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## Philosophy of action and creativity in Wilhelm Feldman's historical syntheses

Wilhelm Feldman – a writer, publicist, literary critic, activist and political thinker, legendary editor of “Krytyka” in Kraków – was also an initiator and participant in many Young Poland discussions. The article is an attempt to reconstruct the basic ideas and intuitions present in Feldman's major historical works and minor sketches. The author argues that they are philosophical in nature and form a coherent position. His philosophy combines romantic inspirations with the positivist programme of organic work and with elements of independence socialism, constituting an important element in the philosophical thought of Polish modernism in Galicia.

**Keywords:** Wilhelm Feldman, romanticism, modernism, socialism, philosophy of culture

Considered from the heights, life represents ideas only, whilst history a struggle of worldviews.

W. Feldman, *Na posterunku* [At the post]

Every moment in history finds a corresponding correlate in a certain art form.

W. Feldman, *Współczesna literatura polska*  
[Contemporary Polish Literature]

### I

When one thinks of Galicia not in today's popular, mythological and tourist sense, but in the strict historical and administrative system of the Habsburg Empire, viewed from the perspective of the cultural and political history of its last decades, it is impossible not to notice the distinctive figure of Wilhelm Feldman (1868–1919). He is the iconic figure and a one-man-institution of Young Poland's Krakow and the entire region. Today, he is probably best remembered

for the portrait of him painted by his friend Stanisław Wyspiański, although the painting depicting his son, *Portret Józia Feldmana* [Portrait of Józio Feldman] from the collection of Krakow's National Museum, is more popular (probably one of the most popular of the entire series of children's portraits painted by Wyspiański, an artist living in the vicinity of Wawel).

Feldman is not only a historian and critic of modernist art, but its tireless promoter, co-creator, inspirer and initiator. Not only a commentator and historian of Galician and national politics, but also an important participant in them; one whose voice and actions (or silence, as in the "Brzozowski affair") clearly shaped their face. He was the editor of the Kraków-based "Krytyka" (1901–1914), one of the most important pillars of Young Poland and progressive thought, co-organiser of the Holiday Courses in Zakopane which were to be the nucleus of a free university, and finally a Piłsudski-ite and Legionary who saw in the World War the fulfilment of Romantics' expectations of a general war which would not only revive Poland, but also awaken and renew the world. Above all, however, he was a Polish Jew, which in this case is a hackneyed term and an utterly meaningless one. A man who, by consciously choosing Polishness, made the most important act of his life, defining his identity and building his world view. For him, Polishness was a choice, the sense of which he explored, strengthened and deepened throughout his life in constant polemics, extensive reading and historical inquiries. He did not receive Poland from anyone, he had to create it for himself, nurture it within himself all the time, and, above all, win it.

His Polishness was a choice and a construct – a synthesis of great values; a culture to which access is not obstructed by religion, race or class origins; a universal, all-human, non-exclusive culture. He found a synthesis of values and social solidarity above all in Romanticism, which became for him his spiritual homeland, which he defended against the Stańcycy-faction traditionalists, positivist opportunists or – last but not least – the National Democratic nihilists (Endecja). He lived his life in language and culture to a larger extent than Julian Tuwim (similar in this respect), who, with every year of free Poland, became more and more depressed. Feldman, remained to the end a fanatic of his vision of an open and free Polishness, as he died on the threshold of a free Polish state.

This fanaticism was linked to Feldman's two passions, which I will attempt to discuss in this sketch. These were both his two main areas of writing and social engagement: art and politics. It is not clear which one is actually more important. Each is present in his work in the form of specific and relatively unambiguous value systems, which can be laconically but unmistakably named: romanticism and socialism. And both of them are indeed connected with the attitudes of man towards reality (already mentioned in the title): with action and with creativity. This dual composition, as it were, automatically leads to Feldman's two most extensive, best-known and most important historical works,

which I also mention below the title; each in two volumes. The first is devoted to contemporary Polish politics, the second – to literature.<sup>1</sup>

The point is that art and politics, romanticism and socialism, creativity and action, are not in this case disjoint sets, let alone elements of possible alternatives. On the contrary: as I will try to show, a characteristic feature of Feldman's thinking is a striving for synthesis, most often present in the spiritually Aristotelian conciliatory attitude, which consists in searching everywhere for elements that can be reconciled and symbiotically incorporated into the framework of a broader construction of intellectual inquiry. In her introduction to Feldman's historical and literary synthesis, Teresa Walas emphasises his "technique of inclusion and preservation of continuity", characteristic, moreover, not only of his literary interests, but also of his own life, the meaning of which was assimilation and accession to Polish culture without cutting off his Jewish roots. Of course, such a strategy is even more evident in intellectual work, and in this respect Feldman stands out against the Young Poland background, where the dominant element was radical ruptures and revaluations, profound negations and sharp refutations. Meanwhile, Feldman "did not want to encounter any book in vain, he wanted to somehow exploit every view and incorporate it into his own system, the notions of orthodoxy, purity of doctrine, rigid schematisation were fundamentally alien to him" (transl. from Polish).<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, often led to accusations undermining his commitment, the constancy of his own convictions, his intellectual certainty or his thinking skills in general. He was accused of a lack of ideological orientation, of eclecticism, whether resulting from the disturbed identity of an assimilated Jew, or from the life-long lack of support of an alienated intellectual who could only afford "emotional demagogy" and "boneless syncretism that of a newspaper column", as pointed out by Stanisław Brzozowski.<sup>3</sup>

