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ROZWOJU HUMANISTYKI**

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

„Kronos” quarterly was established in 2007 as a project of a particular generation of philosophers all of whom started their studies around the transitional year 1989. “Kronos” soon became the largest philosophical journal in Poland. It is a new voice in Polish philosophy.

Poland at the turn of the 21st century was and is an inspiring place for thinkers; it is an interesting vantage point for observing and studying human nature. It is a place which saw genocide and two murderous experiments – the Nazi and the Soviet – the aim of which was to create a new type of human being. A philosopher brought up in Warsaw is living in a city destroyed by Hitler and rebuilt by Stalin.

The place and the time when we started studying philosophy influenced our choices and interests. Perhaps a philosopher is nothing but an emanation of the place and time which shaped him. These factors no doubt explain our interest in Hegel and Marx whom we have read through the lenses provided by religious messianists (Fyodorov) or 20th century prophets of the apocalypse (Kojève and Witkacy). The spirit of time and place prompted us also to study the Classics, to return in thought to Greece where – influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche – we saw the eternally recurring point, where all history ends and every history begins.

SOPHOCLES IN QUEBEC

Everything that I do or write, I sometimes summarize as follows: I only express in a new form something that people always knew. I only try to say it in a learned discourse – a discourse capable of adequately grasping the dramatic challenges of the world to come. That is my position summarized.

Pierre Legendre, *Scattered Views*

Pierre Legendre's *The Crime of Corporal Lortie* is an exceptional book for many reasons. The first reason is its Author, his place in European culture, both current and future. The second reason is the perspective offered by the Author, encompassing areas usually viewed in isolation. The third and final reason would be its Hero, the unfortunate Corporal Lortie – the real Hero of Our Times, a figure typical in its madness: a contemporary everyman, a diminutive, postmodern Antichrist.

1

Pierre Legendre, born in 1930, belongs to the French generation of 1968. We can without hesitation place him next to Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, with whom he in many ways shares both methods and convictions, at the same time standing as their first antagonist, formulating the first – serious – response to their critique of Western civilization. It is a surprising response. Legendre uses his contemporaries' counterculture argumentation against their own criticism, turns it into a shield and sword for the defense of the old forms: Subject, Fatherhood, Tradition.

This particular stance – for Legendre finds himself in the very center of events: Paris is the very hub of philosophy in the second half of the past century; and yet deliberately positions himself, in a true spirit of contradiction, somewhere at the margins – this peculiar stance insured that the author of *The Crime of Corporal Lortie* remained for many years in the shadow of his contemporaries. His work did not become popular, nor was it properly appreciated worldwide. It developed gradually, with growing indifference to fashions and upheavals of its epoch. His work is colossal in its breadth – encompassing over ten books, starting with professional works on the history of the French administration and editions of medieval legal manuscripts, through a dissertation on dance, a monograph on dogmatic anthropology, ending with a collection of poetic aphorisms entitled *The Fabrication of the Western Man*.

However, we live in a different world today. The revolution of 1968 has run its course, exposing all its consequences, and the ideas behind it or connected with it became an academic commonplace. Legendre's position – at the same time central and marginal

– inevitably causes a burgeoning interest in his work. A distinctive group of legendrists is active in the United States and in England. The gigantic project of translating Legendre’s oeuvre into German began in 2010. The Parisian theoretician of community theatre gained followers in India and Japan. The wave is rising. We see a well known pattern repeat itself: a writer ignored by his contemporaries becomes in the eyes of the next generation one of the most important figures of its epoch. Let us stick, however, to his peculiar stance – at once in the center and at the margins – and not just because this is the proper stance of the Philosopher or a Wiseman, but because it also describes Legendre’s place in European culture: his attitude to it, as well as the way in which he finds his own place in it.

Legendre began as a law historian, researcher of Roman and Canonical Law, a publisher of medieval manuscripts – texts which remained unread for centuries, the very existence of which was forgotten, but which, according to Legendre, have a great importance for our life. For within the history of law the most basic forms of rational human existence are formed: the idea of a “subject” – essentially connected with the category of responsibility and crime; as well as the idea of “factual truth” – in its turn linked with the category of “evidence” (while in our daily life unproven statements are often acceptable, not so in the Court of Law). And this, precisely, is Legendre’s main thesis: our rational life rests on the scaffolding of Law, supported by its invisible order. This center, however, remains hidden from us: it shapes our life, dictates the rules of our conduct, while remaining secret. The text of culture, according to Legendre, is something unconscious.

We will err, however, if we consider Legendre to be one of the representatives of the library fauna. Right after so-called *l’agrégation*, the future creator of dogmatic anthropology travels to Gabon where he works as an expert for one of the UN agencies. There he has a chance to observe in person the Western postcolonial politics in Africa, which under the mask of Progress attempts to reeducate the natives. Legendre vividly explains this project’s goals as follows: “The former savages are to march as subjects of the universal rule of law.”¹ That is where Legendre will see for himself the postmodern perversion of the Western culture which at its peripheries – but also at its heart – produces a new human type: a man uprooted from his Tradition, condemned to look for support within himself and unable to find it, and in consequence – sliding into confusion, disorientation, chaos. The new savage populates not only the gigantic cities or rather – city dumps of Africa, but also the so-called HLMs, ghostly suburbs of Paris and disintegrating apartment block districts of Eastern Europe. Legendre resigns from his position as UN advisor and from that time on calls himself a mind “negrified”, *négrifié*, while naming among his teachers such black intellectuals as Doudou Guèye and Hampaté Bâ.²

Once again we recognize the familiar pattern: having appeared at the very center, starting from Roman law, Legendre chooses to view Europe from an external point of view. The author of the *The Crime of Corporal Lortie* dislikes contemporary Europeans. At the same time, one of the 1968 ideas – third-worldism – acquires in Legendre’s work a special meaning. To complete the picture, we also need to mention that Legendre was Jacques Lacan’s friend, and for some time the two would meet regularly, every Saturday

¹ P. Legendre, *La passion d’être un autre. Étude pour la danse*. Paris 2000, p. 16.

² P. Legendre, *Vues éparées. Entretiens radiophoniques avec Philippe Petit*. Paris 2009, p. 121–22.

morning, to discuss law and psychoanalysis. Since, as Legendre points out, he luckily was not Lacan's patient, they could regard each other as equals. Legendre is frequently considered to be a lacanist. Yet it is worth remembering that Legendre transformed Lacan's theories, channeling them in a rather unexpected direction.

2

Lacan used to say that unconsciousness is a text. One should treat it as a sequence of signs. Legendre shifts and inverts this idea – which is consistent with the dynamics of Lacan's theory at its deepest level. To him the text of culture is the unconsciousness and it consists of the regulations of Law, Founding Images and the rules of discourse.

This shift – socialization of the consciousness – allows Legendre to radicalize Lacan's famous description of human development delineated in his lecture *The Mirror Stage* and later expanded in the Parisian psychoanalyst's seminars. The human being, says Lacan, is born too early. The baby does not speak, does not control its bodily functions and is fully dependent on its mother. In the beginning our existence is a "fragmented body". And this experience, according to Lacan, remains with us forever, dormant inside us – it will return in dreams, phantasmagoric images of Hieronymus Bosch, in schizophrenic disintegration.³ Human imperfection becomes obvious when we compare the human child with a baby chimp; the latter is decidedly better organized in the biological sense. A turning point comes at last during the eighteenth month of a child's life and, as the so-called Köhler's experiment proves, is connected with the mirror image of one's own body. The chimp does not show much interest in it, while the baby is fascinated with its own reflection. From that moment on the lines of development of the baby and the chimp diverge: the chimp remains an animal; the child becomes a human being. The image of the body, Lacan explains, appears before the baby as an ideal "I", allowing it to introduce order in place of the original chaos. Observing this image the child gradually gains greater control over its own body. The term "image" should be understood here very broadly – other people belong to it as well. The child finds its reflection in the emotions and reactions of the parents. Let us be straightforward: we are talking about the potty training. The child learns to use the potty.

The first mirror for the child is the mother. The baby is initially a part of her body. It therefore does not see the borderline between itself and the mother's tummy. By entering between the child and the mother, the father – the great Other, *le grand Autre*, in Lacan's words – makes separation finally possible. This allows for the establishment of the "I" which from that moment on will remain forever suspended between schizophrenic disintegration and paranoid hyperintegration in the illusion of the *imago*; between total collapse and an identity which, excluding all difference, solidifies in the stiff mask of spiritual death. This moment is also the birth of language. The child begins to speak. Man uses words because he is estranged from the things to which his words refer, or about which his words speak. The precondition for the rise of the Word is therefore a difference between the subject and the object. Madness, significantly, is always connected with a linguistic disorder; as if insanity was rooted in the inability to find one's own place in the order of

³ J. Lacan, *La stade du miroir*, in: idem, *Écrits*. Paris 1966, s. 97.

speech. This way three orders of human existence develop gradually: the real – original disintegration; the imaginary – the *imago* seen in the mirror of the mother; and finally – the symbolic dimension, the sphere of the father who names the human being.

The above description has a formal meaning. The Father is not a particular person but a function of that which separates Man from his image. Likewise, the mother originally plays the role of the Mirror, but this role is later to be played by someone different – a husband or a wife. This formal or structural style of Lacan's psychoanalysis will become the starting point for Legendre who would eventually, as we said, radicalize it, shifting it to a still different field, a different domain and a different stage.

The story of the Mirror, Legendre says, is not about a family romance (and therefore a certain order of developmental facts); it does not describe some replicating structure (a scheme repeated throughout one's entire life). It is rather concerned with the basic cultural figure which predates the birth of man. "We are not born in isolation [...] we are born in a trio, in triangulation."⁴ Biology deceives us: we see a baby, a single body, isolated, it would seem, from its surroundings. This child, however, has a mother and a father. These figures have a distinct existential status. They belong, Legendre states, to two different ontological registers. The mother, according to the ancient tradition, is always a certainty; the father – always uncertain. *Mater certissima, pater semper incertus*. This sentence means that the father is traditionally a legal construct, an official fiction, an image symbolic in its origins. This is precisely what differentiates the father from a biological reproducer or a sperm donor.

From this rather obvious observation stems the next consequence of the Mirror theory: its foundation, its basic formative rule, is the Law. The father is established through law and it is law that lays the foundations for self-knowledge and self control. I can see myself in the mirror because I am distanced from myself, I am separated from myself. This distance is the condition of my self-knowledge (looking into the mirror I ask: who am I?), and of my self control (I ask: who could I be and who should I be?). However, this distance is founded, according to Legendre, on a cultural Prohibition – the borderline dividing myself from others and limiting me to my own existence. The basic anthropological prohibitions – of incest and homicide – are therefore not laws imposed on man (ready-made and palpable, so to speak, like a chair or a stone); they are rules which separate us from mothers and from other people and allow us to constitute ourselves, to rise in a human form.

This in fact is the very reason why the Law is something unconscious. Here once more empirical reality deceives us. It may seem to us that we only deal with Law in rare cases, when we face the Court or its officials. However, according to Legendre, if we ever exist as independent and separate beings, it is always as subjects of Law. The Law is obeyed unconsciously. Speaking of inscription, Legendre says that the Law is written in our human form, establishing the limits of our possible actions. Legendre – to place him on the map of philosophy – makes a connection between Lacan and Kant and his *Critique of Pure Reason* where the moral law is described as belonging *a priori* to the life of the subject.⁵

⁴ P. Legendre, *Leçons II. L'Empire de la vérité. Introduction aux espaces dogmatiques industrielles*. Nouvelle édition. Paris 2001, p. 115.

⁵ A detailed explication of Legendre's doctrine in the light of post-Kantian philosophy of law, especially of the Hegelian and Marxist views, may be found in J.-R. Seba, *Le partage de l'empirique et du transcendantal. Essai sur la normativité de la raison: Kant, Hegel, Husserl*. Bruxelles 2006, p. 321–414.

Such basic psychological terms as “norm” or “madness” acquire in his works the status legal terminology. The author of *The Crime of Corporal Lortie* searches for the origins of the idea of madness, *mens alienata*, in medieval constructs of the private property law.

Making that step from Lacan to Kant, Legendre repeats some of the canonical formulations of the French generation of 1968. First of all, he contends that the subject is constructed within a structure, therefore there is no such thing as the subject’s self-becoming: “*il n’y a pas d’auto-fondation*.”⁶ Its fabrication – the purpose of which is the grounding of the subject in the body, or, according to Nietzsche’s formula, “man’s interiorization”⁷ – is inevitably connected with violence. Here Legendre exploits the ambiguity inherent in the word “subject” – both a person inferior in hierarchy and a philosophical subject. By means of various maneuvers institutions fabricate human subjects. These manipulations, however – this violence of culture – are inevitable, essential. Beyond the wall of the subject’s life lurks the insanity of breakdown, the original madness of disintegration. When reason sleeps the monsters awake. Legendre thus inverts the figures familiar to the readers of Michel Foucault’s *History of Madness* and *Discipline and Punish*. His work will be an anti-humanistic defense of the subject.

3

Thus the father is a legal fiction. Every law has its own Founding Father – a mythical creator of the state or a metaphysical Father in heaven. This structure can be observed on various levels of social life. The family and the State, as well as every institution and corporation, has its father (director) and its Founding Father (whose name is the trademark or whose picture hangs on the wall). Likewise, every serious institution has its nursery in which it breeds its subjects: the novitiate, apprenticeship or assistantship. At the very bottom, however, the founding father is absent. He withdraws – like the God of the mystics or the Kabalistic Yahweh of Isaac Luria; he becomes a figure from a fairytale – just like the first Kings. Every father, Legendre explains, acts in the name of that absence, of the Third Separator, *Tiers separateur*. The image of the Father therefore has a peculiar constitution – that of a Mirror in which one may find one’s reflection, yet at the same time it solidifies and becomes opaque. What remains is the Effigy of the Father while he himself is somehow removed – thus creating a space for the subject: the Son who becomes the Father.⁸

With this very figure in mind Legendre basis his anthropology on a radical reinterpretation of the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason. It states: “There is a *ground* in nature why something exists rather than nothing. This is a consequence of the great principle that nothing exists without a ground.”⁹ The thought is intuitively self-evident: we

⁶ P. Legendre, *Leçons IV. L’inestimable objet de la transmission. Étude sur le principe généalogique en Occident*. Nouvelle édition. Paris 2004, p. 156.

⁷ F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. F. Golffing, in: F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. New York 1956, p. 217.

⁸ To avoid any misunderstanding, we should note that these ideas have a strictly formal meaning to Legendre, basically denoting only a position within some kind of structure. Thus, women are also considered to be sons, and the State may be a father (and its father would be God). In Lortie’s case, the function of the father is fulfilled by the court. Legendre is keeping within a strictly Lacanian formalism.

⁹ G.W. Leibniz, “The Twenty-four Statements”, qtd. in: M. Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. J. Stambaugh. Chicago 1973, p. 49.

feel we understand something when we are able to give a reason of its existence. Something that exists for a reason seems to us rational. Actions that do not lead anywhere, events which do not have a cause, are seen as nonsensical. Therefore, the principle of reason, *principium rationis*, is the principle of rationality or the law of the mind. And this is also the deep meaning of scientific and technical rationality: of the causal determinism of Newton's physics and of the idea of the machine whose workings are fully predictable.

And yet what is the essence of human rationality, of that speaking animal which creates myths and rituals? According to Legendre, man is rational when he is a subject, i.e. when he becomes independent through Law: separating himself from others and at the same time becoming part of some preexisting scheme. The son, in other words, has to separate himself from the father and at the same time to find his place in the order of the family – himself taking up the office of the father and thus becoming the Father's representative, a representative of the Absolute Other, *L'Autre absolu*. Hence myths and rituals are not proof of some aberration of humankind but an indispensable element in the game of subjectivity. A myth shows some fabulous times immemorial – a reality inaccessible in its unreality whose events are time and again revived by ritual practices and thus prevented from fading into oblivion. In this way a stage (also a temporal one) is outlined on which man can be created – a being at once separated from the past and connected to it. The principle of sufficient reason, humankind's rational principle, is the internal rule of mythological thinking, the principle governing the way in which such thinking finds a foundation for itself. Man, in order to become a subject, must find a base for himself – one which both precedes and accompanies him, and which, at the same time, is inaccessible to him. The principle of fatherhood is precisely such a foundation. If one does not find it, teaches Legendre, one slips into the abyss of unreason, of Groundlessness, *la dé-Raison*.

If such is our understanding of the central mechanism of human culture (and it is, according to the author of dogmatic anthropology, a universal mechanism, present in medieval Europe as well as among the so-called "savages"), contemporary rationalism which maintains that the individual, present here and now, constitutes the source of law, the rationalism which cuts man off from Tradition and tears him away from the Rituals, such rationalism, under its mask of reason, turns out to be madness. The most important promise of Modernity – to gain absolute control over Fate – is, from the psychoanalytical perspective, an attempt to side with the absolute Other. The very essence of Modernity is therefore an abdication from the position of the son and this in turn must lead to insanity. Europe, in Legendre's diagnosis, is descending into psychosis – a psychosis of a politico-legal variety: its most obvious examples are Nazism and the Nuremberg Laws which turn biological facts into law.

Thus Legendre makes his next step: from Lacan to Schelling and further – to Jakob Boehme. For the mirror theory is not, in fact, Lacan's original idea. German theosophy is the dark source of psychoanalysis. The figure of the Mirror first appears in Boehme's exuberant visions where Wisdom of God, Sophia, is described as the Mirror of Creation. Man sees his reflection in God. God sees his own face in man whom He had created in his own image. In German theosophy, especially in Schelling's writings, we find a reading of the Holy Trinity as a figure of separation: the Cross is a sign of the Son's separation from the Father.

Lacan brought German theosophy down to earth. He gave it a commonsensical, anthropocentric shape. Legendre – rousing the cultural subconscious of psychoanalysis – brings out the outlines of social metaphysics in psychoanalysis. This notion, I would suggest, needs to be understood in contrast to social ontologies that locate the sources of our being in objective facts – in, for instance, economic processes. Moreover, it is a notion informed by the positivist critique of metaphysics, which assumes that every statement reaching beyond objective facts is a metaphysical one. Lacan’s psychoanalysis clearly shows that man is a metaphysical animal, living among imaginary visions, surrounded by symbolic phantoms. For Legendre dreams are the basic level of our social existence. “Society – that system of organization – is dreaming, and more than that – it produces symptoms, a whole confectionery of symptoms, a neurotic myth.”¹⁰

In this new, unexpected perspective psychoanalysis changes its meaning entirely. In the years of its first triumph, in the times of Sigmund Freud, it was represented as a scientific theory. Lacan also wanted to practice it as an exact science, trying to present his concepts in the costume of mathematical terms. But for Legendre – who believes neither in science nor religion (every religion is to him equally true as they all point to an Absence), and who also does not believe in Man and prefers to study medieval manuscripts rather than to delve into someone’s soul, someone’s particular privacy – psychoanalysis is the new mythology. At least this is how I understand his declaration that psychoanalysis is *un accident de la pensée scientifique*, “an accident of scientific thought, since Western man finds in it a mythological dimension, an integrist phantasm, an unconscious absolutism.”¹¹ Whoever looks carefully at the face of doctor Freud, will notice that it is a moonlike countenance, with its other, dark side. The bright side is the face of the nineteenth century naturalist, a reader of Darwin. The second, hidden, is the visage of the ancient priest. Freud recounts archaic myths and explains how they shape our life, how they connect with the history of the subject’s becoming. He thus gives them new currency (a new interpretative principle) and causes the old narratives to function within us once more. It should not surprise us therefore that in the institutional history of psychoanalysis (for it is more than merely a doctrine and a therapeutic practice, it is an institution) there have appeared and continue to appear forms familiar to us from the history of the Church: Founding Fathers, holy texts, priestly hierarchies, heresies and sects.

4

And yet, where has all this led us to? – Legendre, we have said, comes from the very center of European culture to deliberately place himself at its outskirts and to observe its current cases from that position. The modern mind, the French lawyer states, has left its orbit. This is the deep meaning of Modernity, that dream of the subject’s self-becoming, of a son without a father. Leaving its orbit – getting derailed – the European Mind descends into madness which is signaled by all the modern disasters.

We see a historian of the spirit, a psychologist of law walking among ruins. He roams the postindustrial landscapes of the overturned order. He observes the Mind

¹⁰ P. Legendre, *L’Empire de la vérité. Introduction aux espaces dogmatiques industrielles*, op. cit., p. 41.

¹¹ P. Legendre, *Vues éparses*, op. cit., p. 32.

deinstitutionalized, *la Raison désinstituée*. The place of action cannot be accidental. Everything happens in a former European colony, Quebec. It is Europe outside of Europe; Europe which moved beyond itself to fall into itself. As it turns out, however, it is just a step away from ancient Greece. It is as if history was about to draw a circle and as if Europe, moving beyond itself, was about to return finally to its own beginning.

According to Legendre, Freudian scientific oneiromancy – *Traumdeutung* – poses the very same question as the authors of the Greek tragedies. It is the question concerning original Law which embodies the necessity of Fate, revealed to us in dreams and songs of the poets. And this is the most important theme of Legendre's book: the symbolic necessity or – according to the formula of Legendre himself – “symbolic determinism of the speaking animal.”¹² Human culture, let us repeat, is at its very core a sequence of images, a succession of figures whose existential status is dubious. These patterns, these moving shadows, create an indispensable order which regulates our life, allowing us to rise into our human shape, the shape of a subject, or to the contrary – drive us into insanity. Whoever breaks the Law, or for whose sake the Law becomes broken – even without his will or knowledge – that man (according to the Law) will descend into madness, crushed under the stony wheels of Fate, surrendered to death.

Such is the awful lot of Legendre's anti-hero. Denis Lortie represents a type. We have all met him before, have seen him somewhere: be it a feminist admitting in a high circulation paper that she hates her own father; or a singer complaining about the priest from the orphanage where she was raised. Denis Lortie also wanted to kill his father. Through a terrible coincidence he happened to have the opportunity to do so. He was a professional soldier. Yet, the mad corporal instead of seeking out his father, went on a killing spree to the Parliament. He staged a bloody public psychodrama – consistent, as it turns out, with the deepest principles of the social theatre. From that point on everything happens just as it should: the journalists and judges enter the stage. We are watching an ancient tragedy in modern costume.

¹² P. Legendre, *The other dimension of Law*, trans. Y. Hachamovitch, in: *Law and the postmodern Mind*, ed. P. Godrich, D. Gray Carlson. Ann Arbor 1998, p. 187.

THE LAST STEP IN *THE CLOUDS*

SATIRE

The Clouds is a satire of Socrates. This is the general opinion, very well founded, supported for centuries by indisputable authorities. And usually it was accepted willingly, instinctively, uncritically, repeated again and again endlessly, until it became a platitude – it simply would not do to disagree with it. Hegel saw in *The Clouds* an anticipation of Socrates's subsequent conflict with the law. In his opinion Aristophanes was the first to discern the “one-sidedness” and “the negative method” of Socrates which permanently destroyed the moral texture of the polis. “Aristophanes was correct in *The Clouds* [...]. [He] was no shallow jester who seized on every opportunity to make the Athenians laugh, for he was thoroughly and deeply patriotic, a proper Athenian citizen. Genuine comedy does not consist of superficial jests, but presupposes earnestness of the most profound sort [...]. Aristophanes was no less important a figure there than were the moralistic Socrates, the great statesman Pericles, and the impetuous Alcibiades.”¹ Kierkegaard, whose thought is at the antipodes of Hegel's speculation, also wondered “what could have made Aristophanes present Socrates in such a light – was he hired by his accusers, or was his bitterness caused by the bonds of friendship between Socrates and Euripides, or perhaps he saw in Socrates an advocate of the naturalistic speculations of Anaxagoras, or maybe he identified him with the sophists? In short: did he have a specific, earthly reason?”² Thus, both Hegel and Kierkegaard seem convinced that the actual impulse which prompted Aristophanes to write *The Clouds* came from Socrates himself – his peculiar way of behavior, great influence on the Athenian youth, his annoying abnegation and the sophistic gift of turning every thing inside out. I intend to reject this reading. From the perspective of the two and a half millennia which divide us from the living Socrates, his image becomes irrevocably mythologized. For some he has become a useful emblem substantiating their attachment to the classical tradition; others take him to be a patron of their own ignorance, repeating that they too know that they know nothing. To put it simply, today Socrates may be employed to represent almost every cause – he became, like Coca Cola, an icon of the “culture” of contemporary Neanderthals. His legend, whether good or evil, is an uncommonly long shadow enshrouding his whole life – especially his life after death. To his contemporaries, however, Socrates was a regular Athenian, just like any other citizen.

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-26*. Vol. 2: *Greek Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by R.F. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, p. 142.

² S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. *Schelling Lecture Notes*, in: *Kierkegaard's Writings*. Vol. 2. Princeton University Press 1992 / *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates*. Octagon Books 1983.

When it was time to go to war – he would go with the others; he would take a post in the public administration (he was a Prytanis for a while); his wife and children waited for him at home; he was called before the court – and he duly appeared before the judges; in other words, he lived a life that only slightly differed from the lives of others. However, according to the testimony of those who knew him, Socrates had peculiar habits – he appeared to them as an extraordinary and highly eccentric individual; they saw a god in him – not because he was a god, but because they loved him. To strangers (to the “uninitiated”) he must have seemed quite an ordinary person, which is indicated by Strepsiades’ hesitation when – asked by his son where he is going – he responds in the Prologue of the comedy in the following fashion: “I do not know the name accurately. They are minute philosophers, noble and excellent” (100-101).³ If it is not the “problem of Socrates”, however, what then is the central idea of *The Clouds*? It appears to be the conflict of generations – this is the issue around which the action of the play is set up.

THE OLD FOOL AND THE YOUNG NIHILIST

To start with, we have Strepsiades – a common swindler and rogue. His only wish is to learn “how to gain law-suits, whether they be just or not”⁴ (98-99). The education which he intends to receive for this purpose is supposed to help him keep his estate which is being lightheartedly wasted by his only son Phidippides. The son, however, is not too eager to begin his education – in his free time, that is – when he is not sleeping, he would prefer to indulge in horse-riding. Yes, he has heard about “the quacks, the pale-faced wretches, the bare-footed fellows” (104), about Socrates and his friend Chaerephon, but he has no intention of getting to know them better. Thus, in the Prologue Aristophanes paints the following picture: the young Phidippides is napping, since the young like to sleep their lives through, while his father, trying to interest his son in learning, exhorts him in vain – talking, in fact, to himself, since a man in his old age becomes, we may say, “auto-narrative”, he enjoys “making fuss” and often converses with himself. One more thing keeps Strepsiades from lying down next to his son: all this time he is trying to figure out how to pay his son’s debts. I believe, however, that yet another problem keeps him awake: old age cannot sleep a wink, it keeps vigil all the time, never allowing itself even a moment’s slumber, because it knows that youth is striving towards a confrontation, that it covets money for those horses it loves so much. Strepsiades loves his son as well as his money, yet he is afraid – afraid of him and afraid to lose his money. When his vigilance slackens only for a moment, he loses everything. And so he joins the Socratic “school of rhetoricians”, phrontisterion, which was translated variously as „Thinkery” or „Thoughtery” or “thinking-shop”, and in contemporary English might be rendered as „think-tank”. Right at the threshold he meets a chatty disciple. Talking to him he presently learns that his master not only stinks and walks barefoot, but sometimes has nothing to eat. What does he do then? – he steals meat from the wrestlers pretending to be using the rotisserie and ashes to explain geometrical problems. Then comes the amusing scene when Strepsiades

³ All citations, unless indicated otherwise, are taken from: Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, in: *The Comedies of Aristophanes*, trans. W.J. Hickie. London: Bohn 1853, available at Perseus Digital Library. Line numbers are indicated in brackets.

⁴ Aristophanes, *Clouds*, trans. P. Meineck. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 2000 (available online).

meets Socrates who – bloated, suspended from the ceiling of the “Thinkery” – thus greets his guest from the pinnacle of wisdom: “Why callest thou me, thou creature of a day?”. Strepsiades wishes to know why the philosopher is spending his time “in the clouds” and why is he living in “suspension”, instead of treading on the firm ground of experience. “If, being on the ground, I speculated from below on things above – explains Socrates – I should never have discovered them. For the earth forcibly attracts to itself the meditative moisture” (231-233). So what has he found above that could not be met with down below, beneath his feet? Well, he has found nothing. He simply saw with his own eyes – just like a certain soviet space traveler two and half thousand years later – that there are no gods above, only the Clouds. It follows that there are no other gods than the Clouds. We should therefore honor the Clouds, and so Strepsiades should make oaths in their name. It is all summed up in a question raised by Leo Strauss: “Why is acquaintance with the Clouds indispensable for men who wish to become clever speakers, or in other words – what kind of gods are the Clouds?”⁵

This question is answered in the second part, Parodos (enter the Chorus). Everything that there is to be learned of any value whatsoever, the entire wisdom of man, is received from the Clouds. The Clouds are “great divinities to idle men” – to all for whom any practical thought or self-interest in their manner of thinking is entirely alien. The Clouds favor pure reason because it is satisfied with itself. Whoever does not believe in them and will not swear by them, will not be granted “thought and argument, and intelligence and humbug, and circumlocution, and ability to hoax, and comprehension” (318). In other words, the Clouds “feed idle people who do nothing, because such men celebrate them in verse” (334). Thus they feed both Socrates and Aristophanes because both sing praises to their “highness”. Strepsiades alone is unable to comprehend this: How can the gods “resemble mortal women”? Why is it that the Clouds in their shape mimic things which surround us; why are they like women; do the gods, like people, have a gender? It is an illusion – replies Socrates – the Clouds may become anything they like. They see a woman and become a woman; they see a coward, and become timid as a stag; and when they see someone stealing public money, they turn into a wolf. Clouds are the goddesses of imitation. They imitate everything that they see. It is hard to notice them, and yet more difficult to perceive their divinity, because – since they may become anything – they may also be nothing. (The “nothingness” of the Clouds is “manifested” when the sky is clear, when the weather is just like in Zarathustra’s prayer: “O heaven over me, pure and high! That is what your purity is to me now, that there is no eternal spider or spider web of reason; that you are to me a dance floor for divine accidents, that you are to me a divine table for divine dice and dice players”⁶). Aristophanes’ sky is not clear. We may say that the Clouds have their hands full, that they are busy with a kind of mimetic invigilation of man. “If the imitative arts are a kind of wisdom, they must be akin to archai. The Clouds derive immediately from the originating beginnings of all things and at the same time conceal them, for by imitating things they claim to be the things in question; they are by

⁵ L. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*. Chicago & London 1980, p. 17.

⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. and with a pref. by W. Kaufmann. New York & Toronto: Modern Library 1995, p. 166.

nature deceiving. They reveal the nature of things by concealing it and vice versa, just as rhetoric does.”⁷

In Plato’s view, art – and tragedy in particular – originates with the imitation of an idea, while according to Aristotle art imitates life. But why should one imitate life, why double it? It would be in order to add to it a pinch of illusion, to make it thus more tolerable. Hence, man’s most sublime ability lies in his propensity to mimetic behavior, to mirroring life. The gift of imitation is his from birth. But tragedy not only “parrots” life, it infuses it – as we read in Aristotle’s *Poetics* – with sublimity. To be precise, it reveals to the spectator the tragedy and the horror of existence, leaving him speechless. And what about the *Clouds*? Now, what to us is a comedy, i.e. *The Clouds* (by parodying life, comedy points out life’s comic aspects), to the cloudy spectators is a tragedy. The *Clouds* imitate man – a woman, a coward, a swindler – so that man may take a closer look at himself, see his reflection in “the clouds”. Thus they are an inspiration for the philosopher and the poet, a *katharsis* for the ordinary man.⁸ Does this mean that the *Clouds* – and only the *Clouds* – know the whole truth about man’s life? And what about other gods? There are no other gods – “There is no Jupiter” (367) – says Socrates. If there is no God, who sends the rain? – wonders Strepsiades. The *Clouds* – comes the reply. This is some kind of misunderstanding, the rain is brought to us not by the *Clouds*, but by Jupiter peeing through a strainer – such was Strepsiades’ belief until now. Socrates seems annoyed by this “foolish person [...], savouring of the dark ages and antediluvian” (398), this “mortal” as he calls him with such gusto. Yet, he already grew fond of him, because he is unable to grasp what is Strepsiades’ purpose – a fool is generally unpredictable and thus interesting. Besides, one can always teach him something. That is why he decides to tell Strepsiades a secret: Jupiter is gone because the ethereal Vortex (*Dinos*) consumed him. There is also no such thing as trans-historical justice which operates through divine intervention, because the thunders that fall from the heavens are more likely to strike Jupiter’s own temple than those who deserve punishment – Simon and Cleonymus, for their perjury, and Theorus because he is a fag. The world as he knows it crumbles around Strepsiades. The gods of old are no more. Reality is penetrated by Chaos, the *Clouds* and Speech – *tria tauti*, the three elements which stir up the all-consuming Vortex. All these incomprehensible revelations make Strepsiades even more confused – he is now like wax, like a tablet ready to be written on. Thus he is taken by Socrates to his “thinking shop” – “purified” (i.e. with empty bowels) and eager to become an eloquent rascal who, if necessary, may just as well swear by the *Clouds* – a feminine reality, capricious, changeable by nature and thus unworthy of oaths.

Strepsiades turns out to be an exceptionally dull student, even dumber than the slave whom Socrates “reminded” of the Pythagorean theorem in *Meno* (Plato, 80d-81d). Strepsiades cannot be “reminded” of anything. In a fit of insanity he even wants to take his own life, assuming that this way no debtor would be able to make a case against him. It is a very strange episode in the comedy. Someone who is going to hang himself in order

⁷ L. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸ The word *katharsis* was originally used by the Greeks as a name of a laxative, and later gained other meaning. That is why the words of the “god-fearing” Strepsiades should be understood in their literal meaning: “I too worship you, O ye highly honoured, and am inclined to reply to the thundering, so much do I tremble at them and am alarmed. And whether it be lawful, or be not lawful, I have a desire just now to ease myself” (293-95).

to avoid punishment for debts, acts as if the continuity of his self was broken, as if he didn't remember who he is dealing with, that it is his own life he is about to take. Was he brought to this drastic choice by Socrates' sophism which demoralizes speech – first speech and next thinking? Or maybe the old fool allowed the Clouds to take over his reason, the Clouds that naturally lack continuity, are sheer inconsistency and change, leading one to the brink of an abyss, into oblivion, a great oblivion that consumes even things which are yet to be? Strepsiades' failure is not just his own, it is a blow to the whole school, as well as to the teacher. There is no happy end – Socrates and Strepsiades take leave of each other. The former has not gained a disciple, the latter has not learned to lie. Therefore, he once more tries to persuade his son to engage in useful studies instead of wasting time and money on horses. Phidippides wishes to know what he would gain by it. Strepsiades begins to list the benefits: first, you will learn that there is no god; next – that thinking is a kind of airy vapor; you will know yourself; and finally, you will become eloquent. Phidippides agrees, although he suspects something evil to come out of it – not for himself, however, but for his father.

In the next two scenes (proagon and agon) the Clouds arrange an argument between the Just and Unjust Causes. Objective and irresponsible, they call themselves allies of both sides. Proagon is a kind of contest, an auctioning of goods by praising them and using various self-promotional techniques. And here we learn that the Just Cause is old-fashioned. Truth fills its mouth. It affirms the belief in meta-historical justice, i.e. in the revenge of the ancient gods visited on all those who turned the world inside out. In the old times people believed in gods, today they honor the Clouds – faith has been replaced by gullibility. The Just Cause criticizes the new customs. It accuses the young of being effeminate, calling them pansies, profligates, parricides. For the Unjust Cause these epithets are “roses”, “lilies”, “sprinkling[s] of gold”. The mire of lies and duplicity, the absence of any shame or constraint, is its natural element. And it wins the contest for the souls of the young because it itself is younger, bolder, more adventurous. The agon concludes the argument. First the Just Cause advertises its virtues. It begins its speech by reminding the audience how wonderful life used to be: no one ever heard “the voice of a boy uttering a syllable” in the company of the elders (963). Modestly dressed, the young people practiced playing the harp, “raising to a higher pitch the harmony which our fathers transmitted to us” (968). Whoever was tempted to improvise, whoever gave signs of creative originality, was flogged. In the old world the jam jars were opened by the elders, the young were allowed to lick out the left-overs. “Nor used it to be allowed [for the young] when one was dining to take the head of the radish, or to snatch from their seniors dill or parsley, or to eat fish, or to giggle, or to keep the legs crossed” (981-983). These were the times! So choose me, the Just Cause addresses Phidippides. We will sit together in blessed peace and reverently recall the greatness of our ancestors who fought at Marathon. I will teach you to honor your parents, you will not call your father Iapetus, and if you abide with me you will have „a little tongue, large hips, little lewdness (literally, a small penis)” (1013-1014). A tempting proposal indeed...

The Unjust Cause, listening with an insolent smile to this apology of old age, knows very well that friendship is built not on mutual respect, saintly union of the great and the meek, but on vice, on the desire to do mischief with a friend. As W. H. Auden wrote

in his essay on Don Juan, “a vice in common can be the ground of a friendship but not a virtue in common. X and Y may be friends because they are both drunkards or womanizers but, if they are both sober and chaste, they are friends for some other reason.”⁹ The Unjust Cause wishes to build its friendship with Phidippides precisely on his rebellion against his elders. It nurtures his youthful passion for overturning the world, for shaking and destroying its foundations. It awakens within Phidippides a tendency for anarchy, for pleasure, for radical individualism. Use your own measure against the world, not the measure of old age – it argues. Your fate is creative turmoil, hubris, and not the pompous, useless prudence of your ancestors:

Consider, O youth, all that attaches to modesty, and of how many pleasures you are about to be deprived – of women, of games at cottabus, of dainties, of drinking-bouts, of giggling. And yet, what is life worth to you if you be deprived of these enjoyments? Well, I will pass from thence to the necessities of our nature. You have gone astray, you have fallen in love, you have been guilty of some adultery, and then have been caught. You are undone, for you are unable to speak. But if you associate with me, indulge your inclination, dance, laugh, and think nothing disgraceful. For if you should happen to be detected as an adulterer, you will make this reply to him, ‘that you have done him no injury’: and then refer him to Jupiter, how even he is overcome by love and women. And yet, how could you, who are a mortal, have greater power than a god?

(1071-1083)

The Unjust Cause does not thunder at the boy: “for the fear of god, what are you doing!”, but to the contrary: urges him to act just as Jupiter does: to grab, embrace, take advantage of the lovely mortal girls. Leo Strauss lucidly expressed this comic aspect of the agon: „Both speeches argued on the premise that Zeus exists, and that one must live according to Zeus’s will. But whereas the Just Speech implied that men should do what Zeus tells them to do, the Unjust Speech asserted that men should or may do what Zeus does.”¹⁰ Socrates takes a still different position. Even if gods exist, he argues, they behave as children: they waste “time” on games, the agon and other entertainments. Instead of learning, they maintain that they already know all things and can do all things. That is why it is not worthwhile to emulate them. It is far better to look into the Clouds, which – changeable and curious about man’s doings – will tell him more about himself than Jupiter and his entourage.

In the end the audience deprecates the principled and at times aggressive justice of the first speech and rewards with ovations its unjust opponent. Thus Phidippides’s choice is made easy for him – he now knows what to do: make the weaker statement stronger, and weaken a stronger one. Only thus may he gain advantage over old age. And so it is time to begin his studies.

⁹ W.H. Auden, “Don Juan”, in: idem, *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays*. New York: Random House 1962, p. 402.

¹⁰ L. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, op. cit., p. 30.

In the next iambic scene it becomes apparent just how much Phidippides has been muddled by Socrates. He leaves the phrontisterion pale and sluggish, moving in a “mechanical” manner. Phidippides is now a man radically transformed. We do not really know how this came about – the forging of his soul had been conducted behind closed doors – yet we do know what the result is. Now the son teaches his father how to rule over the world by means of unjust speeches; of the two of them he turns out to be the better student. The old man asks his son’s advice on how to trick a debtor – and duly receives it. Strepsiades is beside himself with joy: he now knows how to deceive and cheat others, and therefore he no longer needs to worry about anything. His joy and happiness are still increased when it turns out that Phidippides’s wisdom may be put to good use, that it is **effective** (which we observe in the peculiar scene of *agon* with his debtors, Pasion and Arynias). The old, feeble-minded rascal is pleased with his son, but most of all he is pleased with his own effectiveness – at last he can breathe freely. Looking under his feet, looking around him, he does not see the *Clouds* that have gathered over his head. These are their words: “he will certainly meet with something today, which will perhaps cause this sophist to suddenly receive some misfortune, in return for the knaveries he has begun. For he will presently find what has been long boiling up, that his son is skilful to speak opinions opposed to justice, so as to overcome all with whomsoever he holds converse, even if he advance most villainous doctrines; and perhaps, perhaps his father will wish that he were even speechless” (1307-1320).

THE LAST STEP

Let us review the facts: the father from the very beginning intended to use his son to his own ends. Thus he channels his son’s youthful rebelliousness against the debtors who invade their house. Youth, against the father’s wishes, puts its stake on horses – movement and energy (of the horse, not of the mind) is its basic passion. Poring over books one may only get old, freeze in stasis – Youth thinks. Thus in the end it is not philosophy (in its etymological sense) that draws Phidippides to the phrontisterion, but the sight of his father who has been defeated in his scholarly endeavors. His father’s fiasco awakens within Phidippides a passion for competition – since you want me to learn something, he reasons, I will be better than you and learn more than you managed to (the second *agon*). His decision is very much within the general tendency of all times which – though rarely made explicit – maintains that “the knowers have no obligation toward the ignorant, [which notion] arises from the generally accepted principle according to which madmen have lesser rights than the sane.”¹¹ Phidippides senses that the basket in which Socrates lies suspended from the ceiling – where he practices nimbleness of thought and protects its substance from the gravitation of solid matter – is within his reach. If only he could master the art of manipulating others, of bending the principles which govern people’s lives, if only he could ascend to the higher levels of reality, he would gain power over the world; he would be – like his current master – above the law. (Of course, what he has in mind is not the kind of authority which, thanks to custom and the consensus among citizens, can stand above legal regulations. Aristophanes describes a pathological situation, typical of the judicial system of his time which exempted from charges those who were

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36; see also pp. 37 and 39.

able to turn the blade of the law against itself; he is talking, obviously, about the sophists). Strepsiades is pleased with the youthful eagerness of his son because he does not know what the Clouds have been proclaiming all over the town since early morning: his end is near, the end of the whole world based on the sanctity of kinship, on solidarity between generations and on a shared tradition. Strepsiades very quickly learns the fragility of his illusions and the strength of resentment in the young.

We hear a noise coming from the house. Suddenly Strepsiades runs out calling his neighbors and relatives to bear witness – he is being beaten by his own son! The brawl is transferred to the street because only thus he may prove the injury that befell him: no rhetorical syllogism may undermine the fact that he is being beaten and by his own child! The Clouds gather. They wish to know what really happened, how the row between them came about. From what Strepsiades says, it seems that they were drinking wine and he wished his son to sing something out of the ancient Attic repertoire. Phidippides explained to his father that, first of all, he will not sing while drinking, for when one drinks, one cannot sing; secondly, that he will not attempt to resurrect obsolete songs – let his father deal with his nostalgia as he may; thirdly, that he will perform a certain piece, but a lewd one, about a son sleeping with his mother... And this is the background and the main reason of their quarrel. Phidippides goes a step further: he not only beats, smothers and punches his old man in the face – he also wants to prove that this action is just. Strepsiades learns that the law is a sphere of human whim, fancy of the strong and powerful, that it is an outcome of a shaky compromise of the opposing parties. The winner takes it all – that is the motto which one should learn in this brave new world. “The understanding gained by the disciples of Socrates was a realization of the laws’ invalidity”¹² – Hegel writes. But this is not quite precise. What Phidippides calls “law” is the decree of the strongest party. “Why then is it less lawful for me also in turn to propose henceforth a new law for the sons, that they should beat their fathers in turn?” (1423-1424). Of course, it is lawful – he has just proven it with his fist. For quite a while now Phidippides has been more than just a lover of horses – he has become first and foremost a lawgiver; the fact that he is a son striving to get even with his father is of secondary importance. The law which is being established by him is the law of the strongest: since strong fathers beat their small children in order to teach them a lesson, now the strong sons repay them in kind – such is the meaning of the new justice resulting from the war of generations. Thus, the basis of the newly established law is by no means respect, veneration of tradition, and not even the Clouds, or, as Hegel would say, “abstract nothingness”, but sheer arbitrariness of power, a peculiar law of nature. It is upheld by a crude analogy between the human and animal worlds – since the young roosters peck, tug and otherwise harass the defenseless old ones, why should man act otherwise?

The bestiality of Phidippides, the fledging neophyte of the science that can turn human reality inside out, is made apparent on two planes. He becomes a brute when he beats his father arguing that this action is justified; but later he also thinks of beating his mother. We may say that this is the last step in *The Clouds* – after this everything is allowed, even to sleep with one’s mother. If there is no law that would forbid the physical molestation of the mother by her son, nothing hinders him from going even farther and – literally – taking

¹² G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Vol. II: *Greek Philosophy*, op. cit.

his father's place.¹³ Isn't this precisely what he wanted to sing to him about? Strepsiades knows that this sudden turn of events cannot be blamed on Socrates who never offered his teachings in the first place. He can only blame himself and the Clouds who – as the new goddesses – turned out to be infinitely superficial, lacking in depth and in discernment of the old gods. In the end this is admitted by the Clouds themselves:

CHOIR

Nay, rather, you are yourself the cause of these things, having turned yourself to wicked courses.

STREPSIADES

Why, pray, did you not tell me this, then, but excited with hopes a rustic and aged man?

CHOIR

We always do this to him whom we perceive to be a lover of wicked courses, until we precipitate him into misfortune, so that he may learn to fear the gods.

(1452-1461)

Finally it becomes apparent that the Clouds, the goddesses of imitation, have the whole time been replicating the stupidity of the old man. Thus they encouraged him to engage in imprudent and vicious actions, such as telling the young what to sing and what not to sing. Socrates only completed the cycle of misfortunes by convincing him that the gods are mere delusions, that the depth is to be found on the surface. Strepsiades feels that he has lost his mind – swayed by the seductive “prater” (1477) he had rejected gods, thus offending them. Yet, how may one offend gods in which one does not believe? – this, of course, he does not bother to explain. He does know, however, one thing: just as Socrates taught him not to fear the gods (since there is no one to fear), so will he, Strepsiades, teach Socrates to fear them. “Strepsiades’ return to piety and justice – writes Leo Strauss – is not a return to legality.”¹⁴ He tries to persuade his son to a bloody revenge on the “school of rhetors” and their master. However, he forgets about one thing: that he has long lost him, that his son keeps the “prater’s” side and that of his friends. Strepsiades finds himself in a world which has outrun him: the pantheon is empty, filled with nothing but Clouds, the state does not exist, the son beats his father and intends to sleep with his mother, Socrates and Chaerephon rule over the people’s hearts and minds, anyone may – o abomination! – stage Euripides. The old man does not want such a world and not by chance his act of destruction is begun by setting the phrontisterion on fire.

