

Brzozowski and the Italians

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Brzozowski's preface to his *Idee* (Ideas) is a case unique in its kind, altogether contrary to the rationalist canon of modern science. He certainly was not the first thinker who recognized that a philosophical 'opus' is first of all a process as well as an active method of development and construction—the creation of the philosopher's own consciousness. However, it is here as well that the philosopher begins his life-long summa by way of personal confidences that take the form of an intellectual diary. Not only does Brzozowski not give an account of the chapters that make up his philosophical book, he likewise provides no alternative systematic overview of its contents. The author opens his text in a most peculiar way, compromising so to say the objectivity of his own research presented here as a journey through life: "an odyssey across the seas of the human spirit and life which in our time is the only possible epic" (odysėja po morzach ducha i życia ludzkiego, która jest jedynym możliwym eposem naszego czasu).¹ For example:

Krytyka moja była buntem nie posiadającym lub poszukującym dla siebie organów myśli, i w ich braku walczyła takimi, na których ciążyła jeszcze przynależność do bezhistorycznego, abstrakcyjnego stanowiska myślowego, tego właśnie stanowiska, z którym podjąłem walkę.²

My critique was a revolt neither possessing nor seeking to find organs of thinking, and in their absence it was a struggle against those afflicted by adherence to an ahistorical, abstract form of thinking, the form precisely that I set out to oppose.

1 Stanisław Brzozowski, "Kilka uwag o stanie ogólnym literatury europejskiej i o zadaniach krytyki literackiej I" (Some remarks about the overall state of literature in Europe and the tasks of literary criticism, part I), *Głosy wśród nocy*, 97.

2 Brzozowski, *Idee*, 71f.

And again:

Stanisław Przybyszewski to oswobodził mnie z tej najniebezpieczniejszej dla zmysłu prawdy i życia jednolitego niewoli: – dzięki niemu przekonałem się, że można żyć na stanowiskach duchowych nakazanych nam przez poczucie wewnętrzne prawdy nawet wtedy, gdy nie mamy w myśli naszej żadnych środków utrzymania się na nich.³

Stanisław Przybyszewski freed me from that most pernicious captivity affecting the sense of truth and the integral life—thanks to him I came to the conviction that it is possible to live on a spiritual basis prescribed to us by our inner sense of truth even when in our thinking we lack any means to stand firm on it.

Passages like these give the impression that we find ourselves at the heart of a nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* or else in the face of an ironic, self-conscious statement by a character from Witkiewicz, or perhaps as well that we are presented with a fragment from Brzozowski's novel *Plomienie* (Flames) or from his *Książka o starej kobiecie* (A Book about an Old Woman). It is not my point to suggest that *Ideas* starts out as a novel—including recourse to essayistic form, blending a variety of expressive styles, the interpenetration of literary, critical, and philosophical matter, which are rather common in texts grounded in the romantic tradition. Of greater interest would be the kind of strategy to which Brzozowski appeals: it consists in not separating the progressive construction of the creative subject—the critical subject taking shape through self-thematizing, the discovery of fundamental premises for philosophizing within biography—from the philosophical matter itself.

Brzozowski himself, taking account of his own experience of reading Sorel, and by the same token instructing his reader as to possible ways of reading, incites us to change our understanding of the tasks a philosophical text has to fulfill. He puts the accent not so much on the actual meaning contained in the text but on the cognitive activity it triggers. This is not about what the text means but how it acts.

Narzędzie działa i żyje tylko w samym procesie; dlatego tak trudno jest czytać Sorela. Dojrzały czytelnik tych pism [...] przekona się, że pozornie są one tylko tak chaotyczne, że nie są to niespójne nagromadzenia uwag, *ale nowo narodzone, nieznające jeszcze swej własnej natury organizmy myślowe*.⁴

3 Ibid., 72.

4 Ibid., 257.

A tool acts and lives only in the process itself; that is why it is so difficult to read Sorel. A mature reader of his writings [...] will come to see that only superficially are they chaotic, *that they are not formless collections of remarks, but newly born thought organisms still ignorant of their own nature.*

According to Brzozowski, Sorel does not construct a philosophical conclusion on the basis of his considerations: he does not explicate ready-made meanings, rather he ‘creates meaning in us’: “Pisze on ściśle tylko tyle, ile tworzy; daje nam sam proces życiowy myśli” (He writes precisely only as much as he creates; he offers us the very course of life within thought).⁵ Brzozowski offers a similar reading of Bergson. What remains important for Brzozowski is the specific ‘activism’ of philosophical thinking that shapes its meanings in a way resembling the manner in which literature does by exploiting the metaphorical might of fiction, viz., performatively, in a progressive manner, often dramatizing the text by means of what only seem to be fragmentary statements colliding against one another and obliging the reader to second the struggle of ideas and apply himself to the intellectual outcome of their friction.⁶

