

Flames. From the Papers of Michal Kaniowski

Płomienie. Z papierów po Michale Kaniowskim

Presented by: Tomasz Mizerkiewicz

Płomienie was intended to be a response for the novel Demons by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Russian novelist published the pamphlet novel against leftist radicals acting in the second half of 19th century under Tsarist regime. Polish writer rejected accusations of nihilism and amorality of Russian rebels and presented them as a wide spectrum of high-minded political activists forming the Narodnaya Volya ('People's Will') movement. Portraying sometimes the very same politicians as Dostoevsky (such as Sergey Nechayev), Brzozowski revealed their noble intentions, compassion for the suffering poor, willingness to sacrifice their lives and courage of their assassination attacks on the tsar and most prominent representatives of the regime.

The book is presented as though it was a manuscript of Michał Kaniowski found and edited by Stanisław Brzozowski. The novel begins as a Bildungsroman presenting ways new socialist revolutionaries initiated their activities. The main character, the son of Polish noble family, Michał Kaniowski, perceived himself as a devoted Polish patriot, but soon – together with his close friends – abandoned struggle for Polish independence and took the side of socialists proclaiming the need to liberate every man. He defined himself in materialistic terms as “a piece of matter which wants to become a thought”. Most of the content of the first part of the novel is in the form of unending discussions of young conspirators from Narodnaya Volya who declare their furious disagreements with the system of cruel exploitation of the poor, moral depravation of servants of the tsarist regime and in favour of women's suffering. On the other hand, they describe mental states of those who fully devoted themselves for the partisan socialist actions. The second part of the novel depicts repeating attempts to assassinate the tsar Alexander II, new groups of socialists losing their lives in “direct actions”, final killing of tsar and the destruction of Narodnaya Volya by secret service and the police.

Years after the final destruction of that revolutionary movement Kaniowski rests in his family's house and writes the memoirs of powerful socialist actors of his youth. He feels that their postmortal transformation into material state is easy to accept, since it aligns with the conviction that all their deeds and hectic thoughts are “seeds” still preserving the whole potential of their dreams of just, even, and happy humankind.

Płomienie, along with Brzozowski's essays Legenda Młodej Polski (The Legend of Young Poland) and Idee. Wstęp do filozofii dojrzałości dziejowej (Ideas. Introduction to the philosophy of historical maturity), strongly influenced generations of Polish leftist activists (Czesław Miłosz, Leszek

Kołodkowski, Adam Michnik etc.) when they faced the contradiction between the duty to fight for Polish independence and the moral commandment to prioritize the destruction of any oppression of the poor. Different Marxist theories, radical programs such as anarcho-communism, portraits of European socialist conspirators (Russian, Swiss, Italian) in *Plomienie* were combined with aesthetic theories of the time. Most of protagonists shared the feeling of being possessed by the revolutionary moment, they discussed the power of the moment, revelatory insights they have as those chosen few who invested themselves in terrorist attacks. One of them, Solovyev, before his fatal and unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the tsar, confessed that he is so much happier than the rest of his comrades who will not experience this moment of intensity. This allows to read *Plomienie* also in the context of the aesthetic theory of “the moment” elaborated by British essayist Walter Pater admired by Brzozowski. Some philosophical ideas in *Plomienie* could also be understood as distant remains of Neoplatonism when conspirators express the conviction that the man who fully sacrificed himself still exists after his death as a forming energy influencing material worlds of the future. This philosophy of the moment puts *Plomienie* in the politico-aesthetic history of experiencing suddenness as described by Hans-Karl Bohrer.

Today ethical choices of political revolutionaries of 19th century presented in this novel can resonate within the groups of activists struggling with authoritarian regimes when they consider more desperate reactions for the oppression. Brzozowski’s novel would advocate their brave and noble intentions and readiness to sacrifice their lives (for instance, Boris Nemtsov or Alexei Navalny in Russian case).

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: