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Abstract
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The following essay outlines the history of literary biography, with an emphasis on philosophy, in order to identify a corresponding tradition in twentieth-century Polish prose. By concentrating on the literary qualities of texts that combine literature with philosophy, it will highlight inherent difficulties of genre classification.

Keywords: philosophy, Polish contemporary literature, prose, lives of philosophers, essay, dialogue, short story, novel

Biographical writing as a branch of historiography has been practiced continuously from antiquity to the present day. The earliest forms of this genre feature biographies of political leaders and activists, saints and philosophers. During the Renaissance, biographies of artists emerged (for example, by Giorgio Vasari¹), and of influential women from aristocratic families connected to courts (by Pierre Brantome²), and even lives of courtesans (Pietro Aretina³). The latter example, a work of literary fiction, contains an assessment of sixteenth-century codes of morality, supported by solid research on this particular social class.

Alongside the historical significance of this type of writing (often the only or the main source of knowledge for history understood as science), it is often characterized by its literary values. Such literariness then becomes increasingly integral to twentieth-century accounts of philosophers’ lives. One of the first and most important preserved sources for the history of ancient philosophy is Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers by Diogenes Laërtius⁴, dating to the third century AD. In this early doxographical work, literary devices are already present. Diogenes incorporates his own epigrams in honor

¹ See Giorgio Vasari, Żywoty najświetniejszych malarzy, rzeźbiarzy i architektów (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1980).
² Pierre Brantome, Żywoty pań swawolnych (Gdańsk: Tower Press, 2000).
⁴ See Diogenes Laertios, Żywoty i poglądy słynnych filozofów (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1984).
of philosophers being discussed, quoting apothegms, paeans, fables by Aesop, song fragments, lines from the iliad and the poetry of Callimachus, and he presents maxims, shaping his text through various poetical devices including word games. He also draws attention to the style in which these thinkers’ works are constructed.

The first work of a similar nature in Polish literature is perhaps Żywoty filozofów, to jest mędrców nauk przyrodzonych, i też innych mężów cnotami ozdobionych ku obyczajnemu nauczaniu człowieka każdego krótko wybrane (Lives of philosophers, that is, wise men of natural sciences, and also other men by virtue adorned towards moral teaching of everyone, briefly selected) by Marcin Bielski⁵, a historian and, significantly, a poet and playwright. According to Jacek Sokolski, “Bielski’s book is an adaptation of the fourteenth-century Latin text De Vita et moribus philosophorum, extremely popular in the whole of Europe in the late Middle Ages and at the beginning of the modern era”⁶. While this work does not date back to classical antiquity, it indicates that period’s reception of philosophical thought. Bielski, as a translator and a compiler, is interested in anecdotes rather than encyclopedic information. However, he does refer to earlier authors including Diogenes, Seneca, and Valerius Maximus, focusing on sensational events in their lives. At the same time, moral and didactic functions emphasized in the book’s title are more important than those adventurous features. A dedication, preface and a poem stem from the era’s publishing habits and attempt to make the work more attractive, but also indicate relations between philosophy and literature. Even stronger evidence of this connection is formal: the presentation is not a synthetic account of views of “wise men of natural sciences”, but sentences and aphorisms attributed to those wise men.

As displayed in these two examples, the use of apothegms, sententia, aphorisms, and maxims (the concise forms by which ancient philosophers included observations of the world and at times related entire thought systems), as well as anecdotes and embedding a given thinker in fairly definite historical realities, invariably appears in each and every realization of such a life in literature. The texts by Diogenes and Bielski are historical-philosophical statements with literary insertions. In this article, however, I will focus on artistic prose texts with protagonists who are philosophers and also historical figures. In these works, the protagonists’ views, their biographical information, reflections and inquiries are distributed in different proportions. They appear within the framework of texts organized in literary terms and of diverse genres, such as Bolesław Miciński’s essay “Portret Kanta” (1941, “Portrait of Kant”), the fictionalized, unfinished Józef Wittlin sketch “Święty Franciszek z Asyżu” (1927–1932, Saint Francis of Assisi), an essayistic story by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, “Głęboki cień” (1994, “Deep Shadow”), Jan Parandowski’s dialogue “Spotkanie wśród gwiazd” (1949, Meeting among the stars),