In the important chapter in *Ideas* devoted to Sorel and Bergson, the author writes of the “unsystematic” character of the former’s works. They do not permit of “abstract treatment” but constitute “multilateral and vital tools”—“this strange something, that needs to be created by one’s own effort in the soul, as an organ of thought, apt to think about life without injuring it [the organ]” (to dziwne coś, co zrodzić trzeba własnym wysiłkiem w duszy, jako organ myśli, zdolny myśleć o życiu, nie krzywdząc jego).⁷ The fluidity of meanings, extracting them in the course of the subject’s intellectual labor, *in statu nascendi*, is connected evidently with, besides Bergson’s ideally realized perspective, an element previously referred to in the book and tied directly to Marxist philosophy. The reference is to Antonio Labriola’s philosophy of practice (*filosofia della praxis*) understood as the codependence of philosophy and practice, as “the emancipation of life from the dominance of the concepts through which we conceive of it” (emancypacj[a] życia spod władzy form pojęciowych, za pomocą których je

5 Ibid., 258.

6 See also: Joanna Orska, “Stanisław Brzozowski – poeta i filozof. Krytyka jako poezja progresywna w *Głosach wśród nocy*” (Stanisław Brzozowski—poet and philosopher. Criticism as progressive poetry in *Voices in the Night*), *Teksty drugie* 5 (2011); eadem, “Ja – ‘arabeska’” [The self is an arabesque], in *Stanisław Brzozowski (ko)repetycje*, vol. 1, ed. Dorota Kozicka, Joanna Orska, and Krzysztof Uniłowski (Katowice: FA-art, 2012).

7 Brzozowski, *Idee*, 257.

ujmujemy).⁸ The Hegelian-Marxist conviction that humanity is its own more or less conscious product explains Brzozowski's insistent and apodictic tone when, writing about Sorel's philosophy, he insisted that agreement and intellectual concordance do not constitute the basis for truth:

[...] prawda musi polegać na tym, że się nią jest, a nie zaś, że się ją poznaje. I że cały wielokształtny świat ludzki może pozostawać w głębokiej zgodzie z samym sobą, różniąc się umysłowo i duchowo nieskończenie i wiedząc, że ta różnica jest organem tej zgody.⁹

[...] *one is in the truth, one does not come to know it.* And that the entire multifaceted human world can remain *in profound agreement with itself* while manifesting endless intellectual and spiritual diversity, aware at the same time that this diversity is the organ of agreement.

In the present study, what interests me is the 'poetic', that is, literary aspect that a philosophical work acquires as it establishes the creation of an 'interactive', 'living' text-work. Its task would be to represent, or rather to constitute in the reader, the sort of formula for 'truth' that one is to be in the course of action, through the 'progressive autonomization' of philosophical thought. Such 'poetic' experimentation in the context of a philosophical exposition is typical of Brzozowski and can rarely be found elsewhere. The more typical nineteenth century post-romantic thinking, rife in the energy of Marxist or Nietzschean discourse, remains the straightforward discursive declaration of the inseparability of philosophy and philology as tools of 'autonomization'. From an 'external' perspective, this is accompanied by the conviction that they cannot be separated from biology, physics, history, economics, politics—every kind of science and art. This kind of tradition is equally important for German idealist philosophy as well as for the specific renaissance-like humanism of the Italian interpreters of Marxism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These two tendencies constituted the core of Brzozowski's most essential and critical thinking.

8 Brzozowski, *Idee*, 82. Brzozowski first mentions Labriola when discussing the notion of historical materialism in the presently discussed chapter and in another entitled "Epigenetyczna teoria historii" (Epigenetic theory of history) in which Labriola is evoked in the context of a critique of orthodox "post-Engels" Marxism. Brzozowski refers to him as a writer important for both Bergson and Sorel as well as for the Italian thinkers Croce and Gentile, reference to whose writings recurs in *Idee* on several occasions. Brzozowski also wrote a separate essay devoted to Labriola, which was first published in the collection *Kultura i życie* (1907).

9 Brzozowski, *Idee*, 255.

In his introduction to *Ideas*, Andrzej Walicki underscores the specific alternative that thinkers—who stood apart from the politicized and evolutionistic readings of Marxism by the legislators of the II International (Plekhanov, Kautsky), based mostly on *Capital* and Engels's version of Marxism—created to operate with Marxist categories (the world understood as the correlate of activity). Walicki also draws attention to the resemblance of Brzozowski's views to those of the somewhat younger theoretician and critic of Marxism, Antonio Gramsci.¹⁰ Brzozowski and Gramsci both read Labriola, Croce, and Italian critics and aestheticians drawing similar interpretations from their works. The immanentist conception of reality as reduced to the activity of history, or as Gramsci put it, “pure humanism,” explains Kant's subjective conception of reality as the “historical subjectivity of a social group.”¹¹ Freed from all manner of transcendental excesses, radical historicism, by renouncing an essentialist conception of human nature and asserting that all human knowledge is the product of human history, shows that—as Walicki demonstrates—Gramsci is closer to Brzozowski than to Lukács.¹² The simplest way of putting the point is to say that this specific understanding of Marxism (in contradiction to the II International) makes Brzozowski's and Gramsci's thinking kindred. However, Brzozowski, while citing Labriola as an unorthodox and independent Marx interpreter, turned as well on several occasions to yet another Italian source that was for him quite essential, providing a common thread of meaning for the pursuits of the positive heroes of his *Idee*, viz. Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova*.¹³

In a recently published book devoted to contemporary Italian Marxist thought, Roberto Esposito assesses its history in relation to the category of phi-

10 See also Walicki's *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Beginnings of 'Western Marxism'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

11 Andrzej Walicki, “Filozofia dojrzałości dziejowej,” (The philosophy of historical maturity), introduction to: Brzozowski, *Idee*, 23.