To sum up: “The Clouds is Aristophanes’s wisest comedy”¹⁵ – as Leo Straus says. He does not explain, however, the source of these aspirations to wisdom in the play. The comedy is usually a trivial affair, with a tendency – pointed out by Aristotle – to reflect

¹³ See L. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, op. cit., pp. 40, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

human ugliness and stupidity. So why should we look for wisdom in *The Clouds* – a comedy full of burlesque vulgarity and obscene jokes? After all, its rude hilarity has nothing to do with healthy and friendly laughter. And whom, we may ask, does the author intend to infect with this hilarity? Or perhaps he wants not only to infect us but make us “die of laughter”? Aristophanes in Greek, just as Swift in English and Gogol in Russian, exposes to the thrust of his bizarre humor everything and everyone, without mercy – there’s just no stopping him. Thus, his crude joke is like Hitchcock’s birds – just when it seems that they have flown away, they return to tear apart and devour whatever is left. But why? Is Socrates really the target of Aristophanes’ sarcasm, as the general opinion holds? What if the writer has someone else in mind? Who might it be?

The ending of the comedy is uncertain. According to the Polish classicist Adam Krokiewicz, Socrates dies in the flames.¹⁶ Other commentators are more merciful to Socrates and let him escape – the rude audience bids him farewell with an outburst of spiteful laughter. Yet, as I already mentioned, the ending is not really about Socrates. What is essential is the war of the generations itself – the true reason for writing and staging *The Clouds*. Aristophanes is convinced that this war is inevitable. Youth will always strive to free itself from the dictatorship of old customs, while old age will not leave off moralizing. It will keep trying to enforce norms of behavior which to the young must seem a tight girdle, limiting their youthful zest and spontaneity. Yet children grow up without any consideration for the senile resentment of their fathers – such is the law of nature. They wish to impose a new hierarchy of values on the world, negotiate with it according to their own scale, engaging the utmost of their power and ingenuity, and feeling less and less uncomfortable about it. Their greatest illusion is the faith that everything may be made anew, from scratch, without the help of the elders. And this is sufficient reason for them to push their elders to the margins of life, out of the way, sealing them up in the halls of memory. But the young usually underestimate the determination of their fathers’ conservatism. When pushed against the wall, old age will not hesitate to set fire to any initiative of the young, will consistently strike out against all manifestations of vitality, and if necessary – will destroy them with the aid of “the slaves” (i.e. flatterers), just as Strepsiades destroyed the world and the dreams of his son. Aristophanes is convinced, as is clear from the way the events develop, that there is no way of appeasing the conflict of generations, that it must burst forth suddenly and violently. Will anyone benefit by it? The message of the play, its “wisdom” does not seem too optimistic: if life is not a nightmare, sooner or later it will turn into one, because the conflict of generations is something inevitable and unsolvable, and there are no losers or winners in it. The battle of youthful enthusiasm and audacity with elderly conservatism leads in the end to a ruin of both competitors, ending their lives, like a blown out candle, in smoke and stench. The question that needs to be asked is not about the shape and substance of the world in which there is no Socrates (“the master”). There is something else which demands a speedy answer: is it possible to slow down the war of generations, or at least to somewhat diffuse it? Is there a point where the old and the young could meet and at least find a provisional understanding? Is it possible for the elderly to be the fellow brothers of the young in the chaos of the new reality? What new

¹⁶ A. Krokiewicz, *Sokrates*. Warszawa: PAX 1958, p. 31.

reality? When will youth finally admit to itself that the new world is an illusion, that there still remains the old world which may not simply be forgotten and left behind?

SREBRNY'S MASTERSTROKE

The latest Polish edition of *The Clouds* was published by Prószyński in the series “Biblioteka antyczna” (The Ancient Library), initiated by Jerzy Ciechanowicz, the great scholar and lover of ancient culture. As a good publishing enterprise (just to mention Homer’s *Iliad*, *Metamorphoses* and *A Discourse on Magic* by Apuleius, or *Hesiod’s Theogony*), The Ancient Library is an aid to memory. Memory likes to play tricks on us: sometimes it does not want to hear about the debt we owe to the past, it tries to avoid uncomfortable issues and ambiguous figures, over-amplifying current events, most of which – from the historical perspective – are indeed quite insignificant. And sometimes it does not remember anything at all. Prószyński’s *The Ancient Library*, while admitting that we are separated from the source, assumes that a return to it is possible. Not a final return, perhaps, but a continuous process of returning – coming back to the old, still valid questions, unearthing those mysteries which used to trouble the Greeks and which today still haunt us. When we listen to the conversation of the servants in Aristophanes’s *The Knights*, who believe in gods because gods detest them¹⁷, we can’t help thinking that this great scene was written by Ionesco – it is so much in his style, so fresh and up-to-date.

But in *The Ancient Library*, besides the works mentioned above, there is also a real rarity – a collection of comedies by Aristophanes translated into contemporary Polish by Janina Ławińska-Tyszkowska. Until now the translation (into Polish) of all his comedies was completed only by Stefan Srebrny¹⁸, and though I am emotionally attached to this version, I do think that the classics should be revisited from time to time, translated anew into a modern, contemporary idiom. This is why I have decided to renew my acquaintance with *The Clouds*, my favorite comedy by Aristophanes, in Ławińska’s translation, comparing it from time to time, as if to test it, with the other translations known to me.

I am familiar with five translations of *The Clouds*, out of which two – by Cięglewicz¹⁹ and Butrymowicz²⁰ – are obviously anachronistic approximations, almost unreadable, though not without a certain charm (like a cloak that has gone out of fashion or an old, torn and worn umbrella). I never took seriously the nursery rhymes of Sandauer²¹, though in the case of comedies this actually may sound like a compliment. Finally, there are two contenders left – the translations by Srebrny and by Ławińska. Comparing them I decided to finally solve a problem which troubled me for a long time and had earlier also worried Kierkegaard: why does Socrates, when hungry, steal from the Palaestra a cloak (as Ławińska renders it) and not something to eat? I am aware that a philosopher is a perfect object for ridicule and unrefined humor due to his occupation and his

¹⁷ Aristophanes, *Knights*, in: Eugene O’Neill, Jr., *The Complete Greek Drama*. Vol. 2. New York: Random House 1938, p. 36 (available online).

¹⁸ Almost all: *The Wasps*, *Peace*, *The Birds*, *Thesmophoriazusae* in: Aristophanes, *Wybór komedii*. Warszawa: PIW 1955; *The Acharnians*, *The Knights*, *The Clouds*, *Lysistrata* in: Aristophanes, *Komedie*. Warszawa: PIW 1962.

¹⁹ *Chmury*, komedia *Arystofanesa*, trans. E. Żegota Cięglewicz. Kraków 1907.

²⁰ *Przekład komedii Arystofanesa. Chmury i Żaby*, trans. B. Butrymowicz. Kraków & Warszawa 1908.

²¹ *Dramaty greckie. Wybór*, trans. and ed. by A. Sandauer. Warszawa 1977.

indifference to the world. But why does he steel so stupidly? “The words describing this entire event – Kierkegaard writes – «He sprinkled fine ashes on the table, and bent a little spit, and then took it as a pair of compasses...» seem like a prelude to the act of creation and our surprise is the greater when suddenly and with such emphasis the word “filched” is introduced. It makes no difference how one understands the role of this passage in the play, there is always some uncertainty as to how this swindle is related to the privation which it is supposed to remedy. A disciple tells Strepsiades that when they had nothing to eat for dinner, Socrates took upon himself to conduct the operation described, during which he stole the cloak from a fencing school. Yet – on the one hand – it is unclear how he managed to thereby provide dinner, unless we assume that Socrates sold the cloak and thus supplied the necessary victuals. And on the other – we do not know at all what difference it makes that the cloak was stolen from a fencing school.”²² In the translations by Cięglewicz, Burtymowicz and Sandauer – the versions I have just disavowed – this issue is never raised because Socrates does not steal a cloak but meat! And this is not all. Bogusław Butrymowicz provides a historical commentary for this scene: “Socrates – we read in his “footnotes” to the play – is, as usual, in the Palaestra (wrestling school). It is a holiday and time to make sacrifices; thus there are ashes, a spit and a sacrificing table on which some remains of the baked meat still remain. Socrates comes to the table with the seeming intention of using the spit and ashes for a geometrical drawing. While everyone is watching with interest his drawings on the ground, the master with his left hand takes a piece of meat from the table.”²³ What is then stolen by the philosopher? Meat, because he is hungry, or does he act like a madman, a kleptomaniac, taking everything that happens to be in his way? Finally, the translation by Srebrny leads us out of the darkness:

He sprinkled the table with the small ashes, took the spit,
Bent it in half and made a compass out of it, and then...
took out of the cloakroom by the court someone’s “zarzutka”²⁴.

Thus it becomes clear that Socrates may actually be taking both – thoimation (cloak, or “zarzutka” in Polish) and thymation (sacrificial meat, “zarzutka”, another meaning of which in Polish is a soup made of meat, cabbages and potatoes, a sacrifice to the gods). Thus he may both eat to the full and be clothed – such is the greatness of the translator who takes care not only of the letter of his translation, but looks after the health and well-being of the philosopher. Everything in fact depends on the edition which is taken as the source, on the “lecture”, as linguists would say²⁵: it is either thoimation (as in the manuscript) or thymation (as in the “corrected” 19th century edition by C.F. Hermann). But the point is that we should take both the former and the latter.

²² S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, op. cit. / *The concept of irony: With constant reference to Socrates*, op. cit.

²³ *Przekład komedii Arystofanesa. Chmury i Żaby*, op. cit., p. 102.

²⁴ Aristophanes, *Komedie*, trans. by S. Srebrny, op. cit., 178-180, p. 224.

²⁵ This problem was patiently explained to me by Mikołaj Szymański, to whom in this place I would like to express my gratitude.

SUPERSENSIBLE NECESSITY

The problem which shall interest us here in connection with Kant's second *Critique* concerns the imagination and – in that particular context – its relation to freedom and moral law. To put it simply, we want to answer the following question: How do we become sensible¹ of the existence of moral law? How do we know that – as finite beings – we are free? *The Critique of Pure Reason* had proved beyond doubt that our cognition is limited to what here and now is accessible to the senses. And everything we can know in the sensible world is predetermined by the laws of pure understanding, by its concepts. One of the prime rules which governs our cognition is that of causality. It declares that all possible objects of cognition have to be, prior to being experienced, systematized according to objective time relations. Without this a priori ordering objective cognition is not possible. Onto the subjective sequence of the phenomena of our intuition we therefore have to (it is an apodeictic necessity) superimpose an objective temporal order and define all possible “positions” of phenomena in time. In accordance with the principle of causality, each phenomenon is determined by another one which precedes it in time. In other words, in the sensible world everything has its cause; nothing can exist which is causeless. How then are we to imagine a free act? How is freedom possible if everything – in the empirical world – is subjected to causal necessity? And finally, how is morality (moral law) possible whose *ratio essendi* is precisely freedom?

If all our actions resulted from previous ones – if they were always determined by events over which we have no control – the idea of moral responsibility would make very little sense. For how can we be responsible for something which we ourselves – through a free decision – did not bring about? Consequently, how can we adequately speak of freedom – as well as of morality which depends on freedom – in a world in which necessity holds sway? Broadly speaking, freedom consists in being able to initiate a train of events; in being a cause which is not a result of anything prior to it, which is not determined by anything other than itself, and thus is both unconditioned and conditioning. There is no such thing in the sensible world. Since causality has a universal character, everything that exists is conditioned and nothing can be unconditioned. The world which we see before eyes cannot therefore harbor freedom. Is it not spurious then to speak of freedom, morality, moral law or duty, all of which concepts are at the heart of the second *Critique*?

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as is well known, Kant divided that which exists into two spheres: the phenomenal and the noumenal. We can of course say nothing about

¹ I use here the word „sensible” rather than „aware” on purpose and for a reason which will become clear in the course of my reading of Kant.

noumena (things in themselves) apart from the fact that they exist. Positive existence can only be attributed to phenomena, i.e. things which can be known to the senses, things for us. We know not only “that” they are, but also “what” they are. This division, however, did not arise out of any inner necessity, that is – it was not necessary in order to make the critique of speculative reason coherent and complete. The reasons lay beyond the field of problems broached by the study of the nature of speculative reason. In short, they were reasons pertaining to Kant’s system itself. As such, of course, they were relevant to what Kant was saying about the speculative reason. A system is a system both as a whole and in each of its constituent parts, and the governing principle, if it is to be a systematic principle as well, must manifest itself in all the subdivisions of a given system and in all its elements, even those which seem least important. Otherwise we can neither speak of a system, nor of its parts.

The same can be said about the division between phenomena and noumena. In the light of the *Critique of Pure Reason* this distinction explains nothing and is itself – within the framework of this work – unexplainable. Since speculative reason is interested solely in knowing objects and can attain their cognition only under the guidance of the understanding (the concepts of which it uses to describe the sensual sphere), then the only “world” which exists for it is the one accessible to the senses, the world of phenomena. From the speculative (theoretical) perspective only phenomena can be said to exist and only their existence can be fully explained by invoking the transcendental order. The world of things in themselves remains from the perspective of pure speculative reason a *terra incognita* which can never be known.

But although the sphere of things in themselves is unknowable – which on the grounds of Kantian dualism cannot be doubted – it does not follow that it is no way accessible. The infinite order of being, Kant says, is a fact. It is given or established – as further analysis will show – as a Fact. What does Kant mean by this? It can be simply said that facts are manifold. All phenomena whatsoever within the sensible world are facts: a tree, a cat, my own phenomenal existence (I am one of the many things belonging to this world). The transcendental order which explains the fact-phenomena is itself a fact. Finally, there is the fact of the moral law through which Man is revealed in every man; a trans-phenomenal self (personality) manifests itself in my phenomenal being. It is a self which “reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the entire world of sense.”² Unlimited freedom is thus made available to me and within me – it undermines the blind necessity which states that my animal being “after having for a short time been provided (one knows not how) with vital force, must give back again to the planet (a mere dot in the universe) the matter from which it came.”³ It is also a fact – we should perhaps stress – that facts differ from one another ontologically; namely, they belong to different levels, different stages of the process of meaning-formation. A phenomenal fact is wholly comprehensible and capable of being explained. It is transparent, so to speak, to the scrutinizing eye of consciousness – the eye which is aware of its own gaze as it peers through space in search of forms conforming to the truth of cognition – i.e. the meaning which is dictated *a priori*. In short, empirical facts – clear and definite, and capable of being

² I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. W.S. Pluhar. Indianapolis & Cambridge 2002, p. 203.

³ Ibid.

precisely located within the network of relationships established by categories – are least problematic and, so to speak, insignificant from the perspective of being. They merely allow the animal to orient itself in its immediate surroundings, including distant galaxies towards which it can reach out by employing mechanical substitutes of its own body, such as the telescope. The process of the discovery and systematization of empirical facts is not wholly unconnected with man's animal nature. It allows human beings to satisfy their inclinations, their "bodily needs," and ultimately – to achieve happiness. This satisfaction or happiness, however, because it depends on knowing that which is "here," can only occur – just as cognition itself – within the perspective of eternity. The promise of redemption, the hope, is therefore illusory, since the body's proper perspective is that of finitude, and since it must, unconditionally, "give back [...] the matter from which it came."

Apart from empirical facts there are also transcendental ones whose nature is radically different from the former. First of all, they cannot be cognized inasmuch as they determine the scope and the basic conditions of cognition. They are not the objects of explanation or interpretation – they make explanation possible in the first place, they establish the interpretational tropes. They are the rudimentary "images" which cannot be questioned as to their "why" or "wherefore"? They emerge out of obscure depths and plunge into a bottomless abyss, although they may have – and usually do have – their own history and their own purpose. Transcendental facts are the facts of Reason. Reason struggles with them and cannot come to terms with them, is even defeated by them – by what it produces for and out of itself. Kant says as much when he describes the transcendental imagination as dark though necessary, as emerging out of the unfathomed depths of the soul, and when he states that Reason can never fully embrace it. Such epithets best describe the essence of one fact which no doubt is transcendental in nature, namely – imagination. Also consciousness – or speculative reason with its principles and concepts – belongs to the realm of transcendental facts, as well as the feelings of pleasure and pain lying at the root of the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, and finally – what interests us most here – practical reason with moral law, will and freedom.

What does it mean that moral is a Fact of Reason? Transcendental facts – Facts of Reason – are distinguished from empirical ones, i.e. from phenomenal facts, by having the character of an event. Only in their light does the entire genetic process, which "precedes" their disclosure by Reason, acquire a proper meaning. In the case of empirical facts it is the other way round – their meaning is constituted during the process of their production, it is as if prior to them or – to put it differently – they are objects of knowledge before they are known, before they arise in their empirical being. This means that transcendental facts do not, strictly speaking, have a genesis. It can only be retrospectively constructed, "after" the event of the transcendental fact, in order to systematize or divide the transcendental field (the horizon of meaning). It is precisely the events within the boundaries of mere Reason which – in accordance with Kant's dualism – lead to the formation of the two separate spheres of Reason: speculative (theoretical) reason and practical reason. We will now delineate the structure of practical reason and will also explain why Kant considered its position within the realm of Reason to have been primary. We will do so in order to accurately grasp the very concept of transcendental fact which is the proper starting point of any discussion concerning the tradition of transcendental thought.

FREEDOM AND LAW

Freedom, as Kant presents it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, has a negative character. This is apparent from its first definition which states that freedom consists in *not* being subjected to the laws of nature, in being “unconstrained” by them. What is positive here are the laws of nature, the principles of the sensual order, whereas freedom inheres in the suspension of – or the resistance to – the overwhelming presence of the positive. Understood in this way, freedom does not establish an autonomous field for the realization of ends other than those which are necessitated by our animal nature. It does imply, however, that a repressive mechanism might be created in order not to allow the will to be determined by incentives of a pathological nature (by which Kant means sensual determinations, those typical of an animal). Or rather – since a complete elimination of these determinations is not possible – they at least have to be held in check, barred from the sphere upon which our humanity depends. This is the price which the human animal has to pay in becoming Human.

This is the task which Kant sets before the critique of practical reason. He writes: „Hence the critique of practical reason as such has the obligation to keep the empirically conditioned reason from presuming to seek to provide, alone and exclusively, the determining basis of the will.”⁴ Will – the faculty of desire – in order to fulfill the requirements of moral law, and to decisively clamp down on empirical incentives which are forcefully postulated by speculative reason,⁵ has to – above all and with equal force – be compelled to relinquish its “natural” desires. These are the desires which imply the feeling of pleasure and contentment – both simple desires, directly connected with the body, and the sophisticated ones which indirectly, though irrepressibly, push towards the same goal as the former: i.e. the pleasurable enhancement of vital powers. Among those we should of course include the desires which prompt us to take actions aimed at avoiding displeasure or simply physical pain.

Each action which springs from a desire of the will is made up of two elements: the form and the matter (i.e. the object) of desire. The form of desire is its purposiveness, since every desire must be directed towards something which the will wills or which it shuns. Contemporary philosophers would say that desires are intentional. The matter of desire, on the other hand, are the feelings or apprehensions of pleasure and pain. They are the proper objects of the will – its determinations. Such is the matter of the practical principle which in the human being directs the animal will. In order to be “elevated” to the truly human level of willing, to the level of moral law, the will has to be prevented from selecting feelings as the object to which it directs itself (i.e. from adopting feelings as the matter of the practical principle). For if they were – as Kant says – „the will’s determining basis, then the rule of the will would be subject to an empirical condition (*viz.*, to the determining presentation’s relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure), and consequently would not be a practical law.”⁶ Most importantly, such a principle can never be transformed into

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ Speculative reason itself undermines its universal legislation, since it is unable to solve the problem of freedom in reference to the phenomenal world, or in other words – of freedom understood as the faculty of absolute spontaneity; see also *ibid.*, p. 67.

⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

law, since it lacks the quality of universality, an immanent feature of law as such. For vital reasons it cannot be „based on the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, [because] this feeling can never be assumed to be directed universally to the same objects.”⁷ That is not the end of it, however. In order to ascend to the level of moral law it is not enough to exclude the feelings of pleasure and pain from the sphere of that which determines the faculty of desire. It is also necessary to exclude all objective determinations of the will, which means that moral law, strictly speaking, cannot have an object. This in turn implies that moral law must also be devoid of matter. „Now if from a law all the matter, i.e., every object of the will, is separated (as determining basis), nothing remains of the law but the mere form of a universal legislation.”⁸ In short, moral law – not so much with regard to law itself, as with regard to morality – must be without an object, without substance, empty of meaning, and of a purely formal character.

Once the maxims (the subjective practical principles) are cleansed of the element of substance, which constitutes the proper object of desire, or in other words – once the empirical determinations of the will are eliminated, what remains is the pure form of universal legislation inherent in every maxim. The next crucial step in ascertaining the nature of moral law is to discover or establish such a disposition of the will in which it is determined by form alone. This withdrawal from the sensual sphere – from the realm of empirical determinations – is necessary in order to establish the autonomy of practical reason and its law. At the same time, it is a movement which helps to demarcate clearly the boundaries separating the various aspects of reason, while it also reveals two different meanings of the concept of “immanence”. This concept, as is well known, occupies an important, often central position in the manifold inversions of transcendentalism. Kant’s first two critiques introduced into the language of philosophy two crucially different ways of understanding and explicating the concept of “immanence”. The subsequent “development” of transcendental thought, or even of philosophy as such, is to a certain extent the history of contamination of the different meanings of the concept. Kantian immanence reaches back to the beginnings of modern philosophy which founded thought on immanence. Already on the first pages of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes draws a picture of a new type of thinker whose first duty is to detach himself from all “empirical determinations”. He must start everything anew if he wishes to be successful in his endeavor. His first obligation is to renounce all worldly cares and steer clear of whatever may diminish the clarity of contemplation. The attributes of the modern thinker are his dressing gown and slippers, the fireplace before which he sits brooding over the fire – which alas, as Plato tells us, is merely artificial – and wielding a pen and a sheet of paper. It is not much, indeed, for a being which after all is not all reason but is an animal as well. At this point, however, this thinker of “the new order” takes another step: the body disappears, its reality is too uncertain to maintain that it is indispensable for the new project of being. In a single gesture – which no longer is a gesture of the hand – the body is transformed into number (size, shape, location). The people down in the street might as well be automatons clothed in *chapeaux et manteaux*. Finally, it has to be admitted that

⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

what is alive is in no way different from what is dead since the “face, hands, arms, and this whole mechanism of limbs” is something “we see even in corpses”.⁹

Modernity by reinterpreting monotheistic thought – although it claims that it merely seeks intellectual maturity and independence – establishes two forms of radical exteriority: the animal (irrational, material, particular) and the divine (hyper-rational, formal, incorporeal and universal). The *cogito*, having imposed restrictions on itself (an act most radically conceptualized by Fichte in his *Wissenschaftslehre*), attempts from now on to independently reclaim that which it has deprived itself of. By secluding itself in the immanence of what it came to consider as its own, it continues to struggle with the otherness of what it recognized in itself as alien and designated as transcendent.

Kant understands perfectly well the rules of this game which reason plays with itself. He also knows that it is impossible to think the “subject” in any other way than by employing the concept of “immanence”. Radical exteriority, otherness – that which is transcendent in the strictest sense – is for Kant nothing but an artificial postulate of “dogmatism” or the naive notion of someone incapable of using reason “without another’s guidance”, whether out of cowardice or because he is unable to make an independent decision. That is why Kant’s answer to this fundamental dilemma of modernity is neither to reject the concept of “immanence”, nor to radicalize the immanentistic outlook by embracing solipsism. In order to avoid extremes, he introduces the concept of “transcendentalism” which – in this context – implies the incorporation of that which is transcendent into the sphere of immanence, as well as a decisive interiorization of one’s interior – an enhancement of immanence. By reformulating the dialectics of interior–exterior, Kant was able to retain the enlightenment idea of reason’s self-rule. For him this idea offered the only possible hope for the amelioration of humankind – an endless progress, no doubt, but progress nevertheless. The fulfillment of this idea consisted in drawing a precise boundary line between that which is within human power and that which is not and can never be controlled by man. In other words, it was necessary to describe the full potential of mankind and – which is the same thing – of reason. Reason – says Kant – „is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end. But before we venture out on this sea, to search through all its breadth and become certain of whether there is anything to hope for in it, it will be useful first to cast yet another glance at the map of the land that we would now leave, and to ask, first, whether we could not be satisfied with what it *contains*, or even *must* be satisfied with it out of necessity, if there is no other ground on which we could build; and, second, by what title we occupy even this land, and can hold it securely against all hostile claims.”¹⁰

⁹ R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. M. Moriarty. New York: Oxford University Press 2008, p. 19.

¹⁰ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 236, trans. P. Guyer, A.W. Wood. Cambridge University Press 1998 (emphasis KR).

Of course, we „must be satisfied with it out of necessity”. This necessity is in no way detrimental to us, we cannot be censured for accepting it, since immanence allows us to retain the division between that which is internal and that which external, and consequently – between the subjective and the objective order, between what is true and what is merely illusory, between good and evil. The only illusion we fall prey to – the only radical illusion – is the one in which we assume that something may exist beyond the domain of truth, since truth – in the strong, transcendental sense of the word – is not an element of cognition, is not the reverse of falsehood, but entails both that which is false and that which is not-false: it is the result of the clashing of these terms. Truth is the binding together of opposing forces, or – to use Kant’s terminology – of the two sources of our cognition; it is the synthetic product of experience, its object whose opposing poles, if not combined, are nothing, or – putting it differently – are equally false and not-false.

How does this perspective change our perception of what is most important within the domain of moral law? What sort of a will can accept as its determination the pure form of law? Kant is brief here: „a will which is such that the mere legislative form of a maxim can alone serve it as a law is a free will.”¹¹ But what is the meaning of such freedom? Freedom in „the strictest, i.e., the transcendental, meaning”¹² amounts to being „independent” of the laws of nature and of the law of cause and effect in particular. As we have already noticed, such freedom has a strictly negative character. And although in itself it is not sufficient to bring about the fulfillment of man’s supersensible calling, yet it somehow attests to the autonomy of the will. Freedom of will is the formal condition of the legislative maxim. Without it, it would be impossible to conceive of any deed whatsoever not determined by the law of cause and effect – it is as simple as this and yet it is critical. Freedom enables the realization of moral law, it is its unconditional premise but not its cause. A deed can be the result of our will not because we are free in the positive sense of the word, i.e. are free to do whatever we like, but because we can offer resistance to a force which continually holds sway over us. This force is the animal nature which rules over us. In the realm of necessity, the fact that we are free does not in any way distinguish us from other creatures. Freedom is not something which we possess by nature and which on this account distinguishes us from other creatures dwelling in the realm of necessity. It is a possibility which time and again has to be reaffirmed in deed. And it is typical for Kant that he never speaks of a particular deed – of giving alms to the poor, of aiding our brethren, or even of abstaining from committing crimes. Such empirical events, facts, tell us nothing of our freedom or of moral law, that is – they tell us nothing of the determinations of our actions. As we know, only a deed which is not empirically determined can be said to be truly lawful. But how, in such a case, is it possible to act on account of moral law? And how can we find out whether a given deed is in fact moral? Or – to put it in Kant’s own terms – what sort of a judgment, what synthesis stands behind a deed which is in agreement with moral law? In other words, what is the relation between the will and a particular deed from the perspective of the practical object of cognition?¹³

¹¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, op. cit., p. 42.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 77.

RESPECT AND THE SUBLIME

The central issue of the second *Critique* – as seen from the perspective of the problem of imagination – is contained in a short chapter entitled *On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason*. Kant points there to the transcendental feeling of respect as the result of the will being determined by nothing else than the pure form of moral law. He begins thus: „What is essential in all moral worth of actions is that the moral law must determine the will directly. If the determination of the will, although occurring in conformity with the moral law, does so only by means of a feeling – of whatever kind – that must be presupposed in order for that law to become a sufficient determining basis of the will, and hence does not occur on account of the law, then the action will indeed contain legality but not morality.”¹⁴

The question which Kant poses here concerns the difference between a deed performed “in conformity with the law”, and one performed “on account of the law”. Conformity with the law is, according to Kant, insufficient in itself for the deed to be accepted as moral. In such a case, a deed will be congruent with the letter of the law, but will not contain its spirit. The standard thanks to which we can tell apart deeds performed “in conformity with the law”, and those performed “on account of ” it, is precisely the feeling of respect.

Let us have a closer look at the dynamics of our cognitive faculties from the perspective of the feeling of respect. First of all, the way in which moral law acts upon our will is negative, it occurs „not merely without the cooperation of sensible impulses but even with rejection of all of them and with impairment of all inclinations.”¹⁵ Freedom, whose concept is at this stage of Kant’s deliberations defined in purely negative terms, consists in – as we have said – checking sensual inclinations, or in being independent of them. „For all inclination and every sensible impulse – Kant claims – is based on feeling, and the negative effect on feeling (by the impairment done to the inclinations) is itself a feeling.”¹⁶ More precisely, when Kant speaks of „the negative effect on feeling” he means that our freedom is accomplished, above all, by limiting or curbing a certain faculty which controls feelings. That faculty is the imagination, since it is the faculty of sensibility and hence – of what we call feelings. We should always keep in mind, however, that Kant’s analyses are conducted within the sphere of pure thought – he is interested only in what can be ascertained *a priori*. It is for him, and for the whole of the transcendentalist project, a thing of primary importance. The mere appearance of a phenomenon (in this case – of a deed), the fact that it is present in the field of vision, does not and cannot tell us whether it is true or performed “on account of” law. Premeditated murder is “outwardly” no different than accidental murder (here Kant fully agrees with Hume¹⁷). That is, its phenomenal aspect, the sequence of facts, may in both cases be identical. What ultimately determines the character of a particular representation (deed) is the intention which stands behind it. Therefore in order to find out what cognition is – both theoretical and practical – we have to turn towards that which is accessible to us before experience, i.e. what is *a priori*. We have to know the object of (theoretical and practical) cognition, before cognition itself takes place. According to the

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, III, I, 1.

transcendental postulate of establishing (detecting) the *a priori* conditions of possibility of practical cognition (of a moral deed), we have to state that such a condition is found in a conflict of faculties. A moral deed is possible due to a conflict occurring in the sphere of freedom between practical reason and imagination. That is why freedom – as we have stated before – is the *ratio essendi* of moral law which in turn is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom. Paraphrasing Kant’s thought from the first *Critique*, we could say that moral law without freedom is empty, whereas freedom without moral law is blind.

Freedom then is the condition of moral law’s possibility – without it moral law cannot appear in a world governed by laws of nature. But although freedom is a necessary condition for morality to apply to the world of finite beings, endowed with animal nature, it is not in itself sufficient. What is also required is imagination, the faculty of sensibility. If the human animal is to be elevated to the dignity of man, its sensual inclinations have to be checked. Due to their “empirical” origin, they cannot play any role whatsoever in determining the will in its pursuit of a deed performed “on account of” moral law. It may, of course, be the case that a deed springing from inclinations of a sensual nature will be “in conformity with” moral law. Such a deed, however, will always be accompanied by pleasure, which is contrary to the proper way in which moral law may be accomplished by finite beings, and which therefore places it outside the realm of pure morality. What is fundamental here is the feeling of displeasure which *has to* accompany deed performed “on account of” moral law. The essential conflict of reason and imagination leads to a disharmony of faculties which manifests itself in the experience of displeasure or even pain. As Kant says: “Consequently we can see a priori that the moral law as determining basis of the will, by infringing all our inclinations, must bring about a feeling that can be called pain; and here we have, then, the first and perhaps also the only case where we have been able to determine a priori from concepts³²² the relation of a cognition (here a cognition of a pure practical reason) to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure.”¹⁸

What we are dealing with here is analogous to the experience of the sublime. What is more, the structure of both these experiences is identical; it is the same structure. The only thing which distinguishes the experience of moral law from the experience of the sublime is their direction or dynamics. In both experiences the struggle is between the same faculties – imagination and reason. The sublime – according to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* – springs from the harmonious interplay of the imagination and reason in its generality. In the aesthetic judgment about the sublime, harmony (pleasure) can arise only through displeasure. What sets the interplay of cognitive powers in motion – both in case of the sublime and in case of moral law – is their disharmony founded in displeasure.¹⁹ The displeasure connected to moral law consists in a humiliation of the sensual sort – the imagination finds itself restrained. It is the power of freedom that forces the imagination to acknowledge its impotence. Freedom “brings down” moral law from the heights of reason to the level of finite beings, the level of sensibility. This shift

¹⁸ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, op. cit., p. 95–96.

¹⁹ „Thus the inner perception of the inadequacy of any sensible standard for the estimation of magnitude by reason corresponds with reason’s laws, and is a displeasure that arouses the feeling of our supersensible vocation in us, in accordance with which it is purposive and thus a pleasure to find every standard of sensibility inadequate for the ideas of the understanding” (CPJ 141).

has a strictly negative character – it is an “impairment done to the inclinations”. The next step involves the overcoming of the initial disharmony by reconciling the faculties on a “higher” level. The overcoming of the displeasure caused by the humiliation of our sensual nature is precisely what Kant calls respect. It is the respect for moral law and as such it has a positive character. But it is not – as Kant repeatedly emphasizes – a moral feeling in Hume’s understanding of the term, for the respect in question springs neither from the senses, nor from the imagination, but from moral law alone, which means that its cause is strictly rational. This is contrary to Hume’s belief that

“Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”²⁰ From this Hume draws the following conclusion: „Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg’d of.”²¹ Kant reverses Hume’s position and shows that although morality is founded on feeling, this feeling is not of a sensual nature but of a rational one. Thanks to this “reversal of Hume,” Kant – on the one hand – is able to preserve the purity of moral law (the incentive determining the will is formal, rational), and on the other – he points to a quasi-empirical criterion which enables us to distinguish deeds performed “in conformity with” the law (i.e. performed with pleasure) from those which are pursued “on account of” moral law and which are always accompanied by the feeling of displeasure or respect – depending on whether we look at things from the perspective of sensibility or reason. In the final respect, a moral deed (practical cognition) has its roots in duty with respect to moral law, or in other words – it is founded on the objective conformity of action and law, and governed by a maxim whose subjective (sensual) condition is the respect for law as the only legitimate determination of the will.²²

However, the structural identity of sublimity and morality has its deeper reasons. It must be recognized that it is the feeling of the sublime that makes morality – in the “strictest, i.e. transcendental” sense of the word – possible. This in turn suggests the primacy of the imagination in the practical sphere which seems to conflict with the usual interpretation of Kantian ethics. It also implies that – contrary to Kant’s assertions – the imagination, and thus also sensibility, is the foundation on which the edifice of moral law rests. In the final respect, moral law – if it is to be effectual – has to affect the senses, has to *be felt*. Without it, it remains an empty proposition. When *felt*, however, moral law is thrown into an environment alien to it. It is reduced to the standards of animal nature, adapted to its capacity, which seems completely at odds with its ultimate purpose which is to go beyond, to oppose animal nature. Ultimately the paradox is this: the incentive determining the will, if it is to act “on account of” moral law, must negate animal nature, must absolutely humiliate it, which – for obvious reasons – cannot succeed in relation to finite beings who cannot free themselves of their senses. It is therefore impossible to completely eliminate sensual inclinations, to exclude imagination from the game of morality. This means that the postulate of a moral deed performed out of the sense of duty is both necessary – if we are to be elevated from animal to Man – and impossible,

²⁰ D. Hume, *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*. Vol. 2. Edinburgh 1826, p. 169.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

²² I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, op. cit., p. 105.

since Elevation is just the reverse side of Humiliation. As Kant puts it, „humiliation on the sensible side, is an elevation of the moral.”²³ „Now, here it must be noted [first,] that, as far as respect is an effect on feeling and hence on the sensibility of a rational being, it presupposes this sensibility and hence also the finitude of such beings on whom the moral law imposes respect; and [second,] that respect for the *law* cannot be attributed to a supreme being or even to a being free from all sensibility, for whom therefore sensibility also cannot be an obstacle to practical reason.”²⁴ To this, however, we have to add one important qualification: our sensual nature is an obstacle which the practical reason can never overcome, and at the same time – only this obstacle, the imagination’s resistance to our supersensible calling, to the pure law of reason, makes this law possible in the first place. Morality is meaningful only to finite beings whose sensual nature condemns them to eternal immorality. The dualism of our nature (both rational and sensual, moral and necessarily immoral) is the proper environment of morality, hence it is nonsensical not only to speak of respect in relation to non-sensual beings, but even to assume that such beings may have anything to do with morality.

If – as we have said – moral elevation is the reverse side of sensual humiliation, then the entire dialectics of rationality and animality, the whole dynamics of morality turns out to be rather static. It clings to the *status quo* and cannot really abandon the sensual sphere, if it is to retain any human significance. Kant seems to be saying: this is your (our) human condition. You must strive towards the supersensible, this is your task, but you will never accomplish it. You must act morally, out of a sense of duty and respect for law, but your deeds will never be fully moral because your freedom is just your own, human and finite freedom. You will never tame the beast which holds sway over you just as heavenly reason does. It is a lesson worthy of the highest respect.

* * *

Let us end with a short remark on the sublime: in the experience of the sublime, the infinite, supersensible nature of man is revealed to him. It is the first experience which establishes our humanity – in it our finite nature is overcome, but at the same time an abyss is opened in which man disappears. The answer to the experience of the sublime (of the infinite and the limitless) is the establishment of moral law which gives to man’s calling a particular meaning. The sublime consists in the free play of the imagination with an indeterminate concept of the reason – it is an upward movement, a reaching out towards that concept; the very same free play defines morality, but the movement is different – it is a descent from the heights of indeterminacy and an attempt to dissolve it in that which is determinate and finite.

²³ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 100.

THE GOD OF YOUNG MARX

The present text – in which we do not pretend to embrace the problem in its entirety, but see it merely as a first inquiry, an inspection before an ensuing battle, before the marching out of the troops – was inspired by a comment made by Professor Juliusz Domański in his introduction to the Polish edition of Pierre Hadot's *What is Ancient Philosophy?*. Domański cites the well-known formulation by Marx from the 11h thesis on Feuerbach: philosophers only differ in their interpretation of the world while the whole point is to change it. This formulation does not apply to the ancient philosophers, says Domański, for whom merely to interpret the world was also not enough; interpretation was for them a tool to be used towards a certain practical goal. However, this goal differed from Marx's: he desired to change the world (and this metamorphosis he called communism), while the ancients sought to "suffer" the world. As Descartes puts it in his *Discourse on the Method*: "Try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world". Domański expresses his hope here that Marx's formula is already "obsolete".¹

We need to consider whether in fact this is true. Marx himself sees communism as always a thing of the future, since as a thing of the past it can have no meaning: it is either in the future, or it cannot exist at all. In his *Manuscripts* of 1844 – arguing against those who saw the roots of communism in "disconnected historical phenomena opposed to private property" – Marx wrote: "if [communism] has once been, precisely its being in the past refutes its pretension to being essential."² Exactly twenty years have passed since a certain attempt to establish communism became once and for all a thing of the past. Does this mean that it was not the type of communism which Marx had had in mind, or rather – in view of his words – that Marx's communism lacks "essence"? From the point of view of this query, which is a question about the possible end of the idea of communism as such, how are we to understand its conceptual beginnings, found precisely in young Marx's *Manuscripts*? In these writings Marx identifies communism as "fully-developed (*vollendeter*) humanism", which in communism converges with "fully-developed naturalism".³ How does this idea of humanism adhered to by the young Marx relate to its ancient archetype which Hadot and Domański reconstruct in such an inspiring way?

¹ J. Domański, "Przedmowa do wydania polskiego" ["Introduction to the Polish edition"], in: P. Hadot, *Czym jest filozofia starożytna?* [*What is Ancient Philosophy?*], trans. P. Domański, Warszawa 2000, p. 13-14. The source for Descartes' quote: R. Descartes, *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, p. 123.

² K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications 2007, p. 102.

³ *Ibidem*.

There is no ancient humanism, it seems, without god: praise of man may be justified only by that distinctive relation connecting man to divinity, by man's endeavor to attain that which is divine. Roberto Calasso wrote that for the Greeks god is "everything that takes us away from the ordinary sensations of life".⁴ When we are moved by passion and suddenly feel the joy of life, the object of our desire becomes tangible – shines with glory – yet at the same time we ourselves cease to see who we are. Our limitations – the boundaries of our identity – become fluid and flexible. We offer our ordinary distinctness – the shape which used to contain us – as sacrifice to a god who until now remained indistinct but who now appears next to us. Therefore god is that glow of glory which flows through our bodies and moves us, forcing us to go beyond ourselves and create "monuments of good and evil". They are always – whether we want it or not – the monuments of our gods. Everything we create speaks of them.

Marx's humanism, however, is an avowed atheism. "I detest all gods" – this citation from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* was chosen by Marx as a motto to his doctoral dissertation, and we may suppose he was true to it his entire life. And yet the gods, detested by the author of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, are in fact merely dead idols or puppets at most, self-objectifications of the alienated, abstract consciousness. They are monuments of gods, whereas a Greek god, as described by Calasso, is a living god, shattering the mold of the static identity of individual consciousness:

...when something undefined and powerful shakes mind and fiber and trembles the cage of our bones, when the person who only a moment before was dull and agnostic is suddenly rocked by laughter and homicidal frenzy, or by the pangs of love, or by the hallucination of form, or finds his face streaming with tears, then the Greek realizes that he is not alone. Somebody else stands beside him, and that somebody is a god. He no longer has the calm clarity of perception he had in his mediocre state of existence. Instead, that clarity has migrated into his divine companion.⁵

In this god-man process, apparently described by Calasso, we may distinguish two elements: first comes the divine impulse that pushes man beyond his selfhood (takes away his static identity) and makes him love something other than himself; then the dead, subjective "clarity" of man is transferred to god who thus becomes objectified. It is also the moment of god's death: out of the divine impulse a stony monument is created, an empty shell. People kill their gods by believing in them, by making bony cages out of them, empty husks. And it is these husks that Marx's *Parisian Manuscripts* teach to hate, whether they be called "socialism", "communism" or "man". The act of breaking free of these shells Marx calls "atheism", warning at the same time that it cannot be committed only "in thought"; the most important of the gods hated by Marx is "private property" – which is, to be more exact, the rule of money replacing the rule of man – and which may

⁴ R. Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, London: Vintage 1994, p. 243.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

be overthrown only by means of a communist revolution, the practical equivalent of the theoretical act of the riddance of all gods – atheism.

Thus Marxist atheism does not entail godlessness – it is aimed against the objectification of the godhead, and not against the glow of glory penetrating human life. Without it, why should we try to change anything? The bourgeois world would be quite acceptable, just as it is, as a tranquilizer to cope with anxiety, an anesthetic against pain. Yet, how do we understand this glow of glory speaking to Marx? It moved him deeply, making him forsake peace for the sake of a phantom which he helped take on a tangible and visible form for everyone. What its shape was and how it passed away, we all remember only too well. At first it was horrible and inhuman, though from a distance it may have seemed magnificent. Later it was only grotesque. That much we know. But we have long ceased to see the glow of glory in the eyes of Marx. What was the source of this glow? Who or what was the god of young Marx?

Let us turn to one of the most beautiful passages in Marx's *Manuscripts*:

Assume *man* to be *man* and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc. If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultivated person; if you want to exercise influence over other people, you must be a person with a stimulating and encouraging effect on other people. Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life. If you love without evoking love in return – that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a *living expression* of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a *beloved one*, then your love is impotent – a misfortune.⁶

Marx speaks here of love as a certain force. It is an individual and individualizing force; one might say that it is the grace of individuality causing everyone possessing it to become a unique being – the trace we leave in people and things is our inimitable trace. Marx places this political hymn to love at the end of the chapter discussing money: “the world upside-down – the confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities”.⁷ The moneyed fool is treated as a wise man; the most repulsive person – mistaken for an Adonis, etc. Love – as long as it is human love – is therefore first and foremost a denial of the absolute replaceability that characterizes money. Romeo is someone who cannot be replaced by any other and he would remain himself even without his name, his family and his share in its power and wealth: he would still be someone loved by Juliet. Love is thus the human action which makes its object unique and at the same time, reciprocally, if love is mutual, as Marx says, it makes its subject also unique: namely, in the eyes of the object which in its turn also becomes the subject of love. Thus objectification is harmoniously in agreement with the self-confirmation of both parties. To create such harmony it takes – at least – two: love is the social force *par excellence*; and every force that connects people,

⁶ K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, op. cit., p. 141.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 141.

allows the words of an individual to reach others, is in some way love; it is the power of persuasion, a non-violent way of affecting others with their own consent. Aristotle's idea was similar: every political system is based on some model of love; monarchy styles itself after fatherly love; aristocracy – after the love of a husband for his wife (with the assumption of the natural civic disability of women). In a republic brotherly love is the pattern; and in Marxist communism – it is the sensual love between lovers, the sexual relation.

When Marx writes that communism is “the riddle of history solved” because it is the genuine resolution of “the conflict between man and nature and between man and man – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species”⁸ – this sounds like an abstract ideological formulation, for we don't really know how these words can relate to anything in reality; how should we understand them. However, it is sufficient to replace the word “communism” with the phrase “sexual relation” and everything starts making sense: the sexual relation allows an individual to be himself, and yet fully identify with the object of his love; it is the biological compulsion which we accept willingly and treat it as though it was grace. It is a sensual act, and yet it elevates our humanity – for the sake of our lover we endure the greatest sacrifices and are capable of the greatest deeds of heroism. In the face of this relation everything else ceases to matter – nothing we possess, nothing others think of us is of any importance. If communism is the meeting place of the fully developed naturalism with fully developed humanism then such an encounter can only be modeled after a sexual relation.

Thus the sexual act for Marx does not imply the dissolution of human qualities, or a return to undifferentiated beastliness, an undefined unity with nature. To the contrary, sex is a juncture where that which is social coincides with that which is natural, and vice versa; it is the central knot of nature and culture in which the true shape of society is revealed. Thus sex is God's Judgment: it allows us to determine whether we live in a redeemed society or a doomed one:

In the approach to *woman* as the *spoil* and handmaid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its *unambiguous*, decisive, *plain* and undisguised expression in the relation of *man* to *woman* and in the manner in which the *direct* and *natural* procreative relationship is conceived. The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the *relation of man to woman*. In this *natural* relationship of the sexes man's relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature – his own *natural* function. [...] From this relationship one can therefore judge man's whole level of development. It follows from the character of this relationship how much *man* as a *species being*, as *man*, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself.⁹

⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 100-01.

This citation shows that communism is by definition in its sources both humanism and feminism, or rather that humanism which is not feminism must be deficient, since it does not account for the sexual relation. For young Marx the emancipation of women is at least as important as the emancipation of the working class. The worth of a man is equal to that of a woman: so long as the worth of a woman is measured up in money – so long as the woman is a commodity, be it a common good or a luxury, a sign of prosperity – man remains a prostituted creature, selling the best of what he has for money. That which is best is therefore something that is individual, private, unpredictable, random: talent, charisma, gift of persuasion or seduction, charm. Therefore femininity is the power of individualism. There was a point in Antigone being a woman. Everything that is decided by fate is a divine glow which must not be falsified. One of the examples of such falsification provided by Marx is the deceit of money which substitutes value for value – the forgery of capitalism; diametrically opposed to it, yet condemned by Marx just as emphatically, is the forgery committed by “crude communism” which “wants to abstract *by force* from talent, etc.”. “Crude communism” is in its essence “general *envy* constituting itself as a power”¹⁰, a resentment, equating everything that is human to a certain common denominator, a “*pre-conceived* minimum”.¹¹ In this respect Marx could very well shake hands with Friedrich August von Hayek who wrote: „freedom means that in some measure we entrust our fate to forces which we do not control”.¹² Yet we must keep in mind that something that Hayek calls “nature” – the laws of the market – for Marx is merely a game of human artifacts run amok: something akin to the roulette. A player regularly commits his fate to powers he cannot not control – yet this game does not make him more free. What increases with each game is the freedom of the casino owner.

