

Circumnavigations of Charity: The Eighteenth Century, Pilgrimage, and Philanthropic Celebrity

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Abstract

At the turn of Europe's nineteenth century entered a period of dynamic social change. The clash of former and new ideas, interpretations, and alternatives disturbed the transfer of role models. A cultural formation stood between the secular and the sacred, the modern and the ancient régime: the philanthropic celebrity involved new, market-based mechanisms of fame, and the vague allusion to the model of a saint. The article uses the theme of pilgrimage as a tool to explore the intersection between these contradictions encompassed by philanthropic celebrity. Three examples from this perspective are John Howard (England), Jean-Frédéric Oberlin (France), and Stanisław Staszic (Poland), revealing different, but parallel conflation of old and new registers and meanings. In the result, the pilgrimage is effectively used as a methodological tool allowing entangled relations between the secular and the sacred be explored.

Keywords: philanthropy, celebrity, pilgrimage, comparison

I. Introduction

For thinkers, philanthropy is a noble and moral task that can sometimes be tainted with incompetence or bad intentions. Today, charity is termed as “philanthrocapitalism” with its modern bureaucratized, corporate, B-to-B form in the market sector (Bishop and Green, 2010). The only place morals could have in this disillusioned reality is in utilitarian, depersonalized theory backing just one kind of business enterprises.

However, during a certain period in the past, the term was much more persuasive. The Enlightenment ideal of *philanthrōpía*, or love of humankind, had nothing to do with corporations. It did not even concern itself with money or profit. For Scottish moral philosophers, it was a mutation of ancient Greek understanding of the word and an answer to the old question of how to live a moral life (see e.g. Radcliffe 1993). Ironically, philanthropy as a proposed way to reshape one's own personality became a measure to evaluate personalities at the end of the eighteenth century. The shift made philanthropy absurdly ubiquitous. Now, monarchs had to be styled not only as powerful and benevolent, but also beneficent. Philanthropy was also contrasted with the backward and inefficient

medieval almsgiving; politicians, inventors, and even actors tactically engaged in philanthropy to improve their reputations (Hindison, 2016, p. 1-24; Lilti, 2017, p. 24-42). Soon, it was not only an aspect of life, but a legitimate social capital booster. What appeared was a new breed of public figure-- full-time philanthropists who built their social standing mainly or solely through their beneficence (Himmelfarb, 2004, p. 133-5).

Some of these full-time philanthropists quickly became objects of personality cult. The new cultural formation was the celebration of spontaneous philanthropic manifestations among individuals (Wesołowski, 2018). Its emergence marked the transformation of Europe's political, social, and cultural spheres between 1750 and 1850: a period of rapid change or "*Sattelzeit*", "the time of the saddle" named by Reinhart Koselleck (Décultot & Fulda, 2016, p. 1-3). Both in relation to Koselleck-like semantics and to social practice, celebrated philanthropy encompassed a range of meanings, including the most interesting paradoxical contrasts. The appearance of philanthropy cult was a result of the changing character of fame. The increasing role of books and the press, commodification of cultural values brought by market developments, and the shift of understanding of concepts such as citizenship, the state, and the family— all of these contributed to the democratization and marketization of fame. Historiography slowly accepts that the concept of celebrity and its various constituents can be convincingly historicized and traced back exactly to *Sattelzeit* (e.g. Lilti, 2017). Considering that the philanthropists in question often relied on using press visibility, establishing a dialogue with fan audience, and maintaining the tension between private and public faces (Morgan, 2011, p. 99-103), one could argue that the conversation is about *philanthropic celebrity*. Yet, at the same time, the celebration of such figures involved a discussion of morality and allusions to transcendence, either religious or a new, secular and humanitarian version of the sacred. The philanthropists were offered monuments built in their honor while they were still alive. They were publicly compared to heavenly creatures and made objects of "fan" obsessions. Subsequently, they were not put among, but against the celebrities of the era, and looked upon as the champions of moral revival. "We may – persuaded by the supporters of John Howard in England – indulge in the pleasing expectation, that through this example (...) the public man may henceforth become what he always ought to have been" (Pratt, 1787, p. 31). The nuances between the old and the new order of things, between the celebrity-like and the saint-like worship, gives shape to the origins of philanthropic celebrity. Furthermore, these incite curiosity regarding its relation to the modernizing nature of the sacred.

