

# Brzozowski and Rorty: Coping with the Contingent Self

---

Edward M. Świdorski

Brzozowski, always our contemporary, in the light of whose thought we stand—an assertion that inspired a research project within the scope of which the following remarks are couched. The assertion invites confirmation; it bids us to seek partners in dialogue with Brzozowski today. In the present instance, my interest focuses on Brzozowski the philosopher and I ask, does Brzozowski speak to the concerns of philosophers today, and if so, how?

It is not immediately clear that this is the case, starting with the state of the dialogue in Brzozowski's native Poland. His standing as a major representative figure of Polish modernism came in for renewed attention in the aftermath of the collapse of Polish communism that generated soul-searching by the Polish intelligentsia. To the degree that his specifically philosophical views can be prised from his worldview as a whole and addressed on their own footing, they have drawn the attention of those who have been intent on reviewing the status of the so-called "Warsaw School of the History of Ideas," in particular, the stand the members of the school adopted in regard to 'orthodox Marxism'.<sup>1</sup> At a critical

- 
- 1 The locus classicus is the following book: Andrzej Walicki, *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish Beginnings of 'Western Marxism'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). The most up-to-date treatments of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas are two collections: A. Kołakowski, ed., *Wokół dorobku Warszawskiej Szkoły Historii Idei* [Around the works of the Warsaw School of the history of ideas] (Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 2013), and Paweł Grad, ed., *Warszawska Szkoła Historii Idei: tożsamość, tradycja, obecność* [The Warsaw School of the History of Ideas: identity, tradition, presence] (Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 2014). A background question throughout many of the essays gathered in these volumes is whether the scholars most often cited in connection with the 'School' shared a common identity.

juncture Brzozowski came to enjoy celebrity among the scholars with whom the school is identified as a forerunner of 'Western Marxism'. Brzozowski's 'recovery', unbeknownst to him, in the initial decade of the twentieth century, of the spirit, and to a considerable degree the letter, of Marx's early praxis philosophy appeared to augur well for his (potential) influence among those in Poland for whom a socialist worldview remained a viable option. However, when the political authorities cracked down on, among others, the scholars associated with the Warsaw school following the events of March 1968, Brzozowski's potential influence waned. In any case, it is doubtful that Brzozowski had anything to 'say' to analytic philosophers, phenomenologists, and Catholic philosophers, the three salient non-Marxist currents in Polish philosophical life throughout the communist period. In addition, in the course of the two decades prior to the collapse of communism Marxist philosophers in Poland turned increasingly eclectic in their theoretical ambitions in order to preserve the little that remained of their relevance.<sup>2</sup> The direction that eclecticism took was not fuelled by attachment to Brzozowski's philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Nor did the situation change in the aftermath of the transition to a democratic Poland. For example, in the mid-nineties, the Polish Academy of Sciences invited Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, Leszek Kołakowski, and Ernst Gellner to discuss the state of philosophy in the company of the associates of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology in Warsaw.<sup>4</sup> Brzozowski was nowhere 'visible' in this debate, his name appears nowhere on the roster of references to whom the

- 2 No better example of this eclecticism can be cited than the case of the 'Poznan School' whose chief architects, Leszek Nowak and Jerzy Kmita, construed an 'anti-positivist naturalist' account of scientific method eschewing a distinction between natural and human science by bringing central tenets of Marxian historical materialism in line with Popper's philosophy of science, elements of Ajdukiewicz's logical semantics, Znaniecki's conception of the cultural sciences, and in due course a historical epistemology drawing on the Quine-Duhem thesis. As regards the question of whether and how 'orthodox' Marxists in Poland dialogued with their opposite numbers, cf. Józef Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu* [The Polish form of dialogue] (Kraków: Znak, 2002).
- 3 Kołakowski's role, both in a positive and negative sense, as regards Brzozowski's 'Marxism' was crucial. In 1977, when he published his three-volume *Główne nurty marksizmu* [Main currents of Marxism], Kołakowski put paid to his earlier belief that Brzozowski's Marx-inspired 'social subjectivism' provided a sure footing for a philosophical anthropology.
- 4 Jozef Niżnik and John T. Sanders, eds., *Debating the State of Philosophy. Habermas, Rorty, and Kolakowski* (Westport: Praeger, 1996).

associates of the Institute appealed in the course of their discussions with the invited luminaries. This is significant given that it was surely no coincidence that a debate of this kind about the prospects for philosophy should have been organized at that time in Poland, still in the throes of the 'transition'. Apparently, Brzozowski's 'absence' signified that few if any believed that his philosophizing held out any prospects for the life of philosophy in Poland.

It may be an irony, however, that there are voices outside Poland that do match the tone and style of Brzozowski's reflections. One such voice, in my opinion, is that of Richard Rorty. I want to suggest below that the basis for a dialogue between Brzozowski and Rorty does exist and I shall try to bring Brzozowski 'up to date', so to speak, in order to determine if and how he measures up as a 'contemporary', taking Rorty as a pertinent foil. Readers familiar with the writings of both thinkers will surely acknowledge that there are parallels: both display an iconoclastic spirit with regard to age-old philosophical stereotypes; both mix discourses freely—philosophy, literary criticism, cultural commentary—with only passing concern for established academic boundaries; each is alive to the potential of metaphor to invigorate thinking; both are committed to a social ideal ('achieving our country' in Rorty's phrase; reshaping the Polish national consciousness as Brzozowski hoped to do). To be sure, the differences of context cannot be overlooked—Brzozowski's as a (renegade) intellectual in the culture of Young Poland steeped in nineteenth-century philosophy; Rorty the 'American' pragmatist who took distance from philosophy because he understood that 'liberalism' enjoins the search not for 'objective truth' but for 'communal solidarity'.

How then do we reconcile the parallels with the differences in context? The first step is to show that Brzozowski and Rorty raised closely similar questions, differences of context notwithstanding. The second is to note commonalities—and differences—in their ways of handling these questions. And the third is to hypothesize that, with respect to the differences, had Brzozowski at his disposal the kinds of 'tools' to which Rorty could appeal to construct his arguments, he might have come to conclusions very much like those Rorty defended. The 'tools' I have in mind have to do with the ways and means of philosophizing, including philosophizing in a 'deconstructive' vein, something that was common to both. Because we want to test whether Brzozowski is our philosophical 'contemporary' we want to imagine him speaking the 'language' Rorty could assume on the part of his audience, a language honed from the dialectic of philosophical controversy throughout the twentieth century. Needless to say, Brzozowski knew nothing of that dialectic; nevertheless, the aim of my attempt to put words into Brzozowski's mouth is to show that, in the course of thinking about the ques-

tions he held dear, he stumbled over the lack of an adequate ‘vocabulary’ to express what I believe he was groping toward. I contend that the ‘vocabulary’ that might have kept him from stumbling over his words could well have been Rorty’s. The ‘might have been’ needs emphasizing: I will not contend that there is anything like a one-to-one correspondence between the two thinkers.

Despite—or rather because of—Brzozowski’s critical reception of so many philosophies of his day, they conditioned the style of his own questioning. My idea is that, within a given discursive context, disagreement is dialectically proportional to what can count as an intelligible alternative within that context. The philosophical context of Brzozowski’s questioning was such that, despite his critical stance in regard to many of the philosophies he examined, he remained committed to their tenor and purpose, viz., to seek true responses to substantive philosophical questions. In Rorty’s case, by contrast, his critique and ultimately abandonment of time-honoured philosophical assumptions rested on his version of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ abetted by his pragmatist convictions. The upshot was that, in his view, substantive philosophical arguments should be recast as ways of speaking, first of all metaphorically, in order in this way to expose the myth that philosophers have something to discover about the way things really and truly are. I want to say that although Brzozowski remained stuck in the mould of substantive philosophizing his persistent questioning pointed beyond that mould and is consistent with the ‘vocabulary’ Rorty preferred.

