of the 6th octave. The second wave – three passes of the subject: *d* of the 2nd octave, *e* of the 3rd octave, *b-flat* of the 3rd octave. The third wave: *c-sharp* of the 2nd octave, *a-flat* of the 2nd octave, *c* of the 4th octave. The fourth wave: *c* of the 2nd octave, *f* of the 2nd and 3rd octaves (two entries of the subject sound at a time), *a* of the 4th octave. And again we return to the starting point – *b-flat* of the 1st octave. As can be seen, the contours of the three “small” waves are not only consistently extended towards the outside. Furthermore, a chromatic shift downwards from *d* of the 2nd octave becomes pronounced in the reduced bass line: *d – c-sharp – c – [then having missed b] – b-flat*.

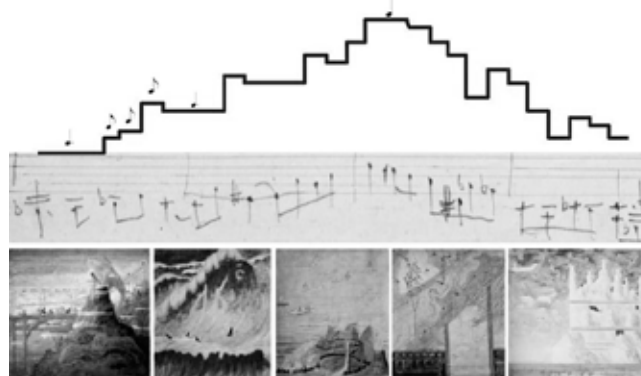
<sup>8</sup> Translation made from the Lithuanian version: *O dabar pakalbėkime apie „Jūrą“ [...] Turiu omeny Prologą. Noriu, kad įžanga į prologą, arba vadinamoji „Ouverture“, būtų tamsi, beveik niūri, keista ir fantastiška, kaip jūros gelmė. Galima net pavadinti „Jūros Gelmė“, ir turėtų būti (įžanga) atliekama tamsioje salėje. Antroje šios įžangos pusėje pakyla uždanga, bet yra tamsu ir beveik nieko nematyti. Palengva išryškėja šviesiausių aksesuarų kontūrai, pirmiausia didelės fantastinės jūros žvaigždės, keistų augalų, gintaro rūmų ir t. t. Viskas turi rasti palengva, šviesos kaskart daugiau – muzika seka šviesą ir tilsta. Pradedama lopšinės pobūdžio dainavimas: „Šlama vilneliai“ – kartojant tartum aidas Kastyčio dainavimas: „Myliu aš Jūrą“, ir vėl lopšinė, o paskui Vandens Mergelių choras, kurį sumaniau taip: pradeda **altai** ir pasirodo, paskui **II sopranai** ir taip pat pasirodo, o vėliau taip pat ir **I sopranai**. „Karalienei reik pranešti“ yra **tribalsės fugos tema**, o temų įstojimai ir tuo pat metu (choro grupių) pasirodymai turėtų padaryti gerą įspūdį, ir, atrodo, kad tai geras sumanymas.*

**Example 3.** Graphical analogies of subject's 16 entries that form in the shape of 4 waves



In the graphic scheme of the subject itself is one large wave with the ascent and the descent (see Example 4): the duration of the sounds is recorded in eight notes on the horizontal of the curve, and the tone intervals are recorded in half-tones on the vertical. Its relief corresponds with Čiurlionis' paintings (for example *The Prelude of the Angel*, 1909, Finale of *The Sonata of the Sea*, 1908, Allegro and Scherzo of *Summer Sonata*, 1908, *The Journey of the Prince III*, 1907, and so on). Another "wave" – going downwards – is the introduction/ prelude of five bars found in the first manuscript of the fugue, which later was refused by the composer. Here the composer limits himself to three pitches *a-c-sharp-f*, "played" with their colours in different registers of the piano by drawing a curve descending from the heights (see Example 5). All presented graphic analogies allow us to think that Fugue in B-flat minor was really related to Čiurlionis' visions of that time about the opera *Jūratė*.

**Example 4.** Graphics of Fugue subject and analogues in the paintings by Čiurlionis



**Example 5.** Descent in the right hand part of Fugue Preamble and the formation of triad



### Constructive manipulations with the numbers 11 and 22

Having studied the structure of the subject and other parts of the compositional construction of the fugue, another line of regularities came to light, which led us to the supposition that the fugue was not only the beginning of the colour – graphic – emotional link with the planned opera and its images of the depths of the sea but also the example of a well-considered, rational and perhaps even calculated "construction" that was foreseen by the composer in advance.