To better understand the system of meanings with which the philanthropic celebrity was imbued, this essay analyzes three famous philanthropists from various parts of Europe. A more complete picture of philanthropy can be obtained by comparing parallel manifestations of the phenomenon in different

places. The concept of pilgrims and pilgrimage is used as an operational tool linking the secular and market-subjected mechanisms of fame to the spiritual and semi-religious interpretations. As a social practice and a set of connotations, pilgrimage concerns itself with the search for transcendence. Its tie with tourism—regarded as its modern secular substitute—was already noticed and sufficiently underlined (Badone, 2010, p. 4-9). Pilgrimage combines spirituality and secularization as it explains the changing interpretation of the sacred at the time of the galloping modernization of Europe. By observing how pilgrimage relates to philanthropic celebrity, one can identify and characterize the points in which cultural formation has maintained similarities with typical moral idols for the *ancien régime*. In the same vein, we could spot where these similarities gave way to a new model of transcendental value and the more modern forms of fame.

II. The Peregrinations of John Howard

Whether John Howard (1726-1790) was a harsh disciplinarian responsible for the invention of the oppressive institution of penitentiary or a humble good-doer dedicated to relieving the miseries of eighteenth-century prisoners remains unclear. It will probably not be resolved anytime soon. The starkly different pictures of Howard are mostly derived from competing interpretations of his motivations. The nineteenth century scholars, such as James Baldwin Brown (1818), presented him with a degree of high admiration enough to reserve for him the title of the Philanthropist...*with a capital P*. For Brown, Howard was a quirky gentleman who became a self-appointed prison inspector, reported the awful living conditions in British prisons to the public, and after this initial success, travelled throughout Europe to save even more lives. Brown described Howard as an embodiment of Christian values and a perfect follower of Christ. He was a charitable landlord in Cardington and a noble High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1774 to 1790, when he died attending to a young Ukrainian lady in Kherson. In the twentieth century, revisionist historians wanted to drive away from this narration, often thought too “hagiographical” (Morgan, 1977). To portray the other side of Howard, they pointed at his supposed parental severity, naïve rationalism, and obsession with statistics (Lucas, 2001). Howard also attempted to diagnose his son with Asperger syndrome and wanted to build a new prison with cruel and dehumanizing practices of the nineteenth century penitentiary (Ignatieff, 1978).

These fluctuations within Howardian biographical tradition came from the historian’s fascination with his subject’s psyche. However, integrating loose impressions into writing could be avoided. As argued recently by Amanda Moniz (2016), Howard’s real significance lies in public perception of his persona rather than in what incited his work. Moniz’s main claim was that after the American revolution, the charitable societies cooperating in every part of the British Empire had to come to terms with the disconnection from their American counterparts. Bonded by similar goals and common structures, they coined a narrative of

cosmopolitan humanitarianism to satisfy their need to share identity (Moniz, 2016, p. 8-11).

Howard served many roles in this process. Moniz (2016) highlighted the fact that his popularity was not simply an appreciation of his virtues but stemmed from a market demand for a figure that would embody the new values proposed by the philanthropic community (p. 111-19). Howard's market presence depended on his media visibility, the frequency with which he was mentioned in the press and the sales results of books, poems, and iconography, that commoditized his image (p. 119-25). The philanthropist himself seemed to consciously craft his public face, paradoxically, by refusing to partake in its capitalization (109-10). The overall way in which Moniz presented Howard broke away from previous traditions and convincingly proved him to be a publicity aware man of his times.

Howard's travelling remains at the center of many interpretations of his character. For Cervantes and Porter, calling attention to this fact is key to explaining the significance of the philanthropist's perceived ubiquity and wide geographical scope of his inspections symbolizing the global reach of the British Empire (Cervantes & Porter, 2016). Edmund Burke insisted that it was through the journey that the philanthropist's achievement must be first defined. It is worth noting how, in the following fragment, he contrasted the touristic motivations of more common travelers with the laudable reasons the philanthropist had to tour Europe:

