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PROGRESS AND CRITICAL THOUGHT IN NORWID'S AND PETER LAVROV'S WORK

1.

At the beginning of March 1873, Norwid received a brochure from Peter Lavrov, a Russian revolutionary, exile, philosopher, and father of so-called subjective sociology. It was probably a copy of a lecture he delivered for Société Anthropologique in Paris.¹ According to Juliusz Gomulicki (editor of Norwid's collected writings) the text in question is *L'idée du progrès dans l'anthropologie*, which is devoted to the specificity of historical progress in an anthropological context (the lecture basically summarizes key passages from the famous *Historical Letters* published under a pen name in Russia in the years 1866-1869 and then during emigration in 1870). The dedication reads:

Au Polonais croyant le Russe incrédule.

Replying in French, Norwid was aware that there is no possibility of serious ideological discussion with Lavrov (whom he personally greatly admired²)

¹ Z. TROJANOWICZOWA, E. LIJEWSKA, *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida*, Poznań 2007, vol. 2, p. 539.

² Norwid met Lavrov probably through Lavrov's partner Anna Czaplicka (real name Modzelewska). Authors of *Kalendarz* also indicate another biographical context: "Both were also friends with the family of the painter Józef Szermentowski" (p. 480). Lavrov and Czaplicka fled from exile in Russia (in Vologda) and reached France just before the outbreak of the German-French war. Norwid dedicated a short poem to Anna Czaplicka, dated 1 February 1871, several days after armistice signed by the newly emerged Second Reich and the Third Republic (this piece is discussed at the end of the article). It thus seems that Norwid, Lavrov, and Czaplicka experienced together the siege of Paris and the later episode of the Paris Commune.

because the Russian's views on historical progress differed substantially from Norwid's principles rooted in the sacred³:

Your work and dedication [...] constitute together such a long letter that replying to it once again would be chimerical, while undermining its fundamental principles would be improper because it would force me to attack your personal beliefs.

Norwid and Lavrov would therefore remain divided, "two gods on their opposing suns" (writing these words in French the Polish poet acknowledged that he used to be close with another great Polish poet: "Certes, je puis vous dire avec mon (ancien!) Jules Słowacki [...]"). The author of *Vade-mecum* and his Russian acquaintance did not know each other's languages but would grasp perfectly well their beauty, all the more so since "one day the entire Europe shall speak one language," especially "the Slavs." Although Norwid regarded this linguistic unification to be achievable not due to progress understood in positivistic and scientific sense but due to its already existing germinal form ("n'existe que par le fonds de chacun de ses idiomes"). As is known, at the turn of the 1870s Norwid was fascinated with the budding comparative linguistics (as confirmed by his "Notatki etno-filologiczne" [Ethno-philological Notes] and the long poem *Rzecz o wolności słowa* [On the Freedom of Speech]). He was a member of the French Société Philologique, which was established by the Catholic royalist Count Hyacinthe de Charencey (1832-1916), who researched, among other things, Basque and the pre-Columbian languages of the Americas; further, he penned the study *Le fils de la vierge*, which explores the theme of "a maiden who bore a son" in broadly comparative perspective, encompassing also non-European contexts: pre-Columbian and Chinese⁴ (in 1859, the young French aristocrat wrote an article describing discussions of the Flood in a linguistic context, a subject close to Norwid).

Société Philologique attempted to combine "positive" science with a religious worldview. Lavrov's first steps in France led him in a different direction, however. After fleeing from Russia and arriving in Paris in 1870 he was elected a member (certainly a "foreign" one) of the Parisian Société Antropologique, which promoted a scientific research programme that steered clear of any contacts with religion. Under Napoleon III (the Society being established in 1859) its members were typically republicans and agnostics (honorary members included Ernest Renan, author of the controversial *The Life of Jesus*, where he regards Christ as a noble visionary, rejecting his divinity). They would thus oppose the rule of the husband of the devout Empress Eugenia. One of the Society's founders, the sur-

³ After *Kalendarz*, vol. 2, p. 540.

⁴ Cf. M. BIELA, *Czy Norwid współpracował z Hyacinthe de Charencey przy pisaniu 'Syna Panny'*, "Studia Norwidiana" 27-28 (2009-2010), pp. 149-183.

geon Paul Broca, later became senator of the Third Republic. One of the statutory objectives of Société Antropologique was to carry out the “scientific study of human races.”⁵ Many members were advocates of Darwin’s theory. Much of what they would carry out as part of “anthropological study” raises many concerns today due to focus on external (e.g. biological) determinants of humanity (in the first half of the nineteenth century the concept of race would be tied to civilizational criteria; this is the case with Renan’s writings on the history of Christianity, although he introduces a more biological perspective). Research of this type would involve *craniométrie* and the silent assumption – in line with the spirit of the era of “progress” – regarding the existence of a racial hierarchy. Less developed races would be distinguished from advanced ones, and this approach would be often confused with differentiating between “better” and “worse” ones (the intellectual superiority of men over women would be justified in a similar manner).

