The aesthetics of the religious and the sacralization of "positivist" science – “idealism” (Adam Asnyk) and decadent religious poetry of early modernism (Stanisław Korab-Brzozowski)

Abstract

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Religious images and motives in nineteenth-century poetry (particularly in the period of dominant Positivism) became gradually aestheticized and lost much their original symbolic impact. This was partly due to the consequences of Kantian philosophy that introduce a dichotomy between phenomena and noumena. Positivism was merely interested in the relation between objects belonging to the phenomenal world. Critical theology (D.F. Strauss, Ernest Renan) started to analyze religious symbols and New Testament stories from the point of view of history and (compared) myth, applying positivist methodology to the “humanities”. Poets wishing to recapture the religious potential (the “Holy”) of traditional symbols and ritual had to recontextualize them. The “sacred” does not reside in the symbols themselves, but it is transferred to the relation established by the individual between his position in the world and a symbol or ritual. The religious moment results from experiencing this “unrepeatable” relation (its unrepeatability being the condition of contact with transcendence, relating the symbol as phenomenon with the noumenal sphere that is present as a trace – the individually experienced symbol points to its absence).

In Polish late romantic poetry (e.g. Adam Asnyk) the individualization of the experience of transcendence is impeded by the patriotic connotations of religious symbols and rituals that presuppose the experience of belonging to a (“national”) community (a “relic” of Polish romantic messianism, c.f. the aftermath of the January Uprising). The modernist poet Stanisław Korab Brzozowski succeeded in developing a poetic method of recontextualizing traditional religious symbols that allowed to show the incompatibility between the phenomenal and the noumenal sphere as an inner experience of a subject (e.g. a wooden cross stretching its arms to an empty heaven) as a direct reaction to Renan’s relativization of the Christian “Heilsgeschichte”, unmediated by Polish romantic messianism).

Keywords: Polish early modernism, poetry, religion, epistemology
Religious poetry after the crisis of Christianity developed as a reaction to “critical theology”, an invention of the German theologian David Friedrich Strauss that was popularized by the French agnostic sage Ernest Renan (author of *La vie de Jésus* and other volumes about early Christianity) and interpreted the miraculous elements in the sacred narratives of Christianity from the point of view of imaginative societal processes giving birth to myth, although it did not consider that an obstacle for “composing a history according to rational principles”¹ (the proportionality of “myth” to “history” depends on the time distance between the depicted events and their codification – Renan, drawing a comparison between the Gospels and the oldest legends about Saint Francis of Assissi, thought that in their essential parts that distance did not exceed fifty years). In literature and art, religious poetry attempted to hold its own against a new form of symbolism that was severed from the Christian concept of incarnation (which, however, in the case of Mallarmé, remained to a certain extent present as “absence”, “void”, “annihilation” etc). Religious sentiment (a feeling of “instinctive” – i.e. not “reflected” by the intellect – awe for the “mysterious”: admiration and fear intermingled, Rudolf Otto’s *mysterium tremendum*) was gradually transferred to “nature” (the immeasurable – infinitesimally great or small) as an aesthetic (“sublime”) experience, rooted in the inability to imagine nature as it was grasped by “modern” (nineteenth-century) science.

The astonishing achievements of nineteenth-century science that allowed the “prediction” and explanation of many hitherto mysterious natural “phenomena” – offering “objective” knowledge, although – on the other hand – raising new questions and doubts – were the outcome of empirical research methods in combination with “mathematical”, generalizing abstraction. They minimized the “creative” role of the researcher as a “subject” (although this suppressed subjectivity remained present as a “unifying” instance, imposing a “theoretical” perspective). In Kantian philosophy the unbridgeable gap – from the point of view of the subject – between the phenomenon and the noumenon (*Ding an sich*) could to a certain extent be abolished by “practical reason” (*die praktische Vernunft*), the subject experiencing its – as we now would say – “authenticity” in acting according to certain “given” moral principles. But modern science, the investigative spirit as a purpose in itself, isolated from a comprehensive “worldview”, was not interested in moral issues (apart from the vague view that “Progress” would gradually solve all our “problems”). This “repressed” subjectivity shaped a new religious subject that expressed itself most clearly through *Fin-de-Siècle* poetry in which an agnostic epistemology was modified by an essentially religious sensibility.

Reading Polish early modernist (the period of “Młoda Polska”) poetry, one often notices that the immeasurable and incomprehensible is deemed to be intimately connected with the “I” (hence a preference for religions with pantheist elements – Hinduism and the Vedas), but – in contrast with the ecstatic feeling of identity typical for romantic contemplation of heaven (a feeling of “wholeness”, the integrity of the subject whilst

¹ Ernest Renan, *La vie de Jésus*, (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères) 1863 XV.
communicating with the “world” and “universe”), decadent (and symbolist) poetry reflects on the immeasurable from the point of view of the inner division and incompleteness – brokenness – of the modern subject that cannot grasp itself as it “truly” is, an “active” entity and not a chain of mental phenomena empirically “observed”; it loses its very nature when it starts to “reflect” on itself (and it is aware of this apory; precisely this “critical” consciousness constitutes its selfhood). The emblem of the immeasurable – heaven with its infinite number of stars and galaxies, and also the world of the infinitesimally small atom – does not so much “reflect” this incompleteness of the subject, but it rather co-produces this sentiment: an “I” fails to grasp itself whilst attempting to grasp what is outside of it (since in this very act it grasps its “inmost” self as part of the “outside”). On the other hand, this “I” can imagine the incompatibility (that constitutes the relation between phenomenon and noumenon) that is part of its own subjectivity and the immeasurable universe. Both entities can be imagined as a whole although there are no objective, “quantitative” scales corroborating this essentially aesthetic judgment. This awareness produces a sentiment of the sublime that Kant characterized as the “mathematical sublimity of nature” (das mathematisch-Erhabene der Natur).²

