Brzozowski or Plots of the Future

Marta Wyka

Brzozowski was the author of five novels: among them the debut *Pod ciężarem Boga* (Under the Weight of God), and *Płomienie* (Flames), a novel written in difficult times during which he was fighting allegations of his supposed collaboration with the tsarist secret police; furthermore the project of European and world scale, as his contemporaries (but also Brzozowski himself) called it, *Dębina* (Oakwood). And yet, despite these achievements, it appears that Sienkiewicz rather than Brzozowski remains the chief diagnostician of Polishness. All of Brzozowski's novels, previously difficult to come by, were published in two volumes in 2011 and 2012 by the Cracow-based publishing house Wydawnictwo Literackie.[1] It is worth mentioning this fact, because this reedition has failed to inspire Brzozowski scholars—especially those of the younger generation—to undertake new readings of these novels. This is surprising indeed, insofar as the author attached considerable significance to his novels, regarding them as a breakthrough. Their later fate, however, did not confirm his sentiment.

For it is around Henryk Sienkiewicz that lively discussions still revolve today, even though he did not attempt to offer, in his works, prognoses for culture. Brzozowski believed that his European contemporaries should by all means get to know the works of Stefan Żeromski, because otherwise the Polish mentality will remain a puzzle. As we know, this puzzle still awaits a solution, although Europe is not even aware of its existence. Żeromski remained an unknown. Already these brief signals announce the first assumption governing my present argument: as a novelist, Brzozowski had a particular aim in mind, namely to give in his plots an account of places which had shaped him and which he considered formative for his worldview to the extent that they were translatable from indi-

1 Brzozowski, *Dębina. Część pierwsza. Sam wśród ludzi. Książka o starej kobiecie*; Brzozowski, *Pod ciężarem Boga. Wiry. Płomienie*.

vidual into collective experience. My preliminary suggestion is that Brzozowski's novels were determined by his biography, and the degree to which he deformed his biography manifests at the same time the artistic style that he wished to create, regarding these particular works (and especially *Dębina*) as a bold experiment. Are we today in keeping with the self-definition of Brzozowski the novelist? Are we willing to admit—as readers and scholars—that in writing *Dębina* he made a breakthrough, forgotten but nonetheless significant, in European and Polish fiction?

Critics deemed *Dębina* an unfinished masterpiece. Originally, the entire work was to be entitled *Mesjasz* (Messiah); in the end, only the first part of the planned trilogy was completed, namely *Sam wśród ludzi* (Alone among People). Let me recall here two lines of fascination with the novel: the authorial dimension and that of the reader. The readers always belonged to the intellectual elite; the novel never won mass popularity, which, as we know, is often the fate of works oriented towards breakthrough, change, and experiment. The passage of time did not help Brzozowski's novels, however; they remain scholarly fare, though in fact within academia they do not enjoy a privileged position.

Czesław Miłosz considered *Sam wśród ludzi* as the most important Polish novel. And yet its plot, and the narrative that carries it, turned out not to be sufficiently appealing to ensure that the novel has a place in Polish history to which readers would want to return. It was Sienkiewicz's *Trylogia* (Trilogy) that achieved this status despite the criticism directed to it. Brzozowski's fiction demanded overcoming stereotypes and penetrating the "dark current" of Polish nineteenth-century history. Sienkiewicz, going further back in time, better satisfied the expectations of those who sought a positive model in the past. Undertaking a far riskier challenge, Brzozowski nurtured the conviction that he was writing about a "historical type" his contemporaries could not fathom, a type (and thus a fictional character) placed in the borderland between fantasy and realism. Strange as this borderland is, this indeed is the space in which historiosophical and personal visions of novelistic characters can be situated.

