

Fairy tale writer, lyrical poet,
songwriter, copyright specialist
— who did Jan Brzechwa want to be?

Jowita Podwysocka-Modrzejewska

In history of literature Jan Brzechwa is not regarded as a magnificent poem and fairy tale writer, despite the fact that he started writing them at the age of forty eight. Moreover he was also an author of songs performed by many cabarets and a lyrical poet. He had degree in law, and achieved much in the field of copyrights. During his studies he was among the founders of Związek Autorów Kabaretowych (Association of Cabaret Authors) then Związek Artystów i Kompozytorów Scenicznych (Union of Artists and Stage Composers) — ZAiKS, which was founded to guard copyrights. When he graduated, he became the head of the legal department of aforementioned institution. Taking care of this area of law was all the more important because initially there were no directives in Poland for fees for composers, authors of texts and writers¹. Brzechwa also provided legal advice in *Wiadomości Literackie* (Literature News).

Brzechwa repeatedly appeared before courts, defending authors (as an attorney he used his real name Jan Lesmian). The most prominent case he participated in was a lawsuit filed by Zenon Przesmycki (nickanme Miriam) against Tadeusz Pini for unlawful edition of poems. Przesmycki, with the consent of the family, carefully published new volumes of Norwid's poems, while Pini, regardless of lack of permission of heirs, printed Norwid's Anthology with minimum cost and in not very elegant manner. It consisted of poems to which property rights have not yet expired. The trial lasted several years with numerous Brzechwa's appeals. Finally, in 1937 the Supreme Court sentenced Pini to a fine and to pay Miriam financial compensation.

Brzechwa, as the chief of ZAiKS department, was working with the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers and he published many papers regarding copyright law in Poland and the USSR. Lesman brought to implementing into the Polish law the *droit de*

1 Copyright in Poland was introduced in 1926

suite concept — the author's economic rights to receiving a royalty which are inalienable and can be inherited.

Despite the fact that Brzechwa was a really successful lawyer, he decided to leave his occupation in 1947 and focus on writing. In fact, he started his literary attempts at the age of seventeen².

His poetic debut took place in 1915. His poems were published in 'Sztandar' and 'Kłosy Ukraińskie'. His first book of poetry was published in 1926. He was trying to print his poems in prestigious journals such as 'Wiadomości Literackie' or 'Skamander' but he met with some difficulties. Publishers of that time did not wish to print Lesmian, and Lesman-Brzechwa even less. The poet started to send his works under several aliases. His trick was successful and in the short time he could eventually publish under his own name³.

The interwar period was a good time for Brzechwa as a poet. He managed to publish five volumes of love poetry between 1926 and 1938. In Brzechwa's poems love is usually unhappy. His poetry is full of longing for an unreachable love object or sorrow of a abandoned lover. In his poems a woman is presented as a vampire wishing to deprive a man of all vitality. She is a heartless, selfish creature wanting to hurt her lover and break his heart.

A rejected man loses his identity and self confidence. He is powerless and helpless.

In light of this complete rejection, a man loses his own identity and self-confidence. He is powerless and defenceless. The physical suffering that the character feels turns out to be worse than death. Repudiation, and continuous exile are a cruel and undeserved fate, they do not however annihilate feelings — a despised lover often still expects the graces of a capricious lady, and is ready to endure the most severe humiliation.

In books from the interwar period, the poet often refers to magical practices. The lyrical hero of Brzechwa's poems believes that getting to know these practices will allow him to understand the world and thus make the reality more favourable to him. Using magical items, he also tries to influence his beloved and win her heart. As Anna Szóstak points out:

poetic magic focuses mainly on the emotional sphere of feelings, boiling down to spells, charms and talismans to ensure the favour of the beloved and happiness in love⁴.

2 Brzechwa was born in 1898, not in 1900 as he stated after marriage with his third wife Janina Serocka.

3 Nastulanka K., *Bajkopisarz mimo woli*, [in:] *Akademia pana Brzechwy*, ed. Marianowicz A., Warsaw 1984, p. 115.

4 Szóstak A., *Od modernizmu do lingwizmu. O przemianach w twórczości Jana Brzechwy*, Cracow 2003, p. 130.

Reception of Brzechwa's pre-war lyrical poems was both positive and negative. We will not elaborate on that nonetheless it is worth mentioning that the reviewers paid attention to the musicality of the writers. Jarosław Jankowski⁵ emphasises rhymes, used by the author, to help the reader to feel the rhythm of the music. Moreover, he accused the poet of being talkative, using pleonasm and having the singer's mentality. Those features do not hamper the performance of a song, they are however not desirable when it comes to writing a poem. It is possible that Brzechwa had difficulties with breaking habits. Along with lyrical poems he also practised cabaret. Since May 1918, throughout the interwar period, he cooperated with many cabarets e.g. Qui Pro Quo and Morskie Oko (The Eye of the Sea).

