Epilogue

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According to dictionaries of literary terms, an epilogue to a given text is supposed to inform us of the subsequent history of the tale recounted in the completed work. But these dictionaries remain silent about when, following the completion of the work, the epilogue comes to be, for which reason I will assume that the time frame remains indeterminate: it can be written shortly after the tale has been told but also well after the event, from a more distant temporal perspective. As I write, more than a year has passed since the end of the international scholarly conference, entitled "Always Our Contemporary: Stanisław Brzozowski and the Intellectual Field in Twentieth Century Poland and Beyond," organized at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, October 23–24, 2014. It might be thought therefore that I am making life too easy for myself by resorting to this, so to say, artistic stylization. However, the point is not merely that the conference took place under the sign of a risky designation ("always our contemporary") and gathered scholars from several countries, especially from Poland, with a program the thematic scope of which was equal to the repertoire of issues that exercised Brzozowski. The point is rather that the conference was expertly organized, the best of its kind in my decades-long experience of conferences throughout the world. To be sure, I have in mind as well the fabled Swiss penchant for exactness, esteemed everywhere, including Poland: everything took place according to plan, punctually and exactly, in a cordial and friendly setting. Even the Alps, clearly visible through the windows of the conference room, seemed to extend their greeting to us. None of this, however, exceptional though it was, would justify recourse to the artistic stylization suggested by the title of the conference were it not for the fact that the conference was pervaded by a distinctive sense of drama, a scenic character, so to speak, to which all the participants seemed alive. It is still fresh in my mind and is the reason why I am adding this epilogue.

How did this dramaturgy come about? First of all, the invited speakers were requested to submit the texts of their presentations in advance of the conference in order to prepare an online as well as a complete print version distributed to all participants at the start of the conference. Everyone knows that generally this fails to happen, and that conferences tend to consist of talks not infrequently constructed in the course of the presentations. The monotony of the ensuing monologues works to the disadvantage of, indeed it tends to stymy, free exchange and dialogue. I have been witness to sessions during which no time remained for discussion. I would have said that the farther one penetrates into Eastern Europe the more frequently do such cases occur, a regularity deriving from Soviet party conferences, were it not for the circumstance that the French, among whom rhetoric tends to supersede argument, likewise favor this style.

From the start the organizers of the conference in Fribourg enjoyed a double organizational success: not only did they distribute the texts of the presentations, they managed to convince all the speakers to restrict themselves to short summaries of the main theses of their papers. I keep racking my brain, trying to understand how the organizers managed to achieve this consensus, since I can recall countless occasions of presentations exceeding all measure—recently, I won't say where, a presentation in bad English dragged on more than an hour—with the speakers stoically ignoring reminders from the chairpersons. Worse still are the cases when speakers acknowledge the time constraints, promise to close anon, and go on incessantly. There would be little point of rehearsing these unfortunate examples were it not for the fact that, seen against this background, the Fribourg conference dedicated to Brzozowski became a model of its kind. It took on the character of a virtually ceaseless debate, a two-day dialectical symposium, with discussions running on even during the prandial interludes. It is evident that the best means alone could not by themselves achieve this level of intellectual drama without the skills and qualities of the conference organizers—Jens Herlth, Dorota Kozicka and Edward Świderski. Personally, in the company of such protagonists, on such a stage, I felt like a fish in water.

The significance of this kind of symposium does not come down to the presentations prepared in advance—though some of these were excellent—with which the reader can at present become familiar in the revised versions following the discussions during the symposium. Rather the two-day, virtually incessant debate constituted the proper sense of the conference, a sense 'superimposed', to quote the Structuralists, on the texts prepared in advance that were so many answers to the implicit question raised in the title of the conference. Does Brzozowski forever remain our contemporary, and if so, in what does his con-

temporaneousness consist? What is it that today continues to lend vitality to his thinking and creativity? In seeking to answer these questions, I should first note that at no time during the meeting was the so-called 'Brzozowski affair' even mentioned, never mind discussed. It is well-known that in 1908 Brzozowski was accused of collaboration with the tsarist political police, an accusation that doubtless shortened his life and exerted a catastrophic effect on the reception of his work over the course of the ensuing century. It became a kind of 'moralizing' ritual to offer answers to the pseudo-question, whether, namely, in case Brzozowski was a 'spy', his works retain an autonomous value and remain important or whether they are without value in this sense and should be excommunicated, together with their author? Nothing of the sort made the rounds in the course of the conference in Fribourg, which fact leads me to conclude that, for the participants, this question had been resolved: not only was Brzozowski not guilty of the collaboration for which he was accused, but the very accusation was a falsehood and thus deserves no further attention. Though this is the majority opinion today, it is not exclusive: on the occasion of another conference I attended someone opined that, had it not been for all the tumult surrounding the so-called 'affair' and the periodic revivals of the controversy, Brzozowski would have long since been forgotten. However, the organizers of the Fribourg symposium recognized in advance, so to say, that the actual significance of the author of *Idee* (Ideas) has all to do with the message he conveyed, a message so rich in content that it would more than meet the aims of the conference. Moreover, it is a message that seems to speak to a key contemporary issue, as represented by Richard Rorty, an issue that Edward Swiderski took up in his paper.

