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Moral Dilemmas of Poles Born in the Late Twenties: Reflections on the Drama *Their Time*, Short Stories, and Novels by Literary Critic Zbigniew Kubikowski

ABSTRACT

Zbigniew Kubikowski (1929-1984) was a literary critic, novelist, journalist, editor of monthly *Odra* in Wrocław (Lower Silesia, Poland), and an activist of the Polish Writers' Union. His biography seems to be representative for more or less independent intellectuals in the regime of communism. In spite of humiliation, persecutions, and invigilation he managed to preserve his ethical principles, although he was not able to achieve a full success as a man of letters. The ethics of his generation, so called "younger brothers" of war generation was founded on Polish independence and European existentialism.

KEY WORDS: ethics, independence, generation of "younger brothers," post-war Polish fiction, existentialism, literary criticism

STRESZCZENIE

Dylematy etyczne późnych roczników dwudziestych. Rozważania na marginesach dramatu Ich czas, opowiadań i powieści Zbigniewa Kubikowskiego

Zbigniew Kubikowski (1929-1984) był krytykiem literackim, prozaikiem, dziennikarzem oraz redaktorem miesięcznika „Odra” we Wrocławiu. Był także działaczem Związku Pisarzy Polskich. Jego biografia wydaje się reprezentatywna dla mniej lub bardziej niezależnej inteligencji w dobie komunizmu. Pomimo poniżeń, prześladowania i inwigilacji udało mu się zachować wyznawane zasady etyczne, choć nie zdołał osiągnąć pełni sukcesu jako literat. Etyka jego pokolenia, określanego jako „młodszy bracia Kolumbów”, opierała się na wartościach polskiej niepodległości oraz europejskiego egzystencjalizmu.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: etyka, niepodległość, „młodszy bracia Kolumbów”, polska literatura powojenna, egzystencjalizm, krytyka literacka

The dates of birth and death of the three outstanding literary critics are arranged regularly: 1927, 1928, 1929 and 1984, 1985, 1986. Jerzy Kwiatkowski (1927-1986), Andrzej Kijowski (1928-1985) and Zbigniew Kubikowski (1929-1984). The first of them lived the longest. He was a resident of Krakow. The second mainly in Warsaw. The third and last, a Wrocław resident born in the Eastern Borderlands, had the shortest life. He spoke about the provincial complex in his *Pięć dialogów wielkopostnych* [Five Lenten dialogues]. These life stories of two historians, woven into the patterns of Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve], referring to the silhouettes of Konrad-Gustaw: one from the capital and the other from the peripheries, one from the intelligentsia and the other a descendant of a promoted peasant, one a liberal and the other one a former Stalinist, deserve to be re-issued, and staged in the theater. Breakthroughs in Poland's recent history: the events of 1956 and 1968 brought changes to the fates of both protagonists. Their rivalry was not devoid of the features of nobility. Despite competing for a woman, they were able to forgive each other and even help at critical moments. These were not black-and-white silhouettes. The writer created them to take into account the development of the psyche of the individualized protagonists (speaking the language of traditional poetics of a literary work, it was a character, not a type). The problems of life's defeat, being stuck in the province, with limited chances of self-fulfillment

and unrealized ambitions seep through novels, short stories, radio plays, and critical literary texts by Kubikowski.

For those born in 1927-1930, the moments of historical trials obviously did not exhaust the circumstances in which moral problems appeared, but what was common for them was connected with political turning points: the consolidation of the one-party system in 1948, the so-called Stalinist period of peak restrictions, and 1968, followed experiencing of the greatest burden of the historical events taking place on an ongoing basis for the subsequent generation. The methodological inspiration for these reflections remains the version of ethics in literary studies proposed by Richard Freadman and Seamus Miller, aiming at restitution of the author's category with their biography in the study of literature, the classically understood truth and valuations.¹

In order to understand the ethical dilemmas of the younger brothers of the war generation, it is worth listening to the words of the eminent literary critic, Andrzej Kijowski. Using his characteristic folk tale expression in the introduction of the sentence, he talked about his generation:

Because it was like this. I was then – me and all my generation – we were then under enormous pressure from new phenomena, new events, new ideas. The pressure was very strong because we stepped in the social life in such a state that what was behind us, lay literally and figuratively in ruins, and what was before us, was all new.²