## II

The author of *Legenda Młodej Polski* [The Legend of Young Poland] was not the only, or even the fiercest, opponent of Feldman's work and attitude, as

<sup>1</sup> W. Feldman, *Dzieje polskiej myśli politycznej w okresie porozbiorowym (próba zarysu). Volume one (up to 1863)*, Kraków, no publication date (this 'attempt' has as many as 444 pages!); *Dzieje polskiej myśli politycznej w okresie zaborów. Volume Two (from 1863 to the end of the 19th century)*, Kraków, no publication date, tenże, *Współczesna literatura polska 1864–1918*, vol. I–II, Kraków 1985.

<sup>2</sup> T. Walas, *Wilhelm Feldman – historyk literatury polskiej* [w:] W. Feldman, *Współczesna...*, vol. I, s. 11–12.

<sup>3</sup> S. Brzozowski, *Współczesna powieść i krytyka*, Kraków–Wrocław 1984, s. 255, 256.

Feldman had a significant number of opponents and enemies.<sup>4</sup> But Brzozowski certainly remains the most important one, because if anyone still remembers the publicist from Kraków in the context of the history of Polish philosophy, it is most probably because of Brzozowski's criticism. This is also the source of my interest in the editor of "Krytyka". Tracing the personal and ideological relationship of these two figures, I wonder more and more whether Brzozowski's sudden turning away from Feldman, was not primarily due to the unusual, not only external, convergence of their philosophical and cultural programmes. After all, it was Feldman, who was the first to perceive the potential and greatness of the ailing Varsovian's thought, who hosted him in the pages of "Krytyka", who helped him during his stay in Krakow, who invited him to his lectures in Zakopane (about which Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz, the other organiser, had a grudge against Feldman), etc. The point is that Feldman formulated his own programme a few years earlier than Brzozowski. If so, the latter's growing aversion to the man who could be regarded as the source and inspiration of Brzozowski's "philosophy of action" and "philosophy of labour" becomes somehow psychologically understandable: the content and the stylistic similarities are thought-provoking despite frequent fundamental differences (e.g. in the assessment of Romanticism). For the time being, it seems to be just a researcher's intuition, taking on the increasingly clear shape of a hypothesis, worthy of separate consideration.<sup>5</sup>

Brzozowski's figure, however, refers to a more fundamental problem that should be, if not resolved, then at least signalled, i.e. the philosophical status of Feldman's statements, or rather his place in the history of Polish thought. Feldman was not a philosopher, nor did he consider himself one. However, he did not share the positivist aversion to philosophy, although positivism also formed an important part of his synthetic worldview. He was open to philosophical ideas, recognising them as an important component of any culture, its base rather than its culmination. He read philosophers, wrote about philosophers, and did so with an understanding and sensitivity greater than that which Brzozowski would have been willing to grant him. Reflecting on the most basic and abstract aspects of political, historical or cultural issues, he also practiced philosophy. For such reasons, the Editorial Committee of the dictionary *Filozofia w Polsce* [Philosophy in Poland] probably decided that it was worth devoting a separate entry to him (the author was Janusz Sławinski).<sup>6</sup> It must be all the more surpris-

<sup>4</sup> An eloquent trace of the disputes with and about Feldman can be found in Karol Irzykowski's sketch *Brońmy swojego Żyda*. See K. Irzykowski, *Czyn i słowo*, Kraków 1980, s. 433–450.

<sup>5</sup> For now, I must refer readers to two partial studies: M. Bohun, *Upiór polskości. Galicja w życiu i myśli Stanisława Brzozowskiego*, „Galicja. Studia i materiały”, nr 2; tenże, *Mitologia i publicystyka*, „Przegląd Polityczny” 2018, no. 150.

<sup>6</sup> *Filozofia w Polsce. Słownik pisarzy*, Wrocław 1971, s. 86.

ing that he was omitted from *Encyklopedia filozofii polskiej* [the Encyclopaedia of Polish Philosophy], the most comprehensive lexicon to date, published in two volumes by the Polish Thomas Aquinas Society (Lublin 2011), although there is room there for many other literary historians, literary critics or social activists much less closely associated with philosophy than Feldman.

Feldman's philosophical thought – I would argue that in his case this is what we can speak of – is dominated by a practical component and activist inclinations. Its basis is criticism, which protects against mental and political authoritarianism; freedom of spiritual exploration. In Feldman's view, the entire history of "human spirit and being" can be structured as a struggle between two worldviews: the principle of seriousness, which orders the world and life by means of prohibitions, and the principle of criticism, which affirms freedom of spirit and rebellion against prohibitions.<sup>7</sup> Feldman, as befits the editor of "Krytyka", fully sympathised with and embodied the latter. Both principles also determine a certain model of social development with its historical concretisations. Thus, the principle of seriousness, which apotheosises the authority of power and affirms the violence it monopolises, is more characteristic of eastern cultures, symbolised (in Feldman's argument) by Asia (which, of course, also includes past and present Russia). The principle of criticism can be suited to the emancipatory and egalitarian inclinations of the West, which places freedom above authority and ethics above the law of the fist, which in its social aspect is increasingly moving towards an equalitarian and solidarist system of collective life. Feldman argues: "All progress begins with individual doubt in the reason and power of seriousness. Spiritual progress walks the line of resistance against dogma (not necessarily in the religious sense of the word), social progress walks the line of resistance against the fist, reigning in the form of absolutism, casteism, hierarchy, disposing of all means of power i.e., above all, capital and the army" (transl. from Polish).<sup>8</sup>