He commented on his connections with aforementioned cabarets in a humorous way:

Since childhood I had a detrimental tendency to rhyme. As a little boy I expressed my malice in writing lampoons about my aunts so when I came back from Russia to occupied Warsaw in 1918, my relatives, remembering my love towards satire, advised me to join Warsaw cabarets which were very popular at that time⁶.

The first cabaret that he cooperated with was Argus. Afterwards he mentions in the interview by Krystyna Nastulanka:

I was taking night shift in barracks on purpose, so that I could write. Finished poems and songs were then smuggled through the gate. One day I was ordered to fetch horses for company to Saski Plac. I was going through Nowy Świat and I stopped in front of Picadero. Lechoń was reciting his poems. It was sufficient for horses to run away and bystanders had to help me catch them⁷.

Cabaret activity, as Szóstak mentioned, was crucial in terms of experience, which plays an important role in writer's poetry. In cabaret, Brzechwa was learning jokes, mental shortcuts, brilliant punch line, wordplay and literary nonsense based on language mechanics⁸.

Brzechwa's cabaret writings referred to turbulent political and social state of Poland right before and shortly after regaining independence. The poet specialised in writing political satire poems, which appeared in every theatre.

5 Janowski J., rec., "Czas" 1936, no. 60, p. 8.

6 Brzechwa J., *Na marginesie*, [in:] *Dymek z papierosa*, ed. K. Rudzki, Warsaw 1959, p. 282.

7 Nastulanka K., *Bajkopisarz mimo woli*, [in:] *Sami o sobie*, ed. K. Nastulanka, Warsaw 1975, p. 78.

8 Szóstak A., *Od modernizmu do lingwizmu...*, op. cit., p. 155.

Unfortunately most cabaret songs from interwar period have been lost. In issue number 17 of “Estrada” from 1921, one can find first Brzechwa’s texts intended for theatres. Song were an important part of every cabaret. The most famous of them were *Nietoperze* with music by Fanny Gordon, *Zdrowie Dam* with music by Jerzy Petersburski and *Jak kochać namiętnie* with music by Henryk Wars. Brzechwa’s lyrics are unsophisticated and sentimental. They mainly refer to love. They are rhythmical with simple rhymes and they have a catchy chorus.

After Second World War Brzechwa continued to write satiric songs. He refers to reality at that time, thus not knowing historical background hampers the ability to interpret them. Who remembers Basia Kwaitkowska¹⁰ who was unlike any other lover? Or Wollejko¹¹ or Łącz¹² from *Ty jesteś moje bobby*, to whom lyric subject is not similar.

The main character of the song *Ważniejsza od żony* is the secretary — a gray eminence, who has the following features:

Who is irreplaceable?
A secretary.
Who is even more important than wife?
A secretary.
A boss leaves, she stays.
So who rules the country?
A secretary, a secretary,
A Secretary, that is me!¹³

In this work, one can also see a satirical picture of the realities of the communist-era in Poland, in which citizens are forced to live:

Phones ring,
Waiting room is crowded,
You will be dealt with today,
And you can come next year.
Please submit a request in writing,
I’ll see to it tomorrow, not today.
Please stop asking me,
I said no!¹⁴

9 Published from 1917 to 1922 by B. Rudzki small books containing collection of songs, poems, monologues and skits performed in Warsaw theatres.

10 Barbara Kwiatkowska-Lass was an actress. She gained popularity after starring in *Ewa chce spać* (1957).

11 Czesław Wollejko, polish actor, 1916–1987.

12 Marian Mikołaj Łącz polish actor, ŁKS Łódź and Polonia Warszawa football player. He also played in national team.

13 Brzechwa J., *Ważniejsza od żony*, [in:] *Brzechwa dla dorosłych*, ed. Moździonek A., Warsaw 1999, p. 99.

14 Ibidem.

Książki... Książki is a satire on the absurd situation which, a reader who wants to buy books, has to face. He is sent from one city to another, but each time it turns out that the items he sought, has never been there. Press continuously informs about book novelties, however expensive, they are still difficult to get:

Catalogues are still published
Time is expensive, so are money,
But in libraries they say:
“There is none, it was... it will be”
What about culture? Education?
Books lay dormant, years pass¹⁵.

