

Three Mr. Bs...

Desired and Undesired Traditions in Contemporary Criticism

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The critical personalities of the three titular “Mr. Bs” —Henryk Bereza, Jan Błoński, and Tomasz Burek—and, more precisely, the specificity of their presence or absence in the contemporary literary field, will serve as a lens through which I examine those aspects of literary critical traditions that are tied to the figure of the master. All three critics entered the 1990s with accomplishments and positions that seemingly “naturally” predisposed them – albeit for different reasons and in distinct literary milieus – to become authorities.¹

I use the term “critical personalities” because I am interested not only in Bereza’s, Błoński’s, and Burek’s texts and critical strategies but, above all, in their position in the field of literature, which

¹ From the perspective of opinion-forming circles in the 1990s, Bereza was not considered such a critic. It should also be mentioned that in the introduction to the anthology *Była sobie krytyka... [Literary criticism...]* its authors and editors mention among others such authorities as Jan Błoński, Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, Andrzej Kijowski, Jacek Łukasiewicz, and Kazimierz Wyka. However, they argue that the young critics of the 1990s “matured on their own; they did not look back at the Old Masters” because they were “too monumental and too distant.” Dariusz Nowacki, Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika” [Preface], in: *Była sobie krytyka... Wybór tekstów z lat dziewięćdziesiątych i pierwszych [Literary criticism...Selected texts from the 1990s and the 2000s]*, prefaced and edited by D. Nowacki, K. Uniłowski (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), 9, 10.

I perceive as an interplay of combination of tangible achievements (texts and activities within the literary field); various political, social, and communal conditions; and the shifting interpretations and evaluations of the three critics' personal and professional lives over the years.

I have chosen these three critics not for the titular concept of "Three Mr. Bs" but out of conviction – confirmed by critical texts from the 1990s and early 2000s – that among the active critics of the older generation, they were perceived as the most important and/or the most influential. My aim, however, is not to evaluate the achievements of Bereza, Błoński, and Burek or to assess the prevailing perceptions about them in the literary field today. The story of *how* these three critics have been present in the field in recent decades strikes me as (simply and profoundly) an intriguing perspective from which to examine the problems, entanglements, ruptures, and complexities of literary criticism (and literature). Although, given the constraints of this essay, it must necessarily remain a short story.

Three Mr. Bs...

Henryk Bereza, Jan Błoński, and Tomasz Burek were influential critics operating in three distinct milieus during the final decades of the Polish People's Republic (PRL): Tomasz Burek in the democratic opposition sphere, Jan Błoński in the academic mainstream, and Henryk Bereza in the young avant-garde circles. These environments intersected and significantly overlapped within the centralized literary life of the Polish People's Republic. Even when, in the second half of the 1970s, a clear division emerged between two literary circuits –underground and official –with censorship restrictions on one side and accusations of superficiality and "socparnasianism" on the other forming substrational barriers, some social and institutional ties were still maintained. Traces of mutual ("inter-circuit") readings and discussions can still be seen in their texts.² Some examples include Andrzejewski's *Miazga* [Pulp], which was only published by the underground press, the reception of Tadeusz Konwicki's works (mainly circulated underground at the time),

² See: Stanisław Barańczak, "Fasada i tyły" [Façade and the back], Puls 2 (1977), reprinted in: Stanisław Barańczak, *Etyka i poetyka* [Ethics and poetics] (Krakow: Znak, 2009); Michał Głowiński, "Soc-parnasizm" [Socialist parnasianism], *Polityka* 6 (1981): 3, reprinted in: Michał Głowiński, *Rytuał i demagogia. Trzytnaście szkiców o sztuce zdegradowanej* [Ritual and demagogy: Thirteen essays on degraded art] (Warsaw: Open, 1992). The unique realities of the late Polish People's Republic, its political and social circles, and, since the mid-1970s, also the existence of two publishing markets, influenced literature, methods of communication, and the positions of writers and critics. Literary hierarchies and, in Bourdieu's terms, positions in the field of literature were created and determined by the elusive but influential "opinions," or more specifically "literary opinions" (cf., among others, my comments on criticism in the 1970s and the 1980s in: "Czas przyszły niedokonany, konstelacja «Miazgi» Jerzego Andrzejewskiego" [Future imperfect tense, the constellation of Jerzy Andrzejewski's 'Miazga'], in: *Konstelacje krytyczne. Tom I. Teorie i praktyki* [Critical constellations. Volume I. Theories and practices], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Monika Świerkosz, Katarzyna Trzeciak [Krakow: Universitas, 2020]). Łukasz Żurek has also commented on this. Żurek reconstructed the contexts in which Parnicki functioned in the literary field (he analyzed the role he played in the cultural policy of the Polish People's Republic and opinions about him) and described the "critical aura" of the time. It was made up of not only reviews and literary criticism but also a constellation of various other texts (columns, diaries, interviews, letters, etc.) published by both the official and the underground press. "Opinions," as traces of the system of values and conditions of literary life that influenced the reception of Parnicki's works, were also analyzed (see: "«Gnida» z «socparnasistowskiej» «fasady». Teodor Parnicki i aura krytyczna w latach 80. i na początku lat 90. XX wieku" ['A weasel' from the 'façade' of 'Socialist parnasianism.' Teodor Parnicki and the critical aura in the 1980s and the early 1990s], in: Łukasz Żurek, *Filologia lokalna – lokalność filologa. Praktyki literacko-naukowe Stefana Szymutki* [Local philology – The locality of the philologist. Literary and scholarly practices of Stefan Szymutko] Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022)).

and the reactions of both “official” and “underground” critics to the silencing of new-wave authors and the so-called Polish new prose promoted by Henryk Berezka (“literature of Berezians”).³

Such spaces of inevitable interaction between literary scholars and critics from different backgrounds during the PRL era included institutions like the Institute of Literary Studies (IBL) in Warsaw and the journal *Teksty* [Texts], which Jan Błoński became the editor of in 1972. In 1970, Burek joined IBL as an assistant professor.⁴ Berezka also briefly began his scholarly career there, through his tenure was short-lived.⁵ At the time, having an academic background and combining the competencies of a literary historian or theorist with literary-critical activity was highly regarded. In a text devoted to the “adventures of literary-critical thought,” Marek Zaleski attributes this trend primarily to the growing authority of literary scholarship in the late 1960s,⁶ although it is worth noting that such models were also provided by older generation critics, such as Kazimierz Wyka. Zaleski writes about the “appeal of the connoisseur’s discourse” and argues that at the turn of the 1960s and the 1970s, reading *Teksty* published by the Institute of Literary Studies was “equally important (if not more so)” for young students of literature and literary criticism as reading *Twórczość* [Creativity]. Still, it seems that by the late 1970s, the academic grounding of a critical voice was not unequivocally positive. The authority of expertise could (and often was) legitimized within the field of criticism through other means. This is evident, for example, in the debates on the “artistic evolution” of prose, where Berezka’s anti-academic and anti-institutional arguments, championing “genuine” reading, stand out.⁷ By the 1990s, when young critics began to challenge the pretensions and limitations of the university establishment, Berezka, as an “anti-academic” critic, became one of their role models.

³ A campaign against Berezka’s “artistic revolution” was famously initiated by Błoński in his essay “Dwie groteski i pół” [Two and a half grotesques] (*Literatura* 5 [1987]: 12–15); it took place in 1987 and 1988 in the magazine *Literatura* [Literature] published by the official press. But the dispute over the so-called “Polish new prose” dates back to the mid-1970s. The “artistic revolution” itself was proclaimed by Berezka in 1979 (“Dopowiedzenia” [Additions], *Twórczość* 5 [1979]: 161–163), and it was then that the most important texts were published by both the “official” and the “underground” press. Cf., among others, Krzysztof Rutkowski, “Przytomny uczestnik rozmowy” [Conscious conversationalist], *Literatura* 32 (1979): 12; Marian Stala, “Ucieczka od wartości” [Running away from values], *Student* 14 (1979); Bronisław Maj, “Martwe dusze” [Dead souls], *Nowy Wzrost* 7-8 (1980): 15; Andrzej Mencwel, “Co się dzieje” [What’s going on?], *Literatura* 2 (1980): 9, 14.

⁴ Fired in 1985, he returned to the Institute of Literary Studies after 1989. Earlier, in 1977, he became a lecturer at the Flying University. In 1978, he co-founded the Society of Scientific Courses. From 1977 to 1981, he co-edited *Zapis* [Record].