12 Walicki, *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish Beginnings of 'Western Marxism'*, 26. There are still other similarities between Brzozowski and Gramsci. Walicki supports his thesis by calling on Bronisław Baczko and Ewa Sowa (*ibid.*, 2, 318) who contributed to the collection *Wokół myśli Stanisława Brzozowskiego*, edited by Walicki and Roman Zimand in 1974.

13 See Eliza Kącka, “‘Nieobciążony wpływem żadnej sekty...’ Giambattista Vico w myśleniu Stanisława Brzozowskiego.” In *Brzozowski (ko)repetycje*, ed. by Dorota Kozicka, Joanna Orska, and Krzysztof Uniłowski (Katowice: FA-art, 2012). The first to write about the ties of Brzozowski's philosophy to Vico was Rena A. Syska-Lamparska, *Stanisław Brzozowski: a Polish Vichian*, preface by Wiktor Weintraub (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1987).

losophy connected to the *operaismo* movement. Characterizing what he seeks to present as “the Italian difference,” he refers to categories that on his assumption proceed from the original and distinctive conception of Italian culture, the beginnings of which would be associated with the Renaissance. The philosophical orientation that interests Esposito and that is supposed to constitute the specificity of contemporary Italian Marxism, is most often simply equated with ‘Italian humanism’.¹⁴ At the beginning of his book Esposito cites Pico della Mirandola’s famous oration *On the Dignity of Man* as perhaps being the earliest European philosophical and political manifesto declaring a non-essentialist conception of man. According to Mirandola, man is a “work of indeterminate form” to whom God ascribed “no fixed seat, no form of thy own, no gift peculiarly thine.”¹⁵ It is this indeterminacy that constitutes the basis of human freedom and gives to the Christian doctrine of free will its real meaning. Man is a being who knows how to create himself and not a subject with predetermined conditions of existence. Esposito indicates not only that speculative categories are inseparable from practical and aesthetic categories (much as in early German romanticism), but also that profound philosophical thinking cannot be disconnected from local history, politics and everyday life. He is very much concerned to divorce ‘living Italian thinking’ from any connotations of both nationalism and Italian fascism.¹⁶

Describing the “Italian difference” on more than one occasion in the categories of a philosophy of man as a social being, constantly going beyond himself, tied both to social life and to biology that submits to no norm, Esposito questions the primacy of language (presupposed by hermeneutics and analytic philosophy)

14 Roberto Esposito, *Pensiero vivente. Origini e attualità della filosofia italiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010). All references here are to the translation, *Living Thought. The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, transl. by Zakiya Hanafi (California: Stanford University Press, 2012).

15 As cited in Esposito, *Living Thought*, 41.

16 Esposito treats “Italianateness” virtually as a philosophical a category seeing its sources in the Italian Renaissance. Given the originality together with the anachronistic character of this concept that is central to his work, Esposito keeps clear of any romantic nationalist connotations. The philosophies of Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, Galileo or Vico do not provide, according to Esposito, elements of a typically idealist historiography insofar as they emerged under conditions of political decentralisation, in a fragmented world, in a world of clashing interests. For these reasons “Italianateness” has its beginnings in literature. Although this thesis is to some extent a historical simplification related to the wishful character of the ideological manifesto that *Il pensiero vivente* in fact is, it is hard to resist the attractiveness of “Italianateness” so understood.

that became the basis of the anti-metaphysical turn in European philosophy. From the Italian perspective, the linguistic turn that considers language as a determinate philosophical value, analyzed in its own matter, creates overly abstract speculations and cannot for that reason bring remedies to the ethical or social problems generated by modernism. “The Italian difference” upholds the romantic conviction in the importance as much of language as of literature in order to actualize their conflictual relation to life. It enables us to discern the difference between the intellectual conceptualization of the world from human life as such, and it conceives of this difference as the basic factor in the conflict between the present and tradition, and hence of the dynamics of history. Esposito follows Leopardi’s *Zibaldone* in affirming that the Enlightenment, in its feverish pursuit of truth, deprived humans of their material roots, thus leading Platonism and Christianity, for which the spirit is superior to matter, to extreme consequences, including abstracting entirely from language.

