

Marina Ciccarini

Praxis and Logos. The Archetype of Human Transformation in Słowacki and Norwid

Post-Hegelian philosophy and French utopian socialism find a point of convergence in the so-called "philosophy of action" that was devised in Poland. Its implications were both original and fruitful, and represent the underlying doctrinal theory of the poetics of several writers of Polish literary romanticism (see Ciccarini 2009).

The year 1838 brought *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* by August von Cieszkowski¹, a philosopher greatly admired by Marx, Bakunin and Herzen. It contained *in nuce* the ideas that the philosopher was to fully develop in his later treatises. These include the concept that revolutionary disruptions are not natural to history and that, in the course of its historical development, humanity must be understood as an organism in progressive evolution.

The modern world, for Cieszkowski, began with Christianity, and with it came the responsibility that results from liberty and, from a strictly ethical point of view, from free will. In this world, however, the principles of brotherly love and solidarity as preached by Christ soon gave way to individualism and egotism, thus giving rise to the paradox of a Christian world that was essentially atheist. According to Cieszkowski, however, the organic character of history permits us to know its laws of development and to predict the results determined by the act, both deliberate and free, which drives it. In this sense, the philosophy of the praxis and messianism merges with the philosophy of history in one syncretic amalgam (see Tomba 1977).

He writes about this in *Prolegomena*:

[...] humanity reaches precisely that degree of maturity in which one's own dispositions are totally identifiable with the divine plan of Providence and individuals [...] heroes that personify nations and represent them to such an extent that their biographies can justifiably be considered universal history, no longer do they have to be blind instruments of chance or necessity, but conscious architects of their own liberty. Only then can the will of God find a place on earth as in heaven, that is to say, with love,

¹ The 1838 edition was printed in Berlin by Veit und Comp. From here on reference will be made to the following edition: von Cieszkowski 1972. Cf. the introduction by Andrzej Walicki to that edition, dedicated to Cieszkowski's philosophical writings in the years 1838-1842 in the intellectual context of that era and, in particular, pages XLV-XLVII in which the theoretical positions of the philosopher and those of the great Polish romantic poets are analysed.

conscience and liberty, whereas up to now this merely comes about through divine omnipotence, without the conscious and self-determining collaboration of humanity (von Cieszkowski 1972: 15-16)².

Philosophy, therefore, must be refounded upon praxis³, and man must contribute to the affirmation of truth by his concrete action:

Let us call [...] facts (*facta*) those passive events which, so to speak, we find before us and to which we behave with total indifference: something that exists without our contribution and our conscience [...] The act (*actum*) is, on the other hand, something totally different [...] it is an active event, totally ours, no longer extraneous but already conscious before being carried out. The *facta* consist of an unconscious praxis and are thus pre-theoretical, whereas acts constitute a conscious praxis and are thus post-theoretical [...] the latter [...] seems to us the very synthesis of the theoretical and the immediately practical, of the subjective and the objective, the doing (*Thun*) representing the true substantial synthesis of being and of thought (von Cieszkowski 1972: 14).

If it is true, then, that ‘doing’ is “the essential synthesis of being and of thought,” this synthesis is directed towards an aim that identifies man as an ethical subject; that is to say, towards good (see Alici 2002: 14).

The idea of human action as the realisation of a superior design is developed in one of Cieszkowski’s later works, *Ojciec nasz* (Our Father)⁴, in which the philosopher returns to the idea of Logos as a full fusion of Logos and thought⁵, underlines the importance of the *Pater Noster*, “the prayer that supersedes all others” given that it reveals the future, and articulates the concept of ‘act’ as the culminating moment of human life, a moment in which a human being must render concrete, and carry out, the example of Christ:

² These phrases strongly echo the thinking of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin who, in *Le nouvel homme*, defined the figure of man of action that is the meeting point between heaven and earth, who is the new Christ and carries out the history of humanity in full liberty, together with others similarly chosen.

