

Stanisław Brzozowski and Romantic Revision (Meyer Howard Abrams, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom): Prolegomena

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The development of Stanisław Brzozowski's writing owed much to his profound and complex relationship with Romanticism, not only in its Polish manifestations. This historical-literary assertion should be noted from the outset, since its potential for the study of Brzozowski's oeuvre has not been fully realized.¹ As a result, first, there are only few studies that take into account his output as a whole (from *The Philosophy of Polish Romanticism* to *Voices in the Night*), and second, the multiple aspects of the presence of Romanticism in Brzozowski's work are underrated. It is not by coincidence that I refer to these two books: they are entirely different on account of their language and style and the difference is due to their subject matter and the purpose for which they were written. The sympathisers of English topics and the essayistic character of *Voices in the Night* will at times find it hard to stomach the prophetic and confessional tone of *The Philosophy of Polish Romanticism*. Nevertheless, it is only by studying both these texts (together with *The Legend of Young Poland*, *The Diary*, his correspondence and, finally, *Ideas*) that we can appreciate not only the span of Brzozowski's diction and interests, but also the close relationship between his philosophical-critical project and Romanticism. It is on account of the relationship between reading the Romantic writers and the shape of their own philosophy and

1 In fact, it has been clear since the late 1920s that Romanticism was one of the most important points of reference for Brzozowski, as was illustrated in Zdziechowska's study: Stefania Zdziechowska, *Stanisław Brzozowski jako krytyk literatury polskiej* [Stanisław Brzozowski as a critic of Polish literature] (Kraków: Kasa im. Mianowskiego, 1927), 47–67.

critical work that Brzozowski can be studied on a par with such authors² as Meyer Howard Abrams, Harold Bloom, Northrop Frye, Geoffrey Hartman. Even though their views were different, they all held Romanticism, which they thought through in a profound, multi-faceted, and intensive manner, as the foundation of their criticism. All of them also enlarged the possibilities of literary criticism—as in this passage (about Lionel Trilling):

Trilling was more than a critic [...] though it is difficult to say what term better describes him. No doubt his work bears intermittent witness to the kind of concern we associate with intellectual history, or with literary journalism, or with sheer speculative commemoration; but it is perhaps more appropriate to think of Trilling as having enlarged the possibilities of literary criticism to accommodate almost any subject—provided only that it be framed to meet the terms of a focused and largely thematic enquiry.³

Brzozowski's connection with Polish and English Romanticism makes him intimately linked to the Anglo-Saxon critics not only on account of the importance of Romantic texts in his work (they all referred to a shared set of authors).⁴ The similarities are of far greater weight and more specific. Despite the differing time frames and cultural contexts (Brzozowski died in 1911, while Abrams started publishing in 1934),⁵ all these authors regarded Romanticism as

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- 2 I shall be using the words 'author' and 'critic' interchangeably to refer to Brzozowski, Abrams, Bloom and Frye, despite the fact that I am aware of how problematic this can be. It is due to the nature of their critical work, which only rarely can be taken strictly as literary criticism, for even in the texts in which they reacted to contemporary literary events they seamlessly discussed philosophical or theoretical issues or engaged in essayistic or philological interpretation. Nevertheless 'criticism' in its broad understanding, as I will discuss below, can serve here as the common denominator—even though it is not entirely suitable, it is useful for a number of reasons.
 - 3 Robert Boyers, *Lionel Trilling: Negative Capability and Wisdom of Avoidance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977), 2.
 - 4 Stanisław Brzozowski was familiar with the works of such authors as, among others, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Byron. Cf. Wanda Krajewska, "Związki twórczości Stanisława Brzozowskiego z literaturą angielską" [Stanisław Brzozowski's contacts with English literature], in *Wokół myśli Stanisława Brzozowskiego*, ed. Andrzej Walicki et al. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1974), 331.
 - 5 This is the date of publication of his first book (he was only twenty-two at that time) entitled *The Milk of Paradise: The Effects of Opium Visions on the Works of De Quin-*

much more than an inspiring epoch in the history of literature and culture. For Brzozowski, as well as for Abrams and his disciples, Romanticism provided a frame of reference of reflection and a particular philosophy of the subject which was far from anachronistic. None of them aimed to reconstruct this philosophy in a systematic fashion; instead, they all constructed it in their own ways to suit their own research, philosophy of life, and vision of creative work. I use the word 'construct' on purpose, for it illustrates the specific nature of their interaction with Romanticism, which they viewed as a formation that implicitly advocated the need for creativity. It is just this specific view of Romanticism as a timeless and provoking challenge that allows drawing parallels between Brzozowski and the English critics.

Against Abstraction

The article "The Survival Eros of Poetry," included in the volume *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ends with a questionnaire in which the following declaration is to be found:

Question: Would it make sense to describe your critical theory as Romantic?

