

DOI: 10.31648/pl.9623

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Axiological Centre and Aesthetic Periphery in Henryk Bereza’s Literary Criticism¹

Aksjologiczne centrum i estetyczne peryferia w krytyce literackiej Henryka Berezy

Keywords: Henryk Bereza, literary axiology, literary criticism, „Twórczość” magazine

Słowa kluczowe: Henryk Bereza, aksjologia literacka, krytyka literacka, „Twórczość”

Abstract

The text examines various insights found in the reception of Henryk Bereza’s criticism. Among other things, his commentators emphasised the coherent and essentially invariable system of values on which his appraisals were founded. The article sets out to identify and elaborate on those hypotheses. The author attempts to determine which value was central to Bereza’s criticism and, based on the analysis of sample reviews and sketches, demonstrate how the aforementioned central value informed specific peripheral values and how it bore on Bereza’s critical verdicts. As it turns out, the fundamental value that the critic sought in prose was the subjective and unique truth of the subject, i.e. the artistic record of the writer’s existential experience. The assessment criteria that enabled Bereza to ascertain whether the truth of the subject had been captured in a given work were formulated *a posteriori*, as the critic intuitively verified the formal means chosen by authors for consistency with their goals.

1.

It is stated in Marian Pilot’s memoirs (2015) that Henryk Bereza had reportedly read all post-war Polish publications that were relevant to his field already

¹ Translation services were co-financed by the Ministry of Education and Science pursuant to agreement No. RCN/SP/0200/2021/1 of 1 November 2022; value of the grant awarded as part of the “Development of scientific journals” program – PLN 54 090.

during his university studies. He was a diligent and hard-working fledgling scholar in Polish studies, with an academic career wide open before him. He could have ensured himself a living standard and a stable academic job, but his life choices were not driven by a sense of security². He wanted to be as close as possible to the current developments in Polish prose. If literary criticism came to be called “the first reading”, Bereza’s column *Czytane w maszynopisie* [*Read in Typescript*] in *Twórczość* magazine was an example of early perusal that was unheard of in Polish literary periodicals. There, the critic featured internal reviews, i.e. concerning unpublished texts, and, as a consequence, he often had a decisive influence both on the chances of a work being released and on the date of its coming out in print³. He had an evident and polarising impact on the literary milieu⁴, reflected in the title of “the pope of literary criticism in Poland”, used ironically by some critics and quite earnestly by others. Bereza himself did not wish to be thus symbolically ordained, as an excerpt from the collection of reviews entitled *Bieg rzeczy* [*The Run of Things*] eloquently demonstrates:

[...] I do not aspire to infallibility, and no pope of literary criticism in Poland am I.

There are writers, especially young ones, who trust me, or pretend to trust me, to an extent that is excessive, and these speak of my critical papacy; fortunately, I am in no danger of taking that all too-committal dignity because time and time again each of the more avuncular critics takes out his tiara from his pocket and brandishes it in front of everyone’s nose. What the poor people do not know is that it is extraordinarily difficult to become even a curate of criticism nowadays. The sacrament of the priesthood is not an act of criticism, but a long-term process which consists in the fact that all pre-established literary and artistic convictions⁵ (originating with school, academia or any other) have to be fought against and overcome within oneself so as to enable such a spiritual contact with the text one reads that the mystery of a good or bad text is revealed, that one discovers the life or death of the

² Szymon Wróbel describes the critic’s attitude as follows: “[...] Bereza’s kingdom is freedom, because he writes as if he were not determined by the things that usually determine people. Not only does he write beyond the necessity of earning a living (involving the surcharge of deductible revenue) or beyond the necessity of justifying his thoughts academically (existence), but he also writes beyond any ego [...]” (Wróbel 2007: 70).

³ “Usually, the titles discussed by Bereza would later (after a few or several more months, or a few years) be seen in bookstores [...]” (Pluta 2015: 162).

⁴ Janusz Drzewucki called him the most controversial of post-war Polish critics (Drzewucki 1996: 26), while Anna Marchewka recalls: “For some, Bereza was, as Rabizo-Birek notes, ‘one of the most outstanding and original Polish critics of the latter half of the 20th century’ [...], for others—especially in recent decades—a troublesome figure, such as for Jerzy Illg, who during a debate accompanying the 9th Book Fair in Krakow described him as ‘a man who led to the downfall of *Twórczość*—once the most important literary periodical in Poland’” (Marchewka 2018: 19).

⁵ Highlighted by author.

word being read, that one nearly witnesses the paper birth or miscarriage of the word and knows or intuits whether the word, like an infant, has a healthy or crippled life ahead of it (Bereza 1982: 34).