The attempt to reconstruct the meaning of literature with recourse to Vico’s historical myth, comprising the metaphorically written, historical heritage of man’s past efforts, penetrating the present down to its core, is the reason why Esposito’s text is not a scholarly work. The author of *Living Thought* creates his own history of the “Italian difference,” referring in equal measure to its cultural and philosophical origins (in the writings of Machiavelli, Bruno, and Vico), as well as to paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Cuoca’s historical writings, de Sanctis’s literary critique, and especially Leopardi’s poetry that he so admires. Attempting to reactivate the meaning of philosophy as inseparable from life, Esposito does not turn literature into an instrument for the proof of antecedently admitted philosophical theses, as is so often the case in contemporary German and French thought. Instead, he tries to glean, within diverse means of expression, ‘nuggets’ of thought that actively produce philosophical meanings while excluding nothing from their historical nature or literary specificity. The inseparability, the historical immanence, and progressivism of the many individuals’ spiritual and intellectual lives for whom the most important complex that renders self-consciousness (autonomy) possible, remains the necessity of creating community—this is the ideological conglomerate that, according to Esposito, characterizes the “Italian difference”: It is a specific multi-linear, dynamic, restless, internally contradictory, and constantly changing ‘whole’ of a pre-modernist bent that nevertheless does not prevent it from anchoring itself, polemically, within modernity. What is decisive in this regard is the inclination of Italian thought toward what is not philosophical: to depart from philosophy in the direction of a broadly conceived externality out of which arises

its “civil commitment and its contamination from other styles of expression.”¹⁷ It is this inclination that is the cause of its separation from the specialized, self-reflexive lexicon of philosophical concepts characteristic of modern philosophy.

In the chapter of *Ideas* entitled “Pragmatism and historical materialism”—that together with “The epigenetic theory of history,” “Nature and knowledge,” and the “Prolegomena to the philosophy of ‘labor’” constitutes the philosophical core of the volume—Vico is called on as a witness only sporadically but on each occasion his appearance is spectacular. One instance is the discussion of the empiriocriticist and pragmatist views of Richard Avenarius and Ernst Mach. In *Ideas*, Brzozowski undertook a ‘personal’ struggle with

[...] *niemożność osiągnięcia* jedną i głęboką, współczującą myślą wszystkiego, co było twórczym, pracowitym, pełnym dobrej wiary w ubiegłym stuleciu. Początkiem jakiegoś nowego barbarzyństwa jest stan, w którym pewne dziedziny duszy własnej są głuchonieme wobec siebie.¹⁸

[...] *the impossibility of grasping* in a single profound and empathetic thought all that has been creative, painstaking, and full of good faith in the course of the last century. The beginning of a new barbarism is the state within which certain areas of the soul are deaf and dumb to themselves.

In the “Pragmatism” chapter Brzozowski confronts philosophies that “still continue today to defend the specter of being, of a ready world” (dziś jeszcze usiłują bronić widma bytu, gotowego świata)¹⁹ and that he considers entirely anachronistic. Criticizing Mach’s mechanist view of life, he cites *The New Science*, so resonant with his own style:

W tej gęstej nocy, która zalega myśl od najdalszej, najpierwotniejszej starożytności, ukazuje się to nieprzemijające wieczne światło tej prawdy, która nigdy nie podlega zaciemnieniu i nie może być podana w wątpliwość, że ten świat społeczny został stworzony przez ludzi.²⁰

17 Esposito, *Living Thought*, 11.

18 Brzozowski, *Idee*, 253.

19 Ibid., 209.

20 Ibid., 208.

But in the thick night of darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from us, there shines the eternal and never-failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men.²¹

In his *New Science* Vico traces the entirety of knowledge, understood here as the social world (with its logic, morality, economy, politics, physics, astronomy, chronology in the sense of history and geography), back to poetic wisdom that he considers to be the wisdom of the ancients, the origins of which he attempts to winnow out of commonly known myths, as traces of a no longer decipherable past consciousness. For Vico, the social world is a world that we once succeeded in imagining and narrating; the poetic creation of the community precedes intellectual conceptualization and makes possible the later functioning of social institutions. The idea of the collective construction of history, conceived as the effort of imagination, though without the possibility of attaining any kind of an enduring, however finite form, seems to pervade Brzozowski's philosophy of labor in a most evident manner. In order to systematize the concepts Brzozowski brings to his account, we need to get clear about how he understands the category of 'creation' that seems to be connected to a considerable degree with Vico's 'poetic wisdom'.

Giorgio Agamben, one of the heroes of the last chapter of Esposito's book, in a work entitled *L'uomo senza contenuto* (1970, *The Man without Content*), tries to recover the issues related to the ancients' concepts of poiesis and praxis, the separation of which was decisive for the Cartesian model of epistemology in the European Enlightenment.²² Its direct consequence appears to have been the separation of mind and body, subject and object. Following Aristotle, Agamben restores the Greek meaning of poiesis as inventing rather than acting or 'making' something, as widely understood today, and identifies it with the creative process as such. For Aristotle, poiesis connotes pro-duction (bringing something into the world out of nothing) of new objects, material objects above all, a meaning ascribed in antiquity to every kind of technical creativity.²³ Agamben critically presents the nineteenth century history of the identification of this concept with the practice that was supposed to have led to the nihilist interpretation of art as

21 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1948), 85.