The analysis presents some coincidences observed, which most probably are not accidental but might be Čiurlionis' deliberate manipulation with two numbers 11 and 22. For example, the theme consists of 22 notes, the tone sequence of the subject is made up of 11 tones (see Example 6). It may be stated that it was not accidental for Čiurlionis missed one sound *g* to have a complete chromatic scale. All in all, the subject is shown in the fugue 16 times but it is 11 times that the subject sounds in a full / whole exposition of 22 notes (in other cases – 11 or 18 tones). The duration of the subject is 29 eighths and its Golden Section is between the 17th and 18th eighth note ( $29 \text{ eighth notes} \times 0,618 = \text{notes } 17,922$ ). It was observed that the place of the 18th eighth note in the subject is significant. First, the Golden Section coincides exactly with the local culmination – the highest pitch of the whole subject – *f* of the 3rd octave. And this note is the 11th out of all 22 notes of the subject (see Example 7). Number 11 also emerges in the construction of the rhythmic picture of the subject: rhythmic symmetry is characteristic of the first group of 11 notes, which is “divided” into sections by the fourths – their total duration is 11 eighth notes, the second half of the subject moves on “monotonous” 11 eighths (see Example 7).

**Example 6.** Fugue subject and the constructive extension of numbers 11 and 22

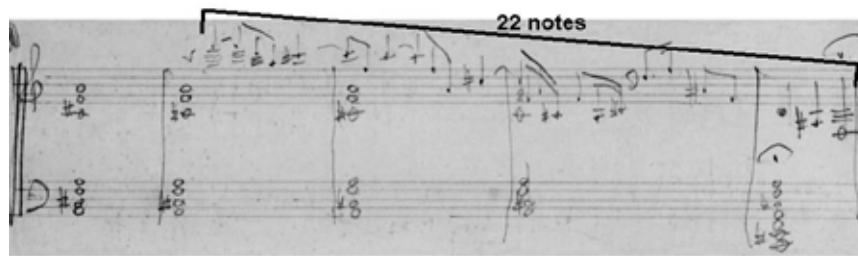
- Subject – 22 notes (*Key stroke*)
- Subject tone-scale – 11 (*cluster index*)

*b flat – b – c – d flat – d – e flat – e – f – f sharp – (g) – / – a*  
*a flat*

**Example 7.** Fugue subject and the constructive extension of numbers 11 and 22

Golden Point  $29 \times 0,618 = 17,922 \approx 18$

Let us go back to the preamble that Čiurlionis refused later: here the sound curve in the part for the right hand against the background of the increased triad chord is drawn downwards. All in all, there are 22 sounds again (see Example 8).

**Example 8.** Fugue preamble and the constructive extension of number 22

### Conclusions

The presented structural analysis of Fugue subject indicated the constructions of numbers 11 and 22. Supposedly composer made such manipulations consciously and the emerge of these numbers was not a bare action. It is possible that these digital signs reveal the meaning hidden behind them and envelop the fugue with a semantic train. The following question arises – what did the composer *want* to say? First, the speculation of the 22nd of September as Čiurlionis' birthday is rejected because according to the old calendar composer's birthday was on the 10th of September. Second, the assumption is made concerning the fact that Fugue in B-flat minor is Čiurlionis' last piano composition and symbolically reveals itself as a music autograph. Composer often signed as *MKČurlianis* (Lithuanian version) or *MKCzurlanis* (Polish version) and in both cases the number of letters is 11. It is most likely when we know Čiurlionis inclination for the language of symbols and ciphers, the alphabets of music and symbols created by him, and on the whole, his way of speaking in symbols, signs, links, images rather than in a direct speech, which is clearly seen in his letters, sketches and all creation (Example 9). Perhaps the meanings of numbers 11 and 22 are to be related to the opera *Jūratė*. An attempt to elucidate this issue is the objective of a further investigation.