As a consequence, as can be inferred from the above, criticism is by no means frivolous. On the contrary: where freedom, doubt and rebellion overcome the chilling spirit of seriousness, spiritual and economic life flourishes, the 'seriousness of being' becomes solidified. Those societies in which criticism is the principle of collective and individual life stand supreme in terms of civilisational development and political significance. Admittedly, a few years later, the Japanese-Russian war would lead Feldman to take a somewhat different view of the sources of the vital forces of nations, nevertheless, the struggle of worldviews based on these two principles is the result of the unstoppable movement

<sup>7</sup> W. Feldman, *Na posterunku (Szkice publicystyczne)*, Lviv 1902, s. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Tamże, s. 83.

of life the formulas of which are the two opposing ideas. This is, in the most general sense, the philosophical-political credo of the author of *Nowi Ludzie* [New People]. At the same time, we have here a merely indefinite, abstract attitude which, in Feldman's case, is concretised in the totality of his writing, starting with works of fiction and drama, through extensive literary criticism, political and social journalism, and ending with historical syntheses.<sup>9</sup> He may be called a syncretist, or even an eclectic, but there is one underlying theme evident in all his inquiries and activities. Indeed, the theme is negative, reactive in nature, as a response to the existing state of the world and the human spirit, i.e. to counteract idleness, agreeableness, pessimism. In this counteraction, it is patronised by the Polish Romantics, Nietzsche, Marx, as well as by the activist reinterpretation of Schopenhauer and, from among the living, Wyspiański or Ibsen. He looks to them for clues as to how individuals and nations can live without enslavement, without fear and humiliation. The solution is one: action, the will to act, activism, which is both labour and ethicalisation of the world. This is the plane on which Romanticism, positivism and socialism, Jewishness and Polishness, nation and humanity, proletariat and culture, art and industry can come together.

### III

The task I have set myself in this sketch does not require a presentation of all of Feldman's works on Polish political thought in the post-Partition era. He sketches a wide and richly detailed panorama of it, starting from the Kościuszko Uprising and ending at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It seems more important to grasp his basic intention, which brings together various assessments and conclusions, often quite controversial. However, Feldman is not an academic historian, obliged to work *sine ira et studio*, but a publicist and a committed intellectual for whom political thought is not a museum exhibit, but a living mirror in which current politics and culture are viewed. From the very beginning, the concept of "action" becomes the leading category of his reflections. For it alone produces the basic premise of effective politics, the mental foundation of which is expressed in the motto "know thine own strength". This is the source experience of modern politics, which the critic from Kraków saw already in the first attempts to break out into independence. Here moral ethos, military strength and their self-knowledge in the form of political reflection

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<sup>9</sup> In this case, the history of political thought and the history of literature should be supplemented by a synthesis that is somewhat more local and particularistic, but also two-volume, namely *Stronnictwa i programy polityczne w Galicji 1846–1906*, vol. I–II, Kraków 1907.

come together: “For only these three factors together: internal freedom, i.e. moral power, a revolutionary soldier ready to die, and self-knowledge of one’s own strength, i.e. independent political thought carrying the whole nation, can bring victory” (transl. from Polish).<sup>10</sup>

Without action, moral perfectionism can fall into contemplative passivity, as shown by the example of Kościuszko at the later stages of his life. Feldman contrasts him with Jan Henryk Dąbrowski, who by deed seeks real ways of reviving the nation and restoring the state. Moral purity can be preserved by an idle symbol, sustained by its passivity. When it expresses a universal and timeless idea, its existence is justified, but not sufficient (such as Kościuszko). But “life belongs to active, dynamic forces. These are embodied by Dąbrowski” (transl. from Polish).<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, the later history of Polish politics and its reflections will somehow reproduce and deepen this dichotomy symbolised by these two great soldiers and politicians.

Action always reveals the realistic essence of politics, harmed by naive moralism. The important aspect is strength, decisiveness and the certainty of one’s place in the world. Particularly in international affairs, there is no room for sentiment: they are ruled by a functional, albeit relative, cynicism of “supra-personal logic”. This is what Napoleon wanted to teach the Poles, instilling in them the resilience of new life, energy and combativeness. Of course, in politics it is not only conscious aspirations and calculating thoughts that are important. Both the logic of actions, resulting from the necessity of a given situation, and the logic of feelings are important, which perhaps most strongly, though usually involuntarily, shapes the mentality of nations and individuals. It is equally necessary to possess a realistic grounding and a peculiar calculation, which were not alien even to the greatest Romantics: “When in the life of individuals one cannot count on the gratitude and excessive selflessness of fellow men – all the less so in the life of nations. And it is good that life is based not on these factors, but on an understanding of self-interest. It compels one to build on oneself, to strive and act without ceasing. One nation can give another nation ideas, treasures of its culture, examples – that is a lot. The rest you have to acquire yourself” (transl. from Polish).<sup>12</sup> Values are therefore only the basis, the starting point and the goal of actions, deeds, self-creation, which create the real existence of man and nation. Contrary to widespread accusations, this fact was well understood by the most eminent representatives of Polish Romanticism (not only the greatest cultural achievement of Poles, but also a school of effective politics, in the eyes of the publicist from Kraków).