⁵ According to Berezka, he was “kind of fired” from the Institute of Literary Studies in 1957 after the reorganization and liquidation of the Department of Contemporary Literature. The then director of the Institute, Kazimierz Wyka, invited Berezka for a walk during which he explained to him that he decided to fire him because he already had a certain position in the field of literature and would certainly do well for himself, unlike others who did not have such a position. See: Adam Wiedemann, Piotr Czerski, Końcówki. Henryk Berezka mówi [Endings. Henryk Berezka talks] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010), 51–53.

⁶ And also the changes which took place in the Institute of Literary Studies after 1968, which led to the breakdown of the rigid scholarly framework. Marek Zaleski, “Przygody myśli krytycznoliterackiej” [Adventures of critical literary thought], in: *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury współczesnej* [Disputed issues in Polish contemporary literature], ed. Alina Brodzka, Lidia Burska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 1998), 210.

⁷ However, Zaleski also draws attention to the dual roles of the literary scholar and the literary critic and the determination of such critics as Błoński, Burek, Kwiatkowski, and Łukasiewicz to use private language and express private opinions. He also describes young critics from – as he writes – the ephemeral “generation of 1975” and their unique search for critical criteria. From the perspective of the dispute over criticism that had been going on since the “artistic revolution in prose,” the issue of the academic nature vs. the “truthfulness” of literary criticism seems particularly important to me. Berezka’s ingenious criticism of academic critics was discussed by, among others, Zygmunt Ziątek, “Misja odnowienia polskiej prozy. [O krytyce Henryka Berezki]” [The mission to renew Polish prose. (On Henryk Berezka’s criticism)], in: *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej. Krytycy* [Disputed figures of Polish contemporary literature. Critics], ed. Alina Brodzka-Wald, Tomasz Żukowski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 2003): 287–318. Cf., especially, Henryk Berezka, “Jołopizm” [Idiotism] (*Twórczość* 11 [1990]), in which he writes about the “idiot savant,” that is a literary scholar.

Above all, however, the place where the paths of various critics crossed was the journal *Twórczość*, with which Bereza had been associated since 1951.⁸ Burek collaborated with the magazine regularly since 1961 and Błoński published his texts there as well. His book reviews also appear in the magazine, and his very good friend, whom he had met at Wyka's famous seminar, Andrzej Kijowski, was a regular contributor to *Twórczość*.

The literary-critical biographies of these critics are similar: they all debuted as critics in the literary press (despite an almost generational age difference between the eldest, Bereza, and the youngest, Burek, all three began publishing their texts in the 1950s).⁹ Then, gradually, although at different paces, they each published successive critical books.¹⁰ Their writing goes far beyond the framework of the dominant literary criticism of the Polish People's Republic, whose goals and ambitions were rather provisional. All three critics write important and insightful texts (including anthologies) about contemporary Polish literature seen as a phenomenon. Each has in their oeuvre synthesizing or authoritative texts, which became important points of reference for others and brought them recognition in their respective literary circles.

Bereza, as the author of two influential critical concepts/propositions, namely the peasant tradition¹¹ and the artistic revolution in Polish prose, and as the critic who, since 1977, ran the column "Czytane w maszynopisie" [Read in typescript]¹² in *Twórczość*, actively promoting his vision of literature and the "first language", was regarded as one of the most controversial (but also well-established) critics at the time. Alongside ardent opponents, there were also writers and critics, or even followers, who appreciated his approach to literature.¹³

Błoński, educated at the so-called Krakow School of Literary Criticism led by Kazimierz Wyka, was associated both with the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and the Institute of Literary Studies

⁸ Bereza had been publishing in *Twórczość* regularly since 1952. From 1966 to 1978, he was the head of the magazine's literary criticism department. From 1979 to 1988, he was the head of the prose department, and in 1980 he became first deputy editor-in-chief.

⁹ Bereza (1926–2012) published his first texts in the early 1950s in the magazine *Wieś* [Country], whose literary section was run by Maria Żmigrodzka and Maria Janion. Błoński (1931–2009) published his first reviews as early as 1949. See: Marian Zaczynski, *Bibliografia Jana Błońskiego* [Jan Błoński's bibliography], in: Marian Zaczynski, *Gospodarstwo krytyka. Teksty rozproszone. Pisma wybrane t. III* [The critic's workshop. Scattered texts. Selected writings, vol. III,], selected and edited by Marian Zaczynski (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie), 310–465. Burek (1938–2017) made his debut in 1957 in *Współczesność* [Modern times] with a review of Molière's *Don Juan* titled "Nie ma Molièra" [There is no Molière].

¹⁰ Bereza's first critical book, *Sztuka Czytania* [The art of reading], was published in 1966. It was a collection of essays devoted to Polish literature and literary criticism written over 15 years. His next book, *Doświadczenia: z lektur prozy obcej* [Experiences: Reading foreign prose] (1967), was based on a similar premise. Among his other books published in the 1970s, the most popular was *Związki naturalne* [Natural relationships] (1972 and 1978). In 1979, *Proza z importu: szkice literackie* (Imported prose: Literary essays) was published. Other books followed: *Taki układ* [Such an arrangement] (1981), *Bieg rzeczy* [The course of things] (1982), and *Sposób myślenia: tom 1 – O prozie polskiej* [Way of thinking: volume 1 – On Polish prose] (1989). In 1956, Błoński published a collection of essays *Poeci i inni* [Poets and others] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie), and, in 1961, the famous *Zmiana warty* [Changing of the guard] (Warsaw: PIW). Other books follow: *Odmarsz* [Departure] (1978) and *Romans z tekstem* [Love affair with the text] (1982) (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie). In 1971, Burek published a collection of essays entitled *Zamiast powieści* [Instead of a novel]; his next book, *Dalej aktualne* [Still relevant], was published in 1973. He published *Żadnych marzeń* [No dreams] in 1987 (London: Polonia Book Fund).

¹¹ Henryk Bereza, "Nurt chłopski w prozie" [The peasant tradition in Polish prose], *Tygodnik Kulturalny* 11 (1970).

¹² Bereza wrote the column from 1977 to 2005.

¹³ Cf., among others, Bohdan Zadura, "Przyjacieli ludzi wśród książek" [A friend of people among books], *Twórczość* 10 (1979): 129–132; Roch Sulima, "Krytyka heroiczna" [Heroic criticism], *Regiony* 1 (1979): 55–72.

in Warsaw, as well as with the journals *Przekrój* [Cross-section] and later *Tygodnik Powszechny* [The Common Weekly], and with the theatre. As an academic and a brilliant literary critic, he is famous for his analysis of the prose of the “Współczesność” [Now] generation (a generation of Polish artists who made their debut around 1956) and as a propagator and interpreter of the works of Gombrowicz, Miłosz, Witkacy and Mrozek. One of Błoński’s most important and influential essays is *Bieguny poezji* [The poles of poetry] from 1973, in which he categorized postwar Polish poetry into lines of continuing the legacy of either Miłosz or Przyboś, emphasizing the significance of the former.¹⁴

Burek gained recognition for his collection of essays (and his original methodological models) *Zamiast powieści* [Instead of a novel] (1971) and *Dalej aktualne* [Still relevant] (1973), in which he discussed the current state of Polish prose and avant-garde struggles with the form of the novel. Burek was also an insightful reader and admirer of Stanisław Brzozowski. He was considered a brilliant critic who analyzed Polish literature in the broad context of social, cultural, and historical changes. He was also one of the co-founders and editors of the legendary *Zapis* [Record] journal. Associated with the democratic opposition in Poland, he was one of the first literary critics to write about the decline of criticism and underground literature, calling for works that were socially relevant and at the same time artistically refined.

The Elders

After 1989, when important changes and reshuffles in the field of literature take place in Poland (related to the liquidation of the underground press, the publication of new magazines, and the creation of new institutions and literary circles), Jan Błoński and Henryk Berezka remained in their literary and social circles. Błoński continued to write for *Tygodnik Powszechny*,¹⁵ with its editorial office in Krakow, and Berezka wrote for *Twórczość*, based in Warsaw. Tomasz Burek, however, completely changed his intellectual environment – he severed ties with the majority of his opposition friends and began to cooperate with *Arcana*, *Dziennik* [Daily], *Życie* [Life], and *Gazeta Polska* [The Polish Newspaper].¹⁶ Thus, once again (as emphasized by, among others, Maciej Urbanowski), he positioned himself in opposition to the mainstream.¹⁷

Jan Błoński was by far the most influential critic at the time of the transformation. Janusz Sławiński in his enthusiastic 1979 essay, an editorial to the fourth issue of *Teksty*, entitled

¹⁴Jan Błoński, “Bieguny poezji” [Poles of poetry], in: Jan Błoński, *Odmarsz* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978). Talk delivered at the Warsaw Poetic Autumn Festival in 1973. First edition published under the title “Aktualność i trwałość” [Current and lasting], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1 (1974): 39–44.

