# The returns of Henryk Bereza

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At the turn of the second and third decades of the 21st century, there was a marked increase in interest in Henryk Bereza's critical-literary legacy. This renewed attention extended to critics from the younger generation.. This is evidenced not only by the facts of the institutional-publishing order (viz. extensive editions of Bereza's critical works) but also by the attention recently devoted to the author of *Sztuka czytania* [*The art of reading*] by online literary publications and the accompanying lively reactions of critics of the youngest generation. Such favourable conditions for a re-reading of Bereza's texts have been created by a few factors, which I will try to discuss briefly. I will consider the context in which the Warsaw critic returns and the roles in which he is cast by the way of his return, that is, how his person and his work are presented by the authors who cite him. Perhaps this will bring us closer to deciding the purpose of invoking Bereza in contemporary literary criticism.

Certainly, one of the reasons why Bereza's achievements have regained the attention of literary criticism was the publication of two collections of his essays and reviews: *Alfabetyczność*[1] [*Alphabeticity*] and *Wypiski ostatnie*[2] [*Final notes*]. *Alfabetyczność*, published in 2018, is a kind of compendium containing Bereza's most important texts published throughout his critical activity. *Wypiski ostatnie*, published in 2020, is a collection of short notes, covering the author's immediate reactions to his readings. Both publications belong to a larger publishing project[3],

[1] Henryk Bereza, Alfabetyczność [Alphabeticity], ed. by Paweł Orzeł (Warsaw: PIW, 2018).

[2] Henryk Bereza, Wypiski ostatnie [Final notes], ed. by Paweł Orzeł (Warsaw: PIW, 2020).

[3] The aforementioned project also includes Bereza's collection of poetry, Sprawa wyboru [The issue of choice] (Warszawa: PIW, 2022) (which, incidentally, went virtually unnoticed in comparison with his previous publications), as well as two planned publications: Zgrzyty [Discords], a collection of poetry announced for 2022, and Oniriada [The Oniriad], a dream journal announced for 2026.

which Paweł Orzeł – the editor and initiator – calls the "radical Bereza series"[4] . The creation of these publications is described by Orzeł as a long and arduous – almost heroic – labour, but also an extremely rewarding adventure. It involved negotiations with an understandably reluctant publisher, hours spent sorting out, deciphering and rewriting manuscripts, and confrontations with people from Bereza's circle, each of whom had a slightly different vision of what the book should contain and what its title should be. He candidly states: "these books (*Alfabetyczność, Wypiski ostatnie, Sprawa wyboru…*) are more mine than Henryk's"[5]. In a word, the creation story of the "Bereza series" is at the same time the story of the editor's close relationship with Henryk Bereza and his fascination with the person and his work.

Paweł Orzeł cites these incidents in a very personal and almost sentimental memoir included in the 2021 thematic issue of "Wizje", dedicated to Bereza on his 95th birthday[6]. Apart from Orzeł's article, the issue includes texts by Bohdan Zadura and Krzysztof Bielecki, who reminisce on Bereza and comment on his work. Of course, this is not the first journal to undertake the task of reminding the readers about the legendary critic: in 2013, a thematic issue devoted to Bereza was prepared by "eleWator"[7] (a journal published by the Henryk Bereza Foundation), whereas "Konteksty"[8] published a thematic block in 2015. However, there are a few reasons why it is worth paying attention to "Wizje" and "Mały Format" in particular, the latter of which announced its "Bereza" issue in 2018[9], coinciding with the publication of *Alfabetyczność*. Firstly, in both cases we are dealing with a new periodical ("Wizje" was founded in 2018, "Mały Format" in 2017), which predominantly feature young authors shortly after their critical debut, they are published exclusively in digital form and are aimed mainly at audiences of the younger and middle generation. Moreover, Henryk Bereza is the only critic to have had dedicated thematic issues of these journals. "Mały Format" had previously devoted entire issues to Jolanta Brach-Czaina[10], Wiesław Juszczak[11] and Adam Ważyk[12] , as well as individual articles on, for example, Jan Błoński[13] or Kacper Bartczak[14],

[4] Paweł Orzeł, "a few snotty words between Henryk and Henryk (bozzetto)', Wizje, 27.10.2021, https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/orzel-bereza/.