³ “[...] philosophy must descend from the heights of theory into the fields of praxis. Practical philosophy or, more precisely, the philosophy of praxis – whose concrete influence on life and on social relations constitutes the development of truth in concrete action – this is the future destiny of philosophy” (von Cieszkowski 1972: 87). Previously Cieszkowski had written: “According to Hegel the will is merely a particular mode of thought: and this is a mistaken conception; in fact thought is simply an integral moment of the will, and thought which *becomes being* once more is will and action” (von Cieszkowski 1972: 81).

⁴ Of *Ojciec nasz*, a monumental work, Cieszkowski only published the first volume in Paris in 1848. The other volumes were published posthumously by the philosopher’s son. The first volume contains an introduction by Adam Żółtowski.

⁵ Cf. the first chapter of the introduction, entitled *The Paths of The Spirit. The Thought and The Word* (von Cieszkowski 1922, I: III-X).

Before long humanity, bearing witness to Christ, better than through words, that is to say, by his own Act, fulfilling that to which he is called, and will repeat with regard to the new law that which He Himself said of the old one: “Do not believe that I have come to revoke the law and the prophets; I haven’t come to revoke but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17) (von Cieszkowski 1922, I: 28).

Of Cieszkowski’s complex philosophical system, it is precisely this possibility of concrete action, of the dual presence of *telos* and *eschaton*, that seems to represent the motive that offers the most to Polish literary culture and, specifically, in the poetics of Norwid and Słowacki. In particular, the idea that the creation ‘ordered’ by divine intelligence is recognizable by man through Christ’s intervention, and that the capability for order and ‘ordered action’ represent the key towards the realisation of the aims of man.

Much has been written on Cieszkowski’s influence and on the paradoxes present in his historiosophic framework. In 2007, Arent van Nieukerken dedicated a detailed study of the common points of Cieszkowski’s and Norwid’s philosophy (see van Nieukerken 2007).

In the same volume, great emphasis is given to the example of Christ the Saviour in the works of Norwid. Van Nieukerken writes:

The life of Christ [...] allows the individual men to become conscious of his destination. He should discover and express the essential sacredness of all aspects of being “here and now”, realize his existential priesthood, solve the riddle of his life [...] by recognizing the miracle of ordinariness [...] Using the terminology of Martin Heidegger, we could say that man rises to the heights of destiny, when he discovers and overcomes (these the two acts are one) *Seinsvergessenheit* (van Nieukerken 2007: 389).

But how can man rise to the heights of destiny, discover the truth of his being and of the world, and make it an action?

Norwid clarifies: “In regard to the sentiment of truth, it seems to me that sometimes, more rather often, we forget that trait of truth whose sentiment every living being possesses, albeit in different forms” (Norwid 1902: 315-316).

The “sentiment of truth” is the spring that propels the act of discovery and overcoming of self, and the thing that fulfils the destiny of man.

Man, once the truth has taken hold of him, creates and determines history. At the beginning, however, he is unaware of the sacredness of his existence and his destiny. For Norwid:

Transcendence is embodied in a space in which man, before beginning to reflect on its conventionality, is “involuntarily and unknowingly” transformed [...] Man connects himself with this space to find a harmonic wholeness which precedes any self-reflection. He becomes aware of the “stigmata” that this space has impressed upon him only when the transcendent instance has miraculously imprinted itself on that space. He then looks at his daily activities from this perspective of the *sacred* [...] This perspective is an inexplicable gift of that instance that goes beyond the original immersion of man in the common sphere (van Nieukerken 2007: 17).

Christ's example is the gift bestowed by God that allows man to undertake that process of self-awareness that leads to a saving redemption. Action thus serves as a reunification, a recuperation of global wholeness, it gives sense to one's life and one's destiny, it is a 'fulfilment'⁶.

An analogous affinity of motives, a symbolic metamorphosis of the individual that occurs through enacting the example of Christ, this rebirth of man into a superior level of life, we find also in a seminal work of Juliusz Słowacki⁷, *Książę niezłomny* (The Constant Prince). Published in Paris in 1844 and translated into Polish octosyllabic verses from the Calderón de la Barca play, *El príncipe constante*, this theatrical play tells the story of a Portuguese prince, Don Fernando who, upon being taken prisoner by the Moors, offers up his own life so that the city of Ceuta is spared from falling to the infidels, and remains a Christian city.