He has visited all Europe, not to survey the sumptuousness of palaces, nor the stateliness of temples; not to make accurate measurements of the remains of ancient grandeur, nor to form a scale of the curiosity of modern art; but to dive into the depths of dungeons; to plunge into the infection of hospitals; to survey the mansions of sorrow and pain; to take the gage and dimensions of misery, depression, and contempt; to remember the forgotten, to attend to the neglected, to visit the forsaken, and to compare and collate the distresses of all men in all countries. His plan is original; and it is as full of genius as it is of humanity. It was a voyage of discovery; a circumnavigation of charity. (Burke, 1780, p. 24-5)

Cervantes and Porter believed that the last phrases, "voyage of discovery" and "circumnavigation of charity", referred to the eighteenth-century enthusiasm towards popular travelers such as William Coxe or Edward Daniel Clarke, imposing on Howard a similar role of an "inward discoverer" of the prison-world (Cervantes & Porter, 2016, p. 112-3). However, there is little evidence to suggest

this rhetoric went beyond an evocative vocabulary of the time. The metaphor of a pilgrim seems to better express the way his contemporaries justified their appreciation of the philanthropist.

Burke proposed a dichotomy of superficial hedonism and altruistic quest that is well-known for scholars of tourism and pilgrimage (Badone & Roseman, 2010, p. 2-3). Howard's reasons for travelling were not only different from the typical ones (seeing foreign and past wonders and art), but were more noble. They involved a resignation from pleasure for the greater good. With that, the last phrases of the quoted paragraph made Howard a discoverer of a new charity niche, an exposé of the prison taboo, and an explorer of neglected values. The philanthropist's journey came closer to a pilgrim as it appears to be driven by the search of meaning.

The metaphor of a pilgrim seems even more appropriate when one considers the way Howard was styled in the media while alive. As previously mentioned, the philanthropist conspicuously thwarted all attempts to glorify him whenever he could. It happened in 1787, when the self-formed committee for erecting his statue raised enough money to put their ideas into life. Howard wrote two letters soon published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in which he harshly criticized the concept: "It deranges and confounds all my schemes - my exaltation is my fall, my misfortune" (Brown, 1818, p. 478-8). The letters established his image as the philanthropist full of humility or, in the words of an observer, by "refusing the monument Howard showed that he doubly deserved one" (Moniz, 2016, p. 106). Howard's daily routine was an intriguing beat for the press, the "early paparazzi", as suggested by Richard Ireland (1999). Despite being famous and chased around by professional drawers, people described Howard's clothing as modest and his diet as ascetic to the press (some fragments were collated by Brown, 1818, p. 14-5, p. 38-42, p. 434-5, p. 513-4). This picture of Howard—apart from his moral superiority—contested the superficial norms of the social order and followed the seemingly old-fashioned models of moral perfection. Inevitably, his "fans" compared him to saints (Pratt, 1787).

Being an outsider in search of meanings beyond the scope of usual inquiry is a valid constituent of many theories of pilgrimage and religious tourism. The anthropological accounts of pilgrimaging recorded how social marginality is magnified through becoming geographically distant and proposed that the pilgrim represents crossing the threshold, which is the border between the earthly and supernatural orders (Turner, 1974, p. 182; Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 3-7). This leads to yet another interpretation that Howard's prison inspections rely on the idea of atonement. Howard's subsequent journeys were reactions to personal tragedies (West, 2011, p. 113-5). He went on a Grand Tour throughout Europe for the first time after the death of his father in the early 1750s; he then set off on another journey immediately after he buried his beloved wife in 1767. He engaged

deeply into visiting prisons when he lost in the local elections in 1773. His last tour of prison inspections was a two-year journey to Turkey and Russia after his son was locked in an asylum in 1787.

Howard saw his charitable mission as a vocation given by God. His journal is full of divine invocations, self-deprecation, and regrets. At times, Howard would write semi-prayers and lamentation instead of writing about practicalities of his trips (Brown, 1818, p. 80). The self-hatred that seemed constantly ready to attack his thoughts could have resulted from his traumas and guilt he felt after disappointing his closest family members (father, wife, and son). “How low, how mean, how little is everything but what has a view to that glorious World of Light, Life, and Love”, wrote Howard, awaiting not only paradise, but the redemption of his mistakes.

