

The Explosive Dynamics of Spiritual Development

Lech Witkowski

The Pomeranian University in Slupski, Poland

Introduction

I want to share¹ a certain strategic principle that I have developed over forty-five years of academic work and reading in the humanities as an important pedagogical and cultural message with a deeper philosophical justification. It concerns the approach to texts, when I write books, when I read and when lecturing when I participate in cultural events or when I have contact with works of cultural heritage. This principle sounds like a call: seek out, absorb creatively and use developmentally for your own spirituality “explosive effects” derived from valuable contact with texts (objects) of culture. Of course, it is not just an autobiographical confession that is at stake here, as it is important for me to invite people to rethink this perspective in the practice of education at all levels and areas of contact with culture as a symbolic heritage. I believe that an important, often surprising, cultural attitude and approach towards pupils and students emerges here for educational applications. We should fight for it at all stages for a real impact on spiritual development, even starting with small children. A new quality of the functioning of culture in the educational space is needed, so that we are not held hostage by the “ritualization of appearances” in contact with culture, as Pierre Bourdieu put it. This allows for a new illumination of the potential “work of the concept,” the characteristics of which were referred to by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

¹ The text is an edited version of the author's lecture, delivered on June 1, 2021, following an invitation from the University of Bialystok to appear in the prestigious series "Open lectures by outstanding professors." This followed the award to the author by the General Board of the Polish Pedagogical Society of the honorary Medal of the Polish Pedagogical Society "in recognition of the merits in the development of pedagogical sciences and popularization of their achievements in the country and abroad" (from the letter of the President of the Polish Pedagogical Society). The author would like to thank Prof. Agata Cudowska from UWB for organizing the lecture and providing a video recording, which became the basis for the preparation of this article.

Hegel, looking for a real encounter in accordance with his “ontological concept of truth.” The adopted strategy of reading belles-lettres, history of philosophy, social disciplines and ideas in the humanities has its own interest, often requiring a dispute over the reception of culture when it is too shallow or loses important impulses with an interpretation dominated by criticism without transformations protecting its value. The presented strategy of drawing from the history of ideas is subordinated to a care for the spiritual development of subsequent generations, inscribed in the symbolic heritage, and at the same time translates into pedagogical postulates².

For me, the postulated quality of reading is related to an intense cognitive and emotional process involving subjectivity that involves a vigilant searching of the humanities in an effort to obtain significant development impulses. The humanities, in turn, is any self-reflection of culture understood as a symbolic soil from which we can draw a base for enriching language, imagination and sensitivity³. Here is the source of energizing our spirit, charging ourselves with the impulses of language processing as creating “screens” on which we can also display our experiences, transforming our potential for expressing ourselves and drawing on the achievements of others in situating ourselves in the world. Concepts or categories are for me a ‘screen’ that enables projection, as Edward Balcerzan (2013) wrote, and I find this emphasis also in Florian Znaniński (1991, p. 822). Concepts as screens allow us to display phenomena that are otherwise overlooked, otherwise beyond the scope of our exposure and projection - in short: cultural perception. Just as we know from Hegel that it is good to follow the “work of a concept,” so after Gaston Bachelard it is worth considering that the epistemological task is situated at the level of each individual concept. Therefore, we will trace the issue of how the concept of “explosion” works in the context of ideas, taking into account the cognitive differentiation of its aspects, affecting the normative vision of spiritual development and growing into the culture as a symbolic heritage.

²Hence, many times I have discussed the quality of the readings of the modern humanities tradition among even eminent theoreticians of culture, such as Jerzy Kmita in Poland; see Witkowski 1996.

³I wrote more about this while reconstructing the perspective of the classic author of social pedagogy in Poland, Helena Radlińska, who sensitizes us to the need to grow into a culture whose ideas create an “invisible environment,” thanks to which we have a chance to increase our symbolic potential, cf. Witkowski 2014.

How Can We Look for an Explosion? and What is “Valuable Knowledge”?

The process of looking for an explosive effect may begin with looking for valuable aphorisms related to the concern to discover some emotionally and cognitively moving “pearl of thought” in someone that we can include in our perceptual horizon. Then it is about giving it such a meaning for the ways of perceiving and experiencing the world, ourselves, and our actions that we can integrate with our meaningful maxims as signposts which we follow in the practice of social interaction, even unconsciously at first, and gradually with an increasing understanding of ourselves and the capacity for symbolic expression. However, the search for the integrity of the attitude is always in the background due to its coherence and axiological depth, related to reflective justification, and not only a spontaneous affirmation of a fragment detached from the whole. Of course, this leads to the formation of a hybrid, liberated from one type of narrative and its reducing effects, as in the case of textbooks using abbreviations and diagrams. Textbooks are not the best intermediaries, an adequate cultural medium; literature, including poetry, should be used since the humanities work as any self-reflection of culture through poetry or “the wisdom of the novel” (Kundera, 2004).

Examples of impulses from the thoughts of Nobel laureates in the field of literature (Elias Canetti, Hermann Hesse, Wisława Szymborska, Olga Tokarczuk) will be used as illustrations, crossed with references to other expressions of creativity (Michail Bakhtin, Jean Baudrillard, Milan Kundera, Juri Lotman, Tadeusz Różewicz, Peter Sloterdijk). So the point is to be able to cultivate this proposed and postulated attitude of opening up to the explosive effect that can be owed to a single encounter, a single form whose limitations must then be overcome. “Life requires a form, but it also requires going beyond the form,” as Witold Gombrowicz emphasized in his “dual imperative of form,” about which I have written separately, asking the question: “How Not To Be Deceived By The Form?” (Witkowski, 2009, pp. 517-540). One has to search the space of texts looking for the integrity of the impulses found in various places of the discourse, against the drama of fragmentation of the narrative of individual formulas, which would suffice—as students sometimes joke—to “cram, pass, and forget.” It is not about what we have already done, but what we have in mind, what transforms us, develops us, enriches us, starting from shaping the experience through spiritual “awakening,” which—as it turns out—is not at all spiritually easy. But it is still not enough when we have to get to the stage of inner transformation.