Simplifications of this kind were also employed by the radical democrat and socialist Lavrov. It naturally needs to be emphasised that he was not a conscious “racist.” His concept of “progress” does not cancel differences between various human groups, but always locates them in some kind of historical dynamic. He associated the higher level of development with moral responsibility for the entire society, especially its lower strata. Groups and societies would not be closed entities in this view, but ones that enter into various hierarchical relations, which can cause one group to oppress another due to progress. True progress is driven, according to Lavrov, by people who are to some degree socially and materially privileged – those whose luxurious life helps them to develop a broader perspective on social reality and understand the necessity of harmony between various social strata. However, this would entail renouncing one’s privilege, or alternatively expanding it onto all people (the most privileged do not muster the courage to be altruistic but exploit their position to justify their elevated status because there is no determinism at work here; Lavrov would thus embrace voluntarism, i.e. the view that everything depends of individual decisions). In this light, not only social differences but also racial ones gradually cease to determine social hierarchy.

Norwid was always sceptical with regard to any evaluative uses of the word “race,” as is confirmed for example by his letter to Joanna Kuczyńska, dated February 1869, where he dissociates himself from “genetic platitudes about the Scythians and Asians” (PWsz IX, 388), treating “Europe” not as a “race” but a “principle.” (PWsz IX, 388). This principle, which combines various elements (including “ethnic” ones) through progress, is on the one hand a “civilizational”

5 Bulletins et Memoires de la Societe d’Anthropologie de Paris Annee 1864, 5-1, p. III, https://www.persee.fr/doc/bmsap_0301-8644_1864_num_5_1_6739 (accessed 20 September 2020).

factor and on the other a foundation in the sacred sense: all Europeans “come from Asia” not because of migrations but because Asia is a “dream of paradise”:

Pani mi pisze genetyczny frazes o Scytach i Azjatach.

Jestem przeciwny systematom społecznym, które głoszą:

„*Europe aux Européens!*”

Selon moi – Madame! – il n’y a jamais eu des Européens, car nous tous nous sommes venus ici de l’Asie – de ce pays qui nous reste maintenant sur l’embryon de notre intelligence come un rêve du Paradis !

Ja pochodzę od Jafetowego wnuka, co przykowany był na szczycie Kazbeku w Kaukazie – od dziada mego Prometheusa.

Ja JEDEN przeczę temu systemowi krwi i ras. Ja jeden – ale cóż zrobić! – to moje mnie- manie takie.

Moim zdaniem, Europa *nie jest rasą*, ale *principium!* – bo gdyby była rasą, byłaby Azją!!! (PWsz IX, 388)

Norwid employs categories used at that time in studies of mythology and in comparative linguistics in order to express the poetico-religious worldview (“Japheth’s grandson,” “Prometheus”), which was in a sense “pre-modern,” basing on symbolic equivalences (a similar approach, though more scientific in the context of this epoch, was taken by the aforementioned founder of Société Philologique – the linguist Count de Charencey), but this also makes it resistant to the biological temptations of the “anthropological” worldview. Certainly, one should not exaggerate the meaning of the letter, which adheres to the salon convention (meant to “amuse” the addressee). Still, Norwid’s strategy of debunking and ridiculing “genetic” (racist) superstitions is typical for the entire mature body of his work. Poles and Slavs are regarded by him as “cultural” categories that change in time and are associated with certain values (this is why the poet can call Pope Pius IX a “Pole” when he was besieged in Rome: “Któż jest ten *Polak*, kto?... co – zrodzony na obcej ziemi / I z obcą w żyłach krwią – dłońmi ku niebu drżącemi / Za Polskę modły śle... i imię jej wymawia?...” (PWsz II, 179) [Who is this *Pole* then?... the one born on foreign land / And with foreign blood in his veins – who lifts his trembling hands to heaven / Praying for Poland... and pronouncing its name?...]). He thus assumes the existence of “individuals” or – to use Norwid’s terminology – “persons” [osoby] (it is not without reason that Norwid refused to attack the “personal beliefs” of the Russian friend).