Thus on the one hand the sexual relation is the domain of natural instincts, of some naïve “noble savagery” as envisioned by Rousseau. On the other hand, it is a relation potentially most human of all: it is a test that will indicate to what degree the “species essence” has been assimilated by the society in which it functions. Potentially everything in this relation is our own choice; it is the only relation in which a man has a full right to speak for himself in the first person plural.

The ability to say “we” Marx calls *Gattungswesen*: “species essence” or – which is just as good a translation – “species being”. The definition of *Gattungswesen* in the *Manuscripts* brings to mind a formulation from Aristotle’s *Politics* – ζῷον λόγον ἔχον: “Man is a species-being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but – and this is only another way of expressing it – also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a *universal* and therefore a free being”.¹³ The ability of belonging to a species is an ability to objectify universalization, of uplifting man over the animal. Further on the Aristotelian associations are strengthened by the reference to μεσότης, or μέτρον, as well as to beauty: unlike the animal, Marx writes, “man knows how to produce

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: The Mirage of Social Justice*. Vol. 2, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1975, p. 30.

¹³ K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, op.cit., p. 74.

in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty".¹⁴ However, Aristotle believes that these laws of beauty are created before man. They form the genuine structure of the world. With Max Scheler we may compare the world to cosmic games in which all beings compete in their striving to reach their natural goal, namely – divine immobility. This peacefulness to which the whole turmoil of the world is directing its efforts is established by the inherent law of beauty: reason.

Marx, however, does not believe in any external inherent goal of man's existence. "The laws of beauty" must be established by man and they cannot be the laws of immobility. From this point of view the supreme way of life cannot be contemplation. "The productive life is the life of the species".¹⁵ Man is his own product. Man is a species producing himself and other species as his objects; producing its "inorganic body"¹⁶, nature, in the course of history which first and foremost is the history of human technology, human industry, this "*open book of man's essential powers*".¹⁷ Writing about nature as the "inorganic body" of man, Marx refers to a phrase borrowed from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* – "inorganic nature" – changing its meaning: it is not the human spirit that assimilates the body of nature (as its exteriorization), but the human body – through human senses which, according to the well-known formulation from *The Manuscripts*, "have therefore become directly in their practice *theoreticians*"¹⁸ – creates nature as assimilated by man, as possessing a particular spiritual meaning. Spirit is the product of the body, the result of physical work, just as love is the product of some kind of sexual relation, whether happy or unhappy, mutual or only imaginary.

Man calls objects into existence through his work. Every act of creativity has a sensual character, i.e. – a material character. Man as a natural creature is

on the one hand furnished with *natural powers* of life – he is an *active* natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities – as *impulses*. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous objective being he is a *suffering* [*leidendes*], conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the *objects* of his impulses exist outside him, as *objects* independent of him; yet these objects are *objects* of his *need* – essential objects, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation [*Betätigung und Bestätigung*] of his essential powers.¹⁹

Thus man creates his objects, but not *ex nihilo*. His limitation is his objectiveness. He himself finally becomes a mere object – he dies. Yet even death is man's royal privilege, confirming his exceptional status – the status of the species: "*Death* seems to be a harsh victory of the species over the *definite* individual and to contradict their unity. But the

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

determinate individual is only a *determinate species being*”.²⁰ Man is capable of dying only as man – animals do not know death, the awareness of which comes to us only with the acquisition of language (with the acquisition of the ability to say “we”). Even death is therefore a human privilege, and at the same time – the seal of human limitation and conditioning. A sign of the human condition.

This condition is unsurpassable. We may not escape from it to any kind of external absolute – our knowledge of such an absolute would inevitably make it human. In this sense the human forms of gods in Greek mythology are in fact truer than the animal or abstract divine forces of the Eastern civilizations. And even if god was a thought, thoughts are no more than our body. “The element of thought itself – the element of thought’s living expression – *language* – is of a sensuous nature”.²¹ Man as a species being relates to himself, but this relation is made out of the same clay as man himself: it is material, sensual – in other words: productive and objectifying. The object is our fate, and the production of the world is our life. We may, however, objectify ourselves in a good way – with regard to the laws of beauty – or in a bad way: caring only about survival, selling our life for a mess of pottage. We may love, caring about the person we adore, or about our own little pleasure. We may try to control the objects or allow them to rule over us.

In the first case we must claim our right to say “we”, the right that makes us human. This, however, means life in a state of war, without any external guarantees for our choices. Marx believed that philosophy may leave behind its preoccupation with itself and join in that war, or remain merely a philosophy – “a word therapy”, an attempt of mental adjustment to the world of human artifacts which rule over us and change us into commodities. But philosophy which is no more than that is not worthy of its name – it is rather idolatry than true love of the divine in a human being.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

²¹ Ibid., p. 111.

NIKOLAI FYODOROV – THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF RESURRECTION

Fyodorov's life was eccentric and extraordinary, although at the same time it was quite uneventful and devoid of any radical actions, which – paradoxically – made it even more exceptional. It was an amazingly modest life, even ascetic, yet at the same time – highly useful and valuable, both socially and intellectually. It was a life marked by an unflinching devotion to all those who sought wisdom; a source of constant inspiration to such luminaries as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy or Solovyov. Fyodorov became a legend in his lifetime. Lev Tolstoy used to say that if saints still existed, they would have to resemble Fyodorov. He was often called a modern *jurōdivy* (a Holy Fool) or – perhaps even more aptly – “the Socrates of Moscow”.

It is not so much his life, however, but his views – in particular, a certain philosophical or perhaps religious idea of his – that make Fyodorov such a fascinating figure. A moral visionary, armed with scientific precision and lively energy of action, he explored regions of thought which hardly anyone had ever dared to chart, which were considered to be the proper object of faith, not speculation, and which most moderns – including strongly religious minds – came to regard as a sentimental longing, a naïve and unrealizable fancy of the human spirit, a child's toy lost in some intimate and lonely nook of the human soul. At best it was seen as a relic of the past, a throwback to the era of man's spiritual and intellectual adolescence, the real function of which was to maintain the symbolic integrity of that phenomenon we call Christianity whose importance is primarily historical, social and political. We are talking about resurrection. All of Fyodorov's thinking, all his writings are centered around this idea; in tackling it he is ingenious, uncompromising and fearless, perhaps even arrogant. In contrast to the usual spirit with which the mystery of resurrection is approached – that of humility, fear of God and devout ignorance – the intellectual struggles of Fyodorov may be fittingly described as “the extravagance of resurrection” (or perhaps more precisely: the extravagance of the idea of resurrection).

Fyodorov refuses to stop short at the idea of resurrection as a mystery unknowable to man (though central to Christianity), as something placed entirely in the sphere of prayer and faith (perhaps even blind faith); something entirely transcendent and belonging to one of the sole prerogatives of God. Thus understood, resurrection may be considered as an obvious (mechanically accepted) and principal component of Christianity, but such

an understanding entails complete passivity, not to say enslavement of man; it also implies an unreserved acceptance of death, which according to Fyodorov is contrary to the very nature of Christianity. Christianity in its essence points to a liberation from death, which is the condition of any kind of liberation whatsoever. It also involves a denial of all the false ways of dealing with death: of the bourgeois-hedonistic elusion, of finding solace in spiritual transcendence, or of domesticating death through heroism (as in the case of the stoics). Deliverance from death – this is the kernel of the Christian promise, misinterpreted in various ways in idealistic, spiritualistic or transcendentalist solutions. However, in order to find its true form, the religious idea or promise of resurrection must, according to Fyodorov, be united with the scientific and technological project of its active, physical, material fulfillment. The Christian inspiration of the human spirit through the promise of resurrection must become incarnated and materialized in a scientific scheme. As Andrzej Walicki states, “Fyodorov’s worldview was a peculiar mixture of mystical and religious ideas with common-sense utilitarianism and practicality [...], and the cult of technology and natural sciences.”¹

We are not talking, therefore, of the transcendental, mystical resurrection brought about by God *for* man, but an immanent, active raising of the dead, accomplished by God *through* man. To express this distinction Fyodorov will differentiate between resurrection and the raising of the dead). In Russian this distinction is based on a subtle terminological difference: “*voskresenie*” vs. “*voskreshenie*”. Fyodorov placed the latter concept at the center of his philosophy and declared it to be the proper formulation of the task set before mankind by Christianity². The risen Christ calls on man to resurrect his ancestors – bringing Lazarus back from the dead is an example of this formula. The resurrection of Christ is the fruit of the connection between God the Father and his incarnated Son and remains as inaccessible and incomprehensible to man as the act of *creatio ex nihilo*. The resurrection of Lazarus, however, is an expression of the most perfect connection between the human God and the created world, based on the renewal and revival of that which has ceased to be, thus snatching it away from the arms of death. This then is man’s proper, though risky and uncertain aim; it is the horizon of his life, of all his activity, the horizon of the boldest and fondest human desires, resolving the problem of evil and suffering in the world, and attainable through the gradual advancement of knowledge, science, technology, cooperation and collaboration. This project of resurrection-revitalization as a social and scientific goal may seem strange, audacious or naïve, a delusion and a utopian extravagance. Nevertheless, such a perspective may be a fine tool for the interpretation of human history and the accomplishments of culture and science; it may indicate with appropriate pathos the meaning and the ultimate goal of human knowledge and all human activity, which – particularly for philosophy – is in itself a distinction not to be lightly dismissed. What is more, this extravagant and outrageous project of revitalization may in the modern era (and possibly also in the postmodern) be the most fitting exposition of the deepest meaning of Christianity – of the absurd faith shared by the “daring fools”. It may

¹ A. Walicki, *Rosyjska filozofia i myśl społeczna od Oświecenia do marksizmu [Russian Philosophy and Social Thought from Enlightenment to Marxism]*. Warsaw 1973, p. 561.

² See N. Fyodorov, *Sochineniya [Works]*. Moscow 1982, pp. 126, 208.

be seen as a way of reaffirming the outrageous, extravagant essence of Christianity. The rapid idea of resurrection adhered to by the theologians should be, in Fyodorov's view, replaced with the living and revitalizing excess of the scientific project; with the organized raising of the dead. Finally, the idea of outwitting death continues to fascinate not only occultists and charlatans, but also – within the bounds of reason – serious scientists. “Are the processes of aging reversible?” – asks one of them. “Currently”, he says, “it is unfortunately impossible”, but goes on to add that: “There is a certain quantity of unspecified stem cells in our bodies which intervene when something ceases to work. That is how we »fix ourselves«. These cells are highly active when we are young, but less so as we grow older. This raises the question: what if we could strengthen these repairing abilities of the body?”³ In my opinion, these are precisely the sort of questions that Fyodorov himself would have wished to see considered and researched by science.

Even if the world is ultimately governed by rational laws and principles, man still tends to see in it nothing but chaos, anarchy and blind force. Life is violent, absurd and slavish. It is a death trap. Death robs the world and life of any vestige of meaning, order or rationality. But it is so only as long as death is consciously perceived as the “outrage” of this world, and not interpreted back into the permanent and final order of things. It is so, in other words, only to individual man. Here we touch upon a theme crucial to Fyodorov's philosophy which, as is often described (quite accurately, I believe) as emphasizing the communal, collective aspect of human existence. Death is natural and quite rational wherever the life of the species takes precedence over the life of the individual; wherever the eternal wheel of unconscious “painless” death seems to be at the same time the eternal wheel of life understood as the continuity of the species. This ceases to be the norm once an individual gains prevalence over the species, once the continuity of the species ceases to soothe the suffering of the individual and to appease his outrage – the outrage caused by self-awareness and by a conscious, moral relation to infinity. In man, nature's development based on the continuity and dominance of the species over the individual, on the natural rationality of death, reaches its limits, exposes its illusive nature, its disgrace, demands a radically new order, new rules – those of freedom, self-awareness and vitality triumphing over death. Man – grieving over death and struggling with it – is fighting not only for his own cause, not only in order to fulfill human goals and ideals opposed to nature; he is also seeking after a cosmic transformation of nature herself, he is attempting to liberate nature from death, effecting the good which cannot be attained by nature alone, while for man it is the very sense of his existence. In Fyodorov's approach evolution is replaced with regulation. Teilhard de Chardin's well-known terminology seems appropriate in this case, a terminology used also by Vladimir Vernadsky, a representative of Russian cosmism (whose ideas are closely related to Fyodorov's): in the process of cosmic evolution the era of the biosphere is followed by the era of the noosphere.

As man enters the scene, nature becomes a “distortion of God's image”⁴, an obvious evil and disgrace which may be overcome by man alone, or – to be exact – by the dynamic,

³ “Inżynierowie matki natury. Z profesorem Piotrem Stępnem rozmawia Sławomir Mizerski” [“Mother Nature's Engineers: Sławomir Mizerski in conversation with Prof. Piotr Stępień”], in: *Niezbędnik Inteligentna. Supplement to Polityka*, 17.12.2005, p. 27.

⁴ N. Fyodorov, *Sochimeniya*, op. cit., p. 437.

joint (universal) activity of man towards the goal of defeating death, of raising the dead. Without human activity the world would disintegrate, fall into degradation, disorganization. Though intuiting that it has been charged with such a task (in fear of death, in passionate and heroic taming of death through culture, religion and social life), humanity has as yet been incapable of grasping it fully and lucidly and has not yet proceed to fulfill it. So far humanity has always ended up accepting death's irreversibility, while (at the very most) expecting a miraculous act of grace, a direct intervention of God, an *interposition* from the transcendental dimension. In Fyodorov's opinion, although humanity has long ago managed to reject overt cannibalism, it is still engaged in covert cannibalism, denying its vocation and trying to excuse its passivity by seeing it as part of the objective order of nature and of the rigid socio-historical laws. The burning need of the moment – both in the socio-historical sense as well as in the cosmological and natural – is to inaugurate the third epoch of human endeavor: the epoch of the resurrection of the ancestors and the regulation of nature.⁵ If we do not undertake this task, we will be faced with a multiplication of the various forms of false (and therefore ineffectual) denial of nature and death: pettiness (fashion), triviality (mass culture), short-term utilitarianism (trade), the exaltations of parenthood, the cult of youth and immaturity, the quietist abstractionism of philosophy and art, the unreflective automatism of church rites, cheap mysticism, spiritualism, drug addiction, alcoholism.⁶

To get out of the cul-de-sac of human history, to get out of the blind alley of Christianity as we know it, we need to, first and foremost, treat resurrection with full seriousness as man's true destiny and the true meaning of history, and secondly – to treat this goal and this meaning in an active way, as a practical task set before humankind, an organizational purpose which should mobilize the whole potential of man: his autonomy (spirituality), freedom (morality), reason (science), industry and effectiveness (social life). In Fyodorov's writings faith in God (i.e. in the idea of resurrection) is possible only if we first gain faith in man (via the act of resurrection, of rekindling life). Yet, without faith in God (humanity's ultimate calling), faith in man is trivialized, measured out in "coffee spoons" (the endless process of generational development, historical progress, intellectual achievements of philosophy, utilitarian achievements of science and the therapeutical function of art and religion, all of which is additionally enhanced by eschatological expectations). These two faiths are the two sides of a single whole motivating man (both spiritually and historically): the idea of Divine Humanity. It is not incidental that Solovyov and Dostoyevsky were Fyodorov's greatest admirers (though not without their reservations) – after all, next to Fyodorov these two were Russia's most famous prophets of Divine Humanity.

According to Fyodorov, two primary and fundamental sentiments (or "moods") define man, or rather – they constitute the essence of humanity, the "surplus" of humanity in relation to nature, a peculiar "fissure" of nature occurring in man, thanks to which he is lifted up from the horizontal dimension of nature into the vertical dimension of freedom and spirituality – into the realm of God. These sentiments are, first of all, the experience of mortality and the fear of death, and secondly – the shame (or the remorse)

⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 362.

of birth.⁷ We could describe the first of these emotions as anti-thanatic and the second as anti-erotic⁸, which points us – in a sort of symmetrical reversal – to Freud. This Freudian context will perhaps enable us to elucidate what may well be the most important aspect of Fyodorov’s philosophy (though it is so integrated that it would in fact be very difficult to point to aspects which might be qualified as “minor”). What I have in mind is the fact that in Fyodorov’s system man is determined not so much by the burden of passively internalized past events, from which he helplessly tries to escape into the future (as Freud sees it), but by a consciously internalized future – the organized task of effectively preserving the past (its rebirth, its resurrection). If the pain of mortality and the shame of birth are considered to be the insurmountable boundaries of human existence, these emotions enter into a mutually destructive dialectic which until now has governed human life. This dialectic points to the intensification of the sexual instinct as a proper way of overcoming death. Even though this creates new life, such life – in Fyodorov’s terms – only allows death to triumph once more, and so on *ad infinitum*: escaping from death through the natural (sexual) life-making passion, man only grants death its ultimate victory. In the final count the erotic passion is the deadly passion – and this, we may add, with fearless perceptiveness was shown by Freud. Yet for Fyodorov the proper consequence of the pain of mortality and the shame of birth is resurrection.

This perspective, however, changes entirely our current cognitive attitudes and life aspirations. The essence of the world (of God, of God’s world) is movement and not stability, immobility or changelessness; it is energy and not substantiality; it requires man to go beyond nature. Therefore activity, constant endeavors, the future, projects, plans and risks define man and his world; only in this sense can man be adequately said to have been created in God’s image and likeness; only thus may he follow Christ. Considered in this light, numerous other biblical principles and metaphors reveal a new, unorthodox meaning – their *true* meaning, as Fyodorov believed. When, for example, we are told to “be like little children” this does not mean that we are supposed to be spontaneous and carefree, but is in fact a definition of our basic “social role” and of our principle obligation which should never be abandoned in favor of our parental responsibilities. Christ’s essence is his status of a son in relation to God, and for humans this relationship is also, we may say, “defining” and morally motivating. Man – Christ seems to suggest – is first and foremost “the Son of Man”, and this status of a son is precisely why he is not just another representative of the species, but can deem himself to be fully human (or even Humanly Divine). The command to “replenish the earth and subdue it” is – obviously – not an incitement to exploit nature or to be selfish, but a postulate of resurrecting from the ashes (by willpower, science and action) all the previous generations. The Holy Trinity is not just an expression of the internal differentiation of God, but – most importantly – a symbol of the living God, of the God of life. It also represents the ideal of human relations, both communal and personal; it gives priority to the relationship of the Father, Son and Daughter⁹ (Holy Ghost) over all

⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 398.

⁸ See S. Semyonova, “Nikolay Fyodorov: Tvorchestvo Zhizni”, in: N. Fyodorov, *Sochinieniya*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁹ Some interpreters accuse Fyodorov of disfavoring women and daughters, as if he totally ignored them in the face of the importance of the status of the son. See for instance C. Wodziński, *Trans, Dostojewski, Rosja, czyli o filozofowaniu siekierą [Trance, Dostoyevsky, Russia, or Philosophizing with an Axe]*, Gdańsk 2005, p. 95, where

other relations (those of brotherhood, marriage and nationhood) which are secondary and represent the threat of naturalistic degeneration (embodied in – appropriately – socialism, hedonism and nationalism). The commandment not to kill is something much greater than a call to refrain from murder; refraining makes us just as guilty and responsible; only he who actively and vigorously abstains from killing may be said to fulfill the biblical commandment; a person who truly does not kill not only abandons all action on behalf of death, but also acts for the benefit of life. For Fyodorov then the true meaning of “do not kill” is “raise the dead”.¹⁰ If Christianity requires a certain restraint in the sphere of eroticism, it is not in the name of the asceticism and pure spirituality, or out of contempt for flesh. To the contrary: it is done in the name of turning the body into a divine, eternal, imperishable object, to prevent wasting the power of the body on something that is trivial and acquiescent with transience and death. The Christian vision of Earth’s central place in the cosmos, i.e. the place where God became incarnate, is elucidated by Fyodorov in the following way: Christ indicates and initiates a great transformation of the cosmos, its rebirth, ennoblement, its repudiation of the power of death. From the place of His incarnation, life and resurrection, a great process will begin, the purpose and the meaning of which is not life after death (and in another world), but life without death, while the testimony of the overcoming of death will be the resurrection (in this, though transfigured world) of all the dead. Finally, it is only in Fyodorov’s philosophy that the words “faith without works is dead” ring with such simplicity, and yet with an adequate measure of pathos.

Fyodorov’s whole project – the project of resurrection, of Christian endeavor, of “sonship” – is directed against nature which is seen as solid, substantial and governed by the necessary principles of reality, preserving its basic laws by a constant elimination of individuals. In short, nature lives by death. But a different understanding, a different perception of nature is possible – as a dynamic, evolving, universal interdependency of everything that exists and ever existed – in other words: a community. Yet this second understanding is not related to some already existing, though not yet discerned and realized factuality; it is also not a mystical insight into its future which is bound to occur due to the operation of some natural or divine principles. That second understanding of nature is its possibility; it is a project, a mission whose fulfillment depends on the conscious and subjective activity of man. In this pursuit nature must transcend itself and be metamorphosed; it must reject its basic principles, until now considered as unshakable certainties; and yet – nature is not to be annihilated but is to find a rational, moral, divine and Christian

we find the following statement: „rarely, carefully and unwillingly does Fyodorov use in his project such terms as ‘daughter’ or ‘mother’, realizing that women are not characterized by such obvious messianism as the ‘Son of Man’ and do not quite fit into the religion of ‘God the Father’”. Fyodorov’s texts, however, do not support this opinion. Fyodorov defines the Holy Ghost’s function as corresponding to the position of the daughter, and states her full equality with the Son, which in the light of the Orthodox attitude to the question of *filioque* becomes especially important and powerful. (See N. Fyodorov, *Sochinieniya*, op. cit., pp. 141–43). Fyodorov several times underscores the equality of men (sons) and women (daughters) within Christianity, indicating it as one of the crucial differences between Christianity and Islam, as well as the main reason of the „imperfect idea of God” in Islam (ibid. p. 149). In fact Fyodorov’s work may be seen as a hymn of praise in honor of the woman-daughter who, impersonated in Mary Magdalene, was the first to recognize the resurrected Christ, and impersonated in Antigone gave an example of absolute love of fathers; it is in a daughter – states Fyodorov – that the feeling of love to parents was first born, earlier than in a son. (See *ibid.*, pp. 412-13, 418).

¹⁰ See N. Fyodorov, *Sochinieniya*, op. cit., p. 171.

expansion. The element that connects these two approaches to nature will therefore have to be science, constantly exploring the structure, laws and possibilities of the world, as well as technology, verifying the innovative exploration and achievements of science.

Fyodorov saw the first spectacular experiments in weather control (such as inducing rainfall) as the inauguration of the new science. In the future he expected other achievements of this kind: ecological pursuits¹¹, research into human memory, electricity¹², solar energy¹³, management of the earth's movements and exploration of the cosmos¹⁴, progress in communication, storing of information, development of medicine.¹⁵ Man, who until now was just an observer (*zritel'*) of the cosmos, must become its master (*pravitel'*), just as our body (*tyelo*) must finally become our accomplishment (*dyelo*).¹⁶

Let us repeat: Fyodorov's project is to negate nature's erstwhile mechanisms through the power of that very same nature as it is being transformed by knowledge and consciousness. In other words, nature's mechanisms must be rewired, changed from the egoism and enmity of the parents (demanding gratitude from their progeny) into the gratitude and attachment of the sons (striving for the benefit of their fathers); from the anticipation of the future, dispersed in senseless endlessness, it must be directed towards a definite, reconstructed past; the force of sexual energy, characteristic of the first concept of nature, must be replaced with the power of resurrection, in accordance with the second concept. At the same time it will lead to the refutation of all conventionality, of the arbitrariness of social hierarchy; legal and economic ties will be replaced by bonds of kinship (ultimately – of universal kinship). Philosophically speaking, the fulfillment of these projects depends not upon a spiritual transcendence of any sort, but upon a position that is perhaps best defined as a moral materialism.¹⁷ Nature will be ruled not by the laws of causality, not by the irreversibility of facts, not by the ruthless supplanting of the present by the future, but by the dynamic and fully conscious activity of the effect recreating (resurrecting) the cause, by the moral care of the sons, inspired by the limitless fulfillment of righteousness and duty, and not by submissiveness to mere facts which finds false comfort in parenthood – the parenthood of even more deaths. It will be a conquest of nature's laws not through a miracle (*chyudom*) – as was hitherto assumed – but through successful action, through work (*trudom*).¹⁸

The essence of moral materialism lies in the rejection of evil, and this attitude, according to Fyodorov, remained in the background of human thought, in the shadow of mainstream culture and history, and at best it was seen as a beautiful, utopian naivety. The dominant attitude was – in different ways – to accept evil (especially metaphysical evil, death): there was the Buddhist attitude towards evil which was escapist and which saw man's purpose in his dissolution in radical transcendence; there was pantheism which

¹¹ See *ibid.*, p. 57.

¹² See *ibid.*, pp. 356, 422.

¹³ See *ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 362.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 367.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁷ See S. Semyonova, "Nikolay Fyodorov. Tvorchestvo Zhizni", *op. cit.*, pp. 153-54.

¹⁸ See N. Fyodorov, *Sochinieniya*, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

accepted the evil of the world by pointing to its spiritual and divine dimension and insisting that man as a creature of reason should heroically endure evil; finally, there was subjectivism (egocentrism) in which man acknowledged that the evil of the world is his own evil and therefore attempted to neutralize it (and mysticize it), interpreting it as – for instance – free will (Socrates, Kant) or creativity (Nietzsche). And even though Fyodorov's concepts lead to a radically critical reevaluation of contemporary culture and human civilization as such¹⁹, they nevertheless draw our attention to some important events and signals in history which predict and in a way substantiate his project. A quite distinct position from the abovementioned worldviews is held by Zoroastrianism and Slavic spirituality, and the essence of their difference lies in the refusal to accept evil, an optimistic faith in man's future. The proper end of human history, and at the same time – of philosophical and scientific enquiry, was discerned (thought not clearly) by Bacon, Condorcet and Comte²⁰, philosophers whose veneration for science was combined with a humanistic vision. Some scholars also list Fourier's and Feuerbach's concepts as congenial to Fyodorov's.²¹

On the other hand, Fyodorov's project develops out of his attempts to question and redefine the very foundations of metaphysics. If the basic questions of metaphysics are: "why does being exist?" and "why is there something rather than nothing?", these questions present a limited perspective, a narrow-minded, passive and strictly theoretical outlook. In this paradigm man expresses his disinterested – nobly, aristocratically disinterested – concern in elucidating something that already exists; "why" is tantamount here to a "petition", it is a request to gain clarity, an appeal for the disclosure of the foundations, of the essence of something that "already" exists. In fact, however, man passionately desires to know the answer to an entirely different question which expands and redirects metaphysics; and that question is: "why do the living die?" or – to put it differently – "why does a living creature suffer and die?"²² In that query, in that "why?", there is something more than just a question, more than mere disinterested curiosity, there is a "concerned", passionate desire which may either become reconciled with the impossibility of finding an answer (thus remaining in the circle of metaphysics of existence, of fact), or turn towards action (thus opening up the sphere of active philosophy, the philosophy of a project). This second path leads to the philosophy of the common task – *filosofia obshchego dela*.

¹⁹ This is emphasized – perhaps even somewhat excessively – by S. Mazurek in his *Utopia i laska. Idea rewolucji moralnej w rosyjskiej filozofii religijnej* [Utopia and Grace. The Idea of Moral Revolution in Russian Religious Philosophy], Warsaw 2006, pp. 21-22.

²⁰ See N. Fyodorov, *Sochineniya*, op. cit., pp. 311, 630, 638 (see also G.V. Florovski, *Puti russkogo bogosloviya* [The Ways of Russian Theology], Paris 1937, p. 328; A. Sawicki, "Eschatocentryzm. Wskrzeszenie zmarłych przodków wedlug Nikołaja Fiodorowa – naukowa fantastyka czy imperatyw wiary" ["Eschatocentrism. Fyodorov's Idea of the Resurrection of the Ancestors – Scientific Phantasy or an Imperative of Faith"], in: *Idea – studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych* [Idea – Studies of Structure and Development of Philosophical Concepts], XVII, Białystok: 2005, p. 85).

²¹ See S. Semyonova, "N.F. Fyodorov i yego filosofskoye naslediyе" ["N.F. Fyodorov and his Philosophical Inheritance"], in: N. Fyodorov, *Sochineniya*, op. cit., p. 17; G. Przebinda, "Władimir Sołowjow i Nikołaj Fiodorow. Dwie koncepcje eschatologiczne" ["Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolay Fyodorov. Two Eschatological Ideas"], in: G. Przebinda, *Między Moskwą a Rzymem. Myśl religijna w Rosji XIX i XX wieku* [Between Moscow and Rome. Religious Thought in Russia in the 19th and the 20th Century], Kraków 2003, p. 115.

²² N. Fyodorov, *Sochineniya*, op. cit., p. 68, 477; a still more direct reading of this question would be: „why does something that lives, die [...], why do not the dead return to life?” (ibid., p. 479).

Filosofia obshchego dela is the title of the most important and best known of Fyodorov's works. It requires some elucidation. Translating the first word of the title as "philosophy" is of course unquestionable; the second word is best translated as "common" (though, in some instances and not without a reason, it is translated as "general" or "universal"); the third word, however, poses a translational problem which eludes a satisfactory and unambiguous solution. *Delo* (in the context of Fyodorov's philosophy) may be translated as "deed", which has been suggested here and which is the usual connotation. At the same time we need to be aware of political connotations – generally eschewed by Fyodorov – that this possess (especially in the light of 19th century Russian thought). For this reason some translators and scholars tend to interpret *delo* as "issue" (which seems, however, too passive and trivial), or as "work" (which is a rather unreflective translation from Russian), or finally – as "action" (which sounds too technical and praxeological).

There is one more aspect of Fyodorov's philosophy we need to address here. The consciousness of death, the fear of death, the dream of overcoming death is believed by Fyodorov to be such a natural motivating force that adding a religious (no to mention Christian) dimension to it seems quite unnecessary, unless for "ideological" purposes. The scientific, organizational and technological efforts for the purpose of resurrecting our ancestors also seem to require the religious aspect only as a kind of initiating energy, in order to begin the required social, scientific and technological process, but not because it plays any further role in the development of this process. In any case, the imperative of resurrection seems to be comparatively independent of religious preferences and values, and in the entire body of Fyodorov's works two separate themes or lines of argumentation may be identified: the religious and the naturalistic.²³ And yet, it was Fyodorov's intention to integrate these themes, both in his philosophy and in the fulfillment of the project of resurrection. Fyodorov feared that left to itself religion will become radically transcendent and thus lead to a passivism and a demobilization in the sphere of scientific and technological development (leading to a "poetic" reconciliation with death); at the same time, if nothing held naturalism in check, if nothing reined back the progress of science and technology aspect, the result would be humanistic idolatry, hedonistic progressivism and the victory of triviality, fashion and consumerism (i.e. the acceptance of death through forgetting). Without the religious inspiration human activity will no longer be a "deed"; within the spiritual dimension it will degenerate to individualistic decadence and in the bodily sphere – to short-term efficiency which blocks out the perspective of resurrection. Religion directs man towards a certain "impossible" goal, inspiring him to its attainment, and at the same time it makes man aware of his limitations: human beings – even in the most perfect brotherhood, having gained ultimate control over nature – will "merely" be resurrectors (of something preexisting), but will not be able to create *ex nihilo*; they will remain creatures made in the image of God, but not new Gods.

Connected to this is another, very subtle matter, which seems to place the idea of the resurrection of the fathers in a proper context (and on a proper scale of difficulty). This project according to Fyodorov must begin with the closest in kin, and gradually move back to embrace earlier and earlier generations. Yet the feeling of duty and moral guilt in relation

²³ See S. Mazurek, *Utopia i laska. Idea rewolucji moralnej w rosyjskiej filozofii religijnej*, op. cit., p. 25.

to our fathers must be balanced by a feeling quite different in nature. We feel that “the fathers – in the narrow but also in the broader meaning – have not insured our safety”²⁴; even though there were so many of them in so many (countless) generations, they have abandoned us, left us to our fates and to our existential anguish; “they have not fulfilled their duty”. This disappointment and this tension would be unbearable if it were not for the figure and example of the “first” father, “the Heavenly Father who overcomes the imperfections of all fathers”²⁵, who grants the appropriate purity and power of inspiration to the concept of resurrection, which would most likely prove insufficient for the cosmic (supercosmic) task, if it was limited to the “empirical” fathers, those that turned out to be too empirical, dying “too easily”. God is the only true motivation for us in the project of resurrection of our fathers wherein we ourselves become their fathers in our turn; a motivation for us to become fathers who finally fulfill their task, instead of failing in it. Otherwise resurrection would become an absurdity, it would merely be a more perfect copy of deadly nature, and thus a more efficient, a more versatile slaughter. The naturalistic interpretation of resurrection is unable to manage without the religious motif, it is unable to retain its autonomy towards religious argumentation. It is either God, or death, one or the other – Fyodorov seems to say; and yet, such dilemma is possible only if there is someone who faces it and who does not allow the religious interpretation to abstract from nature.

²⁴ V.V. Bibikhin, “Возвращение отцов” [“Return of the Fathers”], „Nachala”, 1, 1993, p. 103.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

WITKACY AND MODERNITY

1. HISTORY

There are few authors whose view of reality is as marked with historical perspective as it is in the case of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz – that is, a view that places each and every observed phenomenon on the axis of history. The beginnings, however, promised something completely different. Letters written to his son in 1905, show Stanisław Witkiewicz worried about young Staś's scant interest in revolutionary change: "Examine carefully all that is now happening here and in Russia. [...] Great shifts of the collective soul are taking place, and it would be bad for you to live without a proper knowledge of all this. It is a living history which educates and has a direct influence on one's soul."¹ But Staś did not want to read newspapers. According to Jan Błoński, "neither in *Bungo*, nor in his correspondence before 1914 can we find a single word to suggest he might become the prophet of annihilation, the decline of art, or civilization's change."² In contrast to his later novels, *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo* contains a vision of the "horror of human experience" that is set against a background of "the beauty of nature" rather than the futurological landscape of a future society. That initial lack of interest in historical and social matters is often explained as being the result of as yet undigested modernist ideology. The shock of the Great War and of the Russian Revolution is, however, said to have made its due impact on Witkacy: the experience of those events was to permanently change his youthful and nonchalant *désintéressement* into intellectual obsession. Still, there are interpreters of Witkacy's oeuvre, for instance Bożena Danek-Wojnowska, who consider the writer's later historiosophic ambitions to be nonetheless "surprising": "The elements of socio-historical determinism, just as his introducing evolutionary perspective to the process of valuation and assessment of art, clash with, or at least diverge from the basic direction of Witkiewicz's ontology; direction which consisted in the study of man in the context of his unchangeable relations with being, and which rejected the varied sphere of human historical activity as a possible source of cognition."³ Can it really be the case, as this critic suggests, that the omnipresent historical background against which human tragedy is taking place (so passionately portrayed and projected in Witkacy's essays, novels and stage plays) be only a rhetorical necessity, dictated by established axiological ideas ("metaphysical feeling" as the supreme value) and contradicting the writer's "general

¹ Quoted after: T. Burek, "Bądź zdrow, dobry, mądry i jasny", in: *Twórczość* 7-8 (1970), p. 136.

² J. Błoński, *Od Stasia do Witkacego*. Kraków 1997, p. 48.

³ See: B. Danek-Wojnowska, *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz a modernizm. Kształtowanie idei katastroficznych*. Wrocław 1976, p. 129.

ontology?” This argument seems too far-fetched. Krzysztof Pomian is certainly closer to the heart of the matter when he points to duality instead of contradiction in the way Witkacy reflects on a human existence.⁴ This possible clash between an outer, historical, species-defined perspective, and an inner, individual, universal one, constitutes the essence of his thought – not a lapse or inconsistency that should be overcome. Putting aside the possible circumstances and influences that shaped young Witkiewicz’s point of view, it has to be said that, starting in 1918, when he wrote *New Forms in Painting*, up to the end of his writing career, the problem of historicity is constantly present in Witkacy’s work. It serves as a point of reference for all artistic and philosophical problems, including ontology and cultural theory, not to mention politics and social evolution.⁵

2. THE LOGIC OF HISTORY

Witkacy does not consider history an element ruled by coincidence. In their general plan, historical events have a sense which reveals itself in the linkage between the evolution of various forms that socialization can take and the process of human control of the natural environment that is more and more far-reaching. Witkacy follows the fashionable term when he refers to this relation as “historical evolution,” whereby more and more people gain the status as a subject of society, which in turn entitles them to indulge in the advantages of taming nature (once a privilege of a narrow and strictly defined group of people) but which also allows for a more and more effective conquest of the environment. This process is defined by Witkacy as “democratization” and can be seen as yet another tool of civilization in its efforts to control the world, comparable with the development of technology.⁶ Apart from the possible influence of Spencer’s or Frazer’s evolutionism, it is most likely due to this attitude that Witkacy’s historiosophy is not limited to “European civilization” but addresses “universal man” and “mankind in general,” as Małgorzata Szpakowska rightly observes.⁷ It took as its basis the relation that is ontically given to each human being – the relation between a consciously active subject and mindlessly passive nature. Maciej Soin, the author of a monograph on Witkacy (*Filozofia Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*) argues, however, that there is much more to the writer’s historiosophical conceptions than this way of thinking about history. He suggests these conceptions be divided into two models of history that are on equal terms. One of them can be called a “theory of social evolution” and linked to the “objectivistic” thread of Witkacy’s thought in which an “impersonal historical subject is the hypostasis of the species’ ontological structure.” The other, Soin refers to as “cultural theory,” linking it with the “intersubjectivistic” thread whereby history becomes an arena of the game played by competing relative values that in turn must be chosen by those individuals who participate the game.⁸ In this first case,

⁴ K. Pomian, “Filozofia Witkacego. Wstępny przegląd problematyki”, in: idem, *Człowiek pośród rzeczy*. Warszawa 1973, p. 206.

⁵ Apart from *New Forms in Painting*, Witkacy’s historiosophical views are said to have been best expressed in *Unwashed Souls* that belongs to the late stage of his writing life (1936). The evolution of the writer’s views can be defined by the differences between the two works, and is still subject to critical debate.

⁶ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia”, in: idem, *Pisma filozoficzne i estetyczne*, ed. J. Leszczyński. Warszawa 1974, p. 108.

⁷ M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*. Wrocław 1976, pp. 132-35.

⁸ M. Soin, *Filozofia Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*. Wrocław 1995, pp. 63-64.

Witkacy is a “chronicler of the crisis,” revealing the historical necessity, while in the second he is a “propagandist” for specific values and a “prophet of annihilation.” The way of thinking about history, as reconstructed earlier, should clearly belong in the first of Soin’s categories, the second category being suitable for the aforementioned ontological project, with its pretensions to “unchangeability” and “absoluteness” so much highlighted by Danek-Wojnowska. A question can be posed at this point whether it is this tension between the two orders – a species necessity and an individual autonomy, in which to look for the source of Witkacy’s catastrophism.

3. TOWARDS CATASTROPHE

Witkacy’s historiosophy is of peculiar kind. What constitutes the sense of history from the species perspective, is for him precisely anti-sense, the opposite of what is most important. So perhaps we should start talking about purpose and teleology rather than sense and historiosophy? Or perhaps it is a historiosophy *à rebours*, historical events creating space for the emerging non-sense? As we know, Witkacy understands catastrophe as a fulfilment of the progress utopia. In the world that has been perfectly “socialized,” where “democratization” has led to the historical subjection of the whole community, there is no room for the individual (“Individual Existence”) who experiences “metaphysical feeling” and expresses it by artistic forms and concepts.⁹ Metaphysical anxiety interferes with conquering nature. This is why this supreme value which can shape humanity must yield to the inner purposefulness of social development. The inevitability of “democratization” means therefore the necessary agony of the three large fields of man’s cultural activity, all originating from “metaphysical feeling:” religion, philosophy and art. Religion was replaced with “the cult of society;” philosophy committed suicide the moment it adopted the pragmatic definition of truth (James) and when it negated “intellect” in favor of “intuition” (Bergson), thus labeling metaphysical problems as “only seeming” (Vienna Circle); and art dooms itself to vegetation by denying its true essence, Pure Form, and serving merely as a consumer good (“narcotic”) that satisfies masses.

A fundamental question arises: what is it in fact that really interests Witkacy? The “Mystery of Existence” or the social expression of its experience? “Metaphysical feeling” or the way the community that considers it to be the supreme value functions? “Humanity” or the physical presence of “people” around? Supposing it is the former, then his catastrophic jeremiads seem to become an abstract, senseless ornament. Supposing it is the latter, however, then one can easily consider the title of part four of *New Forms* to be misleading, for the case here is not that “metaphysical feelings” are “disappearing,” but that they are increasingly less present in society.¹⁰ Just as Nietzsche’s “death of God”

⁹ “Subordination of the interests of the single individual to the interests of the whole – this is the most general formulation of the process that we call social progress...” Or: “In our opinion, true artists – that is, those who would be absolutely incapable of living without creating, as opposed to other adventurers who make peace with themselves in a more compromising fashion – will be kept in special institutions for the incurably sick and, as vestigial specimens of former humanity, will be the subject of research by trained psychiatrists”. “New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom.” *The Witkiewicz Reader*, ed., trans. D. Gerould. Evanston 1992, pp. 108, 116.

¹⁰ Maciej Soin seems to support this interpretation when he refers to “the disappearance of metaphysical feelings, understood as a feeling that the world is mysterious,” which is “a matter of the social relevance of values.” Soin

was not about the “disappearance of the Absolute” (could anyone begin to prove it?), not even about the loss of the possibility to believe (he maintained the spiritual example of the “First Christian” would always be possible to fulfill), but about what Heidegger expresses as follows: “*Der ‘christliche Gott’ hat seine Macht über das Seiende und über die Bestimmung des Menschen verloren.*”¹¹ The doubt as to the actual reasons underlying Witkacy’s so-called “catastrophism” can be approached from yet another angle: if we assume that the “metaphysical feeling” is an “absolute” value, like “truth,” i.e. that it cannot be reduced to the necessities of life or social functions but represents instead “the transcendent” which is given to a human being and is eternal, and at the same time we maintain that there is some disturbing relation between its existence and the historical process of socialization, then the subject of “interest” can only be something we may call a “culture-making function of the absolute.” In consequence, catastrophism would turn out to be a type of “culturalism” that describes the lamentable future consequences of the collective “forgetting” of “supreme values,” while Witkacy would take his place among the modernist “culture critics,” thereby following Stanisław Brzozowski as well as his own father. But this would be somewhat at odds with the peculiar nature of his historiosophy, according to which the ideals of progress are of minus value. As Małgorzata Szpakowska fittingly pointed out, “catastrophism is a particularly hyperbolic expression of an existing situation negatively assessed,”¹² and I am also more attracted to the interpretation that shows ‘Witkacy the catastrophist’ as an artist who is terrified by the lack of a proper audience for his art, rather than as a moralist worrying over the fate of future generations.

Witkacy’s “catastrophism” is usually examined in two contexts. On the one hand, his work is placed among the works of the European thinkers and writers who lived more or less at the same time, and who prophesied the downfall of Western civilization: Oswald Spengler, Ortega y Gasset, Daniel-Rops, Nicolas Berdyaev, Yevgeny Zamyatin and Aldous Huxley. As far as Polish authors are concerned, Marian Zdziechowski and Florian Znaniecki are often mentioned along with Witkacy. The pragmatic horizon for the works of these writers was the “zeitgeist” that originated in the strictly twentieth-century experience of the Great War, revolution and new social doctrines (fascism, communism), whether experienced and analyzed, or apprehended and only deduced, or – as was most often the case – subject to a mixture of the two processes. Such “study of the influences” cannot but arouse a feeling of insufficiency today, even if it assumes the form of localizing the “problem field” while refusing to “establish the possible genetic interdependences.”¹³ Witkacy indeed shared the fate of other self-taught geniuses. He achieved the uniqueness of his own stance not only thanks to the exceptional forms that he chose for already established concepts, but also through the way of thinking that he discovered for himself and that must have led to the discovery of those forms. It would be a mistake, however,

also points to “the disappearance of metaphysical feelings, understood as an expression of individual will,” which is a matter of “changing political organization, the system of government that evolves from individual tyranny into the equalization of citizens in perfect democracy.” See: *Filozofia Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., pp. 43, 46.

¹¹ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*. Pfullingen 1989, p. 33.

¹² M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

simply to include the ideas that he advocated among the banal “theories of decline,” so fashionable at that time.¹⁴

On the other hand, Witkacian “catastrophism” is interpreted by many in the context of the nineteenth-century phenomena as stemming from the “modernist revolt” and thus comparable to “decadentism” or “pessimism.”¹⁵ In one of the first reviews of *Farewell to Autumn*, Karol Irzykowski referred to the book’s “ideology” as a “belated *Próchno*” and criticized the author for “being heart and soul in the past” despite the fact that he set the action of his book in the future.¹⁶ Labeling Witkacy’s critique of modernity as “catastrophism” provokes the narrowing down of its interpretation to this kind of narrow and outmoded rhetoric. Although the definition of “catastrophism” itself allows of much freedom,¹⁷ its meaning is inevitably linked with and dependent on the modernist understanding of *décadence*, which is the result of the term’s history and its due connotations. Seen this way, Witkacy turns out to be a belated acolyte of the Young Poland avant-garde, prophesying the twilight of bourgeois society and the end of modernist culture – Kasprówic, Przybyszewski, Miriam, or Berent. Fear of the mob, which Szpakowska claims to be a common feature of all catastrophisms,¹⁸ can thus be interpreted as an overpowering echo of contempt for the “philistine” felt by the artist “at the end of the century,” while the “decline of art” diagnosis can be seen as an extension of the old theory about a fundamental contradiction between the two hostile orders: art and life. The modernist cult of a creative individual and of art seen as the only legitimate sphere of values was to bring about a new “catastrophic” wave of decadentism, when confronted with the actual processes of popularization and democratization (not just apprehended or foretold, but really taking place). Catastrophism is decadence after “the end of the century.”

Read in this context, Sławomir Mazurek’s inspiring study offers an exceptional interpretation. In a very constructive way, the author compares Witkacy’s historiosophical ideas with the works of the “Russian Religious-Philosophical Renaissance.”¹⁹ Mazurek uses the term “catastrophism” understood as the “product of the crisis of historiosophy which we can consider one possible symptom of the crisis of modernism;”²⁰ however, he uses the term “modernism” in a peculiar way, referring to the period of late modernity. In his view then, catastrophism would be the fruit of the crisis of the modern, i.e. “finalistic

¹⁴ The possible dangers of too easy an analogy between Witkacy, Ortega y Gasset and Oswald Spengler are analyzed by Kamila Ruzińska in her book *Artysta wobec kultury*. Wrocław 1973, pp. 81-82.