<sup>10</sup> W. Feldman, *Dzieje...*, vol. I, s. 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> Tamże, s. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Tamże, s. 45–46.

Political realism reverberates in Feldman's writings with a Promethean-activist tone that can be associated with Brzozowski's rhetoric. But the editor of "Krytyka" cannot and will not stop there. He supplements French political realism with the moral loftiness of Polish Romanticism, which in his view is the first incarnation of the ideology that embraces and creates the modern world – socialism. The vaguely defined act (again like in Brzozowski) is concretised as labour. This is perhaps the greatest revelation of the democratic emigrants of the post-November-Uprising period, who "stood before Europe as the progenitors of freedom" not only because they took up the struggle against despotism *par excellence*, and then fought for freedom and justice almost all over the world, but also because they raised high the banner of social ideas. The banner which promoted absolutely one true principle: "that the basis of social existence is labour, which must also be properly organised" (transl. from Polish).<sup>13</sup>

It was indeed the entry of Poles into the realm of 'great politics', as Feldman calls it, but the adjective 'true' seems more appropriate to me. It consisted in searching for the sources of Polish strength in the sphere of general human values, in the heritage of the Great Revolution, which proclaimed the 'liberation of man'. Napoleon tried to make such an idea a reality, but it was the Romantics who introduced it into the cultural life of the nations and thus determined the course of political affairs for the next century. Romantic heroism showed how true heroism moves through conflict and the 'fires of wars' towards universal human harmony. This is, incidentally, a popular element of the understanding of history, described in those years, for example, in Hegel's historiosophy. Feldman expresses it as follows: "All historical heroes form in the material of history only emanations of their own individuality, but with intellect and ethical will they rise beforehand above their egoistic-animalistic reflexes: they are guided by a motive and a general human purpose" (transl. from Polish).<sup>14</sup> Political realism and sobriety, therefore, imply neither procrastination, fearful self-doubt, let alone egoism or "zoological nationalism" in the Prussian style. The principle of nationhood is fulfilled in its world mission, and nations are simply organs of developing humanity. Their struggles signify *de facto* relative particularism, leading through conflicts and contradictions to universal human unity.

In Feldman's view, Romanticism is simultaneously aesthetic and political. The great creator of culture is an artist of action and a social activist; art reveals itself as politics. This is due to the fact that for the Romantics the only measure of truth is action, which is why, contrary to positivist and loyalist critics (for example from the school of Stanislaw Tarnowski), out-of-this-world

<sup>13</sup> Tamże, s. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Tamże, vol. II, s. 143.



speculations, pipe dreams, head-in-clouds phantasms are out of the question. Truly Romantic art touches on the most real issues of human life, nation and humanity, with a view to actually transforming a personality, and the whole world in the process.<sup>15</sup> Feldman consistently defends Romanticism against the assaults of the Stańczycy faction, the criticism of academic philologists, and Brzozowski's attacks. Above all, he refuses to allow Romantic creativity to be enclosed in bizarre ghettos such as anarchic Polishness, phantasmagorically, Byronism, dreaminess, mysticism... Polemising with Józef Treliak's then famous book on Juliusz Słowacki, he wrote: "The artist is a social being even when he consciously breaks various venerable social orders, because he always produces social values, for us cultural and spiritual values of the highest measure; he gives values a meaning of greater permanence than transient social forms, dependent on time and place" (transl. from Polish).<sup>16</sup>

The measure of the significance and value of political thought is its topicality. And in this respect, Romanticism undoubtedly confirms its greatness, embodied both in the artistic forms of Young Poland (the main current of which is neo-Romanticism), in the independence-oriented upsurge of Polish socialism, and, what at first glance may not seem obvious, in the peculiar heroism of industrial modernity, i.e. an attempt to pull Poles out of a state of civilisational passivity and lethargy through economic and cultural development. Feldman consistently proclaims that everything is decided by the 'will to action' – all arguments and fantasies can be countered, only the law and the will of the people are irresistible. As a socialist, he seems to approve of the position taken after 1900 by Ludwik Krzywicki, who rejected the idea of social revolution in the form of a destructive rebellion, and adopted the evolutionary strategy of the road to socialism and national freedom through the industrial development of the country, labour legislation and the reform of the capitalist system. In this spirit, the socialist from Kraków consistently puts forward the demand for the intensification of industrialism in Galicia and the rest of the country. But he speaks with the romantic voice of heroism of production and workers' self-creation rather than bourgeois acquisitiveness. He contrasts the lofty types of worker and engineer with both the stratum of the nobility in a state of decay and the homunculi of capitalism in the form of the rentier, the market speculator and the trader.