Another example of an anti-biologicistic attitude can be found in Norwid’s letter to Lavrov. Jokingly mentioning the “Slavic” custom of sending letters through friends, Norwid asks him to choose for this purpose a “beautiful traveller” who can even be “Turan” as long as she is not an atheist or a “professor of medi-

cine.” This is a playful reference to the theory about the difference between the ethnic origins of “Russians” (Wielkorusowie) and “Slavs” (especially Poles, but also Ukrainians) presented by another foreign member of the Parisian Société Antropologique, Franciszek Duchński “from Kiev” (1816-1893), author of the bizarre (as it seems today) work⁶ titled *Peuples aryâs et tourans agriculteurs et nomades. Nécessité des réformes dans l'exposition de l'histoire des peuples aryâs-européens & tourans particulièrement des Slaves et des Moscovites* (Paris 1864), which was supposed to demonstrate that due to their “Turan” origin Russians can never be a part of Europe, culturally speaking (this publication, geared for “French teachers of history,” was published in the atmosphere of an anti-Russian turn under Napoleon III in the autumn of 1863, caused by the January Uprising). According to its author, it was not the dynasties of Piast and Rurik that contributed to the formation of the Polish and Russian character. In his view, the Polish identity emerged as a result of uniting Polish territories with the Lithuanian and Ukrainian ones (in this narrative, descendants of Piast and Rurik met), whereas the Muscovite state was founded by peoples who belonged, just like Turks, Semites, and even the Chinese, to the “Turan” branch of humanity, which has a nomadic mentality.

From a characterological perspective, these “races” (and tribes) would differ in all respects. In contrast to the farmer-like Slavs and other “Europeans,” the Turan “Moskovites” are patient and resilient but less creative, imitating the achievements of others. The “Aryan” people – synonymous with “Europeans” (especially “Gauls,” “Latins” and “Slavs”) – would be predominantly emotional, which may sound paradoxical given their alleged inventiveness. On the other hand, the Turans would be more inclined to play the wise guys. This would be particularly clear in art. The poetry of the “Slavs” would stem – according to Duchński – from the heart, while that of the “Mokovites” – from imagination (similar views were espoused by Mickiewicz in *Prelekcje paryskie* [*Parsian Lectures*] and in the first part of the so-called *Ustęp* [*Passages*] from *Dziady III* [*Forefathers' Eve, Part III*] significantly titled *Droga do Rosji* [*The Road to Russia*]). These characterological differences also have gender-related consequences. Among the “Aryan” nations (including the “Slavs”) women have developed a greater sense of individual morality than men, and thus enjoy great respect. Among the “Turans,” however, their role is limited to the function of a man’s dignity. On the other hand, “Turan” women are incomparably more fertile than the “Aryan” ones (hence the pessimism regarding the future of European civilization, which is particularly strong in the considerations of Count de Gobineau, another “racist”). Duchński’s work

⁶ Jan Baudouin de Courtenay calls these claims “rather suspicious” in a brochure titled *Z powodu jubileusza profesora Duchńskiego* (Kraków 1886).

also features potentially anti-Semitic themes. Under the influence of Egyptian priests, Moses attempted to transform the “Turan” Hebrews into “Aryans” but during the forty-year wandering through the desert they turned back into nomadic “Turans.” A similar situation occurred after the destruction of the third temple. Dispersed around the world, Jews would return to their nomadic, “Turan” roots (this biological interpretation of the fate of Jews can be compared to Norwid’s entirely dissimilar account presented in the famous poem *Żydowie polscy* [*Polish Jews*], with cultural and sacred connotations prevailing in the image of a “shattered monument.”

Perhaps these views should not be taken too seriously. Duchński multiplies partially Romantic stereotypes, although his biologism brings to mind the racial theories of de Gobineau, whose *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* he would certainly know (although the concept developed by the French aristocrat is certainly more complicated, for example due to his preoccupation with *métissage*, the mixing of races). It was the Russian Slavophile Aleksey Khomyakov, who sketched the history of the world as a struggle between two “racial” elements (although not yet understood biologically): the “Iranian” and the “Cushite,” with Russians and other Slavs being on the side of the former. One can surmise that Duchński’s work was, to a degree, a reaction to this concept and, more generally, a response to the “pan-Slavism” that Russia deployed for propagandist purposes. This detailed account of Duchński’s views and their context helps to better understand Norwid’s letter to Lavrov. Ironic exposition of racist clichés plays in it the same role (though perhaps less visible at first glance) as in the aforementioned letter to Joanna Kuczyńska, affecting the concept of progress in the sense of a historical movement aiming towards universal human subjectivity. The genre of a letter, which is rooted in dialogue, perfectly fits the attempt to undermine a racist worldview because it assumes the subjectivity of both author and addressee. Both Norwid and Lavrov are “individuals” and even though they do not agree, they are certainly capable of “respectfully disagreeing with each other.”)DW IV, 245)