## **The ‘Truth within’ rather than the ‘Truth without’?**

### **First Glimmers**

What are the questions that Brzozowski and Rorty share? Each wants to become clear about the relation of the self to the world and in particular about the nature of the relation. Each believes that the relation is not discovered, it is made; and each seeks clarity about the nature of the making. For his part, Rorty came to the view that there is no centred self who would do the making by exercising powers grounded in some underlying human essence. One way in which he came to this conclusion concerns the idea that language is the medium through which the subject reaches the world. Rorty sought to undermine this idea and in so doing jettisoned two issues closely connected with it: representation and truth, including truthful representation of the self. Freed from the onus of truth-telling, lan-

guage reappears as a 'poetic' tool serving diverse needs and interests within the community.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, Brzozowski, I will say, struggled to reconcile nostalgia for a centred subject, on the one hand, and a socio-cultural historicism with regard to the 'content' of the subject, on the other. From stage to stage in his thinking the tension between these poles is palpable: who or what is the subject who makes the history that is all the content that the subject is (or has)?<sup>6</sup> In this regard, how he sees language remains somewhat ambiguous, an ambiguity which is, I contend, a symptom of the tension in his thinking. Whereas he would appear to agree with Rorty that as far as the 'world' is concerned language is not a transparent medium of worldly representation, he remains in thrall to the truth of *self*-representation, to the 'truth within'. Despite insisting that we are only what we have made ourselves to be, Brzozowski, I will argue, never relinquished the conviction—the hope—that there is a fundamental truth about the 'subject', the 'truth', namely, that the self is *essentially* self-constituting, that it belongs to its nature to be so. And here is where he 'stumbles over his words', as I put it above: how to pair the demand for truthful self-representation about what we are, essentially, on the one hand, with, on the other, the claim that we are but the products of our contingent, forever impermanent industry?<sup>7</sup>

Let me now go over this ground again, this time with an eye to detail.

Consider the following sentence from Rorty. "At the heart of pragmatism is the refusal to accept the correspondence theory of truth and the idea that true beliefs are accurate representations of reality."<sup>8</sup> Brzozowski never tired of stating similar-sounding claims, initially in his Fichtean activist philosophy, subse-

---

5 These are the master themes of Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), in particular the first part, "Contingency."

6 Throughout, my reading of Brzozowski is directed to "Nasze 'ja' i historia" [Our "self" and history] (1909), the first chapter of *Legenda Młodej Polski*, 9–27.

7 I leave out of account here the dialectic of the individual and the collective which played a key role in Brzozowski's speculations, but which took more than one form. Initially, he placed the accent on the autonomous individual; then in the Marxist phase of the philosophy of labor attention to the individual receded in favour of collective, 'social subjective', labor history; in his last period, Brzozowski returns to the individual self. More on this below in the section devoted to Brzozowski's evolution.

8 Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Romanticism," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics. Philosophical Papers*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 105.

quently in his Marxian praxist phase, and right through to the end of his life.<sup>9</sup> There is the eventual complication that Brzozowski had qualms about the pragmatism with which he was familiar, charging its proponents with not having sufficiently explained the concept of activity,<sup>10</sup> the concept that provides the reference frame of the sentence I just quoted from Rorty. At the same time, however, a pragmatist strain in his thinking is rather evident, though of course Rorty's pragmatism had come a long way from that of William James, with whom Brzozowski appeared to be familiar.<sup>11</sup>

- 
- 9 One example: "In cognition, we come to know forms of goal-directed action and the creation of ever newer such forms. [...] Man does not come to know some ready encountered world, but rather, at first unawares, but at present consciously, he creates and grows aware of his different forms of activity. If cognition can still be explained as coming to know something given as ready, then this is possible only in the following way: it turns out that what lies outside of us is such that now these, now those actions can be undertaken that lead to determinate results." "Przyroda i poznanie" [Nature and cognition], in *Idee*, 195.
- 10 "What is an action?—I ask the pragmatists. And here we have the weakest point of their philosophy. Here they break down. They are incapable of distinguishing action from the feeling [poczucie] of action." "Pragmatyzm i materializm dziejowy" [Pragmatism and historical materialism], *ibid.*, 211. I am not clear, however, about what Brzozowski means by „the feeling of action.”
- 11 A Polish commentator selects the following passages from Brzozowski and argues that they show Brzozowski's affinities with pragmatism (my translations): "The basis of the theoretical truth of some point of view is its practical value (in the widest sense of the expression)." "The soul of a world view, its veritable princeps movens is always the need to assume a certain active position in relation to life and the world. It is not so much our theoretical thinking that requires unification as our actions." He asserts that "these theses are very similar to the pragmatist claims that resolving metaphysical controversies may require [...] to turn [...] away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins' and to turn instead 'towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power.' It would seem that Brzozowski tended toward this kind of approach." Paweł Bielawski, "Stanisław Brzozowski 'Wstęp do filozofii – próba analizy'" [Stanisław Brzozowski's "Introduction to philosophy"—an attempt of an analysis], <http://www.racjonalista.pl/kk.php/s,500/k,3>. The first two quotations are from "Monistyczne pojmowanie dziejów i filozofia krytyczna" [The monistic conception of history and critical philosophy] in Stanisław Brzozowski, *Kultura i życie*. 313, 279 respectively. The remaining is

Brzozowski's reservations with regard to pragmatism have much to do with the influence his selected philosophical brethren exercised. These included Vico, German idealist philosophers from Kant onwards, but also their critics (Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard), bits of Bergson, Sorel, and Labriola, as well as the empiriocritacists Avenarius and Mach, for good measure. With this heady potion to stimulate him, Brzozowski required 'activity' to be something more than activity as James liked to think about it, as that to which we defer when we wish to know what it is useful to believe.

Rorty shares some of these affinities—Hegel, Nietzsche, for instance—but blows the trumpet especially for philosophers and writers in the New World: Emerson, Peirce, James, Dewey in particular, as well as for those of his contemporaries in whose work he perceived pragmatist affinities—Davidson, Quine, Sellars, Putnam, and Brandom. While all the figures in Brzozowski's and Rorty's pantheons question representationalist epistemology, arguing the case instead for the constructive character of human cognition, the second group, unlike the first, does not ascribe a privileged ontic status to the agent or subject. Those in the first group vacillate with regard to whether the subject (agent) is centred or not, whereas those in the latter on the whole think that is not the case (a point to which I will return presently).

To grasp the import of the difference, consider in addition the following passage from Rorty.

[...] what we call "increased knowledge" should not be thought of as increased access to the Real, but as increased ability to do things—to take part in social practices that make possible richer and fuller human lives. This increased richness is not the effect of a magnetic attraction exerted on the human mind by the really real, nor by reason's ability to penetrate the veil of appearance. It is a relation between the human present and the human past, not a relation between the human and the non-human.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, Brzozowski would surely have warmed to Rorty's practical interpretation of 'knowledge', his appeal to the primacy of human flourishing, as

---

from William James, *Pragmatism*, in *Writings, 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1987), 508f.