I shall tell you in a moment what valuable knowledge is from this perspective. First, however, I need to sensitize you to what the classic of ecological epistemology, Gregory Bateson, draws attention to, and this is also the case in Florian Znaniecki -

whose humanistic ideas I am writing about in another book—when both emphasize the need to understand cultural content not as information, but as a source of meanings that require inscribing into a personal relationship with their recipient and its ability to actively process and apply them. Valuable knowledge is not content. It is not information. It is an area of meaning as meaningful impulses, where understanding does not come down to what is said, or even “why?,” but what is the meaning for the recipient, what makes him think. Therefore, it is about dialogue in a more profound sense, processing cognitive attitudes. Such a formula is of a dialogue where we do not have to convince each other but give food for thought without agreement. Meanwhile, we are often unable to absorb and digest meanings. One of the classics of the Polish pedagogy Zygmunt Mysłakowski has emphasized that “even masterpieces can be culturally mute objects” if we do not make an effort to get something out of them and let them speak.

Moving on to the idea of explosiveness, I would like to remind you that I once formulated a title for a text that says an educator always functions “in the minefield of culture”: we must therefore be able to disarm mines, we must be able to use them so that the explosion is controlled and valuable. Explosions of anger do not belong to this type of cultural effect, as far as they are not conducive to development and have no reflective consequences.

Lotman, Hesse, and the Beyond

In order not to suggest that I am the only one who has invented the issue of explosiveness in cultural contexts, I would like to recall that an essential book by Yuri Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, was also translated into Polish (Lotman, 2009)⁴. From

⁴ The task of dealing with the category of “explosion” inscribed in the contexts of cultural semiotics in Y. Lotman goes beyond the scope of this text. I see many valuable analogies and important clarifications inherent in the analyses of Russian semiotics in relation to my concerns and considerations. The accents in which Lotman sees the alternation (alternations, oscillations, fluctuations) of references in the dual entanglements of pairs of poles: dynamics and stabilization, or the explosion and organization of discourse, as well as explosive dynamics and the gradual change by degrees oscillating with it, are priceless. It is also important to point to the requirement to reverse the relationship between the close, the familiar and the distant, the stranger, or between the centre and the periphery of images or language. Lotman’s deliberations are inscribed in the general theory of culture and language, meanwhile I am interested in the reference to education and specific meetings with cultural texts as well as the determinants of the quality of development consequences that can be obtained and their conditions. Here we have an overlap of certain inspirations that guide both of us, albeit in different entanglements; this especially concerns references to the semiotics of culture by Mikhail Bakhtin, which I have already written about (Witkowski 2000), or the use of accents present in

its inspiration, I draw the ontological paradox of knowledge, consisting in the fact that valuable knowledge does not eliminate ignorance, but on the contrary, opens up a new space of ignorance, giving us not only the possibility but the necessity to ask new questions, revealing the space of previously unrealized and unverbilized problems. Anyway, it is related to the broader paradox that valuable knowledge is combined with spiritual nourishment, which deepens the thirst, deepens and triggers the hunger for knowledge if it is authentic and reaches us, even generating a lust for knowledge. In interwar pedagogy in Poland, this phenomenon was associated with the now lost category of the "Eros of knowledge" as a result of meeting something that would develop the passion for knowledge, and not extinguish openness to the complexity of the world or its curiosity and the ability to ask questions, as a result of a valuable meeting with that which is unknown.

These additional benefits, related to what I have evoked from the inspiration of Y. Lotman, are combined thanks to valuable knowledge revealing previously inaccessible complexity; as a result, the appearance of simplicity and the domination of thought patterns is eliminated. So it works against the appearances of the obvious at first, then makes differentiation accessible where there was an illusion of homogeneity. There is a need to break with naivety, with the inability to take a critical, reflective approach. It is about a new type of normativity concerning individual concepts and their meanings, which can become pearls of thought for us, enriching us internally in symbolic energy of meanings that bring a new ability to express and open ourselves to the world of meanings.

To show one more, additional sense of explosiveness, it is worth recalling one more inspiration, which lies at the basis of further considerations, which is significant for me. I refer to Hermann Hesse, the 1946 Nobel Laureate in Literature, a cult figure for rebellious American campuses, who inspired me to understand the importance of the title triad of my joint book with Monika Jaworska-Witkowska (2010): *Experience–Awakening–Transformation*. This shows three dimensions and requirements that constitute the criteria and conditions for the reality of an encounter with cultural content; first it leads to an experience of the encounter as a shock or surprise; further it contributes to awakening the imagination, opening the eyes to a new aspect of discourse; and finally, it leads to an internal transformation after recognizing the

Ilya Prigogine (1990) or René Thom (1991) in terms of fluctuations or tensions between neutral cultural contents (in the plane of truth and falsehood) and meanings perceived in the clash of what is indifferent, though true, with what is "significant." My further reflections on the idea of "explosion" and the category of "explosive ideas" are taken further and carried out regardless of possible inspirations from Lotman or others mentioned here, except for H. Hesse and F. Znaniecki.

importance of this event in our understanding and processing it for ourselves. We know from antiquity that education means and requires transformation, so this internal transformation is an existential condition of a spiritual encounter that opens up a new way of being. Especially since in Mircea Eliade, I found an answer to an important question for pedagogy, although he asked it in the context of the history of religiosity: what is the condition of a significant existential experience? In his view, this condition is an initiation experience (Witkowski, 2007a).⁵ I shall show that this is a necessary but not sufficient condition, requiring a more comprehensive and more profound process of spiritual transformation.

