The Epistemological Context of Stanisław Brzozowski’s Ideas on Polish Messianism

Abstract
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The article embarks on an analysis of Stanisław Brzozowski’s views on Polish Romantic messianism. Its main purpose is to cast a broader light on the epistemological context of Brzozowski’s opinions in this respect and to make a preliminary attempt at embedding his standpoint in the broader context of the historical reception of ideas of Polish messianism. Also addressed is the aspect of this position’s philosophical relevance in the present day.

Keywords: Stanisław Brzozowski, messianism, Romanticism, epistemology, Marxism.

Stanisław Brzozowski’s essay “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego” [Philosophy of Polish Romanticism], written in 1905, is the philosopher’s most structured, coherent text devoted to the problem of Polish Romantic messianism. From the first paragraph to the last, the reader who closely follows its author’s line of argument is overwhelmed by the unwavering sense of communing with a highly suggestive, unambiguous apologia of the messianistic ideology. This is a fairly paradoxical situation for at least two reasons. One relates to Brzozowski’s image, well established in the literature on the subject: seen as an independent philosopher, he was a declared opponent of all forms of dogmatism and ideological limits on thought, never succumbing to the pressure of the intellectual “herd instinct”, a thinker known as a perceptive and insightful critic of the Romantic worldview, deftly exposing its illusions and flaws. The paradox also relates to the fact that in his text Brzozowski doesn’t actually use the term “messianism” directly, not even using its adjectival form. For these reasons, and for several others, “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego” poses interpretational challenges and cannot be easily and unambiguously assessed within the context of Brzozowski’s overall intellectual output.
The aim of this article is to shed more light on the epistemological context of the subject Brzozowski’s essay addresses, and make a preliminary attempt to set his position against a backdrop of the historical reception of Polish messianism.\(^1\)

The text’s title and the first paragraphs leave no doubt as to the central topic and the intellectual significance it holds for the author:

Polish Romanticism has its own philosophy, because it is an outflow – in part unconscious and in part, in its final peak period, full of self-knowledge – of a homogeneous worldview defined at least in its fundamental aspects.

[...] I am focusing all my attention on presenting the content of what I believe to constitute the worldview of our Romantics (I am still using the well-established term here).

I find this approach to be right and justified also because nowadays this worldview is never considered from the perspective of truth.

It is my view, though, that a true revelation is ingrained in it, attained by our nation for the benefit of all humanity, a revelation about the essence and destiny of man.

I am wholly aware of the enormous responsibility I assume by writing this grand, formidable word at the beginning of my study: truth.\(^2\)

Thus, Brzozowski argues, in the philosophy of Romanticism the Polish nation reaches its “ultimate self-knowledge”\(^3\) – grasping the foundations of its identity. Romantic thought brings to full awareness what emerges from beyond Polish history’s empirical variability and transience, and hence from the mere succession of generations, as a certain timeless form: a defining element of the unity and invariability of the Polish spirit. This element is an original ideological message with a primary epistemological and historiosophical value, the substance and primary carrier of which reveals itself to be the domain of higher culture with its spheres of religion, art (particularly literature), and philosophy. The message encapsulates this “truth” in a dual sense. First, it is the moment of revealing that history’s true meaning: the time when its hitherto undisclosed mystery can be fully understood. Second, it provides a breakthrough insight into truth’s nature,

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\(^3\) Brzozowski, “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego”, 385.
into the essence of the human spirit’s history. As Brzozowski argues, nineteenth-century Polish Romanticism and its ideological core of messianism as advocated by poet-bards (chiefly Adam Mickiewicz) and by the religious mystic Andrzej Towiański, along with philosophers of the mid-century period between national uprisings (led by August Cieszkowski, author of Ojcze nasz⁴ [Our father], recognizes this truth, integrating it into the collective life of the specific historical national community and endowing it with an irreducible universal dimension:

Polish Romanticism is not a reflection or an echo of any Western European cultural and literary movement. I have no time or desire to contest views that trace the origin of works of art and literature to other works and lives, forcing literature and creativity to live a phantom life, drawing their substance only from books. With respect to Polish Romanticism, it is sufficient to expose them as preposterous. Polish Romanticism was an outcome of the change, movement, and transformation that took place in Polish society’s soul at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To understand Romanticism is to recognize this change, this movement, this transformation. Having explored these inner psychological roots of Romanticism, one can appreciate why during the early stages of its evolution it tied its efforts to this or that famous name in the West⁵.