22 Giorgio Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1970); here and below I reference the translation: *The Man without Content*, trans. G. Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

23 Agamben refers of course to Aristotle's distinction between poesis and praxis in the Nicomachean Ethics. Agamben, *The Man without Content*, 68f.

an essentially self-sufficient, critically self-aware practice based on, as with Aristotle's praxis, desire and the will. The history of this equation is tied to Novalis who, following Leibniz, Fichte, and Schelling, inherited the conviction in the correlation of the concepts of practice and activity in the 'poetic' sense, as the outcomes of perception (that is, the cognition of the world) and the will (its creation). As is well known, in its culmination the will was absolutized as the originary principle of all things. As a spiritual-biological hybrid, man's task would consist in transcending limitations carried by the intellectual, conceptual dichotomy inscribed in his activity:

This idea of man as the redeemer and messiah of nature is developed by Novalis in the form of an interpretation of science, art, and in general all human activity as the "formation" or "education" (*Bildung*) of nature, in a sense that appears to anticipate Marx's thought and in some ways Nietzsche's as well.²⁴

The creative potential of the thinking spirit, flowing the self-reflection, was to go beyond Fichtean idealism, since: "As Marx would fifty years later [...], Novalis located this going beyond in praxis, understood as the higher unity of thought and action."²⁵ Agamben points to the ensuing consequence of the philosophical equation of poesis and praxis in the form of alienated activity reduced in modernity to the melancholy artistic act directed to the past conceived as a whole and deprived of any tangible social effects. The division of the world, of experience and language, is Agamben's main philosophical thesis.²⁶ In order for language to be able once again to name, create the real world as well as to determine the community, Agamben conceives of the 'voice' as a paradoxical phenomenon, one in which the corporeal and the lingual in man cross. The energy flowing from the division of language and the world, the creative potential of alienated, non-signifying language renders possible the replacement of devalued traditions by a community whose identity must remain a pure, constantly recreated possibility.

In his criticism of romantic ideas of art as the sole possible, uniquely true realization of life, Agamben is reminiscent of Brzozowski with his negative, but fascinated orientation to the speculative worlds of the romantics, wholly lacking in real effects for the life of the collectivity and indeed rather standing in for its life. In *The Man without Content* Agamben rejects Novalis' concept of 'Poetry'

²⁴ Ibid., 46f.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. K. E. Pinkus, M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

as the fundamentally creative but autotelic will. On the other hand, however, he reserves for poesis—within art and literature—in the Italianate manner, the important task of mediating the conflict between the old and the new, between the past and the present, and what in the future is to be consigned to the flames.²⁷ The ‘circular’ activity of the human mind, coming to know itself in the act of continuous self-development, turns out to be abstract rationality mired in philosophico-aesthetic speculations. The result is that, from the Italian perspective, it comes to lack the fundamental component of experience, biological corporeality, the matter of life and its conditions, dictated by history and relations of domination rendered conflictual by the individual constantly struggling for his freedom. Doubtless, for Brzozowski as well, biology and the reality of social change constitute the fundamental limits to philosophical speculation, for which reason perhaps he praises Vico.

Vico’s concept of “poetic wisdom” appears to presage the nineteenth-century concept of poesis as the “creative will.” Esposito’s Italian “living thought” is therefore dependent on not only the Renaissance but also the early romantic intellectual heritage. As Agamben shows, Marx’s thought, too, is marked by this characteristic. “Poetic wisdom” is characterized as social experience extracted creatively from the past as it was remembered or inscribed in the collective myth that requires actualization. On the one hand, given the premises pertaining to ‘poeticalness’ understood as creating a new world, there follows, on the part of “Italian thought,” a characteristic relation to history, likewise in the manner of a ‘fable’. On the other, an equally specific place is accorded to what is creative in literature. Brzozowski’s chapter on the “Epigenetic theory of history” corresponds precisely to Vico’s categories of circularity. Vico’s tradition is visible as well in later chapters of *Ideas*, characterizing the concepts of historical materialism and the philosophy of labor, the discussion of which necessarily presupposed the theory of history. What is especially interesting, however, is the way in which Brzozowski draws the reader into the flow of his account, requiring of him a certain creative effort and obliging him to adopt a critical stance. We can see this in what is the most important chapter in *Ideas*, “The Prolegomena to the Philosophy of Labor.” Initially, Brzozowski attempts to provide a more precise account of labor as creativity that has a determinate aim and calls forth determinate ‘creative gestures’. Resistance to labor that is to bring about real, fundamental change, in a social sense, comes on the one hand from nature and human biology and, on the other, from the entirety of encountered gestures and objects, the outcomes of earlier labor. As such, there is no matter which would condition the creation of a common world in a way not connected to human activity. In