The antinomies of Kant’s speculative aesthetics contributed, after the decline of romanticism, to an increasing metaphysical disenchantment. The subject cannot penetrate to the inmost being of the immeasurable “universe” (there the Ding an sich [noumenon] must exist though it hides itself beyond the “phenomenal” world) – this impossibility is – as an act of the subject – produced by the fact that the subject cannot penetrate its own “inmost” being. Losing its own self the subject loses the universe (and vice versa). It merely succeeds in relativizing the security (stability) of its grasp on its direct surroundings – the world of everyday life (including history and tradition – time changes into a “mechanical” succession of moments without any “inner” connection) that presents itself as an illusion, a “fantasy”, a dream dreamed by a dreamer whose subjectivity is a dream as well. This twofold sentiment of isolation (not entirely being oneself and – at the same time – feeling lost in a borderless immensity) awakens the emotional necessity of finding (creating) “objects” that point to the possibility that the infinity of which we are part can be encompassed or – at least – “domesticated” (the sublime aesthetics of “imagining” the universe’s infinity as a whole that cannot be encompassed no longer suffices). These objects that point beyond themselves in a way that cannot be entirely explained by “cause” and “effect” produce sentiments that differ from the feelings aroused by the traditional religious symbols that were part of a world that the subject “shared” with other subjects without the need of any further justification since it [re]affirmed itself as member of a community (c.f. the “communion of saints”) by taking part in “repetitive” religious rituals. The (early) modern subject still attaches importance to rituals, but links them with the notion of “individual” authenticity, a negative consequence of the Kantian “Copernican” revolution that linked the subject’s “true” identity with the performance

² https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/kritik-der-urteilskraft-3507/35
of moral acts. However, under the conditions of an increasingly complex society the impact of such individual moral acts on the “real” world of socio-economic relations appeared insignificant.

A possible solution of the gradual alienation of many social groups (particularly artists and poets – c.f. the phenomena of the Bohème and dandyism, examples of self-conscious aesthetic “subcultures”) would be a reversal of an epistemological paradigm in which the subject is the active force and – to a certain extent (within the limits of space and time, by means of “causality”) - shapes the object. This approach was chosen by Marxist historical materialism, but its influence on early modernist poetry remained limited (c.f. however the case of the Dutch poet Herman Gorter who, in the nineties of the 19th century, wrote extremely “subjective” – “sensitivist” – poems before undergoing an evolution that led him through “Spinozism” to orthodox Marxism). More typical was a different approach: the “alienated” subject yielding to its “natural” inclination to create situations in which it could grasp itself in its “immediacy” by focusing on art and particularly poetry. Poetic language employs “formal” restrictions as a means of producing aesthetic effects and foregrounds the role of the artist/poet as an active force bringing order into the inchoate matter of “raw” experience (the “immediacy” of man as a creator of original forms may be an illusion, but its illusionary, “phantasmatic” character did not diminish its desirability; it appeared to be the only reality that could offer the subject a certain “autonomy”). The repetitiveness of artistic (poetic) devices (which later became one of the distinctive features of “poetic” language according to Russian Formalism) was originally closely connected with the repetitive nature of rituals and their symbols. It could perhaps be maintained that artistic repetition replaced ritual and symbolic repetitions as a means of experiencing selfhood after the Kantian relativization of the “phenomenal” world. This also appears to hold for traditional religious symbols and rituals. Subjective authenticity, the (“true”) illusion of the self’s “substantiality”, was henceforth only found in continuous change, the fluidity of the world to which the individual self belongs as just one of many phenomena, although – on the other hand – it creates, being an artist – a poet, an “alternative” world of stable (“eternal”) forms that owe their aesthetic effectiveness to repetition as an artistic “device” on many levels.

For this reason late nineteenth-century “agnostic” religious poetry “privatizes” rituals (and symbols). They cannot be repeated as such, but must continuously be reestablished by artistic (poetic) repetition (in ever fresh contexts that, of course, still refer to the ancient symbols and rituals, but by way of recontextualizing them – and it is precisely these act of recontextualization, rooted in the tension between change and repetition, that access the sphere of religious sentiment – a sentiment that expresses the subject’s authenticity in its being never identical with itself, but always in statu nascendi, allowing it to experience itself in its absolute and unrepeatable indeterminacy by a/the “outside”, being a “naked soul” – c.f. Przybyszewski’s “naga dusza”). On the other hand, this “agnostic"
sense of the unavailability of what is hidden behind the “veil” (Schopenhauer’s Maja, der Schleier des Truges\(^5\)) of the phenomenal world, the unknowability of its “essence” or “substance” (in modernist religious poetry these traditional philosophical notions – which guaranteed the stability of phenomena – often contaminate the paradoxical meaning of Kantian Ding an sich, turning it into a quasi-phenomenon) can turn into its opposite. In that case the infinity of the phenomenal world (embodied by the borderless physical universe, the “cosmos”) is treated as an expansive force in which the subject, due to its indeterminacy (the precondition of “further” development), takes part. This identity of agencies, which cannot be grasped in its “wholeness” (although such agencies can – as we have seen – be imagined and they produce the “mathematical sublime of nature”), arouses a sentiment of euphoria, akin to the ecstasy of traditional religious mysticism. This ecstatic mood of a borderless subject in a borderless universe (which is often accompanied by a secret despair that all acts of self-expansion are “in reality” self-deception – ecstasy is a very ambiguous state of mind, psychologically close to scepticism, particularly when the modern scientific concept of “phenomenal” infinity is combined with traditional religious motives as – for instance – in Jan Kasprowicz’s “Hymns”) expresses itself in a poetry that often attempts to simplify or avoid the traditional forms of repetition and equivalence. Sometimes it becomes vers libre which, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, became popular due to the efforts of the American poet Walt Whitman (its best exemplification from the point of view of infinity as an expansive movement of the mind is his famous “Song of myself”). Thus, the confrontation of the subject with a world that has become infinite and been deprived of the once stabilizing effect of notions like “essence” and “substance” (in Kantian philosophy they are subordinated to the “forms of understanding”), the relativization of the subject itself (both a “phenomenon” and an “energy”) and, finally, the decline of traditional Christianity, gave rise to contrasting models of poetry that are, however, rooted in a similar state of mind (and were often adopted by one and the same poet – though generally at different stages of their poetic career - a good example in early Polish modernist literature would be Jan Kasprowicz – but in this text I will focus on minor poets with a more limited poetic scope).