Regardless of whether the above refusal to accept the function of a high priest of literature was an expression of modesty, coyness of sorts⁶ or a completely legitimate objection, the very suggestion of such a title attested to a certain authority of Bereza's, at least in some circles. He achieved that degree of deference by consistently building and applying a coherent system of values. The core of his measures and criteria took shape at a very early stage of his critical career⁷. After all, it must be remembered that the above passage comes from a book published after nearly thirty years of intensive work that was characterised by axiological uniformity. According to Andrzej Skrendo, the even later *Pryncypia* [*Principia*], a 1993 collection of essays and manifestos by Bereza, also highlight the integrity and continuity of his aesthetic doctrine despite the passing time (Skrendo 2017: 36). Those discussing Bereza's critical oeuvre emphasise both the "diachronic" constancy of his judgments as well as the axiological cohesion that in a sense applied across the board, encompassing all the genres in which he expressed himself, including descriptions of dreams. Krzysztof Nowicki observes:

[...] it is difficult, and yet one does it repeatedly, to disregard the essence of his writing, which reveals its secrets to us if we happen to revisit the sketches from his debut *Sztuka czytania* [*The Art of Reading*] and then look at Bereza's formal inventions, such as the series entitled *Czytane w maszynopisie*, letters, notes and commentaries or the poignant *Oniriada* [*The Oniriad*] (Nowicki 1996: 2).

This applies even to poetry in which, as one might expect, Bereza does not renounce his "self", which lends structure to the universe of the values he professes. For instance, the volume entitled *Względy* [*Aspects*] (Bereza 2010) is "another fairly peculiar element which bears out and supplements the knowledge of Bereza's biography and literary fascinations" (Nęcka 2010: 14).

⁶ Piotr Kowalski observes: "When he bridled a few times in his recent books at being called the 'pope of criticism', there was some coquetry in that, especially that what constantly recurs in his sketches is the awareness of some contribution to their [the reviewed books] final shape" (Kowalski 1983: 85).

⁷ According to Zbigniew Bieńkowski, the crucial moment in the formation of Bereza's postulations and literary-critical method was the experience of "empiricism of imagination" in the work of Marek Nowakowski. The battles that the critic waged for a homogenous picture of Nowakowski's oeuvre yielded the oppositions of empiricism and conceptionism, subjectivity and objectivity, which were so essential for Bereza. All that took place already in *Prozaiczne początki* (Bieńkowski 1972: 106).

Still, what would that essential convergence between particular forms of expression consist of? Bereza found literary criticism and artistic creation to be one and the same. Such a notion is most emphatically asserted in *Związki naturalne* [*Natural Associations*]:

I tacitly identify criticism with literary art. I do so not for want of personal modesty but with full philosophical and aesthetic conviction. Criticism is neither less nor more than literature. Only those who are not conversant with the current state of literary affairs are ignorant of the fact. The art of recording thoughts and feelings is one in all its manifestations and scopes.⁸ It is only conceit to suppose that any of the arts of writing is closer to artistry or truth (Bereza 1978: 43-44).

Again, the reception of Bereza's texts offers evidence that the assumption comes true, specifically in view of the critic's creative disclosure manifesting in the personal attitude to the authors he reviewed: "Apart from anything else, one can read [...] *Obroty* [*Revolutions*] as a singular and dramatic testimony to the life of one who has devoted himself utterly to the art of the word. [...] One who would advise 'his' authors to be bold and absolutely honest in their writing, who dared to expose himself in public, even to the point of ridicule (which is, after all, the most difficult thing to do)" (Rabizo-Birek 1997: 132–133). Roch Sulima notes that by virtue of the personal tone of Bereza's essays, "in the humanist sense, the subjective perspective is common to both the author and the reader of literature. [...] Bereza is a hypersensitive reader and, as a critic, he makes this hypersensitivity public" (Sulima 1979: 58). Jerzy Pluta stated in no uncertain terms that the reviews by the author of *Sztuka czytania* "are not merely para-literary texts, but pieces of prose in the strict sense as well" (Pluta 2015: 162), whereby the critic presented his "self" in reviews, sketches and notes, as opposed to novels and short stories (Pluta 2015: 162).

The previously cited Agnieszka Nęcka sees a similar tendency to publicise contact with literature – or, in fact, with writers above all – in Bereza's poetry: "In speaking of others, Bereza – as I have noted – speaks of himself. [...] in the manner of invoking successive persons – [one discerns] discreet exhibitionism. This revealing of oneself, after all, takes place 'by the by', 'on the margins', as it were" (Nęcka 2010: 14). Something akin may be encountered in the critic's "notes and commentaries" constructed around the names of people associated with literature, which served as a starting point for related diaristic observations, anecdotes and

⁸ Highlighted by author.

reflections. Bereza often addressed those figures directly, as if they were a quasi-epistolary genre, which is perhaps closest to the posts on a private Facebook profile today. The mode of communication was personal and familiar, and yet it was formulated in a way that all concerned would have been witnesses, as if – to use the Facebook metaphor – he had decided to change the audience group in the settings from “only me” to “public”. However, it would be difficult to unequivocally define the genre and function of those statements which, “according to the author himself, formally resemble[d] Robert Walser’s *Microgrammes*”⁹ (Orzeł 2015: 168). Moreover, the notes in question may be interpreted as yet another manifestation of Bereza’s belief in the essential unity of all incarnations of the art of writing and its intimate association with existence, an instance of “life-writing”¹⁰ which is simultaneously “life-reading”: “Unwittingly, this system may also have evolved into a peculiar manifesto which abolished the boundary between literature and life, between the important and the seemingly insignificant” (Orzeł 2015: 169). The following short excerpt from the notes refers to as many as seven men of letters:

[Marian] Pilot came in around five o’clock, brought a whistling kettle as a gift, said that [Bohdan] Dzitko had become president of the Olsztyn Branch [of the Polish Writers’ Union], that [Józef] Morton had offered him *Calopalenie* after the former said that he did not harbour a grudge against Morton for the article because Adamczyk admitted that Morton had only signed the article, the story about [Zygmunt] Trziszka is somewhat incoherent; apparently, there is a contract for Trziszka, but the team at *Tydzień Kulturalny* are against it. Pilot is going to the mountains in mid-February, though we talked mainly about the situation in Poland. Pilot knows nothing new or special, nothing can be predicted, and the situation is devilishly dramatic. Pilot accepted [Kazimierz] Długosz’s invitation, and he is to come around in the evening. We’ll go with [Wiesław] Myśliwski, it’ll be easier to find the place. Pilot left before six o’clock (Bereza 2015: 176-177).