- 12 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 108. Compare this with Brzozowski: "Thinking is a part of life, its forms, tools, and perspective: it can affirm its effective reach only through life. The significance of thinking consists in the effects it exerts on the creation of victorious forms of life. We don't ask, what are you thinking?, but what are you doing—as the pragmatists say." Brzozowski, "Pragmatyzm i materjalizm dziejowy," 209.

well as his recommendation to us to acknowledge the self-sufficiency of the human condition within the socio-cultural matrix that makes up the substance of history.<sup>13</sup> Rorty's remark about the relation between the human past and present sits well with Brzozowski's contention that all that we are is our own history.

On the other hand, however, when Brzozowski waxed lyrical about activity he had in view first of all the transformative power of labor, which extends so far as to underwrite the categories of cognition. For Rorty, our "increased ability to do things" is not a matter of 'transformative powers' mediating the self's cognitive relation to the world, but of the imagination. 'Imagination' is not the name of a cognitive faculty, as in Kant, for instance, who allies the imagination with the understanding in order to account for representation. Rorty's imagination stimulates new ways of speaking, new descriptions that come with time to animate cultural practices. He fixes this imaginative capacity by the term 'Romanticism'. "At the heart of romanticism is the thesis of the priority of imagination over reason—the claim that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken."<sup>14</sup>

We know that the 'mature' Brzozowski didn't hold much truck with Romanticism, a major target of his criticisms being the neo-romanticism of Young Poland. Nevertheless, he appeared to have believed that romanticism did convey an urgent sense of the creative powers of the ego, however unfinished the creative potential of the ego—the individual ego—finally is.<sup>15</sup> Allowing for Rorty's slant on Romanticism, Brzozowski could well have penned the following Rorty-like sentence: "I hold that "activity"—be it the deed [*Tat / czyn*], labor [*praca*], struggle, creation, terms omnipresent throughout his writings—is prior to reason; I claim that reason can only follow paths that 'activity' has broken."

---

13 Something very much like this sentiment is expressed by Brzozowski as follows: "When we evaluate the cultural value of a given thought, a given current, we examine not its intellectual logical character, but its vital productivity [*wydajność*]: we ask not whether this current answers to our preferences, habits, presuppositions, but whether it will manage to maintain and develop itself in relation to the world, whether it will manage to survive in the face of life." Brzozowski, "Nasze 'ja' i historia," 25. The idea expressed can be parsed in pragmatist terms: the cultural value of a given thought is tantamount to the way in which it helps us with some task.

14 Rorty, "Pragmatism and romanticism," 105.

15 Agata Bielik-Robson, "Syndrom romantyczny. Stanisław Brzozowski i rewizja romantyzmu" [The romantic syndrome. Stanisław Brzozowski and the revision of romanticism], *Ślupskie Prace Filologiczne. Seria Filologia Polska* 5 (2007). See as well Eliza Kącka's article in this volume, 187ff.

Still, the difference between ‘labor’ and imagination, in the ‘activist’ setting Brzozowski and Rorty otherwise share, is significant. My claim is that the difference hinges on vestiges of a foundationalism in Brzozowski that Rorty explicitly disavows, vestiges due in large measure to the philosophical lineage with which Brzozowski associated. Citing Rorty again, for him pragmatism and romanticism—a union tantamount to the utter rejection of the correspondence theory of truth and representational epistemologies—“are reactions against the idea that there is something non-human out there with which human beings need to get in touch.”<sup>16</sup> Brzozowski, I would say, has not altogether given up the idea that there is something “with which humans need to get in touch.”<sup>17</sup> However, in his case, the ‘out there’ is transposed to ‘in here’; he wants us ‘to get in touch with’ something fundamental about our human condition. He raises high the banner of human self-realization, understanding it as the affirmation of the human potential to create a world—a culture—in tune with something fundamental about human nature. Or at least this is how I read his paeon to freedom, to take control of our destiny, in the essay “Our ‘Self’ and History.” There, in ringing tones, Brzozowski proclaims:

Rysem znamiennym nowoczesnej europejskiej kultury jest to, że opiera się ona na tak pojętej indywidualności, że przyjmuje ona cały bezmiar tkwiący w samym pojęciu *ja*, że usiłuje to *ja* zrealizować. To wyznacza zasadniczy, podstawowy kierunek europejskiej historii. *Ja* tu jest nie złudzeniem, lecz czymś istotnym. Kultura europejska – to usiłowanie zmierzające ku utożsamieniu pojęcia *jaźni i człowieka*, to podniesienie człowieka do godności swobodnego, rzeczywistego sprawcy swoich losów.<sup>18</sup>

The significant feature of modern European culture is that it is based on a conception of individuality, that it accepts the immeasurable proportions of that concept, and *strives to*

---

16 Rorty, “Pragmatism and romanticism,” 108.

17 Of course, activity qua labor is ‘in touch with’ something ‘out there’, viz., the stuff—nature, matter, that undergoes transformation in human hands for human purposes. But it is not a stuff that, on Brzozowski’s view, has to be adequately represented in order to ensure the success of ‘transformation’, an idea that attracted Brzozowski’s scorn. In this respect there is no disagreement between Brzozowski and Rorty: nothing ‘out there’ is a ground of our ‘activity’. For example, “By his will, thinking, and labor man must reinforce himself in the face of nature; our enemy is all that is uncontrolled, that which in us or beyond us is left to itself; our enemy is any and every state of nature: raw matter and the naked soul.” Brzozowski, “Polska dziecięciniała” [Poland gone puerile], in *Legenda Młodej Polski*, 68.

18 Brzozowski, “Nasze ‘ja’ i historia,” 19.

*realize it*. This is what determines the fundamental, basic orientation of European history. Here the Self is no illusion, but something *essential*. European culture strives to bring together, to unite the concept of the self and man, to raise man to the dignity of *the free and really effective agent* of his destiny.<sup>19</sup>

Brzozowski deploys terms that evoke historical purpose, an inherent aim of cultural history: “striving to realize [...], to unite under one concept [...]”. Nor does he shun the term ‘essential’ with reference to a Self to whom it belongs to be free and effective. Can this way of talking be understood in any other way than to say that, however much it may be that all we are is what we have made ourselves to be, the making, the power or capacity itself, is essential to the nature of the Self, the ground of the Self’s freedom?

Rorty would desist; he would consider this kind of language, the language of truthful self-representation, as rooted in a ‘poetic’ tradition that has known a variety of forms. In his view, talk about self-realization is just that—it is talk that conveyed a culturally significant narrative rather than a report about something that had been waiting to be discovered. Self-talk is a language game among others, some of which are consistent with it, some not, that we owe to a succession of genial speakers (“strong poets”) who managed to get across the idea—‘romantic imagination’—that self-talk is a better tool than other forms of talk humans have invented to decide what is good to believe.

Brzozowski (under the spell in part of Kant<sup>20</sup>—the world conforms to concepts, it is the world for the subject—but also of Avenarius and Mach—the raw material of psychic elements awaiting organization) makes much of the teeming vital energy of the psyche that in the course of labor rises to the status of a ‘solid’ Self able to withstand nature’s destructive forces. On the strength of the passage from Brzozowski cited above, self-constitution is inscribed within the European cultural idea as its essential end—the realization of man as the autonomous Self. In my estimation, this is the way to understand the following passage by Brzozowski: “[...] we have to struggle to render permanent what we value in ourselves, which means that we need to work on how to ensure the duration of that which appears to us to be what is most valuable in us.”<sup>21</sup> The idea seems to be that by our inherent resources, which belong to us essentially, we fix on that within the self which we discover to be the self’s fundamental value (or truth). Brzozowski concludes the essay in question with the sentence:

---

19 Italics mine (E. M. Ś.).

20 For instance, the essay Brzozowski, “Kant w stulecie smierci” [Kant. On the centenary of his death], in *Kultura i życie*, 249–258.

21 Brzozowski, “Nasze ‘ja’ i historia,” 26.

“Our foundation and our construction take place only within us; they are not outside of us,” which I understand to be his call to “get in touch with something in here.”<sup>22</sup>

Rorty could perhaps go along with that part of this evocation of the Self that is the expression of the ‘romantic ideal’, with the proviso, however, that we relinquish the myth of a Self that *has* powers of self-constitution.<sup>23</sup> To be clear: by denying that there is a ‘substantial’ self which has such capacities Rorty does not mean this to be a point about ontology, that is, about “reducing” the subject to something of an entirely different nature. Quite to the contrary, the meaning of self-talk, i.e., its uses in our socio-cultural context, is not endangered by physicalist talk about the way things really are supposed to be ‘in here’ (no more or less than they would be by the way things are supposed to be ‘out there’).<sup>24</sup> Dropping futile worries about the status of self-talk in relation to some other supposedly privileged form of talk in no way abets or diminishes the role it has played in our culture; rather it testifies to the powers of the “imagination.”<sup>25</sup>

---

22 Ibid., 27

23 Richard Rorty, “Non-reductive physicalism,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

24 The reason this is so has to do with semantics, with synonymy. Reduction of self-talk would need to proceed by way of a ‘translation’, one-to-one, without remainder, to the preferred physicalist idiom—a translation which Rorty claimed was neither possible nor intelligible, i.e., useful.

25 It may be that what kept Brzozowski from getting clear about the vestiges of the modern subject in his thinking was his abhorrence of ‘naturalism’, both in its evolutionist form and in that of ‘scientific Marxism’, both of which struck him as ‘reductionist’. He quoted approvingly Marx’s first “Thesis on Feuerbach” in which Marx dismisses the naturalist (‘materialist’) project (as well as its ‘idealist’ counterpart). However, he offers the following gloss on Marx’s meaning: “Given that our fundamental reality is life, given that man is the giant ceaselessly struggling with nature [żywiolami], he has to become his own law-giver” (Brzozowski, “Pragmatyzm i materializm dziejowy,” 210). Would Marx have subscribed to what appears to be a Kantian reading of his passage: as if in invoking the Kantian “autonomous” subject Brzozowski sought to infuse Marxian Praxis with an inner purpose? Indeed, this impression can easily be reinforced by the lines that follow the passage just quoted: echoing his conviction about the creation of the self as the aim of history, Brzozowski writes about man’s “victory over the unknown” (ibid., 211), a victory consisting in appropriating and maintaining his autonomy. The underlying question here seems to be whether ‘self-creation’ is ‘self-determination’ in the Kantian sense, as submission to the moral law?

So it appears that for Brzozowski the human condition is, on the one hand, *sui generis* and in process, and, on the other hand, it appears that self-constitution proceeds from a centre, a foundation within man's activity that, in the end, is the whole point of activity—to assert and maintain its autonomy.

### Excursus: Brzozowski's "Evolution"

My sense of the tension in Brzozowski's thinking is confirmed to a degree by discussions among scholars in Poland about the evolution of Brzozowski's thinking. And part of that discussion has to do with the changes in Brzozowski's approach to the Self. A brief pause to consider this discussion will provide additional stimulus for the Brzozowski-Rorty juxtaposition. Andrzej Walicki has looked carefully at stages of Brzozowski's development both in his book-length study<sup>26</sup> and in an article entitled "Leszek Kołakowski a Stanisław Brzozowski" (Leszek Kołakowski and Stanisław Brzozowski).<sup>27</sup> Walicki's references to his colleague include an article the latter wrote entitled "Miejsce filozofowania Stanisława Brzozowskiego" (The Place of Stanisław Brzozowski's Philosophizing),<sup>28</sup> which will figure in the background of my remarks.<sup>29</sup>

Walicki contends that Brzozowski's thinking is "remarkably organic" and "the general problematic of his thought remained basically unchanged."<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding the claim, Walicki's own presentation could well produce the opposite impression—that Brzozowski was less than entirely clear as to what it

26 Walicki, *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish Beginnings of 'Western Marxism'*.

27 Andrzej Walicki, "Leszek Kołakowski a Stanisław Brzozowski," in *Kołakowski i inni*, ed. Jan Skocznyński (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 1995).

28 Leszek Kołakowski, "Miejsce filozofowania Stanisława Brzozowskiego," in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone z lat 1955–1968*, vol. 1 (Londyn: Puls, 1989); originally published in *Twórczość* 6 (1966): 39–54.

29 There are writers who question whether there is anything resembling an evolution in Brzozowski's philosophical writings. With reference to the research on Brzozowski that began appearing in Poland as of the 1970s one writer is baffled by the seeming consensus that "we can discern something like an evolution in his thinking." Try as he might, this author finds none, remarking only that "what we have here is an evolution devoid of anything that might be called its teleology [...]; just a pure and abstract process of evolving for its own sake." He continues: "Each time I read Brzozowski and try to grasp the gist of his philosophy, it all bursts and implodes, as if there was no gist to it at all." Jacek Gutorow, "Stanisław Brzozowski and the Ends of Thought," *Studia Culturae* 16 (2013): 39f. <http://iculture.spb.ru/index.php/stucult/article/view/469>

30 Walicki, *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish Beginnings of 'Western Marxism'*, 169.

was that he was searching for. On the one hand, Walicki identifies the philosophy of labor as the linchpin joining the phases of Brzozowski's thinking. On the other hand, there is reason to ask what the core of this idea is that remained intact from stage to stage. As Walicki characterizes these stages, we have, first, emphasis on labor in a narrow sense, that is, material production; second, 'labor' characterized by Walicki as 'social praxis', which he understands as the construction of humanly meaningful reality; and finally 'labor' understood as the will to discipline the irrational, chaotic forces within both man and nature.<sup>31</sup> What do these several meanings have in common? Walicki offers no answer.

More to the point, Walicki is entirely candid about the significance of Brzozowski's last phase, the "movement from radical humanism to an attempt to ground human existence in the Absolute Being."<sup>32</sup> He writes in this regard of Brzozowski's "radical reorientation" consisting in his giving up Promethean anthropocentrism in order instead to ground human existence in the divine being. If so, then talk of a radical reorientation hardly sits comfortably with affirmations about the organic continuity of Brzozowski's philosophy. Between radical anthropocentrism, that is, an immanent historicist perspective advancing the cause of the *Gattungswesen*, and the search (or longing) for a transcendent ground of personal existence there is more like an abyss than a continuous line. Perhaps a solution to this quandary might be to suggest a core in Brzozowski's thinking other than the 'philosophy of labor'. Walicki, so far as I can tell, does not propose any alternative. My sense in this regard is that the alternative might be Brzozowski's search for the centred subject, be it the individual, the toiling collective, the working class, the nation—all of which Brzozowski at various times assigned the epithet 'Man' (człowiek).