27 Agamben, *The Man without Content*, 68f.

this way, all concepts are rendered present and intelligible only insofar as they are commensurate with labor. Brzozowski offers the following, only seemingly puzzling, definition of labor: “Jako gest wewnętrzny jest praca określonym przez nas przemijaniem życia”²⁸ (In being an internal gesture labor is the passage of life as determined by us). According to “Prolegomena” it is difficult to speak of a reality as long as it is not created or of a subject that is not constructed in unending confrontation with the limitations of our biology and common history. For Brzozowski, the truth about creativity as the sole truth renders the concept of truth as predetermined essence impossible. That is why he, in treating creation in the philosophy of labor precisely as “creation,” at once real and “poetic,” promulgates a “new knowledge” attempting to “activate” his own text by means of a play of statements put forth as well as by the continual reconstruction of his subjectivity. He is indefatigable in exercising or rather ‘training’ the reality created by the intellect, believing that when he writes he creates facts belonging to a common intellectual world and in this way reinforces the collective self-consciousness.

Where the arguments are concerned, the five parts of “Prolegomena” do not differ fundamentally from one another; the narrative is not sequential, from part to part, but rather involves a specific superposition of ever more developed contents at ever higher and more complicated levels of understanding. As soon as we have the sense that we understand Brzozowski, the impression arises that he keeps saying the same thing round and round—an effect encountered as well while reading *Scienza Nuova*. He attempts to cope with recourse to means he particularly disliked, the pragmatist perspective, in that he submits to a test the different world views that interest him. In the fifth, summarizing subchapter of “Prolegomena,” Brzozowski begins with a characterization of the concept of ‘life’ in order to throw down, in the last sentences, the project of freedom worked in accordance with local principles and traditions specific to the Polish nation. He then proceeds to a polemic against the objectivized, sociological languages of Simmel and Poincaré describing ‘life’ as a phenomenon “just as incomprehensible and external as a sunset, a mountain cascade” (równie niezrozumiałego i zewnętrznego jak zachód słońca, kaskada górską).²⁹

However, Brzozowski simply does not clarify the failings of what interests him, viz., the scientific view of the world. Instead, he mitigates by raising a simple question, “What is life?,” and then he gives himself an answer in a manner that imitates the positive theses he put forward in the preceding chapters: “Wszystko jest dziełem życia, a samo życie nie może być przez nas myślane

28 Brzozowski, *Idee*, 223.

29 Ibid., 241.

jako rzeczywistość, możemy myśleć o nim jedynie w kategoriach zacieśniających tę rzeczywistość”³⁰ (Everything is the product of life, and life itself cannot be conceived by us as reality, we are able to think about it only in categories that restrict this reality). He seeks first of all deceptive similarities of contemporaneous thoughts—the Marxist prerogative of a reality that is entirely in flux and dynamic as well as post-Cartesian scientific projects that, in keeping with the Enlightenment, exclude metaphysics from the sphere of description of shared reality that after all is a social fact here as well. The definition of ‘life’ to which the latter style of thinking leads us is compromised in an exceedingly subtle way by the subject of the critical text who as it were ‘identifies’ himself with a position that is contrary to his own. By subjecting the myth of the worldview to hyperbole, in order to acquire a dramatic dimension with its accompanying deep irony, this subject tries to present to his readers the terrifying absurdity of Poincaré’s ‘non-human’ world:

Są te zjawy i to jest wszystko; umysłowe życie człowieka i sam człowiek jako jeden z przedmiotów, jedna z jego zawartości, jest w gruncie rzeczy przygodą, wydarzającą się nie wiadomo komu – w głuchoniemej próżni. [...] Pozornie tylko mówimy, wewnętrznie i zewnętrznie, właściwy świat jest niemy.³¹

There are just these phenomena and that is all; man’s thinking life and man himself as one object among many, one of its contents, is at base pure chance happening to one knows not who—in a deaf and dumb void. [...] Speech is an illusion, internally and externally, the world as such is dumb.

At this point of the argument a rebound occurs—in the words of Paul de Man one would like to say, a parabasis of the allegory of tropes:

Mnie, który jestem hipotezą, powiodła się inna hipoteza. Pozornie jest to stanowisko *niezmiennie* uwypuklające czynniki, spontaniczny charakter życia, ale jest to pozór tylko. Tłem zasadniczym jest zawsze to: coś się tworzy, coś się myśli i w pewnej mierze trwa; nie wiemy, czym jest to coś, myśl nasza, ale trwałość jest oznaką skuteczności, szukajmy tego trwania.³²

I who am a hypothesis ceded successfully to another hypothesis. On the surface it is a perspective that puts *great emphasis* on the active, spontaneous character of life, but this is

30 Ibid., 240f.

31 Ibid., 241.

32 Ibid., 242.

only an illusion. The basic background is always the following: something is created, something is thought and to a certain degree persists; we know not what this something is, our thinking, but persistence is the sign of effectiveness, let us seek out this persistence.