As always with Brzozowski, the steadily expanding literary project, extensively described in his letters to friends, was not completed. Here are examples of how the author saw it:

> […] jest absolutnie pewne, że sama zasada kompozycyjna powieści zrozumiana nie będzie, ale jestem już tu tak na stronie od młodopolskich wartości i norm, że na razie jest nieporozumienie i lekceważenie mojej pracy nieuchronne […].[2]

2 Brzozowski, *Listy*, vol. 2, 554f.

[…] it is absolutely certain that the principle guiding the composition of the novel will not be understood, however, I am already so far removed from the values and norms of Young Poland that for the time being incomprehension and neglect of my work is inevitable […].

Moja nowa książka będzie dla ludzi w Galicji – dla różnych „niepospolitych" i „oryginalnych" umysłów, które, licho wie dlaczego, uważają, że mam z nimi coś wspólnego, ostatecznym kamieniem obrazy. Natomiast jestem przekonany, że robię rzecz dobrą, która jeśli nie dziś przyniesie pożytek trwały i głęboki, później będzie w każdym razie czymś spoza granic dzisiejszej polskiej umysłowości.[3]

My new book will be, for people from Galicia—for those "uncommon," "original" minds who, for some reason, believe that I share something in common with them, the ultimate stone of offense. On the other hand, I am convinced that I am doing something good that, even though it may not bring lasting and profound benefits today, will in due course be something beyond the limits of the current Polish mentality.

Księga III jest właściwie beletrystyczną krytyką polskiego romantyzmu.[4]

All things considered Book III is a belletristic critique of Polish Romanticism.

These three quotations and three points establish the function and message of Brzozowski's fiction: a new compositional style, a critical field of reference (Romanticism), and fixing the limits of Polish mentality. Brzozowski turned his back on the *status quo* in each of these domains, i.e., he pursued his project without regard for its thematic tradition. How else could he proceed, if the theme itself was considered intellectually frivolous and anachronistic ("Poland gone puerile," "Poland of pet pupils"—these and similar epithets from *Legenda Młodej Polski* (The Legend of Young Poland) characterised his critical discourse)? Brzozowski's contemporaries did not deserve an intellectual, let alone creative partnership. This is very evident in his satirical collection *Widma moich współczesnych* (The Spectres of my Contemporaries), which can be read as an announcement of his principal *belles-lettres* campaigns (I am using this expression in Brzozowski's sense, to mean novelistic writing).

The author was certainly right when, having completed the first part of *Dębina*, he wrote to Walentyna and Edmund Szalit: "[…] mam wrażenie, że w całości jest to najdziwniejsza rzecz, jaką od wielu lat, może od czasu pierwszych

3 Ibid., 546f.

4 Ibid., 377.

powieści Przybyszewskiego, – w polskiej literaturze ktokolwiek napisał."[5] (I have the impression that as a whole this is the strangest thing that has been written in Polish literature for many years, perhaps since Przybyszewski's earliest novels.) We must not forget, however, that "the whole" never saw the light of day.

Brzozowski's enemy number one was the "Galician mentality." What did he mean by this? Certainly not just the well-rooted "territorial" conflict between the Austrian- and Russian-governed parts of former Poland. Brought up in the Eastern Borderlands, educated in the Russian-controlled Kingdom of Poland, Brzozowski suffered the greatest personal defeat in Galicia: it was in Cracow that he was brought to court on a charge of espionage. On the other hand, many of his close friends as well as his wife's family lived here. In any case, Brzozowski's mental map points to Galicia as the place of oppression, one where the most respected figures of city life can be exposed as individuals unable to transcend their own limitations. No "uncommon minds" are to be found here. But then again, it was in Galicia that, at the beginning of his career, Brzozowski enjoyed spectacular success as a speaker and lecturer: in Lvov and also in Zakopane. Cracow was the home of Wilhelm Feldman, editor of the journal *Krytyka* (Critique) and Brzozowski's long-time intellectual ally, who published his texts.