¹⁵ E.g. Bożena Danek-Wojnowska, see: *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz a modernizm. Kształtowanie idei katastroficznych*, op. cit., pp. 147-49. See also: M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., pp. 127-28. Or: J. Błoński, *Od Stasia do Witkacego*, op. cit., pp. 48, 40, 66 (“catastrophic premises are already inherent in Witkacy’s decision to reject the idea of art as an intensification of life, or literature in the service of action,” which was the result of his belief that “‘non-metaphysical’ art is simply of no value [...]” – a belief that in turn was the legacy of the modernist tradition. Błoński ranks Witkacy as “the third generation of Young Poland.”)

¹⁶ K. Irzykowski, “Walka o treść. Beniaminek”, in: idem, *Pisma*. Kraków 1976, pp. 297, 301.

¹⁷ E.g. Małgorzata Szpakowska’s definition: “By catastrophism I mean a theory that speaks about a current or imminent destruction of values heretofore considered to be of considerable importance.” *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 38. A rather ambitious attempt at a coherent definition of historiosophic catastrophism as a philosophical notion can be found in Maciej Soin’s “O pojęciu katastrofizmu historiozoficznego”, in: *Archiwum historii filozofii i myśli społecznej* 35 (1990).

¹⁸ M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁹ S. Mazurek, *Wątki katastroficzne w myśli rosyjskiej i polskiej 1917-1950*. Wrocław 1997.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

and progressivist vision of history”²¹ that has its earliest beginnings in Giovanni Battista Vico’s *Principi di una scienza nuova* (1725). Such an extension of “modernism’s” temporal frames might allow us to use “catastrophism” as its equivalent, but I refrain from this option in order to avoid misunderstandings.²²

The majority of the interpretations discussed above have one thing in common – they do not relate the catastrophic prophecies to the present situation. The critics either “examine” those prophecies as an isolated problem of the past “literary era,” making no effort to go beyond the analysis of their inner relations, beyond cataloguing similarities or differences and influences, or they presume, most often tacitly, that the prophecies were fulfilled in the atrocities of the Second World War. The latter approach does not answer the question: what of the fulfilled “catastrophe” has remained in the world we live in today, with the war long finished?²³ This lack of answer is not coincidental. It results from the same instinct of self-defense that Witkacy talked about when he analyzed the mechanism of philosophy “forgetting” insolvable “metaphysical” questions.

One of the most important causes of this state of affairs, the cause that lies in the language of description itself, is precisely the very term “catastrophism.” If we want to go beyond the limits set by the present response to Witkacy’s thought, we must discard the term and introduce instead the problem of modernity approached in two ways: the question of Witkacy’s attitude towards modernity which he so openly declared and which was in line with the basic assumptions of his theory, as well as the modern aspect of this attitude. In other words, what will interest us here is not only the Witkacian understanding of modernity, but also the modernity of his understanding. A new kind of interpretation is possible this way as well as a new set of questions that we can apply to Witkacy’s work. Contradictions within bourgeois culture at the end of the century thus become the function of those processes that consumed European culture (what Nietzsche called “European nihilism”) in the longer term. The aesthetic notion of formalistic individualism recognizes its ontological background in the crisis of a self-grounding subjectivity, while the “unity in plurality” paradox, so essential to Witkacian thought, emerges from the long tradition of abolishing the dualism of consciousness and experience – the tradition that can be regarded as one of the philosophical foundation stones of modernity. The difficulties encountered by the modernist art model turn out to be part of modernity’s problem with determining (“projecting”) the hierarchy of values. The strong presence of existentialist experience in Witkacy’s work, can also be seen in a new light: boredom and melancholy lose the context of modernist *spleen* and *l’ennui* to become a human experience *par excellence*.

²¹ Ibid., p. 201.

²² Mazurek has probably been slightly misled by a calque of the Italian term *modernità*, used by Gianni Vattimo, to whom he often refers in his prose.

²³ While acknowledging the up-to-dateness of Witkacian diagnoses, critics tend to underestimate their meaning. For instance, in his essay “Trzy Apokalipsy w jednej,” Jan Błoński proves that the consistency of Witkacy’s argument is but an illusion achieved by means of a virtuoso conceptual jugglery (he calls this method “code-switching”). The same, rather condescending tone can be heard in this critic’s another essay: *Witkacy a świat zachodni*, in which Witkacy is compared with contemporary futurologists – Toeffler and Lem. See: *Witkacy sztukmistrz, filozof, estetyk*. Kraków 2002.

4. ANTI-MODERNITY

Witkacy did not use the term “modernity,” but he referred to modern times as the “interim period” marked by the culmination of certain currents that notably grew in strength in Europe during the French Revolution. He in turn considered the revolution to be “the moment our history shifted itself to the other side, substantially different from the previous one: a mass of gray mob reached out its tentacles for power.”²⁴ It was then that “the mob [...] felt its own power and could not forget the feeling.”²⁵ The quote reveals two details: the psychological explanation of history’s irreversibility (there is no return to the state of collective consciousness from the time before the revolution) and the radical division of human history into two periods – before and after the revolution. Both statements place Witkacy within the long tradition of thinking about modernity which has its roots in the Hegelian philosophy of history.²⁶ According to it, citizens of the modern world were exposed to “Big Bang” effects that were to shape a new era: the universal right to subjective freedom and the growing process of “rationalization,” both being the result of a sudden progress in conquering nature, impelled in turn by the growing needs of the emancipated crowds as well as the technological progress it entailed. This process setting its gradually more visible stamp on social and economic relations and entering the sphere of culture was labeled by Witkacy as “demystification:” “Apart from its impact on science, the developments in philosophy contributed to a gradual decrease in the mystification of the world.”²⁷ To capture the relationship between the social imperative of the efficiency of science and technology in conquering the natural environment, and the general need to abandon metaphysical thinking, the instrumental objectivization of one’s world and of oneself – this is the core of Witkacy’s critique of modernity. Witkacy’s “thought-monster” that expresses the “demystification of the world” tells us what follows: “The world is simply what it is, without any problems, and all philosophical problems – all of them, that is, except for certain petty opinions or practical issues, social, national and even religious ones – are but an illusion created by a couple of schizos.”²⁸ Jan Błoński was right to observe that there is a similarity between Witkacy’s “demystification” and Weber’s *Entzauberung*, the “disenchantment of the world.”²⁹ Analyzing cultural effects of the rationalization process (sc. “intellectualization”), Max Weber contributed this new term to the lexicon of sociological reflection upon modernity. He maintains that “rationalization” does not mean “an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. [...] Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This

²⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia”, op. cit., p. 107.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ E.g. J. Habermas, *Filozoficzny dyskurs nowoczesności*, trans. M. Łukasiewicz. Kraków 2000, p. 15. The analysis of a “simplified Hegelian historicism” as that which constitutes a “philosophical basis” of Witkacy’s historiosophical reflection can be found in Józef Tarnowski’s essay “Witkacy, Fukuyama i koniec historii”, in: *Witkacy. Życie i twórczość*, ed. J. Degler. Wrocław 1996, p. 200. Hegel’s influence on Witkacy’s theory of cultural development is examined by Małgorzata Szpakowska in her book *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 91.

²⁷ “Nowe formy w malarstwie”, op. cit., p. 119.

²⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Jedyne wyjście”, in: idem, *Dziela zebrane*, ed. A. Micińska. Warszawa 1993, p. 36.

²⁹ See: J. Błoński, “Gra o tajemnicę istnienia”, in: idem, *Witkacy sztukmistrz, filozof, estetyk*, op. cit., pp. 45-46.

means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits [...] Technical means and calculations perform the service.”³⁰ Weber’s words correspond with Wang-Tang-Tsang’s speech, the victorious commander of the Chinese army from *Insatiability*, when he talks about the society of the future: “Almost overnight our science overtook yours. It was then we discovered that you could not govern, whereas we could. Every country has its own system for achieving the greatest prosperity. That our system is superior to yours is seen in our system of organization and that of our racial brethren. We shall teach you. [...] by politics we understand productivity that is scientifically organized and regulated. We will organize you and you will be happy.”³¹ Developed according to the pragmatic objectives of technological civilization and based on the laws of logic (the law of contradiction), calculation eliminates not only “magic” from a common way of thinking, but also metaphysical issues from philosophy, thus supporting the anti-metaphysical character of modernity: “That is why our times gave birth to this special breed of philosophers who found it hopeless to create a set of philosophical terms that would be able to testify to the problem of “Existence” without paradoxes, who themselves suffered from the intellectual progress that made them unable to directly experience the “Mystery of Existence”, and who thus decided to completely exclude metaphysical problems from the sphere of thought.³² In Witkacy’s view, the leaders of that anti-metaphysical crusade were the “pragmatists” (James) and the Vienna Circle (Carnap), as well as Leon Chwistek along with the so-called “Lvov-Warsaw School” in Poland. It was those groups, he argued, that represented the spirit of modern philosophy and were also responsible for the shrinking of this spirit: “Even a person possessed by an unhealthy religious mania could be considered incomparably higher than a true pragmatist, Bergsonite, or follower of Mach...”³³

Witkacy’s idea of the “Mystery of Existence” as the main principle of establishing values, and the ability to feel it as the criterion of humanity, makes somewhat obvious his attitude towards the epoch, the historical essence of which consists in the feedback between the “democratization” and “demystification” processes. Witkacy’s historiosophy takes the form of a radical critique of modernity – an epoch constituting a logical link with historical progress and entailing inevitable nihilistic consequences. According to Witkacy, all the things that might limit one’s ability to feel the “Mystery of Existence” are indeed to be blamed for “cattle braining” (resp. “dehumanization”): for instance, the decay of traditional social derivations of that feeling (religion and art), or those new forms of the programming of mankind which are now devoid of a metaphysical element. Growing out of that, modernity becomes the moment of humanity’s regression to animality: “No matter how socialized we are, by renouncing metaphysical feelings we become more similar to animals than we can possibly admit.”³⁴ Paradoxically, it was Witkacy’s humanism that made him declare himself against modernity; the humanism that unites human dignity

³⁰ See: M. Weber, “Science as a Vocation”, in: idem, *Essays in Sociology*, eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Abingdon 1991, p. 139.

³¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, trans. L. Iribarne. Evanston 1996, p. 516.

³² “Nowe formy w malarstwie”, op. cit., p. 120.

³³ “New Forms in Painting”, in: *The Witkiewicz Reader*, op. cit., p. 113.

³⁴ “Nowe formy w malarstwie”, op. cit., p. 11.

with the unique ability to experience one's ontological singularity (Individual Existence) against the infinite plurality of the rest of the universe ("unity in plurality"). It is precisely in that act of primary distinction between the I and the Not-I³⁵, which brings to mind Fichte's *Selbstsetzung*, as well as in the encounter of one's own irreducible identity with the endless variety of the universe – it is in this "unpleasant" moment which makes us think of Pascal's, Kierkegaard's or Heidegger's "dread" and "anxiety"³⁶ that the essential difference between man and animal lies; the difference that is the source of sublimation of the whole cultural activity (i.e. esthetic and civilization's forms that evolve in various ways).

Fichte has not been mentioned here by coincidence. This advocate of the subject's self-determination embodies the risk embedded in the notion of human identity as a project – the risk that creates a paradigm of modern existence. Attacks on the philosophy of his contemporaries – Mach, Bergson or James – show Witkacy as an inheritor of that big chance which their philosophies did not cover. Witkacy's criticism of modernity is thus its legacy, which is also proved by the absence of nostalgia for the "pre-established harmony" of human "immaturity" in his work. Nor will we find a trace of sentimental appeal for the "return" to the "pre-modern" naivety in his anti-modernist philippics. Witkacy's revolt against the inevitability of demystification is his helpless protest against the betrayal of those possibilities that, *in nuce*, were already present in modernity's project and were more in line with his own hierarchy of values. Witkacy expresses it acutely and directly: modernity lost its way when it sacrificed humanity for general satisfaction and the logical rule of contradiction. However, many critics either approach this stance with some distrust or openly question it. The opinion most often quoted is that regarding Witkacy's attitude towards the process of modernity as ambivalent, as if he were hesitating to make a final judgment or evading the decision about which is better: full access to civilization's goods for everyone or the status as a human being for an unstable majority. According to Małgorzata Szpakowska: "If artistic-individual values are constantly contradicting the ethical ones, then the existence of those ethical values is also somehow affirmed. We know which of these two Witkiewicz chose. Still, he was not able to free himself from the other, the uncongenial set of values. His stance on this was ambivalent."³⁷ Konstanty Puzyna puts it the following way: "Catastrophic sense? Certainly, but an ambiguous one: metaphysics and art will perish, life after the deluge will turn gray, yet towards the close of both novels, those free from metaphysical feelings are happy at last, at least to some extent."³⁸ It does happen that this clash is shown as an inconsistency of thought, a kind of "gap" or "discontinuity" of the "system." Some argue that Witkacy's views evolved: "early" Witkacy would accordingly

³⁵ See: the second principle of "Foundation of the Complete Science of Knowledge". J.G. Fichte, *Teoria wiedzy*, ed., trans., intr. by M. Siemek. Warszawa 1996, pp. 101-02.

³⁶ "...the experience of metaphysical anxiety itself can have certain unpleasant undertones as it devalues everything – when set against infinity and mystery or death." S.I. Witkiewicz, "Nowe formy w malarstwie", op. cit., pp. 10-11. See also: B. Pascal, *Myśli*, trans. T. Żeleński (Boy). Warszawa 1989, p. 169 (fragm. 335 in the Chevalier edition). Or: S. Kierkegaard, *Pojęcie lęku*, trans., afterword by A. Dżakowska. Warszawa 1996, p. 49; and M. Heidegger, *Bycie i czas*, trans. B. Baran. Warszawa 1994, p. 261. On Kierkegaard's and Pascal's influence on Heidegger – see: W. Rymkiewicz, *Ktoś i nikt. Wprowadzenie do lektury Heideggera*. Wrocław 2002, p. 183.

³⁷ M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 122.

³⁸ K. Puzyna, "Witkacy", in: S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dramaty*. Vol. 1. Warszawa 1972, p. 37.

be “an aesthete and a pessimist” while the “late” one – “a monadologist and an optimist.”³⁹ Sławomir Mazurek’s interpretation goes the furthest of all. He points to the following two currents in Witkacy’s work: catastrophic historiosophy, present in *New Forms in Painting*, and the finalistic theory of history, represented by *Unwashed Souls*. Mazurek argues that while Witkacy’s early historiosophy is of fatalistic and anthropocentric nature (catastrophe is the end of humanity and no human activity can change the course of events), his late theory of history allegedly refrains from assessing the historical process and suggests a relativistic view of it, determined by its social context and the historical moment. Let me make it clear that these interpretations are a tangle of misunderstandings. Let us take a closer look at some of the various reasons that caused them.

First, it is a common opinion that Witkacy’s work joins in the triumphal parade of modernity. This view is conditioned by the strong presence of the somewhat superficial context in which his artistic activity is perceived and which Kazimierz Wyka refers to as a “personality legend.”⁴⁰ I would not ignore the influence of this anecdotal element. The “legend” shows Witkacy as a shocking anarchic provocateur, leader of the Zakopane “bohemia,” taking drugs, a “freethinker” rejecting religious practice, or a “dandy” practicing sexual freedom, etc. Even younger critics highlight this image of Witkacy, thus following Andrzej Makowiecki: “He is not only an artist like Przybyszewski – one with a remarkable air about him, devoted to art and writing, but also quite simply a freak, drug abuser and drinker; a rake and a troublemaker.”⁴¹ Witkacy himself is responsible for the fact that the legend is still vivid (Gombrowicz used it in his *Diary*) and so Jan Błoński is right to observe that being indignant at the triviality of the rabble who are hungry for sensation would be to act in much too principled a way.⁴² It is hardly surprising then if the legend inspires a school of opinions that wants to show Witkacy as belonging to the “progress camp” and joining the ranks of those who set out to reform old Polish ways, along with Boy-Żeleński and Antoni Słonimski. For a popular understanding of “iconoclasm,” by definition directed against “superstition,” must necessarily mean a “modern world-view.” That this vision is much too simplified is best proved by Witkacy’s difficult relations with the editorial board of “Wiadomości Literackie.” Let alone his open sneering at the cultural optimism of the “progressivists” such as Leon Chwistek or “late” Florian Znaniecki.⁴³

³⁹ E.g. B. Michalski, *Polemiki filozoficzne Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*. Warszawa 1979, pp. 268-73. This interpretation is criticized by M. Soin in *Filozofia Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

⁴⁰ K. Wyka, “Trzy legendy tzw. Witkacego”, in: *Twórczość* 10 (1958).

⁴¹ See: A. Makowiecki, *Trzy legendy literackie. Przybyszewski-Witkacy-Galczyński*. Warszawa 1980. See also: A. Pastuszek, *Metafizyczne grymasy. Czysta forma Witkacego jako kategoria metafizyki*. Toruń 2000, p. 11.

⁴² J. Błoński, *Od Stasia do Witkacego*, op. cit., p. 114. One of Witkacy’s favorite polemical tactics was to make his opponent appear a typical example of Polish intellectual sloppiness and idleness (a so-called “shallower”) who does not aspire to the heights of objective neutrality proposed by Witkiewicz, but seeks cheap sensationalism. This tactic was followed by Witkacy’s devotees who defended him against “the rabble.” See: B. Miciński, “Jutro NP! Na marginesie nowej książki St. Ignacego Witkiewicza”, in: idem, *Pisma*. Kraków 1970, p. 269.

⁴³ Here is how Witkacy wrote about Florian Znaniecki’s book, *Ludzie terażniejsi a cywilizacja przyszłości* (1934): “Florian Znaniecki’s entirely unjustified optimism (which comes after his previous fairly deep pessimism), based on simple ideology (too simple indeed), seems to me quite hopeless.” See: *Niemyte dusze*, p. 176. See also his polemic against Leon Chwistek’s book, *Zagadnienia kultury duchowej w Polsce* (1930), in: “Leon Chwistek – demon intelektu”, in: S.I. Witkiewicz, *O idealizmie i realizmie. Pojęcia i twierdzenia implikowane przez pojęcie istnienia i inne prace filozoficzne*, ed. B. Michalski. Warszawa 1977, pp. 159-60.

Secondly, the interpretation holding that Witkacy's historiosophy is, at the very least, "ambiguous," is conditioned by the writer's modernizing zest which reminds one of the passionate memorials written by the positivists or those by Stanisław Brzozowski in that it attempted to "raise the general level," "make up for delays," put to shame all sorts of "shallowers", intellectual dandies, or condemned intellectual laziness, lack of philosophical knowledge, etc. Witkacy's popularizing passion for spreading around the ideas of Freud or Kretschmer brings to mind Brzozowski's engagement in propagating the empiriocritical jargon of Avenarius. Jeremiads deploring the lack of philosophical background in Polish literary criticism, the provincialism of artistic discussion or the plagiaristic nature of the Polish avant-garde – all these features define the discourse of that time, the writings by Irzykowski, Żeromski as well as younger writers, such as Miłosz or Gombrowicz. Witkacy's project to "wash Polish souls," that is, the collective psychoanalysis of the whole nation, which appears alongside recommendations on hygiene, abstinence from nicotine and alcohol, a complete theory of washing oneself (Sennebaldt brushes), and "scientific" methods of dealing with other indispositions (hemorrhoids, dandruff or seborrhea) fit in with the modernizing campaigns launched by Polish state institutions at that time: for instance, to build latrines in the countryside and plant flower-beds in Warsaw's streets. However, if we take into consideration the maximalism of Witkacy's philosophical and artistic program, a program that for him was a matter of life and death, then the "popularizing" and "organicist" ambitions present in *Unwashed Souls*, *Narcotics* or his numerous magazine articles, cannot but reveal themselves as being as mediocre as they are – even if we agree that they echo the one-time postulates of Witkiewicz senior and his honorable allies in the modernizing crusade of the end of the 19th century.

Third, and possibly the most important reason why Witkacy's historiosophical thought can be seen as ambiguous in its assessment of the pros and cons that follow the modern necessity of social evolution, are the writer's rather straightforward enunciations of that ambiguity. One example is the beginning of part IV of *New Forms in Painting*, where we find a typical statement: "The views expressed here are not those of some "social revolutionary," for in fact we believe in the inevitability and necessity of certain changes that have as their goal justice and the common good."⁴⁴ The statement is further developed in Witkacy's last theoretical essay that expresses the author's historiosophic views: "Even before the war, in 1912 and 1913, I came to the conclusion that the price mankind must pay for perfect socialization is a) the end of religion [...], b) the suicide of philosophy [...] and c) the decline of art [...]. Of course, for the above mentioned reasons, I used to be in a state of despair, scarcely having gone beyond my aristocratic worldview, buttressed by philosophic skepticism acquired from contact with the system of Cornelius, whom I have been studying since the age of nineteen. Now, after having renounced art and written my philosophical *Hauptwerk* (1917-32) I have come to terms with all that as with an unavoidable historical necessity, and I think that everyone should make a similar adjustment and then there would be heaven on earth..."⁴⁵ This fragment is usually interpreted as serving to prove that Witkacy's views evolved and that he "oscillated between

⁴⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, "New Forms in Painting", in: *The Witkiewicz Reader*, op. cit., p. 108.

⁴⁵ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Unwashed Souls", in: *The Witkiewicz Reader*, op. cit., pp. 319-20.

two orders of values.⁴⁶ Sławomir Mazurek ventures an argument that “late” Witkacy substantially re-evaluates his views on history (his “axiological taste changes”). Instead of individualistic values (experience of the Mystery of Existence) he now speaks in favor of “social values” as the supreme value, that is, “the public good understood as putting an end to the suffering of the masses,” in other words – “putting an end to proletarianization.”⁴⁷ Mazurek argues that Witkacy’s revaluation is so strong that even though it does not lead him to nihilism, it still “does not make it harder for him to accept the death of culture,” especially when it is accompanied by the conviction that “culture is being created at the price of mass suffering.”⁴⁸

I consider Mazurek’s statement completely mistaken and think it must have been conditioned by a linear understanding of Witkacy’s argument, with the author ignoring an essential detail of Witkacy’s style: the quoted passage from *Unwashed Souls* is marked by “gallows humor,” so typical of Witkacy and clearly visible in the final paragraph of *Farewell to Autumn*: “And all the same everything is fine, everything is just fine. What? That’s not true? It’s fine, dammit, and whoever says the contrary will get smacked in the gob!”⁴⁹ That “propaganda for happiness,” which brings to mind some such Soviet slogan as “Life is better, life is jollier,” is uttered by the omniscient narrator, after the main character is shot. In other words, if Mazurek interprets the above-quoted fragment of *Unwashed Souls* as a clear manifestation of Witkacy’s “change of axiological taste,”⁵⁰ then it is probable that he would also take seriously the passage quoted next, from *The Only Way Out* – the author’s apostrophe to a reader bored with philosophical discourse – and treat it as Witkacy’s declaration of the advantage of pop-literature over other kinds of literature: “Wait, pumpkin – maybe you’ll un-dull yourself a little, maybe it will help you one day if now you overcome yourself a little, silly sweetheart – don’t get discouraged too early – you’ll have what you like, too, shitty scum.”⁵¹

Apart from “elements of anti-utopia,” some critics point to a “distinct utopian feature in the traditional sense of the word”⁵² present in Witkacy’s work. One of them is Małgorzata Szpakowska, who argues that “all catastrophic prophesies: mechanization, homogenization, revolutions, convulsions, mass invasions, bureaucracy, terror [...] – all these phenomena are interim. The future is a universal happiness, justice, the satisfaction of needs, peace, cooperation.”⁵³ The symbol of this universal happiness is a “little bungalow for everyone” which can be found in the majority of passages that describe the future: “one day, within three generations, say, a cabal of immaculate and wonderfully nourished (and, alas, hopelessly specialized) experts and capitalists would finally see the light and put up cozy little bungalows replete with gardens, radios, and home libraries.”⁵⁴ We come across a similar fragment in *Unwashed Souls*: “I have the impression that a lit-

⁴⁶ M. Soin, *Filozofia Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 60.

⁴⁷ S. Mazurek, *Wątki katastroficzne w myśli rosyjskiej i polskiej 1917-1950*, op. cit., p. 190.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁴⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Farewell to Autumn”, in: *The Witkiewicz Reader*, op. cit., p. 236.

⁵⁰ S. Mazurek, *Wątki katastroficzne w myśli rosyjskiej i polskiej 1917-1950*, op. cit., pp. 185, 192.

⁵¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Jedyne wyjście”, op. cit., pp. 53-54.

⁵² M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 198.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, op. cit., p. 148.

the bungalow with a garden, world travel, and popularized knowledge are the only happy solution for the future man's moments of leisure; one's own body, one's own woman and one's own toothbrush – no-one will ever renounce this.”⁵⁵ Szpakowska also points out that “With all due sincerity, Witkiewicz declared that he would not like to live there [on the Isle of Happiness]; at the same time, however, he emphasized that he regarded his own views and inclinations as anachronistic.”⁵⁶ Stefan Morawski questions Szpakowska's approach, saying that “utopia does not seem to be an apt name for Witkacy's views on universal harmony and happiness – at the price of abandoning all spiritual aspiration in favour of “wholesale cattle braining.” [...] What constitutes Witkacian pandemonium is a kind of truncated, caricatural anti-utopia that is only one side of the coin of his tragic apocalypse.”⁵⁷ Morawski's point of view, which argues for the recognition of Witkacy's radically negative attitude towards the mass culture of “the coming nightmare,” i.e. towards the “egalitarian society,” seems both obvious and surprisingly separate.

There is one feature that appears to unite all attempts to capture and understand the “ambivalence” of Witkacy's attitude towards the inevitability of modernity. They all imply an accusation of the “unhappy” consciousness, or a “false” one, that acknowledges the objective necessity of historical process but at the same time adheres to “anachronistic” values that are going to perish. This accusation remains unspoken, otherwise one would have to call Witkacy's stance “irrational” because of its ignorance of reality (if one follows the theory that only what is real is “reasonable”), or call it simply “erroneous” because it results from either the wrong interpretation of historical process or from a lapse in the assessment of cultural and social effects of the foreseen changes. This kind of criticism could be voiced by someone who rejects Witkacy's diagnosis or his value system; someone who denies the existence of the processes it describes, or who recognizes his own ideals in Witkacy's anti-utopian vision of the future. But there seems to be no such critic among the significant interpreters of his work. Hence the confusion that speaks of inconsistencies: Witkacy is right, in a sense, but not entirely... While growing aware of the “necessity,” he did not want to “acknowledge” it. To use Sławomir Mazurek's brief formula: “Though he is a historicist, Witkacy does not follow the way of assessment typical of many other “historicisms,” that is, by identifying the state of necessity with the desired state.”⁵⁸ What is striking, is the fragmentariness of attempts to capture the seemingly aporetic nature of Witkacy's stance. Without meaning to, it becomes evidence for the helplessness of interpretation. The same is the case with all the attempts at softening Witkacy's drastic conclusions, questioning his “bleak vision” of the future society and undermining the coherence of his historiosophical argumentation (which is not hard to do), as well as those numerous instances – from psychological-biographical to bibliographical ones – where his message is simply relativized.

Witkacy's attitude towards modernity is lucid. It is free from “contradictions”, “inconsistencies,” “ambivalence,” or “oscillation.” It becomes clear and does not require further justification when we put it into an appropriate conceptual context. A certain

⁵⁵ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Niemyte dusze”, op. cit., p. 177.

⁵⁶ M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 198.

⁵⁷ S. Morawski, “Na witkacodromie jaśniejszej i... ciemniejszej”, in: *Twórczość* 5 (1977).

⁵⁸ S. Mazurek, *Wątki katastroficzne w myśli rosyjskiej i polskiej 1917-1950*, op. cit., p. 192.

digression will enable us to do so. Assuming that his stance reveals a relationship between the process of “rationalization” or “socialization” on the one hand, and the process of “demystification” on the other, then we can agree with Miłosz’s remark voiced in his pioneering study: Witkacy’s historiosophy convinces us that “ethics will devour metaphysics,”⁵⁹ which “made Witkiewicz a witness for one of the sides in the old and rather pettifogging dispute”⁶⁰ between ethics and art that has been running in European thought since the banishment of poets from Plato’s *polis*. It seems impossible today for this formula (taken after all from Witkacy) to be understood outside the specific context of “Russian nihilism,” the apt definition of which we owe to Sławomir Mazurek: “nihilism *à la russe* [...] while not negating the sense of existence and of the world, but underlining instead the rational and purposeful character of the historical process, aims its impetus at culture, repudiating high culture in particular. This act of sending it for trial is justified by its moralism – rigorous, maximalistic, futurism-oriented (i.e. considering a future social harmony as the supreme value).⁶¹ Exactly! The moralism of nihilism is a typically Russian invention. Its emblematic representative, Dmitry Pisarev, when posing a question as to what is more important “Shakespeare or a pair of shoes?” would point his finger at the shoes! Why such a strange dilemma? Why the conviction that it is impossible ever to abolish the conflict between aesthetic and moral values, the right of creative freedom vs. the right to free oneself from suffering?

A possible answer to this questions can be found in “The Grand Inquisitor” parable from *The Karamazov Brothers* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It is the essence of the Russian argument about theodicy: how to reconcile God’s infinite goodness with the immensity of human suffering? The Grand Inquisitor is a fount of horrible truth: people do not want the freedom which leads to the unfair division of goods – which “changes stones into bread” as Dostoyevsky puts it. They choose violence, which promises that “bread” will be shared out fairly. At some point the argument about theodicy becomes an argument about culturodicy: how to reconcile the coexistence of Shakespeare’s sophisticated poetry with poverty and hunger suffered by the masses? As Nicolas Berdyaev observed it a long time ago, “But as a result of pity, sympathy and the impossibility of bearing suffering, Russians became atheists. They became atheists because they could not accept a Creator Who made an evil, incomplete world full of suffering. They themselves desired to make a better world [...]”⁶² In his famous essay, *The Ethic of Nihilism*, Semen Frank proposes a thesis that the absolutization of “people’s suffering,” which can be ended by the destruction of the “old order,” has its origins in the denial of the “religious tendency” to presuppose that the sphere of values has a transcendent foundation.⁶³ What happens after this “death of God” is a peculiar switch in axiology: absolute values are replaced by “people” and their poverty. The maximalistic moralism of Russian nihilism, paradoxical as it sounds, is similar in nature to altruistic utilitarianism, according to which the cause of the world’s

⁵⁹ C. Miłosz, “Granice sztuki. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz z perspektywy wojennych przemian”, in: idem, *Legendy nowoczesności*. Kraków 1996, p. 118.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 146.

⁶¹ S. Mazurek, “Odmienność idei nihilizmu w Rosji”, in: *Res Publica Nowa* 4 (1999), p. 29.

⁶² N. Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, trans. R.M. French. Ann Arbor 2004, p. 42.

⁶³ Quoted after: S. Mazurek, “Odmienność idei nihilizmu w Rosji”, op. cit.

evil lies in the products of a corrupt civilization, unfair social divisions, and human will. In Berdyaev's words, "Nihilism considers as sinful luxury not only art, metaphysics and spiritual values, but religion also. All its strength must be devoted to the emancipation of earthly man, the emancipation of the labouring people from their excessive suffering, to establishing conditions of happy life, to the destruction of superstition and prejudice, conventional standards and lofty ideas, which enslave man and hinder his happiness."⁶⁴ The condemnation of the products of civilization and culture, the name for which is *oproszczenie* – a peculiar atheistic asceticism – can be found not only in Pisarev, but first of all in the social and aesthetic writings of Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, or Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Their nihilism has been interpreted as "the negative of Russian apocalypticism", a *de facto* religious phenomenon, despite its atheistic edge, which proves difficult to understand if one disregards the spiritual context of the Orthodox Church. Materialism became a theoretical means of *quasi*-cult: "But already in the 'sixties materialism had assumed this theological tinge; it became a dogma of moral obligation and behind it was concealed a distinctive nihilist asceticism. A materialist catechism was framed, and was adopted by the fanatical circles of the left Russian intelligentsia. Not to be a materialist was to be taken as a moral suspect. [...] The attitude of the Russian nihilists to science was idolatrous."⁶⁵ Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* illustrates this peculiar linkage between destructive contempt for the world of spiritual values, referred to as "the opium of the people," and the cult of modern science or anti-dogmatic slogans of the age of Enlightenment. A perceptive analysis of this linkage was offered by Gottfried Benn in the early 1930s: "this Bazarov's nihilism [...] was not negativism pure and simple but a fanatical faith in progress, a radical positivism with regard to natural science and sociology. [...] let's listen to the familiar sounds [...]: I prefer a piece of cheese to the whole of Pushkin. Don't you think anything of art? Of course, but much more of the art of making money and of curing hemorrhoids!"⁶⁶ In this anti-nihilist lampoon against the shallowness of contemporary European culture, Benn argues that hostility towards metaphysics has been conditioned by the conviction that "creation itself" is "accessible to science." Tracking down the current symptoms of Russian nihilism he goes as far as to point to Dadaistic ideas in Chernyshevsky's novel of the 1860s, *What Is to Be Done?*

It needs to be said that the typically Russian conflict between the sphere of creative freedom and moral necessity is no less visible today than it used to be in the times of Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy: "In an anthropological respect, let me reiterate, a human being is an aesthetic creature before he is an ethical one. Therefore, it is not that art, particularly literature, is a by-product of our species' development, but just the reverse. [...] Lenin was literate, Stalin was literate, so was Hitler; as for Mao Zedong, he even wrote verse. What all these men had in common, though, was that their hit list was longer than their reading list."⁶⁷ The author of these words, Joseph Brodsky, adopts Dostoyevsky's stance that "beauty will save the world." However, he repeats it in the context of immediate reality, not from

⁶⁴ N. Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, op. cit., p. 45.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁶ G. Benn, "After Nihilism", in: *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. A. Kaes, M. Jay, E. Dimendberg. Berkeley 1994, p. 382. And: *Origin 9*. Kraus Reprint (1970), p. 101.

⁶⁷ J. Brodsky, "Aesthetics and Language", in: *idem, Nobel Lectures*, trans. B. Rubin. New York 2007, pp. 260, 263.

the perspective of the Grand Inquisitor's deduced victim, and as a victim who personally experienced the benefits of an ethics-oriented utopia which promised to conquer the fragile autonomy of individual bel-espritism and thus make the masses happy.

And Witkacy? Whenever he gives the floor to Sajetan Tempe, the ideologist of "levelism" from *Farewell to Autumn*, we deal with a grotesque hyperbolization of "Russian nihilism:" "Happiness depends solely on a full stomach," Sajetan replied. "All your problems are sham. Only by wholesale cattle braining, carried out rigorously and systematically, will mankind reach its true and desired resting point: not to know anything about anything, not to be conscious of anything, simply to vegetate agreeably. All civilization has turned out to be a freud."⁶⁸ Witkacy's prose indeed is not polyphonic and if it ever allows his enemies to speak, it makes sure the reader has no doubt as to who is right. This makes the writer's stance only the more visible. A nihilistic moralism, or even the a pseudoreligiously ascetic altruism and love of one's neighbour (so much present in the futuristic speeches of Witkacy's characters) are still no argument for the revolution of modernity. They are an integral part of the anti-metaphysical utopia, and not just a nice paradox that surprises the reader who has got used to Nietzsche's immoral version of nihilism. Neither can they be seen as equal to the other values, including culture which predisposes to metaphysical experience. No, not in this case.

A genetic question arises as to how Witkacy absorbed the Russian model of nihilism and incorporated it into a coherent theory of social evolution which brings about certain cultural transformations, the famous "demon of the species" being the very essence of modernity, i.e. the conquest of nature. Although the question seems to be of secondary importance, there exists a number of interesting hypotheses that try to address this relation. Sławomir Mazurek argues that it was "Bolshevik millenarianism" that made Witkacy introduce new categories and ideas to his lexicon: "historical necessity," "the battle of classes," the critique of bourgeois democracy, or the conviction "that the development of productive forces which determines social relations is an important factor in historical evolution."⁶⁹ This interpretational intuition has been expressed most explicitly by Jan Błoński: "the revolution of 1917 seemed to him [Witkiewicz] a matrix or a prototype of the future humanity."⁷⁰ Witkacy first encountered Bolshevism during his stay in Russia where he was an eyewitness to the bloody events of the revolution. Some critics point to other possible sources that inspired Witkacy with Russian thought – to his being familiar with Vladimir Solov'yov's *Short Story of the Anti-Christ* and Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*⁷¹.

⁶⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Farewell to Autumn", op. cit., p. 217.

⁶⁹ S. Mazurek, *Wątki katastroficzne w myśli rosyjskiej i polskiej 1917-1950*, op. cit., p. 173.

⁷⁰ J. Błoński, "Witkacy i rewolucja", in: idem, *Witkacy sztukmistrz, filozof, estetyk*, op. cit., p. 278.

⁷¹ See: J. Iwaszkiewicz, "Witkacy", in: idem, *Petersburg*. Warszawa 1977, pp. 55-61. At least two critics referred to Witkacy's stay in Russia as the time that eventually shaped his views. See: K. Puzyna, "Witkacy", in: *Dialog* 8 (1961), pp. 121-29. Or: A. Mencwel, "Witkacego jedność w wielości", in: *Dialog* 12 (1965).

W. G. SEBALD'S ELECTIVE AFFINITIES: ON *THE RINGS* *OF SATURN*

*Up from the Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,
And many Knots unravel'd by the Road;
But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate.*
Edward FitzGerald, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*

The Rings of Saturn, published in 1995, is W. G. Sebald's third and penultimate novel. I would like to describe here certain recurrent patterns and trajectories of thought that can be traced back to Sebald's earlier books, but which also herald the figure of Austerlitz. Let us begin by commenting on the author's peculiar strategy of weaving into his own text black and white photographs or facsimiles of other texts. It would be a mistake to call these photographs "illustrations," for it does not take long to realize that the image, more often than not, obscures the narrative, rather than illuminating it or making it more coherent. As Mark Anderson aptly put it, the photographs in Sebald's novels do not serve "as the illustration of the text but as its slightly out-of-sync counterpoint, a kind of punctuation that subtly irritates and challenges our notion of what is real, what is fictional."¹ This ambiguity makes it difficult to determine what sort of literary genre we are dealing with in the case of this strange docu-fiction. On the one hand, it might be tempting to tame this book by seeing it as a combination of memoir and essay, so popular in the 20th century, and by identifying the narrator with Sebald himself – a professor of Norwich University who, while he describes his hiking tour along the Suffolk seacoast, makes various de-tours into literature, art, natural sciences, biography and autobiography, but above all – into history. On the other hand, however, the narrator of the *The Rings of Saturn* is quite enigmatic, as if he was withholding some awful secret from the reader, and in many respects he resembles fictional characters. It sometimes seems, for example, that we are dealing with a narrator out one of Beckett's novels. Just like in *Molloy*, the events of the expedition are related by someone who ends up in hospital "in a state of almost total immobility"². We are then

¹ M. M. Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W.G. Sebald", in: *October*. Vol. 106, 2003, p. 109.

² W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M. Hulse, London: Vintage Books 1998, p. 3.

told that this inexplicable paralysis does not allow the narrator to move otherwise than by crawling “half on [his] belly and half sideways.”³ A similar immobility overwhelms Malone (of Beckett’s *Malone Dies*) and just like Malone, Sebald (or should we say: that mysterious patient of Norwich hospital) sees nothing but a bit of sky through his window and has the increasing sense of the outside world’s unreality. This makes him somewhat similar to the figure of Herbert Ashe from Borges’ short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”: “In his lifetime, [Ashe] suffered from unreality, as do so many Englishmen.”⁴ (The fictitious land of Uqbar is discussed towards the end of chapter three of *The Rings...* and I shall also refer to it in the conclusion of my essay.) The strange disorder which the narrator suffers from might take on an even more disquieting aspect if we pause to consider the first photograph presented in the book, that of the hospital window. Why is it so “bare”, without any curtains? And why is it secured with a net of some sorts? Is it possible that Sebald’s story begins in an insane asylum? In a secure room for patients with suicidal tendencies? After all, towards the end of his journey the narrator visited a desolate peninsula near Orfordness which the local fishermen avoided because “they couldn’t stand the god-forsaken loneliness of that outpost in the middle of nowhere, and in some cases even became emotionally disturbed for some time.”⁵ And since the place is England, and the narrator of the book is obviously locked up on one of the top floors of the hospital (as he cannot see anything outside the window, not even treetops or tops of other buildings), he may be associated with Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic, although he himself feels more like Gregor Samsa, locked up in his room and transformed into a monstrous beetle. Finally, we should keep in mind that Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist of Sebald’s last novel, was hospitalized as a result of similar “breakdowns” and “paralyses”.

But insanity, the feeling of unreality, the inability to distinguish truth from fiction – all this seems difficult to reconcile with the idea of a reportage or of an historical essay. How are we to trust and what are we to think of an historian whom we suspect not only of being deranged but also of fabricating, or at least – of manipulating the evidence which he presents to his readers? The best example of this is the story of major Le Strange who, as we are told, took part in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and after returning to England retreated to his countryside estate where the only person he ever saw was his housekeeper. “Le Strange employed his housekeeper [...] on the explicit condition that she take the meals she prepared together with him, but in absolute silence.”⁶ After decades of faithful and utterly silent service, the woman was rewarded by Le Strange who in his last will bestowed on her his “whole estate, with its gardens and park.” The narrator claims that he found out about the eccentric major from an article in the *Eastern Daily Press*. He even includes a photocopy of it to persuade the reader that the story is true. And still, one cannot help but feel that the strange tale of Le Strange is quite implausible. In fact, not a single reference to the story is to be found in the online archives of the *Eastern*

³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴ J. L. Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, trans. D. A. Yates, New York: New Directions 2007, p. 7.

⁵ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, op. cit., p. 234.

⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

Daily Press. Perhaps if we conducted a more thorough research⁷, some trace of George Wyndham Le Strange might be discovered. Perhaps someone, somewhere could confirm the fact that “one summer Le Strange dug a cave in his garden and sat in it day and night like St Jerome in the desert,” and that when he died „his snow-white hair had turned to raven-black.”⁸ One thing is certain: the figure of major Le Strange becomes a symbol of the epistemological confusion into which the reader of *The Rings of Saturn* is thrown. It is, on the one hand, the confounding thought that what is fictitious (the fabricated story) is not real – that after the Holocaust we have not grown silent like Le Strange. On the other hand, it is equally (and horrifyingly) strange that certain real events are not fictitious – that they are not a bad dream and could really have happened. Thus, a certain peculiar affinity connects the “photocopy” of the article in the *Eastern Daily Press* and the preceding photograph showing heaps of twisted, emaciated bodies: both are unbelievable.

Therefore, if we insist on calling the narrator of *The Rings...* a historian, we should first recognize that his attitude towards the past has certainly nothing to do with the historicist quest of finding out *the way things really were*. As Walter Benjamin stresses, there exist other ways of “articulating the past historically,” and perhaps Sebald’s novel may adequately be described as the work of a historical materialist whose aim is to appropriate “a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast to that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger.” The danger which Benjamin has in mind is that of “becoming a tool of the ruling classes.”⁹ The narrator of *The Rings...* constantly sets before the reader such “dangerous” situations, for example when he describes how millions of Congolese people became rubber-collecting tools of king Leopold II of Belgium. In Sebald’s novel, however, we are dealing not so much with moments of danger, as Benjamin puts it, but with chronic dread; the narrative takes on the form of a relentless, melancholy and almost pathologically unemotional contemplation of “an immense penumbral continuum of human suffering, exile, and »silent« catastrophes that take place »without much ado«.”¹⁰

In space, the narrator’s journey is limited to a short strip of coast in the east of England. However, he is constantly sucked in by “the immense power of emptiness”¹¹ into the historical abyss – that “bloody horror [...] beyond all imagining.”¹² The things that catalyze the nightmarish vision (though perhaps “vision” is not the right word here, since the narrator traverses the realm of the unimaginable) are quite casual, coincidental and not particularly ominous, at least at first sight. And so, the decorative dragons on antique carriages of the Great Eastern Railway “transport” the narrator to China and the times of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) which cost the lives of over twenty million people. No doubt, in *The Rings of Saturn* our guide across Suffolk is that historical materialist

⁷ This in fact was attempted by Brett Ashley Kaplan who sent a letter of inquiry to the librarian of the *Eastern Daily Press*. The search, as might be expected, yielded nothing. See: B. A. Kaplan, *Landscapes of Holocaust Post-memory*, New York: Routledge 2011, p. 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁹ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, ed. H. Eiland, M. W. Jennings, Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2006, p. 391.

¹⁰ M. M. Anderson, “The Edge of Darkness: On W.G. Sebald”, *op. cit.*, s. 121.

¹¹ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

for whom – as Benjamin says – „There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”¹³

For anyone possessed of such sensibility, the city which in itself is one stupendously large document of barbarism is of course Brussels. Sebald's protagonists seem both fascinated by this place – somehow drawn to it – and nauseated by it. (It is in Brussels that we encounter Jacques Austerlitz for the first time.) Belgium of Leopold II begot Kurtz. Its splendor was paid for with the lives of millions of Africans. Sebald's narrator, although he visits quiet fishing villages in Suffolk, experiences something similar to Conrad who on his return from the Congo could not help feeling that Brussels “with its ever more bombastic buildings [was] a sepulchral monument erected over a hecatomb of black bodies.”¹⁴ One might doubt, of course, whether the word “hecatomb” is appropriate here, as it might suggest that history sacrifices its victims to some god, be it only ravenous Saturn. Is there any place left, however, in Sebald's vision of history for sanctification, expiation or redemption?

Reading this book, one often gets the impression that the history of Man (which, as we like to believe, possesses a moral and teleological dimension) is not that much different from the history of... a herring. In chapter II, within the space of two or three paragraphs, Sebald moves from a description of enormous shoals of herring caught off the coast of Suffolk to a description of mass murders committed at Bergen-Belsen – only five pages separate the snapshot showing heaps of fish in the docks of Lowestoft from a terrifying photograph of stacks of emaciated corpses. And particularly terrifying is the similarity of the white bodies strewn on the ground. Sebald goes even further in equating the two orders – the animal and the human, the natural and the historical – when a moment later he speaks of pigs grazing in a field in such a way as to suggest their likeness to the prisoners of a concentration camp: “Beyond a low electric fence lay a herd of almost a hundred head of swine, on brown earth where meagre patches of camomile grew.” Every now and then, the animals “sighed like [someone] enduring endless suffering.”¹⁵ This continues until the very end of the book: the natural erosion of the east coast of England with its towns engulfed by the North Sea, the butchery of war, the destruction of the whole population of English elms, ethnic purges – everything seems part of one and the same process of cosmic entropy. This undifferentiating gaze is the gaze of a melancholic. From his perspective, just as from the perspective of Benjamin's “angel of history,” the image of the past does not present “a chain of events” but a “single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage.”¹⁶ In Benjamin's description, from the direction of the wreckage of history a strong wind is blowing and bearing down on the angel so hard that it cannot fold its wings. “The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned.”¹⁷ What makes the melancholic and the angel of history similar is the fact that both cannot envision Salvation. The design thanks to which Macbeth's “tale told by an idiot” is transformed into a tale of deliverance constantly eludes them.