One critical element in this “transformation” is the elevation of freedom, in both its individual and collective dimensions, to the rank of supreme value in life. Furthermore, it is precisely the objective recognition of the complementary importance of these two dimensions of freedom that imbues this breakthrough with particular historical significance. According to Brzozowski, a deep sense solidified in Poland’s history of the irreducible meaning of the individual subject’s freedom, on one hand, and on the other of the nation’s freedom as a concrete political community bound by the cross-generational fabric of faith in a union of shared ideas, which constitutes an enduring component of its people’s historical consciousness that then acquires, in Romantic messianism’s ideology, a moment of self-reflection, learning the full extent of its metaphysical nature:

The logic underlying the development of Polish Romanticism is extremely simple once one understands its assumptions. It is an act of faith in the spirit of the nation, a spiritual self-affirmation of a nation that is lacking a physical manifestation.

[...] To see a path, reason must discern at least a sliver of reality; but there are times when that reality disappears entirely, even to the last fraction; there are moments when the only reality is that being cherished in the depths of the heart, sustained against the view of reason. [...] It was from neither reason nor understanding that the inner strength of [Tadeusz] Kościuszko and the Legionnaires was borne, or the strength that upheld the Romantics, above all he who was the pillar supporting the roof’s whole weight, Adam Mickiewicz, and that man of inexhaustible faith who when the pillar swayed buttressed him, a figure of quiet but invaluable merit in the history of the Polish spirit, Andrzej Towiański.

There was a time when the nation had been turned into a dismembered corpse shackled in chains, when groups of emigrants wandered Europe like repenting ghosts amid growing tensions, doubts, and bitterness. In such circumstances the Polish poetry of Romanticism was born, and our nation reached its ultimate, everlasting self-knowledge.6

This specific self-knowledge of freedom maturing over time – that is, full awareness of the absence of any external spiritual conditioning of humankind – has origins, both immediate and more distant, in mainstream development of European thought. Hence, the Polish idea does not take its shape in cultural isolation. Its deeper roots are traced mainly to the core of Christianity’s evangelical message, retaining its timeless value regardless of modern secularization processes sweeping through European societies. Brzozowski identifies origins of this self-knowledge in more recent Western philosophical concepts, with classical German idealism at the fore. Interestingly, his main emphasis is not on Hegel’s absolute idealism, which dominates this historical trend in the evolution of European thought, but on the concept formulated by Johann Gottlieb Fichte. It is Fichte’s activism, founded by the originator of Wissenschaftslehre on the epistemological basis of post-Kantian transcendental idealism, that provides a major sources of inspiration for Brzozowski’s thought in his period of “philosophy of action”, the phase directly preceding the period of “philosophy of work” known for Legenda Młodej Polski [Legend of Young Poland]7, Idee [Ideas]8, and the later Głosy wśród nocy [Voices in the night]9.