[5] Orzeł.

[6] "Special issue: 95th birthday of Henryk Bereza", Wizje, 27.10.2021, https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/numer-specjalny-henryk-bereza/.

[7] eleWator 3 (2013).

[8] Konteksty 3 (2015).

[9] „Co po Berezie?" [„What after Bereza?"] series, Mały Format 6 (2018), http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-co-po-berezie/.

[10] "Szczeliny istnienia" ["Crevices of existence"] series, Mały Format 4 (2018), http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-szczeliny-istnienia/.

[11] „Wieslaw Juszczak" series, Mały Format 3 (2018), http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-wieslaw-juszczak/.

[12] "Jestem chłonącą katodą!" ["I am an absorbing cathode!"] series, Mały Format 9-10 (2022), http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-jestem-chlonaca-katoda/.

[13] In 2017, on the 30th anniversary of the publication of the essay Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto [The poor Poles look at the Ghetto], a conversation with Jacek Leociak was published ("Ja, Żyd Nowego Testamentu. Z Jackiem Leociakiem rozmawia Andrzej Frączysty") [„I, a New Testament Jew. Jacek Leociak interviewed by Andrzej Frączysty"], Maly Format 6 (2017), http://malyformat.com/2017/06/ja-zyd-nowego-testamentu/.

[14] Excerpts from his book of essays, published in 2020, were accompanied by the conversation "Przybornik indywiduacji. Z Kacprem Bartczakiem rozmawia Andrzej Frączysty", [„A toolbox of individuation. Kacper Bartczak interviewed by Andrzej Frączysty"], Mały Format 3 (2020), http://malyformat.com/2020/03/przybornik-indywiduacji/.

but Henryk Bereza is the first literary critic to feature among this group. The introductory article makes it clear that for the editors Bereza is a *pars pro toto* of Polish literary criticism – he serves as its embodiment, even if not a representative or emblematic one, yet certainly highly interesting and one which lends itself as material for a case study. The editors write that "instead of announcing an issue about literary criticism, or – even worse – "the state of literary criticism", we prefer to deal with a specific case. "Material for interpretation" was provided by the lifelong critical activity of Henryk Bereza".[15]

Given that the Orzeł belongs to the 1980s generation, we can venture a claim that the attention Bereza has received in recent years is a product of the efforts on the part of younger generation – those who were born after 1980 and after 1990 – and proof that this generation has assimilated his works, expressing their (at least symbolic) approval. It is worth examining these texts to see what image of Bereza they convey, what hopes are pinned today on a reinterpretation of his works and what potential alliances might result from it all. Most importantly, Bereza is represented as a critic misunderstood to some extent and unfairly judged. In his text, Andrzej Śnioszek (b. 1987) quotes Stanisław Lem, who complained about the linguistic experimentation of the prose promoted by Bereza, calling it "linguistic gallantry – the polishing of pretty pendants on the tongue"[16]. He also cites a very unflattering statement by Jan Zieliński, who in his review of the book *W barszczu przygód* [*In the borscht of adventures*] reads the formal procedures of Marek Słyk (i.e. one of the main representatives of the "artistic revolution" in prose of the 1970s and 1980s) in terms of "linguistic incompetence" resulting from ignorance[17]. For Śnieszek both statements are clear examples of misunderstanding the aims of the "artistic revolution" literature and the means employed by it. He argues that Bereza associated them primarily with breaking up fossilised linguistic forms, undermining the codes of correct Polish, which petrify literary language, and replacing them with "living speech", unlearning linguistic thoughtlessness and raising awareness of the incompatibility of a dead language with the world.

Read today, Bereza thus turns out to be an ally of authors continuing the avant-garde traditions of artistic experimentation. It seems quite natural and perhaps even surprising that Bereza did not appear earlier in the critical reception of such authors as Adam Kaczanowski, Marcin Mokry, Cezary Domarus, Robert Rybicki or Konrad Góra. Critics of these authors often invoke strategies like breaking linguistic habits and challenging automatisms, especially in poetry. These approaches align with Bereza's propositions about the nature of language and the necessity of its revision.. As Andrzej Śnioszek writes:

> So, what is liberation all about? One needs to challenge the dictatorship of the norm, which in many cases means turning life upside down. The long-ordered world suddenly loses its uniqueness and validity. At first we are shocked, but the next moment we see glimpses of other, differently ordered worlds. We discover that they were not created by the whim of

[15]"Co po Berezie? – Od redakcji" ["What after Bereza? - From the editors"], Mały Format 6 (2018), http://malyformat.com/2018/06/od-redakcji-3/.