¹³ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, op. cit., p. 391.

¹⁴ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, op. cit., p. 122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, op. cit., p. 393.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

In English literature this understanding of melancholy was given full expression in the work of Thomas Browne about whom much is said in the first and last chapters of *The Rings of Saturn*. In 1658 Browne published *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* in which he wrote about the funerary urns recently discovered near Norwich. The first part of the work consists of archeological speculations, but gradually it turns into a highly personal and erudite meditation on death and the passing away of all things. In Browne's tone there is evident tension between skepticism and a desperate need of faith. The most famous part of *Hydriotaphia*, chapter five, is a lamentation on unredeemed history – on time which lacks proper measure and is governed by the “angels of contingency.” Where contingency reigns supreme, the sufferings of the innocent and the noble deeds of the righteous are forgotten, while villains, madmen and fools enjoy fame and honor; blind fate decides how – and if at all – we shall be remembered by posterity; a person's good name is powerless against malicious tongues. What is more, “the greater part [of humankind] must be content to be as though they had not been.” Browne, just like the narrator of *The Rings...*, is horrified to contemplate the “night of time.” The crucial difference, however, is that Browne finally comes to express his belief in “Christian annihilation [...], exolution, liquefaction, transformation” – the conviction that God will redeem history and introduce the right proportions of things. In Sebald's book such unreserved optimism is no longer possible, or to put it differently – the world described in *The Rings if Saturn* is a post-eschatological one. Can anything replace Salvation in such a world? Is some sort of redemption still possible?

Sebald's narrator does not have a ready answer to this question, but he quite often ironically regards redemption in its secularized version, namely – progress. It even seems likely that the title of the book itself is an allusion to the 19th century (partially positivistic, partially utopian, Fourieristic) vision of the progress of mankind – of humankind's redemption through technology and well-organized labor. What is the connection between the rings of Saturn and the idea of progress? Once again we will resort to Walter Benjamin, this time – to his famous *Arcades* project which includes (towards the very end) a short sketch entitled *The Ring of Saturn or Some Remarks on Iron Construction*. Benjamin writes about the enthusiasm with which – in the first half of the 19th century – people reacted to the new architectural style based on mass-produced cast-iron elements. “We stand here at the beginning of a development that is sure to proceed at a furious pace,” wrote Alfred Gotthold Meyer. “The conditions of the material [...] are volatilized in »limitless possibilities«.”¹⁸ Iron construction – illuminated by the mystical brilliance of *G(l)as* (glass and gas lighting) – was a gift of the modern Prometheus; this new technology was to produce “arcades”, i.e. passageways to a better, more spiritual reality, transcending the weight and oppression of the material world. In the culminating moment of this vision, “four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding.”¹⁹ The empty and hostile universe becomes domesticated – Benjamin quotes the following futuristic description from Grandville's novel:

¹⁸ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2004, p. 156-57.

¹⁹ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, op. cit., p. 394.

A bridge – its two ends could not be embraced at a single glance and its piers were resting on planets – led from one world to another by a cause-way of wonderfully smooth asphalt. The three-hundred-thirty-three-thousandth pier rested on Saturn. There our goblin noticed that the ring around this planet was nothing other than a circular balcony on which the inhabitants of Saturn strolled in the evening to get a breath of fresh air.²⁰

But the rings of Saturn in Sebald's novel are nothing but the remains of an ancient catastrophe – as the motto informs us, they “are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect.” Technological progress is presented by Sebald as a process which is inevitably transformed by its own dynamic into, at best, a grotesque caricature, more often however – into Conradian horror. The best example of this is the story, told by Jacques Austerlitz, of the expansion of Belgian forts: “the idea of concentric rings making their way steadily outward” – out of which developed the supreme design of “the star-shaped dodecagon [...] derived from the Golden Section”²¹ – gradually degenerated into a monstrosity: the fortifications became so large that they “devoured” the whole country, “with the result that the entire Belgian army would have been insufficient to garrison [them].”²² The narrator of *Austerlitz*, when visiting the fort at Breedonk (in which a concentration camp was created during the war), says that despite the building's “rational structure” he could not recognize in it “anything designed by the human mind but saw it, rather, as the anatomical blueprint of some alien and crab-like creature.”²³

Since we have mentioned both *Austerlitz* and Grandville's marvelous bridge, it might be worthwhile to quote yet another passage from Benjamin's *Arcades*: “The Austerlitz Bridge was one of the first iron structures in Paris. With the lightning flash above, it becomes an emblem of the dawning technological age.”²⁴ It turns out then, that the unusual surname of the main protagonist is a reference not only to the horror of the celebrated massacres which inaugurated the 19th century, but also to the architecture „of the capitalist era” which Jacques Austerlitz specialized in. What is interesting, Austerlitz's unfinished project for his doctoral dissertation brings to mind Benjamin's *Arcades*: these investigations „had long outstripped their original purpose as a project for a dissertation, proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches for a study.”²⁵ What particularly interests both scholars is the fact that architecture, which initially went hand in hand with philanthropy and the belief in technology's redemptive function, played an important part in creating a society based on the model of “barracks” – a society in which Man was replaced by the notion of “human material.” Benjamin: “Now, it is the same with the human material on the inside of the arcades as with the materials of their construction. Pimps are the iron

²⁰ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 885.

²¹ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. A. Bell, Toronto: Vintage 2002, p. 14-15.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁴ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 151.

²⁵ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, op. cit., p. 33.

uprights of this street, and its glass breakables are the whores.”²⁶ Austerlitz: “the vision of model towns for workers entertained by philanthropic entrepreneurs had inadvertently changed into the practice of accommodating them in barracks.”²⁷ Ultimately, as we know, Austerlitz’s inquiry into the history of modern iron construction and “the whole railway system” reaches a dead end at the siding in Auschwitz.

Let us return to the question of whether history may be redeemed. If for Sebald, just like for Benjamin, progress is a storm which wreaks havoc, and if – in contrast to Benjamin’s vision – there is no hope that the angel of history might in the end rest his back against the day of Final Judgment, then the “night of time” seems endless and impenetrable. But perhaps we should consider a different answer, one that does not depend on the idea of transcending history, but makes use of the abovementioned distinction between historicism and historical materialism?

The rejection of the notion of progress, Benjamin claims, also implies the rejection of historicism since both “progressivists” and “historicists” have similar ideas about time. Let us have a closer look at three passages from Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”:

1. The concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time.
2. Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. [...] Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on the constructive principle.
3. Historicism offers the “eternal” image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.²⁸

The time of historicism resembles the North Sea described in *The Rings of Saturn*, devouring – one by one – human habitations. This time is nothing but “the immense power of emptiness”²⁹ in which all life, all events – great and small – are turned into facts, increasing the dismal and boring ballast of the past. (I use the adjective “boring” in connection with Browne’s melancholy: boredom – spleen – black bile³⁰ – Μελαγχολία.)

Against this concept of time (as empty and homogeneous) and of the past (as a homogenized “deposit” of facts) historical materialism juxtaposes two things, although they can be expressed in a single formula – it is the principle of *construction* in *experiencing* the past. It is not my intention here to discuss in detail the philosophical premises and implications of this “constructive principle”; I want to see, however, whether it can be of any use in resolving the enigma of the narrator of Sebald’s novel.

²⁶ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 155.

²⁷ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, op. cit., p. 28.

²⁸ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, op. cit., p. 394-96.

²⁹ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, op. cit., p. 159.

³⁰ In the theory of the four bodily fluids (“humours”), black bile is of course connected with the planet Saturn.

I pointed out the enigmatic nature of the narrator of *The Rings...* by drawing attention to the strange quality of the photographs which – it seems at first – are supposed to document the journey across Suffolk (and at same time – across the archive of history), but after a while they only enhance the epistemological confusion. Some of the “documents” presented in the book (such as the “copy” of the article about major Le Strange) cannot be taken in good faith – they make the impression of having been constructed, not to say – counterfeited. It is precisely constructed history that is to provide the antidote for the “spleen” of historicism, or – as Nietzsche puts it in “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” – of the “*antiquarian* method” in historical studies which is harmful to life since it “mummifies it.” The consequences of this are quite unexpected – it seems that only fiction can save us from the horror of history; only fiction can redeem it. But in what sense? Does it mean that in order not go insane we have to accept a comforting, life-giving illusion? And if so, how are we to distinguish soothing sentimentalism or monumentalism from propaganda engineered by the employees of the Ministry of Truth to conceal murderous designs (as in the case of the Nazi film about Theresienstadt concentration camp described in *Austerlitz*). We would expect Sebald’s protagonists to be alert to all forms of historical “swindle.” The narrator of *The Rings...*, for example, says at one point that: “While most of the accounts of the battles fought on the so-called fields of honour have from time immemorial been unreliable, the pictorial representations of great naval engagements are without exception figments of the imagination.”³¹ Are we therefore justified in assuming that apart from false and murderous fictions there can exist true and redemptive fictions as well? The motto from Milton³² suggests that it might be possible: „Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably.” We should therefore keep in mind that the “swindle” mentioned a moment ago might signify something more than simply “lies.”

Schwindel. Gefühle is the title of Sebald’s first novel. It’s ambiguity is lost in the English translation in which the title was rendered as *Vertigo*. The period dividing the two nouns draws attention to the double meaning of the first of them: it is important that „Schwindel” means not only „swindle” but also “a feeling of dizziness,” “vertigo.” In the original title, therefore, we are dealing with a peculiar indeterminacy – the inability to distinguish between *falsity* (manipulation) and *authenticity of feeling*. In *Vertigo* Sebald writes – among other things – about Stendhal’s Italian adventures: his love-affairs but also his participation in Napoleon’s victorious campaign. Seventeen-year-old Stendhal witnessed the Battle of Marengo. The bloody spectacle made such a terrible impression on the youth that he decided not only to describe his own experience, but also started writing down the recollections of people who took part in the battle, as well as preparing a detailed map of the battlefield. However, on his return to Marengo a year later he is overcome by a sudden dizziness (the “Schwindel” of the title) when confronted with the incongruity between historical reconstruction and the subjective, “living” feeling of “how it actually was.” Paradoxically, it is something that the historian (or more precisely: the historicist) can never give an account of. Although he ascends to higher and higher levels

³¹ W. G. Sebald, *The Ring of Saturn*, op. cit., p. 76.

³² This motto – present in the German original – is not included in the English translation.

of objectivism, he cannot avoid committing “swindle.” It is precisely this problem that the narrator of *The Rings...* addresses when contemplating Louis Dumontin’s panorama of the Battle of Waterloo:

This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. [...] Whatever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really have the much-valued historical overview from such a position?³³

Historicism is therefore condemned to eternal frustration. It turns out, however, that the truth about “how it actually was” can be somehow grasped thanks to that which has been falsified (tainted by the subjective experience of the individual); thanks to that which is invented and fictitious, although in a different way than historicist reconstruction.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, these rare moments of “dizziness” or “vertigo”, which undermine “the much-valued historical overview,” reveal another interesting dimension. It first becomes apparent in chapter three, soon after the account of major Le Strange’s strange habits. The narrator is walking high above the beach, on the verge of a cliff in whose upper part swallows have delved their nests:

I was thus standing on perforated ground, as it were, which might have given way at any moment. Nevertheless, I laid my head back as far as I could [...] fixed my eyes on the zenith, then lowered my gaze till it met the horizon, and drew it in across the water, to the narrow strip of beach some twenty yards below. As I tried to suppress the mounting sense of dizziness, breathing out and taking a step backwards, I thought I saw something of an odd, pallid colour move on the shoreline. I crouched down and, overcome by sudden panic, looked over the edge. A couple lay down there, in the bottom of the pit, as I thought: a man stretched full length over another body of which nothing was visible but legs, spread and angled. In the startled moment when that image went through me, which lasted an eternity, it seemed as if the man’s feet twitched like those of one just hanged. Now, though, he lay still, and the woman too was still and motionless.³⁴

In the above scene we are once more dealing with a situation quite characteristic of *The Rings of Saturn* – it is difficult to tell what actually happened and what was only imagined, what the narrator “thought he saw.” We are confronted with a vision of an intimate union of two beings – a brief encounter amidst the “night of time” and the horror of history, against whose dark background the loving embrace seems quite unreal

³³ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, op. cit., p. 125.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

and inconceivable. Later on in the novel, the narrator is confronted with the same vision, although this time the lovers appear in the guise of... a pair of ducks³⁵. One rainy night the traveler, unable to sleep, was standing in the open window of his hotel room: "Once, when the lightning again flashed across the sky, I looked down into the hotel garden far below me, and there, in the broad ditch that runs between the garden and the park, in the shelter of an overhanging willow, I saw a solitary mallard, motionless on the garish green surface of the water. This image emerged from the darkness for a fraction of a second."³⁶

In a novel dominated by melancholy, almost obsessive musings on the horrors of history, such "flashing visions" may easily go unnoticed. However, it is thanks to them that a way out of the nightmare of historical time is suggested – they speak of astonishing "affinities," intersections of individual destinies and encounters which take place as if beyond time. The narrator of the rings is often haunted by – as he puts it – "the ghosts of repetition": "my rational mind is [...] unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency."³⁷ In a state of this peculiar *déjà vu*³⁸, he feels as if he was being reunited with someone very close – in the abyss of time he suddenly finds his soul mate: "Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor?"³⁹ A good example of such "timeless affinities" is the story recounted by Sebald of the English poet Edward FitzGerald and his fascination with marquise de Sévigné – the famous 17th century author of thousands of letters written to her daughter.

Madame de Sévigné [...] became far more real to him than even his friends who were still alive. Time after time he read what she had written, quoted her in his own letters, continuously added to the materials he was assembling for a Sévigné dictionary which would not only provide commentary on all her correspondents and all the persons and places referred to in their exchanges but would also offer a key of sorts to the way in which she had cultivated and developed the art of writing.⁴⁰

As I have already mentioned, Sebald – unlike Browne or even Benjamin – does not directly express faith in Salvation. However, the *idea* of salvation as an incomprehensible,

³⁵ In the English translation the pair has been erroneously substituted with "a solitary mallard." The German original is as follows: "Einmal, als wieder ein Blitz über den Himmel fuhr, blickte ich hinab in den weit unter mir liegenden Garten des Hotels und sah dort, in dem breiten Graben, der den Garten vom Park trennt, im Schutz der niederhängenden Zweige einer Trauerweide *ein Entenpaar*, reglos auf der von grasgrüner Grütze ganz und gar überzogenen Fläche des Wassers." (W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, Frankfurt a. M.: Eichborn 1995, p. 114. Emphasis added.) *Entenpaar* clearly indicates that we are dealing with "a pair" of birds. This may seem an insignificant deviation from the original, but in fact it is quite important to my reading of Sebald's novel.

³⁶ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, op. cit., p. 89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

³⁸ Interestingly enough, it is this state that is accompanied by the most intense feeling of dizziness (*Schwindel*): "The physical sensation closest to this feeling of repetition [...] is that of a peculiar numbness brought on by a heavy loss of blood, often resulting in a temporary inability to think, to speak or to move one's limbs, as though, without being aware of it, one had suffered a stroke." (*Ibid.*, p. 187.)

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

soothing fiction is – so to speak – the gravitational center around which *The Rings of Saturn* revolve. It is symbolized by “the sarcophagus of St Sebolt” which represents “the entire order of salvation” and is “the harbinger of time when the tears will be wiped from our eyes and there will be no more grief, or pain, or weeping and wailing.”⁴¹ From the point of view of orthodoxy, Salvation is accomplished by – among other things – the communion of saints. The forms of communion presented in *The Rings of Saturn* – for example that between FitzGerald and marquise de Sévigné – are devoid of the metaphysical dimension. Rather, they serve as a model for a particular way of experiencing history – different from that which “scientific” historicism accepts as the only legitimate one. FitzGerald therefore represents all those whose way “of doing history” – as Nietzsche puts – “stands in the service of life” and “should never be able to [...] become pure science.” “[O]nly then, through the power of using the past for living and making history again out of what has happened, does a person first become a person.”⁴² This is precisely Sebald’s aim in *The Rings of Saturn* – to make history again out of what has happened. In order to succeed, however, he must remain faithful to that which “pure science” would like see completely eradicated – he must put his trust in fiction. For it is only fiction – as Borges suggests in his short story „Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” – that constitutes an effective antidote to the spleen caused by historicism – to melancholy.

The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* devotes much space to a discussion of Borges’ story. It treats of a non-existent (fictitious) land of Uqbar “discovered” in a copy of one of the volumes of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* which – as we are told right at the beginning – “is a literal but delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1902.”⁴³ This is an interesting remark, for what may it possibly mean that an encyclopedia is delinquent? Does it mean that it is illegal (has been illegally copied)? Or perhaps – that it has been copied in a delinquent (neglectful) way? The adjective used by Borges is “morosa” – tardy, heavy, or perhaps we could say “uninspired” or simply “boring.” But again, how can an encyclopedia be uninspired or boring? After all, encyclopedias – as we are accustomed to think – are supposed to give an exhaustive account of facts, and nothing beyond that. An encyclopedia, just like historicism described by Benjamin, simply “musters a mass of data.” Saying that encyclopedias might be “morosa” suggests that some additional factor determines whether a given encyclopedia is good or not. In the case of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* that factor is the fiction that unexpectedly found its way into the *opus magnum*. But how does the fictitious land of Uqbar redeem the boring accumulation of facts? Uqbar is one of the countries in the world of Tlön where “complete idealism”⁴⁴ is the accepted norm.

Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlön, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing;

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 87-88.

⁴² F. Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, trans. Ian Johnston, available at: <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/nietzsche/history.htm>.

⁴³ J. L. Borges, *Labyrinths*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hronir* [...].⁴⁵

The “hronir” are objects “produced through suggestion, educed by hope.”⁴⁶ Is it possible then that at the bottom of his melancholy meditations on the “night of time” Sebald has concealed a brighter – though difficult to glimpse – vision of history as *hronir*? The horror of historicism is averted by constructed history which is the expression of human hope.

However, this optimistic conclusion – with which perhaps we would like to end the present discussion of *The Rings of Saturn* – rings false. After all, it is precisely the fiction and hope of progress that is subjected by Sebald to a devastating critique. The redemptive “affinities,” the rays of hope, emerge from the void and darkness only for a moment: eternity, as the description of the lovers on the beach suggests, “lasts” no longer than a split second and horror creeps in back again at the very moment of ecstasy. Characteristically, *The Rings of Saturn* do not end with the image of St. Sebolt’s sarcophagus and “the entire order of salvation,” but with the image of blotting out of all images: a black cloth thrown over mirrors and paintings at the homes of the dead. We can thus say nothing more about the redemptive power of fiction than what Robert Frost once said about the power of poetry – it offers “a momentary stay against confusion.”

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

LOITERING WITH INTENT: DAEMONIC AUTHOR AND SELF- INVENTING HEROES

And I collected some people and reshuffled them, and they all began to live in such a way as to make you laugh and cry... Some, it is true, worked better than others, but I got used to them. It would not do to delete them! They are not mere words – people.

E. Schwartz, *The Ordinary Miracle*

The convention of the unreliable narrator will never go stale. There are circumstances preventing the usual process of effacement of a literary device from taking place here. To put it quite simply, there are too many ways in which a narrator may be unreliable. There are the obvious positions which place narratological faithfulness to life under doubt, mostly having to do with the involvement of the narrator in the events s/he is trying to relate: emotional states, errors of judgment caused by a variety of reasons, from age to sanity of the storyteller, purposeful inventiveness, evil – or good – reasons for suppressing the truth, obsessions, fascinations, coyness, romantic naivety, mythomania. There are also infinite degrees and stages, with narrators ranging from flamboyant liars to hesitating fumbler. There may be a storyteller who at once realizes and bewails the regrettable gaps in his memory and uses these as an excuse to change his past into a more convenient story, as in John Barnes' *A Sense of an Ending*. The device may also be turned inside out, as in McEwan's *Endearing Love*, with the author doing his utmost to indicate unreliability of his narrator, only to finally prove that the narrator was reliable after all. There are also very subtle ways in which unreliability may slightly yet significantly color the events, to make it so very difficult to grasp quite exactly what has been changed and why and how to unchange it – as in the novel by Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent*.

In this novel Spark once again tries her hand at the metafictional game. There is the authoress and her work, splendidly free – all fiction, all inventiveness; and then there is life, right next to it, obligingly providing the necessary material: “I was finding it extraordinary how, throughout all the period I had been working on the novel... characters and situations, images and phrases that I absolutely needed for the book simply appeared as if from nowhere into my range of perception” (7). And yet life and fiction are not quite separate, the authoress tells us, in fact life twists itself fantastically into the folds of fiction

– or perhaps it is fiction that disturbingly overlaps with reality – in such a puzzling way that not only the reader, but the authoress herself is quite unable to unravel the knots that life and fiction tie between themselves. It seems to be the task of the reader to establish the precedence in this novel – would life have the last say, or would fiction prove to be the ultimate master? – an ironic task in a novel that mocks obsession with (social) precedence.

All the tensions in the plot of the novel are managed through the reversals of power. The reader is tantalized by watching the changing dominance of two players, Fleur and Sir Quentin (who sometimes uses the services of minor characters acting as his substitutes). First Fleur finds herself in the insecure and somewhat embarrassing position of being interviewed for a job, which she gets, becoming a secretary for the Autobiographical Association, run by Sir Quentin, her employer. The next move is Fleur's: she takes control over her job by revising the narratives of the Association members (hopelessly boring and rather illiterate), as well as getting friendly with the fabulous Lady Edwina, Sir Quentin's "ancient" mother. The changes she introduces into the narratives at first seem playful frolics of a young author, bursting with creativity, and she does not expect, it seems, her inventions to be accepted by the distinguished though void of all talent autobiographers. But a strange thing happens: all the members of AA (as we may call this weird society of increasingly unhinged and needy members) are delighted with them, with the single exception of the person whose narrative has been tempered with, and thus the "real author" is maneuvered into accepting the changes by the ghost author, who is actually secretly aspiring for a more prominent position of the Author. Weirdly, Fleur seems to guess some facts – her inventions being the hidden essence of truth that the "author" of the given autobiography meant to suppress. Yet, she plainly does not mean to uncover the truth, she only means to make the narratives "expertly worse" (18), perhaps more amusing. The truth is a by-product of her creativity, unwanted by Fleur. The value of facts is thus made rather unstable, not to say insignificant. As it turns out, Fleur's embellishments of the narratives aid Sir Quentin in his task of collecting dangerous information about members of his association. He intends to use the manuscripts for his peculiar brand of blackmail: making the members of the association live out whatever Sir Quentin invents for them, thus taking full control over their lives – both past and present.

It appears that Fleur loses her control over the situation even while she seems to enjoy it, and this is confirmed when Sir Quentin takes over the meetings and narrative composition himself and when Dottie, Fleur's friend and the wife of her lover, becomes part of the Association. Cut off from the actual influence over the "lives" (in both meanings of the word) of the members, Fleur gets back her power through her own narrative structure in her novel, for which she even manages to get a publisher. But the balance of power will tilt again with Dottie who becomes a kind of double agent in the novel, passing information about Sir Quentin to Fleur and about Fleur to Sir Quentin. When this sinister leader of the autobiographers learns about the novel, Fleur seems to once more lose the power: her manuscript is stolen and, bribed by Sir Quentin, her publisher refuses to go through with the publication. Things get really steamy at this point, as Sir Quentin not only orchestrates the physical theft of the manuscript, but begins to steal ideas and actual phrases from it. Unwittingly, he gets himself enmeshed in the foils of fictionality, and that is how Fleur gets the upper hand again. First she steals back the manuscript, with a surplus,

achieved through “taking hostage” the unfinished biographies. The surplus is quickly lost, however, when another burglary is organized by Sir Quentin, yet she manages to regain it when Lady Edwina passes on to her incriminating pages from her son’s diary. Finally, Fleur consummates her advantage by threatening Sir Quentin and achieves the complete power over him when he dies in an accident (just as a character he resembles from *Warrender Chase*). What’s more, Fleur’s novel is published by a distinguished publishing firm to a chorus of ecstatic reviews. The authoress wins over the would-be author who dared to cross swords with her.

And while the reader applauds Fleur’s fortune, there is a slight feeling of uneasiness: something seems to be amiss when Fleur unhesitatingly uses Sir Quentin’s own methods to get an advantage over him. There is something rather sinister about her, too: she repeatedly poses as the carefree author disposing of her character’s fates without a second thought, as if unaware that she too may be perceived as a character by someone on a higher level (reader’s level) – and, of course, this is what writing of an autobiography is all about: placing the author into the position of a character, to be judged (and manipulated) by the reader. Perhaps this is something that other characters object to in her novel – the heartlessness, the carelessness? She admits that at the Autobiographical Association she “was thought rather mad, if not evil” (2).

Fleur’s dispute with Dottie over *Warrender Chase* is at the very heart of the novel – the question of whether fiction is just that – fiction, a lighthearted invention of amusing characters and events, or something much more serious, something that may influence reality and convey ideas of good and evil that may disturb the balance between these forces in the ordinary life of the ordinary people, as well as in the life of the author. Dottie seems troubled by the fact that Fleur takes her fiction lightheartedly (or, as she says several times herself, heartlessly), she also resents the fact that Fleur’s book does not tell the reader clearly how to understand her characters:

It was at this point Dottie said, “I don’t know what you’re getting at. Is *Warrender Chase* a hero or is he not?”

“He is,” I said.

“Then Marjorie is evil.”

“How can you say that? Marjorie is fiction, she doesn’t exist.”

“Marjorie is a personification of evil.”

“What is a personification?” I said. “Marjorie is only words.”

“Readers like to know where they stand. In in this novel they don’t.”

(48)

Of course, the reader is on Fleur’s side in this argument. She as the author must have the artistic freedom not to be obviously didactic in her fictional exploits, and to develop complex characters whose motives are difficult to understand. That is how the good fiction is made. And yet, Fleur seems to be missing the real purport of Dottie’s words. Characters are personifications of ideas as well as words: if they are skillfully shaped, they will have a psychological truth about them that will be interpreted by the readers. And though the readers must be ready to do their work themselves without the

author telling them how to read the novel, the text does create a certain truth that has a relationship with reality, whether or not the author is ready to recognize this. In fact, every author's secret desire is to make fiction matter, to make reality conform to its pattern, to awaken in the reader the feeling of wonder. Yet, Fleur seems quite often to be saying that her creativity's only purpose is to give pleasure to herself, with the by-effect of providing entertainment for others:

I wasn't writing poetry and prose so that the reader would think me a nice person, but in order that my sets of words should convey ideas of truth and wonder, as indeed they did to myself as I was composing them. I see no reason to keep silent about my enjoyment of the sound of my own voice as I work. I am sparing no relevant facts. Now I treated the story of Warrender Chase with a light and heartless hand, as is my way when I have to give a perfectly serious account of things. No matter what is described it seems to me a sort of hypocrisy for a writer to pretend to be undergoing tragic experiences when obviously one is sitting in relative comfort with a pen and paper before a typewriter. I enjoyed myself (...)

(54)

What is happening here seems to be a case of self-contradiction. The whole story is about fiction influencing life, while the author is at pains to make us disbelieve that this is possible. But at the same time, something more subtle is taking place. Fleur is as well as admitting her own heartlessness, as her most essential trait: to be unemotional and detached, not to care about others is the way she is when she is at her most earnest. Thus, the reader gets a quick glimpse of some rather unpleasant truth – that the members of the Autobiographical Associations, the hopeless cranks, for whom we are not even allowed to feel sorry, were in fact right about Fleur when they thought her evil.

The evil core of her character is also the very source of her art. Fleur calls it a daemon, playfully, once again giving us a glimpse of truth through her careless games of words: "I was aware of a daemon inside me that rejoiced in seeing people as they were, and not only that, but more than ever as they were, and more, and more" (2). This daemon is at work when she starts revising the biographies, as her changes invariably seem to make some character within the narrative appear evil. Fleur's daemon makes her actually enjoy situations that would be painful for a more ordinary person – situations in which people act unnaturally, betray their littleness, their vileness, the repulsive qualities that normally they try to suppress – situations that reveal evil in people. This is something that Fleur shares with Sir Quentin, who also tries to make his friends reveal something evil within themselves in order to gain control over them. What Fleur is wishing for is seeing more than the truth of someone's character. She desires to see people more themselves than they in fact are – she is seeking a poetic concentration of the character for the purposes of her creative work. What is strange, is that the characters themselves seem to actively engage in making themselves attractive ("as they were, and not only that, but more than ever as they were, and more, and more"), as if they were preparing themselves for the process of being written out.

Let us first look at Sir Quentin's awful housekeeper who is in love with him, Mrs. Beryl Tims. During Fleur's first visit to Sir Quentin's house, Beryl enters the room, goes to the window and takes into her arms a bowl of withered roses, which she next carries out of the room. She also makes a comment to herself ("They're dead") that is perfectly engineered to get Fleur's attention. She will be characterized by Fleur as the English Rose, hypocritical, self-engrossed, snobbish in a wrong way, and horribly clichéd. Her little stunt with the bowl of roses seems to be contrived on purpose – it is a perfectly poetic concentration of her character as Fleur will perceive it – as if Beryl was making sure that Fleur gets the right words to describe her. And to make double sure, Beryl has a lipstick named "The English Rose", which information she conveniently supplies to Fleur.

Other characters seem also at pains to make the proper impression on Fleur. Her publisher is called Revisson Doe, and, fittingly, he is very eager to revise her as yet unwritten novels. Dottie – the other English Rose of the narrative – is introduced by Fleur first as "the terrible wife of my lover", then through her narrow and rather self-righteous Catholicism ("I will pray for you" phrase makes one's flesh creep), then through her knitting (the perfect housewife, making herself useful even while visiting friends). Conveniently, she also uses a perfume called "The English Rose" – as if to make sure that Fleur files her under the proper heading. And, it does make the impression on the writer's mind: "this both repelled me and gave me happy comfort as confirming a character forming in my own mind" (16).

Of course these characters should not be treated as such by Fleur, because they are on her own narrative level. But they are, and that is also Fleur's daemon's doing. While she is waiting to meet for the first time the members of the Autobiographic Association, Fleur admits:

For years I had been working up to my novel *Warrender Chase* and had become accustomed to first fixing a fictional presence in my mind's eye, then adding a history to it. In the case of Sir Quentin's guests the histories had been presented before the physical characters had appeared (...) I had ... read the first chapters of their pathetic memoirs, and through typing them out and emphatically touching them up I think I had begun to consider them inventions of my own, based on the original inventions of Sir Quentin."

(21)

She treats them as characters because they come to be known to her through text, which she adapts for her own amusement. However, once the actual people appear, they do not conform to their textual portraits, and this troubles Fleur. Did she get things wrong? Now she begins to rewrite the characters once more (this time, for our benefit), making sure they conform to her version. Maisie Young represents the biggest problem, as she is the only personage out of the Association members that Fleur is attracted to. Fleur would wish to present Maisie as an attractive young girl injured in a riding accident and holding the straps of her bag threaded through her fingers as horse-reins. But Maisie herself makes sure that the image from her memoir is not lost, by saying emphatically something about the mysterious "universal phenomena" too great to be investigated by the mortals (25).

Thus she insists on presenting herself as a spiritually befuddled person in love with obscure thoughts “on the Cosmos and how Being is Becoming” (23). In fact, she is by far too young to be writing a memoir, as her name usefully indicates. Fleur solves the problem by nonchalantly stating that Maisie was a substantial character precisely because she represented a paradox, a contradiction (25). This proves that she has accepted Maisie’s contribution into the creation of her own image, just like she did with Dottie and Beryl Tims. More examples of this process of self-creation of characters may be easily found in the novel.

But let us return to Fleur’s daemon by noting that the crisis of the plot – Sir Quentin’s involvement with Fleur’s manuscript – is, in fact, her own fault. Some evil imp causes her to introduce Dottie, her friend and thus in possession of privileged information on both her private life and her artistic work, to Autobiographical Association, where her secrets are soon out. Dottie is Fleur’s present to Sir Quentin, her own live “autobiography” that he will, of course, temper with. It is inexplicable that Fleur actually proposes Dottie to write an autobiography, when she already suspects that Sir Quentin is up to no good and has no illusions about the literary worth of the narratives produced by the members. It seems Fleur does this strange move in order to rid herself of Dottie and concentrate on her artistic work (“my best brains”, “the sweetest part of my mind and the rarest part of my imagination” (38)). However, the daemon seems to know what he is doing: when Sir Quentin tries to take advantage of the connection between Dottie and Fleur, he falls deeper and deeper into her net of invention, enabling Fleur to manipulate him as if he was her character. The resemblance between Sir Quentin and Warrender Chase seems to be there from the start, inexplicable as it seems even to Fleur. When she tries to convince her readers that “Warrender Chase never existed, he is only some hundreds of words, some punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, marks on the page,” (56) she is revealing herself to be a substantial character, based on contradiction, since her whole novel (autobiography) is about the real life of Warrender Chase.

Thus, the unreliability of Fleur Talbot, the authoress who looks back at her youth when she began to be a writer, is of a very peculiar kind. It will not do to suspect everything she says, or try to undermine any of her statements and read the novel against the grain. Such reading is always enjoyable, but in this particular case it does not change much. We do not suspect Fleur of telling us deliberate lies, or of beautifying her past either consciously or subconsciously, we do not see her as obsessed or deranged. In fact, the texture of the narrative is such that it seems Fleur is not really concerned with either being true to facts, or being untrue to them – it seems simply irrelevant. Her unreliability is in the nature of her character, that is, in its most essential truth – that she is an authoress, a writer who “is a myth-maker, and the wonder of the art resides in the endless different ways of telling a story, and the methods are mythological by nature” (95).

Myth is at the very heart of her art – when Sir Quentin begins to use the pattern of her novel for his own sinister plans, she accuses him of stealing her magic, without which the novel is nothing. Her understanding of her creative process as “instinctive, the sum of my whole experience of others and of my own potential self” (13) reflects her vision of artist as consisting of several selves – which include the people one meets in the course of one’s life. The myth of the novel is the magic extracted out of those characters – real and unreal. And if a character dares to make use of this dangerous magic, it cannot go

unpunished. Fleur succeeds in portraying Sir Quentin as an evil manipulator and plagiarizer, making the reader side with her both in the creative pursuit behind the novel within a novel, and in her fight against the peculiar oppression of Sir Quentin. Yet, Sir Quentin is in a way Fleur's unwitting victim. His death – also conveniently written into the pattern of her novel that he tries to appropriate – sets Fleur free to publish her book, which most of the people who happened to read it believe evil. Of course, Sir Quentin is far from being an innocent lamb led to the slaughter. The sublime unreliability of Fleur as a narrator does not invert the character of her distinguished opponent, as one would expect. It “only” inverts Fleur's own role in the events, minimizing her actual power over the characters in the novel. Those characters are a part of her, and Fleur's unreliability lies in the fact that she is unable to differentiate between these selves, and in her experience of evil she is unable to perceive herself as its possible source.

Interestingly, Muriel Spark's art has been characterized as walking “a fine line... between a magician's fraudulence and his magic – where nothing is entirely what it seems or entirely other than what it seems.”¹ That Fleur's character may in fact be at least partially autobiographical is one of the fundamental assumptions of the novel, as she seems to share quite a number of features with her creator. Fleur's artistic methods seem akin to what Spark described as her own: “I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim that they are fiction out of which a kind of truth emerges. And I keep in my mind specifically that what I am writing is fiction because I am interested in truth – absolute truth – and I don't pretend that what I am writing is more than an imaginative extension of the truth – something inventive.”² Yet, for the purposes of this essay, it is essential to distinguish, difficult as it is, between the real author beyond the frame of the novel and the projected author within it, with the great insolence of youth and real talent on her side, posing as a mixture of Cassandra, Joan of Arc and St. Teresa. A luminous creature, who goes on her way rejoicing, inventing and taking freely from life whatever comes her way – a phrase, an image, a character.

As already mentioned earlier, *Loitering with Intent* is one of those novels in which levels of discourse interpenetrate. There is a proliferation of biographies in the novel, each vying for supremacy: it is an autobiography of Fleur Talbot, who tells the story of the Autobiographical Association created for the express purpose of writing autobiographies by distinguished people who get their inspiration from the autobiography of John Henry Cardinal Newman, while Fleur herself is inspired by the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini. There are also other texts that create disturbances within the changing hierarchies of biographical texts – this is a novel about Fleur Talbot's first novel (*Warrender Chase*) and beginnings of the second (*All Souls' Day*) and third (*The English Rose*), a story of the artist in the making whose art has an uncanny relationship with life. But where exactly is life? Everything is trickily textual, even though the very essence of biographical writing is to create a text resembling the past events of one's life. Spark's novel is for the largest part a story of characters conceived on the second level of fictionality – in the novel within

¹ R. Eder, “Getting Away With Murder”, *New York Times Book Review*, 3.11.2001.

² F. Kermode, “The House of Fiction: Interview with Seven English Novelists”, *Partisan Review*, 30 (Spring 1963), p. 80.

our novel – who turn up on the first level – within Fleur’s own life, which is recounted as her autobiography. It seems Fleur herself is unable to say how much of her own life was put into her novel, and how much her novel was put into her life.

There seems to be a resemblance with a novel by Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. It is also an attempted biography, like Fleur’s book, and in some interpretations it even appears as an autobiography (written by Sebastian Knight as if from beyond the grave, using the proxy of his half-brother who is the apparent author of the text). Both novels are concerned with the aspect of the REAL – what is real and what is fictional – and how may we distinguish one from the other – a hopeless task, as it appears, because while the real may be glimpsed through the fictional, as if in spite of the fictionality, it always wears such deliberate disguise, such artful stylization, that one is unable to make out the precise moment when the breakthrough appears. Both novels are a tangle of textual hierarchies – the characters from Sebastian’s fictions keep appearing on another level, in the would-be life that V., his biographer, is describing, with a curious effect: it seems, in one sense, that V. is running into the people who inspired Sebastian and on whom he based his fictional creatures, and in another sense we cannot get rid of the suspicion that the characters are trying to somehow influence the life of their creator. The same tangling of levels appears in *Loitering with Intent*, where we keep having an impression that the exceptional vitality of Fleur’s imagination is animating her life, while the common sense says that there is a more reasonable explanation of the overlaps between her novel and her experience, namely that she is transferring what she sees and hears into her fictions, as writers always do. Yet, she insists that her fictions come first, even before the curious situations arise in her life, and even though as we have established, our narrator is unreliable, there is something too alluring in this view of imagination’s primacy over reality to simply dismiss it.

There is yet another explanation of the interpenetration of levels. Time and again while reporting the supposedly “real” events of her life, especially while meeting interestingly horrible people, Fleur keeps wishing to get away so that she could be “chewing over ...[a] character in [her] mind” (9). This may be read as an admission of her active on-going reworking of reality to such an extent that – after all these years – there is no actual reality left over in her memory. What we get is a creative reworking of something that was possibly the source of her earlier creative exploits.

This raises another question: how well does Fleur remember her past? Even though the actual time of narration is years after the events, which means that at least some information must be lost, Fleur admits to forgetting surprisingly little. She keeps quoting the actual phrases, claiming to remember them word for word, thanks to her amazing auditory memory: “My ears have a good memory. If I recall certain encounters of the past at all, or am reminded perhaps by old letters that they happened, back come flooding the aural images first and the visual second” (8). This, of course, confirms that she is a true artist of the language: it is words, not images, that are the building blocks of her world. She treats the reality “poetically” – for instance, she quotes Sir Quentin’s list of Autobiographical Association members as a kind of a poem. And it is so peculiar that it is, in fact, a poem in itself, written in the paradigm of “This is the house that Jack has built” nursery rhyme – it represents a skeleton of connections between various distinguished personages, a select social network of 1949 vintage:

Major-General Sir George C. Beverley, Bt. C.B.E., D.S.O., formerly in that “crack” regiment of the “Blues” and now a successful, a very successful businessman in the City and on the Continent. General Sir George is a cousin of that fascinating, that infinitely fascinating hostess, Lady Bernice “Bucks” Gilbert, widow of the former charge d’affaires in San Salvador, Sir Alfred Gilbert, K.C.M.G., C.B.E. (1919) whose portrait, executed by that famous, that illustrious, portrait painter Sir Ames Baldwin, K.B.E., hangs in the magnificent North Dining Room of Landers Place, Bedfordshire, one of the family properties of Sir Alfred’s mother, the late incomparable Comtesse Marie-Louise Torri-Gil, friend of H.M. King Zog of Albania and of Mrs. Wilks, who as a debutante in St. Petersburg was a friend of Sir Q., the present writer, and daughter of a Captain of the Horse at the Court of late Czar before her marriage to a British Officer, Lieutenant Wilks.

(10)

Beyond the gibberish of the abbreviated titles there is a kind of involuted structure in this “poem”, a certain repetition, an inner rhythm, all resembling the poem that Fleur wrote herself and quotes as one of her favorite:

This is the pain that sea anemones bear
in the fear of aberration but willfully
aspiring to respire in another,
more difficult way, and turning
flower into animal interminably.

(32)

This is puzzling because Fleur would never want to admit that there is any kind of connection between her and Sir Quentin. She claims that he plagiarizes her style, yet his “poem” is written much earlier than Fleur met him. So, a curious process is at work: Sir Quentin may as well claim that Fleur plagiarizes him when she writes her own strange poem, using the pattern of his myth for a skeleton of her anemone poem. And, interestingly, the poem is about a plant that is in reality something else besides a plant: an animal. Both Fleur and Sir Quentin are such hybrid creatures: they feel the pain of transition, combining alluring beauty, a daring aspiration with a dangerous predatory nature, drawing others towards them to feed on them – as sea anemones do – and as authors and manipulators do as well.

Creative pursuit takes a lot of concentration because Fleur “conceives everything poetically” – meaning that her output is stylized, restructured, concentrated – as in poetry. Besides, there are complex literary connections within her narrative that also indicate enhanced stylization. The narrative starts, just as *Great Expectations*, in the graveyard. A fitting place to begin an autobiography, though unlike Pip, Fleur does not sit on the grave of her ancestors, but on some alien tombstone, where she is writing a poem and is approached by a policeman instead of Pip’s convict. There is something at once ecclesiastical (“all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” – poetry and death in close embrace), and

ironic about this situation (policeman vs. escaped prisoner), if the reader can appreciate it. After all, *Great Expectations* may be called Pip's autobiography, a context consistent with our text. Unlike Pip's convict, Fleur's policeman is not at all intimidating, in fact shy; he also refuses a meal instead of requiring it (as Magwitch does, forcing Pip to commit his first crime). What seems to be at work here is a deliberate reworking of Dickens' pattern. The literarity of the beginning of Spark's novel suggests a peculiar relationship with reality, which is in no way unequivocal, but rather very tangled: it is a reality retextured and recontextualized, to an extent of being hardly recognizable.

As usual with Spark, the reader has to deal with a temporal displacement, as the chronology of the novel is far from being straight-forward. The time of the scene that opens the narrative is after nearly all the action of the novel, or at least after the main crisis of the novel. It has a privileged status, as it is recalled several times, and it seems to be the source for the title of the novel. Fleur is writing poetry at a forsaken grave, loitering with intent, which is, apparently, a sort of a crime. But the policeman is too shy to charge her with it, he only explains what it might be called, thus giving the shape to Fleur's entire autobiography. Thus, being an authoress is a crime that goes unpunished. The narrative is an elaborate flashback, however some aspects from the first scene tend to color our impressions of the following, and in actuality preceding, episodes. For instance, we are told that Fleur's landlord, Mr. Alexander, is avoided by Fleur because he tries to pressure her into taking a more expensive room. This, in fact, is a direct result of all the comings and goings to her little room that take place in the course of action: Dottie's repeated and sometimes unwarranted visits, Leslie's sporadic appearances, spectacular apparitions of ancient and striking Lady Edwina, Maisy's strange and confused visits, not to mention Fleur's semi-boyfriends, Solly and Wally. However, even while all these events are being described, we keep waiting for Mr. Alexander to burst with indignation and demand Fleur to move out – we subconsciously assume that she is in trouble from the start, forgetting what is the cause and what is the effect.

As Joan Leonard writes in her essay on *Loitering with Intent*, “fiction for Spark both discloses and creates, both makes and remakes reality”.³ In such conditions, trying to understand what is the cause and what is the effect – what took place earlier and what later, which events and characters had a precedence, either in temporal sense or in their purport on Fleur's mind (or, perhaps, on the minds of others) is the key purpose with which the reader is charged.

Fleur is, of course, a Catholic, so she must realize how her status of an authoress mirrors (or, perhaps, it would be better to say rivals) God's. As a believer she must also realize how her “professional” pride makes her resemble God's rebellious Angel, Lucifer, the luminous being that choose his own path and became God's evil opponent. Fleur's faith is contrasted with Dottie's (who is a practicing Catholic addicted to rites and conventions of the church, as well as to some of its clichés – the overused verses from the Bible, such as “pride comes before fall” (16)). However, while we see pretty well – and detest – Dottie's version of Christianity, we know very little about Fleur's faith. We guess that it does

³ J. Leonard, “‘Loitering with Intent’: Muriel Spark's Parabolic Technique”, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 1985, Vol. 18, Is. 1, p. 66.

not rely on petty rituals, and that it allows Fleur to live her life rejoicing (this is a constant refrain in the novel: “I went on my way rejoicing”, “how wonderful it feels to be an artist and a woman in the 20 century” (14)). It seems that Fleur’s faith and her art are somehow connected, and it is also apparent that there is a conflict, a paradox in this connection.

The very essence of the novel’s central issue, which deals both with the art of writing and faith in God, is contained in the quotation from the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* by Cardinal Newman:

... in isolating me from the objects which surrounded me, in confirming me in my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator...

(64)

Even though Fleur admits to have long loved this passage, she reacts violently against Maisie Young reading of it:

the whole Newman idea which up to now had thought enchanting took on a different aspect. I had always up to now had a particular liking for this passage, feeling a fierce conviction of its power and general application as a human ideal. But as Maisie uttered the words I felt a revulsion against an awful madness I then discerned in it. (...) I was glad of my strong hips and sound cage of ribs to save me from flying apart, so explosive were my thoughts. (...) “I think it awful,” I said, “to contemplate a world in which there are only two luminous and self-evident beings, your creator and yourself.”

(64)

Fleur does not really explain why this idea used to enchant her, but we may make a guess: there is a certain poetic quality in it, which is perhaps responsible for the impression of beautiful and ideal balance of pure and earnest faith that it produces. The awful madness that becomes apparent to Fleur when an inferior being in her understanding – a character – not only claims the same luminosity as the Creator, but also proclaims that this relationship is unique, closed to all other creatures. The egoistic exclusion of the rest of the world, demoting all others to the status of mere characters, which exist on the same level as “material phenomena” and are to be distrusted and dismissed with it, is something that horrifies Fleur. Yet... somehow she seems to falsify Newman’s idea. Newman’s passage proceeds to explain that “while I considered myself predestined to salvation, my mind did not dwell upon others, as fancying them simply passed over, nor predestined to eternal death. I only thought of the mercy to myself.”⁴ Thus, it is not that Newman sees himself as the only real being in the world besides God, but that he simply momentarily forgets about others in the intensity of his love for his Creator.