One of the contexts in which symbols and rituals help to create fresh configurations and acquire new meanings (or – if the act of recontextualization fails – reduce what is new in the context to the traditional sense of the symbol or ritual) are – in the case of Polish poetry after 1863 (and up to 1914/18) – the reactions to the history of repeated unsuccessful resistance (the “risings”) against (particularly) tsarist Russia, in other words: the poetics of Polish romantic “martyrology”. In fact, it seems that in Polish early modernist poetry (and also prose – c.f. Stefan Żeromski’s novels) Schopenhauer’s pessimism and the disintegration of traditional Christian faith always remained to a certain

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\(^5\) https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/die-welt-als-wille-und-vorstellung-band-i-7134/5.
extent at odds with a revolutionary patriotic activism that had been shaped by romant- 
cic, catholic-inspired (although “heterodox”) Polish messianism (of which “martyrology” 
was an important ingredient). Traditional religious symbols in late nineteenth-century 
Polish poetry often express a certain ambivalence. On the one hand they are relat-
ted to the consequences of the post-Kantian relativization of the phenomenal world 
(and the self-alienation of the early modernist subject); on the other hand their func-
tioning in a modernist context is often “contaminated” (or – a more positive view – re-
contextualized, in terms of “formalist” aesthetics: “defamiliarized”) by the pre-modern 
paradigm of Christian Heilsgeschichte that “inscribes” [self-]sacrifice into the order 
of providence. In this text I will focus on a few examples of Polish late romantic and early 
modernist poetry [re]contextualizing the fundamental Christian symbol of the cross.

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As I have already pointed out, the “modern” aesthetic experience “individualizes” 
traditional images and motives by its very nature. A work of art (and also its aesthetic re-
ception) is based on a relation between subject and object that cannot be repeated. One 
of its constitutive elements is the fluidity of time or, as the Polish “positivist” poet Adam 
Asnyk expressed it in his cycle of sonnets Above the abyss [Nad głębiami]:

“You, mobile wave of mutable being,
That carries us away across the universe’s abyss!
In vain our sight chases everything
That tries to hide under your surface;
(Zmiennego bytu ty falo ruchliwa,
Co nas unosisz po wszechświata toni!
Daremnie wzrok nasz za tym wszyskim goni,
Co pod powierzchnią twoją się ukrywa4).

Man is never identical with himself because time, being ceaseless movement, never 
stops nor rests. The element of narrativity that would allow the interpretation of a work 
of art (a painting, a poem) in the context of “sacred history” (the function of traditional 
symbols) loses its relevance. The traditional system of images and configurations of im-
ages linking the immanent world with the realm of transcendence could not – as we 
have seen – defend its stability against the increasing impact of modern science, Kantian 
philosophy and critical theology that modified the asymmetrical relationship between the 
sacred and profane by introducing a new apory: the phenomenon versus the noumenon 
(the Ding an sich). The essential difference between these two sets of oppositions is that 
knowledge about the realm of the sacred is possible, although it is “revealed” knowl-
edge that man is supposed to “believe” in, whereas the noumenon remains by its very 
nature entirely beyond his grasp (though he can imagine it as a meaningful concept – which, however, does not imply that it exists). The impossibility of attaining the sphere

of the noumenon (apart from proposing its necessity as a logical category) changed the status of the subject (and the self) with regard to religious experiences. The entire content of the systems of symbolic equivalence created by theist religion was [re]integrated as essentially belonging to the phenomenal world (though, of course, suffused with emotional meaning) and the transcendence to which those systems were pointing was gradually confused with the unknowable realm of the noumenon… Against this background the notion of revelation itself turned into a mental phenomenon that could be “explained” by modern psychology. The repetitive element in the traditional theistic systems of symbolic equivalence did not exclude a personal relationship between the believer and the object/addressee of his faith. A system of symbolic equivalence reduced to the level of the scientific explanation of certain mental phenomena robbed the individual believer of his uniqueness as a subject of religious experience.

In order to regain one of the most important features of theistic religious experience, a personal relationship between the believer and the sphere of the sacred (“God”), the object of belief must itself be represented as a phenomenon. Its uniqueness as a “transcendent” (“transcending”) phenomenon is reestablished by making it part of a relation that “in itself”, as a relation, cannot be repeated (not because of the uniqueness of the two “persons” – or “instances” – that are related to each other, but because of the irreducible “event” [c.f. Bakhtin’s notion of “eventness”] of their participating in a relationship). The meaning of the aesthetic experience consists precisely in creating a unique relation between a subject and an object that exposes the subject’s subjectivity (but also – negatively – its isolation and loneliness which arouses both feelings of elation and depression) whilst shaping (or reinterpreting) an artistic object consisting of images and situations with which it may have been familiar for a long time. What we therefore see in early modernist poetry is that traditional Christian symbols are “aestheti-
cized” by relating them to certain – generally pessimistic, and often despairing – human moods that give them a new, “subjective” strength (even though it may be used for self-annihilation) rooted in the unrepeatability of the aesthetic relationship… The traditional sacrum of Heilsgeschichte is personalized and retains its disturbing features (anguish, mental cruelty) only against the background of a struggle between absolutized moral entities (“good”, “evil”, “Angelism”, “Satanism”) or excessive and perverse eroticism that is mentally experienced, i.e. there exists a distance between the physical aspect and its reflection in the mind (c.f. Stanisław Korab Brzozowski associating the crucifixion and its accessories with the plight of “his soul” – I will later analyze this poem), a non-identity rooted in a polarization by which both symbols and values become ambiguous and that is exposed by contemplating traditional religious “symbols” in a defamiliarizing context of “transgression” (but everything takes place in the “soul”, it is related to “moods”).