The key to understanding the alternatives faced by Polish twenty-year-old people in 1948 (if they were not martyred) are the words:

to me that 1948 was indeed a life disaster. Imagine that at that time a young man (and I was young, I was just twenty years old), in order to imagine his future life at all, to take up any position in it, to do anything in it, to mean anything in it, he had to renounce his home tradition, to acknowledge that he was badly born at all, in any class or social sphere or family. Any. Because even if it's working class, well, it probably was a wrong kind of laborer, because he belonged to "working class aristocracy." If it was a peasant, it certainly was a *kułak*. If it was even a socialist family, it was definitely connected with the wrong variation of socialism. And if you had a military tradition, it was definitely the wrong army. If it was a scientific or humanistic tradition, it was definitely bad schools and a bad scientific humanist tradition. So, he had to renounce their previous reading, his mental habits,

1 R. Freadman, S. Miller, *Re-thinking Theory. A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and An Alternative Account*, Cambridge 1992.

2 A. Kijowski, *Rachunek naszych słabości*, Warszawa 2009, p. 229.

his ideas, his myths, actually, even his language. He had a choice of three paths: either to renounce it on the surface and pretend otherwise, i.e. to become cynical, or to really renounce it and learn the simple doctrine promoted at the time, for which it was not necessary to read the theoreticians, and it was enough to read one or two novels, so to become an idiot, or to die socially, to dive into an abyss. So, either a cynic, a moron, or nothing. That was the choice for my generation in 1948, in 1949, that is, just when life was beginning.³

Moral dilemmas are not always associated with extreme situations of war. The inner monologue of the main character of the *Chwila po przebudzeniu* novel concerns the realities of the peace period:

And now another witness, another candidate for a judge, a male conversation, when I hear about a male conversation, I go out, I don't go out, I listen to the end, I understand him, but I don't grant him the right to such conversations, if I don't have any more rights, nobody should have them, they are lost between the ages of twenty and thirty, or maybe earlier, maybe when you first tell yourself: This is my choice, this is the form in which I enclose my life and everything will be a betrayal and a lie, which will come from outside, and since you once said this to yourself, you no longer have any rights, you can only swear in your thoughts, in your dreams, unconsciously regret that you did not postpone your decision for a year, for ten, because every moment determines us, every conversation, every deed, and we build ourselves hastily, impatiently, just to be able to say: this is how I am.⁴

The beginnings of Kubikowski's work were, however, the time of extreme experiences. The problem of betrayal in underground activity during the occupation was returning to his novel prose. The debut book (a partisan novel) caused difficulties for editors who were afraid to print it, e.g. in local "Zeszyty Wrocławskie." As one reads the memoirs after the writer's death (see the enclosed bibliography of this article), the esteemed and popular author made his debut as a prose writer with a few years' delay. The title, *Zielona granica* [The green border], with a number of connotations, such as border or liminal situations, moral boundaries, etc., is not necessarily just a significant place of illegal movement between countries, was never printed on the cover of the book. The text about the resistance in the East, which only gently touches upon the issue of mistrust between Poles and Ukrainians, appeared in episodes in the "Dziś i Jutro"

3 A. Kijowski, *Rachunek naszych słabości*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 214-215.

4 Z. Kubikowski, *Chwila po przebudzeniu*, Katowice 1967, p. 153.

magazine, titled *Sprawa Jaśka Browarczuka* [Jaś Browarczuk's Case]. The message of the second novel, *Prorok i ministranci* [The prophet and the altar boys], is original today, because it was free from pacifist moralizing. Released three years after the end of 1956, it could present fair conspirators in a favorable light. Gullibility and nobility, however, become the bane of the main character, who instead of eliminating a traitor, as an experienced commander ordered him, will fall victim to the delator. In the context of these two novels, a comparison is made with the drama *Ich czas* [Their Time] about the May Coup d'état, which was written more than two decades later. The work clearly shows the difference between the mentality of the generation that regained independence and did not retreat from direct combat, from the scruples and hesitations typical of the generations formed in the years of peace. In one word, in the texts about the moments of the most difficult trial, when life was commonly at risk, Kubikowski did not give up on heroic ethics. The time of the soft virtues (M. Ossowska's expression) fell on later decades, especially the period Różewicz called the "little stabilization."