Brzozowski not only well understood the meaning of Marxian alienation of labor and commodity fetishism in opposition to the representatives of the determinist and scientific conception of the historical development of classes in their struggle for emancipated existence. By means of a variety of devices of a 'poetic' character, sudden shifts of discourse, the construction of a kind of represented world of the critical text, Brzozowski tried hard to avoid an 'objectifying' definition of phenomena he considered to be dynamic, in flux and vital. As the creative subject who sets the scene, he neither presented nor systematized his worldview. Instead, he gave free reign to the dynamic clash of his own convictions, their change, creating in the face of what is other, strange, absurd, even unreadable.

Brzozowski describes the relations that tie labor and life—his fundamental concepts—in a way that could be characterized as autotelic story-telling, presenting—or rather constantly working out—the autonomous creative process. According to Brzozowski, the only basis of our psyche's authority over us is the entirety of human life, such as it is:

Poza nim, poza tym życiem jest coś, o czym to tylko możemy powiedzieć, że jest współmierne z naszą pracą; to jest że pomiędzy czasem w nas a czasem poza nami jest taka styczność, że możemy przez pewne zużycie naszego życia zapewnić pewne właściwości psychiczne nastąpić mającym przebiegom czasu.³³

Beyond it, beyond this life there is something about which we can only say that it is coeval with our labor; that is, between the time within us and the time outside us there is a contiguity of a sort that, by using up some degree of our life, we can ensure certain properties of the psyche supervening on the flow of time.

In keeping with his auto-thematic style Brzozowski relates to the philosophical meaning of the foregoing thesis about life, developing not the sphere of examples and proofs, but instead directing the reader to its variable and ineffable nature that is meant to find its reflection in the author's vital style:

Jest rzeczą do najwyższego stopnia trudną dokonać całkowicie tego przetworzenia myśli, jakiego wymaga ujęcie tego stanowiska. Rozkłada ono wszystko, co wydaje nam się

33 Ibid., 243.

stałym, cały świat fizyczny [...] i roztopia we wrzącej i chropawej, zasadniczo niepełnej, spontanicznej nieprzewidywalności, irracjonalności życia.³⁴

It is exceedingly difficult to transform thinking in the way that this standpoint demands. It breaks up everything that seems to us constant, the entire physical world [...] and melts [it] in the roiling, coarse, fundamentally incomplete, spontaneously unpredictable irrationality of life.

Brzozowski, without defining, systematizing, introducing any speculative characteristic of phenomena in the course of a philosophical deduction, creates social concepts such as history in a way distant from the modern, post-Enlightenment project of ordering knowledge as truth. Proceeding philosophically beyond philosophy he interprets history in the manner of Vico:

Harmonia sfer trzyma się na krwawym słupie ludzkiego wysiłku, jest jedną z cech zbudowanego przez nas ludzkiego życia, jedną z cech potoku życiowego, który przez wnętrza nasze przecieka; jest nami w momencie bierności, sam siebie pogłębia i dźwiga; tworzy swe wzniesienie, by utworzyć swój spadek i pięknem własnego przepływania utrzymuje się w wysiłku dźwigania. Żaden obraz nie wyczerpie tu wszystkich stron rzeczywistości, jaką jest ona.³⁵

The harmony of the spheres hangs on the bloody mast of human effort, is one of the traits of human life we have constructed, a property of the flow of life coursing through our innermost being; it is what we are in the instant of passivity, it deepens and bears itself; it raises itself in order to create its downfall and in the beauty of its own flowing it maintains the effort of bearing. Here no picture can exhaust all the aspects of the reality that it is.

Thus, creative autonomy is worked out, the autonomy of the subject understood as the voice of the individual struggling to acquire the right to the creative differentiation of jointly constructed social life—an individual whose essence is activity, development, change, labor, the transformation of what is encountered in order to attain the impossible perdurance of one's achievements. This is not a process that remains a mere gesture and that can be associated with the modernist concept of intellectual autonomy as the purely subjective autarchy of art. It is an 'autonomy' that carries above all the meaning associated with Mirandola's Renaissance humanism. At the same time it proceeds from the absolute freedom and indeterminacy of man ceaselessly creating his forms out of matter on the

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 245.

basis of his own decisions that give form to ‘humanity’. Autonomy thus conceived, autonomy signifying the self-consciousness of society, remains as well the history of the collective. It should be understood not only ‘poetically’, but also in the Italian manner.

As Esposito argues, Italian thought sets itself up in parallel to European modernism; when modernist processes occur in Europe it is in a sense ‘non-actual’, though it stands ready, with its reserves of meaning, to run with the baton in case modernism does not manage with the issues it has brought to the table. Rather than cutting itself off from its sources, modernist and European, Italian thought always turns to its sources and seeks there the meaning of its actuality. The “Italian difference,” instead of creating its specific modernity starting from zero, by instituting a robust frontier between the rational and the feral, creates itself rather by returning to the sources prescribed in Machiavelli’s writings or understood as Vico’s *ricorso*. This is the return of a dark, unfathomable past recovered within the very heart of creation today, so necessary for new historical openness. Here the past is the source of energy, its reproduction does not consist in ‘reaction’, a real return to or restoration of the past, but rather in its evident ‘contiguity’ with the actuality of changing history which is immolated in what draws near. The necessary co-functioning of the contradiction constitutes in this way the present order of history, having nothing in common with the philosophical systems of the Enlightenment. The history that comes to expression in the formula of the present clash of diverse perspectives cannot discard its source, for the shaky order of the collective is derived from and reproduces it. “Attualità” is thus shot through with incommensurable alternatives that demand decisions. Life, which acquires its expressive formula, especially when it becomes a stake in political conflicts, is understood as “[...] a set of impulses, desires, and needs that run through the body of individuals and populations in a form that is irreducible to the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, reason and force, or proper and common.”³⁶