⁴ J.H. Card. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: Being a History of His Religious Opinions*, London, New York & Bombay: Longmans Green, 1902, p. 4.

Note also that in Newman's quote Creator is written with a capital "C", while in Fleur's retort to Maisie it is written with a lower case "c". Newman is talking about God, Fleur – about a creator, or perhaps the creator of Maisie – which would mean that she is talking about herself. And at this moment of truth she rejects the idea that the whole world consists of only two "real" beings – even though she can count herself as one of these luminously self-evident creatures.

However, at the same time the merry heartlessness with which Fleur creates her characters, makes them suffer and die or restores them to health and happiness, all the while enjoying the sound of her own voice (according to her own admission), is rooted in the conviction that these characters are only words, that they do not qualify to the status of self-evident and luminous God's creature. Fleur does not believe – quite rationally, we have to agree – that invented characters hope, scheme, feel, suffer. Simultaneously Fleur seems to confuse her characters with the real people around her (which are, of course, characters to us, which again proves her right in a way). And precisely this conviction of her luminosity and self-evidence at the cost of unreality of all others is the source of the evil in her character. As an artist, Fleur has to remain detached – and since being an artist is at the very core of her being, she treats all reality artistically (poetically) and thus fails as a human being. Perhaps, this is why the characters of her memoir are trying so hard to get her attention, inventing themselves – to prove that they are more than just "some hundreds of words, some punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, marks on the page" (56).

After the shock of Maisie's reading of Newman's passage, Fleur appears to purposefully force herself to see others as just as luminous as herself, though this comes with a definite effort (at seeing her former lover's new lover, Gray Mauser: "in came the self-evident and luminous little mess" (67)). But it is just a phase, it does not last. She keeps inventing others – imagining their reactions to certain situations and then making decisions based on those imagined reactions (as when she decides not to ask Wally for help with getting back her manuscript from Dottie). This does not mean that her imagined picture is wrong – but it does prove the primacy of imagination over reality. And since Fleur is also just a product of writer's imagination, the metaphysical anxiety stares into the reader's eyes: there is a way in which we too are only characters in God's book, and it is just possible that He may not be the ultimate God, but a god, an evil designer, merely one in the receding line of creators in the terrifying gallery of mirrors.

Spark's world is constructed out of the stuff of such anxiety, ambivalence and fudgy uneasiness. "In Spark's universe, the floors and ceilings are so thin that the patter of devils filters up and the patter of angels down, along with everyday leaks and squeaks."⁵ At the same time, all this is charged with a high joy of young and fearless creativity, telling the reader to rejoice, instead of fretting over the past or the future, playing freely with the ridiculous creatures created for his entertainment. It is one of the contradictions inherent in Spark's writing (which make her a substantial character) that where she seems to be having fun, critics insist on seeing her in the position of a Teacher:

⁵ R. Eder, "Getting Away With Murder" op. cit.

Part of her pedagogic intent was to show how the reading and writing of fiction might provide important lessons in how best to resist reduction and containment (...). But the broader perspective taken here is that she is a writer who not only addresses incisively and revealingly the *material* conditions of late modernity but also lays bare its *metaphysical* roots and fundamental assumptions... In doing so, she lays bare, uncannily, a sense of the way in which our contemporary metaphysics of materialism underpins not only a loss of embeddedness in the world but also an emptying out of the feeling of presence and self-presence.⁶

One cannot deny that *Loitering with Intent* is, despite its lightness, a metaphysical book about our particular relationship with reality and faith. It is also a book about the luminosity of art which makes the artist into a demonic presence and imagined characters – into self-evident REAL people who are capable of inventing themselves.

⁶ P. Waugh, “‘How She Trails Her Faithful and Lithe Cloud of Unknowing’: Keeping Muriel Spark’s Metaphysics Warm”, in: D. Herman, *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, JHU Press: 2010, p. 63-64.

SACRED POWER DRENCHED IN BLOOD

Politics is theology's younger sister. The justice which is guaranteed by the laws established by the government imitates the justice of God and its laws, recorded in holy scriptures. The voice of the people, which every couple of years rings out in contemporary democracies during the election period, echoes the voice of God, speaking to his people in whatever way He please (through the lips of the Saints, burning bushes, etc.). The secular system of justice is a pantomime of the Final Judgment, organized within a temporal framework and taken in earnest. Even the modern love of equality is only an epigone of the Christian idea that we are all equal in God's eyes; that our human condition is essentially the same. Jacob Taubes once observed that just "as there is no theology without political implication, [so] there is no political theory without theological presuppositions."¹

However, it is not often that we recognize the fact that whatever is sacred may function in politics in two possible ways. It may lead upwards, out of the "dirt of this earth" towards the spark of divinity shining in man; or to the contrary, it may climb down the hierarchy of existence from the impeccable absolute towards the human medium which by its very nature is flawed. These options may be defined as, respectively, heathen and Christian. On the one side there is man who becomes a mortal God, on the other – God who becomes a mortal man. Shakespeare demonstrated the first option in *Julius Caesar*, and the second – in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*. In this essay I would like to discuss these two perspectives on how the *sacrum* functions in the *profanum* of everyday politics.

I

What is the basis of the intricate relationship between politics and theology? It seems that it is the longing of every government for self-justification. Every political order claims that it alone embodies justice. It refuses to see itself as only one among many possibilities; it seeks to monopolize justice or at the very least promises to apply it in the most effective way. In other words, it is "theologically motivated" – it wishes to see itself as "sanctified", uplifted to the sacred altar of justice. What is more, this need for sanctification characterizes all systems – including tyrannical ones. Even the bloodiest despot still tries to somehow justify his title to power.

¹ J. Taubes, "Theology and Political Theory", in: idem, *From Cult to Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010, p. 223.

Yet this desire for self-justification contains a certain paradox. Presenting one's rule as the only legitimate one (or at least in some sense "the chosen one") implies that other political orders are possible. To argue that the edifice of a given political system has been erected on the best of foundations suggests at least that other systems are conceivable. In effect, the very gesture of the ruler, which is meant to convince his subjects that they must accept his power over them, persuades them that in fact they are not in any way forced to accept it. The moment the government tries to justify itself – and this quest for the "right to rule" is in the nature of all regimes – its subjects become aware of other possibilities – although, as the sovereign tries to convince them, those other options are much less perfect, perhaps even "sinful".

In reality this means that every political order, while creating its own logic of self-justification, also produces the logic of resentment and thus undermines itself. The rejection of a given political order is either a rejection of a principle on which it is based, or a rejection of the ruler who does not do justice to the values in the name of which he wields his power. Rebellion may therefore mean two things. First of all – and most frequently – it is caused by a change in the nature of the relationship between the ruler and his subjects. Subjects no longer recognize the imperative legitimizing the power of their ruler. This leads to the collision of two contrasting and irreconcilable visions of the world. Hence rebellion is also theologically motivated, and the war between divergent mandates is nothing but a conflict between gods, by definition insoluble. Secondly, rebellion may entail the rejection of specific actions of a given ruler. Its aim in such a case is not to reject the basic principle on which a given political order is based, but merely to get rid of the person currently in power. The first type of rebellion is revolutionary by nature because it rejects the world as it finds it and longs to build a new world on newly established rules. The second type is revolution in its original sense. The word comes from the Latin noun *revolutio* – a „return“, a backward motion; or perhaps it derives from *revolvere* – “to turn”, “to overturn”. In this case we are dealing with a return to one's beginnings; with an attempt to once more root the world in the old foundations with which – contrary to the sovereign's proclamations – it has lost touch. However, in both cases of “revolutionary action” we are dealing with a repetition of the same scheme. In one way or another it is the “man in power” who defines the standpoint of his “man in revolt”.

II

Let us see how it works in Shakespeare. In *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* the ruler is the eponymous king; the rebel is Henry Bolingbroke, injured by the king's unjust solution of his quarrel with Thomas Mowbray whom Bolingbroke, the king's cousin, accused of what today would be called corruption: embezzlement of the money intended for the wages of the king's soldiers. What is more, the Duke of Hereford (Bolingbroke) also suspects Mowbray of having murdered the Duke of Gloucester. Old John of Gaunt, Bolingbroke's father and Gloucester's brother, goes even further and presumes that king Richard himself is responsible for this death. He sees this as an effect of the bad company which, as he believes, the king has fallen into. Therefore he warns him in a decidedly Cassandra tone: “Thy death-bed is no lesser than thy land / Wherein thou liest in reputation sick; / And thou, too careless patient as thou art, / Commit'st thy anointed body to the cure /

Of those physicians that first wounded thee: / A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown, / Whose compass is no bigger than thy head; / And yet, incaged in so small a verge, / The waste is no whit lesser than thy land.”²

John of Gaunt addresses the king from the privileged position of his advanced age, indicating that although the king’s power is of divine origin, he cannot wield it in an arbitrary way. It is first and foremost an obligation, not a privilege. Its “absolute” mandate implies the necessity of staying within certain bounds. Richard must “mature” into his throne, so he may remain there proudly and securely. The King’s power as a continuation of God’s rule over world thus brings about paradoxical results. It binds the ruler more than his subjects. Resentment may justly arise every time the king in his practical actions proves to be beneath the dignity which brought him to the throne.

The true catalyst of Bolingbroke’s rebellion, however, is not the issue of Richard’s judgment of the quarrel with Mowbray (Bolingbroke is banished for six years, while Mowbray – forever), but the king’s takeover of John of Gaunt’s lands and property after his death.³ It is at this point that the tension becomes apparent between Richard’s supreme prerogative as a sovereign and the limitations he has to accept in order to legitimize his power. By unlawfully appropriating Bolingbroke’s patrimony the king turns against the sacred order in which his own power is grounded. Without being aware of it, he undermines the very laws which made him who he is. The Duke of York warns him of the dangerous consequences of such actions by saying: “Take Hereford’s rights away, and take from Time / His charters and his customary rights; / Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day; / Be not thyself; for how art thou a king / But by fair sequence and succession? / Now, afore God--God forbid I say true!-- / If you do wrongfully seize Hereford’s rights, / Call in the letters patent that he hath [...] / You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts / And prick my tender patience, to those thoughts / Which honour and allegiance cannot think.”⁴

A political rebellion is therefore an expression of opposition either to a particular form of legitimizing power, or to a particular person whose conduct proves him “below” his title to power.

III

While only the last case is presented in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, Shakespeare was able to represent both situations in *Julius Caesar*. Cassius rebels against Caesar for reasons similar to Bolingbroke’s in his rebellion against Richard. In his youth he was one of Caesar’s closest friends. He therefore – unlike others – knows (has seen with his own eyes) his weaknesses. He knows that the “prodigious grown”⁵ Caesar – who is revered by everyone as if he was a mortal god, the son of Jove himself – is only a human. He is now reminded of an event from his youth when he stood together with Caesar on the banks of

² W. Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King Richard II*, in: idem, *The Complete Works*. New York: Avenel & New Jersey: Gramercy Books 1975, p. 402 (Act II, Scene I).

³ The king is not unduly moved by the death of John. Saying his farewell to the deceased he expresses his grief in a rather economical way: “The ripest fruit first falls, and so doth he; / His time is spent, our pilgrimage must be” – ibid., p. 403 (Act II, Scene I).

⁴ Ibid., p. 403 (Act II, Scene I).

⁵ W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, in: idem, *The Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 818 (Act I, Scene III).

the stormy Tiber and Caesar asked: “Dar’st thou, Cassius, now / Leap in with me into this angry flood, / And swim to yonder point?”⁶ Even before Caesar ceased speaking Cassius was already in the water. A second later they were both fighting with the elements, striving to reach the point indicated by Caesar as their goal. Finally Caesar became exhausted and cried in dismay: “Help me, Cassius, or I sink!”⁷ Cassius then carried “upon his shoulder / [...] from the waves of Tiber / [...] the tired Caesar. And this man / Is now become a god, and Cassius is / A wretched creature and must bend his body / If Caesar carelessly but nod on him.”⁸ We learn from Cassius another story which “demythologizes” the divine Caesar: “He had a fever when he was in Spain, / And when the fit was on him I did mark / How he did shake. ‘Tis true, this god did shake; / His coward lips did from their color fly, / And that same eye whose bend doth awe the world / Did lose his luster. I did hear him groan. / Ay, and that tongue of his that bade the Romans / Mark him and write his speeches in their books, / Alas, it cried, ‘Give me some drink, Titinius,’ / As a sick girl. Ye gods! It doth amaze me / A man of such a feeble temper should / So get the start of the majestic world / And bear the palm alone.”⁹

Cassius knows about the God-Caesar’s embarrassingly human side. He knows that his greatness is underpinned by the most common weaknesses, that in the face of danger he trembles like any mortal does. Why then should Cassius recognize him as his lord, when he knows so well that Caesar in fact is no different than himself?

But can we really say that Cassius is no different than Caesar? Is the feeling of injustice that stems from this conviction the true reason of Cassius’ actions? Or would it be more accurate to say that this similarity reminds Cassius of the crucial difference between him and Caesar? Undeniably, Cassius is a man of great courage. His heart knows no fear. Yet at the same time he is extremely impulsive. His passions blind his reason, and the rage in him is stronger than the “cold” calculations of his mind. That is why he did not hesitate to jump into the tumultuous waves of the Tiber the moment Caesar challenged him. Yet the power of these passions at times makes Cassius yield to impulsive moodiness – he is often frustrated, unstable. Caesar, dealing with less intense emotions, tames them more effectively. He knows how to hide his weaknesses before the world, how to conceal his fear under a mask of impassivity. Even if Cassius’s soul is braver than Caesar’s, the latter can act out courage in a more convincing way. And Cassius realizes this. He cannot stand the thought that someone at once better and worse than him should be worshiped as God; someone who, when seized by fever in Spain, trembled with fear (“this god did shake”, says Cassius), who called for help “as a sick girl”. Cassius, an impulsive and militant man, cannot bear to live in a world in which someone as cowardly and effeminate is treated like a god.

Cassius’s motivation, though paradoxical and inwardly conflicted, is clear to us. The question is, however, why the courageous Cassius allies himself with the innocent Brutus, the paragon of virtue? He does this because, as Allan Bloom noted, only Brutus “could make the deed appear to the people to be good and just.”¹⁰ But why does Brutus decide

⁶ Ibid., p. 815 (Act I, Scene II).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ A. Bloom, *Shakespeare’s Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996, p. 93.

to confront Caesar? He chooses this course of action not because he considers Caesar unworthy of his honors. What motivates his actions is the conviction that the ruler of Rome has betrayed Roman ideals and instead of resting his power on patricians, has decided to earn favor with the mob. The mob, as Brutus knows, mistakes appearances for reality and beautiful gestures for true intentions. Brutus fears the effects of Caesar's sweeping triumph, as if anticipating Lord Acton's famous statement that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely: "But 'tis a common proof" – says Brutus at the beginning of Act II – "That lowliness is young ambition's ladder, / Whereto the climber-upward turns his face; / But when he once attains the upmost round, / He then unto the ladder turns his back, / Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees / By which he did ascend. So Caesar may; [...] / that what he is, augmented, / Would run to these and these extremities; / And therefore think him as a serpent's egg / Which hatch'd would as his kind grow mischievous, / And kill him in the shell."¹¹

What we see here is how the Roman principle of the legitimization of power turns against itself at the very moment of its fulfillment. As Allan Bloom accurately observes in his book on Shakespeare, "paradoxically, it is the greatest Roman of them all who destroyed the Republic which was the seedbed of great Romans. Out of the constant and all-absorbing competition for the rewards of citizenship [which was the nature of the Roman political system – J.T.] finally emerged a victor who could subdue all his opponents. This was the decisive moment in Roman history, the culmination of the Republic and the threshold of the Empire. The end once achieved, there was nothing else to be done."¹²

Caesar's triumph carries with it a threat of ending a certain epoch in the history of Rome and – at the same time – the possibility of beginning a new one. If the political world of the ancients can be described as torn between alternatives of the city, on the one hand, and empire on the other, here we find a synthesis of these elements. The city, whose sovereignty is self-evident, is the smallest imaginable society capable of autarky. Empire, on the other hand – an organism by definition self-sufficient – is the largest manageable society, i.e. a social order possessing a single sovereign. Rome, of course, had the ambitions of a city which was supposed to be capable of creating a world empire. Caesar, however, through his spectacular successes fulfilled these ambitions so completely that the contemporary political form of Rome was shaken in its foundations, dwarfed by the greatness of his triumphs. We may say therefore that he endeavored to build a certain form of political monotheism with himself as Jove incarnated. With Caesar's triumph there arose the threat that the city-empire's political structure would be significantly altered. To avoid having to submit to the man who became God, one had to kill him.

IV

Two basic conclusions follow from what we have just observed. Firstly, the manner in which power is legitimized determines the place of the "man in revolt". Secondly – and this has not yet been elucidated properly – every rebellion (like the power which it overthrows) must in one way or another justify itself. In other words, when a revolution takes

¹¹ W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, op. cit., p. 819 (Act II, Scene I).

¹² A. Bloom, op. cit., pp. 78-79.

place and rebels triumph, they must accomplish roughly the same feat as their overthrown sovereign: they must present to others the conclusive evidence of their claim to power. Thus the problem of legitimization ricochets, distorted in the revolutionary mirror. Why “distorted”? Because a successful revolution must justify not only its claims to power but also the very fact that it had a right to feel discontented under the former regime. Creating a new beginning – by adopting a new manner in which power is legitimized – must at the same time involve a refusal to create “newer new beginnings”. The rebels must justify their own right to revolt against a given ruler, while refusing such a right to all those who might object to their rule. That is the revolution’s impossible task of squaring the circle.

In the two plays we have discussed, it is perfectly clear how neither Bolingbroke, nor Cassius, nor Brutus is able to deal with the dynamics of their own revolutionary actions. Let us take a closer look at the two last examples. Can we say that Cassius and Brutus have accomplished their goal? Our first impulse is to say that they have – they have managed to kill Caesar. In reality, however, they fail – and in two ways.

Their first failure lies in the fact that seeking to free Rome from the looming figure of Caesar, who unexpectedly came to be treated as a god incarnate, they in fact doomed Rome to remain in Caesar’s shadow forever; destroying the body of Caesar, they created his immortal myth. Having died at the height of his glory, he became a true god and the assassination carried out by Cassius, Brutus and their companions turns out to be an act of political deicide. The daggers dripping with blood in the bloodstained hands of Caesar’s butchers were in fact instruments of his eternal glorification. It is therefore not without reason that Caesar spoke of himself as “the northern star, / Of whose true-fix’d and resting quality / There is no fellow in the firmament.”¹³ The sun of the world did not set but was extinguished at high noon. People are not likely to forget scenes at once so beautiful and so terrifying.

The second dimension of the failure of Brutus and Cassius is the fact that the rebellion is governed by the principles of Brutus, and not those of Cassius. That is why Caesar’s murderers let Mark Antony live. This will turn out to be their great mistake, which becomes clear as soon as Brutus and Mark Antony make their burial speeches over Caesar’s body. The first will give a sincere speech of an “honest revolutionary”, which – however – is quite unconvincing to the mob. The second speaker will seduce his listeners because he understands only too well that to the masses everything is in the name and substance means nothing.

Brutus makes this mistake because he is convinced that the murder he has committed is something other than it is in fact. “As he was ambitious, I slew him”¹⁴ – he says. He truly believes that the bloodshed had a sanctifying quality and that it may therefore become a foundation of the new order: “Stoop, Romans, stoop, / And let us bathe our hands in Caesar’s blood / Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords; / Then walk we forth, even to the marketplace, / And waving our red weapons o’er our heads, / Let’s all cry, ‘Peace, freedom, and liberty!’”¹⁵ However, this is not so. Blood is blood, a crime is a crime. Brutus

¹³ W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, op. cit., p. 825 (Act III, Scene I).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 828 (Act III, Scene II).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 826 (Act III, Scene I).

is an example of a revolutionary filled with “bad faith”. He becomes a revolutionary unaware of the burden which unavoidably goes with it. And though, as Albert Camus wrote, “every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being”, still “one day nostalgia takes up arms and assumes the responsibility of total guilt; in other words adopts murder and violence. The servile rebellions, the regicide revolutions, and the twentieth-century revolutions had thus, consciously, accepted a burden of guilt which increased in proportion to the degree of liberation they proposed to introduce.”¹⁶

Brutus did not want to accept this and therefore could not properly justify the new political order. Cassius on the other hand knew perfectly well that in the human world there is no justice which is not founded on crime; no truth which is not grounded in a lie; and no greatness which is not erected on lowly weaknesses. Cassius knew this because he used to know Caesar before he had become a mortal god. It is striking, however, that precisely this knowledge made Cassius an impotent revolutionary. He was someone who believed that it was just to put an end to the power of an insufferable autocrat, without believing in the new, just order. He simply could not bear the thought that the same Caesar, whom he had saved in his youth from the whirlpools of Tiber, now “doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus, and we petty men / Walk under his huge legs and peep about / To find ourselves dishonorable graves.”¹⁷ Cassius was moved by resentment which could not be rechanneled into any positive political program.

Describing the story of Caesar’s murder, Shakespeare with unmatched artistry portrays the human world as filled with unsolvable antinomies. Justice may be established only through unjust action. Political order may be founded (or reestablished) only through actions which this new order may neither substantiate nor justify. Or to express the same sentiment in a theological language: every political system, every form of government has its own “original sin”. “Violence” (not necessary physical) is inseparable from politics. Those rule who are able to “suspend” or bracket the current regulations of political life, thus crossing the boundaries of its official norms. The required quality, in other words, is the ability “to begin” – the beginning always stands outside of the order which it establishes. Politics is no more than an attempt to answer the question who and under what conditions may claim the right to begin. It is not a coincidence, as Hannah Arendt notes, that “in classical Greek, *archē* simply has two meanings, ‘beginning’ and ‘rule’, but earlier it indicated that he who begins is the natural leader of an enterprise that necessarily requires the *prattēin* of followers to be achieved.”¹⁸

V

Let us now return to *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* and take a closer look at the political takeover it describes. In the context of the preceding discussion we are at once forced to pose the following two questions: what makes Richard II different from Caesar and what distinguishes Cassius and Brutus from Bolingbroke?

¹⁶ A. Camus, *The Rebel*. London: Penguin Classics 2000, p. 79.

¹⁷ W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, op. cit., p. 815 (Act I, Scene II).

¹⁸ H. Arendt, “The Tradition of Political Thought”, in: eadem, *The Promise of Politics*. New York & Toronto: Schocken 2005, pp. 45-46.

We will begin with the first issue. Richard, unlike the greatest of Roman rulers, was not – as we would say today – a self-made man. The power he held was the result of a certain tradition. Thus, retaining the position of the sovereign depended on adhering to the tradition; on insuring that it remained alive. Richard, however, was unable to accomplish even this much, and used his power to usurp the estate of John of Gaunt, taking it away from the rightful heirs and using it to finance his war with Ireland. While Caesar flattered the Roman plebeians because he understood perfectly well what it takes to stay in power, Richard, abusing his power over loyal subjects, had no understanding of this matter. While Caesar earned his position and became a mortal god thanks to his victories, Richard was born a god – and because of this, as well as due to his own nature, he became a divine blunderer. Finally, while Caesar was immovable as a Northern star, Richard was characterized by instability. We can see it clearly in the scene of his return to England after the expedition against the Irish. First he makes a passionate speech, giving courage to his companions: “Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king; / The breath of worldly men cannot depose / The deputy elected by the Lord. / For every man that Bolingbroke hath press’d / To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown, / God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay / A glorious angel. Then, if angels fight, / Weak men must fall; for heaven still guards the right.”¹⁹ He expresses here the conviction that because the power of the earthly rulers is of divine origin, God will always support his viceroys. Richard seems to believe that in the final count fortune (to use a term borrowed from the political language of Machiavelli) will smile upon him. Very quickly he realizes, however, that this does not happen. And then the unstable nature of Richard becomes apparent: impetuous declarations give place to despair and melancholy. However, characteristically for him (and this aspect makes Richard a truly fascinating figure), swayed by these moods the king unexpectedly gains a surprising clarity of sight – he suddenly begins to perceive things as they really are. But though he still lacks political sense (which requires the ruler not to allow himself to be moved by emotions, as Caesar manages to do), he manifests an acute awareness of his existential position. Looking at his crown, he suddenly notices – not only as king, but first and foremost as a man – how uncertain his situation is: “for within the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king / Keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits, / Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp; / Allowing him a breath, a little scene, / To monarchize, be fear’d, and kill with looks; / Infusing him with self and vain conceit, / As if this flesh which walls about our life / Were brass impregnable; and, humour’d thus, / Comes at the last, and with a little pin / Bores through his castle wall, and farewell, king!”²⁰

Secular power turns out to be deceptive, unreal, as all people are in the same measure subjected to death. But here something else is at stake. Does the king speak about his fear of death only? Or do we also find in Richard’s soliloquy matters relating directly to his political situation? When he says that his crown is hollow, doesn’t he mean that his power is unfounded because it is cut off from its beginnings – the beginnings with which Richard never had and never could have had anything in common? Is he not equal to his

¹⁹ W. Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, op. cit., p. 409 (Act III, Scene II).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

subjects in the face of death precisely because just like all of them he is merely an epigone, a puppet in a play not of his own choosing? Someone else determined the beginning. As Richard says, “throw away respect, / Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty; / For you have but mistook me all this while. / I live with bread like you, feel want, / Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus, / How can you say to me I am a king?”²¹ And in fact they no longer can, for the very same reason why Cassius could not accept Caesar’s power: Richard, by displaying his despair and fear, becomes a god in whom it is no longer possible to believe – a god who trembles.

Does this mean, however, that Bolingbroke’s task becomes easier to accomplish? Does Richard’s failure make it easier for him to take over power and convince everyone that his actions were – as we would say today – “legal”? Of course not. Bolingbroke is also full of doubts. Although rebels against Richard’s decision, he cannot decide whether to be a Brutus or a Cassius. On the one hand he resembles the former: he is respected and his basic motivation is the desire to regain something rightly belongs to him. He neither openly denounces the king, nor strives to take his place – he merely wishes to bring back order in the kingdom. On the other hand, however, he is definitely a man of great pride and ambition. Just like Cassius cannot bear to see the “human” face of God-Caesar, so Bolingbroke is unable to bear the “human” mistakes and injustices of the man whom God had anointed. It is therefore difficult to believe that he was not motivated by the wish to usurp power – if not from the very beginning, then at least after a certain point.

Because he is torn between Brutus and Cassius, makes Bolingbroke a perfect usurper, even though he is not fully aware of his actions and their consequences. As Allan Bloom wrote, the newly chosen king Henry (Bolingbroke) “cannot bear to face the possibility that the sin of Cain, as Machiavelli teaches, may play a role in the establishment of earthly justice. In deposing Richard he was halfway to the realization that he was committing a crime but that such crimes are sometimes necessary for the common good. However, so strong is his faith or his fear of hellfire, he prefers to brand himself a guilty man and cripple his political sense and dedication rather than admit what his deed has shown.”²²

A new beginning is impossible without the old order coming to a definite end. Yet Henry can only make up his mind to imprison Richard. He is not willing to do that which is necessary, assuming that Richard’s actions in fact desecrated the holy power granted him by the heavens – he is not willing to bring his revolt to its conclusion and order Richard to be killed. He does not understand that if his own power is to be sacred, it needs to be drenched in blood. “If the old king was not a traitor, the new one must be a usurper.”²³

However, the architects of political upheavals quite often lose control over the course of events. Since Henry is not able to bring about a new beginning, the mercenary Exton wishes to do it for him: murdering Richard in his cell, he hopes to incur the new monarch’s favor. But Bolingbroke cannot accept the fact that the government of the God-man is necessarily that of a God-villain. Even though he is to a certain extent the author,

²¹ Ibid.

²² A. Bloom, “Richard II”, in: *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, ed. by J. Alvis and T.G. West, Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute 2000, p. 68.

²³ J. Kott, *Szekspir współczesny [Shakespeare, Our Contemporary]*, Warszawa 1965, p. 22.

the director of the whole “revolutionary” spectacle, the outcome arouses his disgust. At the very end of the play Henry utters the following words: “Lords, I protest, my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow: / Come, mourn with me for what I do lament. / And put on sullen black incontinent: / I’ll make a voyage to the Holy Land, / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand: / March sadly after; grace my mournings here, / In weeping after this untimely bier.”²⁴

VI

Hannah Arendt wrote: “It is in the very nature of a beginning to carry with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness. Not only is it not bound into a reliable chain of cause and effect, a chain in which each effect immediately turns into the cause for future developments, the beginning has, as it were, nothing whatsoever to hold on to; it is as though it came out of nowhere in either time or space.”²⁵ It seems to me that precisely this peculiar origin of the beginning implies that every time a political upheaval occurs there is also a correspondent and necessary upheaval in the theological sphere. Political revolutions are not so much about establishing a new government, as about establishing the *authority* of that new government. The problem is that the authority of that which is new cannot be based on custom or tradition. How then can the halo of *new* eternity be created? Once a break occurs in the texture of time, how can one ensure that from that moment on time will run its course smoothly, according to the newly established rules? In other words, how to make the current revolution resist all future ones?

“It is impossible” – seems to be Shakespeare’s answer.²⁶ The ambivalence that resides in every beginning established by man cannot be done away with. There is no return to the state of political innocence; but it is also impossible to escape from politics – unless into some new, hitherto unknown state of barbarism. There is always something sacred in politics, yet at the same time one can engage in it only by resorting to violence. The *sacrum* – in any form that it appears in this world – becomes desecrated, tainted, defiled. No power can ignore its own sacred character, but at the same time no new beginning is possible without the shedding of blood.

“But of course it is possible!” – cries the modern man in reply to the above question, unable to hide his annoyance that someone dared to doubt it. It was precisely in this epoch, which we usually denote by the name of “modernity”, that thinkers undertook to deal with the consequences of political “original sin”. Power was to be disenchanting, made to stand firmly on the ground. This was the purpose of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke or Jean Jacques Rousseau. In some sense this project ended with complete (perhaps even too complete) success. Secularization (a terribly overused word) means that any legitimization of power may be conducted only from below. It depends on the subjects, and not on God who is politely asked to leave: “You may, dear Lord, look into our souls, but stay away from our parliaments...”.

²⁴ W. Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King Richard II*, op. cit., p. 423 (Act V, Scene VI).

²⁵ H. Arendt, *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Classics 2006, p. 198.

²⁶ See P. Nowak, “Król Lear albo wojna pokoleń” [“King Lear or the War of Generations”], in: *Wojna pokoleń [The War of Generations]*, ed. P. Nowak. Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka 2006, p. 237.

In spite of this – i.e. despite the successful (as it may seem) “disenchanting” of the world – the connections between politics and religion are in no way severed. Establishing new authority, providing a new explanation of power required (and perhaps still requires) that the face of the hitherto unknown absolute be unveiled. As a result, even contemporary liberal democracy has its own version of secularized theology, although this seems to clash with the mythology of Enlightenment. I mean the theology in which the place of God the Creator has been usurped by the many-headed monster called “the people”. As Alexis de Toqueville wrote after his visit to the United States in the 1830s, “the people reign in the American political world like God over the universe. It is the cause and aim of all things, everything comes from them and everything is absorbed in them.”²⁷ This new deity now becomes the source of all just power and claims the right to rule over human souls. Its name is universality.

The contemporary political scene as it presents itself from the perspective offered by Shakespeare is striking in one other way. It turns out that the “original sins of establishment” of the pre-modern political systems were at once less and more terrible than the ones that we know from our times. Previously, whenever the sacred order was disturbed, it was in the name of *that* order. Modernity put man in the place of ancient gods, making him the creator of himself who independently, without anyone’s assistance “fashions” his own being. In consequence, even if the modern man rebels, it is only against human contrivances. If earlier in the name of justice one had to risk eternal damnation (hell or – in its heathen version – eternal dishonor of “evil” memory), one is now threatened only with physical death – the highest form of punishment Her Majesty History could devise.

VII

Politics and religion are connected by the question: “Whom should we worship?”. They are separated, however, by the different answers they provide to this question. The answer of religion is that of the flesh. For it is the flesh that demands to settle its accounts with the world. Reason may accept its limitations, but flesh – due to sicknesses, decomposition, weakness, the decay of old age – cannot come to terms with the world without outside assistance. Even if abstract reason could create an Absolute, it would never be a compassionate Absolute, concerned with human fate. The God, who may encountered on the paths of reason, is perfection itself, that is – a being in perfect agreement with itself. It feels no wants, it may not act or intervene into human affairs, nor can it love man. It may be at most the first and hence immobile mover of the universal machine, or its silent, unmovable foundation. It is because of the flesh that gods come to life and carry a human likeness. They promise they will help us come to terms with the world – as does the flesh which they spring from – but have not yet been able to keep any of those promises. That is at least how things are with the Christian God who has not yet come to earth for the second time to judge the quick and the dead.

The answer of politics to the question mentioned above is exactly the opposite, it is the answer of reason. It does not concern itself with bringing about a state of peculiar symmetry or equality between, on the one hand, different kinds of suffering we have

²⁷ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Vol. 1. London: Penguin Books 2003, p. 71.

to bear in this, and our moral expectations on the other. It strives to create the best possible (or perhaps merely bearable) conditions of everyday life. Reason (meaning the mind free from “carnal” passions) is by nature self-limiting – it may recognize the areas of its competence and limit the field of its activity. In politics it limits itself to the temporal world and has no wish to build a heaven on earth, but merely an order which man will be able to accept as just (even though it remains imperfect). The public sphere is – or was for the ancient Greeks – the space of reason. Whatever was crucial, whatever was basic had to be first of all brought to the light of day and then withstand the test of public scrutiny. That which was most important was at the same time that which people had in common (or rather people discovered together what was for them of the greatest importance). Truth demanded a disclosure – often described as ‘*aletheia*’ – it had to be uncovered, brought to the surface. That is why the ancient Greeks are “visual” – for them the important thing is that which may be seen by everyone at the *agora*. Not so in the case of religion, especially the Christian religion. For religion that which remains hidden is of the utmost importance, that which may not be brought out into public sphere but instead may be felt at the bottom of one’s heart: the living presence of Jesus Christ. And it is not reason but God’s grace which allows individuals to be sensitive to His presence.

In other words, the bended knees of the people provide the link between theology and politics. For a man to know whom to worship is an issue as important as that of freedom. Perhaps – as Dostoyevsky argued – even more important. Some fall to their knees before that which is visible, trying at the same time to detect in this tangible imperfection signs of divinity. Others worship the Perfection which cannot be touched or seen, and thus must be perceived *by faith* only. The tangled ties between politics and theology are symbolically represented by these two figures – of the man who becomes God, and of God who is incarnated in man; of Julius Caesar and King Richard II. Shakespeare depicted with unparalleled genius all the twists and turns which make up this Gordian Knot. And if there is something to be learnt here, perhaps it is not to attempt to cut through this knot too hastily, and at the same time –not to pretend that we can easily untie it.

KAROL IRZYKOWSKI'S LACANIAN READING OF FREUD

A German philologist by training, known mostly as a literary and film critic, but also a novelist and playwright, Karol Irzykowski (1873-1944) was not a philosopher in the traditional sense of the word. Over the last few years, however, critics have more and more often referred to him in philosophical context, finding his rich legacy difficult to grasp from the perspective of literary criticism or even cultural studies.¹

One of the many threads that can be traced in Irzykowski's thought seems particularly important today. No one seems to remember nowadays that before World War I Irzykowski was the only non-physician who followed with interest the emergence of psychoanalysis. In 1912 – before the famous speech, *Die Frage der Laienanalyse*, in which Freud clearly states that medical education is neither necessary nor sufficient for the practice of psychoanalysis – Irzykowski (“a layman”) attended the second Congress of Polish neurologists, psychiatrists and psychologists in Cracow, and raised important questions about the relationship between psychoanalysis and culture – or interpretation in particular. Irzykowski wrote a report of the congress proceedings for his fellow writers and critics, which he then published in the *Nowa Reforma*² magazine. Later, at the beginning of 1913, he developed his remarks into an extensive essay entitled “Freudyzm i freudyści” [“Freudianism and the Freudians”], published in *Prawda* between January 11 and March 1.³ He also wrote a short essay, “Acheron duszy” [“The Acheron of the Soul”], for the weekly *Świat*.⁴

At the time when these essays first appeared in print, Freud was virtually unknown in Poland. Irzykowski mentions two “summaries” of Freud's theory then available in Polish, having most probably in mind Ludwíg Jekels's *Szkic psychoanalizy Freuda* [*An Outline of Freud's Psychoanalysis*] and *Odczyty kliniczne* [*Clinical Papers*] by Tadeusz

¹ Wojciech Głowala insisted on treating Irzykowski as a philosopher in his preface to an inspiring collection of Irzykowski's essays entitled *Alchemia ciała* [*The Alchemy of the Body*], Warszawa 1996. Two other important books devoted to the philosophical implications of Irzykowski's thought were recently published: Katarzyna Sadkowska's *Irzykowski i inni: twórczość Fryderyka Hebbela w Polsce 1890-1939* [*Irzykowski and Others: The Polish Works of Friedrich Hebbel 1890-1939*], Kraków 2007, and Maria Gołębiowska's *Irzykowski: rzeczywistość i przedstawienie. O tezach filozoficznych Karola Irzykowskiego* [*Irzykowski: Reality and Representation. On Karol Irzykowski's Philosophical Theses*], Warszawa 2006.

² K. Irzykowski, “Teoria snów Freuda” [“Freud's Theory of Dreams”], in: *Nowa Reforma* 590 (1912), p. 1-2.

³ K. Irzykowski, “Freudyzm i freudyści”, in: *Prawda* 2-6, 8-9 (1913).

⁴ K. Irzykowski, “Acheron duszy”, in: *Świat* 3 (1913), p. 1.

Jaroszyński. The first Polish edition of Freud, Jekels's translation of *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis. Delivered on the Occasion of the Celebration of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Foundation of Clark University, Worcester Mass.*,⁵ was published in Lvov in 1911. Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*⁶ appeared two years later (1913), and only much later – his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*⁷ (1924) and *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*⁸ (1935). All these publications were addressed to the medical community, which was emphasized by the publishers: Freud's and Jekels's names on the cover were preceded by academic titles, while the introductions written by the translators referred to psychoanalysis as a science.

Irzykowski's essays undoubtedly mark the first attempt in Poland to reflect on psychoanalysis as something more than just a new model of therapy. His analysis of Freudianism is surprisingly modern and thus close to Lacan's insights presented in his memorable Rome lecture of 1953.⁹

Irzykowski focuses on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the title of which he renders into Polish as *Tłumaczenia senne [The Translations of Dreams]*. He knew the book quite well already in 1908, though he had probably read it a couple of years earlier.¹⁰ It should be noted here that Irzykowski read the 1900 unabridged edition of *Die Traumdeutung*. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not find it sufficient to read its abbreviated version prepared by Freud himself and published a year later under the title *Über der Traum*. It was that second version that appeared in 1923 in Beata Rank's Polish translation – *O marzeniu sennem [On Dreams]*.¹¹ The complete version of *The Interpretation of Dreams* appeared in Polish only a few years back as *Objaśnianie marzeń sennych* (1996).¹² At some point Irzykowski justifies himself by saying that “unfortunately, I do not know any other works of Freud,” yet his remarks reveal that he is no stranger to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* or *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, nor to the Freudian interpretation of Jensen's *Gradiva*. It should not pass unnoticed either that Irzykowski mentions Jung, although he only associates the name with the discovery of the method of free association.

Irzykowski read Freud very early, just as – or perhaps even before – the first physicians were beginning to show an interest in psychoanalysis. And he read Freud very carefully, finding in his thought some answers to the questions that had troubled him for years. Already in his youth Irzykowski “immersed himself in dreams and experimented with methods of recording them.”¹³ as his *Dziennik [Diary]* informs us. Irzykowski was only

⁵ Prof. dr Z. Freud, *O psychoanalizie. Pięć odczytów wygłoszonych na uroczystość 20-letniego jubileuszu założenia Clarc University w Worcester Mass.*, trans. dr L. Jekels. Lwów 1911.

⁶ Z. Freud, *Psychopatologia życia codziennego*, trans. L. Jekels and H. Ivanka. Lwów 1913.

⁷ Z. Freud, *Trzy rozprawy z teorii seksualnej*, trans. dr. med. L. Jekels and dr fil. M. Albiński. Leipzig, Vienna & Zurich 1924.

⁸ Z. Freud, *Wstęp do psychoanalizy*, trans. S. Kemperówna and dr W. Zaniewicki, ed. G. Bychowski. Warszawa 1935.

⁹ See also: J. Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, in: idem, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan. London 1989.

¹⁰ See also: B. Winkłowa, *Karol Irzykowski: życie i twórczość [The Life and Work of Karol Irzykowski]*. Vol. 2. Kraków 1987, p. 376.

¹¹ Prof. dr Z. Freud, *O marzeniu sennem*, trans. B. Rank (authorized by the author). Leipzig, Vienna & Zurich 1923.

¹² Z. Freud, *Objaśnianie marzeń sennych*, trans. R. Reszke. Warszawa 1996.

¹³ K. Irzykowski, *Dziennik. T. 2, 1916-1944 [Diary. Vol. 2, 1916-1944]*, ed. B. Górńska. Kraków 2001, p. 526.

18 when in 1891 he studied the phenomenon of “unconscious but deliberate forgetting”. At about the same time he created the theory of “involuntary behavior” which he then claimed to be his own theory of the unconscious.¹⁴ His first novel, *Paluba [The Hag]*, published in 1903, is a literary account of this theory. Irzykowski’s ideas were in many aspects concurrent with those of the Viennese psychiatrist, whose work he was not familiar with at the time, and were pointed out in the earliest critical studies¹⁵ (Irzykowski admitted that his first encounter with Freud’s work was “two or three years after I published my novel”¹⁶). More recently this issue was raised by Włodzimierz Bolecki.¹⁷ Irzykowski’s short story titled *Sny Marii Dunin [The Dreams of Maria Dunin]*, a peculiar introduction to the novel *The Hag*, is particularly abundant in “Freudian” elements. Indeed, one cannot ignore the fact that one of its main characters is called Acheronta Movebo – a name inspired by the same line of *The Aeneid* that Freud used as a motto to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (i.e. *flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*). Nor can it be overlooked that the story is in fact a record of a hysterical patient being treated with the method of analyzing her erotic dreams (in one of the episodes Maria goes into a fit, the description of which includes the characteristic “bow” and thus seems taken straight from the writings of Charcot). *The Hag*, in turn, draws the reader’s attention to the role of sexuality in early childhood and to the formation of the first “sexual theories”. It also examines the significance of self-deception to one’s mental life (what Irzykowski terms “mental contraband”) and undermines the characters’ knowledge of themselves when verbs such as “understood” or “decided” are put in quotation marks. Moreover, Irzykowski also looks into what his characters find “shameful” about themselves, namely – the instinctual motivations of their actions; he makes them seek the bizarre, as if Lacanian “residues” in the personalities of the beloved women, the consequence of which is that they are unable to fully unite with the object of their desire (*objet petit a?*); but above all Irzykowski discusses the famous “Palubian” (or “haggish”) element that can be associated with the Lacanian Real or the Freudian Uncanny. What should be recalled at this point is Irzykowski’s manifesto of 1896 (i.e. prior to *The Hag*) entitled *Czym jest Horla? [What is Horla?]*.¹⁸ Inspired by Maupassant’s short story, Irzykowski formulates his own conception of the Uncanny, which serves as the basis for his literary program (“Horla is a mysterious minotaur inhabiting the depths of that terrifying loneliness of human life which accompanies it from cradle to grave, encircling

¹⁴ K. Irzykowski, *Diary. Vol. 1 1891-1897*, ed. B. Górńska. Kraków 1998, p. 137. Irzykowski’s observations are not included by Bartłomiej Dobroczyński in his book *Idea nieświadomości w polskiej myśli psychologicznej przed Freudem [The Idea of the Unconscious in Polish Psychological Thought Before Freud]*, Kraków 2005. The author classifies Irzykowski as a “literary figure in the field of psychological thought”, along with Stanisław Przybyszewski, Ignacy Matuszewski and Antoni Lange. Excerpts of Irzykowski’s *Diary* were published in a monographic issue of *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (1998) devoted to psychoanalysis.

¹⁵ J. Topass, “Un précurseur de Freud et de Proust. Charles Irzykowski”, in: *Pologne Littéraire* 4 (1927).

¹⁶ In a letter about *The Hag*, written by Irzykowski to Koniński, we read: “I became acquainted with Freud two or three years after I published my book”. (K. Wyka, *Modernizm polski [Polish Modernism]*. Kraków 1987, p. 195). Irzykowski must be referring to the year 1905 or 1906 because *The Hag* appeared in 1903.

¹⁷ W. Bolecki, “Metaliteratura wczesnego modernizmu. *Paluba* Karola Irzykowskiego” [“The Metaliterature of the Early Modernism. Karol Irzykowski’s *The Hag*”], in: *Arkusz* 2 (2003), p. 4-5.

¹⁸ See also: K. Irzykowski, “Czym jest Horla? (Rodzaj programu)” [“What is Horla? (A kind of manifesto)”], in: idem, *Nowele [Short Stories]*. Kraków 1979, p. 81-86.

the human soul with gorges, allowing no escape"¹⁹). In *The Hag*, Horla is exemplified by the uncanny Ksenia, "the embodiment of the secrets of pleasure [...], everything that he [the main character] feared and hated."²⁰ An encounter with Ksenia is described as an experience similar to that of "touching the goddess of Reality, [...] something that made him feel helpless and humiliated like a child, a moment that shook the foundations of his humanity."²¹

Irzykowski uses all these elements to explain his own idea of the structure of the self in which the main role is played by "the wardrobe of the soul" – a transmission belt between the conscious and the unconscious. At the heart of the writer's interest lies his characters' "underground life," the life which they suppress and feel shameful about, but which has a huge impact on their decisions and choices, even if these are costumed in "the wardrobe room of the soul" to appear more acceptable. Irzykowski considers the three layers of psychic apparatus to be clearly separate from each other (as is the case with Freud's first topic), while the unconscious is made up of everything that is repressed from consciousness but which can always return to it, if only we venture to be absolutely honest with ourselves, or allow someone else to bring it out in us. In his *Diary* Irzykowski uses a characteristic comparison to explain this point: "our civilization is now on the verge of discovering certain mysterious spirits: just like miners digging a tunnel hear the knocking of their companions who work on the other side. *Das Unbewusste liebt uns und lässt sich entdecken*."²² Consciousness and unconsciousness can meet since Irzykowski situates that which is unconscious literally "under consciousness." Bringing it to the surface is necessary because it allows to build a modern culture of honesty. In 1894 Irzykowski noted down in the *Diary*: "it is my inner necessity and my mission in the world to lead humanity to consciousness by means of psychology and thus alleviate the suffering which none of the socialist utopias can remove."²³ His goal was to "reform souls"²⁴, an enterprise which Katarzyna Sadkowska defines as follows: "«The reformation of souls» means uncovering what is shamefully hidden and integrating it with consciousness in order to elucidate the ostensible (because based on false assumptions) drama of some of our moral choices, and if possible – to free people from guilt about what is shameful yet inevitable, rooted in nature."²⁵ This is the role that Irzykowski plays as author – he becomes something of a psychoanalyst to the characters that people his novels.