[16]Andrzej Śnioszek, "Henryk Bereza jako terapeuta" ["Henryk Bereza as a therapist"], Mały Format 6 (2018), http://malyformat.com/2018/06/henryk-bereza-jako-terapeuta/.

[17]Śnioszek.

> hacks, although this much has been suggested so far. The effort of creation was particularly arduous. A new world requires new operators. Here one cannot copy from reality, since the whole of reality – a set of elements, and relations between them – is sometimes created from imagination. [...] The manifestations of language games are manifestations of spiritual freedom.[18]

The claim about the topicality of Bereza's postulates and their potential links with contemporary attempts at linguistic experimentation is confirmed in Andrzej Szpindler's text[19], which appeared a year after the publication of *Alfabetyczność*. In an extensive essay, Szpindler discusses the entirety of Słyk's work and reports on the accompanying critical dispute. He presents it as a story of the failure of the mainstream to understand the prose of the author of *W barszczu przygód* and its attempts to denigrate it. Bereza, who was the spokesman for that work, is presented as the one who was right from the very beginning of the dispute. Given the experimental form of Szpindler's essay (it is reminiscent of the author's prose) and the writer's consistently post-avant-garde technique, it is difficult not to read his text as approval for Bereza's perspective and a declaration of ideological affinity with him. At the same time, Szpindler brings Bereza into contemporary criticism by applying the categories and judgments from *Związki naturalne* [*Natural unions*] to current debates about literature's condition.. This is accompanied by a suggestion that any discussion of linguistic innovation and the role of unleashed imagination in contemporary literature can and should take into account Bereza's arguments from half a century ago. A similar claim appears in Justyna Sobolewska's statement from a survey by the editors of "Mały Format": "the artistic revolution [...] is happening all the time; the only change are the writers who undertake it"[20]. In that same survey Jakub Skurtys also points to the timelessness of Bereza's ideas:

> when one reads the following passage from *Bieg rzeczy* [*The course of things*]: "Everything that is happening in the poetry and prose of the twentieth century is a rediscovery of the living language, a revolt against the self-rule of written language, a liberation of the language of imagination and speech from the terror that made the graveyards of words impose their law of death on the life of language", one feels like shouting: oh yes! Add capitalism and the notion of commodification, and the promise of "the living speech" turns out to be an ever liberating, emancipatory promise, repeated like a mantra by cultural theorists.[21]

A trail of a radical revision of language leads in a completely different direction in Michał Trusewicz's (b. 1995) "birthday text". Here, Bereza appears as someone akin to a postmodern revolutionary: he calls for a literature that multiplies possibilities, capable of challenging *the status quo* by dismantling linguistic norms.

[18]Śnioszek.

[19]Andrzej Szpindler, „Ciągłość daleko poza nią samą. Pokażcie choć, kto istnieje!" ["Continuity far beyond itself. At least show us who exists!"], Mały Format 6 (2019), http://malyformat.com/2019/06/szpindler-slyk/.

[20]Jakub Nowacki, "Co po Berezie? – Ankieta literacka" ["What after Bereza? - A literary survey"], Mały Format 6 (2018), http://malyformat.com/2018/06/berezie-ankieta-literacka/.

[21]Nowacki.

> It seems obvious that for Henryk Bereza humans live in language, that they play and learn in it. It is not about obscurantist games of slips of the tongue or artistic encapsulation, but about the sudden intrusion of an unannounced guest into the space of language, questioning obvious connections between words and things. The guest – this sudden anacoluthon, this unannounced loosening of grammar – establishes a host, i.e. a subject who manages the private and collective vocabulary of terms describing reality. Writers valued by Bereza, such as Marek Słyk, are supposed to play the role of teachers *á rebours* – they should unlearn the habits of cataloguing the world. Language is a matter that can be vividly reworked, making other worlds possible.[22]