Of great interest would be full and in-depth study into the manipulations and additions made by the Polish poet to the original text⁸. For the purposes of my discourse here it is sufficient to provide a few examples demonstrating how Don Fernando, the protagonist of this work, exactly personifies man regaining possession of himself and of his moral vocation by virtue of an act of retrieval and regeneration, in which his essence is fully manifested, upon following the guidance of the example of Christ.

Calderon's historical drama, in Słowacki's translation-readaptation becomes something more than the heroic tale of a prince who sacrifices himself for his people. Słowacki adds elements to the original text which transform it from a historical play into a 'mythical' one.

One of the key scenes in Słowacki's modification is that in which a messenger of Don Alfonso, king of Portugal, delivers a parchment to the king of Fez on which is written an undertaking to give up the Christian city of Ceuta in return for the release of the prisoner Don Fernando who, nonetheless, as we have already seen, refuses to be saved and accepts martyrdom.

In the play, the desperate prisoner laments his plight and despairs at his misfortune, and yet carries out an act that serves as a metaphor for his 'metamorphosis': he grabs the parchment that sanctions the surrender of Ceuta from the hands of the king's messenger, tears it into shreds and then swallows it (cf. Słowacki 1949: 333-334).

Following this ingestion, in fact, it is as if the prisoner soars from the dust on which he had been miserably prostrated and, upon swallowing the parchment written by a king, becomes a king himself.

Słowacki, in fact – at this point of the play – adds to the Spanish text a long and significant insert, of which I will read here but a few short lines: “[...] Know that a king, whether he wishes it or not, / has within himself such an authority, a divine force, / and such an illustrious force / that the blood running through his body / rises above the worthlessness of his body / to attest his kingdom / and get into his kingly virtues” (Słowacki 1949: 381).

⁶ 'Fulfilment' understood as '*vollbringen*', cf. Heidegger 1947.

⁷ On the relationship between Norwid and Słowacki cf. van Nieuwerkerken 2009.

⁸ Several examples concerning this subject can be found in Ciccarini 2008.

The prince-king thus decides to annul the order of his sovereign, to whom he is by now equal in regal dignity. In this unexpected transformation of the Calderonian play, two elements seem to be decisive. It's necessary both that he who opposes a king be a king himself, and that, given his divine qualities, to fulfil the obligation of every sovereign a king must sacrifice himself without hesitation for the well-being of his people.

There is little question that the 'mythical' transformation of the historical event has a deep significance and describes an unexplored vein of Słowacki's inspiration, both in drama and in philosophy.

If a slave can transform himself into a king, then everybody can do the same. In fact, everybody *must* do the same in order to master his ethical actions. And if this transformation ultimately calls for the sacrifice of one's physical liberty and one's life, this means that liberty and life are, in Christian terms, the price of true liberty (Matt. 16:25).

The sacrifice of Don Fernando is the result of his radical metamorphosis: from slave to king, but also from a man focused on his own suffering to a sovereign focused on the suffering of others. The act of transformation results primarily in the giving of himself, implicit in the change in worldly perspective that occurs in Fernando: from the present of personal suffering to the future of the suffering avoided by the Christians of Ceuta.

The choice to follow one's ethical conscience is within all of us: to choose whether to lose oneself in order to gain the world.

What is fulfilled, therefore, is the overcoming of selfishness and individualism by virtue of a man who is a 'history-maker' and who, in the manner of Cieszkowski, transforms from an abstract entity to a concrete being through the process of active action.

In *The Constant Prince*, the contradiction between the free will of the individual and the omniscience of the Absolute would seem to be resolved: for those who have chosen the path of Don Fernando, no Second Coming is expected. Their Second Coming lies in the renunciation that they have undertaken, which initially renders them omnipotent among men (it makes them Kings) and then the image of Christ on earth.

This ethical conception contains a subtle but recognizable line of thought which can be traced to a paradigm which gained favour in Europe, precisely at the end of the seventeenth century and, in particular, in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and whose precedents reach far back in time: the idea that history has a remote goal, but it is brought about in each moment that passes and, therefore, in each individual step that is *fulfilled*.

The Kingdom of God is *here and now* (*hic et nunc*) and in this kingdom every man can be both a citizen and a Lord.