⁵ See Marcin Bielski, Żywoty filozofów (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, 2015).
“Rozmowa poprzez wieki” (1963, A conversation over centuries) by Zygmunt Kubiak, and finally Prof. Aleksander Krawczuk’s novel Pan i jego filozof. Rzecz o Platonie (1970, Sir and his philosopher: a work on Plato). These texts have been studied to various degrees to date. The greatest interest among researchers is given to the works by Miciński, Wittlin, and Herling-Grudziński. Studies exist on the works of Parandowski and Kubiak but they are not concerned with dialogues, which I will continue to focus on. No scientific text on Aleksander Krawczuk’s literary output has yet been written.

This article will consider the works listed above as prose writings perpetuating the tradition of philosophers’ lives. I will attempt to demonstrate the continuity of this form of writing, focusing on its belonging to different genres and functions, resulting from a particular genealogical form. At the same time, I will treat the genre as another literary category inscribing the contemporary “lives of philosophers” into an artistic discourse, not a scientific one.

“Spotkanie wśród gwiazd”, Jan Parandowski

Dialogue, as a genre that grows at the interface between literature and philosophy, favors the confrontation or crystallization of ontological, epistemological, and ethical content. It also uses such literary devices as poeticization of language and fictionalization of content. And it has a rich philosophical tradition: Plato, Lucian of Samosata, Saint Augustine, Erasmus of Rotterdam, David Hume, and George Berkeley engaged in the dialogue form. Early in Stanisław Brzozowski’s philosophical thinking, dialogue was an important form of expression for him, as well. In “Spotkanie wśród gwiazd”, Parandowski updates his version of the genre, a conversation of the dead derived from Lucian of Samosata; the protagonists of that dialogue are the souls of Cicero and Julius Caesar, afloat among the galaxies. This space is a clarification of the titular reference to arguably the most recognizable work of Cicero, that is, to the ending of On the Commonwealth. This reference goes deeper, because the protagonists found themselves in a cosmic space (as we can guess) as two “the greatest men of their time”, patriots who, thanks to their talents, care for the good of the republic. This space is not the same as that depicted in “Dream of Scipio”, which Cicero took from Posidonius (as he admits in “Spotkanie”), but space as described by modern science.

When meeting after centuries, the interlocutors discuss their achievements, the legacy of their times and the whole of ancient Rome. Caesar speaks from the position of an accuser and a revisionist, while Cicero takes on the role of a defender, which he had played during his lifetime:

No one has surpassed us in the sense of the law, no one has drawn a bolder and clearer line between good and evil. [...] There is no better way for man than the one we have pointed out: the way of duty, virtue, justice.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Parandowski, “Spotkanie wśród gwiazd”, 138.
The moral ideals of the philosopher are therefore heard in words of defense. Justifying Caesar’s aggression against the Gallic tribes, Cicero’s words express a concise stoic belief in determinism and nature’s hierarchy of power: “This was destiny. You obeyed it – nothing more. The lower fate must give way to the higher fate”\(^8\). In turn, justifying his lack of support for Caesar’s faction, he elaborates his views on politics:

And I think that you can live only during the republic. [...] Yes, and I wanted to see, when I go out on the podium, free citizens, whose thoughts I will win for my thoughts, who, unhindered, will give me their vote, whose trust will be my highest reward, and whose reluctance will indicate that I have taken the wrong path\(^9\).