Answer: Oh, it's entirely Romantic, yes. I see the Romantic movement as the first great step in clarifying the role of criticism and bringing in a conception of creativity that could unify the mental elements in creative process.⁶

The respondent (and the author of the article) was Northrop Frye, who wrote a pre-eminent study on William Blake (*Fearful Symmetry*)⁷ and an equally acclaimed work on "the scope, theory, principles, and techniques of literary criticism."⁸ Frye emphasised the role of Romanticism as the foundation of the modern critical paradigm and of the tendency to activate the full potential of an artist,

cey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge. His most significant study, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, appeared in 1953.

6 Northrop Frye, "The Survival Eros in Poetry," in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Eaves Morris and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 15–45.

7 Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

8 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 8.

not only in its intellectual sense. The fine scholar of Blake⁹ must have shared Stanisław Brzozowski's view, namely that the passion of a Romantic writer was focused not on the abstract, but on the concrete, be it historical, anthropological, or human. In other words, one that does not gloss over the full scope of humanity in all its historical manifestations. As Brzozowski wrote in his *Diary*, "Only Blake with his [words]: 'abstract thoughts belong to scoundrels!'" (Jedyny Blake ze swoim: "abstrakcyjne myśli należą do oszustów!").¹⁰

He advocated taking a firm stand rooted in reality, both in thoughts as well as in practice. A similar tendency was found in Harold Bloom's thought (with reference to his fascination with Blake—"mental Traveller in the open world of poetry")¹¹ by Agata Bielik-Robson:

If there is a slogan, which captures the force of Bloom's theoretical efforts, from his earliest works on romanticism, through his engagement with deconstruction, to his latest inquiries into the aesthetics of genius, it ought to be drawn from the marginal notes of Blake: "To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess."¹²

This aphorism by Blake, so meaningful to Brzozowski¹³ and Bloom, could serve as an epigraph for an essay on the relations between Brzozowski's philosophy of the subject and that of the other 'Romantic critics'.¹⁴ They did not treat this philosophy autonomously nor did they give any systematic lectures on the subject. As a result, it can be only deduced from their most important works.¹⁵ It

9 Cf. Murray Krieger, "Northrop Frye and Contemporary Criticism: Ariel and the Spirit of Gravity," in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism. Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. M. Krieger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

10 Brzozowski, *Pamiętnik*, 37.

11 Harold Bloom, *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 436.

12 Agata Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie: Harold Bloom and Deconstruction* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 3.

13 Maciej Urbanowski, who provided the footnotes to *The Diary*, pointed to this quote from Blake as the most probable source for the paraphrase by Brzozowski. Cf. William Blake, *The Complete Prose and Poetry*, ed. G. Keynes (London: Nonesuch Press, 1989), 777.

14 For the purposes of this article, I use this particular expression drawing on the term "Romantic critical theory" used by Frye, "The Survival Eros in Poetry," 38.

15 Among others, Adam Lipszyc undertook this task in his book on Bloom. Cf. Adam Lipszyc, *Międzyludzie. Koncepcja podmiotowości w pismach Harolda Blooma z nieu-*

remains clear that Abrams (in *The Mirror and the Lamp* or in *Natural Supernaturalism*), Bloom (in *Agon* or *Poetry and Repression*), Frye (in *Fearful Symmetry*) and Brzozowski were loath to see philosophy separated from poetry,¹⁶ literature, and the experience of life. They advocated an all-encompassing view of the human being, a 'living singularity', as Bloom would have it, which radically changes the perspective of studying philosophy, history of literature, and theory. It entails rejection of the sort of knowledge of humanity which tends to generalize by disregarding the multitude of historical and social factors. In their interpretation, Romantics cultivated historical awareness sensitive to subtleties and were reluctant to admit abstraction, desiccated theories, and impersonal approaches. Bloom wrote in his *The Breaking of the Vessels*:

Any mode of criticism, be it domestic or imported, that would defraud us of this true context of suffering must at last be dismissed with a kind of genial contempt. Perhaps there are texts without authors, articulated by blanks upon blanks, but the strong poet has the radical originality that restores our perspective to the *agonistic image of the human which suffers*, the human which thinks, the human which writes, the human which means, albeit all too humanly, in that agon the strong poet must wage, against otherness, against the self, against the presentness of the present, against anteriority, in some sense against the future.¹⁷

In this passage, Bloom described, yet again, the figure of the powerful poet, which was so central to his critical conception. It is not for this reason that I use this quote, but rather on account of the emphasis it places on human potential and the character of creative activity, or any activity for that matter. Bloom's remark is not a platitude, but a sort of a credo, especially if we see it against the background of other critical schools (e.g., the Yale deconstructionists) rather than the general knowledge. The weight of Bloom's 'human' is similar to Brzozowski's remarks concerning 'the living thought' as the only subject of interest for a thinker of such stature. Their remarks are equally general and expressed with similar power, but it is not only the rhetorical intensity that makes these two declarations so close. What they also have in common is the attempt to

stającym odniesieniem do podmiotoburstwa [Inter-human. The concept of subjectivity in the writings of Harold Bloom with constant reference to the deconstruction of the subject] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 7ff.

