

Włodzimierz Bolecki

"Historia i biografia. "Opowieści biograficzne" Wacława Berenta",
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[recenzja]

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Book Review

Compte rendu de livre

Włodzimierz Bolecki, **Historia i biografia. "Opowieści biograficzne" Waława Berenta (History and Biography. Waclaw Berent's "Biographical Stories")**, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1978, pp. 164. The series: *Z Dziejów Form Artystycznych w Literaturze Polskiej (A History of Artistic Forms in Polish Literature)*, vol. XLIX.

This work borders upon "the sociology of literary forms," the history of literary forms and the history of literature. It concerns Waclaw Berent's (1873–1940) last three novels: *Nurt (The Current)* – 1934, *Diogenes w kontuszu (Diogenes in a Nobleman's Coat)* – 1937, and *Zmierzch wodzów (The Decline of the Leaders)* – 1939, all three referred to as "biographical stories."

In the introduction the author presents a profile of the writer, who today is only known to historians of literature. He discloses the paradoxes of the reception of Berent's works.

The first chapter "How 'biographical stories' were read between 1934 and 1939") is devoted to the "styles of reception" of biographical stories, that is the ways of reading these works as recorded in historical documents. The author studies three collections of reviews published before 1939. He investigates the mechanism of evaluation of Berent's novels by his first readers and arrives at the conclusion that there were incompatible "reception norms" pertaining to literary texts. Some of them made readers class Berent's novels as scholarly prose ("historical sketches"), others as literary ("artistic") prose. Depending on the adopted premise, they were either thought to be a great literary achievement, or else they were considered outdated and altogether a failure. This fact leads the author to make a distinction between "styles" and "types" of reception. The "type of reception" is the set of convictions which makes literary communication possible within a definite span of time in the historical/

literary process. The "style" is then the particular, individual instance of implementing the reception type. The relationship between the "style" and "type" of reception resembles F. de Saussure's distinction between *parole* and *langue*. The various styles of reception are in constant conflict and determine literary communication at a given point in history. The presence of these norms and styles of reception proves that a book is never read "directly," that there is always an intermediate sphere which separates a text from its reader, and this sphere is the literary culture of the period. The author introduces the idea of "social bounds", which cause certain elements to recur in the individual receptions of literary works. The main thesis put forward in this chapter is that historical changes in literary culture leave their imprint on the reception of a text. Mention is made of J. Sławiński's book *Dzieło, język, tradycja* (*The Literary Work, Language, Tradition*, Warsaw 1974) and in this context the author affirms that the "literary fact" (i. e. the literary work and its receptions) is the basic unit for research into the history of literature. The historian of literature should synchronize the reception of a text with all its elements.

In chapter 2 ("Berent's narrations") the author employs the category of "quoted words" introduced to literary theory by Russian scholars: Voloshinov and Bakhtin. Bolecki draws attention to the fact that Berent's novels are made up of specific kinds of quotations: from letters, diaries, memoirs, scientific studies, literary works, etc. Berent was interested in social remembrance and lasting values in history. His works do not have a strictly documentary character, for he gives documents a literary form, and that also means a new meaning. The author confronts his analysis of Berent's narrative technique with the ideas of the first readers of his novels. He points out that various elements of the text allowed completely different interpretations.

In the third chapter ("Myths, spaces and varieties of Romanticism"), Bolecki investigates the relationship between particular novels and the full range of books written by Berent. Critics agree that his last novels are quite different from his earlier works (*Fachowiec—The Expert*, 1895, *Próchno—The Rot*, 1901, *Ozimina—Winter Corn*, 1911, *Żywe kamienie—Live Stones*, 1918). A stylistic analysis carried out by the author reveals in all of Berent's novels a system of

specific meanings, a set of codes superimposed on the language of the narration. Two of these codes are connected with Greek mythology and the Christian religion. The third code is made up of quotations or allusions to works of literature from the Polish Romanticism. In this way Berent's "biographical stories" have an "intertextual" character, consisting in an interplay of quotations and various narrative planes. The author of the present work treats the three novels as one text and shows that the three codes generate a specific model of the world. These codes must influence the reception of Berent's works. For their first readers, the "biographical stories" were all quite different from one another, and this was so because each code or system of meanings was perceived differently. Bolecki makes an attempt at synchronizing the specific features of the text with its reception. He believes that the historian of literature should try to explain why these literary works were interpreted and evaluated in so many ways, taking into consideration the social (i. e. not subjective) determinants of reception and then putting forward his own metalanguage.

In this part of his book Bolecki also investigates the meaning of space in Berent's novels; he points to the great variety of meanings in particular novels and to the fact that there are also some invariable meanings which allow Berent's works to be seen as an artistic and ideological whole. The main semantic/axiological opposition which constitutes the spacial model of the world in Berent's novels is the opposition between open space and closed space. His modernistic works are dominated by closed space, his later ones—by open space. Berent associates the category of "openness" with the affirmation of an active attitude, with people who participate in an active way in the making of culture, and finally with the problem of history and individual destinies. Bolecki concludes that Berent's contemporary readers found in his novels only those items which interested the reading public before 1939. The existing "social bounds" determined which elements of the codes used in the novels were to be brought to the surface in the literary awareness of those people.

In the next chapter ("Biography, culture and historic time"), the author analyzes the chief contexts of Waclaw Berent's "biographical stories." He shows that the very conception stems from the antipositivist trend the works of the "philosophers of life":

Dilthey, Simmel, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Bergson. The same inspiration may be detected in the "biographical novels" or *vies romancées* of Maurois, Zweig or Strachey after World War I.

The second context which participates in building up the central issues of the "biographical stories" is "group psychology," which was very popular towards the close of the 19th century (G. Tarde, G. Le Bon). Bolecki concentrates on the psychology of the crowd, and he refers to Polish research in that field. The third context which explains the semantic side of Berent's novels is the trend of Polish and European catastrophism from the turn of the century. It was concerned with the philosophy of culture, and these same issues may be found in Berent's prose. Finally, the subject-matter of the "biographical stories" was influenced by the historical and journalistic discussions on the formation of the Polish nation in the 18th and 19th centuries. The author tries to show to what extent Berent made reference to those discussions. He concludes that Berent in his "biographical stories" argued against nationalistic and chauvinistic tendencies in the interpretation of Poland's history. Bolecki also studies the conceptions of history and culture which may be detected in Berent's prose. In this way the book is an analysis of the "literary fact," for the author describes the text, its contexts and its reception as the coordinates of the process of communication in literature. It is not a critical monograph in the traditional sense. The author has chosen only one subject (history and biography) out of all of Berent's works and he studies it using various modern critical methods; he borrows his terminology from stylistics, semiotics, genealogy, he makes reference to the history of literary forms and the history of ideas.

In the closing chapter ("Instead of a conclusion") the author shows how the issues he has studied may be investigated in other Polish novels connected with "history and biography."

Sum. by the author

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*

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