Interestingly, the issue I have been driving so far, the tension inherent in Brzozowski's thinking, comes out explicitly in Walicki's reading of what he sees as the virtual congruence of Brzozowski's and Kołakowski's "evolutions." Following their closely similar anthropocentric phases, in large measure derived from—in Brzozowski's case surmised from—the same source (the early Marx), each arrives at a critical 'reorientation', viz., each turns to transcendence and the search for certitude. Walicki pays attention to the difficulties of this quest given both thinkers' suspicions of 'representationalist' epistemologies. Each denies that human knowledge can avail itself of standards by which to measure truth value that are independent of any and all circumstances in which the knowing subject finds herself and within which it constructs tools for survival. For Brzozowski-Kołakowski, "no truth can be free of history, that is, of the situation in which it

31 Ibid., 174.

32 Ibid.

was acquired. No human knowledge can pretend to be free of the inevitable relativity attached to the human species.”<sup>33</sup> But then, how to recognize transcendence, how to aspire to what is not contingent?

Each came to doubt, according to Walicki, the cogency of this relativist vision; each began to see that its consequences could become culturally fatal... the danger of universal relativism, creeping skepticism, and finally outright nihilism. Nevertheless, as Walicki recreates the logic of their respective situations, neither Brzozowski nor Kołakowski wished simply to give up the idea of the creative potential of the human deed and the tools it creates to satisfy its needs, but they came to understand that attempts to stave off the ravages of relativism by shifting to a generic or social subjectivism are illusory. Brzozowski recognized, as Walicki puts it paraphrasing Kołakowski’s own account, that a radical anthropocentrism was at base “contradictory.”<sup>34</sup> How could a radically contingent being, whether the individual or the species as a whole, hold itself up, over the course of its biological and cultural history, as a self-sufficient absolute? The upshot is to recognize that the search for unconditional truth assumes contact with “something” other than that to which labor or social praxis provide access—neither of which can surpass what is contingent and relative to changing needs. Hence, either a leap of faith and personal commitment to transcendent values—by Walicki’s lights the solution Brzozowski favoured—or the recognition that the search for certitude is the symptom of mythopoeic consciousness—the solution favoured by Kołakowski.

As Walicki presents these parallels they take on the air of paradox. He writes, “For both Brzozowski and Kołakowski philosophy is first of all the search for meaning, not the meaning of words, but the meaning of life, the meaning of the world.”<sup>35</sup> Walicki sees Kołakowski’s embrace of the ‘mythical option’ as a clue to what might have been Brzozowski’s own path had he had the time to probe to his nascent religious inclinations. Now, for Kołakowski, to recognize the presence of myth<sup>36</sup> is to recognize that cultural forms are inherently projective, that they supersede anything our experience in the world can possibly vouchsafe. Terms such as value (e.g., truth), abiding permanence, wholeness, contrast with our concrete experience of finitude, contingency, and fragmentation. Concerning the latter, there is all too much evidence; as to the former, it is as if the wish could make it so.

---

33 Walicki, “Leszek Kołakowski a Stanisław Brzozowski,” 19.

34 Ibid., 20.

35 Ibid., 21.

36 Leszek Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, trans. Adam Czerniawski (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989).

It seems to me, then, that with regard to the question of the “meaning of life,” as Walicki puts it, the position Kołakowski adopts, on the basis of his suspicion that myth permeates every cultural form, is akin to Anselm’s ‘*credo quia absurdum*’. We seem not to be able to get along without values which we ‘create’ to assure ourselves of meaning; but despite this we want to believe (an excusable form of bad faith) that some values are not contingent and historically relative, that they abide somewhere outside our ordinary experience. *Pace* Walicki, this does seem to be about the meaning we ascribe to words, empty signifiers, however much we may wish to believe the contrary.

In the end, therefore, once they gave up their ‘neo-Marxist’ convictions, Brzozowski and Kołakowski struggled with something redolent of the Hegelian ‘unhappy consciousness’—the search to reconcile the temporal and the eternal, the inner world of the spirit and worldly finitude. I can summarize this part of my discussion by the following pairs of contrasting characteristics—unresolved *aporias*—which, on the basis of Walicki’s reflections—apply equally to Brzozowski and Kołakowski in the last stages of their thinking:

|                                 |   |                                 |
|---------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Immanence                       | ↔ | Transcendence                   |
| Making truth                    | ↔ | Discovering truth               |
| Relativity/contingency/finitude | ↔ | Permanence/structure/foundation |
| Historied <sup>37</sup> culture | ↔ | Reality (Truth)                 |

where the characteristics in the right column are—certainly for Kołakowski and, I assume, for Brzozowski as well—projections (myths) by which we seek to assure ourselves that we are bound to something beyond the pale of finitude—represented by the characteristics in the left column.

**Brzozowski’s “Incomplete” Paradigm Shift?**

I have proposed that Brzozowski remained captive to the ‘modern philosophy of the subject’, though he sought a way to historicize, relativize the centred subject, believing that the autonomy of the self-creating subject would be preserved. That he remained captive is to say that he found it difficult to relinquish the idea that there is something essential, something substantive at the basis of self-creation.

37 The term ‘historied’ is taken from Joseph Margolis: “The grand theme that thought is historied, incapable of fixing the norms of reason beyond the horizon of its own contingent vision.” Cf. Joseph Margolis, *Historied Thought, Constructed World: A Conceptual Primer for the Turn of the Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 7.

I speculated at the outset of the paper that, given his questions, had Brzozowski at his disposal the discursive, philosophical means that Rorty deployed to considerable effect, he might have managed to relinquish the idea and take a path similar to Rorty's. While I can't hope in the present paper to sufficiently justify this hypothesis, I want to illustrate what I mean by 'had Brzozowski at his disposal the discursive, philosophical means'. It is a hypothesis about the dialectic of philosophy, about paradigm changes in philosophy, about new ways of thinking, something to which Brzozowski was attuned.

I will present two views of the history of (European) philosophy in terms of paradigm shifts, one by Habermas,<sup>38</sup> the other by Rorty,<sup>39</sup> and propose on that basis an interpretation of Brzozowski's truncated shift.

Habermas outlined the major shifts in the European philosophical consciousness since the Ancients as successive passages from being to consciousness to language. These can be described, very roughly, as, first, fascination with essence, whereby knowledge, itself an essential component of being, pays witness to essence in the form of Logos. The anomalies that came to afflict this paradigm prompted the questioning that culminated in the Kantian Copernican Revolution (things conform to concepts, not concepts to things), the shift to *Bewusstseinsphilosophie*, the 'philosophy of the subject'. In its turn, this move brought in its train the vexed question of the relation of mind to world, that is, the issue of 'epistemology', viz. does consciousness / mind reach beyond itself to the world in a way adequate to the world? This paradigm began losing its grip throughout the nineteenth century (perhaps with Nietzsche in one direction, with Frege in another, and with Peirce in yet another). Signs increased that *Bewusstseinsphilosophie* was ceding ground to symbolic practices—language—that not only carry meaning but are at the source of meaning.

Habermas does not hold, however, that the succession from being to consciousness to language involves radical discontinuity, such that it would be difficult to speak of the "history" of philosophy. We are, it is true, he holds, in a post-metaphysical era of philosophizing (that is, beyond being and the recovery of being in the subject), but that is not because we deserve to be sceptical about the pertinence of the old questions. Instead, new ways of thinking are better adapted to integrating the many and increasingly diverse discursive formations that Modernity has introduced into the public sphere. 'Paradigm changes' in philosophy

38 Jürgen Habermas, "Metaphysik nach Kant," in *Theorie der Subjektivität*, ed. H. F. Fulda, R-P. Horstmann and U. Pothast (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1990).