The writer's conflict with "the city of funerals" (this is how he saw the Cracow of the turn of the century, as shown in his column piece "Król-Duch w Krakowie" [King-Spirit in Cracow] from *Widma moich współczesnych*) was much more complex than that: he objected to a certain type of mental constitution prevalent in Galicia. However, it was in Cracow that Stanisław Przybyszewski's artistic milieu took form, setting a model for the modern novel. Even though Brzozowski did not belong to the bohemian circle headed by the author of *Satans Kinder* (Satan's Children) nor traverse its trails in Cracow, his reception of Przybyszewski's novels was uncritical: He placed them in the leading position as far as new themes and new expression were concerned.

In present-day readings of Brzozowski's novelistic endeavour, the Galician conflict, once so sharply accentuated by the author himself, is treated as almost irrelevant or is only rarely mentioned. It is true that characters created in the first part of the novel were to develop psychologically with time, and the reader's initial contact with them was only meant to provide an introductory overview presaging further progress. Such was the principle of composition in *Dębina*, similar to that of the great European cycles which came twenty years later, although in the former the content of the "family framework" was already radically

5 Ibid., 525f.

different; we could say that, from the perspective of a European of Brzozowski's time his compositional style appeared as fantastic and exotic. Yet as regards the artistic effects of "cyclicality," so important for the fiction of high modernism (Mann, Musil, Proust), Brzozowski did anticipate them, just as he anticipated the diversity of novelistic discourses.

The "historical type" in Brzozowski's fiction is highly complex and his experience quite inaccessible, hermetic. The author was aware that this type needed "civilising," i.e., it needed to be fitted with features—related to the places he came to know—which would bring him closer to some cultural community. This seems to be why Brzozowski regretted not having managed to describe mid-nineteenth-century Paris, with all its artistic and human diversity (in this context Balzac plays a central role as a model). The culture of Florence, too distant from the nature of Polish disputes, could not inspire him the way French culture did. No matter that Georg Simmel considered the Italian city as especially conducive to culture, or, on a different level, that Brzozowski responded deeply to the story of Robert and Elisabeth Browning, who lived in Florence. Emotionally dedicated to his wife, he compared the British couple to his own marriage. We can surmise that the writer's disposition needed the kind of stimulation that moved Zola, Flaubert, or Balzac rather than the harmonious palimpsest of culture that Florence arguably was. Today, venues of writing are of particular interest to scholars of the novel, hence my reason for referring to them; writing in Italy, Brzozowski stigmatised both the city and state as a space of exile and undeserved suffering. He tried to escape to other cultures, with different degrees of artistic success.

The French inspiration of Brzozowski the novelist, superseded by the dominant influence of British authors, is underestimated. We can hardly speak of an evolution here; what happened was rather a revolution of sentiments, which changed radically over the course of several years. In Brzozowski's case, the idea of an evolution of sentiments and models generally does not seem very useful. It is better to replace it with the notion of "change" (with all its implications), or perhaps to express it in performative terms.

In the rather rarely cited Chapter Ten of *Legenda Młodej Polski* ("Naturalizm, dekadentyzm, symbolizm" / Naturalism, Decadence, Symbolism) Brzozowski points to the works of Gustave Flaubert and to the French author himself, seeing in him the progenitor of changes of the second half of the nineteenth century. There is no Zola without Flaubert, nor Anatole France or Jules Laforgue. Without getting into comparatistic detail, we can say that Flaubert's *Éducation sentimentale* (Sentimental Education) was a matrix which the modern writers could fill in accordance with their own social and historical experience, with the proviso that they always and above all follow two principles: that the

novel should be seen in its social context, and that the emotional life of the characters must be filtered through the author's own personality, i.e., his biography. Brzozowski wrote about the social background of *Dębina* as set against the European context, about the transformations of the international activist, who as a type was the psychological descendant of Polish Romanticism; he also wrote about people who for different reasons found themselves uprooted. Refuges and exiles, incomers from foreign cultures, were to determine the shape of Europe—but how? Does this special visionary quality bring Brzozowski's fiction closer to modernity?