Industrialisation and a modern economy are both a necessity within the laws of social development and a moral necessity, saving us from destructive apathy. In an interesting sketch, *Dwie Kultury* [Two Cultures], written on the occasion

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<sup>15</sup> W. Feldman, *Pomniejszychyciele olbrzymów (Szkice literacko-polemiczne)*, Stanisławów 1906, s. 27. It is worth adding that this collection was published as the third volume of the series edited by Brzozowski, „Literatura i sztuka. Monografie”.

<sup>16</sup> Tamże, s. 82.

of an industrial convention in Kraków, Feldman, proclaiming the necessity of modernising the Galician economy, states: "Like capitalism, industrial culture is an irresistible historical necessity, an evolutionary phase through which, on the way to higher forms of life, every nation that does not wish to be devoured by another must pass" (transl. from Polish).<sup>17</sup> So, another apologist for the inevitability of market laws and the bourgeois mode of production? There were quite a few of them, whether among Warsaw positivists, native Social-Darwinists or orthodox Marxists (though not necessarily Poles being leaders in this discourse).

Indeed, under the pen of a socialist, such phrases do resound like a confession of faith of a necessary variant of Marxism, dominant in the times of the Second International, but in Feldman's work the axiological accents are somewhat differently distributed. He is not concerned with affirming the ironclad laws of development, which condemn every nation to slavishly imitate the drama of primitive accumulation and repeat the development cycles of the leading countries. It is about modernity, about social and cultural modernisation, about the livelihood of a nation. Firstly, industrial development (conditioned by working capital) stimulates the flourishing of political and material independence of nations, and enables individuals to develop their own self. Secondly, the notion that workers have no homeland is false. It is capital that is fatherless, but the same cannot be said of people, regardless of which side of the social barricade they stand on. Finally, industrial development is an enhancement of human creativity and a force of mastery over nature. As such, it has a heroic character and coincides with the Romantic spirit. It is, in a word, a manifestation of a kind of artistry: "the greatest artistry – wrestling with nature, teasing out its secrets, this Promethean struggle with the gods, the moulding of human souls" (transl. from Polish)<sup>18</sup>.

To put it yet in another way, the romantic politics of real action is by no means incompatible with modern industry, developed technology or a modern social structure. In Feldman's eyes, an excellent example of the peculiar combination of the great tradition of the old nation with economic mobilisation and efficiency on the international stage was Japan, which had just defeated Poland's greatest enemy in the Far East. Almost at the same time as Józef Piłsudski and Tytus Filipowicz were negotiating in Tokyo, Feldman was presenting Japan in the pages of "Krytyka" as a model for Polish modernisation, becoming a kind of forerunner of the famous slogan of the 'second Japan' forty years ago. What can Poles learn from the Japanese? – asked the socialist from Kraków and provided the answers himself. Firstly, idealism in goals, while maintaining realistic means of achieving them. Secondly, the recognition that labour and

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<sup>17</sup> W. Feldman, *Na posterunku...*, s. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Tamże, s. 79–80.

action are the ultimate principles of knowledge and life. Thirdly, unity in diversity – the cohesiveness of national identity, which holds together the various factions and manifestations without destroying their distinctiveness. Fourthly, and finally, the power and immortality of the spirit, capable of revolutionary transformation.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, such generally formulated goals and values, could be shared by representatives of most political parties and worldviews. In Feldman's case, however, the elements that gave coherence to his syncretic beliefs and diverse inspirations were the socialist-romantic dominant. In the end, Romanticism and socialism merged in his thinking to such an extent that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between them, and they themselves constituted a kind of ideological nexus for the various components of his vision of the world, especially his convictions concerning Polish culture and politics.

#### IV

Feldman was not particularly concerned with distinguishing between the concepts of action and creativity; he often combined them or used interchangeably. It seems, however, that they are not necessarily synonymous in his worldview. Rather, the notion of action refers to social reality, denoting all activities within it, involving a struggle with the circumstances and matter of life. Creativity, on the other hand – more related to the sphere of artistic creation – fosters man's liberation from factuality, emerging from a state of unreflective acceptance of the *status quo* by genuinely changing reality through creative work. The social significance of creativity would then consist in proving that change is possible, that man has the power to transform his world and that the primary means of doing so is the creation of new values. In this sense, the most prominent form of manifestation of creative potential was, in Feldman's view, art, and in particular the great Romantic literature.

The editor from Kraków had no doubts: in his view, art was a body co-creating history and responsible for history. Individuals and nations manifest their historical existence through culture, which alone can justify their existence. Poland ceased to be a state when it lost its culture “full of heroism, spiritual freedom and beauty”. The condition for regaining independence therefore becomes cultural maturity, which consists in expressing ‘living truths’: freedom, justice, labour, the will to live. Feldman wrote: “What are political struggles, what are

<sup>19</sup> W. Feldman, *Na przystanku*, „Krytyka. Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom społecznym, nauce i sztuce”, edited by W. Feldman, year VII, vol. II, Kraków 1905, s. 227 (I quote texts from „Krytyka” according to the annual edition).

the necessary struggles for freedom and wholeness, and a state of one's own making, if not a struggle for the soul of the nation to exercise and intensify it freely, to spread its wings to the best of human ability? It was not for trade markets or the ability to oppress others that the greatest peoples and geniuses bled, least of all, the Polish ones. What is at stake is one's own position among nations, and a nation without a culture of its own will not gain or retain it. The conscience of this culture – Mochnacki already knew – can only be literature – art” (transl. from Polish).<sup>20</sup>