¹⁵Cf., among others, collection of Błoński’s short essays published in *Tygodnik Powszechny* from September 2000 to March 2001 – *Mieszanki* [Mixtures] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001).

¹⁶Burek also sat on the jury of right-wing awards, namely the Andrzej Kijowski Award and the Józef Mackiewicz Literary Award.

¹⁷It should be noted, however, that the opposition circles were – and are still considered to be so from the perspective of the 1990s and the 2000s – mainstream and influential, because they created the literary hierarchies of the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s. Cf., among others, Przemysław Czaplinski, *Ślady przełomu. O prozie polskiej 1976–1996* [Traces of a breakthrough: Polish prose 1976–1996] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997); Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Po roku 1970” [After 1970], in: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Polska proza innowacyjna w perspektywie postmodernizmu* [Polish innovative prose and postmodernism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1999).

“Za co powinniśmy kochać Jana Błońskiego?” [Why should we love Jan Błoński?],¹⁸ discusses the anti-institutional qualities of this critic. Błoński’s presence in the literary space was simultaneously accessible to the general public and seen as unorthodox in relation to the communist regime. His combination of academic authority with a free style of critical discourse; his victory in his dispute with Bereza¹⁹; his role on the jury of the Kościelski Award, which, though it was awarded by a foundation based in Geneva, proved very influential for Polish literature; and his famous and widely discussed essay *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* [Poor Poles look at the ghetto]²⁰ – these are just some of the circumstances contributing to his authority and influence.

The authors of the textbook on literary criticism *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory] refer to Błoński as *the* critic who at that time “played the most institutional role as someone who hierarchized and ordered literature; he was also an autonomous player who recognized and named specific trends and phenomena in the field of literature.” Błoński is described as the “last anointing critic,” that is a critic who determined the places of debutants in the field of literature.²¹ Błoński also writes from this position in his 1990 book *Bezładne rozważania starego krytyka, który zastanawia się, jak napisałby historię prozy polskiej w latach istnienia Polski Ludowej* [Disorderly considerations of an old critic who wonders how he would write a history of Polish prose at the time of the Polish People’s Republic]. In the book, despite the title, although in a rather free, sometimes sarcastic and malicious tone, he orders post-war literature in accordance with his readerly preferences. He writes, among other things, about the “longue durée” of socialist realism and the failure of “thaw” literature (that is literature created after the death of Stalin). In his opinion, the most valuable trend in the Polish prose of the 1960s and the 1970s is the “emigration of the imagination” and the search for lost identity. He is also disappointed in avant-garde literature. The tone of his short description

¹⁸Janusz Sławiński, “Za co powinniśmy kochać Jana Błońskiego?” [Why should we love Jan Błoński?], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1979): 1–9, reprinted in: Janusz Sławiński, *Teksty i teksty* [Texts and texts] (Warsaw: PEN, 1990). Błoński is mentioned as one of the “last representatives of a dying breed (at least spiritually) – the private literary and critical initiative.” And Błoński’s literary criticism, as Sławiński further writes, is located “outside the repertoire of forms and modes of expression considered useful in Polish literary life [...]; [Błoński] speaks his mind, challenging the norms.”

¹⁹Cf. footnote 2.

²⁰“*Tygodnik Powszechny*” 2 (1987).

²¹Michał Sowiński, Katarzyna Trzeciak, “Krytyczne pozycje. Od krytyki konsekrującej do krytyki natywnej” [Critical positions: From consecrating criticism to native criticism], in: *Literatura polska po 1989 roku w świetle teorii Pierre’a Bourdieu. Podręcznik* [Polish literature after 1989 in the light of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory. A handbook], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz, Piotr Marecki, Michał Sowiński (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015), 231. Błoński’s review of Weiser Dawidek [Who was David Weiser] (“Duch opowieści i wąs Stalina” [The spirit of the story and Stalin’s moustache], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 44 [1987]) contributed to the phenomenal popularity of this novel in 1987. Writing about the literary debuts of Paweł Huelle and Magdalena Tulli, Sowiński and Trzeciak rightly note that Błoński’s institutional power as a “make-or-break” critic was based on a combination of two factors: he wrote for a very popular magazine (primarily *Tygodnik Powszechny*) using a critical language that allowed the reviewed text to “speak” (in other words, he tried to respond and react to every text in an original manner). Cf. Jerzy Jarzębski, “Namaszczanie” [Anointing], in: Jan Błoński ...i literatura XX wieku [Jan Błoński ...and 20th century literature], ed. Ryszard Nycz, Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Universitas 2002). It is also worth recalling, however, that Błoński tried to promote Myszkowski’s novel in 1992 and failed. Czaplinski writes about it in a slightly different context – showing the painful clash between literary criticism (and the authority previously attributed to it) and popular literature and media reality (*Żwawy trup. Krytyka literacka 1989-2004* [Lively corpse. Literary criticism 1989-2004], in: Przemysław Czaplinski, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [The return of the center: Literature in the new reality] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2007), 87-132).

of the trend, subtitled *Awangarda Jej Ludowej Mości?* [Its majesty the people's avant-garde?], aligns with his negative assessment, particularly deprecating "Bereza's darlings."²²

Tomasz Burek enters the 1990s with no lesser authority, being considered one of the most important critics of the democratic opposition. In addition to his earlier analyses of avant-garde prose, his new publications *Rozmyte tradycje* [Blurred traditions] and *Jaka historia literatury jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna?* [What history of literature do we need today?] also garnered significant attention. In the latter, he described four defining features of Polish literature: its political nature, its engagement with the philosophy of history, its religiosity, and its supra-literary nature.²³ Burek's spectacular transition to right-wing criticism, and especially his feuilletons published in *Gazeta Polska* between 1996 and 2000, later republished in *Dziennik kwarantanny* [Quarantine diary] in 2001, contributed to the rejection (or silencing) of his opinions in the Polish literary world. However, he is not so much forgotten or pushed out of the center of the literary field as he becomes the most important authority of right-wing criticism, and his opinions – although they differ from the voices of the contemporary mainstream – carried considerable influence. Importantly, young authors and critics are gradually establishing their own hierarchies, often challenging the pre-transformation divisions and social and political coteries.

The fact that Błoński and Burek were the two strongest points of reference in the 1990s is also reflected in the remarks of other critics, for example Krzysztof Uniłowski, who, assessing the prose of the time wrote: "Meanwhile, the 'literature of the thirty-year-olds' still waits for Jan Błoński or Tomasz Burek to enthusiastically praise its merits. It created a myth according to which it was born *ex nihilo* at the turn of 1989 and 1990."²⁴ Maciej Urbanowski, emphasizing the importance of Antoni Libera's *Madame*, argued in 2000:

²²He writes: "Do you notice a distinct avant-garde tendency in prose? Not really. With one exception, where quantity triumphed over quality. I refer to "the prose of *Twórczość*," "the school of Bereza," the new novel or what have you. Its greatest triumph, paradoxically, dates to the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s. The "new novel" was often defined as prose which was written like poetry, that is, prose which focused on its literary quality. What is most striking in these books is the very act of speaking, writing, telling, inventing. Hence the interest in language, or rather languages, because Bereza's favorites like to mix idiolects and sociolects, change styles and even genres of expression, which is supposed to show the authors' social advancement... The problem is that the contrived and semi-grotesque worlds they create are rarely interesting or at least coherent. Having filtered out the linguistic extravagances, the reader quickly recognizes ordinary youthful dreams and common frustrations, spiced up with social (or verbal) provocation. So much for our Marquezes and Musils, Lisowski dixit. And it is probably no coincidence that after almost twenty years, none of these geniuses has lived to see success or at least recognition. So perhaps the avant-garde also failed in the Polish People's Republic" (Jan Błoński, "Beżładne rozważania starego krytyka, który zastanawia się, jak napisać historię prozy polskiej w latach istnienia Polski Ludowej" [Disorderly considerations of an old critic who he wonders how he would write a history of Polish prose at the time of the Polish People's Republic], *Teksty Drugie* 1 [1990]: 11–12). Uniłowski disagrees; in an essay devoted to the prose of Dariusz Bittner, looking forward to the reactivation of the publishing series "Nowa prosa polska" [New Polish prose] and considering this event a "sign of normalization," he writes in a footnote: "Wishful thinking. Contrary to what Jan Tomkowski wrote a few years ago, for young people the dispute between Błoński and Bereza is not something distant and insignificant. They consider its result, i.e. the complete defeat of the writers associated with *Twórczość*, conclusive. Some still believe, therefore, that what prose writers associated with *Twórczość* propose should be ignored, that it should be dismissed with a joke. Even if the proposals of some of them do not differ from what "thirty-year-olds" write. Even if some of them are "thirty-year-olds." But why should you [author's emphasis] read something if Błoński mocked it?" ("Błogosławione skutki niemocy" [Blessed results of infirmity], in: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Skądinąd* [Anyway] [Bytom: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 1998], 96).