16 I refer to poetry as independent of literature on account of its particular understanding in the nineteenth century and its privileged position in nineteenth-century literature.

17 Harold Bloom, *The Breaking of the Vessels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 82.

pursue the critical work that by means of its propositions would make an impact on the reader. Another common feature is the need to find a psychological and spiritual struggle in literature—the need that binds the critical project very closely to Romanticism in the existential, philosophical, and historical-literary sense. Brzozowski wrote in his *Voices in the Night*:

W ogóle chciałbym by czytelnik zrozumiał, że moje książki są zawsze systematem wyznań i podniet intelektualnych: że nie mają gotowej treści i na próżno by jej w nich szukał. Moją rzeczą jest czytelnika tak zaskoczyć, usytuować, by, jeżeli chce on zgody z sobą i życiem, musiał myśleć i znaleźć mniej więcej te myśli, o które mi chodzi. Jeżeli czytelnik z góry już nie chce dać nie książce, ale samemu sobie z jej powodu ani okruszka żywej i własnej energii, niech lepiej nie czyta tych rzeczy [...].¹⁸

In general, I would like the reader to understand that my books are always a system of confessions and intellectual stimuli: that they do not have a ready-made content and that it would be futile to search for it. It is my concern to surprise the reader so that if he wants to be in accord with himself and with life, he must think and find more or less the thoughts that I am concerned about. If the reader does not want to give, not to the book, but to himself on its occasion, a crumb of his own living energy, then he should rather not read these things [...].

This caveat to the reader reveals an important premise underlying their reasoning: Brzozowski, in a way similar to Abrams, talks about a sort of writing that applies an interpretative intuition (on the part of both the writer and the reader) rather than an easily identifiable method. They both emphasized (and it may well be that Bloom would subscribe to this narrative) the impression of truthfulness, the very power and energy of the text, and the importance of interaction with the reader. Abrams remarked:

[Wayne C. Booth, in his critique of Abrams's book *Natural Supernaturalism*] involves, explicitly or implicitly, a wide range of propositional truth-claims, of which only a fraction assert literal causation. [...] The basic mode of "proof" employed for this mixed bag of assertions is their incorporation into a story—more specifically, into a story made up of many stories, in which we can distinguish, within the overarching narrative, a number of middle-sized "novellas" and a great many "short stories"; and a book as a whole requires that the reader enter into its "narrative world" and be convinced that "*all of this hap-*

18 Brzozowski, *Głosy wśród nocy*, 8.

pened—this story is *true*,” as a necessary condition for being persuaded of the soundness of the truth-claims and value-claims that the narrative implicates.¹⁹

In the text quoted above (“Some remarks on the general status of European literature,” from in *Voices in the Night*) Brzozowski proposed to treat the critic as a “profound artist.”²⁰ He wrote that “the critic can be recognized by the fact that he is never content with impressions, he immediately, at the slightest twitch of his sensitivity, searches for life [...], recognizes it and strives to preserve it. He stands continuously as a watchful guard” (Krytyka poznaje się po tym, że nie poprzestaje on nigdy na wrażeniu, lecz natychmiast poza najbliższym drgnięciem swej wrażliwości szuka życia [...], rozpoznaje je, usiłuje zabezpieczyć. Jest on nieustannie czujną strażą).²¹ The figure of the “watchful guard” refers to the particular and the individual, which are in fact the most real. This is a recurrent motif in Brzozowski’s writing: he underlines the need to remain open to life and the concomitant readiness to individualize one’s approach each time. The basis for such individualization is the awareness of human involvement in history, an antidote to all abstractions. Certainly, this perspective is not a great accomplishment of speculative thought, but it has to be said that Brzozowski (following Vico, Newman, and Norwid) did not aspire to reach the heights of idle and lifeless speculation. He encouraged reflection that would restore the human being to the historical world and empower the concrete ‘I’. Regardless of the attitude adopted to this perspective, be it the Hegelian “feeling soul” (*die fühlende Seele*),²² as Agata Bielik-Robson would have it,²³ or Vico’s vision of the historical man,²⁴ there remains the common conviction that participation in

19 Meyer Howard Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 115f.

20 Brzozowski, *Głosy wśród nocy*, 5.

21 Ibidem.

22 Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Subjective Spirit / Hegels Philosophie des Subjektiven Geistes*, ed. and trans. Michael John Petry (Dordrecht: Springer, 1978), §403.

23 Agata Bielik-Robson, “Syndrom romantyczny. Stanisław Brzozowski i rewizja romantyzmu” [The romantic syndrom. Stanisław Brzozowski’s revision of romanticism], in *Romantyzm, niedokończony projekt. Eseje* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), 76f.