⁹ On the other hand, intimism could well have been the only literary form of hiding from the public for Bereza, if one believes what W.G. Sebald wrote about *Microgrammes*: “Certainly, Walser’s aim [in *Mikrogramme*], as he explained in a letter to Max Rychner, was mainly to overcome his own literary inhibitions using the less definitive pencil method; it is also certain, as Werner Morlang observes, that he subconsciously tried to hide among illegible markings from the ‘public and internalised instances of evaluation’, to crouch down below the level of language, to disappear”. That being said, this may have been—for Bereza and Walser alike—a kind of repository for things to be disclosed later, as Sebald argues further: “Still, the system of pencil and pieces of paper is also a defensive fortress that is exceptional to literary history, in which the most minor and innocent things are to survive drowning in the imminent era of greatness” (Sebald 2019: 227–228).

¹⁰ This is one of Bereza’s most recognizable neologisms, coined by the critic to describe the work of Edward Stachura: “Truly, Stachura’s life is life-writing. His writing is identical with his life, one follows from the other, one is the other, it is a unity, an inseparable unity, a complete unity” (Bereza 1978: 312).

As may be seen, there is a distinct subjectivity behind the axiology, which remains stable and essentially unchanging across time and genres, a man espousing a particular philosophy of reading. A specific, living person, as much alive as the utterance of a wordsmith, which, Bereza believed, had to be distinct from the conventionalised dead language of the “dictionaries of correct Polish”¹¹. The notion of a “philosophy of reading” may be inferred from the writings of the critic himself, whose aforementioned manifesto of equality of arts spoke of a “philosophical-aesthetic conviction”, but also based on the intuition of Wiesław Myśliwski who, in a commemorative text, calls Bereza a “critic-philosopher” (Myśliwski 2020: 19), and on the observation of Krzysztof Nowicki, according to whom Bereza created his own school of thinking about literature (Nowicki 1996: 2).

Nonetheless, all literary scholars cited above have in mind a philosophy in the colloquial sense. They do not refer to the academic discipline of practicing science but use the term to denote holding and expressing a certain set of critical literary beliefs. Although a certain systematicity may indeed be involved, as Waław Sadkowski notes in his review of *Prozaiczne Początki* [*Prosaic Beginnings*]:

[...] the marks that Bereza awards to the authors he evaluates, even if they occasionally appear less than perfectly apt, are always the outcome of an internally coherent, thought-out and mature system of critical assumptions¹², which are maximally “open” to literature and all its possible varieties, artistic tendencies and directions (Sadkowski 1972: 28).

Such an enigmatic, flickery and essentially colloquial wording should nevertheless be approached with some suspicion by any researcher. Instead, this brief study sets out to examine Bereza’s oeuvre to find the centre of something that Władysław Stróżewski called the axiological structure of the human being (Stróżewski 2002: 29–30).¹³ Considering that the existence of the author of

¹¹ This is one of Bereza’s key and fundamental formal postulations with respect to prose. In the essay entitled *Dopowiedzenie* [*A Supplement*], the critic asserts: “In dictionaries of correct Polish, acrobatic miracles were performed to find scientific sanction in the recorded results of linguistic freedom from centuries ago, to mould them into a form that would endure permanently, to create a canon of linguistic beauty in literature. [...] All formal transformations in prose (abolition of plot, its flourishing, the disappearance of action, its exuberance, transformations of forms of expression, narrative polyphony) derive from an altered attitude towards language, which restored the right to live, in which such forms life has survived, is triumphantly reintroduced into literature” (Bereza 1982: 14).

¹² Highlighted by author.

¹³ In order to characterise that structure, Stróżewski lists ten propositions: “1) the axiological structure of the human is radically individual; 2) the structure encompasses different types of values (which are not confined to strictly moral values); 3) the structure is hierarchical; 4) the axiological

Sztuka czytania was, as he himself wished, “life-reading”, this can be more accurately described as the core of the axiological structure of the critic.

2.