²³Both were published in the collection *Żadnych marzeń*. *Rozmyte tradycje* was published earlier in the collection *Badania nad krytyką literacką* [Studies on literary criticism] (ed. Michał Głowiński, Krzysztof Dybciak [Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1984]). This essay is one of Burek's most frequently cited texts; *Jaka historia literatury jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna?* [What history of literature do we need today?] was published in 1979 as a pamphlet.

²⁴Krzysztof Uniłowski, "Chłopcy i dziewczęta znikąd" [Boys and girls from nowhere], in: Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Skądinąd* (Bytom: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 1998), 11.

Madame was awarded first prize in a competition organized by the Znak publishing house. On the jury we find critics associated with the “party” which appears to control Polish literature today, Błoński and Jarzębski. Immediately afterwards, the brilliancy of *Madame* was confirmed by the jury (headed by Tomasz Burek) of the “oppositional” Andrzej Kijowski Award.²⁵

Henryk Bereza finds himself in the least favourable position at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Pushed into the corner of the critical field as a result of his dispute with Błoński, he became known as a critic of the lost cause, dogmatic, inflating weak and incomprehensible novels to the status of masterpieces. The authors of *Literatura polska 1976–1998* [Polish literature 1976–1998] (including active young critics) seem to best describe the image of Bereza that dominated in the 1990s. In the chapter devoted to the “artistic revolution in prose,” they described him as a late avant-gardist, a critic who was tireless in promoting new and innovative prose, “eager to provoke unrest and uncritical of the chaos he created.”²⁶ They also pointed out that Bereza made empty promises, and compared his actions to “a psychomachy, a war waged against imaginary opponents, whom the critic invariably ‘portrayed as philistines,’ accusing them of ‘literary illiteracy,’ hypocrisy, aesthetic conservatism, trivial taste [...]”²⁷ How Bereza described Miłosz in a questionnaire of Parisian *Kultura* [Culture], entitled *Pisarze niedocenieni – pisarze przecenieni* [Underestimated writers – overestimated writers], was also considered bizarre.²⁸

On the other hand – initially only in a small circle of his supporters – Bereza was considered an exceptional critic who was wronged by the opposition which became the mainstream. He was seen as a stubborn and consistent defender of artistic values (and not moral or political ones) and the literature of the 1980s. And despite, for example, texts devoted to the “black hole of the 1980s”²⁹ and Jerzy Jarzębski’s essay published in *Teksty Drugie* in 1990 [Second texts], where he wrote “I won’t mention the ‘artistic revolution’ because one doesn’t kick a man when he’s down,”³⁰ some critics defended Bereza and his favorite writers.³¹ While critical opinions dominate in the 1990s, literary criticism also eventually acknowledges other aspects of the phenomenon of the school of Bereza. Apart from the circumstances which surround the formation of a group of writers who consider themselves students or enthusiasts of a given

²⁵Maciej Urbanowski, “Syzyfowe prace (w 1965 roku)” [The labors of Sisyphus (in 1965)], in: Maciej Urbanowski, *Dezerterzy i żołnierze. Szkice o literaturze polskiej 1991–2006* [Deserters and soldiers: Essays on Polish literature 1991–2006] (Kraków: Arcana, 2007), 128. First printing: *Nowożytny Postygodnik* [Modern Postweek] 7 (2000).

²⁶The chaos in question was both “sociological,” “because as the editor of *Twórczość*, Bereza institutionalized the revolution,” and “chaos,” “because when the critic announced the ‘revolution’ he relied on a vaguely defined and double criterion of linguistic innovation” (Przemysław Czapliński, Piotr Śliwiński, *Literatura polska 1976–1998. Przewodnik po prozie i poezji* [Polish literature 1976–1998. A guide to prose and poetry] [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999], 48).

²⁷Czapliński, Śliwiński, 51.

²⁸Bereza wrote about Miłosz: “he happens to be a poet from time to time, he is a mediocre prose writer and a skilled essayist, which is perhaps enough to win a Nobel Prize, but it is not enough for true greatness” (“*Pisarze niedocenieni – pisarze przecenieni* [ankieta «Kultury»]” [Underestimated writers – overestimated writers (Kultura’s questionnaire)], *Kultura* [1992], 7–8).

²⁹“Czarna dziura lat osiemdziesiątych. O literaturze ostatniej dekady dyskutują: Jan Błoński, Tadeusz Nyczek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Marian Stala oraz – ze strony redakcji TP – Jerzy Pilch” [The black hole of the 1980s. The literature of the last decade is discussed by: Jan Błoński, Tadeusz Nyczek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Marian Stala and – a member of *Tygodnik Powszechny* editorial board – Jerzy Pilch], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 13 (1990): 1, 4–5.

³⁰Cf. Jerzy Jarzębski, “Apetyt na Przemianę” [Appetite for change], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (1990): 5, reprinted in: Jerzy Jarzębski, *Apetyt na Przemianę* (Kraków: Znak, 1997), 9.

³¹See: Tadeusz Komendant, “Trywialne pytanie o prozę” [A trivial question about prose], *Tygodnik Literacki*, 1 (1990): 4–5; Jerzy Łukosz, “Prozaiczna głębia. Dopisek do polemiki o prozie” [Prosaic depth: My opinion in the debate about prose], *Tygodnik Literacki* 11 (1990): 1, 6; Krzysztof Rutkowski, “Bereziada” [The saga of Bereza], *Twórczość* 10 (1996): 52–59.

literary critic, which is worthy of sociological reflection, there are also more fundamental issues at stake. They concern the broader view of Polish literature and its development – disputes over avant-garde traditions and a reevaluation of the achievements of the Polish People's Republic.

Departure

It seemed that Jan Błoński's anti-institutional stance (as Janusz Sławiński emphasized), based on readerly revelations, close personal reading, and textual romances (as seen in the writings of Roland Barthes), would be an important point of reference for young critics in the 1990s. However, that was not the case. Błoński's newfound fame (not only in locally Krakow – in the circles associated with the Polish studies magazines *Gołębnik* [Pigeon house], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and *Znak* [Sign] – but also in Poland, as evidenced by the first page of the first issue of *Tygodnik Literacki* [Literary Weekly], a new nationwide literary magazine,³² and the fact that Błoński was invited to join the jury of the Nike Literary Award established in 1997³³) is accompanied by deprecating voices from younger critics reacting both to his level of interest in new literature, his “make-or-break” status, his hermetic style of writing, and his positioning as an academic and a member of the intelligentsia.³⁴ At the same time, a more serious campaign was underway. Poetic traditions, other than the one defined by Czesław Miłosz,³⁵ were to be reclaimed for Polish poetry. Also, Henryk Berezka, as young scholars argued, should regain his rightful place as a literary critic. Błoński, less and less active due to his progressing illness, did not take a direct part in this discussion. Still, he was seen as an important adversary, responsible for maintaining the canon of ‘beautiful poetry’ at the expense of avant-garde tendencies and for diminishing the critical activity of the patron of the artistic revolution in prose. In both of these matters (which intertwine significant efforts in recent years to gain recognition for avant-garde achievements and traditions), Błoński's texts from the 1970s are foundational for the polemicists.

The “question of poetry” was discussed in detail by Joanna Orska, who in *Republika poetów. Poetyckość i polityczność w krytycznej praktyce* [The republic of poets. Poetry and politics in critical

³²Tygodnik Literacki was published from 17 June 1990 to June 1991. As Galant writes, analyzing, among other things, the exceptionally long list of staff in the editorial footer of the first issue, the periodical was to be a nationwide and cross-generational platform for dialogue – a magazine that would transcend generational and community animosities (Jan Galant, “«Tygodnik Literacki», czyli próba istnienia pogranicznego” [Tygodnik Literacki, or an attempt to exist on the border], in: *Boom i kryzys. Nowe czasopisma literacko-artystyczne i społeczno-kulturalne w Polsce po roku 1980* [Boom and crisis: New literary, artistic and socio-cultural magazines in Poland after 1980], ed. Magdalena Rabizo-Birek [Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2012], 125–138). In this context, featuring Błoński on the first page of the first issue (Jan Błoński, “Przeciw liczmanom” [Against banality]) seems significant. A different generation, environment, and views on prose are represented in this issue by Tadeusz Komendant and his essay “Trywialne pytanie o prozę.”