It is not entirely clear whether Trusewicz, writing about language as that which makes "other worlds possible", sees literature as a tool for changing social reality or merely a tool for creating alternative imaginary realities. To a certain degree, his text implies each of these possibilities. On the one hand, he notes that Bereza's proposal is "a praise of the possibility and infinity of literary worlds"[23], i.e. of the power of fiction to create images and narratives. At other times, he writes that reading literature "Bereza-style" would involve following "glimpses of other realities, adjacent to the one that, by some strange coincidence, was declared obligatory"[24], which would in turn suggest that what is at stake is an alternative to the real, existing social order – a "different" version of the "obligatory" reality, i.e. one that could replace our reality. This dilemma could be resolved by assuming that social reality is linguistically (or, more generally, culturally, symbolically) mediated, so that there is no fundamental difference between the social order and the discursive order. This is the direction that Trusewicz seems to be aiming at: in his perspective Bereza appears to be an advocate for social change taking place through a change in language, that change involving a turn away from hegemonic discourses. Trusewicz goes on to write:

> [T]he norm [...] is determined by dictionaries, constantly petrifying our ways of thinking about the world. As it turns out, neoliberal realism today is all about upholding the ban on alternative realities. "There is no alternative", says Margaret Thatcher, the guardian-symbol of codices and norms, although she can be circumvented by widening the field of language, which ruptures the corsets of ideological and economic nomenclature with a bang.[25]

In this vision freedom is about trying to find a subversive way of describing the world. "Let us therefore read a liberated Bereza, who questions the dictatorship of norms, turns language upside down and shows that foundations are only moving concepts, substituted by the power of discourse"[26], as the author concludes. The demand to replace dead language with living speech, put forward by Bereza in his texts on the artistic revolution, here feeds into the Foucauldian privileging of reflection on the "power of discourse" over the analysis of the material conditions of existence underlying social relations. Bereza thus proves to be a practitioner of a critique of ideology, guided by the assumption that "the mere erosion

[22]Michał Trusewicz, "Odsłanianie niewiadomego" ["Unveiling the unknown"], Wizje, 27.10.2021, https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/trusewicz-bereza/.

[23]Trusewicz.

[24]Trusewicz.

[25]Trusewicz.

[26]Trusewicz.

of the monolith of speech [...] is already a critique of a unifying discourse"[27]. It is not the purpose of this essay to decide whether the above-quoted statements accurately capture ideas close to Bereza. However, it is worth pointing out that some of ideas of his ideas, cited by Trusewicz in support of the above-mentioned "possibility" interpretation, which was inspired by post-structural philosophy, are taken out of context. Sentences like: "It remains unknown what else will become ridiculous. The unveiling of the unknown is one of the main meanings of literature. Always and of every single one. Including the one under consideration here", conclude one of the sections of Bereza's essay about the peasant current[28], which does not discuss alternative realities at all, but simply contains Bereza's speculations on the artistic path taken by the writers he describes.

Maciej Libich moves in a slightly different direction, no longer on the pages of "Wizje", but in his review of *Wypiski ostatnie* for "Twórczość"[29]. He, too, points to Bereza's aversion to ideology, although instead of emphasising the decisive role of discourse and its criticism, he sees in the sensibility of Bereza as a reader an inspiration for the expansion and multiplication of literary and critical vocabularies.

> Although I would not like to make Bereza a hostage of the current political dispute between, to put it very simply, what is collective and what is individual, it seems to me that in general *Wypiski* are a manifestation of a profoundly autonomous, not to say liberal, thought, sensitive to an individual voice, the individual truth of man, which is expressed in an equally individualised language. And I am willing to risk the claim that it is precisely this kind of criticism that we need today.[30]

The usefulness of Bereza's criticism thus lies in the possibility of inventing a new language, free of the usual, worn-out patterns, which would make it possible not so much to transform reality (in Libich's perspective, reality is more resistant to change than it was for Trusewicz) as to describe it more successfully. A contemporary revision of critical language inspired by Bereza could start from, as Libich writes, "not exaggerating the economic perspective, not sticking to one dictionary, but expanding it with a concept from the field of, say, psychoanalysis. "Replace 'economy' with 'libidinal economy' – and see what happens next"[31]. If, then, Bereza's notion of artistic revolution is seen today as still carrying important consequences for literary criticism, these would entail the need to refresh the languages of literature and criticism as tools of resistance. This resistance would have to be against – as in Trusewicz – the non-alternative nature of the global order, or – as in Libich – against a narrow critical perspective which reduces literary problems to economic ones.