In the Polish context the (romantic) backdrop of these early modernist recontextualizations of traditional Christian symbols (rooted in acts of transgression) is, however – as we have seen – additionally complicated by the (silently assumed) equivalence between Heilsgeschichte (Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection) and the fate
of the oppressed and partitioned nation. In the poem “At the feet of the Cross” [“Pod stopy krzyża”], written by Adam Asnyk in 1869 (five years after the crushing of the January Rising in which the poet himself played a role, being for some time a member of the underground “national government”), he implicitly refers to the effects of the Kantian division between the phenomenal world and the noumenon (Asnyk’s positivism was to a certain extent modified by post-Kantian idealism). After the acceptance of the scientific reduction of knowledge to the realm of phenomena man is forced “to look into bottomless abysses” (“negative” infinity, i.e. borderless space and time, without the possibility of transcendence) and under such conditions Christ vanished from our view, although it seems that in this particular poem these abysses should not be identified with the cosmic infinity on which the poet broods in his already mentioned cycle of sonnets “Nad głębiami” (c.f. the quotation about the fluidity of time), but rather with an abyss of suffering and historical (Polish) defeat (symbolized by the bones of many generations of victims):

“Even facing You, O Lord, I could not
Utter the lament squeezed in my sorrow-laden breast,
Because I gazed in a bottomless abyss,
And You disappeared from my sight, crucified on the cross,
Amidst generations of scattered bones,
Behind a dark cloud of blood, tears and nothingness.
(Nawet przed Tobą, nie mogłem, o Panie,
Wydobyć płaczu z mej piersi ściśniętej,
Bo wzrok mój padał w bezdenne otchłanie,
A tyś mi znikałeś na krzyżu rozpięty,
Spośród pokoleń rozrzuconych kości,
Za ciemną chmurą krwi, łez i nicości)\(^5\).

But the very fact that the poet refers in this poem to the same notion of “negative” infinity as later in his cycle “Nad głębiami” is significant.

A similar semantic coincidence occurs in a poem that Asnyk wrote to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the January Rising:

“The mobile waves of time have not wiped off
Your bloody traces, O year of misery!
(Ruchliwe fale czasu nie zatarły/ Twych krwawych śladów, o nieszczęścia roku!;
W dwudziestopięciolećiu rocznicę powstania 1863 roku)\(^6\).

From Asnyk’s pessimistic point of view the world of space and time is both infinite (borderless) and fluid. Identity in such a world (including self-identity) is an illusion, but it appears that man, particularly when he is a Pole, cannot do without it. The point is that the “patriotic” emotion – sad as it is – fills to a certain extent the void left behind by the renunciation of transcendence. When the poet depicts the romantic illusions

\(^5\) Asnyk, 178.
\(^6\) Asnyk, 512.
of his generation (comparing the “romantic muse” to a “rainbow state” [tęczowe państwo⁷]) he idealizes the religious meaning of self-sacrifice. He and his comrades would be satisfied when, thanks to their efforts, Poland would be resuscitated (“shining with the Morningstar in heaven”), even if they themselves would “turn to dust” and their only reward would be “a dowry of eternal oblivion”:

“We do not desire anything for our own happiness –
For us – we do not even demand to live
Until the moment when day’s first light illumines the sky.
We want for ever to lie down in the dust
And take eternal oblivion for our dowry,
If only You will pour out sunny brightness.
(My nic dla szczęścia swego, nic dla siebie
Nie pragniem – nawet nie żadam dożyć
Chwili, gdy z jutrzni zabyłœsz na niebie.
Chcemy na zawsze w prochu położyć
I za swe wiano wziąć niepamięć wieczną,
Byleś Ty jasność rozłała słończną)⁸.

Here “rising from the death” has turned into a metaphor that underlines the absolute status of the motherland (“with a face similar to that of the Holy Virgin”⁹) – it derives its emotional impact from Polish romantic patriotism rather than from its original Christian context (Heilsgeschichte). One gets the impression that the speaker (a spokesman for his generation) even at the time of the January Rising did not really believe in Christian redemption. It is the feeling of grief that is foregrounded which compensates the loss of the beloved object caused by the passing of time. In spite of this loss “we” (a community) can still commemorate the failed insurrection. The act of commemoration based on a mood (“sadness”) is stronger than “the mobile waves of time” (although the latter may be closer to the truth of man’s fleeting existence). Life and loss present themselves as an everlasting inner monologue of a subject who is aware that his dreams can never reach the Absolute and that religion itself is a mental phenomenon, or – in other words – a delusion of the mind that on the one hand remains unreconciled with the inaccessibility of transcendence and – on the other hand – rejects the notion that the phenomenal world could be the only “reality”.

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The (explicit) focus on the specifically Polish context of suffering and defeat deprives Asnyk’s Christ of the disturbing meaning created by nineteenth-century critical theology that severed itself – as in Renan’s Vie de Jésus – from belief in the resurrection of the body – and recontextualized the tragedy of the “God-man” as the impossibility of crossing the line dividing the phenomenal world from the sphere of the noumenon. From this point

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⁷ “I w naszych oczach rozpadło się w gruzy/ Tęczowe państwo romantycznej muzy” [Asnyk, 517].
⁸ Asnyk, 517.
⁹ “Z twarzą podobną do Najświętszej Panny” [Asnyk, 516].
of view Christ’s sacrifice consisted in paying the ultimate price for the illusion that man’s redemption depends on overcoming mortality. It turns out – from this point of view – that Christ’s death on the cross “redeems” us precisely because of his despair, whilst becoming aware that the resurrection of the body is a delusion because “God does not exist” and his acquiescing in that depressing truth. This is the message of Gérard de Nerval’s famous cycle of sonnets “Le Christ aux Oliviers” (written in the eighteen-forties). The following lines are from the introductory sonnet:

> “Il se tourna vers ceux qui l’attendaient en bas
Rêvant d’être des rois, des sages, des prophètes…
Mais engourdis, perdus dans le sommeil des bêtes,
Et se prit à crier: »Non, dieu n’existe pas!«”¹⁰

But this statement (“God does not exist”) is not a simple denial of the certainties of Christian faith. It is the outcome of having attained the borders of finitude, the awareness that “eternity”, the “infinite” (the “abyss”) is incompatible with phenomenal reality and that attempts to cross its border can only end in failure. The only consolation is that there is no consolation, a message that is hard to grasp (Christ’s companions are not awakened by his complaint):

> “ Ils dormaient. »Mes amis, savez-vous la nouvelle?«
J’ai touché de mon front à la voûte éternelle;
Je suis sanglant, brisé, souffrant pour bien des jours!