This display of rhetoric, in addition to presenting the real aspirations and views of a Roman speaker, implicitly informs the reader of his style and rhetorical skills. In several places, Cicero’s historical erudition is also revealed; he is known to have valued education of this type. The dialogue’s literary nature makes it possible to extract relevant content in an implicit or allusive way. The passus, which reveals Parandowski’s finesse in bringing the philosopher’s intellectual achievements to light, is Caesar’s remorse that during his expeditions he lacked the voice of conscience that Cicero would have offered: “How it could have been otherwise, if your goodness, your cheer, and your humanity had been with me in this savage struggle?” It will be recalled that he is considered the creator of the concept of humanitas, translated as humankind or, most often, humanity.

In another paragraph there is a notable allusion to an anecdote about Cicero’s attitude to the Julian calendar: “It was the real December according to my calendar, at which you laughed so much”. Along with giving exposure to the philosopher’s statements and opinions, the dialogue provides a report on the more important events in his life. Although there are no specific dates, the conversation shows that Cicero’s life falls within Julius Caesar’s rule. His affiliation with the Pompey camp is also described. The protagonists draw up the political situation that led to the exile of the speaker, and describe the circumstances of his death at the hands of Antony’s assassins. They don’t ignore the gesture of grasping the beard with the left hand, so characteristic of Cicero, as Plutarch describes. Finally, they allude to the posthumous dismemberment of the philosopher’s body and to the fact that his right hand was nailed to the Forum podium, from which he often spoke.

“Rozmowa poprzez wieki”, Zygmunt Kubiak

Zygmunt Kubiak has slightly modified the dialogue form in “Rozmowa poprzez wieki”. He enters into a polemic with Diogenes of Oenoanda, the terse pronouncements and the Epicurean philosophy he represented:

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\(^8\) Parandowski, “Spotkanie wśród gwiazd”, 141.
Diogenes of Cappadocia, old Epicurean, I would like to talk to and argue with you, a man from two thousand years ago. [...] I don’t know what you looked like [...]. You were the first to speak to me. You lived in the city of Oenoanda, in one of the early centuries of our era. [...] That is all I know about your life. And on the wall of a large portico [...] you carved your words [...] so that all passersby could read them.

Although the statement takes the form of a monologue, on several levels it has the marks of dialogue implemented. One feature is a variable addresser-addressee situation: me-addresser vs. you-Diogenes; me-addresser vs. you-Diogenes and Epicureans; we-addresser and all humanity vs. addressee-Diogenes; we-addresser and Diogenes vs. humanity; me-addresser as a part of humanity vs. you-Diogenes. Its second feature are Diogenes’ statements, quoted in direct, indirect, and free indirect speech. Kubiak adheres to his words, reports and comments on them and argues with them. This monologue is not just an impassioned summary of Diogenes’ views, nor does Kubiak treat those views as a pretext for reflection loosely related to them, but remains in constant dialectical tension, built by shifts of meaning (for example, understanding of the deity differs), opaque comments (verbs introducing dependent speech are marked and evaluative), irony (symptomatic use of Diogenes’ authorial epithets emphasize the condescending tone), and by oppositional rhetoric. It is a sustained confrontation of two worldviews and their ethical consequences.

Kubiak, in this excerpt from the monologue’s beginning, presents biographical information about the philosopher that is exhaustive because it is all that is known. The artistry of these first sentences lies in the fact that it is precisely this scarcity of knowledge about Diogenes of Oenoanda that contradicts his words about the possibility of reaching the truth and an understanding of the world in its physical dimension. The term “old”, in a literary text with a potential multiplicity of readings, can define the actual state of affairs (the philosopher was elderly when writing out his views) or may be pejorative epithet: a synonym for “irredeemable” or “unreformed”. Kubiak opposes Diogenes’ ideals: “You were a lover of peace and moderation”, because he sees, in peace and moderation that results from a conviction that existence is pointless, an unacceptable axiological indifference to the horror of reality, and nihilism. Superficial Epicurean ideals, according to the speaker in the text, lead to moral dullness and indifference towards more subtle metaphysical issues. Despite his disapproval of Diogenes of Oenoanda’s teachings, the protagonist resurrects his thought; in demonstrating that it has never been relevant, he exposes its weaknesses. Nevertheless Kubiak keeps Diogenes’s philosophy at the fore, available to more than the narrow circle of historians of the period.