From his high esteem for Wacław Berent's *Próchno* (Rotten Wood)—a European novel about European artists whom Europe does not want to admit to its circle (the story takes place in Munich), we can infer, among other things, that Brzozowski not only could relate to the technical fabric of Berent's experiment ("action pushed out into inter-chapters" or a certain "plotlessness"), but also sensed a deep analogy between his own uprootedness and the situation of the protagonists of *Próchno*, who in their monologues manifested alienation (which occupied Brzozowski's attention in other contexts as well) and separation from the social world. There was one difference: the son of Brzozowski's protagonist was supposed to return to this world, albeit not as an artist but as a socialist agitator. Or as the Messiah, which would be the next prophetic figure following Romanticism, and now fulfilling modern tasks.

As we know, in the end neither version was put to paper, although politics and socialist agitation appeared as a theme in *Książka o starej kobiecie* (A Book about an Old Woman), written simultaneously with *Dębina.* This barely sketched novel announces Brzozowski's novelistic potential: the narrator moves to the margin, he is "nameless," so that it is left to the reader to judge the characters. The opening scene of *Książka…* takes place in a courthouse—does this mean that Brzozowski aimed to abandon the "grand" narrative of *Dębina* for the sake of performance?

The foreground story of *Dębina* is hard to grasp for a European reader: Polish Podolia in the time of the Napoleonic Wars (and later the November Uprising of 1830–1831), complicated relations between the forebears of the Ogieński family and the Petersburg court, dark scheming and patriotic escapes (the figure of emissary Trawka)—a reader without knowledge of Polish history will untie—if at all—the whole plot tangle in a way entirely different from that of a Polish reader (if at all). The former will certainly be taken aback by the contrast between the European age of Enlightenment and its feeble Polish mutation. He or she will also be moved—I believe—by the tragic loneliness of the inhabitants of a far-off periphery of the enlightened world. Yet despite these

historiosophical merits, the nineteenth-century culture of Polish gentry and its heritage (we may also call it the Romantic heritage), unknown in this exotic dimension in Europe, did not find a place among the themes of great European literature.

Learning about Europe in Poland also meant education in the field of style, natural for the reader familiar with Goethe's rules: this style is created by travel accounts, reports on the progress of schooling received from tutors (even those ridiculed, like Truth-Hegel in Brzozowski's novel), exploring cities (Berlin, Paris), getting involved in conspiracies. But how, under what conditions could a Romanticism as versatile as Polish Romanticism be read, a Romanticism so subtly transposed by Brzozowski into family stories, conflicts in small communities, the social and individual quirks of people "thrown off the saddle," the complex character of Polish-Russian contacts (both intellectual and erotic…), revolts, escapes, the return of young men so different from their fellow Europeans?

In the Polish cultural context, the philosophy of a declining house and the dissolution of family structure was certainly a breakthrough, as Brzozowski meant it to be, but it was completely divergent from, say, the image of Lübeck as created by Thomas Mann. Although Brzozowski admired him, and sensed precisely the functions of the novelistic autobiographical style developed by the German author, it would have been very difficult for him to cross the border separating two worlds: the German bourgeoisie and Polish landowners.

Abandoning Flaubert (even though he saw in the French author the father of new fiction), Brzozowski discovered the British route. This is a rather well-researched aspect of his reading interests—from Kipling's "imperialism" through Conrad's "colonialism" to the fiction of Herbert George Wells, which attracted Brzozowski's attention.

As can be seen, the nineteenth century was the natural soil of Brzozowski's mind, and could not have been absent from his greatest novel. Its psychologism seems to owe much to the already common, widely read, predominant model.

Where then, in which spots, did Brzozowski project his "plots of the future"? Why did he regard his novel as an experiment which no other author could measure up to and no reader fully understand? An important role in the design of *Dębina* was to be played by the long timeline: the history of three generations, hence—time. At the time Proust's cycle, whose first volume will be published in 1914, was well under way. Without getting carried away by easy comparisons, let us note, however, that confrontation with time is a structural component of the text, and signals that the anticipation of fundamental changes in the modern

novel was already deeply ingrained in the awareness of prose writers who addressed the nineteenth-century stereotype.