Unlike that second stage in the evolution of Brzozowski’s thought, the first stage is not commonly thematized in detail. It is often seen in the standard view as merely a transitional phase. Therefore this must be noted as the period when he wrote “Philosophy of Polish Romanticism” – which tends to be overlooked in analyses of his writing (and even taken to be a kind of intellectual aberration) – and a considerable portion of the collection Kultura i życie10 [Culture and life], first published in 1907, containing texts written from 1904 to 1906. These include, in particular, essays such as “Monistyczne pojmowanie dziejów i filozofia krytyczna”11 [Monistic understanding of history and critical philosophy] from 1904. However, if works from this period are approached with an unbiased attitude, one can avoid stereotypes in assessing Brzozowski’s stance on the intellectual heritage of Polish Romantic messianism. And can evade difficulties in appropriately qualifying the final stage in the evolution of his thought in the period

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9 See: Stanisław Brzozowski, Głosy wśród nocy (Lviv: Księgarnia Polska B. Połoniecki, 1912).
10 See: Stanisław Brzozowski, Kultura i życie (Lviv: Księgarnia Polska B. Połoniecki, 1907).
of transition towards the position of Catholic modernism, the unambiguous historical testimony to which can be found in his posthumous *Pamiętnik*\textsuperscript{12} [Diary]. One precondition for an unbiased approach to the period from 1903 to 1905 involves extracting a broader epistemological background of his philosophy, to expose its strong genetic ties with post-Kantian transcendental idealism.

Claims in the literature regarding perceived discrepancies in Brzozowski’s evaluation of contributions in more recent German philosophy (those of Kant in particular)\textsuperscript{13} in his texts from the period do not apply to his attitude towards Fichte\textsuperscript{14}. Brzozowski distinctly excludes him from philosophical criticism, though comments on the position he expounded are, as a principle, fairly restrained and laconic, while appreciative statements are typically formulated with reservations. Clearly, however, one may include Brzozowski without major theoretical oversimplifications among those Polish philosophers who appreciated classical German idealism’s fundamental role in the development of modern European thought, while not succumbing to Hegelianism’s compelling magic, and who attempted to bring out the historical significance of concepts proposed by Hegel’s predecessors. Before Brzozowski, that group comprises two preeminent thinkers of the inter-uprising period at mid-century: Bronisław F. Trentowski and August Cieszkowski. While in the former’s thought, historians of philosophy discern predominant influences of Schelling’s ideas, in Cieszkowski’s contribution, clear inspirations from transcendental idealism in the Fichtean sense are revealed.

György Lukács was the first scholar exploring Cieszkowski’s thought who identified these strong influences. Lukács argues that the attempt Cieszkowski proposed to theoretically overcome Hegel’s absolute idealism remains essentially on Fichtean grounds\textsuperscript{15}; Shlomo Avineri, referring to this thesis, formulates a statement about Cieszkowski’s theoretical “return to Fichte”\textsuperscript{16}. Cieszkowski’s letters written during his studies in Berlin to Karl Ludwig Michelet, his German mentor and a proponent of Hegelianism, indicate that even before writing *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* [Prolegomena to historiosophy] he was familiar with Fichte’s lectures on the philosophy of history\textsuperscript{17}. Further evidence for their deep-seated theoretical convergence comes from the fact that Fichte highlighted


\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Walicki, “Narodziny filozofii pracy: Brzozowski w latach 1904–1907”, 26–27.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Walicki, “Narodziny filozofii pracy: Brzozowski w latach 1904–1907”, 27.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. György Lukács, “Moses Hess und die Probleme der idealistischen Dialektik”, Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung 12 (1926), 112.


the philosophical meaning of the category of “action”\textsuperscript{18} that was placed by Cieszkowski several decades later at the foundation of his interpretation of “historiosophy”\textsuperscript{19} and of the “philosophy of action” project derived from it\textsuperscript{20}, which he and others later referenced\textsuperscript{21}. In this context, an aspect repeatedly mentioned in the literature is noteworthy, that is, the influences of Fichte’s philosophy on Brzozowski’s body of thought\textsuperscript{22}. This inspiration is clearly visible in Brzozowski’s attitude to the idea of Polish Romantic messianism, addressed systematically in “Philosophy of Polish Romanticism”:

The juxtaposition of our Romanticism with German philosophy of early in the last century is dictated by more than purely synchronistic historical considerations. […]

Our Romanticism and German philosophy are concerned with one and the same thing: freedom, or the liberation of man. However, the main direction and goal determining the entire evolution of our Romanticism is to attain this freedom, to fight for it, and to make it real.

German philosophy seeks to know freedom.

Man’s freedom can only be known to the extent that it is realized in him.

Freedom is the power over oneself, independent of anyone and anything else, established by action.

To seek it outside is to look for something that would grant us freedom, that is, something to obey and to gain freedom through that obedience – hence throughout the entire evolution of German philosophy, with the sole but not absolute exception of Fichte, freedom refers to the recognition and acceptance of a certain kind of dependence.


In Kant, with the noumenal essence of man in the form of the categorical imperative. In Hegel, with the universal reason. In Marx, with the development of economic conditions.\(^{23}\)

Brzozowski claims that what Polish Romantic messianism teaches us is that “only the realization of truth in oneself can lead to the knowledge of truth”\(^ {24}\). First and foremost this means all human activity must be based on the knowledge of truth and, second, that relations between knowing and acting are not a temporally linear sequence or external “progress” or mechanical historical determinism. Therefore, we do not reach the truth in a purely theoretical manner – that is, by assimilating knowledge gained by someone else or accumulated through the sheer momentum of humanity’s historical social development and then put it into practice. The relationship between knowledge and human action represents in its essence a certain integral whole. For spiritual life is a teleological process of self-improvement or self-realization of the human spirit and at the same time its own self-confirmation (individual and collective) in the substance of process’s effective goal.

Thus, Polish Romantic messianism shows that there is no good outside self-action, and the essence of human fulfillment, both in its general and specific dimensions, lies in self-confirmation in action. Polish Romanticism, its deep philosophical foundation, combines the following elements as it were in a creative epistemological synthesis probing far into the sources of Western metaphysics: 1) the speculative tradition of antiquity (Greek and Roman, in particular) that discovers, initially in a mythological form, the primary definition of the truth of the spirit as “self-knowledge”, and then transforms it into classical metaphysical systems, and 2) practical and ethical achievements of the Christian thought of our era. The latter places ancient philosophy’s classical truth on Christianity’s religious foundation, redefining it in the radicalized form of the moral standard of self-renunciation, inner striving for perfection, and practical liberation that the biblical Christ embodied. Who, in Saint John’s vision, stands before earthly authority and its reflection in declining truth (theoretical in a one-sided way) – epitomized by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, crumbling and drifting into the past before our very eyes, utterly absorbed by the sceptical, rhetorical question “What is truth?”\(^ {25}\) – thus formulates a new practical paradigm of truth as a moral testimony\(^ {26}\), articulated in the Gospels in the farewell discourse he gives to his disciples as the revealed, unconditional, eternal message: “I am the way and the truth and the life.”\(^ {27}\). Polish Romanticism’s philosophy binds these two historically separate ends of the thread of human spiritual development (and hence the theoretical and practical pursuit of its own essence) into an ideological whole:

\(^{23}\) Brzozowski, “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego”, 404–405.

\(^{24}\) Ibidem, 391.

\(^{25}\) John 18:38.

\(^{26}\) See: John 18:37.

\(^{27}\) John 14:6.
The measure of achievement is the measure of self-knowledge. A distinctive trait of Polish Romanticism, and the underlying basis of its philosophy, is the lack of belief in thought lacking foundations for fulfillment. Our Romanticism is without intellectual superficiality. Its faith in light does not represent the indifferent, cold optimism of thought, because that light is forged in the soul’s darkness through one’s own effort\textsuperscript{28}.