> »Frères, je vous trompais: Abîme! abîme! abîme!
Le dieu manque à l’autel où je suis la victime…
Dieu’ n’est pas! dieu n’est plus!« Mais ils dormaient toujours!…”¹¹

Nerval’s sonnet combines an “agnostic” worldview with rituals of [self]sacrifice. If one compares its content with Asnyk’s far longer poems (“Under the Feet of the Cross” consists of sixteen stanzas of six lines and the poem commemorating the 25th anniversary of the January Rising is even of forty three stanzas) one immediately notices that the French poet’s Christ has had a disturbing experience (the absence of God as the necessary consequence of insight into the nature of the universe) that could – and perhaps should – be shared by each human subject identifying with the God-man in an act that is very similar to the “dark night of the soul” often depicted in mystic poetry (the difference is, of course, that in Nerval’s case absence does not point to a presence that is so overwhelming that it cannot be represented in words or images – absence is simply absence, although it shares with overwhelming presence one feature: it cannot be directly represented – which means that it may be another example of Kant’s “mathematical sublimity”, i.e. – in this case – human “nature” imagining entities that are beyond its intellectual capacity). Asnyk’s approach to Christ is far less radical: the nature of the universe (its infinite immensity) runs counter to his divine aspirations, but he can console

¹⁰ Gérard de Nerval, Poésies et Souvenirs, (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 129.
¹¹ Nerval, 129.
us (though not redeem us) in our misery, due to the memory of childhood (a “paradise” associated with the “mother”) when the speaker’s belief was still undefiled and pure. Asnyk’s Christ is in the first place an emotional presence. “Touching eternity with a blood-stained forehead” – as in Nerval’s poem, the failure to attain the Absolute, does not play any role here. The “abyss”, “infinity”, “nothingness”, the feeling of being pushed into a “bottomless night” etc. are in reality related to the defeat of the January Rising. They draw our attention away from “negative” infinity. The illusions that are lost refer to the rebirth of Poland. The “omnipotent necessity of a higher and at the same time infinite power” that “still is the witness of the power of God” does not point to the tragic essence of human existence (that wishes to believe in the possibility of transcendence whilst “knowing” that it is impossible), but rather to a private delusion (though shared by a “nation”) and a private hope (history could have taken another turn). The epistemological insight into the incompatibility between man’s finite being and the incomprehensible and unattainable infinity of the universe that later – in the cycle “Above the abyss” – gave rise to a truly agnostic poetry is in the poem “At the feet of the cross” more or less a pretext that helps the speaker to assuage his grief after the crushing of one more Polish insurrection. It is neither religious nor metaphysical. Paradoxically, the emotional attachment to the figure of Christ – still present through the attributes of Polish martyrlogy (“Więzienia, groby, szubienice, krzyże/ I śnieżna, mrożna otchłań na Sybirze”12), “prisons, graves, gallows, crosses/ And the snow-covered, frosty abyss of Siberia” (once again the image of bottomless infinity is concretized in a specifically Polish context) is in both poems the same (although they are separated by nineteen years and Asnyk used, in his “metaphysical” poetry [“Nad głębiami”], an entirely different idiom). This curious schizophrenia shows the tenaciousness of Polish messianism that could make almost everything serve its purposes, but – at the same time – prevented attempts at “individualizing” the Christian Heilsgeschichte (the only Polish nineteenth-century poet who successfully resisted this pressure was Cyprian Norwid). This state of affairs only changed (though to a limited extent) with the advent of Młoda Polska.

* The motive of the cross and the crucifixion is more originally handled in early Polish modernist poetry (and particularly – an additional paradox – by “minor poets”). A good example is several poems by Stanisław Korab Brzozowski (1876–1901) who, only 35 years old, committed suicide in an apartment in Warsaw. Here the religious symbolism is not only recontextualized in a space that is organized according to the incompatibility between the phenomenal world and the (unattainable) sphere of the noumenon, a world wherein traditional religious symbols are literally “pointless” (i.e. they are markers referring [“pointing”] to nothing [beyond themselves]), it is also deprived of its specifically Polish, “patriotic” context of suffering and sacrifice (although one might argue that context is so potent that even its omission is an implicit act of recognizing its force). In the two analyzed Asnyk

12 Asnyk, 514.
poems patriotic emotion built a bridge between the motive of the “abyss” (negative infinity) and traditional Christianity, but at the price of depriving Christ’s act of self-sacrifice of its universal impact that Nerval successfully – although by inverting its traditional meaning – retained in the image of the God-man accepting that “God does not exist” (allowing “us” – other individuals – to identify with His despair). The difference between both stances is the referentiality of emotion – Nerval’s Christ expresses his despair about the indifference of the “outside world” (ruled by “immobile destiny” and “cold necessity” identified by the poet with “chance”\textsuperscript{13}) and arrives at the conclusion that the only other emotions available in the unresponsive universe are negative ones. Hence his appeal to Judas, the eternal traitor, to deliver him as quickly as possible to his torturers, but the traitor’s negative emotion turns out to be far from absolute (Judas immediately starts to regret his intention of betraying Christ) and the pity shown by Pilate for the holy fool appears to be rather accidental:

“Mais Judas s’en allait, mécontent et pensif,
Se trouvant mal payé, plein d’un remords si vif
Qu’il lisait ses noircceurs sur tous les murs écrites…

Enfin Pilate seul, qui veillait pour César,
Sentant quelque pitié, se tourna par hasard:
»Allez chercher ce fou!« dit-il aux satellites\textsuperscript{14}.