The poet does not forget about writer's fate. In satire titled *Pisarz Społeczny* he introduces his everyday schedule. It turns out that he has no time to write because his timetable does not allow him to do so. He is either on meeting of the Union or on an author's evening. The situation repeats itself every day:

I go through my calendar:
10 o'clock — meeting
11 o'clock — committee
12 o'clock — sitting
1 o'clock — Raczek's lecture
2 o'clock — bulgarian trip
3 o'clock — activists convention, discussion
4 o'clock — Drda valediction
5 o'clock — Young Club meeting
(...)
On Thursday the same all over again
Till Friday¹⁶.

In spite of the ability to carefully observe reality and translate it into language suitable for satire and grotesque, it was not the cabaret performance that made Brzechwa recognizable. He became know as writer of poetry for children in 1937, when his first collections of such poems titled *Tańczona igła z nitką* was published. Brzechwa having been asked about sudden change of audience replied:

It happened accidentally. One day during holidays I was in Zaleszczyki and I started writing humorous poems. I was surprised when Mortkowiczowa said that they will be published as a book for children. I was even more surprised when Leśmian said that my work is quite good and original¹⁷.

15 Brzechwa J., *Książki... książki*, [in:] idem, *Cięte banki*, Warsaw 1952, p. 38.

16 Brzechwa J., *Pisarz społeczny*, [in:] idem, op. cit., p. 32.

17 Nastulanka K., *Bajkopisarz mimo woli*, op. cit., p. 115.

Szóstak emphasizes that a new type of poetry for children has been born. In children's poems she sees grace of poetry, wit, lightness and unpretentiousness of phrases to a small reader who is not looked down upon, but treated in a friendly way. Moreover she points out that wordplay is visible in the unusual use of the phrasemes¹⁸.

The author of Brzechwa's monograph accentuates that all his experience gained as a lyric poet and cabaret writer, also his psychological credibility and perspicacity as well as understanding of language influenced children's poetry and contributed to its positive reception.

Brzechwa writes about children's poetry:

Avoiding schematic didactics I tried to mock its disadvantages and vices and show its negative side to a young reader. I thought that children's literature should not be instructive in a special way. It should extend their imagination, enrich vocabulary, indirectly present educational ideas in a sparkling, cheerful and light form so that a child does not notice it, otherwise the author's reasonable thought becomes repulsive. I tried to use anecdotes, unusual and surprising events, rhymes that attract attention so that child's memory would be stimulated, sound elements that are clearly distinguishable because every child has an inborn tendency to rhyming. I did not avoid word play (...). I thought that words themselves improve children's knowledge and provide entertainment like new toys¹⁹.

The poet stands in child's shoes and by the use of verbal play, he examines the effectiveness of the language and its usefulness as a tool and means of communication. The object of interest is colloquial language with its ambiguity, colour and controversy. Brzechwa often collates words with similar sounds ("Spotkał katar Katarzynę"²⁰), confronts literal and metaphorical meaning ("Poniedziałek już od wtorku / poszukuje kota w worku"²¹) or placing words in various context, demonstrating the greatness of their meaning (*Leń*²²).

In the poem *Na straganie* (On the stall) the poet describes in a colourful way the properties and colour of vegetables:

Kohlrabi says:
Look at turnip — she's so strong!
But parsley looks worse:
Pale, skinny, and she cannot sleep.

18 Szóstak A., *Od modernizmu do lingwizmu...*, op. cit., p. 272.

19 Ibidem.

20 Brzechwa J., *Katar*, [in:] idem, *Wielka księga wierszy*, Poznań 2002, p. 36–37.

21 Idem, *Tydzień*, [in:] *Jan Brzechwa dzieciom*, Warsaw 2011, p. 275.

22 Idem, *Leń*, [in:] *Brzechwa dzieciom*, Cracow 2013, p. 10–11.

Beetroot keeps away from her,
While onion shows tenderness:
“My Red Beetroot,
Wouldn't you want such wife?”