The similarities between this concept and Freud's first topic are quite striking, though far from surprising. They can be explained not only by the fact that young Irzykowski and Freud had common interests: their theories of the unconscious also derived from a particular philosophical source. The first topic is not very much different from the Schellingian understanding of the unconscious which was expounded by Hartmann in his

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁰ K. Irzykowski, *Paluba. Sny Marii Dunin [The Hag. The Dreams of Maria Dunin]*, ed. A. Budrecka. Wrocław 1981, p. 389.

²¹ Ibid., p. 380.

²² K. Irzykowski, *Diary. Vol. I*, op. cit., p. 162.

²³ Ibid., p. 542.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 548.

²⁵ K. Sadkowska, *Irzykowski i inni: twórczość Fryderyka Hebbła w Polsce 1890-1939*, op. cit., p. 157.

Philosophy of the Unconscious (1869). According to Katarzyna Sadkowska, Irzykowski's fascination with Hebbel meant that he was also familiar with some less well-known disciples of Schelling, whose work Hebbel popularized, for instance Schubert (the author of the *Die Symbolik des Traumes*) or Körner (*Die Seherin von Prevost*). Irzykowski might have drawn his inspiration from the writings of Schopenhauer too – as he stated many years later: “The Freudian «It» is Schopenhauer's «will».”²⁶

However, what seems much more intriguing than the opinion that Irzykowski was a “precursor” of Freud, is the fact that when Irzykowski read Freud, he intuitively grasped the essence and the consequences of his discovery, which brought him close to the second topic that Freud was working on at the time.

At the beginning of his essay “Freudianism and the Freudians”, Irzykowski draws our attention to collaborative work by Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*. His view is that Freud turned to dreams when he realized the insufficiency of hypnosis as a method of accessing the forgotten trauma: “traces of the disease-causing material can be detected in disguise in one's dreams and these can help reconstruct the blurred memories.”²⁷ He also refers to Freud's studies of various everyday symptoms – slips of the tongue, memory lapses, humor: “Freud focused on all these symptoms in order to show that they are not neutral and through them the soul reveals its secrets.”²⁸ Obsessed with the idea of “honesty,” Irzykowski realized that Freud's method reflected his own aspirations:

The main principle of this therapy is to release the “trapped trauma,” make the patient realize it and thus erase it. The doctor works with the patient, examining and x-raying his or her sick soul. This therapy is beautiful in that it assigns such an important role to making one conscious of what is unconscious, which means that the game also involves ethics because it puts emphasis on honesty – and reason. It is as if consciousness was sunbathing.²⁹

Having devoted his experimental novel, *The Hag*, to the importance of the erotic experiences of childhood, Irzykowski – unlike many writers at the time³⁰ – does not feel the need to justify psychoanalysis and the meaning it assigns to sexuality. Referring to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Irzykowski points out (and thus enters into a dialogue with contemporary commentators of the Freudian theory of sexuality) that according to Freud “sexual pleasure is not only a spice, nor is it simply a bait to lure us into reproduction, as Schopenhauer has it, but it is something autonomous, something that has its own sources and ends. The fact that these two things go together does not prove that they are interdependent. Rather – and to the dismay of the moralists – it is a symptom

²⁶ K. Irzykowski, “Perspektywy schopenhaueryzmu” [“The Perspectives of Schopenhauerism”], in: idem, *The Alchemy of the Body*, op. cit., p. 133. (The essay was written in 1938).

²⁷ K. Irzykowski, “Freudianism and the Freudians”, in: idem, *Pisma rozproszone. T. 1, 1897–1922* [Miscellaneous Writings. Vol. 1, 1897–1922]. Kraków 1998, p. 171.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 178.

³⁰ E.g. Marian Albiński, who wrote the foreword to the Polish edition of *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*. See: Z. Freud, *Trzy rozprawy z teorii seksualnej*, op. cit., p. 3-4.

of adaptation. The things that are not talked about certainly have not said the last word yet.”³¹ At the same time Irzykowski was against encouraging patients to become sexually liberated, as psychoanalysts used to do. He argued – like many of Freud’s followers – that it is not so much repressed sexuality that causes trauma (he shared Freud’s conviction that sublimation, or “uwznioślenie,” to use his own term, was the cornerstone of culture and society), but that sexuality itself is already traumatic. To illustrate his point, he used Wedekind’s *The Awakening of Spring* – that “tragedy of childhood,” as he called it, “which strangely enough has been ignored by the Freudians.”³²

This is not the only objection, however, nor the most important one, that Irzykowski leveled at Polish and German “Fraudians” (as he mockingly calls them in his *Acheron of the Soul*). Most importantly, he reproaches them for not giving enough attention to Freud’s theory of dreams, for referring to it merely as one of the methods of working with the patient, and in particular – for disregarding “chapter VII, no doubt the most intricate and difficult part of Freud’s book.”³³ It is precisely the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* that Irzykowski – just as Lacan – considered as the most important.

Irzykowski reconstructs the mechanism of the dream-work as presented in that chapter and discusses the role of censorship which “falsifies and distorts” its actual text while trying to mask the dream’s fundamental role – that of wish-fulfillment. “The refashioning of a wish” can happen in two ways which Irzykowski terms “crowding” (Polish: “stłoczenie”) and displacement. We deal with displacement when “censorship does not let a wish pass before the forum of consciousness in its primary form; it has to somehow sneak in using various masks, hide behind some serious symbol, or don a clownish and absurd costume.”³⁴ Crowding, on the other hand, is a situation when “many different wishes are mingled with one another, thus producing fantastic characters, shapes and words that correspond simultaneously to manifold objects of desire.”³⁵

Irzykowski, however, questions the idea that the sole purpose of the sophisticated work performed by the unconscious is to avoid censorship, or to conceal from the dreamer the actual content of his or her dream. He is irritated by the manner in which Freud and his disciples disregard the “style” of their patients’ dreams; by the fact that they show no interest in the quasi-literary composition of dreams. The following example given by Irzykowski is typical of this attitude:

A lady is relating her “beautiful” dream: “she is carrying a twig thickly studded with red flowers; she meets a stranger and tells him she would like such flowers to grow in her garden. Freud interrupts her and explains crudely: My dear lady – they are genitals.”³⁶

³¹ Ibid., p. 184-85.

³² Ibid., p. 187.

³³ Ibid., p. 176.

³⁴ Irzykowski, K. “The Acheron of the Soul”, in: idem, *Pisma rozproszone. T. 1, 1897–1922*, op. cit., p. 201.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ K. Irzykowski, “Freudianism and the Freudians”, op. cit., p. 182.

Irzykowski does not consent to reduce the interpretation of one's dream to a mere act of exposing it as a repressed wish. Doing so, he argues, "drowns out the voice of a dream." "That twig and red flowers, he goes on to say, are no doubt genitals, but they are flowers nonetheless! – which is what the dream wanted to say."³⁷

Irzykowski's main objection pertains to the fact that Freud's theory lays insufficient emphasis on how important is the way one narrates his or her dream. He argues that Freud focuses on "analysis more than on the text itself."³⁸ By dividing the dream into its structure and physiognomy, Irzykowski wants to stress the importance of a dream's language, noting that "in every dream [...] there remain some puzzling bits of images, curious stitches and transitions that draw our attention to the central problem of expression."³⁹ Irzykowski makes it clear that "the physiognomy of a dream is not the same thing as its structure for it has its own sources and ends."⁴⁰

Irzykowski reads *The Interpretation of Dreams* alongside *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, and indicates the close affinity between the mechanism of dreams and the mechanism of jokes as described by Freud. He points to a number of similarities: "the joke also uses condensation, allusion, the form of the absurd in presentation, errors in thinking, displacement, ambiguity etc."⁴¹ While comparing the two books, Irzykowski reaches the crucial point of his reflections. He writes: "Freud noted the technical similarity between a dream and a joke, but he fails to recognize that this affinity refers to the countless methods that fantasy applies in its work in general."⁴² In short, dreams and jokes are both characterized by a strictly literary structure.

Irzykowski's essay signals what later Lacan would express more straightforwardly, namely – that Freud himself was not aware of the most important dimension of his own discovery. In order to give the reader an idea of this discovery's importance, Irzykowski compares it to "the shocking claim made by some astronomers that the symmetrical shafts of light on Mars were signals by means of which the inhabitants of that planet want inform us of their existence. Or think of the time when people began to read hieroglyphics and cuneiform."⁴³ These examples are intended to remind the reader that what used to be considered "mere fanciful drawing" turned out to be a new language. What Freud discovered was also a new language. Psychoanalysis decodes the creations of the unconscious – it helps us to decipher its runes. In no case, however, should it attempt to create a glossary of the unconscious. Irzykowski believed that Freud's followers were susceptible to disease which he teasingly called "*furor interpretativus*."⁴⁴ He is concerned that "Freud's method, in the hands of charlatans or bunglers, may turn fraudulent."⁴⁵ He is particularly outraged by one of Freud's disciples, Wilhelm Stekel, who published a book, a kind of dream-book, in which he attempted to "fix" the meaning of certain dream symbols. Moreover,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 193.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ K. Irzykowski, "The Acheron of the Soul", op. cit., p. 200.

⁴⁴ K. Irzykowski, "Freudianism and the Freudians", op. cit., p. 187.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

Irzykowski is disgusted by the fact that the only way Freud's disciples have so far managed to employ psychoanalysis in literature is to analyze the poet by examining a sample of his or her work in the light of certain biographical details, especially those relating to incest (Irzykowski spoke only of German authors – the first examples of such criticism in Poland appeared only later, in the interwar period).

Irzykowski claimed that when dealing with literature the Freudians should use the methods of analysis and interpretation that Freud developed to explain dreams and jokes. They should therefore focus on linguistic mechanisms that govern them – on the way the unconscious reveals itself in the text (in its “physiognomy,” to use Irzykowski's term), i.e. not on the level of content, but on the level of linguistic operations (“poetic figures”). Irzykowski writes: “It may be the case that I demand the impossible; that for Freud and the Freudians, as physicians, it is enough to examine the structure of dreams. But whoever has an ear for literature must feel there is a gap here.”⁴⁶ The Polish writer is particularly interested in the “secondary revision” of dreams, the moment when the hidden thought of a dream “lazily rolls back and forth like a great weight, probing various associations, to later grow more animated, more theatrical, so to speak, and finally – poetical.”⁴⁷

The reader today cannot but be surprised by the fact that as early as in 1912 Irzykowski extracted from Freud's work precisely those elements that would become important to later twentieth-century interpreters, especially those in the Lacanian school of thought. Irzykowski seems to have foreseen Lacan's famous statement about the linguistic structure of the unconscious when he propounded his theory of using psychoanalysis in interpreting literature, without however depending on biographical data or any other external context, and treating the unconscious and its creations as an autonomous text. Lacan would later emphasize that what is most important about *The Interpretation of Dreams* is precisely the way dreams are narrated and not their content.⁴⁸ The French psychoanalyst seems to have fulfilled Irzykowski's wish by identifying the mechanisms of dream-work, discussed by Freud in the seventh chapter, with the poetic processes of metaphor and metonymy.⁴⁹ (Irzykowski wished Freud would acknowledge the presence of “poetic figures” in the dreams which he analyzed).

This problem is further developed by Irzykowski in an essay published the same year as “Freudianism and the Freudians” entitled “Zdobnictwo w poezji”⁵⁰ [“Ornamentation in Poetry”] and later included in the collection *Walka o treść* [*The Struggle for Substance*]. It discusses, for instance, the idea of the metaphorical process understood as the source of all species of metaphor and as equivalent to the creative process in general (Irzykowski considers metaphor to be almost synonymous with art). It also contains the observation that this is precisely how language itself works when “it creates symbols of

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See also: J. Lacan, “Introduction au commentaire de Jean Hyppolite sur la ‘Verneinung’ de Freud”, in: idem, *Ecrits I*. Paris 1999, p. 370-71.

⁴⁹ J. Lacan, “L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud”, in: idem, *Ecrits I*, op. cit., p. 490-526.

⁵⁰ K. Irzykowski, “Zdobnictwo w poezji”, in: idem, *Walka o treść. Beniaminek* [*The Struggle for Substance. Beniaminek*]. Kraków 1976, p. 14-70.

truth and clarity [...] from an inherently obscure material.”⁵¹ Once again Irzykowski refers to Freud’s theory of the joke and uses his analysis of the mechanism of humor to explain how metaphor works, by which he also tries to prove that telling jokes and creating metaphors give a similar kind of pleasure.⁵² Yet again it will turn out that what the two have in common is precisely the fact that they express the unconscious:

Burdened with cultural, social and family responsibilities, people accumulate in their souls various residues of everyday life, unsatisfied, wild yearnings, and bury them in the unconscious, do not acknowledge them, banish them forever. [...] But these yearnings want to see the light of day, they take the form of dreams, neuroses, psychoses, lapses of speech and writing, poetry or jokes. They emerge from the Acheron of the soul and run wild. Dreams, neuroses, humor, poetry are like the opening a safety valve – it is how the soul cures itself.⁵³

Irzykowski is well aware of the fact that psychology depends on “how one approaches the question of the unconscious.”⁵⁴ Although he was familiar only with that part of Freud’s work which belonged to the so-called first topic, his exceptional intuition makes his understanding of the unconscious seem close to the second topic. When explaining the phenomenon of the return of the repressed, Irzykowski visualized the unconscious, preconscious and conscious as separate “alembics”⁵⁵, but he criticized any attempt to seek out precise correspondences between the elements that occur in a dream and the specific forgotten events that the dreamer experienced in his or her life. He is very much against a simple direct correspondence: $A = A'$, against the definition of the unconscious as a system comprising that which has been repressed. Irzykowski believed that the unconscious cannot be thus reduced and that one does not gain access to it only by abolishing censorship. Its laws are also the laws of literature, poetry or, perhaps, of language itself. One of Irzykowski’s seemingly marginal observations must strike the contemporary reader as surprisingly perceptive: he points to the fact that Freud neglected the importance of “secondary revision, when the half-awakened consciousness contemplates the bizarre dream-creatures, trying to understand them and put them in some kind of order.”⁵⁶ In his later work Freud would express a similar idea, admitting that dreams and other phenomena he had studied previously are to some extent already processed and thus belong in the

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵² Ibid., p. 29-30.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 51-52. Wojciech Głowala tries to explain Irzykowski’s fascination with chess and Esperanto, pointing precisely to this “rationalizing” element shared by these two artificial languages over which man seems to have control (this is because these languages “are based on sets of rules which make them ‘usable’ and because they “are built in a way that is somehow parallel (mimetically) to the phenomena that man uses, but over which he cannot have full control (e.g. standard languages). In this sense they act as a kind of compensation to the mind that is suffering from the chaos of reality; they create their own, reasoned reality”). W. Głowala, *Sentymentalizm i pedanteria: o systemie estetycznym Karola Irzykowskiego* [*Sentimentalism and Pedantry: Karol Irzykowski’s Esthetic System*]. Wrocław 1972, p. 45.

⁵⁴ K. Irzykowski, “Freudianism and the Freudians”, op. cit., p. 197.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

preconscious. Moreover, Irzykowski uses one of Freud's metaphors in order to explain the sources of a dream – the metaphor of the capitalist and the entrepreneur which future researchers would find so pregnant:

a daytime thought or event may provide an impulse for a dream, but the capitalist providing the motive force which the dream requires is invariably and indisputably a wish from the unconscious, usually from childhood. Sometimes the capitalist is himself the entrepreneur – when an unconscious wish is stirred up by daytime activity. So, too, many other possible variations in the economic situation have their parallel in dream-processes: the entrepreneur may himself make a small contribution to the capital. Several entrepreneurs may apply to the same capitalist. Several capitalists may combine to put up what is necessary for several entrepreneurs.⁵⁷

Irzykowski also speaks of “the childhood of humanity” which keeps returning in the psyche of every individual; he points to the theory of correspondence between phylogenesis and ontogenesis that Freud was working on practically at the same time (Freud's *Totem and Taboo* appeared exactly at the time when Irzykowski was writing his report).⁵⁸ And when Irzykowski speaks of the “compassion for all anachronistic manifestations of the soul,”⁵⁹ which, he argues, is characteristic of all of Freud's writings – albeit “disguised as science” – one cannot help thinking of *The Ego and the Id* and the “poor ego” which “wants to live and be loved”⁶⁰ (Irzykowski's interpretation again stands in opposition to the views of the specialists in white frocks gathered at the Congress).

It should be noted that although in his earlier writings Irzykowski uses the term subconsciousness, when referring to Freud's German terminology he always speaks of unconsciousness or the unconscious, thus avoiding the mistake typical of the later reception of psychoanalysis. And though he uses the two terms alternately, he does not ontologize the unconscious. Irzykowski – just as Freud in his second topic – does not regard the unconscious as an independent sphere of being within the realm of human psyche, nor as a simple negation of consciousness. Of course, it is still a long way from Irzykowski's essay to Lacan's contention that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, but the essay already shows the Polish writer's interest in the question of who exactly it is that designs the sophisticated structures appearing in our dreams and slips of the tongue; and what is the source of “the identity of the artistic process with the dream process.”⁶¹ For Lacan this mysterious author of poetic figures will be language itself – the Other.⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 183. The translation is based on: S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. J. Strachey. London 1971, p. 561. [Translator's note].

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 177.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 177-78.

⁶⁰ Z. Freud, “Ego i id” [“The Ego and the Id”], in: idem, *Poza zasadą przyjemności* [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*], trans. J. Prokopiuk. Warszawa 1994, p. 96.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 191.

⁶² See also: P. Dybel, “Nieświadome w psychoanalitycznej teorii Lacana” [“The Unconscious in Lacan's Psychoanalytic Theory”], in: *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka XII*. Poznań 2005, p. 9-25.

What is also unusual is the fact that Irzykowski turns his attention to the mechanism of *post factum* understanding. It is indeed surprising because at the time of the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* this particular element really plays a minor role in Freud's theory – it is yet to be defined and developed in Freud's later writings (the case of the “Wolf Man” or *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* were written after Irzykowski published his essay). Irzykowski devotes much space to explaining the phenomenon of trauma and its repression. For instance:

the process of repression, i.e. the suppression of instincts, takes place at puberty. It is the time when one is most likely to develop “trauma,” which remains in the soul as *locus minoris resistentiae* and might cause more or less serious mental disorders, hysteria or neurosis in the later lives of certain individuals, especially if adverse life circumstances occur or sudden strong emotion is experienced. According to Freud, these new sensations are just the cause; the essence of the disease is the former trauma, usually forgotten, that needs to be extracted from the depths of oblivion.⁶³

The category of *Nachträglichkeit*, thus defined by the Polish writer, will turn out to be of major importance for Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud (Lacan will use this concept as the basis for his theory of the subject and *signifiant*). Still, in Irzykowski's times it did not really attract the attention of researchers and critics.

Irzykowski's essay deserves admiration also when it comes to its innovative terminology. One must bear in mind that he wrote it when no Polish translations of Freud were yet available. Irzykowski's terms are often more apt and more progressive than those proposed later by Ludwig Jekels or Marian Albiński. For example, Irzykowski uses the term “perversion” (“perwersja”) instead of “deformation” (“spaczenie”) as the two translators do; he uses the neutral word “drive” instead of “lust” (“chuć”), which Jekels uses after Przybyszewski, or “miłota” (a dialectical variation of the Polish word “miłość” / “love”), as proposed by Albiński.⁶⁴ He also introduces such terms as “repressed affection”, psychic wound and substitution.

The way Irzykowski interpreted Freud at a time when the latter was known in Poland only among doctors, as well as the fact that he called Freud “a genius of interpretation”⁶⁵ and demanded that he be recognized as a philosopher (in his review of Władysław Tarkiewicz's *Historia Filozofii* Irzykowski reproaches the author for having “brushed Freud off”⁶⁶) – all of the above compels us to recognize Irzykowski's essays as seminal for the Polish reception of psychoanalysis, and at the same time – as one of its most important “broken paths.”⁶⁷ One of the last sentences of “Freudianism and the Freudians” seems

⁶³ K. Irzykowski, “Freudianism and the Freudians”, op. cit., p. 172-73.

⁶⁴ See: Z. Freud, *Trzy rozprawy z teorii seksualnej* [*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*], op. cit.

⁶⁵ K. Irzykowski, “Freudianism and the Freudians”, op. cit., p. 176.

⁶⁶ K. Irzykowski, “Historia filozofii” [“History of Philosophy”], in: idem, *Pisma rozproszone. T. 3, 1932-1935* [*Miscellaneous Pieces. Vol. 3, 1932-1935*], ed. J. Bahr. Kraków 2000, p. 203.

⁶⁷ See also: P. Dybel, *Urwane ścieżki. Przybyszewski-Freud-Lacan* [*Broken Paths. Przybyszewski-Freud-Lacan*]. Kraków 2000. (Unfortunately, Dybel hardly ever mentions Irzykowski).

symptomatic in this respect: "Tracing the consequences of Freudianism, I have arrived at certain points in question that interest me the most – which is why I break off."⁶⁸

After the war, Irzykowski referred to Freud only incidentally when discussing other topics. The two most significant of these occasions are: a review of Stanisław Przybyszewski's memoirs, *Moi współcześni* [*My Contemporaries*], in which the author presented himself as a precursor of Freud, a pioneer in the field of psychoanalysis⁶⁹; the second instance is a review – which Irzykowski was commissioned to write by *Wiadomości Literackie*⁷⁰ – of Gustav Bychowski's book *Psychoanaliza*. In his later life, Przybyszewski complained that only an unfortunate course of events prevented him from enjoying Freud's fame as the man who developed a novel theory of sexual difference.⁷¹ Irzykowski's response to this claim is rather surprising:

this random analogy with Freud must not obscure the fundamental differences. Freud is a true psychologist, his work involves introspection, observation and scientific exploration, his psychology burrows deep under the earth's surface; a thinker such as Przybyszewski is (merely or proudly) a prophet, a visionary who penetrates straight to the earth's core. The term unconsciousness, as used by Freud, is something different than the naked soul. Freud spreads the net over the complications of life, while Przybyszewski's plays, if indeed they are supposed to illustrate his theory of the naked soul, show people who are simple and uncomplicated.⁷²

Irzykowski thus returns to his observations in "Freudianism and the Freudians" – written long before Przybyszewski declared himself to be Freud's precursor – in which he pointed out that the "honesty" of psychoanalysis consists in "bringing to light the underground mental life," but "not in the metaphysical sense, not as Przybyszewski would have it. It has been a common mistake so far to dig either too shallow or too deep, where nothing whatsoever can be found anymore, and to create cosmic visions rather than to practice introspection. I feel it is enough to burrow several hundred meters below the so-called surface of the soul – we don't have to look for the nadir."⁷³

In reviewing Bychowski's book, Irzykowski calls Freudianism "the most brilliant madness of the 20th century" and wonders why it has been given little attention in Poland: "with our zest for boasting about exotic news, our affinity for mysticism and cabbalism, the fact that we talk so little about Freudianism is quite incomprehensible."⁷⁴ But above all, Irzykowski expresses his hope that Bychowski's work can fill "the embarrassing gap

⁶⁸ K. Irzykowski, "Freudianism and the Freudians", op. cit., p. 198.

⁶⁹ K. Irzykowski, "Pierwszy bilans Przybyszewskiego i jego autorehabilitacja" ["The First Revision of Przybyszewski and His Self-rehabilitation"], in: idem, *Pisma rozproszone. T. 2, 1923–1931* [*Miscellaneous Writings. Vol. 2, 1923–1931*], ed. A. Lam, Kraków 1999, p. 142–43.

⁷⁰ K. Irzykowski, "A Study of Acheront", in: *Wiadomości Literackie* 36 [244], 1928, p. 3.

⁷¹ S. Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni* [*My Contemporaries*]. Warszawa 1959, p. 81.

⁷² K. Irzykowski, "Pierwszy bilans Przybyszewskiego i jego autorehabilitacja", op. cit., p. 142.

⁷³ K. Irzykowski, "Freudianism and the Freudians", op. cit., p. 178.

⁷⁴ K. Irzykowski, "A Study of Acheront", op. cit..

in our intelligentsia's education"⁷⁵ despite one undeniable drawback of his book – “doctor Bychowski teaches his theory like a scholar, with orthodox solemnity, while he should rather turn to a lighter mode and present it as a modern scientific legend, approach it in a more anecdotal attitude, stylistically emphasize all that is attractive and intriguing about it, like a writer would.”⁷⁶ Irzykowski himself did not manage to carry out the task of explaining Freud in such a literary manner, beyond what he wrote in his essays of 1913. We learn from Irzykowski's *Diary*, however, that during the bombing of 1939 his library was destroyed together with various “sources, books, notes, remarks on the margins, newspaper clippings,” including “a lot of Freud.”⁷⁷

His pre-war postulates would not, in fact, be realized. Psychoanalytic interpretation of literary works, so prevalent in the twenties (as practiced by Marian Albiński, Stefan Baley, Stefan Marcus, Rafał Blüth and especially Gustav Bychowski), certainly cannot be regarded as a fulfillment of Irzykowski's wishes expressed in 1913. Polish researchers were clearly followers of the tradition which Irzykowski tried to warn them against. They are psychiatrists analyzing not literary works as such but their authors – the great classics of Polish literature: Słowacki, Mickiewicz, Wyspiański, Żeromski, investigating in their work the traces of their earliest experiences, traumas and complexes.⁷⁸ Moreover, they claim Stekel as their patron – the author that Irzykowski was particularly adverse to.⁷⁹ Irzykowski openly disapproved of such practices in his lampoon aimed at Tadeusz Boy Żeleński.⁸⁰

An apparent link between Irzykowski's interpretation of Freud and the interpretations of the interwar period is that they all praise the psychoanalytical method. But differences still appear to be more important. In 1936 both Gustav Bychowski and Witkacy regarded psychoanalysis as a cure for Europe which they believed was heading for self-annihilation. The former interviewed Freud, asking whether it would be possible to influence entire nations and their leaders by means of psychoanalysis, while the latter, in his book titled *Unwashed Souls*, expresses the belief that psychoanalysis can save us (unwashed souls are the souls that are uninformed, “not made conscious”, ignorant of Freud). Freud himself also at times envisioned a society emancipated by psychoanalysis. Irzykowski, in turn, was closer to Lacan's *traversée du fantasme*, which is rather about becoming aware of the symptom and not necessarily about curing it, for “it is the latent,

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., *Dziennik*, p. 209.

⁷⁸ This way of using psychoanalysis in literary studies still has its supporters. In his recent book titled *Krytyka literacka i psychoanaliza. O polskiej psychoanalitycznej krytyce literackiej w okresie dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [*Literary Criticism and Psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism in the Interwar Poland*], Warszawa 2008, Marek Lubański reconstructs the psychiatrists' interest in the canonical works of Polish literature, especially of the Romantic period, however, he does not consider it as a historical phenomenon but tries to verify which of those achievements may be of interest to literary historians today (which explains why his book is divided into chapters that are labeled with the names of the authors who proved especially attractive from the psychoanalytic perspective).

⁷⁹ See also: M. Albiński, “Stan badań psychoanalitycznych w zakresie twórczości literackiej” [“The state of psychoanalytic studies in the field of literature], in: *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 2 (1923), p. 3-22.

⁸⁰ K. Irzykowski, “Beniaminek”, in: idem, *Walka o treść. Beniaminek*, op. cit., p. 366-67.

unconscious evil which does most evil.”⁸¹ What was particularly important to him was not the result of a treatment but “the deep spiritual relationship”⁸² between the psychoanalyst and the psychoanalyzed who should above all realize to what extent he is ignorant of himself.⁸³ This is precisely how psychoanalysis could help build bridges between people – the bridges that Irzykowski dreamed of. He did not manage to write a book about them as he had planned, but its outlines remain, scattered in so many of his writings.⁸⁴ That unwritten book definitely is to be regretted. Slightly altering Irzykowski’s own words, one might say that had it been written, who knows, “Poland might have had its Lacan.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ K. Irzykowski, “Freudianism and the Freudians”, op. cit., p. 197.

⁸² K. Irzykowski, “The Acheron of the Soul”, op. cit., p. 202.

⁸³ 83 See also: M. Gołębiowska, *Irzykowski: rzeczywistość i przedstawienie*, op. cit., p. 114-15.

⁸⁴ See also: W. Głowala, *Sentymentalizm i pedanteria: o systemie estetycznym Karola Irzykowskiego*, op. cit., p. 114-15.

⁸⁵ K. Irzykowski, *Dziennik*, op. cit., p. 526. (Irzykowski uses the phrase “its Freud”).

LÉVINAS'S CONCEPT OF JUSTICE: FROM ETHICS TO POLITICS AND BACK

Classical philosophy – in a more or less rigorous sense of the term – has accustomed us to perceiving the notion of justice as bound to the notion of equality (simple/numerical or proportional) and more specifically to equity; to the notion of universality (what is just is fit to be the general norm and may become the object of general consensus); and the notion of impartiality (usually understood as neutrality, freedom from personal bias in the resolution of contentious issues). According to Rawls's standard model, impartiality is synonymous not so much with disinterestedness as with interest which is restricted by reason and abstract in the sense of abstracting from specific qualities of the "I," who behind the "veil of ignorance" thinks of him or herself as anybody, thinks of his/her interest and somebody's, everybody's interest. For that leads to the lack of interest in the fate of specific others who also become reduced to abstract beings, "man in general." Impartiality is then obviously related to universality and equality. Importantly, justice defined in these terms – as equality, universality and impartiality – assumes a fundamental as well as abstract identity that is shared by the "I" and all others each: hence, goods should be evenly distributed; norms should be universal; the impartial "I" can and should think of him/herself and everybody else as anybody, precisely because all human beings are essentially alike. This means that all are equally endowed with reason and freedom. Or, to put it differently, all are endowed with equal dignity as persons.

The uniqueness of the conception of justice proposed by Lévinas rests in the fact that in the first move or on a certain level he rejects all those classical intuitions, in order to restore them in the second move or on another level, while modifying their sense.

TWO FACETS OF JUSTICE AND "DIALECTIC BEYOND DIALECTIC"

In Lévinas's writing we encounter two distinct or even opposing concepts of justice: one adheres to the classical paradigm and may be called a legal-political concept while the other, not classical at all, and apparently mad, grows directly out of his ethics. This duality is directly related to the coexistence in Lévinas's thought of two levels of analysis and, in a sense, two types of logic: ontological and metaphysical, the logic of the totality and the logic of infinity, immanence and transcendence, being and the Good. The difference between them can be mapped onto the difference, or even the disparity, between politics and ethics.

The relationship between these two types of logic in Lévinas's thought is a complex one. It is also, to put it bluntly, extremely unclear. At best, one may speak here of a duality, though it would be closer to truth to call it ambiguity. On a certain level the order of politics (ontology, totality, immanence, being) and the order of ethics (metaphysics, infinitude, transcendence, the Good) are posited as radically separate or even opposed in a truly Manichean manner. On another level, or in alternate passages, they are addressed as related to or even conditioning each other. On a certain level of analysis, it is as if those two orders ran parallel to each other. On another level, it seems as if they overlapped or even limited and corrected each other. Finally, and most importantly, Lévinas makes a claim for the primacy of the metaphysical-ethical order over the ontological-political order. But the meaning of the notion of primacy is not clear. It can be understood in the axiological sense as a synonym of superiority or "greater significance": in this sense ethics would simply be more important than politics to human life and to the establishment of individual subjectivity; it would be the synonym of a normative concept of humanity. But this understanding of the primacy of ethics, even if present in Lévinas's thought, seems insufficient to understanding his intentions. In the light of some passages from his work, primacy acquires a transcendental meaning in the Kantian sense of the term: ethics would constitute the formal, subjective condition for the possibility of politics, at least a *certain* politics, that is, one could not think politics without already assuming an ethics. In the light of other passages, the priority of ethics acquires a more traditionally metaphysical sense, or transcendental sense in the Husserlian understanding of the term, becoming synonymous with the forgotten source: here, ethics would constitute the hidden ground and the hidden engine of politics, a type of deep spiritual energy which would outwardly manifest itself in the hardened, "numb" (to use Bergson's term) and inevitably distorted forms of various political movements and institutions.

If in this context one may speak of any dialectic at all, it is a dialectic that cannot be reduced to any conceptual formula, to any logical mechanism – a dialectic that carries multiple significances and does not attempt to reduce that multiplicity. Most surely, and quite programmatically, it evades the course of the Hegelian dialectic. It constitutes "a dialectic beyond dialectic" or, if you wish, a "postmodern" dialectic. The Lévinasian concept of justice is, then, dialectic in this special sense. The aim of the present analysis is to bring to light some aspects of this concept, but I make no claim to completeness.

A passage from *Totality and Infinity* testifies to the duality of the term "justice" in Lévinas's work: "In reality, justice does not include me in the equilibrium of its universality; justice summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice, and henceforth nothing can mark the end of this march; behind the straight line of the law the land of goodness extends infinite and unexplored, necessitating all the resources of a singular presence. I am therefore necessary for justice, as responsible beyond every limit fixed by the objective law." (TI 245).

Here is an outline of the two concepts of justice: in the light of one, justice is "a straight line" established by "the objective law"; in the light of the other, justice is, conversely, an "unexplored land," an infinite journey and a going beyond all law. The first concept defines justice as a universal norm; the second defines it as a summons addressed to the singular subjectivity, ordering it to go beyond itself in the direction of the equally

singular Other. Let us dwell on the characteristics of those two facets of justice. We will begin by emphasizing their differences.

LEGAL AND POLITICAL JUSTICE

“The straight line of justice” applies to a totality such as the state. Law and justice, justice *as* law, may even constitute a definition of the state. Obviously, historically, there existed various political systems and therefore various forms of law and, consequently, justice. As a rule, justice belonged to the conquerors, who judged the conquered. More than anyone else, Lévinas is aware of this historical correlation between the position of the conqueror and what is considered just. The distance between this type of justice and the intuitive perception of moral justice is indisputable. What is more interesting in Lévinas’s consideration, however, and far from self-evident, is not this differentiation between moral justice and the factual historical justice, but that between moral justice and the justice of the theoretical perfect state, a state that fulfills the essence of the law as a claim to universality, equality and impartiality. According to the whole modern, and particularly Kantian, tradition, that state is fair which is governed by impartial law – a law that faces everybody as equal and, what is more, bestows upon everyone the same responsibilities but also equal rights, that is, guarantees everybody the same freedom, while being this freedom’s only limitation. Consequently, in a just state, the law becomes a mediator between individuals, between respective freedoms, thus transforming natural freedom into political and moral freedom.

According to an equally influential modern theory (let us call it the tradition of Hobbes), no moral revolution is needed to establish ideal justice of this kind: it would suffice for the egoism of individuals to become reasonable. Theoretically, even “a tribe of demons” as Kant says, would be capable of this kind of justice. As Rawls demonstrates, a somewhat guarded calculation in terms of “minimum/maximum” would suffice, along the lines of: “what would be best for me in the worst possible situation?”; or a mechanical balancing of opposing forces: there comes a moment when it is not worth fighting for one’s own privileges for the losses would exceed gains. One realizes that it will be most profitable for all to submit themselves to one law and recognize everybody’s equal rights. Legal/political justice may then be no more than, as Lévinas puts it, “a technique of social equilibrium [...] harmonizing antagonistic forces” (OB 159).

From Lévinas’s perspective, justice of this kind is morally crippled for two complementary reasons.

To begin with, such justice in no way violates the logic of egoism; on the contrary, it seems to sanction it. Within the bounds defined by law, a war of all against all is permissible or even unavoidable: it takes the form of economic and political competition or that of rivalry for prestige. The conflict between individual egoisms is subdued and channeled but by no means eliminated. A just state – lawful state, as we call it today – in fact encourages egoism in that it authorizes the attitude of a claimant, along the lines of “they owe it to me.”

Secondly, legal/state justice means the triumph of the impersonal, a domination of all that is general, abstract, anonymous, over the uniqueness of individuals, of singular subjects. Lévinas writes that: “There exists a tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal, an order that is inhuman though distinct from the brutish. Against it man affirms himself

as an irreducible singularity..." (TI 242). Universal law silences "the plea for self," forces into silence the individual in his/her singularity. The generality of the law is a generality of the concept or species and by definition abstracts from what is unique or exceptional; as a rule, law inevitably subsumes individual cases under a common category.

Consequently, within a just totality, equality becomes synonymous with the leveling of differences, with elimination of exceptionality, repression of otherness. Equality means no more than being identical in a certain respect, with the measure imposed from an abstract, external perspective on the internal "selfness" of the subject. Once all are the same or identical, everybody can be replaced by anybody else, thus becoming "no one in particular" or "as good as the next person." Treating a human being as one of many replaceable elements is for Lévinas identical with "primal disrespect, [which] makes possible exploitation itself" (TI 298). (One might say that Lévinas takes some common intuitions such as "justice is blind," "the law is cruel," but also "everybody, means nobody" and reworks them in philosophical terms.)

From this perspective, justice within the totality, legal-political justice, appears to be unjust.

MORAL JUSTICE

At first glance, then, the "real," religious-moral justice postulated by Lévinas seems to be completely opposed to the legal-political justice.

To begin with, his justice assumes a human (face to face) relationship, an immediate relationship, one which is not mediated by the law or any community (even the community of reason): a singular "I" faces a singular Other. "Justice would not be possible without the singularity, the unicity of subjectivity" (TI 246), says Lévinas. In *Totality and Infinity* he calls such a relationship a conversation, a social relation and a "relation beyond relation"; in *Otherwise than Being* he calls it proximity. Let us recall a telling quotation from the former text: "We call justice this face to face approach, in conversation" (TI 71).

It belongs to the essence of this relation that the Other appears in it as an exceptional being, that is, irreducible to any general concept or any other being, to no one else, above all else – to myself. The Other appears "in his own being." This is possible on the condition that I allow him/her to express him/herself: "Justice consists in again making possible expression, in which in non-reciprocity the person presents himself as unique. Justice is a right to speak" (TI 298).

In order, however, for the Other to be able to express him/herself, I have to give ground, suspend my own freedom, and in a way subject myself to the Other, listening. If justice perceived from the perspective of the Other is equivalent to "a right to speak" then from the perspective of the "I" who remains in an immediate relationship to the Other, justice is subjection: "Justice is recognizing the Other as my master. [...] Justice is the recognition of his privilege qua Other and his mastery" (TI 72).

In order to be just toward the Other, I have to allow him/her to reproach me. In other passages Lévinas defines the Other as a pauper, a proletarian, an orphan, a widow. The paradox is only apparent, and it is intended: for it is also, or precisely, as a pauper that the Other is a master, that is, the one who teaches me to go beyond myself and to take upon myself the responsibility for him/her.

In any case, the relation of conversation, in which justice is fulfilled, is an asymmetrical relation, with the “I” not equal to the Other, but lesser: subordinate, beholden. Personal justice requires such inequality. There is no doubt that the inequality is “subjective,” that is, felt only by the subject and imperceptible from the outside, not to be discerned by “an impartial observer.” But it is precisely the subjective perspective that matters here, for only from this perspective do both sides of the relation become subjects. Lévinas wants to show that when the “I” subjects itself to the Other, not only the Other but also the “I” becomes itself as a being that has been summoned, marked, “chosen,” exceptional, precisely because irreplaceable in its responsibility.

Religious-ethical justice, unlike legal-political justice, does not place limitations on individual freedom. It “does” something much more subtle with justice by simultaneously problematizing it (it makes one ashamed of it, leads one to suspend it) and justifying it, transforming it into the responsibility for the Other, which cannot be limited by any law.

All in all, justice defined in these terms is synonymous not with equal treatment but with subjection to the Other; not with establishing universal norms but with openness toward exceptionality; not with impartiality, in which abstract thinking about the self and others who are like myself is preserved, but absolute disinterestedness which, not caring for reciprocity, nullifies the ontological identity of the “I,” replacing it with ethical subjectivity.

Disinterestedness is a key term here, a term to which Lévinas came to devote more attention and to which he lent special meaning. In his *sui generis* philosophical etymology, disinterestedness is a way of going beyond being, a lack of interest in being, at least in one’s own being, a way of sacrificing one’s being for the Good. (The being of the Other – his continued existence and well-being – remains the necessary “correlate” to the “I’s” moving beyond its own being. In this sense the Lévinasian evil of being is unavoidably partial and inconsistent. To put it differently, being is evil only when I appropriate it, make it my own being.) While for Rawls impartiality means abstracting from empirical features (both on the side of the “I” and on the side of the others) combined with general interest in the greatest possible well-being of “anybody,” for Lévinas impartiality means relinquishing one’s own interests combined with unconditional engagement in the cause of a specific Other. This impartiality is as radical as it is asymmetrical, for the only “side” from which the “I” is to abstract is the “I” itself. As Lévinas says in *Otherwise than Being*, “The forgetting of self moves justice” (OB 159).

In this way, we are propelled from the realm of the legal-political categories of justice toward holy madness. By criticizing the legal-political concept of justice as morally crippled, Lévinas seems to be postulating a self-sacrifice by fire, which, outside extreme exceptional circumstances, an average human being is unable to make.

This proposition testifies to the radically apolitical or even programmatically anti-political character of Lévinasian ethic. Were we to pause at that, we would have to acknowledge that the two conceptions of justice in his thought are in direct opposition to each other, an opposition in which the two sides are both antithetical to, and independent of, each other; or that the only positive relation which can be established between them is that of hierarchy: ethics rises above politics without owing anything to it; it is, as Lévinas says in *Totality and Infinity*, “the surplus possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice” (TI 64). Consequently, it seems also that politics

can easily do without ethics, leading societies from the state of barbarity to the state of equilibrium and of legal-state justice or even to universal happiness. "Politics [...] ensures happiness" (TI 64), says Lévinas. In this context the need for ethics may seem unwarranted. The only motivation for it (beside masochism) would be a metaphysical longing for something "absolutely different," with the face of one's neighbor merely an indication of that something, serving one's neighbor is a mere pretext in striving towards it.

A more careful reading of Lévinas's texts, however, may demonstrate that the problem is not that simple, and Lévinasian ethic not that mad. In the light of *Totality and Infinity*, and even more so in the light of the philosopher's later texts, it appears that, to begin with, the ethical relation contains within itself the rudiments of a politics and requires a politics for its own, even partial, fulfillment. Secondly, politics in its movement toward legal-state justice cannot fail to assume an ethics.

FROM ETHICS TO POLITICS, AND BETWEEN THE TWO

Religious-moral justice would constitute a simple opposite of legal-political justice if the personal relation, the relation of conversation and directness were an entirely private relation, a clandestine "tête-à-tête." But Lévinas emphasizes again and again that this is not so. Hence his resistance against identifying personal justice with love, the latter being a personal emotion. By contrast, the ethical relation is not private, for it is not a bond between the "I" and a specific chosen Other – the lover – but between the "I" and every Other the "I" encounters. Every other is exceptional, but no other is superior, higher or more important than the remaining others. Crucial here is the Lévinasian concept of the third party.

"The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other" (TI 213) – he writes in *Totality and Infinity*. With time, the idea of the third party will gain significance in Lévinas's thought (as will the concept of disinterestedness); it will begin to shimmer with various senses which, without being identical, nonetheless shed light on each other. The third party – the third person – is particularly or finally God – He, the one who came, leaving only a trace behind him; He who cannot be addressed as Thou. The third party is also humanity, where each neighbour and each "I" have his or her own part – "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (TI 213). According to this understanding, humanity cannot be identified either with reason or with any other empirical attribute; it is that which ties all into a community of nameless fraternity. Finally – and this is the most banal aspect – the third party is quite simply a neighbor, other than the one with whom I am now in a relation, but equally important. The concrete other, someone I encounter, is thus for me an other among others, or the embodiment of the Other as such, of all others. This is why "[e]verything that takes place here 'between us' concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order" (TI 212). I am beholden and responsible not only towards the specific other, the second party, so to speak, but also towards the third party, i.e. towards everyone. In this sense, the condition of personal justice is universal from the very outset. In this sense also, or from this perspective, the source of moral obligation is not the individual face, but the force that flows from beyond it (as well as through it). And all others turn out to be equal; the "I" is equally committed to all.

What follows universality and equality is reciprocity, or that which in *Otherwise than Being* is referred to as "the constant corrective of the original asymmetry," the original

ethical inequality. When the third party (understood here quite simply as a fellow human being), is equally important to me – equally an Other – as the second party, then I cannot remain indifferent to the relation between them. I cannot allow either of them to persecute the other. I necessarily want each of them – just like myself – to see the “master” as well as “pauper” in the other. At the very least, I want them to treat each other in a “human” way, that is to respect each other’s humanity. Hence, my commitment to the Other qua Other is no longer unconditional: I serve him under the condition that he shall serve the third party, or at least respect him. If this is not so, if the second party harms the third party, then I have the right to oppose him – on behalf of the third party – to prevent him from violence (“only the violence suffered by the third party can justify the use of violence in order to prevent violence committed by the second party”; BM 150). From this point on, observes Lévinas, “proximity becomes problematic: one must compare, weigh, think, do the justice which is the source of theory” (BM 148). Justice as the “source of (legal-political) theory” is no longer synonymous with stepping beyond all law, in responsibility or goodness. Quite on the contrary, in so far as it compares and weighs, such justice becomes precisely the sketch of a law that designates the boundaries of freedom for everyone.

In a conversation published in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Lévinas admits: “The word ‘justice’ is much more adequate where the situation is not one of my ‘subordination’ to the Other, but one of ‘equal worth.’ For this, both comparison and equality are necessary: equality between the incomparable. Hence, the word ‘justice’ refers more to the relation with the third party than to the relation with the other human being” (BM 148). Is this a way for Lévinas to back out of his earlier conception of justice as infinite and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other? Not in the least. The above statement merely reveals the complexity of the earlier construct, and the tensions inherent in it. Justice as “equal worth” is not the same as unconditional commitment to a specific Other. But the former cannot exist without the latter. Not only because “the relation with another man is never simply a relation with the second party” and “in the very appearance of the Other, the third party is already looking at me” (BM 148), but also because the “third party” is also an Other, and the relation between the the “I” and the third party does not differ structurally from the relation between the “I” and the Other. I am obliged towards the third party – in fact, towards everybody – in precisely the same way as I am obliged to the Other; the comparing and the weighing are only inevitable consequences of the service to the Other. And the requirement of reciprocity of a relation is secondary to the primary, one-sided obligation of the “I” towards others. Hence, to put things more precisely, what is at stake here is a reciprocity which maintains its ethical character only as long as it is not complete: from the point of view of the “I” the second party owes to the third party no more and no less than the third party owes to him, they have the same rights and obligations towards each other, but they have only rights in relation to me, and I have nothing but obligations towards them (“The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my right”; OB 159)

The above remarks allow us to understand the proper meaning of equality and universality, in the Lévinasian sense. Equality is grounded in the ethical relation “between what cannot be compared,” i.e. an equality of persons each of whom is different

and exceptional. The only way to recognize each person's uniqueness is to acknowledge his superiority, his "mastery." One might conclude, then, that we are speaking about a paradoxical sort of equality, where everyone is the master of everyone else, and at the same time everyone is everyone else's servant. From its own point of view, each individual "I" is subordinate to all others, obliged to them. But to the extent that each "I" is also the other to the Other and to others, each "I" is also included in the universal obligation of reciprocal duty. In this sense, personal equality is "an equality in inequality," an equality that emerges from the recognition of an original asymmetry between each "I" and all others. Such an equality does not erase the obligation of disinterestedness, but only makes this obligation general. As such, it differs substantially from equality among "replaceable units", "abstract moments of conception" or "reversible elements of a reciprocal relation".