**Example 9.** Čiurlionis autograph and music-letter alphabet (alphabet illustration from: Kučinskas, 2004, p. 84)

### Literature

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## Santrauka

## Mikalojaus Konstantino Čiurlionio Fuga b-moll: struktūrinė ir semantinė analizė

Čiurlionio garsų pasaulis – turtingas XX a. pradžios kultūrinių kontekstų atspindys, įvairių tendencijų sintezė – suvienyta aplinka gyvenant Lietuvoje, Lenkijoje, Vokietijoje, Rusijoje, šio menininko akiratyje išsiskleidusi kūrybinių ieškojimų įvairiapusiškumu ir gausiu palikimu (šimtai muzikos kūrinių ir paveikslų, grafikos darbai, literatūros ir poezijos kūriniai, meninės fotografijos eksperimentai). Didžioji Čiurlionio muzikinės kūrybos dalis – originali fortepijoninė kūryba. Galima sakyti, ji žymi takoskyrą tarp ankstyvuojų laikotarpiu Čiurlioniui būdingesnių vėlyvojo romantizmo atgarsių ir kūrybiniuose sumanymuose gimstančio bei plėtojamo XX a. pradžios modernizmo su originaliais ekspresionistiniais, konstruktyviais bruožais.

Fuga b-moll – vienas paskutinių, reikšmingiausių Čiurlionio kūrinių, kataloge nurodoma VL 345, buvo kuriama 1908–1909 m. Tačiau fuga ne tik simboliškai vainikuoja kūrybinį kelią, bet kartu ir vizionieriška, vienas pirmų Lietuvos moderniosios muzikos pavyzdžių greta kitų Čiurlionio vėlyvųjų kūrinių fortepijonui, kuriuose supinami tautiniai motyvai su serijine technika, konstruktyviu ostinato naudojimu.

Straipsnyje pristatoma Fugos b-moll struktūrinė ir semantinė analizė. Pirma, remiantis Čiurlionio laiškais, rašytas iš Sankt Peterburgo 1908 m. lapkritį, svarstoma apie kompozitorių supusios aplinkos, patirtų įvykių įtaką kūrybiniam procesui. Kaip tik tuo metu jo paveikslai sulaukė pirmojo tarptautinio pripažinimo, jo muziką pradėta atlikti šiuolaikinės muzikos vakaruose (*Soirées of Contemporary Music*). Fuga b-moll buvo Čiurlionio vidinio pakylėjimo, meninės satisfakcijos ir didžiulių ambicijų, susijusių su jo operos „Jūratė“ (kuriai libretą kūrė Sofija) planais, liudininke. Antra, kadangi laiškuose Čiurlionis užsimena apie fugą kaip atkarpą operos pradžioje, daroma prielaida, kad fortepijoninė Fuga b-moll tiesiogiai susijusi su šiomis vizijomis. Laiškų ištraukose sutinkami muzikinių vizijų aprašymai sugestionuoja vaizdinius sprendinius – kylančios kreivės grafiką, kurios kontūrai išvelgiami ir Fugos b-moll struktūrinuose parametruose: temos grafinėje schemoje matyti banga su pakilimu ir nusileidimu; išrašius visų 16 temos įstojimų po pirmąjį garsą išryškėja 4 į viršų kylančios kreivės; besileidžianti žemyn banga formuoja fugos rankraštyje išlikusios penkių taktų įžangos reljefą. Trečia, keliama prielaida, kad fuga yra racionalaus, gal net apskaičiuoto, iš anksto numatyto kompozitoriaus „konstravimo“ muzikoje pavyzdys. Atlikus struktūrinę fugos temos ir rankraštyje išlikusio preliudo analizę, buvo nustatytas galbūt sąmoningas Čiurlionio manipuliavimas dviem skaičiais 11 ir 22: temą sudaro 22 garsai; garsaeilė – 11 garsų; 11 kartų tema fugoje nuskamba pilnu pavidalu (viso 16 temos pravedimų); Aukso pjūvis temos struktūroje yra 11-as temos garsas; temos ritminis piešinys skaidomas į dvi atkarpas, antroje – „monotoniškas“ 11 aštuntinių judėjimas; fugos įžangoje dešinės rankos partijoje iš viso skamba 22 garsai. Keliama prielaida, kad šie skaitmeniniai ženklai skleidžia už jų slypinčias prasmes, pavyzdžiui, kaip Čiurlionio muzikinis autografas, dažnai pasirašytas kaip *MKČurlianis/ MKCzurlanis*, abiem atvejais raidžių – 11. Prielaida, kad skaičių 11 ir 22 prasmės sietinos su opera „Jūratė“, reikalauja detalesnio tyrimo. Tačiau tai labai tikėtina, žinant Čiurlionio polinkį į simbolinę kalbą, jo susikurtas muzikines, simbolių abėcėles, jam pačiam būdingą kalbėjimą ne tiesiogine kalba, bet simboliais, ženklais, sąsajomis, vaizdiniais, kas matyti ir jo laiškuose.