³³Błoński was a member of the first jury (1997–2000).

³⁴For example, during an editorial discussion in 1997, when asked “Are older critics trying to do something?,” Krzysztof Koehler replied: “We certainly cannot hand everything over to Professor Jan Błoński, who sleeps, suddenly wakes up, shows up, and then falls asleep again. So, I disagree with the thesis that older critics are trying to do something” (“Na powierzchni literatury i w środku...” [On the surface of literature and inside...], *Kresy* 1 [1995]: 20).

³⁵In the famous “Apel poległych” [Roll call of the fallen] from 1993, Sosnowski writes about the state of poetry and specifically the “paradigm of new-wave poetry.” He also points out the shift in emphasis that occurred “in a manner as ethically determined as the one in which Błoński once put an end to the avant-garde.” Andrzej Sosnowski, “Apel poległych” (o poezji naiwnej i sentymentalnej w Polsce) [Roll call of the fallen (On naive and sentimental poetry in Poland)], *Kresy* 16 (1993): 158–164, reprinted in: Andrzej Sosnowski, *Najryzykowniej* [The riskiest] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2027), 17–29.

practice], published in 2013, analyzed critical texts that defined the expectations towards poetry in the 1990s. In the chapters entitled “Linia Miłosza” [Miłosz’s legacy] and “Obywatel poeta” [The poet citizen], Orska shows how in the 1970s and the 1980s attempts were made to invalidate the entire sphere of Polish avant-garde poetry, criticized by Błoński in *Odmarsz* [Departure] for continuing the legacy of Przyboś. Only some literary languages were canonized. Orska also conducts a detailed analysis of Błoński’s *Bieguny poezji* and his critical method³⁶ from the perspective of the avant-garde and the opposition between literature and politics. She argues that designating the respective traditions of Miłosz and Przyboś was not a neutral ordering of the literary field, made from a dissident perspective. On the contrary, Błoński showed whom he values more. Which makes him (along with Miłosz) responsible for distorting the achievements of the avant-garde.³⁷

Błoński was held accountable for favoring “Miłosz’s legacy” and for actively promoting it during the times of the Polish People’s Republic. That is also why Miłosz’s legacy was actively challenged in the 1990s and the 2000s by young poets and critics who fought for the recognition of other poetics and traditions in Polish poetry. While we have witnessed a noticeable change in the critical reception of Miłosz’s poetry/Miłosz as a literary figure in recent years, Błoński was not absolved of his “crime.” Observing this change, Jakub Skurtys, again recalls the “visions of literature and criticism that relied on Błoński’s simplifying ethical and political binaries,” and points to Miłosz’s role in defending the ethos of the intelligentsia (especially in Krakow).³⁸ This last issue seems all the more interesting, as it recalls a reason for the aversion

³⁶ Orska discusses Błoński’s critical views and methods in detail. She describes the way in which Błoński combines the social with the literary from two perspectives. For one, Orska argues, it may be read in terms of the represented (Christian, essentially romantic) worldview which determines the critic’s choices. Respectively, it may also be read as an active intervention in the state of literature. In doing so, she reveals “the hidden premises of the personalist reading” – the notion that the work is sacred, judgments that exist “as if beyond the democratic textual encounter with the ‘other,’” anti-relativism. Focusing on texts from the 1960s and the 1970s (mostly reprinted in *Odmarsz*), Orska shows how literary criticism, which appears to rely on “neutral” and “authentic” foundations, may be considered ideological, and how the understanding of a work of art and greatness of spirit resulting from such an approach to literature translates into dismissing the avant-garde as a “fad” (Joanna Orska, *Republika poetów. Poetyckość i polityczność w krytycznej praktyce* [The republic of poets. Poetry and politics in critical practice] [Krakow: EMG, 2013], 86–97).

³⁷ In the afterword to the anthology *Awangarda jest rewolucyjna albo nie ma jej wcale* [The avant-garde is either revolutionary or it does not exist at all], Orska reminds us that Polish poetry was stylistically varied and that the avant-garde played a significant role in it. In her opinion, until Białoszewski’s death (1983), “the avant-garde experimental margin in poetry remained in literary criticism not so much a synonym for something worse, less important and difficult, but something in which readers were genuinely interested.” As a result, poets who challenged readers (Różewicz, Karpowicz, Wirpsza) were truly admired. And the poetic programs of artistic groups from the 1960s and the 1970s show that experimentation determined the artistic horizons of many poets. It was not until the 1980s that the avant-garde approach was challenged by the underground press and the Polish canon was narrowed down to a set of rules consistent with the aesthetic and moral decorum created by the “Old Masters” of Polish poetry. “The authorities which created the new Polish canon associated the avant-garde – which was seen, following Miłosz, as a failed experiment – with the communist past, with the Marxist concept of art; it was to fade into oblivion in a new democratic Poland” (Joanna Orska, “Awangarda jest potrzebna jak powietrze” [The avant-garde is as necessary as air], in: *Awangarda jest rewolucyjna albo nie ma jej wcale* [The avant-garde is either revolutionary or it does not exist at all], edited and compiled by Joanna Orska, Andrzej Sosnowski [Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2019], 630).

³⁸ Jakub Skurtys, “Miłosz strikes back. Powrót poety politycznego” [Miłosz strikes back. The return of the political poet], in: Jakub Skurtys, *Wiersz... i cała reszta. Rozważania o poezji i krytyce po 1989 roku* [The poem... and all that. Reflections on poetry and criticism after 1989] (Krakow: Universitas, 2021), 323. And Piotr Śliwiński, in an essay devoted to the dark side of Miłosz’s poetry, writes about Miłosz’s darkness “which Błoński marginalized in his suggestive interpretations” (Piotr Śliwiński, “Z ciemności” [Out of darkness], in: Piotr Śliwiński, *Horror poeticus. Szkice, notatki* [Horror poeticus. Essays, notes] [Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2012], 174).

to Błoński, which is often revealed in such a slogan-like manner. The “Krakowness” of Miłosz, canonized in the 1980s, like Błoński’s own “Krakowness” (however one defines this seemingly obvious label), is a recognizable feature treated by a significant portion of critics, probably as a result of the dispute over the artistic revolution,³⁹ quite unfavorably.

Andrzej Skrendo (a literary scholar and critic, an enthusiast of Bereza’s criticism⁴⁰) brilliantly challenges Błoński’s methodologies and findings. In “Błoński idiosynkrazje” [Błoński – idiosyncrasies], Skrendo deconstructs the formula of Błoński’s “love affair with the text,” looking at it from the perspective of those who were “unjustly and severely” rejected and excluded, not least because Błoński was “already having an affair with someone else and was not looking for any new relationships.” Skrendo discusses Błoński’s “idiosyncrasies,” that is, moments where he stops and “refuses to understand, even though he is usually so sensitive and so ready to make an effort to understand poetry [...]” For Skrendo, the prime example of such a rejection are the works of Tadeusz Różewicz, but the same applies to the works of Miron Białoszewski and the entire tradition of linguistic poetry, as well as to Henryk Bereza and his favorite prose writers. Skrendo also demonstrates that Błoński read his favorite authors in a very peculiar manner. Błoński, as Skrendo points out, writes about Witkacy’s “ludicrousness,” Mrozek’s “personal fantasies,” Gombrowicz’s “nonsense,” Borowski’s “negligence,” Beckett’s “bad manners,” and Kołakowski’s “ridiculousness.” Such biased criticism, echoes of which we also find in the critic’s diary entries and letters, show that “Błoński’s relation with literature (especially with the writers he valued the most, that is Gombrowicz and Witkacy) is governed by a religious pattern of temptation and a vision of the world that greatly differs from the one found in the works of the contemporary writers he interprets.”⁴¹

³⁹This issue seems intriguing to me for at least two reasons. First, I am curious as to why Bereza disliked Błoński and “Krakow,” after all, most essays which criticized the “artistic revolution” were published in Warsaw magazines, and Bereza himself had been criticized more harshly and more directly before Błoński’s famous essay “Dwie groteski i pół...” (cf., among others, Michał Łukaszewicz, “Nie wierzę Berezie!” [I do not believe Bereza!], *Więź* 6 [1983]: 142–145). One could probably also look for personal reasons (related to Wyka’s decision?), as evidenced by Bereza’s criticism of “Krakowness.” However, the fundamental reason seems to be Błoński’s position and influence in the 1980s. And both critics had had completely different views on literature already since the prose of the *Współczesność* generation. The issues of an “academic” vs. an “artistic” relation with literature, the “work of reading,” intellectualism, and legitimizing the critical literary voice, discussed by Bereza in various texts over many years, undoubtedly played an important role as well. Secondly, I am intrigued by the stereotype of the “Krakow school of criticism” / “Krakow ethos” / “the Krakow intelligentsia” that may still be found in Polish literary criticism, especially since it is contrasted with the “innovative” and the “new.”