This is related to the fundamental characteristic of art, which is most fully expressed in the creative act. Art is the affirmation of freedom. Hierarchy and rigid order are not conducive to the development of art, and certainly not a necessary condition for it to flourish; freedom and free man, on the other hand, by all means. And freedom, Feldman emphasises, like a declared anarchist, is the mother of all life. It is not just about the freedom of artistic creation, non-conformism and liberation from authority inherent in artistic spheres, but about the social dimension of art. In this sense, art and revolution condition each other: “There is a close, inseparable relationship between art and the social question! There is no free art without free people, there is no beautiful art in the midst of ugly life, there is no sublime art when the burdens of life chain you to the plains of existence!” (transl. From Polish).<sup>21</sup>

The social-revolutionary and national-revolutionary dimensions of art are at the heart of Feldman's vision. The Poles, thanks to the great art of Romanticism, revived by the creators of Young Poland led by Wyspiański, in a heroic uprising achieve a double liberation at the same time: one of the homeland and the other – of labour (of the working classes). Hence the indispensability of “modern Romanticism” – faith in spite of the obvious, love that does not count the victims, irrational feelings that show the new world order, but, above all, the need for “wisdom and strength, guiding the heroic action”. Feldman records these words in the next edition of his historical and literary synthesis, in the years of the Great War, an answer to the prayers of Romantics, who, in this respect, proved to be the most far-sighted politicians. The war for the freedom of nations, turns out to be at the same time the most fundamental revolution, transforming the foundations of personal and social life: “The hour came and unleashed a storm such as the world had never seen and began to topple, as it were, rotten trees, mighty powers, monuments of iniquitous culture, temples of the golden calf, steel soldiers without human souls. The materialism in which hearts grew fat, the realism of the sages of brute force, the bloodthirsty greed of the insatiable plunderers of other

<sup>20</sup> W. Feldman, *Współczesna...*, vol. II, s. 246.

<sup>21</sup> W. Feldman, *Na posterunku...*, s. 28–29.

people's goods – all these supreme values of the governments and leading classes of Europe shone once again, as meteors, and burst, and crashed, and collapsed into rubble and dust. Stars dawned in the sky in which weary man no longer even dared to believe: the stars of ideals...” (transl. from Polish).<sup>22</sup>

As the significance of Polish Romanticism and its Young Poland revival is not exhausted in the undoubted perfection of works of art, but in their socio-historical message, in the ideals of life and politics, in the general attitude towards life. Creativity turns out to be the most perfect form of action, i.e. of actual participation in history. Romanticism, Feldman proclaims, is “the fatherland’s immortal spirit”, breaking through fossilised reality; it is the expression of the will to live and the “perpetual momentum of feeling”. And as such, it is a constant power present in history, not just one of many cultural epochs. It reveals a “spontaneous power creating momentum”, the absence of which means defeat that the editor of “Krytyka” recognises and condemns wherever there is a lack of faith and romantic feeling, wherever the dominant element is the fear called realism, resignation to ideals and empty wishful thinking. “Romanticism is a drive of feeling, of will, of nature, of freedom. As applied to post-partition Poland – it is independence. (...) Romantic literature speaks of a Pole of a certain historical category, as well as »the eternal man«. Being national, it is – as Norwid wanted – supranational. Romanticism developed from the old elements and brought into bloom a new, great Polish culture” (transl. from Polish).<sup>23</sup>

Feldman’s literary output, journalistic activities and historical works consistently express and confirm this conviction. Romanticism occupies the most important place in his life and worldview. He fights for Romanticism on every possible front – he argues with positivism (although he sees a certain continuity and connection here, expressed in the central positioning of action, as a manifestation of life-creating and sense-creating activism), he fights with the renowned ‘diminishers of giants’, he fights just as fiercely with National Democratic critics of Romanticism, and finally he enters into an argument with Brzozowski, whose assessment of Romantic heritage in the context of the defeat of the 1905 revolution seems to him to be remotely unfair and somewhat misguided. While recognising Romanticism as the essence of Polishness, as a noble distillate of all its most creative and most positive aspects, he is in fact fighting for himself, for his own basic identity choice.

In his polemic with Brzozowski, he defends the ‘modernity’ and ‘practicality’ of Romanticism. He insists that Romanticism was the beginning of “organic work”, the work of resurrecting the nation.<sup>24</sup> This belief coincides with his view

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<sup>22</sup> W. Feldman, *Współczesna...*, vol. II, s. 416.

<sup>23</sup> Tamże, vol. I, s. 58.