Three Types of Explosion

Moving on to the central part of the article, I want to proceed like Alfred Hitchcock in his horror films. So I would like it to start with some initial shock and tension, leading through subsequent mental explosions to the apogee, which I shall try to carry out at the end of the text. So, there are three types of explosions that we don't usually realize, three ways to generate an explosive effect in cultural interactions. The first one, also important at the beginning of real education, is connected with the necessity to knock down and destroy obstacles, some structures that constitute mental deadness, and the dominant matter of attitudes. I have already mentioned destroying appearances, destroying naivety, destroying the lack or limitations of imagination, destroying stereotypes, gaps, and clichés concerning language. Thus, the demolition effect must be at the heart of thinking about educational explosiveness.

Secondly, the explosion must enable a new encounter, pave the way to something inaccessible, it must blaze a trail, as sappers eliminate ice jams with explosions, or miners open access to a wall, with material whose value we want to obtain. Therefore, it is about enabling access to meanings through a disruptive effect and leading on to new content of experience, opening eyes to new phenomena.

This disruptive effect opens access, although it can be entangled in resistance and blockade, surprise, shock, and even discord and a sense of irrationality. It was no coincidence that in the "non-Cartesian" vision of reason, Gaston Bachelard pointed to the constitution of reason through the "assimilation of irrationality" as a sphere previously remaining beyond the limits of a too narrow rational framework in its

⁵ It is no coincidence that in my vision of "applied humanities" I consider references to three important, as it turns out, key, categories of stimulating cultural development through school and reading: virtuosity, passions, initiations, see Witkowski 2018.

constant constitutional transformations, revealing and overcoming previously unrealized limitations. First, therefore, we have to meet the content that does not fit in our head, collides with our attitudes. In contrast, the second aspect of the explosion is related to the fact that, although it is already in the head, not associated with the absurd, it would not come into our mind without the impulse. Unveiling a new way of thinking is already a cognitive gain.

But it is still not enough for pedagogy concerned with education and development; it is not enough because an explosion is needed to transform the interior, broadening individual dispositions in the space of cultural diversity. It must cause some glare from this gaining access to meaning, also generate an emotional preoccupation with the importance of what we can visualize. Namely, it is about an explosion that changes our way of looking at the world, ourselves, specific aspects of our actions and attitudes, situations, and circumstances. It is about taking over the new impulse to such an extent that you can take ownership of it for your use in the sense of its value for your perspective and attitude. The condition for this is to eliminate many elements of our former symbolic potential and surpass our limitations thanks to the new equipment that must start working in us. There is a formula in Bachelard: to start learning, you have to ‘unlearn’ many things first. Of course, the question of what the school is ‘unteaching’ must return, and it must be critical. The explosion of a new potential of thought grows locally, exploding some previously unrealized blockade, inertia, and closure within too narrow frames to cover a broader horizon. The formational meaning of new content raises the question: has the explosiveness of meeting something, with some dose of impulses from a different order of thought, changed our attitude, our way of looking and seeing? Can we appreciate something, be concerned with something, and not only know it based on the ability to recreate dispassionately? Valuable knowledge can engage our emotions, reorganizing our identity as a concept of ourselves and how it expresses itself in action. The point is not to take it over indiscriminately. On the contrary, for it to be alive for us, we have to inject our impulses into it, animating it for us.

Five Forms of the Explosive Effect

In ordering the matters analyzed here, I have noticed at least five forms of the “explosive effects.” I usually encourage students to look for them in their reading and other cultural encounter experiences. I also use them in my learning and transformation as the basis for the sense of real spiritual gain that begins to live in me

at the cost of building a new quality from new material, even beyond the author's intention and his vision of the initial formula.

First, then, it is about discovering clues that impose new meanings on old, well-known, even clichéd words. They allow us to see the complexity beyond the common semantics. This will suddenly reveal that a word that seemed familiar, even banal, comes to mean something completely new, more profound, paradoxical, unforeseen if it is to be taken seriously and significantly affect our cultural competence. Secondly, it is about the explosive effect associated with new words that are beyond our current language, but which, as the screens mentioned, allow us to see some problems, new phenomena and not only name them but also see their ontology and generate in us a readiness to take a position, best if it were critical, that is, also carrying a kind of—as Henry Giroux puts it—“empowerment,” giving the power of claiming one's rights and position to speak up and be recognized. Third, a significant manifestation of the explosive effect may be the sudden discovery of the importance of asking ourselves a question we would not have thought of before. The question requires courage. It requires noticing the problem or reporting doubts, even if paradoxical, surprising, and breaking the canons of adequate questioning. The philosophical ability of children is already connected with the questions that they ask us; they are also most creatively touched when we ask them unexpected, sudden, and unforeseen questions. This is about questions that transform us thanks to philosophy or its treatises and contained in a single poem or book title. Questions that are usually not asked when the problematic nature of what was earlier obvious is rhetorically opened up as a suggested, even mental usurpation. Gaston Bachelard affirmed the importance of the question not only “why?” but also “why not?” (French: *pourquoi pas?*), as allowing a provocative change of perspective, at least an attempt to consider an alternative.