39 Rorty, "Non-reductive physicalism." Habermas and Rorty confronted their respective visions of the history of philosophy during the debate about the state of philosophy in Warsaw in 1995. See the reference in note 4 above.

are therefore better understood as increased awareness of philosophy's reconstructive efforts, within its discursive sphere, in view of needs for renewed meaning elsewhere in the broader socio-cultural context in which it is practiced and is acknowledged as relevant (or irrelevant). Habermas offers as an example of philosophy's reconstructive task the ways in which doubts about the discourse of mind and body in its Cartesian or transcendental formats were increasingly handled as the nineteenth century wore on. There are, Habermas believes,

[...] good grounds to ascribe philosophical status [...] to 'tertiary' [dritte] categories such as 'language', 'action', or 'body'. These attempts to rethink transcendental consciousness by 'incorporating it in language, action, and the body, and to 'situate' reason in society and history, have a not inconsiderable argumentative potential [Argumentationspotential] behind them. Starting with Humboldt, such arguments ran from Frege to Wittgenstein or from Dilthey to Gadamer, as well from Peirce to Mead, and from Feuerbach to Merleau-Ponty via Plessner.<sup>40</sup>

The issue I have raised about Brzozowski, in regard to the discursive means which he brought to the resolution of his questions about the relation of Self and world concerns precisely the 'tertiary' to which Habermas alludes. It is indisputable that Brzozowski was very much alive to the possibility that the Subject should be recast in terms of *action* as well as *reason in society and history*.<sup>41</sup> He was of course far less alive to the possibility of recasting the subject through the prism of *language*, in part because the 'linguistic turn' had not yet crystalized in the first decade of the new century. To see how the effects of this 'ignorance' can plausibly be measured in his philosophy I turn to Rorty's take on the paradigm shifts within European philosophy.

Rorty agrees broadly speaking with the 'three stage' view advanced by Habermas, but in his picture the succession *does* proceed in the form of radical breaks. Rorty thinks of the breaks as liberations from outmoded ways of talking, that is, from dead metaphors. He sides with Habermas as regards philosophy's reconstructive task, though in his case the shift to new ground involves not recasting the old questions but inventing new ways of talking, even at the cost of philosophy.

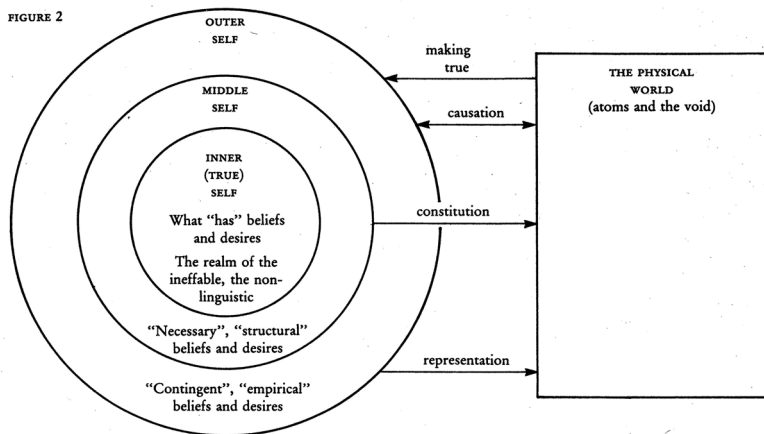
Although philosophers' fascination with 'Being' came to be displaced by discovery of the Subject, modern philosophy bogged down in what Rorty de-

---

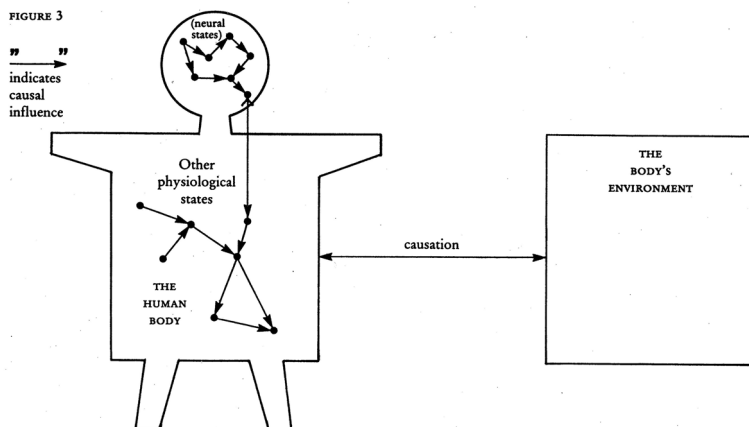
40 Habermas, "Metaphysik nach Kant," 435f.

41 Recourse to italics, here and below, is meant to indicate that the reference of the expressions is to categories.

scribes as the “post-Kantian” model of the Subject (or Self) that had been paradigmatic for some two centuries. He diagrams the model in this way:



The second model, the one that Rorty bids us to recognize (on the basis of his favoured ‘pragmatist lineage’), is strikingly different.<sup>42</sup>



The differences between the two models are all too evident, not least of all visually. The second diagram has but one arrow symbolizing the relation—that of causation—between the human self (the organism) and the world. The first, by contrast, sets up four relations and, in addition, presents a ‘picture’ of the inner make-up of the self that is incomparably more complex than that of the second.

42 Both diagrams are from Rorty, “Non-reductive physicalism,” 119, 122.

Suffice it to say, and indeed Rorty wants to say, that in the former the self is characterized as a (transcendental or noumenal) centre to which various ‘functions’ and resources accrue over which this centre exerts control. The latter model is devoid of any such centre: it represents a major philosophical shift away from the philosophy of the subject. The make-up of the ‘self’ in the second model consists of the same stuff that its environment consists of, that is, the perspective is naturalist all the way down, nothing remains left over which something else—the kind of self pictured in the first diagram—could claim as its specific mode of being. The two models do, however, share a vision of ‘external reality’—one which takes its cues from physical science. God, final causes, unseen spirits are absent in the physics of the post-Kantian model, all the more so in the physics of fields of energized particles.<sup>43</sup>

Now, in light of these models as well as Habermas’ paradigm shifts, how far did Brzozowski come in deconstructing the post-Kantian Subject? He would boil down the post-Kantian self in a way that stands mid-way between Rorty’s two models. With Rorty, Brzozowski would strip away the relations of ‘making true’ and ‘representation’—the mainstays of the correspondence theory of truth. Again like Rorty he would retain the double arrow of causation, the relation of the organism and the environment. However, in contrast to Rorty, he would leave in place the arrow of constitution running from the human being to the world, though in his case post-Kantian constitution becomes (Marxian) ‘labor’. Rorty would see this as a vestige of the post-Kantian *Bewusstseinsphilosophie*. The question immediately arises whether or not Brzozowski believed that behind ‘constitution’ *qua* ‘labor’ there stands some deeper Self, and the further question is whether his ‘model’ of the Self in relation to the world is finally coherent.

Notice first, however, that Rorty believes that he can eat his cake and have it, too. He insists that his second, minimalist model is not to be interpreted as banishing *talk* of the subject (the self). This follows as soon as we acknowledge the futility of the epistemological enterprise—the obsession with objective representation—and drop the idea that language is the medium of cognitive representation: the problem with the reference of self-talk vanishes accordingly. Self-talk does not hinge on objective representations of the way things really are ‘in here’.

---

43 Rorty buttresses his argument in favour of the second model by three theses (mostly taken over from Donald Davidson): (1) reasons for our actions must be their causes; (2) sentences are not made true by the world, and (3) the meanings we think inhabit our sentences are metaphors gone dead. The upshot is that there is no ‘space’, no centre from within which the Subject establishes a relation to the world. The difference that subject-talk makes in our lives does not require an epistemic warrant underwritten by ontological realism (or idealism for that matter).

In Rorty's nominalist model, language games do not pick out bits in the world, nor bits within the subject; they have no place, therefore, within the single relation his minimalist model depicts. Within the scope of the causal nexus joining the organism and the environment all that there can be of language is acoustic blasts and physical marks, the rest being a matter of some of these blasts and physical marks becoming familiar to their users in accord with their needs.<sup>44</sup>

Rorty would not know what to make of Brzozowski's 'labor', all the more so as there is an open question as to how Brzozowski understood labor.<sup>45</sup> Did he think that human labor manages to do more than rearrange pre-existing materials and brings into existence entities of a new 'human' kind, or did he hold instead that our artefacts remain relative to, and therefore dependent on, the way in which we 'perceive' arrangements of pre-existing materials as meaningful to—and for—us? But Rorty, we saw, removes the sting from the issue by dint of his pragmatist 'linguistic turn': once you rid yourself of the idea that language is a medium in which to convey representations of the way things are, including the way 'new things' created by human ingenuity are, then nothing hangs on deciding the issue one way or another. 'Talk' of a new human world that is significant to its users is a feather in the cap of the creative imagination in our culture, not a report about the state of a world 'out there'.

Now given Brzozowski's appeal to the Self to be rid of the historical world it has created, it would appear that he does ascribe ontological weight to labor, for how else could the world compromise the autonomy of the Self? If so, then he is blocked from turning Rorty's neat trick of neutralizing the issue. For if the historical world is 'real', then ipso facto what we say about the things we bring into existence has to be constrained by what they are, objectively, in particular if we are to acquire the means to be better able to realize our intentions. But then,

---

44 Rorty's 'linguistic turn' is that of a radical nominalist, not in an ontological sense since that would run counter to his anti-representationalism, but in a linguistic sense alone. For him, words, sentences, narratives, etc. are just so many tools serving whatever purposes appear important to us within our public spheres. In addition, he subscribes to a Darwinian evolutionary account of the needs for which language is a tool.

45 I took on this question in an earlier publication believing that Brzozowski could be characterized as a constructionalist nominalist in the manner of Nelson Goodman; Brzozowski's labor might be likened to Goodman's 'ways of world making'. However, there are passages in Brzozowski in which he puts forward by far more realist-sounding claims—'labor brings out about' substantial change, creates entities that are properly qualified as human. Cf. Edward M. Świdorski, "Was Brzozowski a 'constructionist'? A contemporary reading of Brzozowski's 'philosophy of labour'," *Studies in East European Thought* 63 (2011).

however much Brzozowski would have liked to rid philosophy of the worry about how things really are out there, by clinging to a strong concept of labor can he consistently give up objective representation?

Of course, Brzozowski would be struck dumb by the question “are there really tables?” As would Rorty, who explains, however: “[...] the best way to predict the behaviour of tables will probably remain to talk about them *qua* tables rather than as collections of particles or as fuzzy replicas of the Platonic archetypal Table. That is all one could possibly mean by saying ‘There really are tables.’”<sup>46</sup> To ‘predict the behaviour of something’ is to make sense of it relative to our needs; we won’t advance the meaning of table-talk amongst ourselves, in our life-world, if we switch to talking about tables in terms of particles or archetypes. We don’t need independent confirmation of the existence of tables *qua* tables to fix the *use* of table talk.

Brzozowski, on the contrary, both does and doesn’t need independent confirmation. He doesn’t insofar as it belongs to a strong ontological concept of labor that, when successful, labor runs its course to the finished product, with the laborer monitoring the process to the end. ‘I made the table, I can show you how—so of course it exists’. He does need independent confirmation, however, in the sense that the strong concept can stand its ground only in case there is an intentional subject of labor suitably equipped and able to set in train the process in the course of which the finished product comes into being.<sup>47</sup>

In this last regard, we arrive once again at the tension at the heart of Brzozowski’s philosophy. Though the history of her industry is all that the Self is, nevertheless, in order to preserve its autonomy and creative potential the Self has to free itself of that content. Stating the same thing in terms of Rorty’s post-Kantian model as modified by Brzozowski—there is a centred Self underlying the constitution of the meaningful experience of the world and intentional action.

I have argued all along that this is what Brzozowski believed, but that at the same time he struggled to reconcile this belief in the autonomous Self with his equally persistent belief in the ‘human world’ created by the Self. On the one hand, he would have agreed with Habermas that relative to the human world it makes, the Self could well be recast in terms of the categories of *action* and *historical reason*. On the other hand, because he thought that it belongs *essentially*

46 Rorty, “Non-reductive physicalism,” 115f.

47 A transcendental argument could be imagined which concludes to the existence of such a subject from the undeniable fact that tables do exist and therefore had to be constructed by a subject. But this is a dubious strategy given that the intentional properties of tables obviously require reference to intentional subjects, without this alone entailing that the subjects produce real tables.

to the Self to make the human world, he shied away from relativizing that essential characteristic in terms of *historical reason*, since in that case the Self would be on a par with its products, as relative as they in relation to changing needs and new ways of categorizing.

Habermas and Rorty, though in different ways, see that the dialectic of philosophical argument moved past a perhaps still substantive notion of the human world as when *language* began taking over the reins of *action* and *historical reason* from whatever vestiges of *consciousness* that still remained. *Language*—in the several connotations Habermas marks out in the passage quoted above—displaces ‘consciousness’ and ‘experience’ as both the source and carrier of meaning, becoming thereby the primary locus of *action* and *historical reason*. The latter became coeval with *language*; they cannot be more meaningful than the meaning that *language* articulates. For the Self, the subject, the upshot seems to be unmistakable. Self-understanding is not independent of, it is constituted by, *language* as the articulate bearer, the ‘site’ of historical understandings. Rorty, however, takes the argument to the limit by dint of his nominalism: self-understanding is not to be glossed as discovering some fact of the matter about the nature of the self across the history of *language*, for instance, some fact about the essentially creative potential of the self.

Seen in this light, Brzozowski’s hope to retrieve the Self from the historical world the Self creates, even as he concedes that the historical world is all the content that the Self has, is rife with paradox: by stepping back from the world the Self has created does it not relinquish the means it has put in place to give expression to its activity in that world? That is, does it not deprive itself of articulate self-representation? Brzozowski’s ‘argument’ is that the Self is forever more than it has in fact created, is never identical with its actual project, and therefore in principle is ahead of itself. The downside for him is that the historical world that the Self has created can compromise its autonomy to the extent that the Self deceives itself about the source and ‘substance’ of that world—as being the outcome of forces beyond the reach of labor—and succumbs as a result to the illusions of fetish. In response to this danger Brzozowski insists all the more on the urgent need for the Self to appropriate its autonomy over and against the world it has created. The questions that remain are: what is the nature of the autonomy that the Self is asked to recover in pure form, so to speak, and how, if at all, does the Self represent that autonomy to itself over and beyond its means of self-expression within the historical world it has left behind?<sup>48</sup>

---

48 In “Nasze ‘ja’ i historia” Brzozowski cites with approval Hegel’s *Phenomenology*: it is an example of how to overcome fetishized consciousness. It seems, however, that Brzozowski either misunderstands or overlooks Hegel’s *Geist* that comes to self-con-

We can avail ourselves at this stage of Walicki's account of Brzozowski's 'evolution'. Recall that for Walicki, not only did Brzozowski grow wary of the historical world, a realm of contingency and relativity threatening the constancy of the Self, he came in time to the conclusion that the Self is not self-sufficient, it cannot pretend to the status of an/the Absolute. In other words, the 'remaining questions' above can have no answer so long as they assume the Self's self-sufficiency. Brzozowski could not go down the road to *Language* in the sense of Habermas and Rorty; the philosophical dialectic at the time had not come far enough to allow Brzozowski to envision such a possibility. Where Habermas and Rorty, each in their own way, relativize the ontology of the historical world to the manner in which way it is displayed in language, Brzozowski, despite his doubts about the self-sufficiency of the Self, needs the 'strong' concept of labor to reinforce the urgent need to recover the 'truth' about the Self—her autonomy over and against this historically created world. But as soon as autonomy as self-sufficiency is perceived to be groundless, empty, where is refuge for the Self, a sense of foundation, to be sought?