Although Norwid seems to avoid an overt debate (“zwalczać zaś jego [Ławrowa] podstawowej zasady nie uważałbym za stosowne, to by zmusiło mnie bowiem do podniesienia ręki na Pańskie osobiste przekonania” [it does not seem appropriate to question Lavrov’s fundamental principle here because it would force me to attack your personal beliefs]) and his polemic bases on allusions, all the contentious ideas (progress, scientism, religion) are concretized in this “friendly” context. As already pointed out, in his dedication Lavrov turns to the poet as a Russian-atheist to a Pole-Christian. As a revolutionary, he felt deep sympathy for Poles and “the Polish cause.” In the period after the January Uprising

this attitude was rather exceptional and limited to the circles of Aleksander Hercen and Bakunin, i.e. the most radical Russian democrats (Russian “liberals” would turn away from Poles, treating them as ungrateful “rebels”). From their perspective, Poland was attractive because the Poles kept alive the revolutionary flame in Europe. However, Lavrov viewed religion negatively, especially Christianity, although in the Polish case Catholicism espoused ideas of liberation, and (to an extent) – those of emancipation (although within the framework of nationalism). The point is rather that, in the context of his “sociological” concept of history, although religion contributed to progress (Lavrov learned a lot in this respect from positivists like Comte and Proudhon), at a moment when “critical thought” emerged from it (criticism being understood by him – just like by early Hegel – as the key force of progress at a higher level of development), religion turned into a “reactionary” element, thwarting further progress. This view would be rooted in a specific understanding of the idea of progress, i.e. as gradual emancipation of people as individuals. Lavrov argued (after Feuerbach), that “consciousness of God may have been a form of human self-consciousness” but religious people were unable to reach full self-consciousness because faith as externalized consciousness assumes lack of “agency” on the part of the specifically human self-consciousness.

It is not the point here to assess the validity of Feuerbach’s argumentation. Nevertheless, it seems clear that “critical thought” cannot exist without specifically human self-consciousness (in the sense of having agency). In the case of religion, it is merely indirect, i.e. the result of certain idealization, usually a positive self-image of humans ascribed to some non-human being. Thus, humanity learns about itself as an object [*Gegenstand*] that in turn becomes the object of cult.

However, a crucial role in further progress is played by self-transcending intellectual acts of humans, and it is religion that thwarts this kind of “movement of thought.” From Lavrov’s point of view, religion is therefore harmful because it affects the intellect, just like “critical thought,” although it explains the world in relation to faith in certain dogmas, which can be precisely formulated but are basically immune to real progress understood as efforts to explore humanity beyond any alienating categories. All external (or externalized) objects of cult also form hierarchical relations, as a result of which people subjugate themselves to themselves-as-others. The next step involves erection of social structures subordinating certain people to others in a relation of externalized self-presentation that bears the name of God (the point of view put “upside down” several years later by Karl Marx). Atheism, or the rejection to locate the source of human consciousness outside humanity, thus turns out (again, from Lavrov’s perspective) to be the culmination of the intellectual process of human (self-)emancipation.

After it concludes, one can introduce reforms or – as in the case of resistance on the part of the old order – topple the social structures of oppression, which turn out to be the unintentional result of religion-caused process of self-alienation (though on the other hand self-alienation seems to be – in accordance with Hegel’s philosophy – the necessary condition of the primal cognitive dynamic). The Russian revolutionary was somewhat less negatively inclined towards poetry and myth, which in his view retain a part of their value because their subject is the sphere of aesthetics governed by feeling. He thus treated them as practical means of “persuasion.”

One can thus assume that Lavrov was annoyed by Norwid’s attachment to Catholicism, although he admired his poetic talent (the author of *Letters from Russia* himself wrote poems, but rather stereotypical ones). In any case, the attitude of the Pole, who on the one hand opposed the European political order (the famous status quo endangered by “the Polish cause”), which seemed to preclude fraternity among nations, classes, and sexes (with critical thought supposedly gradually eliminating inequalities), but on the other was a “reactionary” admirer of papacy, was simply incoherent from Lavrov’s perspective. His brochure containing the lecture delivered at Société Antropologique was supposed to make Norwid aware of his inconsistency. The author of *Vade-mecum* did not directly respond to Lavrov’s philosophical and social theses, but several remarks made in a playful and casual tone show that Lavrov did not achieve the desired result. First, one member of that Society (Duchiński “de Kiew”) argued, on the basis of a primitive biological theory, that Poles and Russians (of the Great Rus) have nothing in common because they represent different races. If so, then people are entirely determined from the start and any idea of progress becomes meaningless (or limited to one group only). Lavrov’s atheism implies a similar (though more conscious) materialistic and biologicistic worldview, which – from the perspective of Norwid – certainly does not eliminate social inequalities but, on the contrary, introduces and solidifies them (e.g. through thinking in terms of “tribes” and “races”). Scientism may not locate the source of human consciousness outside humanity, but reduces it to certain physiological functions (cf. the attitude of “Górnik” in *Assunta*: “Człowieka stworzył ‘łańcuch’ przyrodzenia [...]” (DW III, 325). [Humanity emerged from a “chain” of natural beings]). In the face of the Christian God, we all live on the same level of (self-)consciousness (even if God is our creation, this discovery entails the creative act of developing the idea of human universalism).

It further turns out that the philosophical debate about the sources of modern universalism also has a bearing on the manner of conducting the dialogue between people representing entirely dissimilar worldviews. How are future epistolary con-

tacts between Norwid and Lavrov supposed to look like? The playfulness of how Norwid settled this does nevertheless indicate a degree of seriousness and “ideological” depth. A human being is primarily a consciousness, which means that such contacts should not be impersonal. Thus, Norwid would let these contacts be mediated in further correspondence (“si à la manière de Slaves vous préféreriez d’écrire par *occasion*”) (PWsz X, 8) by a charming woman (even a “Turan” because Norwid did not claim that race significantly affects the position of women in social hierarchy or their emotional capacity) as long as she is not an atheist (like most members of Société Antropologique) or a professor of medicine (like Paul Broca, who founded the Society).

Secondly, what can we say about the quotation from *Beniowski* (“[...] Let’s part here, not at last to shun / But as two gods, each equal on his sun” – trans. M. Modrzewska and P. Cochran), which appears to be slightly ironic in the context of a dialogue between an atheist and a believer? Something else is important here, however. At the basis of communal communication – Norwid argues – we find poetry. Although Lavrov was also aware of its “persuasive” power, he thought that in the era of “critical thought” it cannot lay any claims to universality (which, in his view, always has an “intellectual” character and occurs in the sphere of realizing ideas). This is because poetry cannot reach the Absolute in the sense of some beginning or the goal of intellectual efforts. Norwid argued that, on the contrary, the sacred constitutes the source of poetry, establishing the relation between language and Absolute. “Słowo było z człowieka wywołane” (DW IV, 213). [Word was brought forth from man] and it is the sacred origin of poetry that – as already mentioned – determines its purpose. Without this kind of faith, the idea of progress would become directionless and thus meaningless. As already seen, Lavrov regarded this view in Feuerbach’s categories as self-alienation (and self-enslavement) (it remains unclear how we should regard people from the time before this occurred – perhaps the nature of humanity consists in the capacity to self-alienate). Norwid linked this kind of faith to aesthetics and the experience of beauty, which unites all people (regardless whether they are “Slavs” or “Turans”) in a certain pre-discursive community. This is why Poles and Russians do not have to know their languages, or teach them to each other, in order to grasp the beauty of their poetry. Thus, it is not only the “critical thought” that contributes (in the current phase of humanity’s development) to progress and the future union of all people through some kind of “linguistic unification.” In the end, the condition of any future community is “word” itself, or poetry, although Norwid would hold that poetry as a certain kind of “speech” certainly does not preclude any “critical” intellectual interventions (this is how he regarded the role of irony: “*Iewica-marzeń*” (DW IV, 252). Poems not only affect our feeling but also modify our

beliefs and notions of reality. They express the totality of humanity, especially its carnal dimension by way of rhythm – something that remained alien to Lavrov’s “critical thought” (natural scientism would treat the body merely in “physiological” terms and not as a factor in consciousness), although it seems difficult to imagine progress merely in “abstract” or “physiological” categories.

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SUMMARY

The Polish romantic poet Cyprian Norwid and the Russian philosopher and sociologist Peter Lavrov met while living as exiles in Paris during the 1870s. They respected each other, although their worldviews could not be reconciled at first sight (though both were discontent with the political status quo). Lavrov was an atheist and considered religion to be a “reactionary” force in the age of scientific progress, slowing down further emancipation of the individual (though it once played a positive role). Norwid – on the other hand – thought that progress without roots in Christian religion would restrict the idea of humanity and reduce it to physiological determinism. This article examines the debate between the Polish Catholic and the Russian atheist in the context of their period, focusing on the negative consequences of a narrowly scientific attitude (which was, as a matter of fact, rejected by Lavrov), e.g. the relation between contemporary anthropological research and racial theories.

Keywords: Norwid; Lavrov; progress; religion; scientism; race.

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