

Death, Resurrection, Death

The Modern Poland Foundation presents a podcast titled: *Death, Resurrection, Death*.

The poetry of Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, the most famous of the young poets who died tragically in World War Two, is not easy to interpret. The difficulty, however, doesn't stem from the use of very complicated literary forms. After the first few poems we get accustomed to the most extraordinary characteristic of his style: multi-level images and metaphors, reaching deep into the floral or underwater world, so as to contrast them with war and destruction. The readers also easily get used to his slightly wobbly, not strictly grammatical syntax. We don't even notice it, while engrossed in the imagery, rhythm and melody of the poems.

There's something else that discourages from interpreting those poems. The direct, immediate effect they have on the readers, using the images, sounds and atmosphere, makes it seem as if everything in them was understandable at first glance. That's why Baczyński's poetry is gladly read, but rarely carefully interpreted – which it decidedly deserves. Instead, we tend to talk more about the author: a tragic figure of a poet and a soldier, who died on the fourth day of the Warsaw Uprising, in the fight for the Blank's Palace.

The discussion surrounding the sense of sacrifice made by Baczyński is a reflection of the more general debate on the Warsaw Uprising. It's one thing to consider the fate of the whole generation: 16 thousand of its representatives died fighting and a certain number perished along with 150 thousand civilian victims of the Uprising – and it's a different thought process when you think of one particular, extremely talented individual. Professor Stanisław Pigoń, a literary historian, criticised Baczyński's decision to join the underground Home Army very harshly: "Well, it's our fate as a nation to shoot diamonds at the enemy". The poet himself got furious with another prominent Polish literature expert, professor Kazimierz Wyka, just a few days before the beginning of the Uprising, when the latter suggested Baczyński should "save himself for posterity". The academic recalled what the poet said then: "You should know why I have to go if there's fighting. Not everyone would, but you – knowing and understanding my work so well – you have to understand me too!".

It's time to get back to literature. The human, emotional or political charge of the exchange above should not obscure the fact that we see a poet who is just saying that he wants the reader to understand his works. He believes that his poetry is the most precise explanation of his decision to fight. Thus, his poetry should not convey just atmosphere, but also rational decision-making. It should be something the reader can study and question.

One of Baczyński's poems shares the title of Mickiewicz's manifesto ballad from 1821 – *Romanticism*. The poem of the predecessor questioned the nature of truth, or the correct means of perceiving the world. The poet concluded that the mad girl and the truth of her emotion toward the phantom of her lover are more important than the visible reality and its scientifically measurable truths. Baczyński complicates the original; he shows that such easy contrasts are incompatible with reality distorted by war:

No need to dream – to see flame in clouds,
see hands with no arms? No dream either.

War is a disaster also in the epistemological sense: it becomes impossible to understand the world, which starts to resemble a nightmare. Baczyński is a master of oneiric imagery. In one of the earlier poems, written at the age of 20 and titled *World dream*, he addressed the reader: “now you just dream / blinding dream of thunder, harm and shine”, and then convinced himself: “but I’ll wake up but I’ll wake up”. However, in *Romanticism*, the nightmarish atmosphere is not just a question of style. If we assume that the poem is happening in the world turned into a nightmare, the paths of possible interpretations become very disturbing.

We need to understand the basis of reference between the 19th century original and Baczyński’s poem. In the wartime poem there is no representative of rational thought – since there’s no place for reason during the war. There are no witnesses to the scene, and it’s written from the perspective of thoughts and emotions – both poetic and ignoring their surroundings. In the second and third line, the lyrical subject asks:

Give me your hands, love, that’s what they’re for,
to close them up like a circle.

In Mickiewicz’s poem, mad Karusia is asked:

What is it that you are grabbing?
Who’re you calling? Who’re you greeting?

I don’t quote those fragments just to exemplify the difference in style, although it’s quite striking here. In *Ballads and Romances* Mickiewicz writes as simply as possible, while in Baczyński’s poetry, asking for a simple gesture turns into a sophisticated, speculative image. Among many symbolic meanings of the circle, the most relevant one here would be the protective circle in magic. Love that stays alive while the war destroys the world needs such protection, or maybe creates it.

A simple interpretation of Baczyński’s *Romanticism* would end with this exact conclusion. However, juxtaposition of the two fragments of the poems suggests another, darker interpretation. If the reference to Mickiewicz’s original is supposed to make any sense in the plot of the poem, if Baczyński really wanted to remind us of the romantic ballad about a phantom – then, by asking his lover to give him her hands, the subject positions himself as the ghost – a dead man. Similarly to Mickiewicz, the lover is supposed to touch a corpse. And life? In this poem, the very fact of being alive is considered surprising:

To believe in growth, to see it? What is it
when it stretches and there’s dawn above it?