Here and now, in *The Constant Prince*, there exists the possibility of imitating Christ but not, as in the case of Christian eschatology, by waiting for a distant but certain Parousia.

In this way, Don Fernando discovers the truth about himself, no longer a prince but a king, and the truth leads him to put into 'action' his new state of being. Every sovereign, in order to decide the destiny of his people, is obliged to see into the future. Accordingly, over time Don Fernando changes his vision of the future of Ceuta and enacts the laws of time and of transformation: he becomes, in a manner unique to those who reign, master of the

time of his people. However, as it is for all men who finally become masters both of his time and of his destiny, to act is not to let time roll by, but rather to transform it into history.

Whether it be that from human action comes the historic reflection of a dialectic dynamism, or that it is inserted within the factual logic of the event, it seems to me that, in the light of these basic examples, it can be proposed that the time dimension plays a key role in the poetics of the two authors in question here, albeit in varying ways and with a number of differences.

The awareness of the immanence in the present instant of man's destiny gives the subject a tool of fundamental importance. In fact, it brings to mind the utopia 'of time', the Chiliasm, thoroughly explored by Karl Mannheim (1953).

This is a utopian category – different to the 'classic' one named by Thomas More –, in which the ideal world, opposite in its absolute perfection to the corrupt and imperfect one in which the utopian writer lives, is not located on some faraway island whose shores the utopian traveller reaches by chance, and to which he would not know how to return once he had left them. For Chiliasm the perfect world is here and now. Or rather, as Walter Benjamin would say, messianic time fulfilled is *here and now* (see Benjamin 1977).

The wait for the Year One Thousand is not merely a wait for the end of the world, for the Parusia or for the events described in St. John's Apocalypse, but the profound awareness of the fact that the era of Christ is *now* and that *now* it is being lived.

Clear characteristics of this special form of utopia are the absence in history of a destination and, above all, the immanence in the moment of the destiny of man (Mannheim 1953: *passim*).

Chiliasm is not a philosophical system, but is rather a state of consciousness that permeates a life lived, moment by moment, in the understanding that each of these moments already has its place in eternity.

Gioacchino da Fiore, Thomas Müntzer, Michail Bakunin, all are examples of a utopic tension that doesn't need an island paradise to find its rules and its social equilibrium.

Chiliasm is both static and in continual movement.

Even though 'chiliasm' and 'messianism' are substantially different concepts, they have often been used as synonyms. Suffice to say, for example, that the 'messianic time' that W. Benjamin talks about has nothing to do with the advent of a Messiah, but is instead characterized by the "fullness of time" which is realized moment by moment, as opposed to historic time, "infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment" (Benjamin 1977: 134).

A chiliasm 'approach', whether it involves the static acceptance of the *hic et nunc*, or in the acceptance that leads to a movement without aims and without fulfilment, nevertheless possesses a strong revolutionary value. If, as Karl Mannheim sees it, utopia is 'thinking-against', chiliasm exhibits an indomitable opposition to the existing state of things.

The form in which this 'approach' appears in Norwid's work is basically that of the consciousness that Christ's sacrifice brought together transcendent and immanent in a reality which is only apparently contradictory: the non-time of eternity (transcendence) is

fused with historical time (immanence) and both do not change the appearance of the real, but rather its substance.

In this way, the time that passes before our eyes, moment by moment, acquires the profound and significant dimension of the eternal: in each moment, time is present in its entirety *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Moreover, the world of Norwid acquires a further dimension added by the *presence* of eternity in the moment that is passing.

And finally, the contingent world is transformed when man accepts his role as priest of the divine that is hidden in every event, even in the tiniest and seemingly insignificant ones of daily life (cf. van Nieuwerkerken 2007: 16-78).

Norwid's model thus somewhat resembles those of Gioacchino da Fiore or the Münster anabaptists, given that the 'real' presence of the divine in the world is not postponed to a final time or the end of time: the fullness of time, for Norwid, is present *here and now*, providing man accepts to be aware of it.