“Portrait of Kant”, Bolesław Miciński

Another genre of philosophical origin is the essay. Its modern form was influenced by Michel de Montaigne’s Essays as well as those of Francis Bacon. Bolesław Miciński’s essays are enhanced with an original feature. Jerzy Święch even states that in Polish
literature Miciński created the philosophical essay, as a variety of genre. The ambition of his sketch is “the transposition of concepts into images”, the ability to read the issue “in one take” as with Gotthold Lessing’s concept of spatial arts. This ambition is served by the text’s painterly nature, indicated in the title and achieved through “conciseness, recurring themes, perseveration of themes, plays of light and shadow”, through fictionalization, episodes in which events’ simultaneity is conveyed in language, by using present tense or verb forms in an imperfect aspect. The originality of style and form is also achieved by means of individualization and poeticization of language. Characteristic features of this work are the occurrence of extensive comparisons, metaphors and onomatopoeia, quotations from King Lear and Adam Mickiewicz’s Dziady (1822, Forefathers’ Eve), with poems by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and Henri Frédéric Amiel included as epigraphs.

Miciński quotes extensively from Kant’s notes, and from reminiscences of his contemporaries; at the same time he gives up on presenting the Kantian system or even important ideas connected with it. He depicts Kant in the “maniacal rituals of everyday life, eccentricities and unbroken habits” to show that his maximalistic system of notions was created to deal with this dramatic case, which Miciński names as weakening of the sense of reality and disappearing awareness of principles on which it is based. The selection from notes and anecdotes of which he is the protagonist exposes his neuroticism and the need to control both surrounding reality and the mental sphere. Choosing the essay as a form of philosophical expression gives Miciński much more creative freedom than a scientific dissertation, creating an opportunity to penetrate the areas rarely addressed by Kant’s biographers and researchers or by popularizers of his concepts.

“Deep Shadow”, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński also employed the essay as a form in his short story “Głęboki cień” (“Deep Shadow”), but it is only one of the compositional tricks in the text, coming to the fore as historical analogies are spun in reference to earlier philosophical biographers. Additionally, Herling-Grudziński uses the genre of acta martyrum, used by Christian communities in the first centuries AD, which is signaled by weaving into the narrative legal lexis and court acts concerning Giordano Bruno. The work’s eclectic nature includes elements of apologia, a section of literature referred to by Plato and Xenophon in their defense of Socrates, widespread and practiced in ancient Christian literature by Aristides the Athenian, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen, and Lactantius. Recourse to those early genres highlights Bruno’s spiritual sovereignty and zeal of faith unconstrained by dogmatics. Which amazes insofar as it serves to defend Bruno’s integrity, who had been considered a heretic and an apostate, and who remains officially unrehabilitated today. The story’s heterogeneous span is extended by discursive parties treating his cosmology and theology.

The narrator, in his defense of Bruno, uses arguments that refer directly to Christian doctrine, showing that even in its own light, the accused had been innocent on many
points. For example, in the passage in which he ensures the correct application of terms: “his doctoral degree has filled him with confidence (but not pride)”, for pride, according to Catholic teachings, is the greatest of the seven principal sins. Another strategy of defense is to show a humanist’s sphere of emotions by exploring extreme states: despair, apathy, fear, self-confidence, passion, humility. To the same effect Bruno is presented in moments of physical and mental suffering and is finally embedded in the flesh so the reader, through communal experience, can sympathize with him. Recognizing the defendant’s merits plays a crucial role in his defense: “in both fields [magic and mnemotechnics] Giordano Bruno enjoyed well-deserved fame”. Though an interest in magic was no claim to fame during the Renaissance, the narrator exposes the hypocrisy of Giovanni Moceni, an adept in both areas explored by Bruno, who had invited him to Venice to learn from him, then reported him to the Inquisition. The second witness incriminating Bruno was Celestine of Verona, who while “on the verge of madness” denounced himself as well. Herling-Grudziński adopts a certain ethical attitude in his story, and within this tries to do justice to the Neapolitan. Its date, January 1994, makes it possible to include it in the discourse on restoring to grace those the Roman Catholic Church had condemned, a process initiated by the Second Vatican Council.