The presumption that a crystallised axiological structure did, in fact, exist – especially given previously cited observations of Sadkowski’s – raises a certain problem because positing a “coherent and internally thought-out system of critical assumptions” combined with the hypothesis of an unchanging kernel of such a system is, *prima facie*, difficult to reconcile with Bereza’s attitude towards literature described by Leszek Bugajski: “being open to most diverse kinds of literature” (Bugajski 1997: 106). It is readily conceivable that such a cohesive axiology yields a vision of one particular literature. If the latter is compatible with ours, or at least it does not elicit reservations, it may be articulated as Krzysztof Rutkowski suggested: “Henryk Bereza’s activities stem from his premeditated vision of the work of art¹⁴. Because he belongs to a one-man party: the PDSSPU – Partii Dzieła Sztuki Słowa Poza Układami [Party of the Work of Art of the Word Outside the Framework]” (Rutkowski 1996: 53). However, should it prove largely incompatible with our vision, as Andrzej W. Pawluczuk claims: “the author [of *Obrotu*] aspires to be the proponent of the sole truth” (Pawluczuk 1997: 20). One should add, however, that according to Pawluczuk this makes *Obrotu* a flawed book (*ibid.*). Thus, both critics attribute consistency and coherence to Bereza’s work, but while one recognises its positive quality, the other sees it as a shortcoming. In a nutshell, one can either assume that Bereza operates on a stable axiological structure which presupposes a very specific shape of literature (and therefore dismisses any other) or, relying on intuition, open oneself up to artistic and cognitive multiformity.

Nevertheless, I would like to defend the seemingly paradoxical thesis that Bereza’s reviews endorsed and promoted the prose with multiple, often completely

structure encompasses both positive and negative value qualities; 5) the axiological structure comprises both deterministic and indeterministic factors; 6) the axiological structure is dynamic; 7) the axiological structure is dialectical; 8) the axiological structure consists of both current and potential values, as well as reified and postulated ones; 9) the axiological structure may be characterised by both harmony and discord of its elements (values); 10) the axiological structure is teleological: its most important ‘benchmark’ is the human stance towards values” (Bereza 1982: 14).

¹⁴ Highlighted by author.

contradictory facets, while drawing on an underlying unified system of values, despite the fact that he himself questioned its existence and even warned against attempts at its discursive reconstruction:

Not everyone realises that the criteria for evaluating a literary work cannot be catalogued, although many critics dream of it, and even more readers expect them to deliver precisely that. In those dreams, expectations and aspirations, a destructive instinct manifests itself inadvertently. If anyone succeeded in accomplishing what so many desire, communing with literature would mean schematic bookkeeping that would deprive such a communion of any trace of adventure and surprise, thus eliminating the real need for literature (Bereza 1978: 259).

The above should be supplemented with another, complementary, critical principle that Bereza formulated in his review of Adam Fiala's *Zygzakiem po protestej* (1979) published in *Taki układ* [*This Arrangement*]: "Regarding the shape of literature, it is probably impossible to formulate any certainty that cannot be challenged" (Bereza 1981: 364). In effect, we are yet again confronted with two mutually exclusive options: either the definite and predictable system of assessment attributed to Bereza by his commentators, or – as the critic asserted above – extreme relativism and an anarchic (i.e. non-systemic or even anti-systemic) use of axiological intuition in critical work.

This opposition is only seemingly binary since the readers siding with Bereza did not necessarily have in mind a catalogue of values that would petrify or even destroy criticism. Such an inventory may comprise fluctuating values that organise themselves into a system and "fill up" with specific substances only in a finished work of literature. However, no such framework will emerge without a central value. What value might that be? Let us consider, e.g. Krzysztof Mętrak's suggestion: "For him [Bereza], literature represents the highest value." (Mętrak 1967: 107). Having literature itself crown the hierarchy of values admittedly explains little, but the example offers a good starting point to look for something more specific but still general enough not to necessitate opting for single-facet literature. It would probably be best to go to the source and give the floor to the author of *Prozaiczne początki* himself:

One can identify traces of American writings in [Bogdan] Madej's prose¹⁵, though this does not imply any imitation. Bogdan Madej writes in his own way. Above all, it is simple, earthy and colourful. There is no surprise in the words, but they are as if they have lost none of their well-known and tested value. They are real words that mean

¹⁵ The review concerns the collection of short stories entitled *Młodzi dorośli ludzie* (1961).

what they are supposed to mean. This is very much because nothing more should probably be demanded of literature than that the words be true (Bereza 1971: 219).¹⁶

Hence, at this point, which is still obscure, some kind of truth would constitute the *sine qua non* of literature for Bereza, the essential criterion determining whether a given phenomenon deserves to be called literature. At the same time, “this is very much” and may even be everything if nothing else is required of art. It would also be the fundamental and the supreme value, the axiological centre itself. In such a case, artistic prose would be no different from science, which, after all, seeks truth. Science is supposed to yield an objective and comprehensive description of reality, and it is expected to be in keeping with reality itself. At least, that would be the case were it not for Bereza’s unequivocal objection, expressed in *Proza z importu* [*Imported Prose*]:

Everything depends on whether, in the course of acquiring learnedness, one does not forget the fundamental things, namely that art is something different from science, that artistic aptitude is a prerequisite for practicing art, and that it cannot be replaced by anything else (Bereza 1979: 452).

As far as art is concerned, the critic means a different truth than the truth one arrives at through scientific inquiry. The object of knowing in art is not completely external to the cognitive subject since that knowing is mediated by the subject and the particular circumstances. Consequently, the goal of the cognitive endeavour cannot be identical to all those engaging in that pursuit. Thus, the study of external reality is inextricably linked to self-knowledge. In this arrangement (and in *This Arrangement*), the artistic efforts of a writer aim at “soul-knowing”: capturing and communicating the truth of the subject through the medium of art. The definition of “soul-knowing” is laid out in the review of Wiesław Myśliwski’s dramas:

In Myśliwski, no social historiosophy is conceivable without psychology, or better, without soul-knowing, if this term might be used to describe the sum of knowledge about the internal, biologically and socially determined driving forces of human activity (Bereza 1981: 289).