<sup>24</sup> Tamże, vol. II, s. 334.

on the continuity between Romanticism and Positivism. He argues that although the two currents, or rather attitudes to the world, disagree in their understanding of the foundations and aims of culture, they share a kind of functionalism – an understanding of culture as action. In both cases, action is in the foreground, as a response to some pressing challenge, to an irresistible need. In keeping with his synthetic stance, he sees in the positivist correction a certain positive element, consisting in the descent from the metaphysical heights of the ‘eternal man’ onto the ground of the citizen and the ‘heroism of labour’, the transition to a temporal type whose idealism has been adapted to the struggle for economic existence.<sup>25</sup> As we shall see below, positivism would thus be the necessary dialectical moment of Romanticism’s acquisition of its socialist self-knowledge. What is at stake here, however, is not the accuracy of the cultural historian’s diagnosis, but a philosophical manifesto. “’Tis only action”, writes Feldman, “In the beginning was action. And in the end”. Life is nothing other than the “energy of creation”, the expression of which is action that cannot be realised without internal and external (social) freedom.<sup>26</sup>

Emphasised in the polemic with Brzozowski, therein lies the modernity of Romanticism. Firstly, Romantics, in complete agreement with contemporary philosophy, discovered the irrational power of the spirit, without which there would be no modern technology and no modern labour. Secondly, Romantic social moralism foreshadowed the coming changes in the organisation of the economic system, the goal and culmination of which would be socialism.<sup>27</sup> For in Feldman’s view, Romanticism was socialism *avant la lettre*.

As interpreted by the editor of “Krytyka”, Romanticism was social in nature. Just as it was a religious truth shattering ecclesiastical formulas, it shattered the world of bondage and exploitation, proclaiming a new gospel of the relation of man to man and of one social stratum to another. The cry for the kingdom of God on earth, was really a quest for justice.<sup>28</sup> In Feldman’s thinking, romanticism, socialism and culture mean the same thing. They resound with the “thunderous speech of actions”, proving that socialism is not barbarism, but a continuation and development of the greatest Polish heritage – romanticism, which, in the united actions of workers and the intelligentsia finds a new life in mass incarnation.<sup>29</sup> The romantic spirit of socialism has a number of different manifestations. First of all, it is a revolt in the name of freedom and human

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<sup>25</sup> Tamże, vol. I, s. 100–101.

<sup>26</sup> Tamże, vol. II, s. 97.

<sup>27</sup> Tamże, s. 335.

<sup>28</sup> Tamże, vol. I, s. 59.

<sup>29</sup> W. Feldman, *Dziedzictwo kultury polskiej*, „Krytyka. Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom społecznym, nauce i sztuce”, edited by W. Feldmana, year VII, vol. II, Kraków 1905, s. 105.

dignity, a break with the “criminal tradition of the official classes”. Then, it is a movement of religious purification – a return to the authentic spirit of Christendom before it was frozen in ecclesiastical-institutional formalisation. What is important here, however, is the terrestrialisation of Christianity: the vision of a humanity equal and fraternal not only in God but also in the this-worldly sphere. Romanticists and socialists strive for the same thing: “before justice is meted out with the sword of the archangel – they want justice also on earth”. Together they proclaim the ideal of a non-exclusionary Poland: for them, nationality does not mean exclusivism and chauvinism – a free Poland and the brotherhood of peoples condition each other. It was the Romantics who first showed that the banners of revolution and social issues were reconcilable with a commitment to national tradition and homeliness. Above all, however, what socialism and romanticism have in common is a heroic spirit, a rejection of cowardly, philistine common sense that culminates in the ideal of the hero-fighter. It is socialism and revolution that have made a kind of actualisation of the Romantic heritage, while reaffirming its cultural potential. Amidst the conflagration of the Revolution of 1905, Feldman writes of Romanticism: “In these writings, translated into modern language – the foundations, of a new, great, Polish culture, welding thought and life into one ring, one heat, into one image, whose name is the heroic spirit...” (transl. from Polish).<sup>30</sup>

Romanticism and socialism fused into a complex of heroic activism, show two inseparable, yet artificially separated, spheres of human life in both personal and social dimensions. The first dimension is spiritual in nature and is most fully realised in the art that fights for the value of life. In art a strong, free spirit breaks free from the dictatorship of ‘blood and iron’ and a free, powerful and supportive soul of the whole nation is born.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, neither man nor nation can soar when political and social oppression weighs down on them, when they are chained by the most acute, because physically perceptible, web of economic dependence. Therefore, national liberation must proceed in parallel with social revolution – the first condition for development is the solution of the “question of stomach”, i.e. the liberation of labour, by no means a ‘romantic platitude’, but a sequence of real, obliging acts. And these, as a whole, are transformed into a “will towards creativity”, because man is not a simple product of environment and social conditions, but an active and creative being.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Tamże, s. 108–109.

<sup>31</sup> W. Feldman, *Sic itur...*, „Krytyka. Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom społecznym, nauce i sztuce”, edited by W. Feldman, year VII, vol. II, Kraków 1905, s. 2–3.

<sup>32</sup> W. Feldman, *O wyzwolenie człowieka*, „Krytyka. Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom społecznym, nauce i sztuce”, edited by W. Feldman, year IX, vol. II, Kraków 1907, s. 113, 115.