“Święty Franciszek z Asyżu”, Józef Wittlin

Józef Wittlin takes a rather different approach in his sketch about Saint Francis: “With unworthy hands, I take the burning halo off the head of the man whom the Catholic Church has counted among the saints”. This evocative symbolic gesture is intended to sanctify Francis Bernardone again, a member of a merchant family. It provides an opportunity to look at the human motives of this explorer of a new spirituality, who for Wittlin is a social reformer and an inspired poet. The hagiographic description has been replaced here by literary fiction with an apocryphal function. Wittlin sketches a panorama of political and social history, languages, culture and ideas to set the life of Francis against its backdrop. References to knightly legends, which Pietro Bernardone tells his son, are not just part of the medieval staffage. Those legends construct the very identity of Francis through his childhood. They are also a motive for weaving into the plot an anecdote about hitting a boy – a playmate in a game “for Christ” – with a stick, referencing the knights who fought in Christ’s name. Along with numerous references to literature, which make a significant contribution to Francis’ perception of the world as he grew up, are various references to architecture, painting and sculpture.

Another element of the medieval staffage, which describes Francis’ experience in greater depth, is known at least since Vergil’s day, but was popularized in the Middle Ages by Dante and apocryphal writings: the motif of going down into the afterlife as conceptualized by Bernardone’s lonely stay in the cave: “There he was surrounded by invisible powers: light and dark. They crushed him to a damp wall and fought each other for long weeks for what was the soul of Francis”. It is, at the same time, an unaltered transposition of the morality-text formula into the twentieth-century field
of the sketch, or as Wittlin called it, the literary monograph. This medieval genre also appears in a rephrased form during a spiritual crisis, provoking extreme physical weakness:

Two womanly figures are constantly watching over his bed. One is sitting at his feet, the other opposite, at his head. Both keep their gaze fixed on the unconscious Francis: Lady Pica and death. They fix themselves with each other’s eyes, they rip this body out for months. Eventually, the mother won [...]\(^1\).

Wittlin also draws on the form of religious experience popular in the Bernardones’ era: the compassion. This is the contemplation of the Passion of Christ directly preceding the final spiritual transformation. Also popular were the use of allegories and personifications of abstract concepts.

Just as medieval art and religiosity are exploited in Wittlin’s sketch to help with the notion of a specific human experience of that era, the history of war and conquests precedes a story of military activity in the life of Francis.

The thicket of dates and names of commanders, kings and popes is strewn with blunt vocabulary. Further attempts make the event descriptions more realistic with language aids. A paragraph in which Francis learns Latin is dominated by its Latinate sentence order: subject, object then predicate. A statement about unable to count despite being a merchant leads to a verbal game: “In other matters, he wasn’t a calculator, as well”. Wittlin continues his arithmetic concept: “Instead, however, if something remained with him from mathematics, it is subtraction (of oneself) and division (of everything he possessed)”. The humor of this pun weakens the pathos, making Francis more human and thus easier to follow – which was, by the way, Wittlin’s aim. He states that “Francis has imitated Christ word for word”, therefore following Francis would be the same as following Christ.