It follows that the universality grounded in the ethical relation has nothing – or very little – in common with the universality of a concept, or the impersonality of law. It is a universality that Lévinas calls fraternity, distinguishing it from "identity of genre." Fraternity does not obliterate difference, it does not erase the otherness between brothers – it is a community of kinship, but not of beings that are identical or even comparable with each other, although inevitably they must be compared, since justice is to be shared by all. Finally, comparing the incomparable assumes impartiality. From the "I's" perspective it amounts to disinterestedness, striving to maintain as much as possible, respecting the right to speak enjoyed by each person.

A developed ethical conception of justice – one that includes "the third party" – reveals justice as, to put it simply, the requirement of human fraternity, made evident in a general doing of good for the benefit of one's neighbors – including distant ones, those not known to us in person, yet remaining always within a "horizon of proximity." In short, it is a matter of recognizing the priority of the Other over the "I." In a sense, this is already a political conception, for it pertains to human collectivities, reaching beyond any imaginable scope of action of an individual subject, however moral. It also leads to a principle of universal rights and obligations. At the same time, however, it is also an anti-political conception, in the sense that it constitutes an opposite of the logic of equilibrium among competing egoisms. One might say that it is suspended half-way between ethics and politics, or that it is the outline of a completely utopian politics, a politics that would not only strive for the greatest possible good of all individuals, but would also honor the uniqueness of each person. It is a profoundly paradoxical conception in that it postulates a universality of uniqueness and calls for the comparing of the incomparable – for this reason it can also never be realized in practice. Despite this, compared to an idea of justice as one-sided sacrifice for the concrete other, this conception does constitute a significant step towards politics, at least in the sense that it designates the ideal horizon of a *particular type* of politics.

What is more, such a developed conception of justice leads to a need for politics understood as law-based organization of collective life, where the egoisms of all "I's" as well as all "second parties" are limited in the name of "third parties." An ethics requires a politics if it is to move beyond the individual relation of face-to-face and speak to the needs of collective life. Since there are many others, and personal encounters are both few and subject to chance, it is up to political and legal actions to really take into account the

“third parties” and to ensure a just (equal) distribution of duties and rights. Without the support of a politics committed to the common good, an ethics would amount to occasional flashes of individual saintliness against the background of general barbarity.

FROM POLITICS TO ETHICS AND BETWEEN THE TWO

What then makes possible politics as a striving for the common good, or as the forging of a “straight line of justice”? At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas defines politics as “the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means” (TI 21). Moreover, it appears that justice itself in the political-legal order can be defined as the optimal strategy of foreseeing and winning wars. It consists in subduing the struggle of egoisms, in finding a way to express and ensure equilibrium among them, in the name of egoism itself, which has now become reasonable.

But is this really so? Is any justice – even as faulty as the one described here – a mere effect of the interplay of the forces of egoism? There is a lot to suggest that, despite the very real temptation of radical dualism, Lévinas’s answer to this was always negative. Or rather: from the point of view of his thinking, a negative answer to a question thus constructed is inevitable, precisely because of the radical nature of the dualism his thought contains. For if, left to its own devices, politics is nothing more than the art of war, then there is no reason for the idea of peace to appear on its horizon. If this is how things stand, then politics is merely a stage for brutal struggle, the strong and the crafty are the winners, while the struggle itself, again and again, leads to Auschwitz. Meanwhile, despite the facticity of the Holocaust and other historical crimes, it is also true that for quite a long time it is the capacity to maintain peace that has served as the measure of so called civilized politics. Furthermore, if the essence of politics were to be derived solely from ontological egoism, from the attachment of the “I” to its own identity and from its desire for expansion, then, to put things precisely, politics would turn out to be impossible. After all, politics requires cooperation; it calls for thinking in terms of the community; it is based on some sort of – however limited – “us”. This latter category is not possible without the “I” transcending itself, opening itself to others (at least some of the others), without the establishment of positive social bonds – in short, there is no “us” without ethical inspiration. Even if it is a minimal ethics that is required, an ethics that amounts to the prohibition “Thou shalt not kill,” it is already a step beyond the logic of pure egoism. In this sense, the ethical encounter with the face of the other is – as Lévinas repeatedly emphasizes – a necessary departure point and condition for the possibility of any sort of social relations and for any politics.

To see the problem in this light is to discover a necessary internal bond between politics and ethics – despite their juxtaposition – as well as the priority of ethics in relation to politics, the presence of the former as a sort of foundation to the latter. Above all, it is in a *particular sort* of political project, characteristic of modern, liberal and democratic politics, that we witness the presence of such an ethical foundation.

When he writes that the pathos of liberalism has an appeal to him (see TI 120), Lévinas seems to be making a claim that the ethical idea of justice is the inspiration behind the liberal state, where individuals are not *de iure* elements of a political totality, but exist as beings prior to the state, as persons who cannot be reduced to the state because they are endowed with dignity. This declaration might lead us to the mistaken view of Lévinas

as a liberal. In fact, his political sympathies were quite distinct from what goes by that name today. He was self-declared leftist: a proponent of egalitarianism, who sympathized with emancipation movements, and even with some revolutionary ones. Admittedly, the thinker never made direct public statements to that effect. Nonetheless, several passages might be recalled, where he at least suggests that an ethical inspiration – i.e. the desire for ethical justice – has led to various social and political rebellions, revolts and revolutions (the communist one included, if not cited as prime example). The aim of such revolts – at least the aim they placed on their banners – was to eliminate repression and exploitation, the liberation of victims of power. Needless to say, political, social and economic inequality has nothing in common with the basic inequality of the ethical relation, i.e. with disinterested goodness. Quite the opposite, such inequalities testify to the self-interest and egoism of groups and individuals, to their domination over others. Let us remember that when, due to his egoism, the Other does harm to the third party, it is our right to challenge him and stop him – even resorting to force. I have the right to impose limits on the Other – e.g. require that he share his wealth and power – so that the third party is not harmed. It is no accident that the proletariat is among Lévinas's "figures" or synonyms for the Other.

Clearly then, the idea of ethical justice is both present and active within real history and politics: it motivates specific social movements, inspires particular legal measures, as well as certain political systems and institutions. It is also present in legal-political theories of justice and in the doctrine of human rights. Furthermore, as said before, it is present in the very possibility of politics as action that reaches beyond the individual interests of the "I" and towards the "us." It is perhaps especially present in the liberal project of expanding the "us" to include all people, in the remarkable revolutionary impulse of fraternity of mankind.

In short, at the present level of analysis, politics appears to assume ethics, while ethics requires a politics. Despite occasional gaps of purely political evil, and occasional flashes of pure moral sainthood, actual history turns out to be a combination of the two levels, with the two orders – totality and infinity; immanence and transcendence – penetrating one another.

ETHICS ABOVE POLITICS

By no means, however, does Lévinas's peculiar dialectic lead to the establishment of an ethico-political synthesis. The orders of ethics and politics are inter-related, and to some extent they even condition one another, but they also constantly diverge in his philosophy. The order of ethics is also constantly affirmed as the prior one – at least in the sense of the "higher one" the one that "reaches beyond."

There is no political-legal theory, and certainly no specific political order, specific law or institution within which his idea of justice could find its fulfillment. The nature of ethical justice is such that it desires infinity – in this sense it remains entirely utopian. There is no moment at which the ethical responsibility of the "I" might conclude that the good has been accomplished, that the Other needs nothing more, has nothing more to say. All the more so, as there exist many Others and while we do good to some we might be doing harm to others. This is why moral justice remains the inaccessible regulative ideal in relation to every possible political-legal justice.

To makes things worse – with this we return, in a way, to the starting point of the present analysis – each political-legal order has its own force of gravity, due to which the justice which comes to be realized within that order will always depart from the ethical base, betray it, turn into its caricature. One might call this an alienation of sorts: even if a given law (let us say the right to fair trial, or the right to elect one's representatives), grew out of concern for justice understood as giving the Other his voice, yet, the moment this becomes a positive law, written down and formulated as a series of procedures, it takes on an impersonal character, and inevitably turns all into equals, abstracting from all that is exceptional or unique. The fact that I can elect my representatives does not mean that my voice has real significance for those in power; the fact that I have the right to fair trial does not mean that the court – however independent and unbiased it may be – will take into account my point of view and examine all the circumstances. A positive law creates the boundaries for egoism, it legitimates all actions within the law, people fighting for their own interests rather than caring for the interests of others.

At the very best, then, legal-political justice is insufficient from the moral point of view, as it leaves “gaps,” which the moral type of justice strives to fill; hence the role of the judge who should not be satisfied with a mere adherence to the law; hence also the role of support organizations, and above all the role of conversation and personal responsibility in the relations between specific “I's” and specific others. At worst, legal political justice becomes opposed to personal justice; it leads to visible harm of individuals. From this perspective we can examine not only the phenomenon of bureaucracy, but also so called revolutionary justice, from Jacobean terror, to the “justice” of the communist state, and finally the justice of decommunization.

The disfiguration of ethical justice in the legal-political order is not only possible, but also inevitable, because, in the light of Lévinas's thought, the human condition itself is fundamentally and incurably ambiguous, spread between the two logics, between the possibility of openness towards the other and closure within oneself, between disinterestedness and self-interest. Although ethics can and ought to influence politics, and though in fact it does influence it, and even precedes it, the two logics do not ever overlap entirely: ethics is always beyond politics, forever questioning, challenging it.

The following excerpt from *Otherwise than Being* can, I believe, serve us as a succinct conclusion to Lévinas's reflection on justice and the relation between ethics and politics: “It is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is to be set up, and especially, maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendships and faces” (OB 159–160).

Let us paraphrase this as follows: justice as realized by the state (even the ideal state) is inevitably Janus-faced. One of its faces looks towards moral disinterestedness, the other – towards political egoisms. These two faces might appear to be identical. What is decisive from the point of view of the meaning of justice is the direction of the gaze.

AESTHETICISATION AND ITS AXIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

In philosophy there is no “progress”, hence no regress, either.
Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*

...philosophy does not comply with the prevailing opinion and rejects the status quo. It stands up for those rules which are too easily abandoned [...].

Stefan Morawski, *Niewdzięczne rysowanie mapy* [Unrewarding drawing of a map]

It is often claimed that contemporary culture is heavily aestheticised. However, the projects of aestheticisation which attempt to describe this state of affairs are not often analyzed in depth. The aim of this essay is to take a closer look at the phenomenon of aestheticisation which has become widespread and is spreading through ever larger fields of culture and life. This phenomenon embraces – in my opinion – various projects of aestheticisation which express and reinforce it. I would like to put forward an interpretation of two such projects, formulated by Welsch (1997) and Shusterman (1992, 2008).

When aestheticisation ceases to be peripheral and becomes a universal phenomenon, it seems to deprive culture of its vertical axis, as a result of which hierarchies are overthrown. This, in turn, leads to the homogenization and oversimplification of the ways in which we participate in culture. Visualization is also becoming such a means of aestheticisation.

There are at least three different approaches to aestheticisation. First of all, it can be identified with various modes of beautifying, ranging from spontaneous attempts to make oneself or one's surroundings more attractive, to a programmatic, idea-driven aestheticisation of reality, aiming to transform it. Industrial design is a good example of this tendency, as is the Bauhaus manifesto and its architectural programme, since housing design undeniably affects interpersonal relations. Secondly, it may be conceived of as an extension of the aesthetic approach over those cultural problem fields where it has never been a priority, e.g. epistemology, morality, politics, as well as psychotherapy and self-perception. Such an extended aesthetic approach manifests itself in the employing of aesthetic categories (such as “work of art,” “aesthetic experience,” “beauty,” “prettiness,” “elegance” etc.) for the purposes of describing and evaluating matters previously outside the scope of aesthetics. Thirdly, aestheticisation processes may be viewed not in terms of a certain content which is being transferred from one area onto another, but in terms

of how they work – their *modus operandi*. From such a methodological perspective the processes of aestheticisation can be perceived as a revolution in thinking whose purpose is to shift the level of analysis, to direct the mind towards that which is less relevant, exchanging depth for surface. It can also be described as a movement away from the concealed towards that which is disclosed, away from meaningfulness towards banality, and finally – away from that which is necessary towards that which is contingent or provisional. In short, the previously discredited notions are now treated with all due seriousness and – as Kierkegaard would say – admiration. This third approach towards aestheticisation seems to be the broadest. It constitutes a change in attitude and manifests itself not only in art and aesthetics but is discernible within the whole sphere of culture.

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“Our concern is not so much to know what [God] is in himself (his nature) but what he is for us as moral beings” (Kant 1998: 141). The train of thought observable in the above quotation – especially the shift of the level of analysis – may be defined as aestheticising, even though it does not concern any apparent aesthetic subject. We are in fact dealing with a thoroughgoing aestheticisation when God is identified with morality and thus reduced to it. Fichte notices that the “living and effective moral order is identical with God. We do not and cannot grasp any other God” (Marion 1991: 32). I have chosen the above quotation – which does not explicitly concern art or *aisthesis* – in order to underline the fact that the phenomenon of aestheticisation cannot be reduced to those two areas. It is a process which encompasses a broader intellectual and spiritual approach, and which may manifest itself in all spheres, ranging from everyday life and politics to the most sophisticated forms of cognitive and artistic activity.¹

The projects of aestheticisation analysed in this essay are conceived of in the second sense, i.e. as an extension of the aesthetic approach onto areas that lie outside the scope of aesthetics. Using theories developed by Welsch and Shusterman, I intend to show that the aestheticisation projects proposed by both these authors may be interpreted as modes of thinking. Such broadening of the context will reveal a new meaning of the said theories.

The existence of the aestheticising mechanism was already acknowledged by Plato and later by Nietzsche. Today, it is one of the major concerns of the philosophy of culture. The aesthetic turn, just as the theological one (and many others), has quickly become the buzzword in contemporary discussions on culture. However, these turns have been interpreted in a variety of ways.

The theological turn, for example, is understood in three different ways. Firstly, it is seen as an adaptation of theological discourse, or the theological language of the Old and New Testament, for the purpose of describing 20th century experiences.² Secondly,

¹ Wolfgang Welsch understands aestheticisation differently. He claims that we do in fact extend the aesthetic approach over epistemology, but this operation does not have a reductionist aspect: “It is almost superfluous to note once more that this aestheticization has nothing to do with beautification or the like. It is concerned not with objects’ aesthetic predicates, but rather with an aesthetic characteristic of the state of our knowledge, our cognition and our apprehension of reality.” (Welsch 1997: 58, note 80).

² Cf. Rymkiewicz (2008).

it can be viewed as a redefinition of man and culture in a transcendent context. Finally, some perceive it as the transferring of theological questions to the realm of philosophy. The aesthetic turn marks a shift within the domain of aesthetics from philosophy of art towards sensuality, constituting thus a move away from Kant and a return to Baumgarten. As a result, aesthetics is transformed into epistemology, which can be interpreted as the self-destruction of traditionally understood aesthetics. Consequently, aesthetics once again becomes a discipline studying sensory perception and is laid as a foundation for rationality and cognition as such. Wolfgang Iser, however, draws a different conclusion from the so-called aesthetic turn. He does not see it as the self-annihilation of aesthetics. On the contrary, he perceives this process as the extension of aesthetics over all fields of cognitive and existential activity. In this way – he concludes – aesthetics goes beyond itself. This is how he understands the term “aestheticisation.”

Iser grounds his thought in a specific understanding of Baumgarten³, Kant and Nietzsche. He perceives those three philosophers as representatives of different stages in the development of the process of aestheticisation – a project which is the theoretical endeavour to transfer aesthetic categories to areas that have so far remained outside the scope of aesthetics. “What Baumgarten paved the way for,” he notices, “and Kant had been the first to work out to some extent was developed to the extreme by Nietzsche” (Iser 1997: 42). The interpretation suggested by Iser is an aestheticising mental operation which places the three thinkers in an entirely different intellectual paradigm, reducing the metaphysical dimension of their work to a naturalistic one.

One should remember that Baumgarten understood aesthetics as a discipline devoted to the study and perfection of sensory cognition, i.e. *aisthesis*. Baumgarten is a representative of the gnosiological attitude in the analysis of aesthetic experience. He claimed that aesthetic experiences have a cognitive nature, but are of a lower order and amount to a *logica inferior*. This is what constitutes the proper subject of aesthetics understood as a discipline devoted to the study of sensory cognition.

Kant uses the term “aesthetics” in two meanings: as transcendental aesthetics and aesthetics of taste. The former is a part of the answer to the question regarding the possibility of synthetic *a priori* propositions and constitutes an element of transcendental philosophy. As is the case with Baumgarten, it concerns sensory cognition. However, it belongs to the quest for the conditions required to make that type of cognition universally valid, despite the fact that it is sensory and not conceptual. Kant completes this quest by finding those conditions in the categories of time and space which he postulates to be the *a priori* conditions of perception.

Here we now have one of the required pieces for the solution of the general problem of transcendental philosophy – how are synthetic *a priori* propositions possible? – namely pure *a priori* intuitions, space and time, in which, if we want to go beyond the given concept in an *a priori* judgment, we

³ The term “aesthetics” originates from Baumgarten, but in his philosophy it is synonymous with the theory of the senses.

encounter that which is to be discovered *a priori* and synthetically connected with it, not in the concept but in the intuition that corresponds to it.
(Kant 1998: 192, B73)

Thus, transcendental aesthetics is not just an extension of traditional aesthetics but epistemology as such. Traditional “explicit” aesthetics is established only after the change in the meaning of the word “aesthetics” from *aisthesis* to aesthetics of taste which is elaborated by Kant in his third critique, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. He distinguishes there two types of taste: the taste of the senses and the taste of reflection (Kant 2002: 99). Both are variants of aesthetic judgment because they concern the relationship between the object’s representation and the feelings of pleasure or displeasure. The taste of the senses, however, is the source of personal judgments, whereas the taste of reflection allows us to make universally valid assessments which are, in the end, judgments of beauty.

It would be ridiculous if [...] someone who prided himself on his taste thought to justify himself thus: “This object [...] is beautiful for me.” For he must not call it beautiful if it pleases merely him. Many things may have charm and agreeableness for him, no one will be bothered about that; but if he pronounces that something is beautiful, then he expects the very same satisfaction of others: he judges not merely for himself, but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. [...] He rebukes them if they judge otherwise, and denies that they have taste, though he nevertheless requires that they ought to have it; and to this extent one cannot say, “Everyone has his special taste.” This would be as much as to say that there is no taste at all, i.e., no aesthetic judgment that could make a rightful claim to the assent of everyone.

(Kant 2002: 98).

Finally, we turn to Nietzsche. Let us recall Welsch’s claim: “What Baumgarten paved the way for, and Kant had been the first to work out to some extent was developed to the extreme by Nietzsche” (Welsch 1997: 42). Welsch refers to the colloquial use of the word “aesthetics” which goes beyond the sphere of art. In everyday life we speak about aesthetic behaviour, lifestyle etc. It seems, however, that in such contexts the word “aesthetic” could be substituted with expressions such as “pleasant” or “pretty”. In such cases, it does not have the meaning that Welsch attributes to the word “aesthetic” in his analyses. The meaning he intends for this term would rather be closer to what Baumgarten understood as *aisthesis*, since the words “pleasant” or “pretty” refer to things that are pleasant or pretty to the eye or to the ear, which would make them closely related to our senses. In Kant’s philosophy, aesthetics leaves the realm of *aisthesis* and becomes the analysis of beauty. Although Nietzsche is often considered to be the originator of aestheticisation understood in its popular meaning, he cannot be consistently interpreted in this way, because in fact it would go against his theory. Art, beauty and artistic drives have little to do with the aesthetic. They serve a metaphysical purpose by creating appearances, i.e. empirical reality which allows us to break free from eternal suffering.

For the more I become aware of those omnipotent artistic drives in nature and in them of a fervent yearning for appearance, for redemption through appearance, the more I feel myself compelled to make the metaphysical assumption that that which truly exists and the original Unity, with its eternal suffering and contradiction, needs at the same time the delightful vision, the pleasurable appearance, for its continual redemption: the very appearance which we, completely enmeshed in it and consisting of it, are forced to experience as that which does not truly exist, to experience then as a continual becoming in time, space, and causality, to experience in other words as empirical reality.

(Nietzsche 2000: 30)

It should be stressed that for Nietzsche artistic drives are not innate talents or acquired skills but a force of nature.

Nietzsche wrote about the Greeks trying to recreate their existential experience and demonstrate its multiple layers. The image of the Greek world as cheerful and harmonious, full of restraint and Apollonian self-possession, was rather superficial. Beneath that image there lurked a world of suffering and torment. The Dionysian element revealed it, whereas the Apollonian served as a beautiful veil whose function was to conceal that dimension and allow the primordial being to free itself from suffering. Apollo and Dionysus were thus joined as two elements intertwined with each other and mutually interdependent. Nietzsche demonstrates in *The Birth of Tragedy* that suffering is the condition of beauty, order, cheerfulness and aestheticisation understood as harmony. Within such a metaphysical structure there emerges the concept of the artist who overcomes his or her own subjectivity. The artist sets him- or herself free from individual will and particular self. A subjective artist, or a lyric poet, is – according to Nietzsche – a poor one. In order to become a genius, he or she has to let his or her ego disappear. The lyrical subject, or the lyrical ego, cannot be equated with the empirical one – the real person – but is mystically united with the eternal consciousness and expresses its primordial pain in a symbolic way by becoming the genius of the world. One can thus claim that what we are dealing with here is an aestheticisation of the world – also in the sense of making it more tolerable. However, this process is accompanied by the awareness that such aestheticisation is just an illusion and cannot be the ultimate truth about the essence of reality. Aestheticisation soothes the pain but at the same time it reveals it.

Welsch, who regards Nietzsche as the representative of radical epistemological aestheticisation, refers to the essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”. However, that particular text does not concern aestheticisation only. We are not dealing with a *homo aestheticus* here – that being is a lot more complicated and its existence is full of tensions. Nietzsche’s intention is not too ease them but to become aware of them. He holds it to be untrue that “the essence of things »appears« in the empirical world” (Nietzsche 1990: 86), which makes it difficult to believe in any honest and pure thirst for truth. We are entangled in backbiting, deception, posturing and games, as a result of which human cognition does not adequately reflect reality. Our cognition is governed by sudden changes and leaps, e.g. a sensory stimulus is transformed into an image which, in turn, becomes a sound.

Nietzsche calls those mutations metaphors. Such leaps – like the stimulus-image-sound chain – force us to disbelieve any adequate epistemology. Therefore, truth becomes for Nietzsche “a movable host of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to people to be fixed, canonical and binding” (Nietzsche 1990: 84). The use of such terms as “embellished,” “poetically,” “rhetorically,” “metaphor” and “metonymy” could be interpreted as introducing elements of aestheticisation to the process of cognition. However, they are in fact responsible for the distortion of cognition because “the illusion which is involved in the artistic transference of a nerve stimulus into images is, if not the mother, then the grandmother of every single concept” (Nietzsche 1990: 85). In other words, an aesthetic relationship (as Nietzsche proposes to call it) is formed between the subject and the object of its cognition. Still, it cannot be reduced to *aisthesis*, as it neither constitutes sensory cognition nor is it a sensory experience that becomes a source of pleasure. It is in fact “a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue” (Nietzsche 1990: 86). I do not think, however, that aestheticisation may be reduced to “suggestive transference” or adequately called “stammering translation”.

As an aside, we may recall that Nietzsche believed there are two types of people: rational and intuitive. The rational man “who is guided by concepts and abstractions only succeeds by such means in warding off misfortune,” whereas the intuitive man “suffers more intensely, when he suffers; he even suffers more frequently, since he does not understand how to learn from experience and keeps falling over and over again into the same ditch” (Nietzsche 1990: 91).

Nietzsche’s essay does not describe aestheticisation taken to an extreme, but simply attempts to amplify those elements in culture which are creative and subjective, as opposed to that which is objective, fixed and accepted as true. The strengthening of the creative and subjective elements could be considered as aestheticisation, but it has little to do with *aisthesis* and a return to sensuality. It is the kind of aestheticisation that remains rooted in a traditional understanding of the word “aesthetics”.

Stefan Morawski is entirely convincing when he makes the following remark:

There is no doubt that the philosophical turn of our times takes place under the sign of this particular philosopher [Nietzsche]. [...] [However,] his *fin de siècle* was entirely different from ours. If we assume that Nietzsche’s philosophy was its prime exponent, then we also have to agree that it was still a deeply metaphysical era, craving for an absolute that would be different from the dominant one. It rejected ascetic and scientific priesthood in favour of art by turning towards a spiritual and material revolution [...] which would make us more sensitive to the tragedy of existence [...] and guide towards a particular saving prospect.

(Morawski 1999: 270)

These aspects were neglected in the interpretation offered by Welsch. On the level of content, Nietzsche extended the aesthetic attitude over areas beyond the scope of

aesthetics. However, an interpretation that takes into account the method (one which asks “how?”) reveals the third type of aestheticisation, i.e. aestheticisation as a mental operation whereby the level of analysis shifts from the metaphysical plane onto the naturalistic one.

Welsch also emphasizes the fact that the aestheticisation of knowledge is conducted not only in philosophy but also in science – “the guiding authority of modernity itself” (Welsch 1997: 23). He claims that it is modernity which ordained the aestheticisation of epistemology – a fundamental aestheticisation of knowledge, truth and reality, which has transformed all problems and research issues. In this sense, aestheticisation of epistemology constitutes the heritage of modernity. “There is today no argument which is able to counter this effectively. One has not only every occasion, but the obligation to consider aesthetic elements in the core of truth, knowledge and reality” (Welsch 1997: 47). I am not exactly sure what these “aesthetic elements in the core of truth” really are. It cannot be denied that scientific theories are estimated according to criteria that have been traditionally considered to be aesthetic. For example, we speak of beautiful ideas, elegant proofs or even of nicely and subtly conducted scientific experiments. What is more, no one seems to deny today that intuition plays a certain role in cognition, especially at the moment of making a scientific discovery. However, I would not call this aestheticisation, certainly not in the sense of transferring aesthetic contents or categories to epistemology. I would rather see it as the discovery, made by aestheticians, of certain elements or layers present in the process of cognition.

Therefore, epistemological aestheticisation would boil down to a certain shift in the way of thinking (just as the above interpretations of Kant and Nietzsche do). It constitutes a move away from that which is essential in cognition towards that which is accidental. Ultimately, the prettiness or elegance of the scientific proof does not affect its factual legitimacy.

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Shusterman puts forward a different project of aestheticisation which refers to pragmatism. The aesthetics he established in this way was given the name of somaesthetics. Just as Welsch, Shusterman sees aestheticisation as an extension of the aesthetic approach over areas beyond the scope of traditional aesthetics. However, unlike Welsch, he is not preoccupied with epistemology but with the body and life. Shusterman defends the value of popular art, drawing our attention to the evolution of the word “aesthetic”. He claims that it ceased to be used solely within intellectual discourse. Indeed, it has become so widespread that it is now a popular expression used in brand names of fashion design studios and beauty salons, which are often called research “aesthetic institutes” and their employees – “aestheticians”. One should remember, however, that although a change of vocabulary usually entails a shift in how reality is perceived, it does not happen every time and never to a full extent. For example, the word “salon” could be used in the context of a dry-cleaner’s, but the term “dry-cleaning salon” did not become so established as to transform reality. We can still notice the difference between a salon in its former meaning and a dry-cleaning salon, or a hairdressing salon for that matter.

Shusterman’s basic aim, however, is not to grasp the aesthetic experience or defend popular art, but to turn all the attention to the body so as to maximize its pleasure. This

theory convinces us that we should be “improving our capacities for pleasure, which can be significantly enhanced by more perceptive selfawareness of our somatic experience” (Shusterman 2008: 6). He refers in this context to Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, treating the French philosopher as a pioneer of somaesthetics. This new discipline attempts to place the bodily experience and its creative transformations at the forefront of philosophy understood as “an art of living” (Shusterman 2008: 15). In this way, philosophy ceases to be a spiritual exercise and becomes a physical one. Foucault’s aim to make the body infinitely sensitive to pleasure is expanded by Shusterman from the rather limited domain of “intense delights of strong drugs and transgressive sex” to “tranquil practices of meditative awareness in breathing, sitting, and walking [which] can generate subtle streams of deep delight” (Shusterman 2008: 9). Revelling in the body in a similar way as one enjoys art, and in general – refining pleasure, is the main aim of somaesthetics. Thus, the body becomes a work of art whose delights turn into an aesthetic experience.

The “aesthetic experience” is the model category of Shusterman’s somaesthetics, just like in the case of Welsch’s epistemological aestheticisation. The two theories differ, however, in their understanding of pleasure. In Welsch’s view, pleasure should not be reduced to a bodily or sensory phenomenon and defined as aesthetic. In Baumgarten’s understanding *aisthesis* has an epistemological character. Therefore pleasure – whose source is the body and which is experienced, observed and reflected upon – can also have a cognitive aspect. It may be present in the aesthetic experience but is not, strictly speaking, constitutive of it.

It is an undisputable fact that art has always been an extremely important and inseparable part of human life. Cave paintings are over 32,000 years old.⁴ Moreover, it is generally accepted that art has always expressed something, especially the relationship of one human being to another, to the animal world or to a certain deity. Art was also connected with magic and religion, social and political life, as well as ethics. We can recall here the words of Cyprian Kamil Norwid who claimed in his *Promethidion* that “beauty has one purpose – to enrapture us to work”. Art has been autonomous for a relatively short period of time in its long history. Thus, in Shusterman’s view, aestheticisation would be an attempt not just to immerse art in life but actually to equate the two.

Treating life as art, especially in the sense of creatively shaping it, is an idea that has provoked reflection, provided practical solutions or simply inspired people’s endeavours, and seems to have accompanied all European and non-European cultures since the dawn of history. Proponents of this approach include the Pythagoreans, Socrates, Aristotle, Buddha, Christ and even some contemporary psychotherapists or philosophers. One of today’s most widely accepted opinions is the belief that personal and social life may be shaped by way of altering its narration. This would amount to self-creation via narration. However, self-creation is not the same thing as shaping – it entails “bringing to existence” and not “forming”. Shaping and creating are two different things because their relationship to metaphysics is different.

⁴ Cf. the documentary film by Werner Herzog titled *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* which is devoted to the subject of paintings from the Chauvet Cave.

“[H]e who lives aesthetically does not choose,” writes Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1971: 172). He understands choice as the choice of will, the choice of desire. Such a decision, Kierkegaard argues, reveals good and evil, transplanting man from the sphere of aesthetics to the one of ethics where particular choices have to be made. Kierkegaard claims that human beings are equipped with a teleological instinct. Although he does not use that particular phrase, “self-creation” would amount to something like exploring one’s self. “By the individual’s intercourse with himself he impregnates himself and brings himself to birth” (Kierkegaard 1971: 263). In this way, “[h]is self must be opened in due relation to his entire concretion, but to this concretion belong also the factors which are designed for taking an active part in the world” (Kierkegaard 1971: 279). This is a different take on self-creation, one that does not depend on narration, i.e. on changing the language (“the final vocabulary” – as Richard Rorty would say), but is rather connected with ethical choices and personal engagement. Rorty would call it metaphysical because it presupposes the existence of the self, as well as a specific direction in which that self is meant to develop. He remarks that “we ironists hope, by this continual redescription, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can” (Rorty 1989: 80).

Despite the fact that narrations play an important role in the processes of transforming life, they cannot be absolutized. There are other elements which play an equally important role, such as cultural patterns, work, individual will, exercises, sacrifices, the environment etc. Narrations alone are not enough to construct new personalities. They can only serve a supporting role. We need to believe in them first and convince others to accept them. Therapy – whose aim is self-creation – is based, among other things, on the presupposition that the analysand should come to believe that a particular narration concerns him or her and can thus perform a descriptive role. It is only on that condition that therapy can have a creative potential or the power to transform the mind. Moreover, there is no doubt that body and mind constitute a single organism and that they influence one another. Treating the body as the only source of transformations or stimuli runs contrary to our common experience, self-observation and scientific knowledge. For example, research into the phenomenon of stress shows that there is indeed a strong link between psychological tensions and physiological disorders.

The last issue I would like to comment on in this context is the anxiety caused by the glorification of the body as the source of aesthetic experiences. The body cannot be eternally beautiful, fit, healthy and young. On the contrary, it is often the source of pain, suffering, shame and humiliation. It may be crippled and abhorred. One can of course claim that aesthetic experiences need not always be pleasant. However, I would argue that suffering and feelings of shame or humiliation cannot be treated aesthetically, although expressing them in art is an entirely different thing.

The attitude implying a reduction of the entire human being to the body, as well as the whole of culture to language and narration, may be interestingly confronted with the following remark made by Kierkegaard: “It is very advantageous to let the realities of life be undifferentiated in an arbitrary interest like that. Something accidental is made into the absolute and as such into an object of absolute admiration” (Kierkegaard 1987: 299-300). I do not wish to claim that the body is accidental to man. However, elevating it to the position of an absolute seems to be an operation based on an arbitrarily adopted scale.

The conviction that the human body is shaped by culture and social structures is today generally accepted. The history of the human body has been inscribed into the history of human culture and is no longer regarded merely from the perspective of our biological evolution.⁵ Both Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault demonstrated this in their works devoted to the project of modernity. Throughout history the human body was – as Bryan S. Turner sees it – a “possibility formed by culture and realized in the course of human interactions” (Bauman 1995: 77). However, each culture realizes this possibility in its own way. Zygmunt Bauman holds that modernity – understood as the modern network of interactions – first of all produced the bodies of workers and soldiers. Being normal, or physically healthy, amounted to being able to work in a factory or serve in the army (Bauman 1995: 77). In postmodern times, Bauman observes, people are shaped primarily according to the ludic and consumption-oriented functions they are meant to perform (Bauman 1995: 54). The four types of postmodern identity he describes – the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player – have one thing in common: they all treat the world and other people merely as a source of stimuli, turning them into objects of aesthetic evaluation rather than moral judgment, responsibility or care (Bauman 1994). They lack engagement, share no ideals and do not even have the will to shape and realize them. Consumption, perception and experiencing are the preferred activities. In short, it is the maximization of stimuli that has become the new ideal of life. It is true that experiencing – broadly understood as receptivity or perceptivity – is an indispensable property of human body and mind, as well as the *sine qua non* condition of all intersubjective relationships. However, reducing human life solely to perception is as radical as degrading humanity to the level of euglenas or paramecium.

When aestheticisation is extended to life and fused with self-creation, a question should be asked regarding our relationship with the other. Questions of choice, engagement and responsibility are posed neither in the epistemological aestheticisation project, nor in the somaesthetic one. They remain suppressed because both of these theories are in fact based on an implicit concept of humanity which entails a dive down into the sphere of perception and sensual impressions. Such a concept of man disposes with reason and leaves behind its dilemmas and tensions. It sneers at the notion of the absurdity of human existence. Moreover, as Morawski adds, such thinking steers clear of suffering because it does not see anything meaningful in it.

Apart from discerning the four models of postmodern lifestyle, Bauman proposes to use the term “adiaphorisation” which is tantamount to moral indifference. It consists in perpetually turning one’s from one object to another. Kierkegaard again provides a good example: “What a strange, sad mood came over me on seeing a poor wretch shuffling through the streets in a somewhat worn pale green coat flecked with yellow. I felt sorry for him, but nevertheless what affected me most was that the colour of this coat so vividly reminded me of my childhood’s first productions in the noble art of painting” (Kierkegaard 1987: 23). As soon as one begins to deal with his or her childhood, there is no longer any need to be compassionate or obliging towards others.

⁵ Cf. Bauman (1995: 70).

The project of somaesthetics may serve a valuable function in American culture because it supplements or even opposes the dominant analytic aesthetics which focuses on the notional analysis of aesthetic discourse. Therefore, the introduction of somatic experience into such discourse, as well as its justification in aesthetic terms, constitutes an important supplement. From the methodological point of view, which attempts to explain “how” something works, this theory is quite similar to the project of epistemological aestheticisation. It constitutes an aestheticising move away from the multi-dimensional relationship between the work of art and aesthetic experience towards the relationship between body and pleasure.

Even from a phenomenological perspective aesthetic experience need not be categorized as idealistic and presented as the opposite of *aisthesis*. To the contrary, the analyses of aesthetic experience, which were published by Polish aestheticians in the interwar period, do not ignore the questions of perception and emotions.⁶ They investigate how perception works and is developed in aesthetic experience. It is often emphasized that the aesthetic experience has both a receptive and a creative aspect. In the essay “O naoczności jako właściwości niektórych przedstawięń” [“On intuition as the property of some representations”] Leopold Blaustein remarks that “already in the perception process, which is a seemingly passive awareness of the aesthetic object, there can be discerned an activity characteristic of a person who experiences something in an aesthetic mode” (Blaustein 1931: 6). Blaustein attempts to understand and describe the perception processes that take place at the meeting point of the real world and the one established by art. At these crossroads facts and fiction converge, or – to put it differently – psychology and aesthetics come into contact.

Blaustein claims that aesthetic experience evokes the feeling of rising above the reality of life. The source of this sensation is – he argues – a change of attitude on the part of the experiencing subject, a shifting of one’s focus from the real world to the realm of imagination. When characterizing the aesthetic experience in greater detail, he employs the term “living the moment,” used earlier by Stanisław Ossowski. Blaustein notices that aesthetic experiences “interrupt [...] the primary stream of our mental life which is concerned with the struggle for power or survival” (Blaustein 2005: 3). This, however, does not mean that they can be classified as mere idleness or a purely passive variant of perception.

The concept and analysis of the imaginary world – understood not just as a product of a separate mental faculty such as imagination or fantasy, but as an imaginary representation which constitutes a vital element of aesthetic *perception* – is Blaustein’s important and illuminating achievement. He makes us aware that already the very process of perception is complex and manifold. Moreover, the category of “imaginary representations” he assumes to be a *sine qua non* condition of aesthetic experience. Without investigating them “it will be impossible to construct, among others, the psychology of theatre and cinema, the psychology of the pleasure afforded by works of art, as well as the psychology of certain types of religious experience. They deserve a proper place within the domain of

⁶ For a more complete presentation see: W. Miskiewicz, “Leopold Blaustein’s Analytical Phenomenology”, in: *The Golden Age of Polish Philosophy*, eds. S. Lapointe, J. Woleński, M. Marion, W. Miskiewicz. Dordrecht: Springer 2009, pp. 181-90. Cf. also Z. Rosińska, “Leopold Blaustein: Imaginary Representations; The Role of Perception in Aesthetic Experience Creators”, in: *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, 2 (48): 2011, pp. 199-244.

general descriptive psychology, alongside the reconstructive and productive representations” (Blaustein 2005: 41). At the same time, it is only in practical application that their true nature is revealed. There are three possible attitudes in forming imaginary representations. The first one focuses on the recreated object; the second is geared towards the recreating object; while the third focuses on the imaginary object.

The recreated object may be an element of the real spatio-temporal world that surrounds us, but the imaginary one cannot. Imaginary objects do not exist in our time because they are quasi-temporal, which is to say that they behave as if they were temporal but in fact are not. They are not ideal objects either. We can only conclude that they are quasi-real.

Intending imaginary objects, which we do not conceive of as real and do not position in our common space, is a privilege of people who have achieved a certain level of culture. A testimony of this could be provided by travellers who witnessed the first film screenings in exotic countries. Also children during theatrical performances frequently identify the imaginary object with the recreating one. The attitude of orienting oneself at the imaginary world may be exchanged for the one geared towards the recreating objects. This shift takes place on the basis of the following mechanism: we displace the acts of imagination from the centre of consciousness and supplant them with acts of perception. It can happen either voluntarily or not, depending on whether we act routinely or make a special effort.

It should be added that according to Blaustein aesthetic perception demands an extrovert attitude, one that is oriented at the work of art. An introvert attitude is its opposite as it turns the work of art into a mere springboard for evoking emotions which can then be enjoyed by the subject in question. Finally, I would like to draw attention to the term “*intersubjective imaginary object*” which was introduced by Blaustein but which he did not analyse in detail. It does not only provide us with a theoretical tool for understanding the genesis of cultural communities but also helps us distinctly acknowledge the importance of translation and humanistic upbringing for the establishing of those communities. The repertoire of imaginary objects in the Polish cultural community would include such figures as Orphan Marysia, Kmicic, Izabela and Wokulski, as well as the Pensive Christ.⁷ Some of the intersubjective imaginary objects belong to the world canon, including – among others – Winnie-the-Pooh, the Little Match Girl, Anna Karenina, Raskolnikov, Luke Skywalker and Lord Jim.

To sum up – in order to construct the model of aesthetic experience and characterize it, Blaustein utilizes phenomenological categories. He also introduces the original category of imaginary representations whose main feature is the potential to shift attention from the recreating object to the recreated or imaginary one, and vice versa. Acknowledging this ability as a vital component of aesthetic experience also forces us to recognize the importance of the boundary between the two attitudes. *This boundary can be crossed but cannot be obliterated.* If it were to be cancelled, it would make the shifts of attitude

⁷ It is worth mentioning that schoolchildren are no longer obliged to read Konopnicka in school, so Orphan Marysia ceases to be an intersubjective imaginary object and the generational bond is loosened. This process concerns also many other imaginary objects.

impossible and thus prevent all possible aesthetic experience. In describing the aesthetic experience Blaustein offers a specific model. It does not mean, however, that each and every aesthetic sensation takes the same course in ordinary experience. Nevertheless, it is a description of a pattern which characterizes the mental processes that shape aesthetic experience. The content of these sensations can be – and indeed is – extremely varied, while the empirical capability to engage in such mental activity demands constant practice and perfecting. This is how Blaustein understands the term “refining”.

The third meaning of aestheticisation – understood as an aestheticising mental operation – goes beyond the two aestheticising projects described above. It has become the current way of participating in culture. Kierkegaard provides the following example:

There was a man whose chatter I was obliged to listen to because of the circumstances. [...] On the verge of despair, I suddenly discovered that the man perspired exceptionally much when he spoke. This perspiration now absorbed my attention. I watched how the pearls of perspiration collected on his forehead, then united in a rivulet, slid down his nose, and ended in a quivering globule that remained suspended at the end of his nose. From that moment on, everything was changed; I could even have the delight of encouraging him to commence his philosophical instruction just in order to watch the perspiration on his brow and on his nose.

(Kierkegaard 1987: 299)

It is a well-known psychological mechanism: we divert our attention away from that which is unpleasant and focus on something else. However, it is not the latter element that is the actual source of pleasure. It is the very fact of manipulation that is the source of enjoyment, in this case – encouraging someone to speak on so as to make him perspire even more.

What exactly is this other thing that I focus my attention on and admire? What does it have to do with the “reality of life”? Finally, what does it mean to focus on something? Isn’t Baudrillard describing the same mental operation when he makes the following observation?

The destiny of art is therefore effectively to go beyond itself into something else, whereas life...! This glowing perspective evidently did not materialize. What happened is that art substituted itself for life in the form of a generalized aesthetics that finally led to the “Disneyfication” of the world: a Disney-form capable of atoning for everything by transforming it into Disneyland, takes the place of the world!

(Baudrillard 2005: 53-54)

According to Baudrillard, art has lost its transcendental dimension, which means that now it neither reveals nor conceals. It does not refer beyond itself and fails to provide the possibility of a complete aesthetic experience of the sort described by Blaustein. The transcending mechanism, whose proper functioning is a necessary prerequisite of

a complete aesthetic experience, is getting rusty. In consequence, art loses the imaginary and recreated objects, and is finally left with nothing but the recreating ones.

The “pearls of perspiration,” which drew Kierkegaard’s attention, appeared as a result of the same aestheticising move from meaning to appearance. The analogy between the “recreating object” and the “pearls of perspiration” depends on the fact that both categories describe the effects of reducing a complex structure to its single element. Michał Paweł Markowski regards this tendency not just as an inability to fully participate in the aesthetic experience, or as an axiological impotence, but as an alternative way of satisfying the desire for presence:

That which is present is visible, tangible – available to the senses [...]. It concentrates all attention on itself, concealing the object it refers to [...]. Another way of satisfying this desire is found in the conviction that real presence is to be found where the senses do not reach – it appears only before the soul or the mind.

(Markowski 1999: 13)

In the former case, the object is granted full visibility but – as Baudrillard warns us – “hypervisibility is a way to extinguish sight” (Baudrillard 2005: 65). In the latter – it is only the mind itself that is endowed with the capability to see the “essentially existing entities”. They have no colour or shape, wear no costume and cannot be put into words.⁸ Thus, they cannot be apprehended by the senses, i.e. they cannot attain full sensual visibility. “*Eidos* had two meanings for the Greeks,” Markowski continues, “it was either the shape perceived by the eye, attracting it with its appearance, or the essence which could be comprehended only with the eyes of the soul” (Markowski 1999: 14). This dualism has become a characteristic trait of European culture. It is the source of disparities not only in approaches to art, but also regarding all phenomena of culture and humanity. “Bodily eyes turned to idols, whereas the eyes of the soul – towards icons” (Markowski 1999: 14).

Icons and idols do not have to refer to separate realities which are apprehended and represented in different ways. Jean-Luc Marion remarks that they can define “two manners of being for beings, not two classes of beings” (Marion 1991: 8). To make things more clear, Marion introduces the category of the “gaze” which he endows with an immanent teleology – a goal-oriented determination. The ways in which beings exist are dependent on that gaze. The idol, for example, becomes a function of the gaze and is thus dependent on it. The gaze is satisfied by the idol. The goal-oriented determination of the gaze – its satisfaction – rests on the idol. It feasts on him and comes to permanent standstill. It does not move further and therefore fails to penetrate the realm of the visible. “In the idol the gaze is buried” (Marion 1991: 13). Is this not exactly what Baudrillard had in mind when he said that hypervisibility is the demise of the gaze?

I do not think that such an approach can encompass the entire spectrum of artistic activities, but it does seem to describe the aestheticisation projects. The ways in which they conceptualize art and aesthetic experience point to an alternative way of satisfying

⁸ Cf. Plato’s *Phaedrus* (247c).

the desire for presence. The gaze which operates in the projects of aestheticisation reduces art to an idol. As a result, the representational function of art is lost and art no longer makes anything present. It ceases to perform the task of revealing and concealing, while the aesthetic sensation becomes just individual pleasure. The idolatry of the aestheticising projects manifests itself on two levels. First of all, it is visible in the admiration for the body (somaesthetics) and the emphasis on the presence of aesthetic elements in cognition (epistemological aestheticisation). The body is treated like a work of art and a source of pleasure, whereas the truth-related claims of knowledge are weakened by the infusion of aesthetic factors. Secondly, these projects obviously go into raptures about themselves. They do not offer descriptions of individual aesthetic preferences, but entire programmes. They want to radiate, shaping socio-cultural currents and trends.

If Marion is right in saying that “art attempts [...] to consign materially [...] by what one habitually calls an idol, the brilliance of the god,” (Marion 1991: 15) while the idol is dependent on the gaze and its goal-oriented determination, it might be the case that our gaze will be able to rebound off that which is visible without congealing in it. Our gaze could then remain infinite and transform the idol into an icon.

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