Three factors shape Brzozowski's protagonist: the family, the distant province of Europe, the city. It was in a modern city that the author wanted to place his protagonist: the Messiah or a labor leader. Scholars of modernity like to translate this into Marshall Berman's vision of the city,[6] although in this case Brzozowski himself was probably inspired by Sorel, and not by Marx, as Berman was. This signalled messianic motif is not unique in the twentieth century: several years after Brzozowski it will fascinate Walter Benjamin, likewise a reader of Sorel. Bruno Schulz is said to have written a novel about the Messiah, and efforts to find it continue, as though its appearance could strengthen Schulz's vision of Drohobych, a town brought out from provincial darkness into the world of great fiction.

Brzozowski's last unfinished essay is the kernel of his planned larger exegesis of Conrad. Of course we will not find Conradian motifs in *Dębina*, but while writing the novel, Brzozowski was already thinking about the relationship between culture and imperialism, just as Edward Said did in his seminal work eighty years later.[7]

It seems that the family story in *Dębina* is the most personal story of the author himself. Of course it is not about faithfulness to detail, which would in any case be difficult to measure, since we know so little about his early life. That a family can descend into self-destruction was something that Brzozowski, the critical reader, also saw in Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, of which he provided an accurate description. To what extent he treated Mann's work as the context of his own fiction cannot be resolved in this brief discussion. Brzozowski provokes his interpreters to create very broad contexts for his writing—which is both rewarding as an intellectual exercise and dangerous, as it ascribes to him the creation or rather emanation of analogies which are often difficult to test.

But could the heritage of the Polish gentry, as a culture and not only as plot material, enter Europe? Because this gentry is, in the end, the protagonist of *Dębina*; not the picturesque Sienkiewicz variety, but this impoverished yet proud gentry, having faith in its visions of civilisation based on the family, even though its ties are increasingly weaker. It was the gentry that gave rise to the Polish intelligentsia, of a kind unknown in Europe. Brzozowski had first-hand experience of the heritage of being "thrown off the saddle" and tried to liberate himself from it.

6 I am referring here to Marshall Berman's book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

7 Cf. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

Certainly, this type of culture did stand a chance of an alliance with Europe—and yet it did not come to pass. Here, we touch on a variety of issues and problems. Writing a history of the nation—whether like that of Żeromski's *Popioły* (Ashes) or Brzozowski's *Sam wśród ludzi*—entails a fictional presentation of a particular national idea. As these novels were never translated the Polish Romantic idea remained confined within its own circle. Brzozowski went further than Żeromski; he decided that his plots will be "inlayed" with essayistic discourse, as was later the case with Musil or Hesse.

Today, unlike in the time of Brzozowski's contemporaries, incompleteness is interpreted as guaranteeing the relevance of a text. Certain thematic motifs, such as Brzozowski's interest in Judaism or Marxism, are read as clear signals of communication with modernity. And the plots? They could be used as components of the presented world on the border of fantasy and mimesis.

The fantastic aspect of *Sam wśród ludzi* has been noticed by Andrzej Mencwel in his biography of Brzozowski. Mencwel quotes a passage describing the vision of the "mad child" Oleś, a character appearing in *Dębina*. He places it in the introductory chapter, in which he discusses Mark Twain's novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as an illustration of one of the fundamental conflicts of early modernity, namely that which plays out between (Romantic) nature and the emerging civilisation: between the world of feeling and technology, between the past and modernization arising from technological progress.[8]