The peasant current, another key concept by the Warsaw critic, has also gained contemporary interest, though it carries a paradox. A crucial context for Bereza's return and undoubtedly

[27]Trusewicz.
[28]Henryk Bereza, "Nurt chłopski w prozie" ["The peasant current in prose"], in his Alfabetyczność, 159.
[29]Maciej Libich, "Bereza. Encore", Twórczość 10 (2021).
[30]Libich.
[31]Libich.

one of the factors responsible for the revival of interest in his critical proposals is the so-called plebeian turn in contemporary humanities, which began in the second decade of the 21st century and proceeded along several lines. On the one hand, it was associated with the public debate in the liberal press, which focused on the revision of peasantry, i.e., among other things, the forgotten peasant genealogy of Polish society and its imagined noble origins, class contempt, the legacy of serfdom, the shame associated with provincial origins and the marginalisation of the countryside. In part, these debates had their own dynamics and were a reaction to activist artistic projects, such as the album *Pieśni buntu i niedoli* [*Songs of revolt and misery*] by the band RUTA or the play *W imię Jakuba S*. [*In the name of Jakub S*.] *by* Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski. In part they reflected the reception of publishing proposals that belonged to the same revisionary trend: books by Jan Sowa[32], Andrzej Leder[33], and later by Adam Leszczyński[34] and Kacper Pobłocki[35]. On the other hand, we witnessed an analogous phenomenon in the literary field, i.e. successive books taking up the issue of peasant origins, constructing portraits of the contemporary countryside and programmatically espousing a provincial context (to name but Maciej Płaza, Wioletta Grzegorzewska, Maciej Muszyński or Weronika Gogola). The editors of "Mały Format" point to the importance of this context in the already mentioned introductory article of the issue devoted to Bereza, where they note that since "there is more and more talk about the return of the 'peasant trend' in Polish prose, [...] it is worth going back to the sources of this trend, which – as the author of *Związki naturalne* consistently repeated – are to be found in language, or more precisely: in 'the first language'"[36]. This much was also acknowledged in the survey carried out by the editors of the journal: Magdalena Rabizo-Birek speaks of Bereza's "almost prophetic insight" that the peasant current "is by no means over and exhausted, that we can expect its reopening"[37]. She sees the fulfilment of the predictions in the prose of Karpowicz, Płaza, Grzegorzewska, Stasiuk and Tokarczuk. She also writes that "Bereza was a persistent precursor of the 'peasant turn' in Polish culture, an opponent of exposing and exploiting exclusively the noble-intellectual part of Polish tradition"[38]. The author of the concept of 'the peasant trend' is thus directly linked to the current debate, and clearly picks a side. Justyna Sobolewska makes similar observations, pointing to what she identifies as Bereza's characteristic "accuracy of observations on general matters". "Indeed," writes the critic, "the 'peasant current' or what appears today in writing about the countryside – is powerful, perhaps the most important current in Polish literature"[39] .

Commentators who see in Bereza's proposals a foreshadowing of later phenomena and who try to apply his diagnoses to the contemporary situation in the literary and cultural field seem to forget, however, what specific hopes the critic had for the peasant current and what

[32]Jan Sowa, Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą [The phantom body of the king. Peripheral struggles with modern form] (Krakow: Universitas, 2011).

[33]Andrzej Leder, Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej. [Sleepwalking the revolution. An exercise in historical logic] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014).

[34]Adam Leszczyński, Ludowa historia Polski [A people's history of Poland] (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2020).

[35]Kacper Pobłocki, Chamstwo [Boorishness] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2022).

[36]„Co po Berezie? – Od redakcji".

[37]Nowacki.

[38]Nowacki.