¹⁶ It is worth noting that this general notion of literature and its duties is articulated as an aside in one of the reviews, and not as part of a more general theoretical critical essay. This is a signature trait of Bereza’s writing, highlighted by Myśliwski: “On the face of it, he [Bereza] wrote reviews featured in *Twórczość* in the *Read in Typescript* section. Still, those were not reviews, but little essays, in which he would always go beyond assessing a book and ventured more general remarks about literature” (Myśliwski 2020: 19).

The soul is explored by way of “soul-knowing penetrations”¹⁷, the shape of which may vary as writers develop the most diverse tools for such vivisections. Bereza does not confine his judgments to assessing those tools – meaning all kinds of formal devices – in isolation but makes them contingent on the degree to which they align with the “writing task” that the author took upon themselves. Artistic invention is a secondary value to these assumptions, while the novelty component should be functionalised. Let us now look at how Bereza assessed the authenticity of the subject’s truth conveyed (or not) in artistic prose.

3.

The principle of selecting the correct means for an artistic (and therefore knowledge-yielding) end was already applied in Bereza’s very early critical practice, prior to the compilations of reviews, for example, in his text on *Trans-Atlantyck*: “For his artistic purposes, Gombrowicz created his own syntax, his own vocabulary, his own orthography and his own punctuation” (Bereza 1958: 274). It needs to be stressed that those innovations were all deliberate. According to Bereza, thanks to the novel devices, the writer departed from discursiveness towards artistic language, which is found at the opposite, positive end of the spectrum of ways to articulate thought. This, in turn, enables one to maximise the semantic density of the text and enhance it as a cognitive vehicle, but, as a side effect, it precludes translation. It cannot be rendered into another national language because the experience of a Pole, especially a wordsmith in exile, is comprehensible only to Poles (few of them at that) and – which Bereza considers even more important – the artistic language cannot be reworded into a discursive idiom which is more precise and stable in terms of meaning, but semantically impoverished:

In *Trans-Atlantyck*, it is not the discursive sentences but the artistic vision of the world that conveys the writer’s thoughts. It has to be derived from a description concocted in the Gombrowiczian fashion, from a dialogue noted down in a manner characteristic solely of Gombrowicz, from a monologue which is a Gombrowiczian concentrate of a thousand actual human monologues. More than one sentence in *Trans-Atlantyck* would have to be translated into hundreds of sentences of discursive language (Bereza 1958: 274).

¹⁷ As in the review of Józef Morton’s *Wielkie kochanie*: “Soul-knowing penetrations, contained in the explicit confessions of the peasant Tristan, lay the grounds for (and determine the shape and the dimension of) the moral drama, when the uncompromising judgment and verdict of justice are to be inflicted on the object of love” (Bereza 1978: 88).

Discursiveness and “artisticness” are not distinguished in favour of the latter only by the quantitative criterion, which would enable a culturally significant, complex, nuanced and also subjective experience to be contained in a slimmer volume because the primary distinction lies in quality. Bereza believed in the unique competence of literature and its language. The critic commented more extensively and emphatically on the subject in a paper first delivered at the University of Warsaw in September 1998, where he once again defended the purism of artistic language within literature. It is worth noting that he invoked knowing as a justification, in the belief that that was the only way for literature to unlock its singular potential to gather and communicate otherwise inaccessible knowledge, particularly when compared to other fields:

On the question of the relationship between discursiveness and non-discursiveness in literature, I can reiterate what I have long affirmed: I beg to differ. Against the conscious and inadvertent advocates of service-oriented discursiveness of literature, I argue for its autonomous participation in knowing, that is, for the autonomy of artistic knowing, with its proper modes of cognitive action.

Discursiveness offers no cure for any of literature’s shortcomings, real or perceived.

On the contrary, literature’s lasting chance lies in breaking away from discursiveness, since when it begins to prevail in literature, it deprives the latter of all cognitive fundamentality, making it dependent on the multiple ineffectualities of discourses (Bereza 2018: 56).

Identified and preliminarily described by Bereza, the concept of the event as an essential unit which served Bernard Sztajnert to examine the processes of life in *Księga zdarzeń* (1968) is another example that meets the requirement of correspondence between the formal means and the writer’s pursuit of knowing:

For the purposes of his novel, Sztajnert invented his own exploratory tool, creating his own literarily suggestive system of concepts and metaphors that he employed to structure the entire narrative. The notion of the event in the novel’s conceptual system draws much attention thanks to its functionality and fictional unconventionality (Bereza 1971: 123).

Ultimately, the critic finds this novel to be a “mature writing achievement”, crowning Sztajnert’s “period of conscientious and promising literary apprenticeship” (Bereza 1971: 125).

In contrast, the dialogical narrative in *Nim zajdzie księżyc* by Stanisław Czycz (1968) seems to be negatively assessed in the same collection of reviews, as it is not subordinated to the artistic goal:

This dialogical form of narration [in the stories contained in the volume *Nim zajdzie księżyc*] certainly arose from the desire to further exploit the invention from *And* [1980] and several other pieces in *Ajol* [1967], although in this particular application, it is a form of narration that may be readily judged as artificial or even non-functional¹⁸ (Bereza 1971: 249).