As argued by Graburn (1977, p. 22-3), both pilgrimage and tourism serve a social function by providing “structurally-necessary ritualized breaks in routine that define and relieve the ordinary”. Graburn saw this function as a normalized routine of modern tourists, which could also explain the escapades of Howard to exotic places. The repeated journeys he undertook (1775, p. 76, p. 78, p. 81, p. 83, p. 85-7, p. 89-90) might have been escapes from his traumatic experiences into a sacred mission away from the daily struggles. By going on a quest to save prisoners, Howard not only left his familial role and turned into the public’s champion, but also transcended his private self through fulfilling his own ideas about following Christ and upholding humanitarian ideals sought out by the public. Strange as it may sound, writing reports allowed him to relieve the ordinary and experience the sacred.

Howard’s pilgrim image also attracted others to set off for their own journeys. His supporters visited his house in hope of meeting him in person; many other celebrated figures, like Lord Monboddo, were among these travelling fans. Preparing for his journeys, Howard often commissioned proper care of his garden for his visitors (Brown, 1818, p. 515). He also inspired other philanthropists to repeat parts of his inspections long after his death. The most notable is Elizabeth Fry who paid special attention to the conditions in which female prisoners were held. The trend seems to continue in a way even at present. In 2016, Tom Vander Beken published his book entitled “*The Role of Prison in Europe: Traveling in the Footsteps of John Howard*”, reporting his reconstruction of Howard’s prison tours. Arduous task as it was, Vander Beken did not see it as a closing journey of Howard’s inspection, but as an introduction for a “future traveler in Howard’s footsteps”. In the end, one of the pilgrimage’s characteristics is that it is continued and recurrent.

The concept of “philanthropic celebrity” used in this article is stained with a contradiction that may make it seem audacious. To clarify, each philanthropist I

describe has been long recognized as an authority figure. During two hundred years since their deaths, their fame made them powerful legends and their stories were incorporated into broader narratives of various communities, institutions, and nations. Howard is considered the founder of penitentiary studies and the oldest organization fighting for better prison management: the Howard League for Penal Reform. Stanisław Staszic, the subject of the last part of the text, is regarded as one of the most respected and well-known historical figures in contemporary Poland. How do these titanic representations fit to the word so often seen as derogatory? How can one downgrade these *great men* to mere *celebrities*?

This accusation is obviously groundless when one considers the definitional issues mentioned at the beginning of this article. However, the issues are brought forward to help explain the fact that in case of Jean-Frédéric Oberlin (1740-1826), there were no attempts at demythologization.

III. J.F. Oberlin and his Ban-de-la-Roche

Oberlin—traditionally a Protestant saint—has been discussed variously, but always with a proper degree of veneration. Recent research seldom takes off from the long-lasting conservative trends and topics such as Oberlin’s organizational work, his voice in intellectual debates, and the Enlightenment inspirations in his pastoral approach (Fritz, 2008; Chalmel, 2012).

Oberlin’s fame was not an object of study, although many eighteenth-century sources and early biographies elaborate on the matter. This seems strange considering how influential reputation is in shaping the attitudes of the subsequent generations of philanthropists such as Daniel Legrand, Robert Owen, and the supporters of the *Christianisme Social* movement in France (Chalamet, 2013, p. 13-14). It might also be confusing to call Oberlin a philanthropist. Born 1740 in Strasbourg, he was educated to become a Protestant priest. In 1766, he took the position of a pastor in a barren and neglected village in the Steintal (Ban-de-la-Roche) called Waldersbach. During an almost sixty-year service, he got Waldersbach out of extreme poverty with several activities and assumed various positions—becoming its priest, local doctor, educator, and investor.

Not a man of considerable wealth himself, Oberlin raised funds among the Strasbourg elites and incited the villagers to construct roads, bridges, and new housing on their own. He introduced an improved system of agriculture, and opened manufactures, a bank, and a library. Additionally, he originated the infant schools, making him not only an exemplary priest, but also an inventor. However, throughout the various forms of fame he enjoyed, he was interpreted mainly as a philanthropist. It manifested after 1790, when he suspended the appearances of priesthood and continued his work in Waldersbach as a contemporarily appropriate cooperative of citizens (Kurz, 1990).

He was already well-known locally in the 1800s and was further distinguished by receiving the cross of the legion of honor. True fame came only in 1818, when his story appeared in the press with the report on the state of agriculture authored by François de Neufchâteau (1818). Before his pompous funeral in 1826, Oberlin gained a substantial following. He had the newspaper readers, the local populace of Alsace, and the vast network of charitable and missionary societies members working from London to Paris, Strasbourg, and Berlin as his audience.

Oberlin's fame involved certain celebrity mechanisms. The public was captured by his authenticity and compulsorily fixated on stories highlighting his personal engagement in the restoration of Waldersbach. His "fans" were dedicated to the point where they could not "think, speak, or write on anything but Pastor Oberlin" (Atkins, 1829, p. 199). The most noticeable trait of his renown was the primary type of mediation it assumed. The public knew the philanthropist mainly from the reports made by the interested travelers. Some of them, like Paul Merlin, treated Waldersbach as central sights worth seeing in Alsace. Others set off with the sole aim of visiting Oberlin and experiencing the life in the Ban-de-la-Roche themselves. These admirers were not professional writers but were usually middle-aged gentlemen occupying well-established positions. The emphasis of travelling should not be surprising considering how one of the loudest introductions of Oberlin before the Royal Agricultural Society in Paris began:

If you would behold an instance of what may be effected in any country, for the advancement of agriculture, quit for a moment the banks of the Seine, and ascend one of the steepest summits of the mountains of the Vosges. Friend of the plough and of human happiness, come and behold the Ban de la Roche: climb with me the rocks so sublimely piled on each other, which separate this Canton from the rest of the world; and though the scene and the climate appear unfavorable and forbidding, I venture to assure you an ample recompense for the fatigue of your ascend. (translation by Wilks, 1820, p. 1-2)

Here lies the specificity of Oberlin; although he's recognized by the press and state, he drew further attention through his seclusive appeal. Unlike Howard, Oberlin travelled less and stayed within the reach of his fans. In the hermitic model, this fame is like the long tradition of Christian coenobitic and eremitic saints and the seclusion more typical for some eighteenth-century celebrities, like Rousseau (Lilti, 2017, p. 109-132). The image resonated with the public and attracted those who wanted to find relief from the everyday life in the sight of Waldersbach's civilizational and religious progress. By entering the Steinthal valley, they crossed the border between the profane and the sacred. Oberlin became sort of a guardian for a pilgrimage shrine.

The “pilgrims” were on journeys of transformation in a two-fold manner. First, they were aiming at paying the *tribut de reconnaissance* to Oberlin. According to François-Emmanuel Fodéré (1824), the word *reconnaissance* can be translated both into *gratitude* and *recognition*. As Fodéré explained (p. 2-3), the purpose of his visit in Waldersbach was to reward his efforts by creating a publishable account of Oberlin’s works. His motivation was not original—Fodéré mentioned following the footsteps of “more distinguished travelers” (p. 4). It did not matter, though, as the repetition could only magnify the religious effect. The process of rewarding Oberlin through the recurring pilgrimage aimed to make him more famous in service of transcendence, a continuing underlining of the humanitarian values by the means of fame, or “a paradigm grounded in repetition” (Williams, 1998, p. 6). It is impossible to say with the sources we have, but this trope should not be neglected. In the previous statement, it was a given that one of the “pilgrim reports” ended with an outline of the pilgrimage path to Waldersbach (Wilks, 1820, p. 48).

Second, the journeys made an unforgettable impact to the travelers. Meeting Oberlin was not simply a matter of curiosity or journalistic instincts; it was a spiritual experience. It was life-changing. When a powerful Swiss politician, Jean-Luc Legrand, founded a ribbon factory in Alsace, his son Daniel could not miss an opportunity to visit Oberlin. After meeting the pastor, he completely fell under his spell. Two years later, in 1814, the young Legrand moved his factory to Fouday near Waldersbach, where he lived until his death. He became a devoutly religious man and a lively philanthropist; as one biography put it: “an auxiliary to Oberlin” (Atkins, 1829, p. 172). Similarly, reverent Owen was almost charmed into staying: “It was not without many an effort that I tore myself away and hurried from Ban-de-la-Roche, that seat of simplicity, piety, and true Christian refinement, to resume my journey” (Atkins, 1829, p. 137). The refinement brought by the sight of this philanthropic idyll was sought after among almost all charitable societies. Fodéré was an emissary of one such society in Paris—Madame Félicie Tourette of a Strasbourg club. Mark Wilks wrote his report to share his impressions with his father and with “the circle in which his father moved”. There were agricultural and Bible societies among the organizations who seek the news on Oberlin. However, the reports left no doubt as to the character of virtues they attempted to celebrate: “How consoling to benevolence that this is not the dream of philanthropy, but reality and fact, to which imagination itself can add no embellishment!” (Wilks, 1820, p. 2).