[39]Nowacki.

interested him in it. As Andrzej Skrendo rightly points out in his attempt at explaining that concept[40], the contradiction inherent to it, with which Bereza never really dealt, is a product of a strictly genetic understanding of the term. Bereza speaks of a peasant 'current', rather than a 'theme', to emphasise that he means an 'expressive', rather than 'explanatory' literature. The latter, which construes fictional folklore for a bourgeois audience, is, in Bereza's perspective, an essentially paternalistic phenomenon. On the other hand, the identity of the peasant trend is determined by "peasant social genealogy or particularly close links with the peasantry"[41], which make common features of the writers included by Bereza in the aforementioned artistic trend manifest themselves in "the convergence of certain social, existential and cultural experiences, in inclinations of thought and aesthetics, in predispositions of imagination, in attitudes to language, in a kind of moral sensitivity"[42]. Such perspective, as Bereza admits, "excludes complete voluntarism"[43]: peasant literature is thus an expression, or better, a function of social genealogy. The author of *Alfabetyczność* is clearly in favour of the "social history of literature"[44] perspective, which assumes that, as Skrendo writes, "genealogy matters because literature is born in a world of social divisions"[45]. The writer is subject to a certain social determination, which, is simultaneously a condition for the authenticity of the effects of his literary work. It is on this determination, then, that the authenticity of the whole peasant current, which Bereza valued so highly, also depends. Therefore, for the author of *Związki naturalne* peasant prose was not a tool for discovering, constructing or revising identity, but rather a resultant of experiences arising from social origins. The possibility of recovering the "thousand-years'-old resources of peasant culture"[46], i.e. reaching out to the sources of "the living speech" (for this was, according to Bereza, the main task of this literature) did not stem from the authors' sense of peasantness but was a strictly historical issue. The distinctiveness or uniqueness of peasant writers was not a value to be cherished, but a socio-cultural fact which gave them access to certain means of expression, which in Bereza's opinion were interesting and worth saving.

Contemporary prose and criticism often frame origin as a challenge to be overcome, driving an emancipation narrative. They primarily explore social advancement, reconciling identities, and the accompanying sense of shame.[47]. This is pointed out by Karolina Kulpa, in her review of *Hanka. Opowieść o awansie* [*Hanka. A story of advancement*] by Maciej Jakubowiak[48]. According to Kulpa, Jakubowiak's autobiographical novel, designed to evoke

[40]Andrzej Skrendo, „«Nocny złodziej jabłek» – Henryk Bereza i nurt chłopski w prozie polskiej ["The nocturnal apple thief" - Henryk Bereza and the peasant current in Polish prose"], Teksty Drugie 6 (2017): 36-53.

[41]Bereza, "Nurt chłopski w prozie" [„The peasant current in prose"], 153.

[42]Bereza, "Nurt chłopski w prozie", 153.

[43]Bereza, "Nurt chłopski w prozie", 148.

[44]Bereza, "Nurt chłopski w prozie", 148.

[45]Skrendo, 43.

[46]Henryk Bereza, "Dopowiedzienie drugie" ["The second addition"], in his Alfabetyczność, 183.

[47]This is well illustrated by the reception of Didier Eribon's book Powrót do Reims [The return to Reims] (Kraków: Karakter, 2019); see, for example, Marlena Rycombel, "Zdrajca klasy nie odchodzi" ["The class traitor does not leave"], Mały Format 10-11 (2019), http://malyformat.com/2019/11/eribon-powrot-do-reims/; Iwona Komór, "Wstyd" ["Shame"], Dwutygodnik 12 (2019), https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/8624-wstyd.html.

[48]Maciej Jakubowiak, Hanka (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2024).

associations with the writings of Didier Eribon and to provide evidence that "a folk turn is taking place in Polish mentality"[49], meets all the criteria of a "model, French-inspired essayistic tale of advancement"[50]. According to Kulpa, one of the most essential elements characteristic of this genre is the subjective perspective constructed on the basis of "guilt associated with the 'betrayal' of one's own roots"[51], which makes it possible to take "the most comfortable (albeit tragically stylised) position, focused on the affirmation of difference and the mockery involved in a venting of fantasies of what it would have been like without all this imported science and literature"[52]. This position, in turn, makes the case that within the story of advancement

> actual conflicts can be abstracted from by focusing on the socio-autobiographical monologue, romanticising individual shame and regret for the triumphant thwarting of social determinisms.[53]