Bereza calls this narrative strategy “an example of the writer’s infatuation’ with form, which one would like to endow with the value of being the only possible and only true form” (Bereza 1971: 249). That flaw in Czycz’s collection of novellas does not affect the critic’s favourable final verdict, but it does shed some light on one of the fundamental assumptions guiding the author of *Prozaiczne pozatki*. Here, I am referring to contextual relativism in the assessment of specific writing solutions. When reviewing the aforementioned *And*, as well as *Listy*, Bereza speaks in nothing but superlatives of the avant-garde quality of the same narrative concept:

I am convinced that Stanislaw Czycz’s prose must be approached as a literary experiment that is remote from any extravagance. There are no sentences in *And* that meet the traditional grammatical and logical rigours of language, and yet everything the author wanted to tell is told here with unassailable precision and logic. *Listy* is written in a language that may shock many, but even so, it is a medium that conveys the personality of the author in an astonishingly vivid fashion (Bereza 1971: 249).

Hence, the factor behind the negative shift in the assessment of the formal measure was not the lack of novelty that had supposedly been exhausted as successive works were being created. After all, Bereza values consistency in the writers’ adherence to the recognizable style which they have developed. By way of contrast – though still drawing on the reviews from the same period – let us highlight a characteristic culinary metaphor in a text about Henryk Bardijewski:

In *Talisman i inne opowiadania* [1965], there is a little bit of everything, everything mixed, like a one-pot dinner. Sometimes it tastes better, sometimes worse. One grows weary of such a dinner faster than of a constantly repeated but very tasty dish. Contrary to appearances, such a stew, despite the variety of ingredients, cannot be so greatly diverse (Bereza 1971: 193).

As an outcome of the writer’s artistic endeavours, the stew is thus a sign of creative indecision and the absence of a distinct authorial mark that would enable one to recognise the creator from a fragment of their prose. Those traits are a weak

¹⁸ Highlighted by author.

point of that work and, in Bereza's opinion, a flaw of writing in general. It is characteristic of "apprentice" writers, who are still seeking their own diction.¹⁹ It may be noted that in the previously cited review of *Trans-Atlantyck*, Bereza calls the work in question "the most Gombrowiczian book by Gombrowicz" (Bereza 1958: 274), which, in the light of the critic's axiology, is in itself a major compliment. However, let us return to Bardijewski. A little further on in the same review, Bereza observes that the author shows a propensity for a peculiar "pan-anthropomorphism". His stories humanise "everything organic, objects, events, abstractions, heaven and earth, the devil and God" (Bereza 1971: 193). For his part, Bereza treats that inclination as a kind of promise, not because he is a particular advocate of anthropomorphism, but precisely because it is perhaps the only manifestation of the artistic consistency in the reviewed volume:

It is in doing so [i.e. anthropomorphism] that the author comes closest to a peculiarity of his own and his own style, except that he lacks the courage to make a permanent ingredient into the only ingredient. As a result, the one-pot dinner would turn into a singular dish whose preparation would require the greatest of efforts. Today, this is the only way today to reveal the individuality of the humourist or satirist (Bereza 1971: 194).

Stanisław Jerzy Lec and Stanisław Zieliński serve the critic as models or benchmarks of assessment and hierarchy in the category of satirical literature. Both develop coherent artistic *modi operandi*, whereby the former "undertook the almost suicidal task of enclosing the world and everything into an aphorism", while the latter "makes an absurd situation – in an infinite number of specific variants – into the building blocks of the world" (Bereza 1971: 194). Both authors would later construct their creative universes according to those artistic visions.

Let us now return to Stanisław Czycz's review. As may be glimpsed from the examples of Gombrowicz, Lec and Zieliński, Bereza sees considerable value in

¹⁹ In various respects, Bereza applied a somewhat different yardstick to debuting authors. For instance, the aforementioned absence of a distinctive style in the early literary efforts would not have disqualified any writer, as they were "cut some slack" in this regard; nevertheless, he considered developing one's own style a value to be striven for. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from the review of Redliński's *Listy z Rabarbaru*: "In *Listy z Rabarbaru* (1967), Redliński did not yet have a clear idea of what he wanted to write. The lack of artistic premeditation that is natural to a debutant [highlighted by author] causes the elements of barely masked spiritual and physical autobiography to coexist with elements of reportage and journalism in *Listy z Rabarbaru*; this coexistence is more or less harmonious only because it is imposed by someone who has immediately been thought of as destined to be a writer, although for now he is only capable of delivering loosely coordinated samples of writing skills in sketching the landscapes of his inner and outer world" (Bereza 1978: 343).

maintaining creative discipline, which applies not only to the means one uses but also to the motifs employed and the themes addressed. It is therefore doubtful that the critic considered the potential of the dialogic narration and grammatical-logical experiments of the author of *Nim zajdzie księżyc* to be exhausted, especially that “[Czyz] resorts to the invention in all moments of literary need” (Bereza 1971: 247). He goes on to exploit the “tools” he rightly used previously, although this time they serve a different task – the description of the paradise lost of the “town boydom”, a description that it “would have been better to justify quite differently” (Bereza 1971: 248–249). A description which is naïve and banal because the protagonist desperately seeks to return to an irretrievably lost paradisiacal past that cannot be resurrected anywhere beyond an artistic vision (Bereza 1971: 248–249). It would, therefore, seem that the only yet crucial factor – because it diametrically changes the assessment of the means employed – is its incompatibility with the aim of the work, namely, the evocation of the lost paradise of youth. Czyz does not arrive at the subjective truth of that paradise because it is a utopian undertaking. The paradise turned out to be an illusory projection that was impossible to recreate.

Given the above, the review’s favourable conclusion may sound somewhat contrary²⁰: “If Czyz’s stories are beautiful – which they are, and in their own way – it is precisely because of the courage it takes to see beauty in banality, wealth in emptiness, value in ignorance” (Bereza 1971: 250).

It is characteristic of Bereza to analyse and evaluate each reviewed work in the strict context of knowledge of the entire oeuvre of the author in question. Invoked in the review of *Nim zajdzie księżyc*, *And*, *Ajol* and *Listy* not only serve to establish a hierarchy of Czyz’s oeuvre, illustrate his consistent artistic development or, conversely, his ongoing formal explorations but also allow the works to be mutually – as well as retrospectively – “illuminated”, with previously unnoticed meanings extracted by the critic. At a certain point, the author of *Prozaiczne początki* engages the context of Czyz’s entire oeuvre, radically changing the optics of *Nim zajdzie księżyc*. The final parts of the review afford a synthetic view of the

²⁰ Leaving aside the ambivalent attitude towards particular solutions in Czyz’s writing, the positive verdict is anything but surprising given Bereza’s entire critical work because he practically did not publish negative reviews. His disapproval was conveyed eloquently enough by the fact that he chose to remain silent about an author. Pluta observes: “From the mid-1970s, Bereza would not write about any new book by Marek Nowakowski, which was unequivocally interpreted as the most scathing review” (Pluta 2015: 166). Meanwhile, Mętrak notes that “much about Bereza’s book [*Sztuka czytania*] may be glimpsed from the selection of authors and the roster of those who are not mentioned there” (1967: 103).

work as a whole, compelling one to appreciate the apparently weaker link in the series and, on the one hand, consider it as a necessary predecessor (content-wise)²¹ of the continuum: “There is no doubt whatsoever that Czycz’s narrator ventures into the paradise of boydom to escape the story and figure of And, that menacing fullness which he embodies” (Bereza 1971: 250) and, on the other to re-examine the assessment alleging utopianism and falsity of the “boydom paradise”:

The boy narrator in *Nim zajdzie księżyc* is a figure created in the imagination of someone paralysed by And and his knowledge. That someone has found asylum in himself as a boy who had but an inkling of And. In any case, he has merely an inkling of everything: himself, others, the world, life, love, and suffering. In fact, he knows nothing yet and has experienced nothing. That perfect innocence of his is proof that he is the product of an imagination which indulges one who seeks respite and asylum (Bereza 1971: 250).

Bereza thus revises the judgment according to which the solutions opted for by Czycz are inapposite. Following his own principle of abandoning all prior literary and artistic convictions, he applies other “measuring devices” to examine the veracity of Czycz’s resurrected paradise. Inferring the inclination to “lose oneself almost frantically to such a vision” from Czycz’s other works, the critic acknowledges the subjective (in either sense) veracity and necessity of that enterprise. Admittedly, a veristic recreation of a paradise lost is doomed to failure, but an artistic record of its idealised projection may testify to a successful “soul-knowing penetration”, which reveals something significant about the subject at a given waypoint on the creative and existential journey.

Hence, the outcome of Czycz’s creative endeavours is positive because the artist came closer to a truth about himself by continuing his quest in *Ajol* and *And*. As noted earlier, Bereza appreciated the determination of artists to find and speak with their own original voice, emphasising that style should be attuned to the subjective truth, not the other way around. At this point of our inquiry, one will readily notice that consistency in the artistic striving to accomplish the “writerly task” was no less important. Indeed, these two aspects are interwoven.

Finally, let us take a look at Bereza’s approach to the work of Anna Kowalska. The critic divides her literary biography into three phases: 1) co-authorship with Jerzy Kowalski (1930s), 2) the search for an independent path in writing (1950s) and 3) balancing the experience (1960s) (Bereza 1978: 166). In the selection of short stories entitled *Bejdula i paradnice* (1961), which comprised works mainly

²¹ i.e., out of keeping with the chronology of writing and publication.

from the second of the aforementioned phases, a sentence in the author's preface draws the particular attention of the reviewer:

One will also be inclined to believe the beautiful admission concluding the preface: "At times, I too hear a perfect story within myself, one whose every sentence has its latent necessity, and the entirety articulates the ultimate for the first time. For above all, oh Reader, I am invariably interested in the pursuit of truth through story" [...].

One could hardly encapsulate the faith in the sense of writing a story more beautifully. It is reasonable to assume that such faith accompanied the author as she wrote everything in *Bejdula i Paradnice* (Bereza 1978: 169).

Cited by Bereza, Kowalska's disclosure corresponds with his own literary axiology to a surprising degree. It emanates from the immutable and aprioristic core of the value structure, which is otherwise relativistic and inductive (in which abandoning all pre-established literary and artistic convictions is indispensable). Bereza considers this sentence a touchstone of Kowalska's development as a writer:

Let us assume, however, that Anna Kowalska is trying to arrive at the truth in each story and that she is pursuing her idea of the perfect story. This is how the matter certainly stands, at any rate. Thus, we have a fairly abundant assortment of such creations, which are not and cannot be recognised by the writer herself for what she has in mind, but each time testify to what she is striving towards [...]

They [mostly later stories] demonstrate that Kowalska's literary dream of each story having its own latent necessity came ever closer to being realised (Bereza 1978: 170).

The "let us assume" articulated in the imperative at the beginning of the above quotation would be at odds with Bereza's *a posteriori* principle, were it not for the fact that the assumption is not absolute but formulated ad hoc, for the purposes of that particular collection of short stories; most importantly, it originated with the writer, was read from her preface and treated as an interpretative guideline. The author of *Związki naturalne* tests the artistic veracity of those stories by creating his own "measuring devices" on the spot because this is not a matter of objective truth, or Bereza's truth, but of accompanying Kowalska in her attempts to attain her own truth, since, as the critic observes in his review of Mieczysław Piotrowski's *Cztery sekundy*, that "every person, whoever they are, creates their own image of themselves, their own image of the experienced fate, their own image of the world in which they exist"²² (Bereza 1978: 186). In this case, the

²² Highlighted by author.

concurrence of views on the essential duty of literature in Kowalska and Bereza is – if one may put it that way – coincidental and does not justify a flattering review. It must be stressed that being one's companion in such attempts is in itself a kind of experiment. The knowledge thus acquired is highly uncertain and provisional:

Regrettably, it did not become the author [Anna Kowalska] to confide which of the stories she had written – to her inner aesthetic sense – was closest to the perfect story she had heard within herself. I understand that the question is too delicate to be answered at all. The reader, let alone the critic, is entitled to ask themselves such a question, and their situation is compounded by the fact that the literary notion of the perfect story can be nothing more to them than a conjecture which remains unverifiable in any sense. This is one of the utterly insurmountable ineptitudes of criticism (Bereza 1978: 169–170).

4.

Having thus elaborated on and underpinned the hypothesis formulated from the standpoint of reception of Henryk Bereza's criticism, which presumes the existence of a stable core of his axiological structure, one may venture to claim that the subjective truth of the subject – the writer's unique vision of the world verbalised through creative effort – was the crux of his comprehensive interest in artistic prose. If such a truth is adopted as an aesthetic axiom, the formal shape of the work, as well as any innovations, are assessed in terms of their compliance with that goal.

The structuring of such an axiological system is quite peculiar in that it resembles a laboratory centrifuge. The array of particular values which constitute the aesthetic periphery is unique in each of Bereza's reviews, while the centripetal, i.e. centre-oriented truth of a given writer, seems to be the only invariable factor that organises all the elements, even though it is the lightest and most elusive component. However, one reservation that has to be made is that the notion is "empty" content-wise, relative, having more in common with the notion of a category rather than an object, as it is up to the writer to decide what they would place in that centre.²³ It seems, therefore, that the author of *Sztuka czytania* was as

²³ Still, even that alleged creative freedom should be provided with a major caveat because the critic was fairly convinced of the deterministic nature of the truth of the subject, which entailed the writer's obligation to be faithful to their land, to their first world: "[...] the writer is imprisoned in their inner first world; they cannot be free of it, even if they wanted or had to; indeed, they should

much a systemic critic (the core of his axiological structure was stable) as he was anti-systemic because he would leave much scope in his assessments for multiple, fluctuating formal solutions used by writers to shape the aesthetic periphery of their works.

The goal that Bereza set himself as a reviewer was to arrive – preferably in one or two sentences – at an essential statement of “what is this book about?” and subsequently appraise the extent to which the literary task had been accomplished. In practice, this consisted of assessing whether the arrangement of individual values supported the central one. Naturally, the sequence of those steps was also important. In a review of Buczkowski’s *Pierwsza świetność*, the critic underlined that the preliminary and necessary measure is to identify all the “master plan of the novel” only to embark on the evaluation afterwards²⁴:

In connection with the short stories *Młody poeta w zamku*, I mention that Buczkowski doubts the cognitive powers of the human mind and the perpetuating power of art. The tragedy of his doubt (tragedy, because the writer is far from being reconciled to such a situation) is played out in every sentence of *Pierwsza świetność* and constitutes the master plan of this work. When one does not understand or even perceive that plan, there is no point in trying to comment on a text as puzzling as *Pierwsza świetność*. The riddle of this text cannot be solved at all, while suggesting a solution which omits its basic elements is even less advisable (Bereza 1978: 158).

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neither want nor have to; they should nurture it within themselves, cultivate and enrich it, they should guard it as if it were the source of their life and work” (Bereza 1981: 8). Hence, the pursuit of the truth of the subject is a form of knowing rather than self-creation.

²⁴ Bereza speaks of it explicitly in *Wyznania [Confessions]*, a sketch in the collection *Bieg rzeczy*: “The result of the work of the spirit must meet the work of the spirit, so that the act of recognition and understanding may take place so that the risk of value judgment can be taken [highlighted by author]” (Bereza 1982: 35).

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