Consequently, as Brzozowski asserts, the problem with the messianic program of Polish Romanticism lies less in its idealistic assumptions than in the fact that they were never realized then were ultimately abandoned. Doubt and cynicism\textsuperscript{29}, taking hold of the Polish soul at the end of the Romantic era and replacing the old faith in the timeless substance of Polish thought, do not constitute any alternative reality – in fact, they merely mask despair, and manifest an inconsistency of action:

The truth revealed by our poets has not been fulfilled, but it has not ceased to be the truth, and we are always aware in a more or less vague sense, each and every one of us, that it is the truth, and it does not exist anywhere except here, and we are acutely aware of it every time we summon the courage for consistent thinking. Consequently, we have voluntarily submerged ourselves in falsehood, mistakenly thinking that we may avoid the truth when it is too tough and too difficult to bear. Our nation, however, will only be reborn for the sake of humanity’s rebirth, with which the matter of our own existence is inseparably and irrevocably connected, for so long as it realizes this Truth. Because Polish Romanticism is neither a literary school nor an artistic current. It is not something incidental and superficial: it is a revelation of truth. It is neither a mental construct nor a poetic vision, but life’s truth viewed through the prism of the Word\textsuperscript{30}.

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Stanisław Brzozowski is a writer and philosopher whose contribution to those two fields has exerted a continuous and powerful influence pervading Polish culture from the first decades of the twentieth century until the present day. Brzozowski’s output, in contrast with a vast array of prewar intellectuals representing the current of national thought, broadly understood, who were adversely affected by violent disruption to the continuity of thought with Poland’s loss of political sovereignty in 1939 (and subsequent events after 1945), has occupied an enduring place in literature and philosophy through the second half of the twentieth and into the early twenty-first centuries. This was due in no small degree to his thought’s specificity and theoretical profile evolved during his “philosophy of work” period. During that period, Brzozowski’s strong ties with Marxism, already uniquely transformed and transplanted into Polish philosophy in a resultant unorthodox form decades before Real Socialism’s advent, constituted an “extenuating circumstance” during the time of Polish People’s Republic that to a certain extent appeased the watchful eye of censorship, which usually suppressed any manifestations

\textsuperscript{28} Brzozowski, “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego”, 402.
\textsuperscript{29} Cf. Brzozowski, “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego”, 401.
\textsuperscript{30} Brzozowski, “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego”. 
of “ideological heresy” efficiently, even among long-dead artists (which was Brzozowski’s case). Before 1989, no major political obstacles hindered the publication of successive editions of Brzozowski’s books, and scientific studies exploring his body of work were published comparatively more frequently than accounts of the philosophies of Adam Żółtowski, Wincenty Lutosławski, Jerzy Braun, and Stanisław Szczepanowski (to whom “Philosophy of Polish Romanticism” was dedicated).

Perhaps the Marxist “heterodoxy” of Brzozowski’s philosophy of work reaches further and deeper epistemologically than many postwar researchers of his oeuvre would be prepared to admit, and the question of Brzozowski’s debatable attitude to the Church (in the context of historical materialism) is not merely a minor controversy, while his final reconciliation with Catholicism is solely a manifestation of physical and mental weakness and a seriously ill man’s loneliness just before his death. One can assume, as Andrzej Walicki\(^{31}\) does, that in Brzozowski’s later work, *Legend of Young Poland*, and in his *Ideas*, the philosopher expresses less a break with the axiology of the Polish Romantic thought and its overcoming on the foundation of Marxism than a testimony to philosophical adjustment of its religious symbolism (referring to the image of transcendent divine providence), and a specific translation of this symbolism – inspired by Marx’s critique of political economy – into the “real language” of empirical mechanisms of collective life\(^{32}\). Given this context, then, validity is maintained both for the main elements of the apologia of the messianic ideology presented in “Philosophy of Polish Romanticism” and for the core of the critique of the orthodox Marxist ideology it presents (based on the monistic concept of history) and the accompanying interpretation of freedom and social liberation:

In German philosophy of the nineteenth century, one finds two cycles: one complete and closed, starting from Kant, through Fichte, Schelling, up to Hegel; the other undeveloped, failing to embrace the total crucially relevant content, either in the awareness of its assumptions or in what constitutes its actual completion, which begins with Feuerbach and ends with Marx and Engels.