While contemporary discourse crystallising around the themes canonical to the popular turn thus focuses on the transcendence of peasantry and on the tensions that arise around impossible aspirations, for Bereza peasantry acted as an immanent value: it was a socio-cultural space that contained all the desirable vectors of progress and improvement. On peasant genealogy, he wrote:

> this genealogy should be a cultural honour for anyone who has not lost their marbles; its distinguishing feature is the natural – inherited – access to the oldest and historically most durable social sources of culture; its trump card nowadays is that it does not involve, or in any case should not involve, any social constraints on cultural ambitions; the growth of these ambitions is a fact that can be traced in the work of the most prominent representatives of the peasant current.[54]

In discussion on refreshing the language of literature and criticism Bereza featured as an unwitting ally, even though the critics invoking him did not find it easy to identify specific lines of affinity between his critical-literary thought and contemporary artistic proposals without extensively engaging their own vocabularies. Similarly, today the author of *Alfabetyczność* appears as an almost necessary point of reference, although contemporary commentators fail to agree on the actual stakes of this alliance. Bereza is important as a critic calling for an appreciation of peasant culture, but his actual motivations do not play a significant role for contemporary commentators. Bereza's return today is therefore incomplete and inconsistent at the very least, and in some respects simulated. This seems to go hand in hand with the broader incompatibility of his critical sensibility with contemporary needs. In almost all

[49]Karolina Kulpa, "Spektakl awansu" ["The spectacle of advancement"], Mały Format 3-4 (2024), quoted in Katarzyna Sawicka-Mierzyńska, „Zwrot ludowy dokonuje się w polskiej mentalności. Oto kolejny dowód" ["A folk turn is taking place in Polish mentality. Here is another proof"], wyborcza.pl, 9.02.2024, [ttps://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,30675715,mama-hanka.html.

[50]Kulpa.

[51]Kulpa.

[52]Kulpa.

[53]Kulpa.

[54]Henryk Bereza, "Wyznania" ["Confessions"], in his Alfabetyczność, 162-163.

recollections about him that I have cited here, Bereza appears as a role model of tenacity and consistency in judgement, of unwavering belief in the momentous social role of literature, as well as a model of readiness to take a stand on issues of importance and to defend his theses uncompromisingly. At the same time, contemporary criticism is increasingly characterised by conciliatory and cautious judgements; few of the younger critics practice the polemical mode of critical activity with which Bereza is associated; few make demands on literature and enforce them consistently[55].

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

[55] The disappearance of the confrontational potential of Polish literary criticism was pointed out, for example, by participants in the discussion "Krytyka krytyki" ["A critique of criticism"] in biBLioteka journal (issue 1, 2015): see Monika Glosowitz, "Kruche pozycje" ["Fragile positions"]; Paweł Kaczmarski, "Krytycy i dziennikarze" ["Critics and journalists"]; Marcin Orliński "Nie bójmy się spierać" ["'Let's not be afraid to argue"]. Interestingly enough, Jakub Skurtys was the only one to openly distance himself from Bereza in the "Mały Format" survey ("I never met Henryk Bereza and had not wanted to meet him. For me he was always "an older critic", a representative of a generation not even of my professors but of my professors' professors, someone from a completely different, as if parallel, reality, in which literary criticism exists in spite of the academy, basking in its journalistic columns, in its irrevocable judgments and literary friendships. [...] not knowing Bereza was a certain programmatic assumption for me: to allow him to exist as a critic, but not as a person, as it were."). Skurtys has been a consistent practitioner of this "negative criticism", and that distinguishes him from critics of the younger generation, see his series "Krytyka negatywna" ["Negative criticism"] in Mały Format, http://malyformat.com/tag/cykl-krytyka-negatywna/.

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# KEYWORDS

## Bereza

*literary criticism*

**Abstract:**
The turn of the second and third decades of the 21st century witnessed an increasing interest in Henryk Bereza and his critical-literary output, also among critics and literary scholars of the younger generation. Excerpts from archival articles by Bereza appeared in online literary press, and he was the subject of two special issues of literary journals, featuring in-depth sketches, memoirs and literary surveys. In this article, I look at the ways in which the critic's thought has been presented so far and I seek potential points of connection between the critical categories he created and the contemporary situation in the literary field, with particular reference to two of them: the artistic revolution in prose and the peasant current.

*peasant current*

# artistic revolution

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