Beetroot covers his nose:
“Go away, disappear, die,
I want my wife to be beetrootish,
Because in your presence all must cry”

(...)
“Let Cabbage make a judgement!”
“Who? Cabbage? That silly vegetable?!”

Cabbage sadly says:
“Argue not my friends”
No point in quarrels
Soon our lives will perish inside a soup!²³”

Simple metaphors and everyday expressions placed in extraordinary context gain new, unexpected meaning “Let the goose kick the duck”²⁴.

In numerous reviews appearing in the press, literary critics pointed out that Brzechwa's poetry for children was something special. Anita Thierry emphasized that despite impressive poetic achievement, Brzechwa was not able to create writings that would be on a par with his poems for children²⁵.

In “Głos Pracy” a reviewer stated that:

Brzechwa is not the best lyrical poet, but his fairy tales, children's poems, satires and epigrams are unmatched²⁶.

Tadeusz Syga recalls words of Maksim Gorki who said that when you write for children you have to write better than for adults²⁷. According to Syga Brzechwa is tremendous at doing so.

Ryszard Matuszewski accentuates that when Brzechwa writes for children he:

Entertains young reader by improving and extending their knowledge and vocabulary (...) and teaches through play. He had faith in child's instinct and innate wisdom and he was against imparting knowledge in a direct way. It

23 Brzechwa J., *Na straganie*, [in:] *Jan Brzechwa dzieciom*, ibidem, p. 273–274.

24 Idem, *Kaczka dzimaczką*, [in:] ibidem., p. 211. “A niech cię gęś kopnie” (*let the goose kick you*) — polish curse which Brzechwa used to write about duck.

25 Thierry A., *Ciemne pieśni Brzechwy*, “Kultura” 1968, no. 43, p. 11.

26 XY, rec., “Głos Pracy” 1959, no. 87, p. 4

27 Syga T., *Jan Brzechwa*, “Stolica” 1966, no. 29, p. 11.

is save to assume that a child sometimes has better sense of humour than an adult²⁸.

Brzechwa's wife mentioned that he spoke to children as if he was speaking to adults:

There was no stiffness, no simplification, just a smile, a happy joke and easy-going dialogue, but always a bit exaggerated. Children often accepted the challenge and managed to overcome obstacles²⁹.

Despite that, the writer was afraid of infants and toddlers. Brzechwa recalls the visit of their friends, with their 3 year old daughter who did not speak yet. The girl was full of energy and she was not behaving properly. Her mother did not seem to notice it. When the guest left the poet said:

Are you sure this girl was three?
- What do you mean? — asked his wife — How old is she according to you?
- Twenty three — he mumbled changing his shirt — She almost raped me³⁰.

When asked about children's poems, Brzechwa mentioned many times that he does not write them for children.

When I write those poems I go back to my childhood and I try to recall how I perceived the world back then and what problems I had. I write those poems from the point of view of a child. As child would write it for adults³¹.

In the poem titled *Do matek (które swym dzieciom czytają moje wiersze)* Brzechwa revealed to whom does he really write:

Someone said that I'm a clever tactician,
Because when I wrote poems for children,
As a matter of fact I write them for mothers

(..)

It has been known for centuries,
That is the way of things,
You reach mothers through their children
Like the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.
Does that offend beloved mothers?
I confessed, I sinned.

28 Matuszewski R., ***, [in:] *Akademia pana Brzechwy*, op.cit., p. 129.

29 Brzechwa J., *Coś z kuchmi*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 107.

30 *Ibidem*.

31 *Ibidem*.

I like you a lot
And I often imagine
Your grace and charm, and beauty,
Against my will I dream,
And when my dream sways me,
Then I write for children³².

Brzechwa very much wanted to be a lyric poet and at the beginning he felt disappointed that he was perceived as an author of children's poetry. With time, he changed his mind and said that "it is better to be one, recognizable fairy tale writer than to be lost among many poets"³³.

He tried writing different literary genres. Up until the end, he was working on his last collection of poems.

In that collection we can find poems published before the war but also new, previously unseen ones. It was revealed to the world two years after poet's death. In *Liryka mojego życia* Brzechwa tried to belittle what he was unable to accept — sickness, senility and death. His last poems did not get much recognition and he will be remembered as brilliant children's poet. His "adult" works such as lyric, cabaret and satires have been almost entirely forgotten.

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32 Brzechwa J., *Do matek*, [in:] idem, *Liryka mego życia*, Warsaw 1968, p. 27–28.

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