Słowacki's theo-cosmological position in *The Constant Prince* classifies, if only partially, in the same model that resolves the temporal paradox by means of the 'breaking' of the linearity of the process deriving from the sacrifice of the Self as Christ, and by means of a 'new' utopian category. This category seems capable of resolving the contradiction present in the Calderon-Słowacki play between historical time and Parusia: Don Fernando's sacrifice, saying it with the words of Walter Benjamin, is "time individually fulfilled" (Benjamin 1977: 134), that is a bubble of utopia of time within the flow of history, and demonstrates how the Kingdom of God can be present *here and now*.

In general, in the complex Słowackian system, the same conceptual structure of the process of transformation of both the individual and of things from more primitive states to more complex and evolved ones extends so far that it makes the present, the evolution, the path towards perfection something that stretches to infinity and therefore exhibits chiliastic traits. The most significant trait is clearly that of the immediate possibility of the 'imitation of Christ', but no less important is the tracing of an eschatological destiny that is projected not, as is the case in Christian theology, toward a distant but certain day of judgement, but rather toward a goal whose time is infinitely distant.

The evolutionary path of man that Słowacki delineates is not much different then from Norwid's idea of salvation: on an 'infinite' path, in fact, every moment is worth nothing and everything at the same time, and every movement, as in the *aporia* of Achilles and the tortoise, is both infinite and inexistent.

Thus, despite the seemingly opposite nature of their two conceptions of the world, Norwid and Słowacki share the 'sentiment' that the world, salvation, evolution towards redemptive awareness should not be sought in a distant place or in a distant time but occurs – albeit in different ways – *here and now*.

In the same way for both of them (for Słowacki in *The constant prince*, in which the "utopian bubble" of time appears as individually fulfilled) the figure of Christ-truth-love, eternal *Logos*, resolves the contradiction between the immanent and the transcendent, the

asymmetric relationship with God, an absolute mystery: Christ is the truth revealed and the reason for salvation, either when man should follow him with his cross, as Norwid would contend (see van Nieuwerkerken 2009: 40), or when he should imitate him through martyrdom, as put forth by Słowacki.

The liberating transformation, a saving grace redemptive for oneself and for others: if Polish romanticism – as Maria Janion correctly maintains – is characterised by mystic thoughts that contain this intuition, it is essential to fully evaluate the philosophical premises of an historiosophic doctrine of salvation that, basing its premises on Cieszkowski's line of thought, considers the "individuals as creators of their own liberty, [...] attempts to pull them from the bare necessities of history, viewing them instead as its conscious creators" (Tomba 1977: 32). Polish romanticism is undoubtedly characterised by the fact that it needs change, and the profound traces in late nineteenth and in twentieth century Polish culture are due to that demolishing activism that the avant-garde were to consider so close to their needs.

To be a complete man, a man in his wholeness, a man conceived as a whole, or to such an extent as to be at the same time a warrior who participates in history and in his own personal life, and a man who *actively and totally dedicate himself to what he does*: from the first Brzozowski, to Wyspiański, to Grotowski, the theatre and dramaturgy – at least in their most accomplished form – seem to fully reflect the self-awareness which Walter Benjamin speaks about in his reference to the "time of tragedy" as a "time individually fulfilled" (Benjamin 1977: 134). A time when *praxis* and *logos* blend: on its own, perhaps, the perfect paradigm of human transformation, i.e. of human redemption.

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Abstract

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Post-Hegelian philosophy and French utopian socialism find a point of convergence in the so-called 'philosophy of action' that was devised in Poland. Its implications were both original and fruitful, and represent the underlying doctrinal theory of the poetics of several writers of Polish literary romanticism. This article analyzes the presence of some instances of the philosophical system of August von Cieszkowski in the poetics of C.K. Norwid and J. Słowacki. Special emphasis is placed on some affinities between these two writers, concerning the figure of Christ-Truth-Love, eternal *Logos*, that resolves the contradiction between the immanent and the transcendent, and the asymmetric relationship with God, an absolute mystery. Christ is the truth revealed and the reason for salvation 'here and now', either when man should follow him with his cross, as Norwid would contend, or when he should imitate him through martyrdom, as put forth by Słowacki, for example in *The Constant Prince*.

Keywords

A. von Cieszkowski; J. Słowacki; C.K. Norwid; Action; Transformation.