Then, let us assume: after October 1956 and before March 1968, the protagonists of Kubikowski's prose were engaged in remembering high school romances (*Ostatnia lekcja* [The last lesson]), a career or just professional work (*Chwila po przebudzeniu* [Moment after awakening]), because this is the kind of existential setting, in two meanings, both colloquial, related to everyday life and philosophical, referring to the direction of thought which was then assimilated in Poland with a delay, reading above all Sartre or Camus. The sense of isolation, absurdity, alienation of contemporary man, and at the same time the affirmation of the secularizing world with its modern scenery of fast travels between continents, commonly used cars, emancipated, attractive women, practical and aesthetic fashion – this is the background against which the characters of moral novels, short stories and also, crime stories published under the pseudonym of Jacek Joachim, the author's characters move.

Change will be brought by the reprint-worthy *Pięć dialogów wielkopostnych*. It has a dimension of a universal parable about how the cards of fate turn. The two protagonists exchange roles. The victor becomes a provincial frustrated man and his wronged colleague will turn into a world-famous scientist. Their woman, from a transitory and apparent trophy, will transform into a mature person who can bear the unattractive, everyday suffering with dignity. Ethical dilemmas: fidelity and betrayal, as in times of war, as in moments of political turmoil in a sovereign country, or simply in private or professional life during peace, were taken by Kubikowski dealing with the issues of contemporary morality in such a way as to emphasize change. The processual nature of human

development in his generation born in the late twenties, was particularly pronounced because representatives of that generation were brought up in a completely different reality before the war and the post-war realities when they entered adulthood.

The emphasis on novelty was placed by such different critics as Andrzej Kijowski (born in 1928), Tomasz Burek (born in 1938), Zbigniew Kubikowski (born in 1929) and many more. Burke stated:

The type of reading has changed, as did the awareness and aesthetic sensitivity have changed, the prevailing model of the novel has changed, the character of the contemporary literary experience has changed in general. The new philosophy of literature was primarily created as a commentary on the search and achievements that seemed to transcend literature in its ambitions, and therefore had to take it as an axiom that authentic literature today is everything that is liberated from literature in the conventional sense of the word, from naïve literary ease, from the deception of correct literature. Which is a challenge, a transgression and an enrichment [emphasis by T. Burek] of human reality.⁵

The authenticity residency had existentialist philosophical connotations. Existentialism was an object of fascination for the post-war intelligentsia in Poland. I myself remember the copy of the anthology *Filozofia egzystencjalizmu* in the library of the Institute of Philosophy in Wrocław. As Kazimierz Wyka wrote:

Do a survey among writers, how many of them heard the term existentialism before 1945? It is about existentialism, and this sketchy characterization of the changed ideological and literary situation after the two world wars demands, in its last link, a look at existentialism. In the mode of general interest, it plays a similar role today as the principle of artistic experimentation concerning forms did after that war. But existentialism does not apply to forms. It concerns philosophy, morality, world view, gets involved mainly in polemics with mental reality and not aesthetics.”⁶ As one of the main characters in Kubikowski’s novelism thinks, the recipe for a meaningful life is the following: “Just not to participate in the general pretense. Do not play at meetings and beyond. Replace the tokens for securities. And not spend them bit by bit.”⁷

5 T. Burek, *Żadnych marzeń*, Warszawa 1989, p. 134.

6 K. Wyka, *Pogranicze powieści*, Warszawa 1989, p. 61.

7 Z. Kubikowski, *Ostatnia lekcja*, Warszawa 1971, p. 242.

Existentialism with its imperative to strive for authenticity is recalled whenever the protagonists of Kubikowski's prose repeat that they do not want to be artificial, marking a distance to the convention, established social roles or lies. For example, in the intervening micro-narrative about a prostitute murdered abroad significant words are used:

“I do not know why I thought a lot about her then,” he said. “I felt guilty for having lied to her, because I told her stories about Yugoslavia and myself. I took her for someone else, as she did me. We are pretending in front of one another, and then something really happened. I had no part in this, in what really happened, but I had a part in the general pretense. We pretend all the time and we never know when something really happens.”⁸

Kubikowski's model hero is a reflective person. At the same time, on the level of interpersonal interactions, it is important to compete for prestige, which in the sphere of the individual psyche brings a complex of inferiority for many. This complex is repeated in the characteristics of many characters in *Ostatnia lekcja*, the collection of short stories, from supporting characters, such as Nastalek or the secretary, to the main character. The theme of folk justice will appear in the history of the former school director. Once ruthless towards a girl trying to commit suicide, he vainly asks his former student to help him grant a replacement space so that he may continue to run his engraving workshop where he produced medallions. The newcomer from the so-called great world is surrounded by what seems almost a cult:

People in the corridors will fall silent when he appears in a trail of sunlight falling from the glass walls of the staircase: the indigenous people's reliable instinct will tell them it's a man of the world: he'll be wearing his soft skin jacket, which he bought in Brussels, his Italian trousers from a modern Roman supermarket, a flexible T-shirt from London, and they'll whisper, and they won't say a word when he passes them by and enters the extensive study not having to wait in line, together with his Brussels, Rome and London, as if he's flown between them from an illustration in an old magazine.⁹

Burek indicated:

These are the successive waves of the twentieth-century experiment and the accompanying increase in critical and theoretical consciousness, which

8 Ibidem, p. 167.

9 Ibidem, p. 123.

together led to the state where phenomena which in the first half of the century were still on the far periphery of literature and were regarded by authoritative opinion as typically laboratory and hermetic tests, with a very narrow range of influence, are now in the mainstream of change, at the center of a fundamental literary discussion. Thanks to the intellectual context created by the programs of the French 'new novel' and the parallel activities of critics such as Claude Mauriac and, above all, Maurice Blanchot, the interest of the wider public in heretical trends and tendencies within the inherited tradition increased.¹⁰

Searching for new literary forms, e.g. using the technique of different points of view in the narrative or internal monologue, reading Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Musil, Dos Passos, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Lowry, Durrell, Broch, Canetti, was a tribute to the change of the canon of compulsory reading for educated people.¹¹

The year 1948 was groundbreaking for Kijowski, which was when he enrolled at Polish Studies. Then,

some PPR meetings acquired a nature of violent skirmishes with "carriers of deviation" and took place in a tense atmosphere of mutual suspicion. Although there was earlier controversy and even sharp assessments, in which such people as Władysław Gomułka excelled, a massive campaign was launched by the party elite in July, and moved into the field after September 3, constituting (to use the language of contemporary newspeak) a "new quality". Not only a real or potential enemy of the state could fall victim of the aggressive propaganda, but anyone, without any difference of position occupied in the state and party hierarchy.¹²

For a young man brought up in the spirit of traditional pre-War values, it came as a shock to see change of attitudes in writers who had authority. It was expressed, for example, by the statement of writers after the Unification Congress of the PPR and PPS.¹³ As Andrzej Sulikowski wrote about the first academic year of the future literary critic, "Times were not easy. In 1949 a hard-core course in cultural policy began."¹⁴

10 T. Burek, *Żadnych marzeń*, Warszawa 1989, p. 133.

11 Ibidem, p. 133-134.

12 Andrzej Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939-1989*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 222-223.

13 In the statement it was declared that: "The Congress expresses warm wishes to all creative elements of Polish society." Among the 55 signatories there were: Zofia Nałkowska, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. I cite after: M. Fik, *Kultura polska po Jalcie. Kronika lat 1944-1981*, Londyn 1989, p. 109.

14 A. Sulikowski, *Przechadzki z Andrzejem Kijowskim*, "Arka" 1989, Iss. 25, p. 21.

Currently, a middle-aged reader may wonder about the lack of religious content in Kubikowski's fictional and critical literary prose. It is difficult to speculate whether it is a manifestation of censorship, personal restraint or self-restraint due to political and social circumstances. Jan Błoński (b. 1931, almost Kubikowski's peer) noted afterwards in his diary:

Among historiosophical Christians, there were radiant characters, such as Małgosia Dziewulska, who did all the work, paratheatrical activities, flying on hang-gliders and writing articles: the least of all, directing... They were all tangled up, like in my friend Kijowski, in whom I could hardly ever distinguish between religion and politics (like his inner need from his comedian gesture): and yet they both would be eating him up all his life.¹⁵

Kubikowski made his debut with a religious poem in the *Gość Niedzielny* weekly magazine in 1949, after which he did not continue with a similar type of publication. The author seemed to be confronting the present day on its own rights, avoiding nostalgia for the pre-war hierarchy of values, and using innovative means of expression and take up new topics.