I will return to this paper, since the discussion it called forth amounted, in my opinion, to the intellectual highpoint of the conference. At present, I want to return to the 'Brzozowski affair', approaching it, however, from another angle, not as a problem, but as a symptom. That it became a problem is a matter in regard to which I took a firm stance in my first book, published in 1976, a stance I confirmed in my most recent book of 2014.[1] However, this does not alter the conviction, stated long ago already, that the so-called 'Brzozowski affair' merits a separate investigation in that it is an example of the way in which the media within our mass societies exacerbate contemporary political mechanisms. Or stated in simpler terms: instead of addressing the question become stand-

1 Cf. "Nota V. Czy istnieje sprawa Brzozowskiego" [Note V. Does the Brzozowski affair exist] in Andrzej Mencwel, *Stanisław Brzozowski. Kształtowanie myśli krytycznej* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1976), 362–386, as well as my *Stanisław Brzozowski. Postawa krytyczna. Wiek XX* [Stanisław Brzozowski. The critical attitude. The twentieth century] (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2014), especially 600–612.

ard—was Brzozowski guilty? —I suggest turning to the question, how was the Brzozowski affair concocted? The wide-ranging and fruitful discussions in Fribourg rekindled this question in my mind, turning it in fact into a broader issue: Has the intellectuals' fate in Eastern and Central Europe in the first half of the twentieth century been more specific and dramatic than that of their counterparts in Europe's heartland, that is, in the West? Did the same dilemmas—for instance the conflict between the 'patriots' and the 'internationalists' (as word had it in Warsaw at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)—which in the heart of Europe ran their course in orderly, 'normal' ways, acquire extreme, radical, and explosive forms at Europe's peripheries? And is it not the case that, at the peripheries, modernism was often qualified as a "worthless" (obezwartościowy) relativism, as Brzozowski would have put it, and that the forms of escape from this relativism have often been extreme—in the direction of anarchism, nationalism, socialism, even fascism and communism? Conversions to Christianity, on the contrary, often evince a personalist tinge.

To a question as broad and fundamental as this I have no concise, desultory answer. I do admit, however, that the presentations and discussions during the Fribourg conference stimulated my thinking about these matters, which deserve to become a theme for research. During the conference Brzozowski appeared not only in the light of the by now classical juxtaposition with Lukács, but also with Emile Cioran; as a possible source of inspiration for Ukrainian nationalism as well as the Israeli Kibbutz movements; in the context of the Italian Marxists, Labriola and Gramsci and their contemporary followers. As I listened to Jens Herlth's presentation, whose protagonist was the coryphe of Ukrainian nationalism, Dmytro Dontsov, I recalled Ivan Franko's intellectual biography that in many ways is closely analogous to Brzozowski's. To this analogy I would add the Czech, Zdeněk Nejedlý, who transformed himself from a modernist into a Stalinist, as well as the Lithuanian, Mikalojus Čiurlonis, a musician and painter rather than a theoretician, but whose fate was no less dramatic than that of Brzozowski. What do I have in mind in suggesting these analogies? Just this: writers, thinkers, and artists from the European peripheries experienced the intellectual dilemmas and conflicts of their day with particular intensity. Close attention needs to be paid to their *intellectual milieus*, as signaled in the subtitle of the conference. The clash of modernity and tradition often took an acute, dramatic form at the peripheries and came to expression as well in the cultural modes of being. Outstanding local artists and intellectuals still continue to aspire to 'govern souls' so soon as they are directed to become 'engineers of souls'; they stylize themselves as the 'conscience of the nation', although advancing nations have not a conscience but interests; they seek to be the legislators for their

societies, whereas the latter need experts. That is why anyone who fails to understand this fundamental historical transformation has somehow or other to be depraved and/or liquidated. In my opinion, the staging of the 'Brzozowski affair' is a salient example of the personal consequences of this kind of historical clash.

If, however, the claim that opened the conference—"always our contemporary"—is to stand, that is to say, to be confirmed in relation to Brzozowski, he needs to be more than a historical accident, he needs to be genuinely our contemporary. This was the issue Edward Świderski addressed in his attempt to juxtapose Brzozowski with Rorty. It was a felicitous choice, since Rorty, more than any other philosopher who has recently enjoyed international renown (among others, Habermas, Derrida, Bauman), is the iconic thinker of the *intellectual milieu* at the turn of the twenty-first century. Moreover, he enjoys considerable prestige in Poland, having several devoted commentators, and as testified by the controversial debate that took place in Warsaw in which he was the chief adversary.[2] In his presentation, Edward Świderski first emphasized the analogous roles of the two thinkers, notwithstanding the century that separates their respective activities as well as the different cultural contexts. Brzozowski and Rorty are not arm-chair philosophers but rather conscious actors on a broad cultural stage; both attacked effete idols and *dead metaphors*; each sought to carry out a fundamental reconstruction of philosophy as a whole in the name of a new vision of truth; both engaged in radical cultural criticism in order to transform the state of mind of their respective societies; and each upheld literature as the exemplary model of human creativity.