The root of Christ’s despair is, however, precisely the inevitability of death (not of a particular person, but in general “mortal” man), in other words: man’s finitude facing the apparent infinity of the universe that will continue to exist. From this point of view the disappearance of each individual existence appears to be an inexplicable monstrosity that should cause uproar, but both the mute universe and other finite human existences appear to be little affected by this metaphysical scandal. Nerval’s Christ despairs because the emotion aroused by the inevitable death of all forms of finite being is not proportional to the anguish lying at the root of it: the incompatibility of the phenomenal world and the sphere of the noumenon. Man cannot reach beyond death. Being (particularly human being) turns out be rooted in sacrifice (consciously experiencing one’s own finitude) by its very nature, but a precondition of this awareness (the opening of the “infinite abyss”) is to be considered a fool by the multitude of “ordinary” existences (the proverbial traitor Judas fails to understand the “metaphysical” impact of his treason, interpreting it in categories of personal guilt and remorse instead of understanding that due to his treason Christ discovered and consciously experienced the metaphysical scandal of man’s mortality):

“C’était bien lui, ce fou, cet insensé sublime,
Cet Icare oublié qui remontait les cieux,
[…]
L’augure interrogeait le flanc de la victime,

\textsuperscript{13} “Immobile destin, muette sentinelle,/ Froide Nécessité!... Hasard [...]” Nerval, 130.

\textsuperscript{14} Nerval, 131.
L’univers étourdi penchait sur ses essieux,  
Et l’Olympe un instant chancela vers l’abîme.  

Un seul pouvait au monde expliquer ce mystère:  
– Celui qui donna l’âme aux enfants de limon”  

The insurmountable problem is that the mystery of being’s inner incompatibility can only be explained by a “feeling” entity, a “person”, that is on the side of infinity which appears to be logically impossible because the root of (human) emotion is precisely man’s mortality, the fact that life passes away, that “being” is a “wound”, although we overlook in general the metaphysical consequences of this issue. The conclusion is that only a victim who becomes conscious of the metaphysical inevitability of his “being victimized” can become aware of the sacrificial essence of (human) existence, although this consciousness cannot be shared with “others”, unless they become victims themselves which, however, would imply their absolute solitude and the impossibility of sharing their plight (first experienced by Nerval’s Christ). In the Polish context this absolute solitude of the victim whose plight remains a mystery (or a source of various misunderstandings) was for a certain time unavailable because of the specific, communal nature of Polish romanticism, particularly in its messianic form (we have seen that it even left its imprint on Asnyk’s poetry of unwilling delusion) that focused on the victimhood of the nation (i.e. by definition a – perhaps “imagined” – community, the subject of a “shared” experience).

How could a Polish (early) modernist poet overcome this incompatibility (the impossibility of sharing the sacrificial awareness of one’s individual victimhood on the one hand and – on the other – the sacrificial victimhood of the Polish nation in which all Poles “participate”)? One of the options is creating a situation in which an individual represents his plight as a self-cruciﬁxion. Stanisław Korab Brzozowski’s poem “My soul, crowned with a thorn” (Dusza ma, cierniem uwieńczona […]) represents Christ at the cross as an erotic act of the self (a soul that is embodied and suffers physical pain) cruciﬁed by its desires (“nails” – the disembodied instruments of a “mental” torture of the self) on the “white body” of its beloved – a representation in which the self is speaking in the first person.

“My soul, crowned with a thorn,  
Nailed on the white cross of your body  
With the nails of my desires,  
Slowly expires after bending its head.  
(Dusza ma, cierniem uwieńczona,  
Na białym krzyżu twego ciała  
Przybita pragnień mych gwoździami,  
Schyliwszy głowę, z wolna kona)”  

15 Nerval, 131–132.  
It would be tempting to interpret this poem in the context of Brzozowski’s life (and his suicide), but here I am in the first place interested in the imagery of the poem and the shaping of the lyrical situation. The sexual overtones of the soul “slowly dying” are quite clear, but the reason for its extinction appears to be the impossibility of satisfying its “infinite” desires under finite conditions – there exists a fundamental discrepancy between the physical and mental aspect of human existence. Man could, in fact, be defined as a creature who knows about its own finitude because of his ability to imagine a state beyond its natural one that – however – it can only grasp by making this experience refer to finite situations, and this imaginative ability lies at the core of man’s condition of metaphysical “martyrdom” (implying self-sacrifice) – again an example of the “mathematical sublimity” of human nature. Brzozowski’s poem differs from Nerval’s because of his bold attempt to represent Christ’s suffering in an egotistic context (which makes the difference with Baroque poetry, of which the two stanzas are reminiscent: they are a consistently elaborated concetto).

One could perhaps argue that the poetics of Polish messianism also contributed to this overtly sacrilegious poetic act of self-identification that is complicated by the fact that the speaker gives in to an act of self-alienation, severing his soul from his desires – being at the same time Christ and Judas (“I myself like Judas Iscariot”), though – perhaps – not identical with either of them (but the only way to grasp this “deeper” self derives precisely from this antagonism between soul and desire that point beyond themselves – to the speaker uttering his inner division, his true subjectivity, a “wholeness” that he “embodies”, but that cannot be encompassed by him). If we do not yield to the temptation to reduce the content of this poem to shocking the “bourgeois philistines” with erotic motives that are recontextualized by relating them to Heilsgeschichte and take the lyrical situation at its face value, one immediately notices that the poem represents the already well-known conflict between the finite versus the infinite, phenomenon versus noumenon, body versus spirit etc. in the shape of an internal dialogue conducted by a split subject, and performed in a personified theater (“the white cross of your body” – “your passionate kiss”) that is only – implicitly – addressed (“your”), in order to be deprived of its relevance as another self. The speaker can do without any attempts to console him for his loneliness and does not even need to convince himself that such “outside” attempts at consolation must fail because the consciousness of the impossibility of consolation in view of man’s loneliness in the universe and amongst his fellow men has been internalized by him. In other words: the emotional need to find consolation has been transformed into the emotional need to ensure oneself that consolation is impossible.