Walicki assures us that at this stage Brzozowski grasped at the straws of transcendence, he reached out to an/the 'Absolute'. It is more to the point to observe, however, that if Walicki's word is to be taken regarding Kołakowski's and Brzozowski's spiritual kinship, then Brzozowski's turn to the Absolute was tantamount to coming to terms with myth in Kołakowski's meaning. Semantically, myths are empty signifiers as far as ordinary experience is concerned, nothing corresponds to them, but they are infused with a meaning that comes from the need, the hope that there is something beyond experience to which these signifiers correspond. If we give up this hope, suppress the need, the nothingness that ensues would be tantamount to the death of the Self (and for Kołakowski at least undermine the creative forces within culture).

I wrote above that Rorty would have been nonplussed by Brzozowski's strong concept of labor. He would doubtless have been impressed by the 'romantic imagination' to which Brzozowski gave expression in his passionate quest for some deeper meaning of the creative, autonomous Self. Still, he would have seen behind Brzozowski's efforts the ever persistent influence of the philosophy of the subject throughout the forms it acquired following Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'. He wrote in this regard:

Kant and Hegel went only halfway in their repudiation of the idea that truth is "out there." They were willing to view the world of empirical science as a made world—to see matter

---

sciousness by reflexively appropriating and identifying with the totality of its historical objectivations.

as constructed by mind, or as consisting in mind insufficiently conscious of its own mental character. But they persisted in seeing mind, spirit, the depths of the human self, as having an intrinsic nature—one which could be known by a kind of non-empirical super science called philosophy. This meant that only half of truth—the bottom, scientific half—was made. Higher truth, the truth about mind, the province of philosophy, was still a matter of discovery rather than creation.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the spirit, if not every detail, of this passage corresponds to Brzozowski's predicament: that mind—or labor—'makes' the world, a making expressive of its nature, the self-representation—the discovery of which requires a form of representation that transcends experience, whether or not this form goes under the name 'philosophy' (perhaps 'religion'). Rorty would be happy, I am sure, to label this higher form of self-representation 'myth', though not in Kołakowski's meaning, the point of which is to preserve the semblance of representation despite the empty signifiers. For Rorty, it is myth because it is an idea that has outlived its time; if it was once culturally significant, an overstated invitation to think beyond reified ways of describing human relations, today we understand this need to seek new ways of being without claiming that successive ways are closer approximations to 'truth', Kołakowski/Brzozowski affirm that we can't have one without the other, the new forms of being require a concomitant sense of continuity, certainty, historical wholeness, for as Brzozowski puts it, the entire point of European history is to show that "the Self is no illusion, but something *essential*."<sup>50</sup>

Taken to this stage, to the point where the Truth of the Self, over and beyond its created human world, is 'myth', there is no possibility of a rational solution to the question. Curiously, Rorty would certainly agree with the conclusion, though he would arrive at it from a diametrically opposed perspective. Language is the heart of the matter: Brzozowski's move into Myth requires him to forsake language for the sake of 'what cannot be said'; Rorty detaches language from the obligation to say how anything is. Regarding the Self and its 'truth' the two positions come to the same: words in the absence of representations.

---

49 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 4.

50 "[...] the fundamental and basic direction of European history. The self is no illusion, but something essential. European culture has been the struggle to identify the concepts of consciousness and man, to elevate man to the dignity of a free and real agent of his fate. Brzozowski, "Nasze 'ja' i historia," 19.

## WORKS CITED

- Bielawski, Paweł. "Stanisława Brzozowskiego Wstęp do filozofii – próba analizy." <http://www.racjonalista.pl/kk.php/s,500/k,3>
- Bielik-Robson, Agata, "Syndrom romantyczny. Stanisław Brzozowski i rewizja romantyzmu." *Śląskie Prace Filologiczne. Seria Filologia Polska*, 5 (2007): 53–63.
- Brzozowski, Stanisław. "Kant w stulecie śmierci." In *Kultura i życie*, 249–257.
- . "Przyroda i poznanie." In *Idee*, 184–203.
- . "Pragmatyzm i materializm dziejowy." In *Idee*, 204–212.
- . "Nasze 'ja' i historia." In *Legenda Młodej Polski*, 9–27.
- . "Polska dziecięciniała." In *Legenda Młodej Polski*, 49–84.
- Grad, Paweł, ed. *Warszawska Szkoła Historii Idei: tożsamość, tradycja, obecność*. Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 2014.
- Gutorow, Jacek. "Stanisław Brzozowski and the ends of thought," *Studia Culturae* 16 (2013).  
<http://iculture.spb.ru/index.php/stucult/article/view/469>
- Habermas, Jürgen. "Metaphysik nach Kant." In *Theorie der Subjektivität*, edited by Hans Friedrich Fulda, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, and Ulrich Potheast, 425–443. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1990.
- James, William. *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. In: *Writings, 1902–1910*, edited by Bruce Kuklick, 479–624. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1987.
- Kołąkowski, Andrzej, ed. *Wokół dorobku Warszawskiej Szkoły Historii Idei*. Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 2013.
- Kołąkowski, Leszek. *Główne nurty marksizmu. Powstanie, rozwój, rozkład*. 3 vols. Paris: Instytut literacki, 1977.
- . "Miejsce filozofowania Stanisława Brzozowskiego." In *Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone z lat 1955–1968*, vol. I, 160–176. London: Puls, 1989.
- . *The Presence of Myth*. Translated by Adam Czerniawski. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989
- Margolis, Joseph. *Historied Thought, Constructed World: A Conceptual Primer for the Turn of the Millennium*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Niżnik, Józef, and John T. Sanders, eds. *Debating the State of Philosophy. Habermas, Rorty, and Kołąkowski*. Westport: Praeger, 1996.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

- . “Non-reductive physicalism.” In *Objectivity, relativism, and truth. Philosophical papers*, vol. 1, 113–125. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- . “Pragmatism and romanticism.” In *Philosophy as cultural politics. Philosophical papers*, vol. 4, 105–119. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Świderski, Edward M. “Was Brzozowski a ‘constructionist’? A contemporary reading of Brzozowski’s ‘philosophy of labour’.” *Studies in East European Thought* 63 (2011): 329–343.
- Tischner, Józef. *Polski kształt dialogu*. Kraków: Znak, 2002.
- Walicki, Andrzej. *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish Beginnings of ‘Western Marxism’*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- . “Leszek Kołakowski a Stanisław Brzozowski.” In *Kołakowski i inni*, edited by Jan Skoczyński, 15–23. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 1995.