An interesting narrative trick is reporting on a conversation from three points of view: "They," "She" and "He." This shows the advantage of "His" – a world-famous architect who is ready to marry a provincial doctor. The witnesses of their flirtation provide a background that only confirms the superiority of the newcomer over their surroundings. Such a way of reasoning, in which others contribute to the high social position of the individual, resembles Gombrowicz's literary anthropology.¹⁶ The style in that scene also brings to mind his *Trans-Atlantic*:

But Zygmunt could not answer. The Secretary spoke. Clouds of smoke in the air, moths circling around the chandelier, officials around the President in the other corner of the room, and around their table, but they don't come too close now, not because they probably accepted the voluntary isolation of the renowned guest, but because the abundance of alcohol uncovered to them the beauty of the simplest pleasures. They did not, therefore, invite him, not only sanctifying his connection with the earth by this invitation, not only paying tribute to his talents in this way, but also to have his authority to support their rightful aspirations, to prevail when it comes to measure, when he has added value to the initiative. After all, this is not only about building a hospital, but also about making an object worthy of the creator. If the people on the top of the local social ladder can hinder

15 J. Błoński, *Błoński przekorny. Dziennik. Wywiady*, collected and edited by M. Zaczyński, Kraków 2011, p. 26.

16 Cf. M. Głowiński, *"Ferdynand" Witolda Gombrowicza*, Warszawa 1995, p. 11.

their fight for the quality of an object, blur the objective of this fight, distort the direction of the fight, he [emphasis by Z. Kubikowski] cannot be accused of a lack of qualifications (here, laughter) or of bias. Thus, what they achieve or not achieve [emphasis added by D.H.] he only can, after a long struggle, to show the rightness of the matter by their appearance, decide with one sentence, disperse doubt, and demonstrate the rightness of the cause.¹⁷

Novelty, however, does not imply a lack of intertextual allegations, e.g. the story of *Szansa* is a bit reminiscent of Gogol's *Revisor*. Here someone came to the small village, who was expected to give out positions, benefits, justice, and in the end the newcomer turned out to be someone other than the one he was originally taken for.

As a literary critic, Kubikowski took up the challenge of discussing the provincial complex (e.g. *Bezpieczne małe mity, Wrocław literacki*). Reading his critical statements, it is hard to resist the impression that the author functioned in the literary life of that time far below his ability to deal with issues, formulate thoughts in a synthetic way, and use language with precision. The causes of disparities between the inherent value of the Kubikowski's achievements, qualifications and reception of his work can be seen among others in the cultural geography of the centralized state,¹⁸ in the axiological ambiguities continued for centuries in the country marked by the legacy of the partitions¹⁹ and occupation,²⁰ or in the negative attitude of influential representatives of the Ministry of Interior towards the writer.²¹ Theoretically speaking, when describing the function of literary criticism, Krzysztof Dybciak emphasized that it is "a domain of individual behavior, and even a distinguished method in social life for personalizing the individual and protecting the autonomy of the human person."²² Pragmatic evaluative, problematizing, expressive, aesthetic and ludic—all these functions with the exception of the last two were performed by

17 Z. Kubikowski, *Ostatnia lekcja*, Warszawa 1971, p. 162.

18 Cf. O. S. Czarnik, *Między dwoma Sierpniami. Polska kultura literacka w latach 1944-1980*, Warszawa 1993.

19 Cf. e.g. S. Chwin, *Literatura i zdrada. Od Konrada Wallenroda do Małej Apokalipsy*, Kraków 1993.

20 Sketches by K. Wyka on the subject were widely known (*Życie na niby. Gospodarka wyłączona*), and in recent years a book by philosopher R. Legutko, *Esej o duszy polskiej* gained popularity, as if unconsciously returning to the diagnoses of the outstanding Polish literature scholar. A link between the diagnoses of literary historian and philosopher seems to be the book *Rachunek naszych słabości* by leading literary critic, A. Kijowski.

21 Cf. D. Heck, *Szkice do portretu Zbigniewa Kubikowskiego*, in: *Osaczeni – napiętnowani. Szkice o twórcach w PRL*, ed. S. Ligarski, Warsaw 2017.

22 K. Dybciak, *Wokół czy w centrum literatury? Studia o krytyce i eseju*, Warszawa 2016, p. 17.

the criticism that Kubikowski practiced. Hence the conclusion that self-discipline, moderation, and self-restraint probably occupied an extremely high position in his hierarchy of values. Comparing the ethos of service of his protagonists of the period of trial (within the twenty years after independence or during WWII) with the ethos of silence of literary characters created within the presented world of the People's Republic of Poland, it can be concluded that the accepted moral norms of the late twenties' generation representative turned out to be ultimately consistent with Conrad's ethics, as represented by Jan Józef Szczepański and the war generation.

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