Then, fourth, we have the explosive effect of a single thesis which, by becoming paradoxical, demonstrates the necessity to break with concrete opinions. Paradoxicality is the ability to contradict common beliefs, *doxa* generates this “doxicity” as superficiality and inertia of thought, which is toxic, poisonous, paralyzing. Therefore, finding a paradoxical thesis breaking with popular beliefs is an explosive effect as a liberating challenge, rebuilding the space of our thinking and the framework that is acceptable to it. An explosive thesis that organizes thinking anew may even be forbidden on the basis of previously recognized knowledge or its assumptions. Of course, it is finally possible, fifth, to reach for a whole series of theses that create a particular set, building a new perspective of theoretical understanding and explanation of phenomena and processes. I often show pedagogy students sets of as many as five theses of individual concepts as signaling keystones, evoking a specific frame of a new

theory. At the same time, it is worth emphasizing here that the explosive understanding of the theory for me, which deserves to be recalled for many reasons, is contained in the formula of the Italian mathematician and philosopher Federigo Enriques in his 1906 book *Problemi della scienza (Problems of Science)*. From his considerations, it follows that the theory is—and with a significant meaning to each part of this definition—“a hypothetical conceptual representation of the invariants of experience,” therefore, it always concerns the invariants of a given range of experience, which itself is not invariant. When someone banally says: “I have a theory here,” we usually place ourselves in the field of certain invariants of experience, which one would have to be able to transcend, expressing them in a sought-after way of expression in a hypothetical description. Then we look for language because conceptualism is sometimes insufficient. We have to build the ability to negate the apparent, sterile, shallow obviousness, which, for example, built into the mechanisms of socialization, has resulted in stereotypes or patterns. This is the result of socialization, from which we cannot distance ourselves. These features: paradoxicality, complexity, and normative change of perspective, become crucial. To learn and develop, you have to be open to the unpredictable, to that which we cannot fit into our heads without the effort of processing. We must be prepared to constantly wonder thanks to surprise, overcoming our resistance and comfort of thought. This condition involves the critical examination and chewing over what, in uncritical and thoughtless affirmation, is imposed on us as supposed obviousness.

Selected Examples of the Forms of Explosiveness

I shall now give examples of these five forms of explosiveness. They are, of course, only a tiny signal of the many scattered throughout my books to which I can only briefly refer. I am not developing justifications here, which are easy to add in reflection or seminar debate. Showing that each example meets the three criteria of explosiveness in the sequence of experience, awakening, and transformation simultaneously goes beyond the assumed framework. It should be emphasized that examples may differ from those given here. The list of them can never be finished, or even canonical, as it testifies to the recipient’s living relationship to the living horizon of thought.

(a) New meanings of old concepts.

In Roman Ingarden’s *Książeczka o człowieku* (Little Book about Man), we have a change in the perspective of understanding the category of “free time.” Free time is primarily

empty time, devoid of requirements and tasks, and therefore it is a difficult time within which you have to be able to make sense of your existence. Retired, unemployed, or ill people have a lot of free time, which is a burden due to their lack of sense and feeling of the value of the human being they are. When one of the leading oppositionists recently said that there is a need to change schools that do not give a specific profession, it showed that he does not understand at all that the space of cultural and existential functions of education can be defined beyond roles and procedures or supervision. Free time sometimes lasts for years and the requirement to give meaning to existence outside of professional roles. The same idea is contained in R. Ingarden's second explosive impulse in the same text, concerning the definition of identity as generated, determined by actions I can take responsibility for. You can have a document in the form of an identity card and not have a developed identity understood in this way. Not everything we do, even if we spend time on it, confirms or expresses our identity so understood. You can be in college and not really be a student. You can teach and not apply the criterion of the valuable identity of a teacher, something I discovered in excerpts from Søren Kierkegaard's *Dziennik (wybór) (Diary selection, 2000)*, which say that it is usually believed that a teacher is someone who has the right to ask, and this profoundly applies only to someone who, above all, is worth asking. And how many teachers meeting the first criterion do not meet the second?

Another example is the term "attendance"—the class attendance list has no value; I often give students the task of rethinking the definition of presence in what happens to them when interacting in educational situations. I found this definition of presence in Jacques Maritain's explosive formula: it is "readiness to engage in a meeting," where each element reveals additional requirements with its semantics, showing how difficult it is to be essentially present in cultural interactions, in a way which creates a new quality in the relationship. Readiness includes disposition, commitment involves effort; and in the context of the meeting: we shall meet only when, in the understanding of Hans-Georg Gadamer, we create a sense of community of experience and openness to impulses, when we seriously mean something together. In the context of Zygmunt Bauman's typology of attitudes toward life as "being on the road" (pilgrim, vagabond, tourist or passer-by, *flâneur*), it is known how difficult it is to meet in the effort of self-education (pilgrimage to valuable knowledge) when "no one will tell me what to do."

The same idea is related to the notion of dialogue, which seems banally ubiquitous. Still, as I have shown separately, it is good to note that there are at least three different cultural strategies inscribed in this word. We usually get confused when we write them as agreeing, i.e., convincing ourselves of reducing the difference. It is

also not enough to say that dialogue is an “opening” to other people’s thinking and allowing it to speak up in a gesture of tolerance. Here, you can be caught up in hidden indifference as a lack of readiness to think. The most important thing is to open up—thanks to a meaningful meeting with the Other—to recognize “pre-understanding,” as Hans-Georg Gadamer says, that is, revealing to oneself the domination of silent content in ourselves, representing “mute”(tacit) knowledge. We then allow ourselves to free ourselves from the pressure-generating unconscious “pre-assumptions” that govern our beliefs, becoming prejudicial to our previously unrecognized and insurmountable attitudes.