24 For the importance of Vico in Brzozowski’s thought, cf. Rena A. Syska-Lamparska, *Stanisław Brzozowski: A Polish Vichian*. Pref. Wiktor Weintraub (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1987); Andrzej Walicki, *Stanisław Brzozowski – drogi myśli* [Stanisław Brzozowski—paths of thought], ed. Andrzej Mencwel (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 83f.; Andrzej Mencwel, *Stanisław Brzozowski. Postawa krytyczna. Wiek XX* [Stanisław Brzo-

the world is necessary for being a powerful and complete subject. Both Polish and British Romantic writers (from Mickiewicz to Norwid and, for the British, at least from the late eighteenth century up to the 1830s) were interested in the human being that, as Dilthey wrote, “wills, feels, and thinks” and cannot be reduced to “the mere contents of perception, representation, and thought.”²⁵ Abrams and Frye, as well as Brzozowski, applied the consequences that arose from the Romantic sense of the whole to their own critical practice. The readiness of Abrams to place literature and criticism in larger cultural contexts (note the text by Michael Fischer devoted to his work)²⁶ did not result from observation of the contemporary circles of criticism and methodology, but rather from his reading of the Romantic authors. Being rooted in culture and history not only helps to understand the complexity of a given phenomenon, but it also promises—which is of particular importance in this study—to bring concrete reality seen as a unique outcome of a number of simultaneous phenomena into a closer perspective. Such is the background for the following remark by Fischer: “While appreciating the formal complexity of literary works, Abrams emphasizes that they are by, for, and about human beings.”²⁷ While addressed to Abrams, the remark could well be referred, in its core message, to any of the critics under consideration. Despite appearances, Bloom’s intricate theory of agon, reinforced and renewed a number of times, in the last analysis takes into consideration ‘human beings’, the concrete subjects:

What concerns me in a strong poem is neither self nor language but the utterance, within the tradition of uttering, of the image or lie of voice, where voice is neither self nor language, but rather spark or *pneuma* as opposed to self, and act made one with word (*davhar*) rather than word referring only to another word (*logos*). A poem is spark and act, or else we need not read it a second time. Criticism is spark and act, or else we need not read it at all.²⁸

zowski. The critical attitude. The twentieth century] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014), 25f.; Eliza Kącka, “‘Nie obciążony wpływem żadnej sekty...’ Giambattista Vico w myśleniu Stanisława Brzozowskiego” [Vico in Stanisław Brzozowski’s thought], *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki* 33 (2012).

25 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 50.

26 Michael Fischer, “Foreword,” in Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts*, ix (“A readiness to place both literature and criticism in their larger cultural context.”).

27 Ibidem, x (emphasis mine, E. K.).

28 Bloom, *The Breaking of the Vessels*, 4.

In this passage Bloom testifies to the focus on 'voice' instead of 'language', which in this case underlines the subjective, volitional character of writing (it is perhaps useful to disregard this gnostic vocabulary, which has been commented on also in Poland).²⁹ Writers are, according to Bloom, entangled in tradition, in the textual agon, which does not mean that they are anonymous, extra-historical links in this agon. On the contrary: the 'human being' formula guarantees the historicity and the subjective character of an utterance. Geoffrey Hartman in his important work *The Unmediated Vision* expressed a view that might serve as a condensed characteristics of the approach taken by the 'Romantic critics', in the sense that I wish to emphasize in this article:

Abstraction is never less than total. Great poetry, however, is written by men who have chosen to stay bound by experience, who would not—or could not—free themselves by an act of knowledge from the immediacy of good and evil.³⁰

To sum up: adopting an all-encompassing perspective which does not disregard reality is a fundamentally Romantic approach. Certainly, the readers of Bloom, Brzozowski, Abrams, and Frye are well aware of the fact that, while holding fast to the Romantic tradition, they dispelled several of its most ingrained illusions: the illusion of the full autonomy of poetic imagination and of the subjective self. This dispelling does not break their community with Romanticism. Quite the reverse: Romanticism itself, as they all perfectly knew, had a great potential for self-revision. It is no coincidence that Bloom, a reader of Shelley and the twen-

29 In particular one should refer here to Agata Bielik-Robson and Adam Lipszyc, as well as Jan Potkański, who used Bloom's theories for his own theoretical undertakings. Another author who referred to Bloom with respect to literary criticism was Kacper Bartczak. In Polish interpretations of Bloom's gnostic vocabulary, Bielik-Robson and Lipszyc are particularly important, not unlike, on the European scale, Richard Rorty. Cf., e. g.: Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formę duchowości* [*A different modernity. Questions about the contemporary form of spirituality*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 87–122; Agata Bielik-Robson, "Sześć dni stworzenia. Harolda Blooma mitologia twórczości" [The six days of creation. Harold Bloom's mythology of creativity], in Harold Bloom, *Lęk przed wpływem: teoria poezji*, trans. Agata Bielik-Robson et al. (Kraków: Universitas, 2002); Lipszyc, *Międzyludzie*, 47–59; Kacper Bartczak, *Świat nie scalony* [The unassembled world] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2009), 12–30; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28–30.

30 Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision. An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1954), xi.

tieth-century canon, indicated that complete mastery of language is impossible and that we are indebted to tradition to a much greater extent than we believe, even though we cherish the originality of thought and independence.³¹ In a sense, Bloom's protest against the naive claim of absolute originality as well as the assertion of breaking the continuity between us and history or tradition is analogous to the protest of the author of *The Legend of Young Poland* against thinking that disregards its historical roots.³²

Romanticism(s) and History

Brzozowski and the other authors use different metaphors and different sets of ideas, but they share, as I have argued already, the intention to question the model of subjectivity that 'levitates' somewhere above tradition and history, free of everything that preceded it in the course of events or utterances. So distinct is this intention that it becomes possible to draw parallels rooted in the creative and critical reading of Romanticism. This reading in its turn draws attention to the volatile nature of the historical context of creative work, not only in the strictly artistic sense, but more broadly in action, in human activities. In his text "Humour and law" included in *The Legend of Young Poland*, Brzozowski wrote:

W Anglii świadomość kształtowała się pod wpływem nieustannego poczucia potężnej, zbiorowej mocy, która zdola każdy indywidualny wysiłek wyzyskać, zużyć: rozstrzygało tu to zaufanie ku potężnej jak żywioł angielskiej ojczyźnie. Włoska świadomość ukształtowała się w ponadzyciowym zawieszeniu, kształtował ją opór stawiany przez kulturalną tradycję zniszczeniu; to tłumaczy nam najdobitniejsze różnice w tych dwóch stanowiskach. Ale ważnym dla nas jest ich rys wspólny: jedno i to samo poczucie, jeden i ten sam materialny fakt istnienia i jego najwyższe umysłowe szczyty. Jednostka może tu czuć i myśleć w rytmie wielkiej całości; myśl nie tworzy bolesnych przerw, niebezpiecznych osamotnień. [...] Myśl nowoczesna, jaką ją znamy przeważnie u nas, powstała pod wpływem izolujących lub zrywających naturalne łączności stanów dusz lub interesów.³³

In England, consciousness evolved under the influence of the constant feeling of a powerful collective force that is prone to exploit and to use every individual effort: this is a result of the trust in the English fatherland that is as powerful as a natural force. Italian

31 The role of the guardian of the canon results from this sort of awareness. Cf. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

32 Cf. Brzozowski, *Legenda Młodej Polski*, 15ff.

33 Ibid., 313.

consciousness evolved in a supra-existential suspension, it was formed by the resistance put up by the cultural tradition against destruction; this explains to us the most striking differences between these two positions. But what is important for us is their common feature: one and the same feeling, one and the same material fact of existence and its highest mental peaks. The individual must feel and think in the rhythm of a great whole; the mind does not create painful breaks, dangerous solitudes. [...] Modern thought as we predominantly know it in our country emerged under the influence of states of mind or interests that isolate or break up the natural bonds.

This passage, so important for descriptions of Brzozowski's views of England and Italy (together with his diagnosis of Poland's historical discontinuity), perfectly illustrates the awareness of different rhythms of historical development. He realized that different national Romanticisms should not be mixed together, warning:

Romantyzm polski nie jest odbiciem, czy echem jakiegoś zachodnio-europejskiego prądu kulturalno-literackiego. [...] Romantyzm polski był wpływem zmiany, ruchu, przeistoczenia, jakie zaszły w duszy polskiego społeczeństwa na początku ubiegłego stulecia. Zrozumieć romantyzm, to znaczy, zrozumieć tę zmianę, ten ruch, to przeistoczenie.³⁴

Polish Romanticism is not a reflection or echo of any Western European cultural-literary current. [...] Polish Romanticism was the outflow of change, of movement, and transformation that took place in the soul of Polish society at the beginning of the last century. To understand romanticism means to understand this change, this movement, this transformation.

Brzozowski demonstrated the separate nature of the phenomenon that gave rise to his present, and I am thinking here not only of the modern formation, but also of modernity in its broader sense (and at the particular stage that he was able to observe it). In a sense, Brzozowski repeats, albeit with necessary corrections, the gesture of Mickiewicz's *Paris Lectures*, which he knew well, for he read them passionately while working on his own lectures,³⁵ later collected in that peculiar pamphlet entitled *Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego* (The Philosophy of Polish Romanticism). It is worth noting at this particular instance that, when situating Brzozowski on the map of European thought and philosophy, one should not disregard the focus on Polish Romanticism. This remark is meant to be directed

34 Brzozowski, *Kultura i życie*, 376f.

35 In 1905 Brzozowski held his lectures on Romanticism in Kraków and at the Lwów Polytechnical School.

polemically against an approach that, in this context, favours *Voices in the Night* and marginalizes *The Philosophy of Polish Romanticism*. Agata Bielik-Robson, in her penetrating view of Brzozowski as a forerunner of the Romantic revision,³⁶ asserts her claims on the basis of her reading of the ‘European’ or ‘English’ Brzozowski while altogether disregarding the Polish context. This context, however, should be brought into consideration; paradoxically, it can only corroborate her diagnosis. Brzozowski’s discussion of Romanticism evinces the same awareness with which Abrams declared the following in his response to the reviews of *Natural Supernaturalism*:

I didn’t intend, however, to posit eternal ideas or universal traits of human nature to explain the relations between the various themes and structures that I identify and trace through time. I took care, in fact, to assert early on that the history I undertook to tell is strictly culture-bound.³⁷

Brzozowski, Abrams, Bloom, and Frye appreciated the perspicacity of the Romantics in diagnosing man’s involvement in the world and history. However, they also noticed the excessive passivity and perplexity with which many Romantics treated the very fact of this entanglement, their inability to use it in a positive way. Certainly, both Brzozowski and Bloom had a powerful will of emancipation from the burdensome elements of tradition. They advocated, as Bloom would have it, the ‘strong self’,³⁸ but they did not think of this self outside the historical context, which is a context of dependence. Brzozowski strove to dispel the illusory view of language according to which its origins lie outside the contexts of life and society. His conviction in this regard is similar to that of Charles Taylor expressed in *A Secular Age* (even though the wording of the latter is markedly different):

Even great innovative religious founders have to draw on a pre-existing vocabulary available in their society. This in the end shades into the obvious point about human language in general, that we all acquire it from the language-groups we grow up in, and can only transcend what we are given by leaning on it.³⁹

One of the important indicators of ‘Romantic’ critical practice is the suggestive tone of the argument, which despite being erudite remains non-scientistic. The

36 Bielik-Robson, “Syndrom romantyczny,” 75.

37 Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts*, 120.

38 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 55.

39 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 148.

best known work by Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, is not an anthropological manifesto, but rather a historical reconstruction as well as a paradigmatic construction. His proposition to view the conceptions of art, poetry, and criticism from the perspective of metaphorical transformations engages the reader's erudition and imagination in a way that is markedly different from that of academic 'non-situational' treatises (in Brzozowski's terms). It was to these 'non-situational' thoughts, disregarding reality and intentionally disengaged, that Brzozowski referred to in his *Diary*, most notably in those parts devoted to his critical attitude to the philosophy of Kazimierz Twardowski and his circle. Certainly, he intended to criticize philosophizing understood as a prerequisite for 'being skilled in writing lectures',⁴⁰ for such an understanding of philosophizing takes no real responsibility for anything. In a broader sense, however, he referred the term 'situationality' to the focus on an external (social or existential) check concerning literature or theoretical constructions.

A note of caution: in his *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye attempted to present a model of objectivist criticism in relation to 'an impersonal corpus of received knowledge'.⁴¹ Brzozowski will have none of its impersonal tone and the declaration of having a method. Following Vico⁴² (and not only him, even though the following passage refers to his polemic against Descartes), he perceived the violent character of method directed against life: "Już Vico prowadził nieustanną polemikę przeciwko wszelkim racjonalistycznym próbom zamknięcia treści tego życia w granicach jakiegoś pojęcia, wyrozumowanej i logicznej teorii" (Already Vico carried on a protracted polemic against rationalist attempts to enclose the content of life within a given concept, a ratiocinated and logical theory).⁴³

40 Brzozowski, *Pamiętnik*, 29.

41 Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 15. He would have termed Brzozowski's criticism as 'journalistic'. Brzozowski's mode of work is closer to that of Abrams, even though Frye can also be included in the context of the study of Brzozowski's criticism (in fact, on many accounts: take for example his reading of Blake in *Fearful Symmetry*).

42 The role of Vico in the writings of Abrams and his students merits a separate study. It is not only with reference to the figure or metaphor of the spiral form (applied to the broad understanding of Romanticism) that Vico appears in Abrams's writing: "The book as a whole has a structure that is deliberately iconic of the spiral form which many Romantic thinkers considered the necessary shape of an intellection, and in which many Romantic writers ordered their philosophies, their histories, and their fictional writings." Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts*, 116.

43 Brzozowski, *Współczesna powieść i krytyka*, 170.

Poetry

Philosophy, criticism, and readings interlaced in Brzozowski's mind to form a particular auto-paideia and autopoiesis in the effort to raise, form, and create oneself. This effort was to be connected to the proposition of activity (the Greek *poiēsis*) in a broader sense. Frederick C. Beiser in his book *The Romantic Imperative* wrote:

The primacy of the ethical and political in *Frühromantik* means that the romantics subordinated the aesthetic and religious to ethical and political ends. They defined the highest good not as aesthetic contemplation but as human self-realization, the development of humanity. No less than Plato and Aristotle, they insisted that this ideal is realizable only within society and state. Thus ethical and poetical values played a decisive role in the romantic agenda: they are the ultimate purpose behind its aesthetics, its philosophy of history, and *Naturphilosophie*.⁴⁴

Brzozowski, for his part, wrote in his text entitled "Titania's Spouse" published in July 1905 (against Józef Tretiak and his reading of Słowacki):

Krytyk, który byłby tylko krytykiem, byłby bezwzględny zaprzeczeniem twórczości. Człowiek jest to czynność nieustająca. Istnieje dla niego naprawdę to tylko, co przez jego czyn ogarnięte zostaje. [...] Aby zrozumieć czyjeś ja, trzeba je odczuć, czyli właściwie stworzyć. Stworzyć je możemy zaś tylko z własnej naszej duszy, z własnej jaźni.⁴⁵

A critic who is solely a critic would be an absolute denial of creativity. Man is constant activity. Only that really exists for him, which is embraced by his action. [...] To understand someone's self, one must feel it, or actually create it. However, we can only create it from our own soul, from our own self.

Certainly, one could deduce from this passage a sentence much like Schleiermacher's hermeneutic formula on understanding authors better than they understood themselves.⁴⁶ The passage as a whole, however, has a different purport and

44 Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative. The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), xi.

45 Brzozowski, *Wczesne prace krytyczne*, 509.

46 "It was Schleiermacher's prime objective 'to understand an author better than he understood himself.' [...] Privileging the author, however, does not mean foregrounding a personality but rather focusing on the author as the originator of the individual and hence not immediately graspable meaning of a foreign strange speech."

the affinity with Schleiermacher is not fundamental. What is placed in the foreground is the motif of creativity, action and, consequently, the change in perceiving the role of literary criticism. Even though it sounds somewhat general and esoteric, criticism in this view is seen as an activity that engages the human being as a whole and not just a particular intellectual disposition. Vico's call to create truth, so dear to Brzozowski, led—when applied to criticism—to the praise of invention and responsibility for one's creations. The indication that “we should not seek the truth, but create it,”⁴⁷ which Brzozowski inferred from Vico's polemic against Descartes, was an important impulse that led him to re-evaluate the role of the critic. In “Titania's Spouse,” Brzozowski wrote things that indicate his standing as a continuator of nineteenth-century thought on poetry, in its existential sense rather than the sense of poetic creativity. He can thus be seen as an author who conceives of poetry as another mode of reflection, different from systemic philosophy: For “how many critics withered because they lacked the poetry that would complement them!” ([...] ilu krytyków zmarło przez brak uzupełniającej ich poezji!).⁴⁸ On account of this, he can be seen as a representative of the same tradition which, on the one hand, is founded on the canonical texts of German Romanticism or, in Polish Romanticism, on Norwid's writings on Słowacki or on Mochnecki. On the other hand, this tradition is founded on such texts as *On Heroes* by Thomas Carlyle and the writings of Ralph W. Emerson and John Henry Newman. These authors studied the relations between poets and verse-writers (or: poetry as a means of participation and engagement in the world and poetry as poetic creativity).⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that Harold Bloom, a passionate reader of Emerson, wrote in his *Poetry and Repres-*

Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 46.

47 The translation of *Verum esse ipsum factum* is “The true is the thing made [or done] itself.” Or “The true is precisely what is made.” Cf. Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians: Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, trans. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 46.

48 Brzozowski, *Wczesne prace krytyczne*, 511.

49 Cf.: “There is an ambiguity in the word ‘poetry’, which is taken to signify both the gift itself, and the written composition which is the result of it. Thus, there is an apparent, but no real contradiction, in saying a poem may be but partially poetical; in some passages more so than in others; and sometimes not poetical at all.” John Henry Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 11.

sion that the poet is not a mere “verse-writer”⁵⁰ and that the most powerful poets of the twentieth century were Freud and Nietzsche.⁵¹

A poetic “text,” as I interpret it, is not a gathering of signs on a page, but is a psychic battlefield upon which authentic forces struggle for the only victory worth winning, the divinating triumph over oblivion [...].⁵²

Metaphorical language is a key feature of poetical thinking. In his *The Mirror and the Lamp* and in *Natural Supernaturalism* Abrams wrote about metaphors, used metaphors in his critical discourse, and classified theories on the basis of their prominent metaphors. In the foreword to the former of those two books, he explained:

I have attempted the experiment of taking these and various other metaphors no less seriously when they occur in criticism than when they occur in poetry; for in both provinces the recourse to metaphor, although directed to different ends, is perhaps equally functional. Critical thinking, like that in all areas of human interest, has been in considerable part thinking in parallels, and critical argument has to that extent been an argument from analogy.⁵³

Harold Bloom wrote in his *Kabbalah and Criticism*:

I knowingly urge critical theory to stop treating itself as a branch of philosophical discourse, and to adopt instead the pragmatic dualism of the poets themselves, as I can see not the least relationship of what we have called poetics to the actual problematics of reading poetry. A theory of poetry must belong to poetry, must be poetry, before it can be of any use in interpreting poems.⁵⁴

50 Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Heaven: Yale University Press: 1976), 2.

51 Cf. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 28.

52 Bloom, *Poetry and Repression*, 2.

53 Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: romantic theory and critical tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), iv.

54 Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 109. Peter de Bolla wrote: “For him [Bloom] a theory that is critical, and which deals with poetic texts, must be grounded within those texts: his argument is tied to extremely traditional accounts of the practice of reading literary texts in this respect.” Peter de Bolla, *Harold Bloom: Towards Historical Rhetorics* (London: Routledge, 1988), 18f.

This reluctance to include criticism in philosophy seems to collide with Brzozowski's intention, for he was quite clear that his own theoretical undertakings form part of a particular project of philosophizing. However, as soon as we counterbalance this assertion with a passage from *The Diary*:

Każdy element obojętności istniejący w nas, mogący istnieć w chwili poetyckiego ujęcia, uszczupla głębokość poezji, jest połączony z jej uszczerbkiem. *Poezja musi być pojmowana jako twórcza autodefinicja człowieka.*⁵⁵

Every element of indifference that exists in us, which can exist in the moment of poetic treatment, depletes the depth of poetry, is damaging it. *Poetry must be understood as the creative self-definition of man.*

...then the perspective will change radically, for understanding poetry as a 'creative self-definition of a human being' overrides Bloom's warning that one might engage in theoretical reflections that would disregard poetry and lead criticism into a scientific cul-de-sac.⁵⁶ In the light of this chapter Brzozowski truly appears as a precursor of Romantic revision, which continually faced the challenge of reflecting on *ratio* in its specific Romantic understanding:

Blake calls the sum of experiences common to normal minds the "ratio," and whenever the word "reason" appears in an unfavorable context in Blake, it always means "ratiocination," or reflection on the "ratio."⁵⁷

Conclusion: Towards a New Shape of Criticism

The term "Romantic critical theory" used by Frye⁵⁸ leads me to acknowledge, despite all differences, the common foundation that unites the practices of Stanisław Brzozowski, Meyer Howard Abrams, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom (to this group one might add, with many qualifications, several other scholars).⁵⁹ The common foundation and the mode of reflection is their reading of Romantic texts which transcends the boundaries of critical appraisal, scholarly

55 Brzozowski, *Pamiętnik*, 13 (emphasis mine, E. K.). Cf. Mencwel, *Stanisław Brzozowski. Postawa krytyczna*, 648.

56 Cf. David Fite, *Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), xii.

57 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 22.

58 Cf. footnote 14.

59 E.g. Wayne C. Booth, Jonathan Culler, Geoffrey Hartman, Lionel Trilling.

description or essayistic commentary. It is a practice which brings about a particular community to which the critics themselves subscribe as well. This community does not do away with scholarly, critical or philosophical standards. However, it would not come into being had it not been for the important component inscribed in the text of *Voices in the Night*:

Punktem wyjściowym romantyzmu jest założenie, że świat, w którym nie ma miejsca dla danej indywidualnej treści, nie jest światem skończonym i zamkniętym [...] że ostatnie słowo należy zawsze do twórczej psychiki ludzkiej. [...] sądzę, że jest to [...] rys raczej bezwzględnie wartościowy w romantyzmie [...].⁶⁰

The starting point of romanticism is the assumption that a world in which there is no room for a given piece of individual content is not a finite and closed world [...] that the last word is always up to the creative human psyche. [...] I think that this is [...] a rather unconditionally valuable feature of Romanticism.

In *Voices in the Night* affirmation blends with critical distance, a revisionist approach is paired with codification of the accomplishments of Romanticism, and this blend is not contradictory. Moreover, such an interrelation of approaches is inevitable in the case of the critics for whom Romanticism was a vibrant problem and a challenge. Dealing with Romanticism led to a sense of community, even though a degree of ambivalence remained. In a letter of September 1909, Brzozowski wrote: "I exchange secret greetings with Newman, Hegel, and Norwid" (wymieniam tajne pozdrowienia z Newmanem, Heglem, Norwidem).⁶¹ He referred in a similar way to William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats, who were so important for Bloom, Abrams, Frye, and Hartman.

None of the critics under consideration, nor Brzozowski himself, advocated a simple return to Romanticism. It is not by coincidence that I decided to use the term "Romantic revision" in the title. It entails not only a critical reading, but also an actualisation of meanings: their re-contextualization and creative renewal. Brzozowski, as well as Abrams, Frye and Bloom, did not advocate a return to a Romantic paradise lost, but attempted to establish criticism on the basis of reading Romantic authors and rethinking Romanticism as a productive and modern proposition. That they subscribed to the Romantic circles, which I have discussed here, is not to be understood too simple-mindedly. At any rate, it would be difficult to understand it in this way, given that these scholars were

60 Brzozowski, *Głosy wśród nocy*, 55.

61 Brzozowski, *Listy*, vol. 2, 234.

fully aware of the complexity of Romantic texts, which they explored and publicized so keenly.

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