Out of many possible perspectives of reading Baczyński, I choose this one now. It’s poetry of surprise with the fact that life is still possible. A poetry where the charming poetic images, all those impressive lighting effects, “veins of light on walls”, “girls that changed into flock of birds” - all this gets inevitably confronted with macabre. If any of those elements were missing, Baczyński’s poetry would be incomplete. Their coexistence is clearly visible in the first four lines of the poem *With a head on a rifle*, often appearing in anthologies or selections:

At night I hear it, ever closer
shivering and playing, ring is closing.



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But I was chiselled by water springs,
But I was rocked by clouds in cradle.

What we can already see in the poems is vulnerability, premonition of death, or even – as we observed in *Romanticism* – talking as if already from beyond the veil. The war itself would be enough to elicit such emotions, but there's more in Baczyński's case. This grandson of the January Uprising participant, son of a Polish Legions officer and a mother to whom he addressed his religious poetry – according to German legislation, he was a Jew; definitely on his mother's side, probably on the father's, too. It's more complicated with his father, sometimes referred to with a surname "Bittner", who died right before the start of World War Two. He worked in secret organisations, then in counterintelligence. How could you ask an intelligence agent about his personal data?

Anyway, the Jewish identity in case of Baczyński is indisputable, just as much as his Polish identity. Because of the latter, when the occupying authorities issued a disposition on resettlement of Jews into the ghetto in October 1940, the poet and his family stayed in the Polish part of the city. It was a highly risky decision – if their ethnicity was exposed, they could be killed on the spot. Baczyński was never reported by anyone, but in one of the critical reviews of his poetry published in underground magazine "Art and Nation" an ugly allusive phrase read: "Foreign coachman, you hasten your horse with a whip of decadent atmosphere".

Thus, it's not surprising that when Baczyński addressed Jewish issues in his poetry, he did so in a very cautious manner. In a longer poem titled *Shadow from the Camp*, where a ghost of an imprisoned son appears to his mother, the character's ethnicity is not mentioned at all. The poetic, demiurgic gestures performed by the phantom might suggest that the author saw himself as the prisoner:

It was spring. With his hands – where a flame died –
he poured light into the air – until it stood like vessel
full of fire that came alive. He lead his mother upwards
– where crystalline ceilings melted like ice.

Another poem, interesting for us here because of Jewish references, starts with the following lines:

You were like a grand, old tree
- my nation, like courageous oak.

This time, the information on which nation Baczyński refers to is encoded in the date when the poem was written. It's not stated plainly anywhere, but it's not difficult to guess who was suffering before and now starts fighting. There is a date below the poem: April 1943. That's when the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started. The poem concludes with foreseeing the Uprising, as if the poet saw it as the peak of the Jewish history of occupation:

You'll resurrect like God from grave
with hurricane breath by your brow,
arms of the earth in front of you
will open. My people! To arms!

The final call sounds so ecstatic that it's easy to overlook a very peculiar expression: "arms of the earth in front of you / will open", meaning descending into death. It creates a striking contrast with the resurrection two lines above. But this vision is historically accurate: the Jews in the ghetto started the uprising fully aware of the fact that there's no chance of winning: the Nazi action of ghetto liquidation meant that the only alternative was the Treblinka extermination camp.

This interpretation is obscured by cultural code used by the poet – namely, Polish messianism. It's a belief held by Romanticist poets, according to whom Poland was "the Christ of the nations" and the partitions were a sacrifice leading to salvation. Baczyński used this slightly outdated metaphor to talk about the extermination of Jews. It must have seemed insufficient to him, however, since a story of death and resurrection turned into the unsettling sequence of death-resurrection-death.

Tomasz Żukowski¹ saw a reference to the Holocaust in another Baczyński's poem. It's one of the most famous ones, too – *Rain*; its musical version was sung by Ewa Demarczyk. Indeed, in the verse below we can see a lament of someone who survived while aware of the fact that he could have been in one of the trains headed to Auschwitz:

The trains keep going away and away
without you. So? Without you. So?
to gardens of waters, lakes of regret,
to leaves, to alleys of glass roses.

We often ask what would Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński's role be in Polish literature had he not died so prematurely. After what we said here, we could change that question: what would his poetry be like if he didn't have to obscure and encode the Jewish motives, if he could state them openly. The highly refined metaphors of Baczyński would probably be on the other end of the scale from the ascetic style of Tadeusz Różewicz referring to his war trauma. How would those two compare? Unfortunately, we will never know.

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1 http://rcin.org.pl/Content/52747/WA248_68643_P-I-2524_zukow-kregiem.pdf