The same also applies to the concept of “clear conscience.” It is necessary to be sensitive to Wisława Szymborska, who in her poem *Pochwała złego o sobie mniemania* (*In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself*, 1997) denied the innocence of affirming a clean conscience, free of remorse. The explosion that disintegrates this term will arise when it turns out that the famous declarations called “conscience clauses” refusing emphatic involvement can be treated as manifestations of a lack of conscience. The pedagogically explosive punch line is the poetic formula: “On this third planet of the sun / among the signs of bestiality / a clean conscience is Number One,”⁶ because it is a matter of a lack of imagination, sensitivity; conscience, if it exists and lives, it must be troubling, it must be uncomfortable, it must bring “remorse” and feel guilty.

(b) New terms as screens.

The second type of explosive effect is new words as screens that allow you to see something new beyond your private vocabulary. As they say colloquially, students often already have psychology or sociology behind them. Then for the first time, they hear the term “anomie” from me, which allows us to name the phenomenon of the threat of “anomization” reducing the behavior of an adult to the logic of a small child, devoid of reference to norms and values.

This also applies to the term “de-socialization,” which I recall, if I may use Milan Kundera’s essay *Sztuka powieści* (*The Art of the Novel*, 2004), where, thanks to him, in my reading, I have derived the formula that socialization can be dangerous if it is too successful because it is always a “local whirlwind reducing the cultural complexity of the world.” We are sometimes socialized in the pressure of attitudes imprinted in us of the obviousness of a given place, which form a silent basis for the alleged obviousness binding others in other whirlpools of world reduction. Therefore, there is an explosive thesis that the function of education is to care for the activation of de-

⁶ Translated by Stanisław Barańczak & Clare Cavanagh (Szymborska 1997).

socialization processes so that a person is not a hostage of environmental mechanisms because when they fail excessively, they become perfidious and perverse. After all, we are hostages of the impersonal pressure of what “you know,” as emphasized by Martin Heidegger; in overly successful socialization, we become hostages to usurpation or “claims,” as Florian Znaniecki often says. What is needed is the term the “de-socialization function of education,” absent in textbooks, emphasizing that it is related to the “translocation” function of education or the developmental mechanism of “decentration,” as Jürgen Habermas puts it after Jean Piaget. Neither cultural transmission nor transgression affirming the attitude of individual creativity is enough nor a structural and systemic transformation. “Translocation” means moving spiritually to other worlds and horizons, other spaces and other times through contact with the works of these “chronotopes” (Mikhail Bakhtin).

A hybrid (apart from pathological associations) of the “borderland man” comes to the fore, that is, someone who can open himself to a different view, who uses this life-giving function of a living culture in “places saturated with difference,” as M. Bakhtin once again called it in his semiotics of culture (Witkowski, 2000)⁷. It is about opening up to the world of diversity that does not reduce everything to homogeneity, barren in its shallow and seemingly justified universality. As Czesław Miłosz said, the streets of the provincial borderland of Lithuanian Vilnius prepared the greats there to cope with the ethnic melting pot of New York streets.

It is also a category of the “mass syndrome,” where mass can be a feature of the condition of an individual, satisfied with his mediocrity, protecting himself from separateness, manifesting a demanding attitude, and lack of the ability to be grateful and make demands on himself. It also recognizes the paradox of “defense mechanisms” that are self-destructive by the fact of spontaneity, thoughtlessness, the automatism of unconscious reactivity.

It is a “hermeneutic circle” that becomes a condition for seeing the relationships that affect the quality of understanding complexity in the persistent oscillation between the elements so that they start to energize us in a complex way in the synergy effect, which will allow us to additionally see and use feedback and enrichment of meanings.

(c) Explosive questions.

Examples of explosive questions are only some examples of which questions may be

⁷ The “border effect” in Mikhail Bakhtin’s semiotics has great cultural value, poorly recognized and nurtured, opening to the paradoxical value of “ambivalence” in counteracting fixations and exclusivity (as excluding) in social spaces and practices, cf. Witkowski 1992, 1994, 2000.

explosive. I often tell students: look for your explosive questions, sometimes related to book titles. Herbert Marcuse wrote a book called *One-dimensional Man*, and it is worth considering what it means and whether you are not affected by such a flaw; and similarly, where it comes from Kazimierz Obuchowski book *Adaptacja twórcza* (*Creative Adaptation*, 1985), and it is worth considering how to avoid the trap of non-creative adaptation, recognized in the inability to undertake “distant tasks,” without any guarantees of success in undertaking them, where the path itself is to be of value.⁸

One example is Maria Janion’s question, also the title of one from the collection of her essays *Czy będziesz wiedział co przeżyłeś?* (*Will You Know What You Experienced?*, 1996) sensitizes us to the non-obvious access to understanding our own emotions. We know that “to have an idea” means both to have a term to perceive and, fortunately, to be sensitive to understanding. This is probably the case in every language: in English, “you have no idea” also means the inability to imagine a state of affairs.

We also have a significant question from Mikhail Bakhtin (cf. Witkowski, 2000), very shocking for students when I make them aware of it: “What use do I have from someone who thinks the same way as me?” Suddenly it turns out that it is worth overcoming the limitations of habits in creating valuable contacts and relationships because this difference is to work as a source of symbolic profit for our understanding of ourselves and the perception of the world, if we allow it with our openness to it, going beyond what is tame and close, unaware of our limitations.

For Henry Giroux, in our joint book on critical education, the question is what the school unleashes, regardless of what it teaches, whether it helps you think. For me, his explosive thesis related to this question is: “Whatever the school teaches, it teaches first and foremost civil courage”: standing up for oneself, asking questions, opposing violence, and domination (Giroux & Witkowski, 2010).