The most evident difference between them is the century-long temporal divide, visible as well in their writerly forms—Brzozowski, though attaining literally in the last months of his life a crystal clarity in his essays theretofore unknown in Polish, remains a fundamentally modernist writer, and hence somehow dated; Rorty's style sparkles with all the effects of contemporary philosophical rhetoric honed within and directed to the university seminar. Moreover, the author of *The Legend of Young Poland* could count on no more than the local Polish public, whereas the author of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* stepped onto the broad American cultural scene that today more than ever before is synonymous with global visibility. However, this disproportion in style and exercised effect need not necessarily work to Brzozowski's disadvantage, especially if we keep in mind his pursuit of truth rather than success. In this last regard,

2 Józef Niżnik, John T. Sanders (eds.). *Debating the State of Philosophy Today: Habermas, Rorty, and Kołakowski*. Westport, CT.: Praeger, 1996.

Brzozowski does occupy one of the lowest places in world rankings, although the Fribourg symposium does doubtlessly improve his standing.

I encourage anyone interested in the parallel between Brzozowski and Rorty to attend directly to Świderski's text.[3] I want only to call attention to the way in which the discussion that ensued focused on what I consider to have been the salient point of the Fribourg conference and that is at the same time *a core component of the cultural consciousness*. To this end, let me set out briefly, and hopefully without excessive simplification, the essence of Brzozowski's thinking as manifest in key biographical nodes. The first node is the youthful 'Darwinian crisis', as it was then called, that brought on the loss of religious faith, substituting for the latter the, at the time virtually sacred, "scientific worldview." In Brzozowski's intellectual biography this was the first step to rejecting the 'Platonism' of European thought, as Richard Rorty was to dub any faith in a predetermined world of ideas a century later. But Brzozowski was soon to discover that the 'scientific worldview' depended on a different version of 'Platonism', viz., on the claim that there exists a predetermined 'readymade being' that, like a book inscribed by the hand of God, has only to be deciphered by science. Brzozowski's extensive criticisms of then contemporary versions of the scientific worldview presented in "Monistyczne pojmowanie dziejów i filozofia krytyczna" (The Monist Conception of History and Critical Philosophy, 1904)[4] retains its significance to this day. Fully aware of what he was doing, Brzozowski passed from a philosophy of cognition to a philosophy of action, claiming moreover that being is not readymade but is created, both in its essence and in all of its particular forms: nature, history, societies, cultures, personalities and persons. Here I can no more than mention the philosophical inspirations of this passage, chief of which was doubtless Marx's thought understood as a critical *historical materialism* and Nietzsche's radical critique of science and history.

In my opinion, as the critical side of the *philosophy of action*, subsequently reformulated into the *philosophy of labor*, acquired its proper guise in the *philosophy of culture*, Brzozowski confronted the key problem for the thought of his day. If it is true that all known forms of religion, science, and philosophy are hardly 'objective' revelations about some *extra-human* essence of our world but only 'subjective' claims concerning its human qualities, then on what basis can we evaluate these claims and accept them as more or less true? As he worked on the initial version of the *philosophy of action* Brzozowski grew aware of its subjectivist and voluntarist limitations (is every act of each person of equal value?) and sought to establish the conditions of its validity. He subjected modernist

3 See pp. 159–184 of the present volume.

4 Brzozowski, *Kultura i życie*, 273–347.

relativism, that he termed an *illusionism*, to a withering critique: it is not the case that every statement is equally valid since not illusions but *labor* constitutes our world. Legitimacy accrues to only those thoughts, forms of consciousness, assertions that stimulate labor so understood. Brzozowski's sometimes virtually literal style of expression imparts a somewhat anachronistic character to his thinking, but as soon as its essence is appreciated the difference that separates his thought from the dominating trait of contemporary philosophy, as represented emblematically by Rorty, becomes clear. Brzozowski's main issue was the metaphysical problem; he struggled constantly with the classical question—why is there something rather than nothing?—and sought an ultimate answer in his own language. If the world as a whole and all its concrete forms are of our own making, then what must we be like in order to be equal to this task? This doubtless creationist cosmology required a counterpart in a creationist anthropology. Ultimately, however, of utmost importance is the question of what must man be who is able responsibly to bring this creation into being. Even though, in what were virtually his last words, Brzozowski spoke of *poetry*, he described it as *man's creative self-definition*. And it is here, I claim, that Brzozowski's standpoint outstrips Rorty's philosophy. Happily, Brzozowski knew nothing about the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy. He was not concerned with the validity of philosophical claims but with the validity of man's standpoint as such. It is in this sense that he remains a thinker who is *always our contemporary*.

Translated by Edward M. Świderski