⁴⁰Cf., among others, Andrzej Skrendo, “Czy istnieje proza lingwistyczna?” [Is there linguistic prose?], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2004); Andrzej Skrendo, “Genologia Henryka Berezy (kilka wstępnych ustaleń)” [Genology of Henryk Bereza (some preliminary findings)], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku* [Critical discourses at the threshold of the 21st century], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski (Krakow: Universitas, 2007).

⁴¹Skrendo writes: “Błoński fights against what he is attracted to; [...] he likes to taste the forbidden fruit, and at the same time he feels guilty about it. It is tempting to think that in some sense he is forever part of the world he described in his book about Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński. According to Błoński – and he is probably right – Sęp Szarzyński for the first time in Polish literature “notices the instability, incoherence, multiplicity of the ‘I.’ The writer’s obsession with movement corresponds to the need for stability – and this is provided by God. It would be difficult to say that Gombrowicz or Witkacy live in one of those worlds but perhaps Błoński does? And perhaps for this very reason he finds Kołakowski helpless and ridiculous, and Gombrowicz’s syringe is – at best – ‘foolish’” (Andrzej Skrendo, “Jan Błoński – idiosynkrazje” [Błoński – idiosyncrasies], *Wielogłos* 4 [2014]: 45–52). The intention to challenge Błoński’s way of reading literature leads to a reevaluation of features for which the critic is valued by others. See, for example, what Teresa Walas says about Błoński in: Marta Wyka, Teresa Walas, Małgorzata Sugiera, “Głosy o Błońskim” [Debate about Błoński], *Znak* 1 (2011): 133–136.

In the dispute over the “artistic revolution,” Błoński is criticized and his status as a “European critic of Polish literature”⁴² is increasingly challenged. Respectively, Bereza’s output and achievements are emphasized. In *Henryk Bereza w świetle uprzedzeń Jana Błońskiego. Kulisy pewnego sporu* [Henryk Bereza in the light of Jan Błoński’s prejudices. Behind the scenes of a dispute], Andrzej Śnioszek, following in Skrendo’s footsteps, shows Błoński as an unreliable critic who judges the works of writers promoted by Bereza through the prism of his aversion to his colleague. Błoński, Śnioszek writes, also often relies on biased generalizations (which are later repeated by others). Śnioszek shows that Błoński was actually guilty of what he accused Bereza of: Błoński “was in fact a self-appointed opinion-maker, and he should be called out on his dogmatic judgements.” Śnioszek further explains that the clash between the two critics was not motivated by different literary preferences reflecting “fundamental discrepancies between contradictory visions of literature.” Contrary to what some literary critics and literary historians claim, it was not a literary dispute. Błoński’s idiosyncrasies, which had little or nothing to do with literature, played a huge role in it. One such idiosyncrasy should be discussed in greater detail because to some extent it touches – personally – on what Orska drew attention when she wrote that the aversion to the avant-garde traditions in the early 1990s was a result of anti-communist sympathies.⁴³ Writing about Błoński’s involvements outside of literature *per se*, Śnioszek draws attention to the critic’s aversion to the Polish People’s Republic:

It seems, therefore, that Błoński mostly disliked Bereza because Bereza valued works which were deeply rooted in the Polish People’s Republic. This was not a “literary” concern. On the one hand, the authors of such works did not feel obliged to fight against the communist authorities (which does not mean that they supported communism; rather, they simply chose to focus on different “tasks” of art). On the other hand, they were not ashamed to describe “gray communism,” the realities of everyday life.⁴⁴

In contrast to Błoński’s idiosyncrasies, Bereza’s method, based, among other things, on the study of the (timeless) *f i r s t l a n g u a g e*, was – according to Śnioszek – free from extra-literary entanglements.

“Such an arrangement”

Henryk Bereza’s dynamic positioning in the field of literary criticism in the past thirty years is best summarized by the title of Karol Maliszewski’s 2016 essay *Od krytyka przegranego do*

⁴²Nycz coined this phrase (Ryszard Nycz, *Kultura jako czasownik. Sondowanie nowej humanistyki* [Culture as a verb. Exploring the new humanities] [Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2017], 193), and Śnioszek later quotes it in his text in order to show that in fact Błoński was not the kind of critic that Nycz describes him as – reliable, tolerant, “disinterestedly curious.” Andrzej Śnioszek, “Henryk Bereza w świetle uprzedzeń Jana Błońskiego. Kulisy pewnego sporu” [Henryk Bereza in the light of Jan Błoński’s prejudices. Behind the scenes of a dispute]. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio FF – Philologiae* 2 (2018): 299–314.

⁴³Joanna Orska, *Republika poetów*. Cf. also: Orska, “Awangarda jest potrzebna jak powietrze.”

⁴⁴Śnioszek, 52.

patrona młodych [From a failed critic to the patron saint of the young].⁴⁵ Maliszewski, himself an active literary since the 1990s, describes this transformation referring to his own (private and public) experiences. He emphasizes, among other things, that Bereza actively supported young writers and critics. Maliszewski calls Bereza the “patron saint of experimental, risky, unpredictable writing:”

When the war was being fought, when existing hierarchies were being destroyed, Bereza was an emblem one could and should claim. And he himself waited for a sign from the next ascending generation. He was ready for a creative dialogue with the young. In both his personal and literary experiences he was open to novelty and otherness. And as one of the few critics of the older generation, he entered into a relationship with the new vision of the world and literature, which grew with *Nowy Nurt* [New Trend].⁴⁶

Wypiski [Notes] (2006),⁴⁷ a collection of short articles published in “*Twórczość*” between 1991 and 2004, demonstrates for Maliszewski that Bereza actively participated “in the formation of new Polish literature after 1989.” It also shows that “this critic, ridiculed by academics, was one of the few critically and empathetically prepared to study and help foster the new spirit in Polish literature.”⁴⁸ Maliszewski lists the excellent features of Bereza’s (emphasized as anti-academic) critical work and personality throughout his essay.

In addition to Maliszewski’s account of Bereza’s brilliance, we should also mention other circles which have embraced Bereza as their master. These include the Warsaw circle of writers, critics, and friends (Bohdan Zadura, Adam Wiedemann, Paweł Orzeł, each from a different generation) and the Szczecin Henryk Bereza Literature Foundation (which, among other things, published *Wypiski*, and in 2013 a special issue of the magazine *eleWator* dedicated to Bereza⁴⁹), as well as young writers and critics. Bereza is present in the field of literary criticism

⁴⁵Karol Maliszewski, “Od krytyka przegranego do patrona młodych. Henryk Bereza jako krytyk po 1989 roku” [From a failed critic to the patron of the young. Henryk Bereza as a critic after 1989], in: *Krytyka po przełomie. Wybrane problemy z dwudziestopięcioletnia 1989–2014* [Literary criticism after the transformation. Selected issues from 1989–2014], ed. Marek Kurkiewicz, Robert Mielhorski (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2016), 207–230.

⁴⁶Maliszewski, 213. “Obrachunek” [Reckoning] – a text written by Bereza in response to the question “Do I feel like a failed critic?” – was published in the first issue of *Nowy Nurt* [New trend] (Henryk Bereza, “Obrachunek” [Reckoning], *Nowy Nurt* 1 [1994]: 3); an interview with Bereza was published in the fourth issue (“Marzę o wtajemniczeniu doskonałym. Z Henrykiem Berezą, krytykiem, rozmawia Krzysztof Szymoniak” [I dream of a perfect initiation. Krzysztof Szymoniak talks to the literary critic Henryk Bereza] *Nowy Nurt* 4 [1994]: 4–5); and Maliszewski’s essay was published in the thirteenth issue (Karol Maliszewski, “Bereza, czyli antropologia [w drodze do Krakowa]” [Bereza, or anthropology [on the way to Krakow]], *Nowy Nurt* 13 [1994]: 1, 6). Maliszewski writes about a literary criticism panel organized in 1998 by the editors of the Wrocław magazine *Dykcja* [Diction] to which Bereza was invited: “Some of those present treated what he said almost as the words of an oracle, while others thought they had to argue with him as critics of a younger generation” (Maliszewski, “Od krytyka przegranego do patrona młodych”, 218). A long interview with the critic was later conducted by Adam Wiedemann and Piotr Czerniawski, *Końcówki. Henryk Bereza mówi* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010).

⁴⁷Henryk Bereza, *Wypiski* [Notes], selected by Paweł Nowakowski, Andrzej Skrendo (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma, 2006). In the afterword to *Wypiski*, Skrendo points out that many of Bereza’s key ideas take on new meaning in a new cultural situation.

⁴⁸Maliszewski, “Od krytyka przegranego do patrona młodych,” 226.

⁴⁹*eleWator* 3 (2013).

not only as an author of critical essays⁵⁰ but above all as the object of veneration of a young literary community. The special issues of *Mały Format* [Small format] devoted to Bereza (with an interesting survey entitled “Co po Berezie?” [What happens after Bereza?])⁵¹ and *Wizje* [Visions],⁵² in which young critics discuss Bereza’s works, seem to prove that the “patron saint” of the “artistic revolution” is today an important (or at least: existing, even if sometimes only at the level of general references) point of reference in discussions about linguistic innovation and artistic imagination. The same is evident in Andrzej Szpindler’s essay on Marek Słyk.⁵³ Respectively, as Maciej Libich argues,⁵⁴ Bereza shows how we may counter the schematic and the fashionable and search instead for a genuine and autonomic critical language.

“Still relevant”

Even a cursory look at the Polish literary life of recent decades would lead to the conclusion that Tomasz Burek has become *the* critic of right-wing literary criticism, its strongest “asset” in the fight against the spiritual crisis, the atrophy of values, the decline of metaphysics, and the twilight of civilization. He has maintained an active presence in the field of literature,⁵⁵ so the

⁵⁰Such as *Wypiski*, edited by Nowakowski and Skrendo and published in Szczecin in 2006, and in recent years *Alfabetyczność* [Alphabetical order] (ed. Paweł Orzeł [Warsaw: PIW, 2018]) and *Wypiski ostatnie* [Last notes] (ed. Paweł Orzeł [Warsaw: PIW, 2020]). These publications (without footnotes or historical context) are treated as artistic events, as pure examples of literary criticism; Bereza’s “poetical” style, increasingly valued by readers, also plays a role here. Essays, books and thematic issues of magazines devoted to Błoński were also published (e.g. the series: *Pisma wybrane* [Selected writings] published by Wydawnictwo Literackie, a two-volume selection of literary and critical writings edited by Jerzy Jarzębski; a special issue of *Wielogłos* devoted to Błoński), but they are more academic, commemorative, or historical in nature. The question of commemorating and returning to Burek’s legacy seems interesting in this context. Burek changed his views radically, joined the right-wing circles, and began to criticize his earlier works. The critic’s writings are thus selectively present in the literary field. Publishing the critic’s scattered essays from the 1970s in a collection entitled *Pamięć głęboka* [Deep memory] is, as Zbigniew Mentzel, who wrote the foreword and selected the texts, puts it, “[a] step forward, helping us better understand Burek’s writings.” Mentzel further explains that *Pamięć głęboka* was a result of a compromise; it was published after long negotiations with Burek’s heirs (Tomasz Burek, *Pamięć głęboka* [Deep memory], prefaced, selected, edited by Zbigniew Mentzel [Warsaw: Więź, 2021]). Cf. also: Tomasz Burek, *Niezależność i powinność. Szkice krytycznoliterackie* [Independence and duty: Critical essays about literature], prefaced, selected, edited by Krzysztof Krasuski (Krakow: Instytut Literatury, 2022).

⁵¹The series “Co po Berezie?” [What happens after Bereza?], *Mały Format* 6 (2018), <http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-co-po-berezie/>.

⁵²“Numer specjalny: 95. urodziny Henryka Berezy” [Special issue: Henryk Bereza’s 95th birthday], *Wizje*, 27 Oct. 2021, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/numer-specjalny-henryk-bereza/>.

⁵³Andrzej Szpindler, “Ciągłość daleko poza nią samą. Pokażcie choć, kto istnieje!” [Continuity far beyond itself. At least show who exists!], *Mały Format* 6 (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2019/06/szpindler-slyk/>.

⁵⁴Maciej Libich, “Bereza. Encore” [Bereza. Encore]. *Twórczość* 10 (2021). Cf. also: Adam Komorowski, “Koniuszy koni trojańskich” [The stablemaster of Trojan horses], *Twórczość* 11 (2018), <https://tworczość.com.pl/arttykul/koniuszy-koni-trojanskich/>; “Dziedzictwo «płodnej mierzwy». Z Włodzimierzem Boleckim rozmawia Andrzej Śnioszek” [The legacy of the ‘fertile manure’. Andrzej Śnioszek talks to Włodzimierz Bolecki], *Odra* 10 (2020): 59–64.

⁵⁵For example, he was one of the founders of the Association of Polish Writers in 1989; he was the vice-president of the organization until 1996; for over 20 years, together with Piotr Matywiecki, he was a recurring guest on *Radiowy Tygodnik Literacki* [Radio Literary Show] hosted by Iwona Smolka aired on Polish Radio 2 (until 2013). He took part in a conversation devoted to the visions of the Polish People’s Republic in the literature of the 1990s organized by the editorial office of *Znak* (“W długim cieniu Pałacu Kultury. Rozmawiają Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Dariusz Nowacki, Jerzy Sosnowski i Marek Zaleski” [In the long shadow of the Palace of Culture. A discussion between Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Dariusz Nowacki, Jerzy Sosnowski and Marek Zaleski], *Znak* 7 [2000]: 10–27) and in the debates on the state of contemporary literary criticism (“Znikające cele krytyki? Zapis dyskusji panelowej z udziałem Tomasza Burka, Jerzego Jarzębskiego, Michała Pawła Markowskiego, Mariana Stali oraz Włodzimierza Boleckiego. Prowadzenie: Marta Wyka” [Vanishing goals of literary criticism? A panel discussion with Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Jarzębski, Michał Paweł Markowski, Marian Stal, and Włodzimierz Bolecki. Host: Marta Wyka], in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku. Między rynkiem a uniwersytem*, ed. Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski [Krakow: Universitas, 2007], 411–447).

mythologization of this critic's banishment from official spaces by right-wing criticism is difficult to understand. Burek was never, as right-wing literary criticism would like one to believe, a "disgraced critic."⁵⁶ Such mainstream critics as Piotr Śliwiński⁵⁷ and Przemysław Czapliński⁵⁸ refer to Burek's writings. What is even more interesting, however, from the perspective of the present essay, Burek also appears to have led a different life, somewhat contrary to his claims that he distanced himself from everything that he had written before his ideological transformation.⁵⁹ Burek's essays from the 1970s seem to be constantly present in reflections on contemporary Polish literature; they are insightful and inspiring analyses of prose which seems to reflect the modern consciousness, conducted in the spirit of appreciation of creative individualism, avant-garde art, and revolutionary Marxism.⁶⁰ Critics who were interested in postmodernism and actively tried, at least since the early 1990s, to "restore" innovative prose traditions that had been rendered obsolete when the tradition of opposition literature became dominant – that is critics such as Krzysztof Uniłowski – read Burek (and not Bereza, of whom Uniłowski was rather skeptical⁶¹). Uniłowski valued Burek's essays devoted to the changes in post-war Polish prose.⁶² Since he specialized in the writings of Teodor Parnicki, he also very much appreciated Burek's essays devoted to Parnicki.⁶³ In his writings about the development of Polish prose, Uniłowski referred to some very original sources, such as Burek's *1905, nie 1918* [1905 and not 1918].⁶⁴ We should also remember that the generational search for "their own" literary tradition by the

⁵⁶Cf. Maciej Urbanowski, "Tomasz Burek – krytyk wyklety?" [Tomasz Burek – a disgraced critic?], *Teologia Polityczna*, 30 May 2017, <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/prof-maciej-urbanowski-tomasz-burek-krytyk-wyklety#>.

⁵⁷Among others, in *Świat na brudno* [Draft world], Śliwiński describes various critical reactions to the processes taking place in literature in the first half of the 1990s (and quotes Burek's *Dziennik kwarantanny* where Burek writes about a "culture of classical and modern values which dissolves into a poor quality and easily digestible mush"). He also refers to Burek when he writes about the disappearance of history and the end of the realistic novel (p. 41), kitsch (p. 75), Barańczak's poetry (p. 174), and the dilemmas of criticism after 1989 (Piotr Śliwiński, *Świat na brudno. Szkice o poezji i krytyce* [Draft world: Essays on poetry and criticism] [Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Prószyński i S-ka, 2007]).

⁵⁸For example, in *Świat podrobiony* [The counterfeit world], he refers to Burek's position in the ongoing discussion on realism (Przemysław Czapliński, *Świat podrobiony. Krytyka i literatura wobec nowej rzeczywistości* [The counterfeit world. Criticism and literature towards the new reality] [Kraków: Universitas, 2003]). In *Powrót centrali. Literatura nowej rzeczywistości*, he refers to Burek when discussing various manifestations of the center (Przemysław Czapliński, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007]). In *Resztki nowoczesności* [Remnants of modernity], he refers to Burek's findings when discussing Jacek Łukasiewicz's *Zagłoba w piekle* [Zagłoba in hell] (Przemysław Czapliński, *Resztki nowoczesności* [Remnants of Modernity] [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011]).

⁵⁹*Dziennik kwarantanny* [Quarantine diary] is built around the metaphor of undergoing a quarantine after an illness (Tomasz Burek, *Dziennik kwarantanny* [Quarantine diary] [Kraków: Arcana, 2001]). In a text considered programmatic after his ideological transformation, entitled *Literatura, niepoważne zajęcie* [Literature, a trival occupation], Burek writes that he is aware of "charlatanism" that he has been practicing for almost 40 years (Tomasz Burek, *Dzieło niczyje* [Nobody's work] [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001], 6–15; the text was written in 1996).

⁶⁰Cf. Lidia Burska, *Awangarda i inne złudzenia. O pokoleniu 68* [The avant-garde and other illusions: The 1968 generation] (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2012) 272.

⁶¹Uniłowski writes: "It is true that Bereza's findings were very superficial. Bereza did not have a lot to say about 'aspirations,' antifiction, and metafiction [...]; Tomasz Burek commented on these issues in greater detail in his excellent *Zamiast powieści*" (Uniłowski, *Skądinąd*, 28–29). Cf. also "Szeryf polskiej krytyki literackiej. Z Henrykiem Berezą rozmawiają Kinga Dunin i Stanisław Beres" [The sheriff of Polish literary criticism. Kinga Dunin and Stanisław Beres talk to Henryk Bereza], *Opcje* 1-2 (2004): 148.

⁶²Uniłowski considers Burek's *Zamiast powieści* the most important discussion of the Polish prose of the 1960s. Cf. Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Polska proza innowacyjna w perspektywie postmodernizmu* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1999), 133.

⁶³Cf. Tomasz Burek, "Świat niewymierny Teodora Parnickiego" [The irrational world of Teodor Parnicki], *Twórczość* 6 (1962), reprinted in: Tomasz Burek, *Zamiast powieści* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1971).

⁶⁴Uniłowski, *Skądinąd*, 45. Uniłowski also refers to the same text and Burek's belief that Polish society reached the threshold of modernity in 1905 in *Z popem na ty* [On friendly terms with pop] (Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę! Szkice i recenzje* [Buy a book! Essays and reviews] [Katowice: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 2008]).

writers and critics born in the 1970s and associated with the Krakow magazine *Ha!art* led to the rediscovery of a somewhat forgotten writer, Stanisław Czycz, whom Burek admired and praised in his writings.⁶⁵ And in an introduction to a collection of critical texts from the 1990s and the 2000s, Nowacki and Uniłowski write about the “astonishingly modest” influence of “undisputed classics of Polish post-war literary criticism” and point out that “a group of young authors united by a sense of ideological and intellectual community has formed only around Tomasz Burek.”⁶⁶

Today, Burek undoubtedly remains one of the most important masters of literary criticism, one whose insights and craft are admired by right-wing critics from different generations, including Maciej Urbanowski, Andrzej Horubała, and Przemysław Dakowicz. At the same time, key texts from his entire *oeuvre*, the legend of his life and spiritual transformation, arranged in successive intellectual and spiritual stages (historical, ethical and metaphysical) and similar in nature to his “patron saint” Stanisław Brzozowski, allow us to see the great potential of his literary criticism (if we perceive tradition as a resource endowed with a performative and critical potential, from which narratives can be drawn).

Resources

In 2005, Uniłowski wrote about the reception of the so-called prose of small homelands, mainly in reference to the books written in the 1990s. He thus commented on the mechanisms which defined the emergence and reception of this literature and the beliefs on which they relied:

Poetic devices and compositional solutions – understandably – do not carry ideological meaning in themselves. But at the same time, we are convinced that in the 20th century the avant-garde often leaned towards the political left, while the representatives of classicizing and mythographic tendencies did not shy away from declaring more conservative or traditional beliefs. [...] the aforementioned stereotype (that this is often the case) has become deeply embedded in the cultural and social consciousness of the era, imposing an ideological pattern which we still use to describe and order – often mechanically – artistic programs and phenomena.⁶⁷

Uniłowski drew conclusions from this observation, especially when it came to the type of literature promoted at the time and conservative liberalism. I would like to draw attention to how this stereotype effected our perception of critical programs, practices, and traditions. After all, we

⁶⁵Cf. Tomasz Burek, “Moment syntezy” [The moment of synthesis], in: Tomasz Burek, *Zamiast powieści*; Tomasz Burek, “Ostatni krzyk tamtej młodości. Stanisław Czycz” [The last cry of that youth. Stanisław Czycz], in: *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej*, ed. Alina Brodzka, Lidia Burska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 1995). Cf. also *Ha!art* 9-10 (2002) with essays devoted to Czycz’s work and the Czyczujemy festival organized by *Ha!art*. See, among others, Mariusz Sieniewicz, “Patron-mistrz-nauczyciel” [Patron saint-master-teacher], *Witryna*, http://witryna.czasopism.pl/gazeta/artukul.php?id_artykulu=134; Adam Wiedemann, “Czy Czycz Pani czyta, czy Czycz Pani zna” [Do you read Czycz? Do you know Czycz?], *Tygodnik Powszechny* (30) 1996, reprinted in: Adam Wiedemann, *Poczytalność. Przygody literackie* [Sanity/Readability. Literary adventures] (Wrocław: Warstwy, 2016).

⁶⁶Nowacki, Uniłowski, “Do Czytelnika”, 9. It is also worth noting that they completely fail to “notice” the group gathered around Bereza, which is probably due to the fact that they do not consider Bereza “an undisputed classic of Polish post-war literary criticism.”

⁶⁷Krzysztof Uniłowski, “«Małe ojczyzny» i limitowanie różnicy”. *Ze sporów nad literaturą i wizjami kultury w ostatnich latach* [“Small homelands’ and limiting difference”. From the discussions about literature and visions of culture in recent years], in: *Krainy utracone i pozyskane: problem w literaturach Europy Środkowej* [Lost and regained lands: A problem in central European literatures], ed. Krzysztof Krasuski (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2005), 195–212.

judge Błoński because his literary judgments relied on ideological beliefs, which were “discovered” and criticized by his opponents. Respectively, liberal and left-wing literary critics still value Burek’s early writings on the modern, the revolutionary, and the avant-garde and recognize that his works are thus an important voice in the debate on Polish literature and social reality (despite Burek’s harsh criticism of the left-wing “camp”). And finally, we praise artistic revolution in prose and the avant-garde works of writers promoted by Bereza but it tends to obscure the imprecise, the idiosyncratic, and the traditional in his utopian project of “first languages” and literature in general.

As Uniłowski rightly points out, the point of the critical debates he described was not to “move names around on an ideological board” but determine who truly belongs to the canon of modernity and, crucially, who has the authority to define this canon. It is hard to not agree with this, as well as with the view – returning to the story of ruptures and continuities of critical traditions from the perspective of literary authorities – that each of the three Mr. B figures not only asserted their right to make such judgements but, at different points in history, succeeded in enforcing those judgements in various contexts. The ongoing contemporary disputes surrounding their significance and place can therefore be seen as one form of the broader struggle over the ideal model of literature and ways of interpreting it.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

critical traditions

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses those aspects of literary criticism traditions that are associated with the figure of the master. It compares three older generation critics who entered the 1990s as authorities. All three were associated with different environments and worldviews. And the story of how their presence and absence in the field of literature has been changing across the years allows one to analyze the problems, entanglements, ruptures, and intertwinings of not only contemporary criticism but also literature.

T o m a s z B u r e k

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