And finally, the question of “what does it mean to think.” Martin Heidegger titled his famous essay with such a question (“What is Called Thinking?”), saying, if you want to think, first look critically and retrospectively at the question itself in its originality, postpone the answer, reflect on the situation and contexts in which the question is posed.

⁸ As an expression of my residual awareness of the necessity of the nature of such illustrations in this text, I recall in this context the philosophical answer of Henryk Elzenberg from the volume of his notes in the journal *Kłopot z istnieniem* (*The Trouble with Existence*), where he answered the question about the value of effort or struggle - in my travesty: not the scale of the chances of success, but the rank of the case at stake. The explosive nature of this idea often manifests itself by surprising those who for the first time encounter such a prospect of changing the criteria from effectiveness to ethical engagement.

(d) Explosive theses and their subversive constellations

As already written about in my books, I come to the sets of achievements concerning theses that are explosive as new integrated horizons of thought. As you know, I have written two books on the concept of authority, looking for a discourse on cultural authority against common associations. Zygmunt Bauman has praised me (Witkowski, 2015) that I have shown 30 common superstitions that you must be able to reject if you want to start thinking about “the problem of authority.” In particular, I analyzed the pitfalls of associating authority with power or authoritarianism, infallibility as authoritative, or a threshold position operating with meaningless authorization, tolerated and disregarded at the same time, because a valuable life is elsewhere; as we know, we no longer dare to say that the *Matura* exam is the threshold of maturity since it is only a formal school requirement, deprived of the cultural values previously ascribed to it. And suddenly, after many months of searching, it turned out that there was a need for a way of thinking about authority as being “at your feet” (Witkowski, 2018), to be trampled on, or bypassed, ignored, with a refusal to confront someone’s effort of reflection. Hence, when we hear the commonplace falsehood that there are no “authorities” as meaningful cultural references, I reply that there are fewer and fewer people who share meanings from culture as symbolic soil and can treat them as an opportunity for the quality of their reflection; however, on condition that they bend over in their effort, wanting to give themselves food for thought. Therefore, it is not about exempting from thinking, nor about succumbing to any pressure or superiority beyond the work done, the value of which should be verified on one’s own by asking rebellious questions, for example, by giving oneself a chance for a serious and deep dispute, developing the quality of thinking. Hence, I formulated the anthropologically inspired idea of the “auto rite of passage” as a condition for starting our process of reflection, opening the relationship of dynamic reference to the meaning of meeting someone’s thought. And that is why I am describing to interested audiences the most ingenious definition of authority that I found in Stanislaw Witkacy himself; for it is, in this sense, “The head which risked suicide with a poisonous problem.” (Witkowski, 2018). We could continue to discuss this concept in seminars, even with children, and wonder when the problem is poisonous, not only significant, and the risk of suicidal effort. We often feel in the dark for answers to questions that have taken a long chunk of someone’s life to find, and yet we do not get any final advice except for reflective sensitization to possible mistakes or traps. I had to write two books on authority to work out the foundations of my sensitivity to reducing this idea in culture through the explosive effect of self-transitive rite (French: *auto rite de passage*).

The same is true of the idea of duality. I wrote the book *Przełom dwoistości* (*Breakthrough of Duality*, Witkowski, 2013), showing that a too easy duality, polarities, and dichotomies, or even refinement that takes into account the dispersion in the *continuum*, does not realize the realities of the complex dynamics of combining and balancing opposites, nor the principle of the interaction of poles usually separated for convenience and interpretative simplification. Hence, I had to negate several interpretations of the life cycle model from Erik Erikson's conception as not taking into account the internal structural duality of development phases as the balancing dynamics in bipolar tensions and oscillations (Witkowski, 2015). It is usually forgotten that terms such as ambivalence and bipolarity have been discovered in their extreme negative forms. At the same time, they can also occur without excessively pathologizing the states affected by them. So that this minimum connection is present as a norm and a favorable level of involvement in processes that are otherwise disturbed and distorted. I shall also never forget the phrase of Kazimierz Obuchowski when he noticed that in our academic space, we often lack "hard friends." Here, we have an oxymoron showing the necessity of a dual attitude: demanding and reliable toughness, but also a benevolent and supportive camaraderie.

Thus, it can be seen that the explosive effect sometimes requires a fundamental reorientation of the understanding of the entire concept or attitude in various aspects of its manifestations at the same time. Explosivity, then, may and must often be integrally oriented. Otherwise, it may not happen. In my reading of the theory of Habermas's communicative action for pedagogy, I show (Witkowski, 2009), for example, such an interpretation that is often absent in those of even eminent experts on the entire Frankfurt tradition, not looking for such oriented impulses.

The Explosion from the Discovery of the "Pandemic of Thoughtlessness."

Heading to the final part of the essay, I describe three important impulses for me, which I use with my students, which have led to my experiencing the gravity of a problem that I could not see, name, or ask about before. First, after Hermann Hesse, I define the "awake" man; the awakened one is the one who dares to "look for a path to himself" (Jaworska-Witkowska & Witkowski, 2010). I often provoke students by saying: your body has awakened, and what about your spirituality, sensitivity, imagination, being rooted in culture as a life-giving soil that requires a conscious effort to grow into? Are you working on the quality of your own inner transformation? They do not understand what this may be about and why it is important to them for a long

time. Explosions are neither easy nor automatic, except in young children; adults are already encased in habitual blockades to the pathology of the “economy of deception” (Pierre Bourdieu’s term). Hence, I also use the explosive warning of Witold Gombrowicz himself in the formula: “whoever believed in his authenticity lost the chance for it” (Witkowski, 2009). I write this into a series of similar sensitivities read adaptively by me in this extraordinary playwright, but even more profoundly thinking humanist, who should be treated more seriously, even though he neither wrote nor intended to write philosophical or pedagogical treatises.