In Feldman's view, Romanticism creates the cultural potency of Polish socialism, which, in turn, is a condition for the further development of the nation and the regaining of independence. Once again, he formulates the thought that will subsequently resonate with Brzozowski: "Only an economically emancipated people", he states in his polemic with the National Democrats, "can be the strong basis of culture and the strongest shield in the final battle. Therefore, social justice only will be followed by political-international justice" (transl. from Polish).<sup>33</sup> The biological amorality of Polish nationalism is, in his view, overpowering, because programmatic egoism leads to a false historical solipsism, giving no strength for existence against other nations and regardless of them. Historical strength is constituted by cultural potency, a distinct spiritual physiognomy through which the nation positions itself as a creative element of universal history. Moral and civilisational strength guarantees the nation's existence, which in the case of Poland is expressed in the ideal of fraternity, justice and creative spiritual life.<sup>34</sup>

## V

Creativity and action, Romanticism and socialism – these are the unifying symbols of Wilhelm Feldman's political and historical imagination, which I argue can be subjected to philosophical conceptualisation, and he himself can be counted among the representatives of Polish thought in the modern era. These two distinct, though fused, basic elements of his worldview also have two distinct embodiments, linking Romanticism with Neo-Romanticism. These are two creative personalities, two giants of Polish culture, whose works express everything that was most important, most valuable and existentially significant for Feldman, because they confirmed his ultimate life choices: Norwid and Wyspiański. Great artists, crossing the boundaries of epochs, styles and crafts of artistic expression. Perhaps the greatest. As for Wyspiański, Feldman had no doubts; Norwid, in turn, was just being discovered in his time. Nevertheless, his thoughts are so relevant that an evocation of the author of *Promethidion* can constitute the conclusion and summary of my sketch. It seems to me that Feldman's philosophy can be summed up in his interpretation of *Fortepian Szopena* [Chopin's Piano] and his view on the place and significance of the work of the author of *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation].

"The ideal has reached the cobblestones," wrote Norwid in *Fortepian Szopena*, poetically describing Frédéric Chopin's piano being thrown out the win-

<sup>33</sup> W. Feldman, *Rzecz o Narodowej Demokracji*, Kraków 1902, s. 14.

<sup>34</sup> W. Feldman, *Charakter walki polsko-rosyjskiej*, „Krytyka. Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom społecznym, nauce i sztuce”, edited by W. Feldman, year VII, vol. II, Kraków 1905, s. 308–310.



dow of a second-story apartment. This symbolic scene is conventionally interpreted as an expression of immense lament and despair. However, Feldman sees here a great symbol of the popular revolt of the spirit. The “ideal”, thrown out of the window, will fall on the “street” and wake it up – rouse the people to fight, create tomorrow’s “Poland of transformed wheelwrights”. The vision is unequivocal: the future of the country will be decided in the streets, where the ideal, raised high by the people, will lead the way and bring rebirth of the homeland in direct action. Art will trigger this miracle: “And the highest art – heroism. This truth, shining in the dome of the thoughts of all Polish Romantics, is natural and necessary in Norwid, who walked through the world supported only by the heroism of his soul. Heroism is the meaning of life, with its disappearance and life loses its high meaning and value” (transl. from Polish).<sup>35</sup>

Wyspiański proclaims the same ideas, albeit in the cruder language of tearing down veils of illusion and smashing graveyard slabs, in almost every one of his literary works. In a sense Wyspiański’s work constitutes a literary analogue of Feldman’s struggles and discussions (it seems to be a subject for a separate scientific study). The defence of Polishness against the mold of the grave, the disruption of the rhythms of the dance of the straw man, *Chochół*,<sup>36</sup> through the barrage of questions and criticism, awakening from the lethargy of doubt or greedy illusion – this is Feldman and Wyspiański’s united effort. ‘So that Poland is a place like everywhere else’ – it is their desire for a modernity which must be implemented by action.

Feldman’s words on *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation] will best sum up his philosophy, as well as my sketch on it: “He contrasted the romanticism of the grave with the romanticism of life, passivity with activism. And life knows no other test than that of itself, of its own intensity, of its creativity, of the fulfilment of every historical task; especially a life, which in Wyspiański’s conception, is so capable of confirming itself by deed that it may desire and receive an eternal return. In Poland the first task is to crush bondage, to break with passivity or contemplation of the grave; to prepare what is everywhere, the state, and to do it by action, by one’s own heroism” (transl. from Polish).<sup>37</sup>

For only that which is worth living can live, proclaims Feldman after Wyspiański, but this does not mean a passive affirmation of biological forces. On the contrary: it is a call for action, because only action and creativity justify any existence.

<sup>35</sup> W. Feldman, *Współczesna...*, vol. I, s. 78.

<sup>36</sup> The figure of dancing *Chochół*, a straw man or a straw mulch wrap (from one of Wyspiański’s plays, *Wesele* [The Wedding]) allegorically signifies a situation of apathy, a lethargic trance (translator’s note).

<sup>37</sup> Tamże, vol. II, s. 123.

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### Filozofia czynu i twórczości w syntezach historycznych Wilhelma Feldmana

#### Streszczenie

Wilhelm Feldman – pisarz, publicysta, krytyk literacki, działacz i myśliciel polityczny, legendarny redaktor krakowskiej „Krytyki”, był inicjatorem i uczestnikiem wielu młodopolskich dyskusji. Artykuł jest próbą rekonstrukcji podstawowych idei i intuicji obecnych w głównych pracach historycznych Feldmana i pomniejszych szkicach. Autor twierdzi, że mają one charakter filozoficzny i tworzą spójne stanowisko. Jego filozofia łączy inspiracje romantyczne z pozytywistycznym programem pracy u podstaw oraz z elementami socjalizmu niepodległościowego, stanowiąc ważny element myśli filozoficznej polskiego modernizmu w Galicji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Wilhelm Feldman, romantyzm, modernizm, socjalizm, filozofia kultury