**Pan i jego filozof, Aleksander Krawczuk**

All the „lives” analyzed so far are small in scale, some even miniature, unlike Krawczuk’s novel. The reader gets to learn about Plato’s life and views through Apuleius, a historical figure, the poet and author of the treatise on the philosopher. This provides an opportunity to outline the reception of Plato’s thought through five centuries of antiquity separating master from pupil. Krawczuk’s text fits into the definition of a Professorenroman: its action is minimal, but it contains extensive excerpts from several of Plato’s works, it flaunts dry descriptions of historical realities, often with little significance for the plot or even for an understanding of Plato’s thought. His reflections, like his figure, are constantly evoked, quoted, commented on and praised, and become the subject of reflection or of criticism. Krawczuk is no stranger to popularization, which is at odds with the pursuit of objectivity and reliability, which is especially visible in lengthy quotations taken from Plato’s works, in extensive and detailed rendering of historical realities,

\(^1\) Ibidem, 57.
and finally in the conservative nature of his comments and analyses, which manifest his care in not distorting Plato’s science.

This science is ubiquitous in the novel, and not merely as the subject of a student of the Athens Academy. This becomes a way of explaining the reality that the protagonist isn’t coping with, though often he is brought to it, especially when Platonic science and its tenets remind us of current events and problems. The novel has quasi-casual moments: during the protagonist’s first visit to his future wife, Prudentilla, when love epigrams attributed to the philosopher win Apuleius her favor.

However, Krawczuk doesn’t stop at talking about Plato directly. He imitates the philosopher’s literary workshop, using pictorial parabolas to explain complex issues, such as the plot line in which Apuleius orders a wood model from a carpenter of the cosmos, depicting a vision of the universe from Plato’s Republic and from Timaeus. Dialogues the protagonist has with that craftsman or with Prudentilla are also characteristic – with simple people who don’t yet know the philosopher, in which his teachings are explained to them.

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As I have attempted to demonstrate, the lives of philosophers, a genre with a long tradition and with fixed elements, still appeals to authors of fiction. This often provides surprising artistic effects and stylistic possibilities of mimicking the era in which a particular philosopher lived. As with the case of Saint Francis, its appeal lies in the expression of emotions and feelings and of spiritual transformation, using medieval means of expression. This indicates the difference between times of affectation, such as the medieval period, and times of the mind, such as Józef Wittlin’s day, in accordance with his original concept as set out in his text. With the Platonic manner of speaking about philosophy, Aleksander Krawczuk delivered a lecture on the doctrine of that philosopher. Bolesław Miciński chose anecdotes which he does not apply didactically or morally, as is the case in historical lives of philosophers, but creates from them a logically coherent, artistically effective vision of Kant.

Reaching for tried-and-true forms of writing while using equally timeworn genres doesn’t exclude formal experiments. These authors refer to literature (unlike historical-philosophical studies): Gustaw Herling-Grudziński to Dante, when he ponders whether Giordano Bruno may have known the Divine Comedy’s terza-rima scheme, over the course of which the shadow is spoken of, a concept so important to the Neapolitan; Wittlin to Dante, Arthurian legends, the Song of Roland, the poetry of Trouvères and the troubadours, all serving to heighten awareness of these tales’ influence on Francis’s developing personality; Krawczuk to Homer and Sophocles, to set Plato’s style and momentousness against their background; Miciński to Shakespeare and Mickiewicz, with select quotations illustrating Kant’s state of mind; Kubiak to Lucretius, showing that even a writer from the Epicurean school to which Diogenes had belonged wouldn’t necessarily
agree with that philosopher’s categorical judgments; and finally, for Jan Parandowski, Poseidonios to point out Cicero’s cosmological inspirations.

Equally frequent are the ekphrases of paintings, sculptures and architectural forms. In any case, the crucial elements seem to be the actualization of lives and views of thinkers who might seem so distant in time – of reading them anew in an artistic code and communicating one’s own visions, views and ways of feeling by means of their enduring figures.

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