I found another explosive effect - the first of the last three - with Olga Tokarczyk in her *Czyłym narratorze* (*Tender Narrator*, 2020), with Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (2008), and with Jean Baudrillard in his *America* (1998). The order was actually the reverse. I first saw that Baudrillard (1998) argued that the Americans are hostages to being in a hurry in everyday American life, in which space and time for reflection disappear. Sloterdijk says, for example, from the perspective of a critique of cynical reason, that schools participate in testomania and fragmented, shredded knowledge, killing reflection on the whole that becomes impossible. And in Olga Tokarczuk (2020), I found a formula that combines these earlier signals, in which she talks about the “epidemic of thoughtlessness.”⁹ If these impulses are combined, it turns out that the explosive effect consists in the fact that we are therefore hostages of a much more serious, even structurally generated. . . pandemic, earlier and more dangerous in terms of civilization than covid-19. The pandemic of thoughtlessness represents systemic interest and consent, with the convenience of not being responsible. This is how it results from these characteristics, and let someone tell me that it does not upset our idea of what we often do. In Stanisław Ossowski’s *O osobliwościach nauk społecznych* (*On Peculiarities of Social Sciences*, 2001), I noticed an explosive distinction between three orientations of institutional activities, which are expressed successively by the interest of principles, including the mission of an institution; its interest as an organization for the sake of its survival; and, finally, the interests of the elite of those institutions that dictate the domination of their benefits and conditions that are convenient for them, crossing out the two previous systemic interests. Cracks, even chasms, make themselves felt here. Again, we are affected by a

⁹ Of course, I do not want to reduce the merits of the Nobel Prize winner in literature for 2018. I can fully join the opinion of Ryszard Nycz, issued by the publisher for the cover of the book Tokarczyk (2020) that “The category of ‘tenderness’ and the concept introduced by Olga Tokarczuk of a ‘tender narrator’ “are revolutionary ideas that have all the data to confuse us a lot, turning - for good - the traditional vectors of our attitudes and action dispositions: isn't tenderness favouring what is good for being (on an individual scale, but also planetary)?”

contagious and often difficult to eliminate - because there is no vaccine here - a pandemic of thoughtlessness. You would have to rebuild the entire structure of thinking and acting and their relationships.

Finally, I would like to describe to educators the explosive effect I found in another Nobel laureate in literature, Elias Canetti, in his essay *Sumienie słów* (*The Conscience of Words*, 1999). The author formulated a warning to writers, and from this, I derive the effect of an explosive warning to educators: “No one who does not doubt his right to be a writer is one.” So, in pedagogical contexts, it would be this: no one who does not doubt his right to be an educator is one. Therefore, no one is vigilant to the threat of doing evil in the intention of doing good, who cannot limit his claims to being right and correct his attitudes. So no one is responsible enough as an educator who waves the correct method or a strategy for correcting mistakes in advance. This sense of the risk of ethical error must be present in the space of our activities, both concerning children in the family and in the space of institutional interaction, pedagogically.

And the third warning I found in Tadeusz Różewicz (1995), who was delighted in an interview when I told him that I was showing his poem *Spadanie* (*Falling*) to my students in terms of education. His message is that modern man has been deprived of a sense of the bottom. It even changes the perspective of understanding what an educator can do, contrary to what he thinks. In addictions, is it impossible to show a man his own downfall? What can be done? He cannot be shown to be falling, but he can be helped to see for himself his own disintegration. Therefore, I cannot show anything here in this essay. Still, only with explosive impulses can I give access to the effects that transform my vision if there is a mobilization of effort. Without this effort, the explosive effect is impossible.

I cannot show the theory. I can only use explosive impulses to give access to effects that have the potential to transform the view as understanding because the point is not to show someone something, but for him to be able to see his world on the screen in a different perspective otherwise not available to him. This allows us to say that the most valuable, the most important learning is to meet people wiser than I, to whom I owe my pearls of thought. It also allows one to incorporate links of a new potential of meanings into one’s language. The condition for speaking one’s language is to be saturated with someone else’s speech, processed for our creative use, which we know from Mikhail Bakhtin’s semiotics of culture (Witkowski, 2000). Thanks to this, we can help the addressees of our educational impact to generate this energizing impulse or—as our eminent theatre director Krystian Lupa says in one of his interviews—“a fascination with a fragment.”

In Place of a Conclusion

Summing up, I hope that I have formulated here some perceptible, explosive heresy for each of the recipients, which you may want to reject first. Yet, it is worth rethinking if you want to regain the cognitive absorption and creative surprise of a child. In Albert Einstein, I encountered an autobiographic confession somewhere. When I was at school, I developed more slowly than my friends, and it was more difficult for the school to ‘unteach’ me the right to ask questions that a mature graduate did not ask because he had already learned not to.

So, what is my warm appeal to students and pupils, teachers, parents, and academic staff? The point is to help each other look for explosive impulses and to practice such a search of the humanities that generates a recurring experience of meaningful encounters with something beyond socialization’s reach in our imagination. What’s more, discovered and taken seriously, it begins to create and transform us, revealing access to the layers of our sensitivity to the creative aspects of the identity of a man who manifests concern for his humanity. It is possible because many invaluable cultural meanings lie in culture as a symbolic soil with the character of an invisible environment (Helena Radlińska), as long as we can open ourselves to them. And the function of opening up to them in the mode of cultivating “explosive effects” as a minimum is crucial here, as I have tried to display by showing various aspects of the relationship of culture and explosion. I refer to my books and their reading base for further details, which I constantly surpass. So you can never say the last word here. The eternal return of surprise with the unpredictable is the condition of spiritual life in its becoming. In contact with symbolic culture, then, it is about something completely different from what many believe, who make a virtue out of their thoughtlessness and transfer it to others in the intention of carrying out the dangerous and despicable mission of the “government of souls.”

References

Balcerzan Edward (2013), *Literackość. Modele, gradacje, eksperymenty*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Torun.

Baudrillard Jean (1998), *Ameryka*, translated by Renata Lis, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warsaw.

Canetti Elias (1999), *Sumienie słów. Eseje o mowie*, translated by Maria Przybyłowska, Irena Krońska, afterword Marek Bińczyk, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow.

Giroux A. Henry, Witkowski Lech (2010), *Edukacja i sfera publiczna. Idee i doświadczenia pedagogiki radykalnej*, foreword Zbigniew Kwieciński, afterword Tomasz Szkudlarek, postscriptum Zbyszko Melosikand Bogusław Śliwerski, Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls.”

Ingarden Roman (2006), *Książeczka o człowieku*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow.

Janion Maria (1996), *Czy będziesz wiedział co przeżyłeś*, Wydawnictwo SIC!, Warsaw.

Jaworska-Witkowska Monika, Witkowski Lech (2010), *Przeżycie – przebudzenie – przemiana. Inicjacyjne dynamizmy egzystencjalne w prozie Hermanna Hessego (tropy i kategorie pedagogiczne)*, wyd. 2 poprawione, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Edukacji Zdrowotnej i Nauk Społecznych, Łódź.

Kierkegaard Søren (2000), *Dziennik (wybór)*, translated and annotated by Antoni Szwed, edited by Karol Toeplitz, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin.

Kundera Milan (2004), *Sztuka powieści. Esej*, wydanie II zmienione, translated by Marek Bińczyk, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw.

Lotman Juri (2009), *Culture and explosion*, edited by Marina Grishakova, translated by Wilma Clark, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin New York.

Obuchowski Kazimierz (1985), *Adaptacja twórcza*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa.

Ossowski Stanisław (2001), *O osobliwościach nauk społecznych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw.

Prigogine Ilya, Stengers Isabelle (1990), *Z chaosu ku porządkowi. Nowy dialog człowieka z przyrodą*, translated by Katarzyna Lipszyc, foreword Bogdan Baranowski, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw.

Różewicz Tadeusz (1995), *Niepokój. Wybór wierszy z lat 1944-1994*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw.

Sloterdijk Peter (2008), *Krytyka cynicznego rozumu*, translation and introduction Piotr Dehnel, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Wrocław.

Szyborska Wisława (1997), *Nothing Twice/Nic dwa razy*, translated by Stanisław Barańczak & Clare Cavanagh, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow.

Thom René (1991), *Parabole i katastrofy. Rozmowy o matematyce, nauce i filozofii z Giulio Giorello i Simoną Morini*, translated and edited by Roman Duda, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw.

Tokarczuk Olga (2020), *Czuły narrator*, Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Witkowski Lech (1992), *The Universal Challenge of Borders: The Lesson of M. Bakhtin*, in: Dieter Claessens and Rainer Mackensen, (eds.), *Universalism Today: Contributions at the 2nd International Symposium for Universalism, Berlin August 22-26 1990*, Technische Universität, Berlin, pp. 293-330.

Witkowski Lech (1994), *The paradox of borders: ambivalence at home*, "Common Knowledge," winter, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 100-108.

Witkowski Lech (1996), *The Frankfurt School and Structuralism in Jerzy Kmita's Analysis*, in: *Epistemology and History*, edited by Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, "Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities," vol. 47, pp. 45-63.

Witkowski Lech (2000), *Uniwersalizm pogranicza. O semiotyce kultury Michała Bachtina w kontekście edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Torun.

Witkowski Lech (2007), *Między pedagogiką, filozofią i kulturą. Studia, eseje, szkice*, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Edukacyjnych, Warsaw.

Witkowski Lech (2007a), *Edukacja wobec sporów o (po)nowoczesność*, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Edukacyjnych, Warsaw.

Witkowski Lech (2009), *Ku integralności edukacji humanistyki II. Postulaty, postacie, pojęcia, próby. Odpowiedź na Księgę Jubileuszową*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń.

Witkowski Lech (2011), *Historie autorytetu wobec kultury i edukacji*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls," Cracow.

Witkowski Lech (2013), *Przełom dwoistości w pedagogice polskiej. Historia, teoria, krytyka*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls," Cracow.

Witkowski Lech (2014), *Niewidzialne środowisko. Pedagogika kompletna Heleny Radlińskiej jako krytyczna ekologia idei, umysłu i wychowania. O miejscu pedagogiki w przełomie dwoistości w humanistyce*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls," Cracow.

Witkowski Lech (2015), *Versus. O dwoistości strukturalnej faz rozwoju w ekologii cyklu życia psychodynamicznego modelu Erika H. Eriksona*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls," Cracow.

Witkowski Lech (2018), *Humanistyka stosowana. Wirtuozeria, pasje, inicjacji. Profesje społeczne versus ekologia kultury*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls," Cracow.

Znaniński Florian (1991), *"Humanizm i poznanie" i inne pisma filozoficzne*, "Rzeczywistość kulturowa" translated and edited by Jerzy Wocial, Pisma Filozoficzne, tom II, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw.