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Stanisław Brzozowski (1878–1911)

Introduction

Jens Herlth

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It would surely not be an exaggeration to state that the writings of Stanisław Brzozowski and the intricate story of their afterlife represent one of the most fascinating chapters in Polish intellectual history of the twentieth century. Brzozowski died of consumption in Florence in 1911; his last years had been overshadowed by his ever worsening illness, by his increasingly disastrous material situation—and by the accusation of being an informer of the tsarist secret police, a charge leveled against him in several Polish socialist newspapers in April 1908.

These hardships notwithstanding, Brzozowski spent the last years of his short life working feverishly on articles and books covering a wide range of topics, from the question of modernity and modern consciousness through the problems of Polish national identity to historical materialism, Catholic modernism, and Russian, French, and English literature. There was hardly an issue in the philosophical and literary debates of the time that he did not touch on in these writings; he entered into discussions, mostly one-sided, with Avenarius, Bergson, Sorel, Nietzsche, Vico, and Kant—to mention only some of his imaginary interlocutors. The range of his studies was as stunningly wide as their impact was depressingly small. This was, of course, due to language issues (notwithstanding some smaller contributions written and published in German), but also due to Brzozowski's increasing political and personal isolation.

What would have been possible had Brzozowski written in English, or perhaps in French or German? A futile question, no doubt: With all its inner contradictions, love for messianic flights out of the past, and obsession with the idea of a future culture of sober and disciplined labour, his *œuvre* was only possible in the Polish context—or rather *outside* of it. His most important works were written in Italy, his trajectory as a writer, political activist, and non-academic philosopher was situated

J. Herlth (✉)
Department of Languages and Literatures, Slavic Studies, University of Fribourg,
Rte d'Englisberg 7, 1763 Granges-Paccot, Switzerland
e-mail: Jens.Herlth@unifr.ch

at the periphery of the Tsarist Empire, on the margins of genres, and academic and literary traditions. Brzozowski was aware of and suffered from his marginality, and struggled to overcome it by aiming at the very core of modern consciousness, Polish national identity, contemporary philosophical debates—turning virtually every theoretical issue into a question "of life and death" (cf. Milosz 1981). All this is understandable and imaginable only within the context of this "most unhappy and most peculiar cultural society": "Poland, what can I say?" (Brzozowski 1990, 250)

The last few years have shown that one must not worry about Brzozowski's presence on the intellectual scene in today's Poland: conferences have been held, research projects launched, collected volumes published.[1] In Poland, Brzozowski's name is today above all associated with the *Krytyka Polityczna* (Political Critique) movement, a network of left-wing intellectuals throughout the country with an enviable commitment to the organization of public discussions and cultural events. They reclaim Brzozowski as the "patron" of their organization,[2] and many of his works have been reedited by the association's publishing house. There is, perhaps, something of a distortion in the way Brzozowski's legacy is monopolized by the circles of *Krytyka Polityczna*—his political orientation was far from unambiguous. His emphasis on the "nation," "force," and "discipline" is carefully ignored by his leftist readers, but at least Brzozowski is read and discussed in contemporary Poland.

Outside Poland though, the situation is quite different: There has been little scholarship on Brzozowski in languages other than Polish, apart from Andrzej Walicki's highly valuable book on *Stanisław Brzozowski and the Polish Beginnings of "Western Marxism"* (Walicki 1989). This is certainly due to the circumstance that only a few fragments of Brzozowski's writings have been translated to a Western language; one happy (and heroic) exception being the recent French edition of Brzozowski's *Diary* (Brzozowski 2010). However, there is no need to lament: if Brzozowski's significance for early twentieth century culture and for the historical self-consciousness of an engaged intelligentsia is largely uncontested in Poland; it has still to be seen if his ideas can withstand the challenge of examination outside exclusively Polish contexts. Intellectual history is bereft of any sense of poetic justice. Someone who failed to find a wide echo in his time, whose philosophical and critical *œuvre* did not, for whatever reason, gain the attention of a wider, international audience, might well be declared undeservedly forgotten. Still, even had he deserved to be widely recognized in 1911, this does not mean that he has to be rescued from oblivion in 2011.

When we invited a number of Polish and Swiss colleagues, specialists in philosophy and literary history, to a Workshop on "Brzozowski and the Anxieties of Modernity" in May, 2010, at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), our goal was to assess the current state of Brzozowski studies; to see, if Brzozowski's thinking has anything to offer beyond text-book literary history (or history of philosophy). The aim was to see whether it would be productive to return to his ideas for a better

[1] Mention should be made here of the special issue of *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki* (No. 3–4, 2006), ed. by Anna Dziedzic.

[2] See http://politicalcritique.org/ (accessed September 12, 2011).

understanding of Polish intellectual history—indeed the world we live in today. With the considerable decline of the emancipatory pathos of postmodernism during the last years, it may well be that we can now see more clearly why some of the torments (and opportunities) so emphatically ascribed to modernity in the writings of this Polish thinker are still of some relevance today.

The essays collected in the present volume are revised versions of the papers discussed at the workshop. In addition, two papers, those by Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniela Steila, were solicited for this special issue as they complement in important ways those presented at the workshop. The themes of the papers range from literary criticism through systematic philosophy, to the philosophy of religion and theology. The contributors transcend disciplinary boundaries in order to match the specific transdisciplinary spirit of Brzozowski's critical and philosophical projects.

In her essay on Brzozowski's "Performative Criticism" Dorota Kozicka neatly demonstrates how Brzozowski's writings on literature anticipate *in nuce* several theoretical strategies of late twentieth century criticism. This is true, as Kozicka shows, not only of ideas and content, but also and maybe primarily of style and structure: Brzozowski, with his highly dramatized prose, sought to affect the reader, to shake him into awareness, and make him part of its critical endeavor; the "meandering" (Kozicka) openness of Brzozowski's works keep them open for ever-new theoretical shifts and connections.

Jens Herlth's essay deals with the intersections between literary and political rhetoric in Brzozowski's critical writings. The blurredness of Brzozowski's political ideas can be explained by the predominance of a literary imaginary in his writings—even when political issues are at stake. Here, too, style and performance seem to outweigh content.

Alongside Brzozowski's magnum opus, the *Legend of Young Poland* (1910), it is surely his *Diary*, in all its fragmentariness and vulnerable subjectivity, that should be of interest for contemporary readers, since it is here that Brzozowski most explicitly gives vent to his thoughts on the religious dimensions of culture and society. These pages can in fact be read, as Agata Bielik-Robson points out in her essay, as a case study on post-secular religious consciousness. Brzozowski himself, despite his indebtedness to history and biography,[3] resisted describing his turn to Catholicism late in life (not so much to Catholic faith, but to the Catholic Church as cultural institution) as a "conversion," since he understood conversion to mean the attempt to negate one's own biographical experience. For Bielik-Robson, Brzozowski's case must be read as a "conversion without conversion": not the Paulian way of "metanoia," which implies a full turnaround, but rather what Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century (Cohen, Rosenzweig, Benjamin) were to call "tschuva," meaning not so much a purely spiritual reorientation, as rather a "patient working-through of the universal history of creation" (Bielik-Robson).

Many Polish intellectuals, notably those, whose formative years fell into the interwar period, spoke of Brzozowski as an influential voice in shaping their worldview, their understanding of history and (Polish) culture. Jan Zieliński has

[3] Cf. his well-known saying: "What is not biography, does not exist at all" (Brzozowski 2007, 164).

chosen two interesting examples, the poet Czesław Miłosz and the writer Alexander Wat (familiar to Western audiences above all for *My Century*, a spoken autobiography based on conversations with Miłosz). Zieliński argues that Czesław Miłosz's intellectual biography cannot (or at least should not) be written without taking into account the persistent influence of Brzozowski's thinking about history, man, and religion.

I mentioned above that Brzozowski is widely seen today as an unorthodox Marxist or otherwise leftist thinker. Maciej Urbanowski reminds us that the issue is not that clear, and that certain strands of a nationalized socialism in Brzozowski's late writings have provoked somewhat ambiguous reactions. Urbanowski highlights the affinities between Brzozowski's ideas on the nation and some central concepts of the political current that would later be known as fascism. In particular, Brzozowski at the end of his life was very much concerned about "strength" and "hardness," about the "nation" and the mystic "bond" holding people together. Still, apart from the obvious anachronism of such labeling it would be a misreading to call Brzozowski a fascist: instead he should be classified, as Urbanowski suggests, in the setting of antimodernist thought in the European *lettres* of the last two centuries.

Daniela Steila, in recounting the story of Brzozowski's meeting with Maksim Gor'kij and Anatolij Lunačarskij in Florence in 1907, gives us some insights into a fascinating, though fragmentary chapter of Russian-Polish intellectual exchanges on the eve of World War I and the Russian Revolution. Brzozowski's somewhat subjectivist view of such key notions of Marxist idea-building as "labour" (see Edward Swiderski's essay in the present issue) must indeed have been alien to more orthodox theoreticians. Still Lunačarskij's reading of Brzozowski clearly shows the challenge Brzozowski raised to the socialist thinkers of his time—and to orthodox Marxism on the whole.

Edward Swiderski chooses a systematic approach, in order to track the originality of Brzozowski's way to deal with the problem of labour. He suggests parallels between Brzozowski's Post-Marxist thought (under the heavy influence of the *Lebensphilosophie* of his time) and a classic of contemporary nominalist philosophy, Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*. It is highly instructive to see how Brzozowski's historicist ideas on the self-conscious creation of man are more nearly congruent with Goodman's logically ascetic constructionalism than with a 'naïve realist' picture of labour as 'material-transformative activity'.

As Anna Dziedzic puts it in her essay on Brzozowski's "Ideal of the Modern Man," "the autonomy of man is primary, there are no non-human truths and values obliging us to obedience." And she points out that there is something deliberately decisionistic about Brzozowski's emphatic notion of modernity. Brzozowski wanted Man to take over the responsibility for his own historical existence and not confer it to reified versions of "history," or "nature." He did not deny their existence; he said that they are what we make of them. He could not accept ideologically closed versions of a philosophy of history, and he would never have accepted current 'reductionist' conceptions of man as a cluster of genes or the like.

This collection is, of course, by no means exhaustive; it represents one attempt to offer perspectives on the writings of one of the most interesting figures of early

twentieth century Polish philosophy and cultural criticism. This was still far in advance of so much that was to come, even though the spores of many currents and undercurrents of modern thought can be discerned at work in the ever-fuming laboratory of Stanisław Brzozowski's critical mind.

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