Visiting pastor Oberlin and his Ban-de-la-Roche constituted an ideological refreshment and an act of purification. The ideal of Christian philanthropist at work exemplified by the celebrated priest was akin to many of his fans’ ideas and dreams. In relation to these ideas, the humanitarian values that gained momentum at the turn of the nineteenth century formed the secularized version of the transcendent constant. Oberlin brought the new postulates adhering to this con-

stant together with older instincts related to religious charity. His daily work at the grass roots, outside the busy center of events, successfully convinced the philanthropic elites. It showed them that the pietistic “primitive” motivations and revolutionary or Napoleonic claims on the role of a citizen is reconcilable. The powerful syncretic symbol that is Oberlin attracted various supporters and, after establishing Waldersbach as a pilgrimage shire, imbued in it a transitional function for individual travelers, charitable societies, and its own symbolic significance.

The new version of transcendence that integrated the secular, sacred, and engaged humanitarian concern as well as love for one’s neighbor manifested in different places. In the case of Howard, it was a meaning ascribed to his extraordinary market-based popularity; and for Oberlin, the saint-like meanings and interpretations preceded when he truly entered the public sphere. The forms of public recognition of famous philanthropists were a conflation of the long-established mechanisms such as pilgrimage and press visibility. The modern approach to fame, exemplified in seeing Howard running his garden and mansion or observing Oberlin touching the heads of the children, was entangled with rejuvenation of traditional, saint-like admiration.

A funeral is a typical rite where this respect is shown. Thousands of Alsatian peasants, nobles, and clergymen gathered to celebrate Oberlin’s passing; Howard, despite being buried far from his motherland, was bid adieu by six thousand Ukrainians. However, interestingly, up to thirty thousand people joined a patriotic manifestation in Warsaw to say their goodbyes to Stanisław Staszic in February 1826.

IV. The Grave of Staszic

Staszic’s funeral was not cautiously planned like tsar Alexander I’s nor Wojciech Skarszewski’s, the Polish primate, who are buried in a similar period and place (April 1826 and 1827). Apparently, every fourth inhabitant of Warsaw felt a spontaneous need to be a part of the ceremony. How did Staszic earn this sort of respect? Born in a country where political rights were reserved for noblemen, he used the only opportunity he had to break the glass ceiling. Educated to be a priest, he became an intellectual and an investor. Since the 1790s, even before the final partitions of Poland, he was already established as a political writer. In the late 1800s, Staszic became a public official and then one of the key political figures in the Congress Poland after 1815.

But at the funeral, no one mentioned his exploration of Tatra mountains or the fact that he reinvigorated Poland’s mining industry. Instead, people talked about the stipends and charities he funded. They raved on the experimental cooperative in Hrubieszów in which he gave away his land to the peasants while obliging them to self-organize under a set of rules he wrote out. Staszic’s last will

was a list of charitable donations, with little money left for his servants and family. Between fervent speeches and anti-establishment chants, the title of *dobroczynca* (“the benefactor” or “the philanthropist”) prevailed (Wesołowski, 2018).

Similar to Oberlin, Staszic was recognized as a philanthropist belatedly. The first time he was praised publicly was in 1824 by his colleagues from the Warsaw Society of the Friends of Learning (Szacka, 1966, p. 266). No popular media reported Staszic’s philanthropic image until his funeral and the announcement of his charitable last will. Staszic was made a generous philanthropist in mass sermons and funeral speeches. At the same time, the press exploded with news, secrets, and hidden anecdotes about the politician. The key newspapers, like *Kurier Warszawski*, kept writing about him in almost every issue for more than a month (Wesołowski, 2018, p. 55-6). The narrative was consistent and akin to Howard and Oberlin’s humility, dedication, and moral revivalism—a new, deserved kind of fame.