Brzozowski's novel was supposed to be grand and modern. Of course its author could not have been aware of new tendencies in the development of fiction writing, which were already ripening, albeit as yet concealed. The suggestion of "grandness" brings to mind epic literature. The approach that Lukács presented in his essay "on the forms of great epic literature" is quite relevant for understanding Brzozowski's fiction. According to the Hungarian critic, the fundamentals of epic literature as projected by Cervantes are "melancholy" and "irony."[9]

The plot and narration of *Dębina* undoubtedly meet these criteria. Added to these are the essayistic discourse and the epistolary solution. "Essayism" offers commentary and philosophical reflection, while letters open and conclude the

8 Andrzej Mencwel, *Stanisław Brzozowski. Postawa krytyczna. Wiek XX* [Stanisław Brzozowski. The critical attitude. The twentieth century] (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2014), 30f.

9 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 104.

novel. The letter of the representative of the old world, Castellan Ogieński (of the Kopajgród castle), is a farewell to the world of Enlightenment; the letter of his grandson, in turn, creates an image of despair and melancholia shaping the Romanticism of Poland's Eastern Borderlands, abandoned and tragically unfit for life. These plots can be quite accurately illustrated with passages from *Legenda Młodej Polski*—or the other way round, *Legenda…* receives additional corroboration from the novels.

The foregoing discussion aimed to demonstrate that Brzozowski's connection with the nineteenth century is stronger than we used to think. It could also follow that the writer's every contact with Polish problems was secretly determined by his biography. To conclude: the modern surprises that Brzozowski prepares for scholars result largely from the incomplete and thus unpredictable character of his novelistic projects, as well as from the combination of writing techniques whose coexistence within one text was only admitted within late modernist fiction: the employment of essay and letter, i.e., genres belonging to different textual spaces.

Emotions controlled by irony, the melancholia and neurasthenia of the inheritors of history, which Europe should by all means get to know, the pride of the artist who confronts them—none of these dominant elements in his writing helped Brzozowski secure a place among masters. Perhaps this was meant to be the fate of those "born late." Here, i.e., in the communal experience of a generation, another possible perspective on reading Brzozowski's novelistic plots comes into view, again reaching out into the future (and not back to the past).

But there also exists another solution: I propose to call it "abandoning plots." According to this approach, the scholar of Brzozowski's fiction refrains from deciphering Brzozowski's psychological historicism or adopting it to the European norm. What he or she does instead is look into Brzozowski's essayistic reflection in order to see how it functions, cognitively and artistically, in his fiction. Adopting a research strategy of this kind, the scholar moves *beyond* the plots, thus modifying their function from narratives in the foreground to fictional additions to visions of the nineteenth-century world, governed not only by its own laws but also by the principles by which the philosophical mind learns about reality.

With this choice, Brzozowski's fiction becomes universalised, always relevant for any "world of thought." Whether this proposition can be defended I am in no position to judge. But a polyphonic "concert of ideas," whose coexistence is possible in an extra-historical universe, indeed distinguishes Brzozowski's fiction. Writing about polyphony, Bakhtin used Dostoevsky to illustrate his thesis. Brzozowski admired the author of *Crime and Punishment* as an insightful

spokesman of "the Russian soul." Again, the nineteenth century and its great prose support Brzozowski's novelistic design. "This is our beginning"[10]—these words from the first chapter of Czesław Miłosz's "Traktat poetycki" (Treatise on Poetry), referring to the role of fin-de-siècle for the emerging new era, could be shared by Brzozowski—even though he was such a harsh critic of the "Galician heritage." The heritage of the Eastern Borderlands operated according to similar principles. And the writer made both those currents accountable, believing that he alone possessed the artistic authority to pass judgment on them.

Translated by Edward M. Świderski

WORKS CITED

Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 1971.

Mencwel, Andrzej. *Stanisław Brzozowski. Postawa krytyczna. Wiek XX*. Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2014.

Miłosz, Czesław. *A Treatise on Poetry*. Translated by the author and Robert Hass. New York: Harper Collins, 2001.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

10 Czesław Miłosz, *A Treatise on Poetry*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 5.