Creating life and the world in the historical process, which in Vico’s case takes place poetically, is connected frequently in Brzozowski’s case directly with literature or literary criticism. Literature turns out to be an important polygon, a coefficient in the ‘creation’ of social reality, though not in the categories of the modernist meaning of art’s autonomy—thrown back exclusively on itself. Nor does it relegate to the conviction belonging to philosophical speculation grounding the concept of autonomy: the profound individualization, irreplaceability, as well as the reflexivity of the tools of creation. Life is creative, it works out an autonomy that is broad and socially significant, carrying in itself the possibil-

36 Esposito, *Living Thought*, 25.

ity—as Brzozowski would say—of the proletariat’s consciousness of self that is also a kind of utopia of Italian operatic thinking. The “Italian difference” not only does not eliminate the linguistic-literary aspect of philosophical reflection but in fact connects its own inception with Dante’s and Vico’s poetic humanism as well as with contemporary literature. As Esposito puts it: “[...] the most recent Italian thought takes language as a given that is so constitutive of the human being that it can be identified as the point of suture between nature and mutation, invariance and difference, biology and history.”³⁷

It is natural that Esposito calls on Dante or Leopardi. Leopardi himself described great poets such as Horace, Dante, and Shakespeare as thinkers, and in turn philosophers such as Plato as poets. The poetic imagination remained for him “an indispensable, internal structure of reason.”³⁸ For Agamben, too, literature is a very important aspect of philosophizing. In *Language and Death*, the voice is the point of suture between the body and language to whose system the voice ascribes a bodily singularity. In his *Categorie italiane. Studi di poetica* (The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics), he deals with the source of what it means to be ‘Italian’: *The Divine Comedy* and the life of language.³⁹

From Bruno to Gentile Italian philosophy has gone down the path along which the individual subject is the constitutive locus of the community, never ultimately determined by the constitutive force of his innermost identity. On the other hand, it is deeply rooted in the productive rhythm of unending life. At the heart of Italian philosophy we find not individuality but a common world with its inexhaustible potential. Literature has not been the main focus of Italian Marxist thinkers. The chief theoreticians of *operaismo*, known also as Italian autonomians, such as Massimo Cacciari or Antonio Negri—much like Brzozowski earlier—do not leave behind the subject consciously creating its own world and at the same time fulfilling a certain ‘communitarian’ mission. They do, however, reject the generalizing character of the purely philosophical concept of the dehumanized authority producing its own essence, the individual nature of which consists in isolating itself from social phenomena. They attempt as well to reconstruct the concept of autonomy by conjoining the singular and the universal.

The similarities between Brzozowski’s poetic, activist “Epigenetic Theory of History” and Italian philosophy rooted in Marxism derive no doubt from their common literary sources of inspiration in the nineteenth century—Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Sorel, but also still earlier thinkers. Vico, read by Nietzsche, is the intellectual core, as Esposito puts it, not only of Italian philosophy. On the

37 Ibid., 8.

38 Ibid., 126.

39 Giorgio Agamben, *Categorie italiane: studi di poetica* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1996).

other hand, Agamben finds currents common to Marxism and early romanticism in the writings of German precursors of modernity, such as Schelling, Novalis, and Hölderlin—important equally for Brzozowski—that lead in Nietzsche’s direction. Examining anew the *operaismo* philosophers, observing the course of their thinking in relation to new readings, new historical events, we can shed new light on Brzozowski’s thought by asking in what the current development of Italian humanism consists as well as by considering its closest ideological and intellectual affinities. Doubtless, the emancipatory conceptions of philosophy and art, directed against the Enlightenment project, will reveal a family resemblance. In this way, on the one hand, the joyful Kantian and Spinozist knowledge of the early romantics creating their pan-poetic philosophy at the margins of German classicism; on the other hand, Italian renaissance humanism in the biological and mythical interpretation drawing on Vico, laid the basis for many twentieth-century expressions of revolt against institutions of social knowledge and power, among which Brzozowski’s *The Legend of Young Poland* certainly figures. Speech and myth, voice and language or finally art, ‘poeticity’, constitute from this perspective a creative factor invoked in philosophical as well as philological categories. It may well be that this is the most important remainder of the pre-modernist understanding of the place and function of poesis: to creatively imagine man’s life in the dynamic paradoxical formula of poetic practice.

Translated by Edward M. Świdorski

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