The latter cycle is in contradiction to the former: the idea of freedom is not sufficient; actual freedom is needed, understood as full and complete liberation of man.

The problem is rightly identified: what matters is not the idea of freedom, but liberation, the realization of freedom in oneself, in action.

In its further development, however, the problem becomes sterilized, frustrated by the fundamental assumption of German philosophy to which Feuerbach and Marx remained faithful, despite everything. When it comes to defining this real freedom, the philosophers do not define it as a complement, an accomplishment, or an action, but by knowledge.

As a consequence, passivity, matter and its counterparts in man (impressions) are not suppressed by being transformed into a task, an object of action, but their legitimacy is recognized while preserving all of their essential inertia intact.


\(^{32}\) Cf. Walicki, “Narodziny filozofii pracy: Brzozowski w latach 1904–1907”.
Hence, instead of a worldview resting on freedom that stimulates, liberates, and inspires everything: the whole man, the entire human essence – what ensues is flat, shallow, naive hedonism. The broader background of historical circumstances surrounding the creation of “Philosophy of Polish Romanticism”, the concurrent events of the 1905 revolution, and Brzozowski’s interest in the role of the national and class factor in the political, social, and cultural transformations influenced his view of Polish Romantic tradition and its spiritual heritage in this period. That vision changes over subsequent years, as the philosopher’s one-time fascination with messianic Promethean tendencies gives way to an interest in the consistently “realistic” ideology of work. In the latter area, Brzozowski sees Cyprian Norwid as an important beacon, focusing in particular on that poet’s faith in the culture-creating function of freedom of work, though that faith is no longer integrally embedded in the religious image of divine will (as its transcendent condition), and it is based entirely on the conviction that humanity, through culture, creates its own destiny. Therefore it is no coincidence that Brzozowski then becomes one of Poland’s champions of a modern understanding of philosophy of culture, free from crypto-theological assumptions and uncritical dogmas of national ideology. While outlining the intellectual genealogy of his philosophy of work in Legend of Young Poland, mentioning aspects including the influence of Marx’s thought on its development, Brzozowski isn’t hiding the purely adaptive use of this thought. As a result, he is able to refer to the influence of Georges Sorel and John Henry Newman and of an extensive range of leading Polish Romantics, including Mickiewicz, Towiański, Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński, and Cieszkowski, in the same breath as Norwid. Brzozowski’s Marxism is, therefore, not a philosophical destination and final confession of faith, but one among multiple ideological components jointly describing and defining his worldview, none of which has the power to exclude the others. The thought driving this worldview is understood as a function of national life as a whole. The philosophical diagnosis of the primary epistemological boundaries of historical Marxism, as formulated in “Philosophy of Polish Romanticism”, retains its relevance:

It is time for Marxism to stop obscuring the central and pivotal aspect of the liberation of humanity. Being the result and sum total of nineteenth-century German philosophy, Marxism did not create a conceptual apparatus through which freedom could be thought of. He [Marx] had wanted to articulate this great truth: there is only the Word, and there is only freedom. He wanted to express the obvious necessity of freedom, but he lost his way and professed the freedom of necessity. […]

33 Brzozowski, “Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego”, 407–408.
37 See: Brzozowski, Legenda Młodej Polski, 579–582.
Also truly prolific, and contributing significantly to resolving the problem Feuerbach set in opposition to Hegel’s philosophy, is the position set and defined by Cieszkowski, contrasting the pairs thought-cognition and action-fulfillment. [...] 

Today, when a considerable segment of Polish minds are influenced by Marx, when Marxism has become for many a catechism immune from critique and never challenged, when finally, in this spirit and under this leadership, the rebirth of Poland commences, one must state with all firmness and argue that this rebirth will not take place under this sign.58

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