What is fascinating in the case of Staszic is the degree of the saint-like appeal parallel to press fascination. During the funeral, the frenzied crowds carried the speakers on their arms while sermons styled Staszic as an altruistic saint figure. In the last part of the ceremony, the mob tore the coffin shroud to pieces and every member of the crowd—even the educated elites and university students—participated to keep a part of it as a relic. The sixteen-year-old Frederic Chopin kept a scarp for himself and boasted about it in a letter to a friend; as he put it, “they have stripped the coffin of the shroud, out of love and enthusiasm” (Helman et al., 2009, p. 154).

The frenzy of the funeral mob can be explained through the political, social, and economic lenses in the long-term perspective (Wesołowski, 2018, p. 43-62). What is interesting here is the crowd members’ interpretation of the march as a pilgrimage. The fact that Staszic was educated to be a priest does not support the proposition that he was viewed as a saint; his ambiguous relationship with Polish church, total negligence of priestly duties, and the apparent problems with presenting him as a priest in public after his death (Szacka, 1966, p. 249) suggest that the Church could not be an actor in facilitating such interpretation. On the other hand, some points hint at the possible ritualistic reading of the march.

The procession started at the square between the seat of the Warsaw Society of the Friends of Learning and the Saint Cross church and finished in a Camaldolese church at Bielany district. The crowd marched almost nine kilometers in the middle of a harsh winter, while it was snowing and raining. The sense of duty despite considerable sacrifice is one of the distinctive features of a pilgrim’s attitude (Coleman & Elsner, 1995, p. 61-3). Furthermore, the relation between funeral processions and pilgrimages is that they are similar in function.

Processions frequently play a role of a fundamental precedent initiating future pilgrimages (Luginbühl, 2015). Can we, then, understand this funeral march as a pilgrimage-related event?

The obvious similarities strike first. The funeral procession was a journey and its participants embarked on it in search of significance. There were also the many struggles over the meaning of the funeral. The Church attempted to impose its own interpretation, so did later poets present during the ceremony. Suggestions implied that it was not only associated with the last farewell, but a show of performativity where the crowds manifested the symbolism of the philanthropist and its significance for local community. Therefore, the event was more about expressing their patriotism or the new humanitarian values that stood in opposition to the military fight for Polish independence, rather than simply about appreciating the late minister. In this sense, Staszic would constitute a worthy symbol.

The burying of his body, when the shroud was being torn, was a climax of the ritual which demonstrated the adaptation of the new version of the transcendent. It is surprising to notice how Staszic could maintain significance on this bottom level of spontaneous ritual embedded in the collective unconscious. Similarly, in the press—with intellectual debate and other forms of market-based exchange of ideas. The funeral march was an event that initiated the series of recurrent meetings and individual travelling to his grave later. In a pilgrim-like manner, groups of nationalist rebels, politicians, artists, and individual visitors came back to Bielany to plot, reflect, and celebrate their philanthropic hero. The local priests were reported to be forced to repeatedly remove the writings drawn on the cemetery walls, reading “the benefactor will bring the light again” (Szacka, 1966, p. 251-4).

V. Conclusions

Despite its essayistic form, the article brings certain novelties both into the study of pilgrimage and our understanding of philanthropic celebrity. We see that pilgrimage can be used as a methodological tool, which contradicts the traditional approach to it merely as a social and literary phenomenon. Its broad applicability, whether as a metaphor or as a reference ritual, allows for treating it as cultural theme of explanatory power. It served to clarify the entangled relationship between the secular and the sacred in the stories of first philanthropic celebrities. The place on a scale between treating pilgrimage figuratively and literally could be noticed; there was a different level of adapting older symbols into the new mechanisms of fame.

Howard, who could be described as a metaphorical pilgrim, was a celebrity in the most modern sense; Oberlin and Staszic, the fame of whose engaged celebrity mechanisms to a lesser extent, were also associated with actual pilgrimage.

At the same time, all philanthropic celebrities in question invoked a model pilgrim behavior. There are multiple allusions to that model one can seek in the sources related to them. To a certain degree, it must have been because the pilgrimage archetype is deeply ingrained in the ancient concept of a saint. This allows us to find strong confirmation that the market-driven celebrity status of famous philanthropists was in big part embedded in a network of associations appropriated from the previous model of a saint.

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