This paradoxical emotional strategy of [non]consolation is performed by and in the speaker’s self and he only pro forma addresses other selves that, in fact, are only mute bodies, the objects of a desire that by definition cannot be satisfied. Thus the torture of always remaining imprisoned in the phenomenal world turns out to be a self-torture. Desire is, in fact, always aroused by the confrontation with certain limitations, but in Brzozowski’s case it appears that the very impossibility of overcoming these limitations has become
the main object of desire. Even other selves like “me” appear to be unattainable – authentic selfhood acquires itself the marks of transcendence, but if “I” cannot reach other selves I also cannot grasp my own authentic self. This particular, self-contradictory mental state – being alone in a world of many other selves and confronting a presence that remains beyond “my” grasp although it appears to be speaking through my lips, being the true object of my desire (but its nature is not “objective” and therefore “my” desire has found a surrogate object for my self-crucifixion, an object that remains silent although I know it must be another self, lonely like “me”) and produces a “shudder” (“dreszcz”) of horror that is as much desirable (since it produces self-consciousness and existential knowledge) as it is frightening (a mental “Golgotha”!). The ambivalence of this experience inspires a particular variant of “holy tremor” (a highly original, self-referential form of Rudolf Otto’s *mysterium tremendum*) and is of a religious nature (apart from recontextualizing *Heilsgeschichte* in a highly original manner)

“I myself, like Judas Iscariot,
Delivered her [my soul] to the shudder of dying,
In exchange for your passionate kiss…
O, how I am appalled by this Golgotha!
(Ja, sam, jak Judasz Iskariota,
Za twoj namiętny pocałunek,
Na dreszcz wydałem ją konania…
Ach, mnie przeraża ta Golgota!)*17.

*Is the use of this imagery pointing to the paradoxes of agnostic *mysterium tremendum* merely a matter of accident in Brzozowski’s poetry? In other words: is it possible to establish a direct relationship between his anguished decadent eroticism and the positivist disenchantment with traditional theistic religion? In his juvenile poetry we find a poem that directly tackles the issue (or tragedy) of lost faith. Its title is: “At Renan’s grave-side” (*Nad grobem Renana*). In this poem the author of *La vie de Jésus* is shown as engaging in a self-defeating struggle. Seeing in front of him “Faith” with a “white wing” he allows himself – like a new Laokoon - to be enticed by despair (“zwątpienie”) after which he must look at how “Faith expires”. But immediately after its extinction it is revived in Renan’s soul (“in the transparency of your soul” – “w duszy twej przezroczu”)*18*, a spectacle he cannot bear – he immediately raises his “executioner’s hand against it”. The agnostic battle against religion turns out to be a form of self-torture since faith – the belief in a force that transcends the phenomenal world – is – as an emotional need – rooted in human nature itself, but this explanation of its origins reduces religion (*das Heilige*) to the phenomenal sphere and deprives it of its redemptory force (but it seems that “modern” man cannot simply believe without attempting to explain his belief or, in other

17 Korab Brzozowski, 24.
18 Korab Brzozowski, 56.
words, to find a cause of an effect – Renan represents Christ’s resurrection in his Vie de Jésus as a “hallucination” of Mary Magdalena inspired by love:

“Disons cependant que la forte imagination de Marie de Magdala joua dans cette circonstance un rôle capital. Pouvoir divin de l’amour! Moments sacrés où la passion d’une hallucinée donne au monde un Dieu ressuscité!”\(^{19}\).

Renan adds in a footnote that according to the gospels (Saint Mark and Saint Luke) “Mary of Magdala had been possessed by seven demons” although this implicit psychological “explanation” – being mentally unstable (it is, in fact, only suggested) – appears precarious. Renan was, however, like David Friedrich Strauss, the founder of critical theology, convinced that the core of many New Testament stories was historical (he thought that, in fact, the apostles had diminished the man Jesus’s exceptional greatness by referring it to the miraculous) and that would support the “naturalist” link between mental illness and faith in Christ’s resurrection. What remains is a sentiment that is related to beauty – Christ’s life as an object of aesthetic contemplation. But the link between beauty and truth (that must be corroborated by the findings of “science”) has been severed. Renan explains the inability of the evangelists to grasp the true (but not “transcendent”) stature of Jesus by pointing to the “divine beauty” of his life:

“On sent à chaque ligne un discours d’une beauté divine fixé par des rédacteurs qui ne le comprennent pas, et qui substituent leurs propres idées à celles qu’ils ne saisissent qu’à demi”\(^{20}\).

“Beauty” has become a self-sustaining value (though Renan did still understand it in a moral sense) that is not exposed to the vicious incompatibility between phenomenon and noumenon, the finite and infinity, “scientific” knowledge and “religious” faith. The French sage could – in spite of his melancholia – withstand the pressure of these antinomies. The majority of his readers were less resilient and chose the side of “science”. The artists and poets amongst them attempted to replace faith by building an artificial world of beauty, putting their hope in artifice, inventing sophisticated forms (the intricate form of Brzozowski’s poem about erotic self-crucifixion is an excellent example of this aesthetic turn – “L’art pour l’art” as a remedy against “metaphysical” despair), a remedy that must fail.

The deeper motives of Renan’s melancholia (or “despair” – Brzozowski’s diagnosis) are not discussed in this poem about loss of faith (Brzozowski only points in general to a debate between “heart” and “reason” and that both do not have access to the truth since their bitter war remains undecided), but there cannot be any serious doubt that it is closely connected with the incompatibility between the finite world and the infinite, the phenomenon and the noumenon. Amongst Brzozowski’s translations we find, apart from the inevitable Baudelaire and Verlaine poems, a rather original (as to its form) “Villanelle”\(^{21}\) written by the French parnassiste Charles Leconte de Lisle and published in his volume Poèmes tragiques that directly focuses on the post-Kantian imponderables “Time, Space,
Number” (“Le Temps, l’Étendue, le Nombre”; in Brzozowski’s translation\textsuperscript{22}: “Granice Czasu, Przestrzeni, Miary” – the translator has added to the enumeration of time, space and number that they are “borders”, i.e. limitations). The poem focuses on the desolation of the night and the void in which the spirit ultimately disappears. It is represented as an “immobile and somber sea” (in the translation the sea is additionally an abyss [“otchłań”]) that swallows everything, “memories, dreams, feelings”\textsuperscript{23}. The universe consists of elementary forces and abstract Kantian categories of understanding. These categories through which man perceives “his” world disappear with man himself which, of course, cannot be represented since in that case we would reduce what is “beyond” the phenomenal sphere to just another phenomenon. But neither can it be “imagined” in the sense of Kant’s “mathematical sublimity of nature. Leconte de Lisle’s “Villanelle” shows a spectacle of [self] annihilation in which the speaker is only present as the creator of a highly artificial poetic form (almost a “purely architectural” intelligence)\textsuperscript{24}. The (realized) possibility of this creative act appears, however, to neutralize the inevitability of the void prevailing. In his translation Brzozowski adds – in order to fulfill the formal requirements of the villanelle – something palpable, the “outlines of a ship”. This “romantic” detail slightly “humanizes” (when a ship founders the crew usually perishes) the bleakness of the original poem (though – on the other hand – it might be simply proof of imperfect craftsmanship):

\begin{quote}
W nim i z nim wszystko tonie: wspomnienia, snia, uczucia, zarysy, granice czasu, przestrzeni i miary, w otchłani morza nieruchomej, szarej. (En lui-même, avec lui, tout sombre, souvenir, rêve, sentiment, le temps, l’étendue et le nombre, dans la mer immobile et sombre).
\end{quote}

Typical for Leconte de Lisle’s parnassist stance is the impersonality of the speaker, his ostensible exteriority towards the paradoxical content of this metaphysical villanelle. What is often an asset in his poetic representations of the past (Antiquity, the Middle-Ages) and exotic cultures, is here less convincing. It would presuppose the existence of a human subject “beyond” the ordinary subject (that perceives the world through “Time, Space and Number”), a subject that “transcends” itself by being on the “side” of the void (nothingness) – a logical impossibility that could perhaps be “imagined”, but the impersonal lyrical situation avoids this paradox – imagining the impossible (in a – much longer – poem from the same volume [Poèmes tragiques], titled “Le dernier Dieu”, Leconte de Lisle more convincingly frames a representation of the triumph of the “inanimate” void – showing it as a dream of the lyrical subject about the death “of the last God”, antique Love, Amor)\textsuperscript{25}. Stanisław Korab Brzozowski did not copy

\textsuperscript{22} Korab Brzozowski, 95.
\textsuperscript{23} Leconte de L’Isle, 40.
\textsuperscript{24} Korab Brzozowski, 95.
\textsuperscript{25} “Le dernier, le plus chère des Dieux, l’antique Amour” [Leconte de L’Isle, 151].
this parnassist “immobility” (*immuabilité*) in the more original section of his own poetic oeuvre (although he was – like his brother Wincenty – certainly impressed by poets like Leconte de Lisle and de Hérédia). The only way to authentically represent the motive of the void, threatening to overwhelm and annihilate human consciousness, is to show it from the inside, as the individual experience of a subject. Brzozowski attempted to do so in the poem “Night falls” (*Nadchodzi noc*[^26]) in which the invasion of darkness (the “frightened sun is flying and blood seeps from it”) physically affects the speaker (the blood seeping from the sun turns out to be his own blood in which the sunrays are bathing). But precisely the bodily aspect (there exists no “pure” consciousness) of this scary experience repels the night, symbol of the void, “for ever” – as long as “I” will exist, i.e. perceive the world through time, space and number (a presupposition that need not be explicitly expressed, as in Leconte de Lisle’s “Villanelle”). The body as a necessary correlate – though it might be a suffering body – of consciousness is the best remedy against the fear of the void… Here suffering turns out to be an ambivalent experience that is not entirely negative.

All these motives (the incompatibility between the finite and infinity, the suffering of the soul that cannot be satisfied by what is relative, Christ on the cross, the void) are united in another poem composed by Brzozowski in the first person singular (the “I” appears, in fact, only in the final, third stanza – the first two stanzas are “objective” depictions of a naked tree and a derelict wooden cross on which Christ stretches his arms to the “void of the steel blue heaven”[^27] – this refrain returns at the end of each of the three unrhymed four-line stanzas. The whole animate world is suffering because life is essentially a way of dying to which the void of the heaven (deprived by the “Renan” represented by Brzozowski in a poem we already discussed of its redemptory force) remains unresponsive. Here Stanisław Korab Brzozowski represents an attitude that is not far from Nerval’s metaphysical despair, but instead of representing Christ’s death on the cross as an ordeal that was neither understood nor shared by his disciples he constructs a lyrical situation reversing this experience: the “lonely and naked tree”, “the derelict cross [under the tree] on which the crucified Christ is dying” and “my suffering soul/ That from the abyss of its black nothingness/ Raises its mad desires/ Towards the void of the deep blue heaven”[^28] share their lonely incomprehension of the metaphysical scandal of suffering and death and the lack of a response from what is – perhaps the wrong word – on the “other side”, and the speaker gives voice to that anguish by becoming – to a certain extent – the consciousness (conscience?) of the animate world. This particular twist given by the “decadent” poet to Nerval’s representation of Christ’s suffering might

[^26]: Korab Brzozowski, 28.
owe something to Adam Asnyk’s already discussed poem “Under the feet of the Cross” in which the crucifix, “the witness of undefiled youthful love”\(^29\) – though deprived of its redemptory effect – still retains its consolatory force in spite of “the omnipotent necessity/ Of a higher and at the same time infinite power”\(^30\) (this should, of course, be understood against the background of Polish patriotism and the suffering after the failed January Uprising). The difference is that in Brzozowski’s poem it is the impossibility of consolation that is – from the “inside” – shown as an experience that could potentially be shared.

**Bibliography**


