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Poetry and the Ritual: Poems for Bolesław Bierut's 60th Birthday

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Distinctions between literary genres did not play a major role in the theory of social realism, but official expectations with regard to literature had to at least take into account the rudimentary genealogical properties of literary writing. Novels and plays, which by no means could have been written within a day, served different purposes than poetry. Narratives were supposed to illustrate specific theses spawned by party propaganda which promoted specific attitudes, dictated the correct vision of the world, and thus set the direction of history, creating heroes of socialist work and conveying “moral” teachings (such as, “Stay vigilant!”). However, this was accomplished with a certain degree of delay – the famous novel on the foulness of the nationalist right-wing tendencies, for example, was created several years after the healthy forces among the Polish Communists managed to discover and eradicate this “foulness” with the brotherly support of their Soviet friends.

Poems could also fulfill some of these tasks, conveying for instance teachings seen as worth spreading by dispatchers of communism (e.g. “Stay vigilant!”), but they were not suited to satisfy other demands of aesthetics. However, the specific qualities of poetry made it a kind of light cavalry for literary socialist realism as poets could respond to the ongoing events without delay, singing

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praise or – if need be – marshalling resistance against hostile forces. Temporal distance, inevitable in the case of novels for purely technical reasons, was unknown to poetry. And this was true whether the author was to produce a panegyric for the socialist leadership, or a lampoon to reveal the disgusting face of President Truman, Chancellor Adenauer or one of the domestic enemies: Anders, Mikołajczyk, the reactionary clergy, and so on. In this sense, poetry was helpful in a more direct manner: it could be called to action immediately and quite literally, ordered by phone. In fact, it was common practice to call authors and commission their verses on specific matters or for a specific anniversary, and calls of this kind came not only from the publishing houses, but from party headquarters as well. It is precisely this peculiar practice that Przyboś refers to in his popular (and poignant) satire.¹ While certain conversations were not meant for the phone in the Stalinist era, certain poems were to be ordered by phone. It was a time when poetry had to be occasional, in the narrow sense of the word.

Przyboś's poem (continuing, or perhaps complementing, his larger poetical polemic against social realism presented in *Głos o poezji*²) signals this issue already in the title [*To the Poet with a Schedule*], capturing at the same time one of the more important characteristics of social realist poetry. The schedule in question included not only current political events, but also sacred dates of communism including anniversaries of revolutions and official holidays, such as May 1, July 22, November 7, Lenin's and Stalin's birthdays, and other events. In socialist realism, poetry's *raison d'être* was completely subordinated to the communists' liturgical calendar which had its fixed holidays, but also movable feasts and celebrations taking place only every few years (such as leaders' jubilees). It was precisely this subordination to an imposed and strictly codified liturgy of lies and falsehood which determined the character of poetic production, determining its function and dictating its role and – more or less directly – its qualities.

Subordination to the communist calendar resulted in the ritualization of poetry. Anniversaries and holidays belonged to the sphere of rites whose rules were observed very strictly and whose elements had to be appropriately arranged. Nothing could break the *decorum*, adjusted to whatever was seen as a key function in each case. Moreover, the rituals in question excluded all

1 Julian Przyboś, "Do poety z terminarzem," ["To the poet with a schedule"] in *Pisma zebrane*, ed. Rościśław Skręt (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), 340–341. The poem was published first in *Nowa Kultura* 18 (1958) and later included, among others, in *Najmniej słów* [*The Fewest Words*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1955).

2 Written in 1953, the poem had a rather complicated publication history, described meticulously by R. Skręt in a commentary included in the edition cited above, 640–643.

aspects of the poet's personal engagement, which since Romanticism has been largely and consciously viewed as one of poetry's crucial characteristics – the imprint of personality present in the work regardless of the circumstances of the poem's creation, its content and character. All elements indicative of the poet's personality lost their importance, and were seen as being irrelevant from the perspective of any given ritual, and detrimental or even potentially dangerous as they could disturb, blur or diminish its principles. This was the case of both positive rituals, devoted to the praise and celebration of leaders or events significant to the communist mythology, and those that were negative, focused mostly on throwing strictly regulated sets of invectives at the enemy. In the process, the poet as a personality, as an individual who uses their own voice precisely on the account of being a poet, became redundant or an epiphenomenon at best, and was to be known only as the provider of the ordered good, singing praise to Stalin, Bierut or Dzierżyński. Whether he revealed his personal attitude to the subject or not, was not really a matter of any importance. In fact, the status of such a poet answering the phone call did not differ much from the position of a hired court poet whose patron allowed almost no margin of liberty. In fact, Andrei Sinyavsky's famous thesis that socialist realism is rooted in the tradition of courtly classicism is perfectly applicable to poetry.³

Poetry's subordination to the ritual entailed not only an elimination of everything subjective but also a radical conventionalization of all poetic means. A rigid, strictly regulated convention became a literary equivalent of the ritual, or in fact, one of its embodiments. After all, it is the ritual that sanctions what is permitted; and it is the ritual that dictates which phenomena disrespect the boundaries of *decorum*.⁴ As in any other sphere of social realist production,

3 Abram Terc [Andriej Sinyavsky], *Sąd idzie* and Anonym [Andriej Sinyavsky], *Co to jest realizm socjalistyczny?* [On Socialist Realism] trans. Józef Łobodowski (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1959).

4 It may be worthwhile to refer here to Jean Cazaneuve's theory of ritual, formulated in *Sociologie du rite (Tabou, magie, sacré)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), where the author presents the ritual as a symbolic act: "It may be an individual or collective act but one which, even when sufficiently flexible to include an element of improvisation, stays true to certain rules which determine its ritualistic character." (12) Rituals differ from other customs not only because of their assumed effects, but also because of the importance of involved repetition – this is not a matter of practice but the very essence of the ritual. Their transformation is extremely slow and all sudden and significant change dissolves their value and *raison d'être* (see page 13). My purpose, of course, is not to apply the theory of the ritual to a particular and recent case. However, it is also difficult to ignore the fact that this particular case embodies perfectly some of the characteristics listed by the French anthropologist as constitutive of the phenomenon. Rituals observed

references to styles and directions which had been judged as wrong were unwelcome. Agreeing to the role set by the communist regime, the poet also agreed to meet certain demands in the sphere of poetics, that is to resign from his own voice. Any praise or peon using the tone of the dark, reflexive poetics of the 1930s, or any form of avant-garde poetics, would have been seen as a betrayal of the established rules, or a blunder. Poets did attempt to retain at least a trace of their own personality, using various excuses and procedures to leave an imprint of their individual character in the text. However, agreeing to the role of a poet who obeys the rules of ritual also meant that certain lines were simply not to be crossed. This is captured perfectly in Przyboś's poetic lampoon:

Where did the Editor manage to lure you from,
 all of you busy bees:
 1) followers of Father Baka, crowding in the stanzas,
 2) arcadian rhapsodists of the garden plots,
 3) Homers of chivalric romance on pipes,
 4) philistines excreted in the privies of censorship,
 5) screamers raising high to [star] decorated skies,
 finally – thundering, loud and determined
 TYRTAEUSES!... slithering up the worshipped stairs...
 Your drums lead to nausea, your sweet roller organs cause nausea,
 dilligent, toadyishly haughty,
 scribes of lineage,
 graduates of the void ["lyre"]...⁵

The oxymoronic character of toadyish haughtiness and crawling Tyrtaeus-illustrates the situation in question particularly well. Poetry in the service of the Stalinist ritual was characterized by references to the tradition of revolutionary art, copying its models, attitudes and values. At the same time, despite alluding to the revolutionary sphere, it was an expression not of rebellion but of servitude; rather than negating official views and practices, it perpetuated them; it praised authority while failing to question the actions and characters of rulers. Although the ritual of celebratory Stalinist

by social realist poetry were a form of cult where repetition played a significant role (it is possible, in fact, to create a catalogue of repeated motifs) and the thaw [of October 1956], which in this perspective constituted the radical change mentioned above, dissolved the *raison d'être* of panegyric poetry.

5 Przyboś, "Głos o poezji," in *Pisma zebrane*, 336. [Here and elsewhere, mostly literal translations made for the purpose of this essay – Anna Warsow.]

poetry may appear paradoxical, its internal contradictions are not contradictions in the traditional sense of the word once we take into account the fact that Stalinism dismantled all systems of social communication and had the power to use them, and do to them, whatever was needed at a given time. Conventions of revolutionary poetry reflected the communist rhetoric of the period, and panegyric poetry is perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon.

The communist calendar of the Stalinist period, requiring poetry's ritualistic participation, was also extremely crowded, and so verse makers working the schedule had a lot on their plates. The ritual which incorporated poetry into its works engaged not only poets, but also journal editors who had to dutifully celebrate the anniversary of the revolution with an appropriate rhyme by printing a stanza or two to praise the July Manifesto or celebrate the birthday of the current, or a long deceased, leader (mostly Lenin⁶ and Dzierżyński). Then, there were also unforeseen circumstances which had to be answered in verse, and Stalin's death constitutes a particularly telling example of such a circumstance – the Polish People's Republic experienced two waves of poetry devoted to Stalin: his birthday of 1949 and his funeral one of 1953. Any editor failing to publish a suitable poem would have been accused of ideological negligence. The quality of the poem was of secondary importance; any kind of rhymed text was good enough as long as it was published in the right place and at the right time. An absence of such a text would have broken the ritual, questioning the current political literary order and impoverishing the liturgical dimension.

A poet with a schedule had numerous obligations as the communist agenda included not only holidays and anniversaries, but also various propagandist activities related to concurrent local and international events. Poetry was in fact assigned a rather prominent role, whether it was the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 or the death sentence for the Greek communist activist, Nikos Beloyannis, in 1952. Consequently, hundreds of poems were ordered and written, unified to the degree that they seemed like impressions from the same matrix. Even poetic protests against death sentences (as was the case with Nikos Beloyannis, who became the object of numerous poems and lamentations) had to be sanctioned and decreed. Tender and shaken, the poets

6 Separate poems about Lenin were, in fact, relatively scarce in the period in question, which can be explained, perhaps, by the fact that the years 1949-1953 lacked a good Lenin-related jubilee. As far as I am aware, no separate anthology of Lenin-devoted celebratory poetry was published, except for the volume entitled *O Leninie. W trzydziestą rocznicę śmierci* [About Lenin on the 30th Anniversary of His Death], containing various types of materials, among them literary tributes to the leader.

protested fervently against the murder of a man they had not heard of the day before, and voiced their protests as if unaware of the crimes taking place in Poland. Whoever accepted the order was transformed to a poet, and verses were composed in accordance to specific needs. Enthusiasm for the leader may have been valued equally to the outrage at a death sentence in a distant land – ordinary propagandist activities had a broad scope; and even though poetry surely did not play a prominent role, it was ritualistically necessary, as it elevated the rhetoric of propaganda. The process was most successful when a recognized, popular and well-liked author joined the effort.

Without a doubt, the poetry of social realism was a celebratory endeavor, but in a way different from lyrical poetry as it was not the poet who decided which occasion deserved his or her interest. The occasion was chosen by the person placing the order – that is, in the last instance – a party official. Nonetheless, it was not directly determined by propagandist activities, although this was the ultimate goal, but by the requirements of the ritual to which poetry was, in a sense, indispensable, and which determined the schematic character and conventions of poetry.

Its relation to the communist ritual was fundamental to the poetry of social realism; poetry was free from this dependence only in rare instances (at least in the sense that it was not created on direct demand). This essay does not aim to describe the phenomenon in its entirety, focusing instead on one distinct example whose analysis, however, can hopefully shed light on the whole. Poetry of social realism is highly unified – in fact, Wojciech Tomasiak notes that by describing the programmatic poetry of the Stalinist era one reveals the fundamental properties of the entire poetic production of that time period.⁷ I believe this applies not only to poems expressing the Socialist creed, but to all types of celebratory poetry in its numerous incarnations. It is a production so highly de-individualized, so sharply and arbitrarily regulated, that an analysis of part of the output allows for an interpretation of the whole.

The present essay focuses on a relatively small fragment of the phenomenon, namely, poems written to commemorate Bolesław Bierut's 60th birthday, and discusses only a selection of those poems included in the anthology entitled *Wiersze o Bolesławie Bierucie* [*Poems about Bolesław Bierut*].⁸ The Stalinist

7 Wojciech Tomasiak, "Poezja twardych rąk. Socrealizmu wiersze programowe," in *Słowo o socrealizmie* (Bydgoszcz: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna w Bydgoszczy, 1991).

8 Zdzisław Łapiński, "Jak współżyć z socrealizmem," in *Jak współżyć z socrealizmem. Szkice nie na temat* (London: Czytelnik, 1988), 90. The anthology was published in 1952 by Czytelnik; unfortunately, the name of the editor is not provided. Zdzisław Łapiński comments: "Bolesław Bierut was another presence [after Dzierżyński – M.G.] who encouraged or enforced a concentration of motifs and structures fundamental to the discussed

era produced several celebratory anthologies of this type, which in itself was naturally a consequence of poetry's ritualization and the instrumental, thematic approach of the time. Some of those volumes including poems about communist heroes such as Stalin⁹, Dzierżyński, Świerczewski¹⁰ and Bierut, were meant as a form of worship. Of course, they also had practical applications as well, becoming resources for poems used during various types of jublations and festivities organized at schools, factories, community and cultural centers.

The volume devoted to Bierut is relatively humble, containing only fourteen poems, but they were all written by eminent Polish authors.¹¹ These

poetics: enigmatic to a certain degree, a person whose life lacked dramatic events (as far as was officially revealed), which was a serious obstacle in the attempts at a poetic treatment of the subject. Additionally, an overzealous tribute may have offended someone who was still alive."

- 9 *Strofy o Stalinie. Wiersze poetów polskich* [*Verses about Stalin: Poems by Polish Poets*], (Warszawa: Związek Literatów Polskich, 1949). The cover lists Związek Literatów Polskich [Union of Polish Writers] as the publisher, but also this publication fails to provide the name of the editor. Another volume published in the same year by Czytelnik under the title *Wiersze o Stalinie. Wybór wierszy poetów radzieckich* [*Poems about Stalin: A Selection of Verses by Soviet Authors*] was edited by P. Pollak. The vast number of mourning poems was not collected in a separate volume.
- 10 A number of poems about Świerczewski was written and a propaganda song, with lyrics by Robert Stiller, actually became in fact quite popular. Łapiński comments ironically on *Poematy o generale Świerczewskim* [*Poems about General Świerczewski*]: "Dzierżyński and Bierut were problematic from the literary perspective, but the problems were not insurmountable. Świerczewski's case was different. His soldiery death and perfect revolutionary life immediately worked themselves on their own into forms well known to Polish literature. [Władysław] Broniewski was an undisputed poetic champion of the discipline and the winner of several awards. The traditional theme enticed also the innovators attempting, perhaps, to show that the artistic means which had been previously used for the purposes unrelated to the needs of the moment, can be useful in refreshing already worn-out patriotic poetic forms. Tadeusz Różewicz's later activity in the field probably had the same source. See Łapiński, *Jak wspomóc socrealizmem*, 91.
- 11 The invaluable *Polska Bibliografia Literacka* [Polish Literary Bibliography] provides information about other poets who commemorated Bolesław Bierut's birthday in 1952 and they are Władysław Broniewski, Tadeusz Fangart, Wanda Grodzieńska (in „Świerszczyk!"), Jerzy Jurandot, Leopold Lewin, Jerzy Miller, Waclaw Mrozowski, Zdzisław Polsakiewicz, Seweryn Skulski, Anatol Stern, Grzegorz Timofiejew and Jan Zalewski. They represent a decidedly weaker set. The jubilee included also a foreign author, Liubomyr Dmyterko (trans. by G. Timofiejew), who celebrated Bierut with a separate poem. Notably, the business in question was not restricted to poetry only. Tributes to Bierut also took the form of radio plays, children's stories (in 1952 Halina Rudnicka published a separate book entitled

were, following the table of contents, Adam Ważyk, Artur Międzyrzecki, Anna Kamieńska, Henryk Gaworski, Stanisław Pięta, Włodzimierz Słobodnik, Jan Koprowski, Teofil Kowalczyk, Stanisław Wygodzki and Jerzy Ficowski. The list

Prezydent Bolesław Bierut – wielki przyjaciel młodzieży [*Bolesław Bierut – A Great Friend of the Youth*] and several jubilation speeches, written by, among others, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Lucjan Rudnicki and Julian Tuwim. It may be worth explaining why the first league of panegyrists did not include Broniewski, who was highly beloved at the time and officially promoted as the greatest among the poets. All seems to suggest that the poet was simply late to the party, having written his text at the very last moment, or even after the fact. Broniewski's poem is entitled "To Bolesław Bierut" and appeared in "Trybuna Ludu" on July 22, 1952 (203), in the special issue. It was later reprinted by a few journals but, as far as I know, was never included in any of the poet's volumes and became forgotten. I am quoting the entire text below:

We crossed the Bug River and there's Poland!--
comrade Bolesław.
There march our formidable brave soldiers
Warsaw-bound and headed for glory.

We ourselves build, we ourselves plough,
we claw at the hard soil
we want to, we can make it,
ours is the victory!

A worker – now means more
than one pair of hands,
enough of working like mules,
enough of the suffering!

A farmer? now means a tractor, cooperative,
the People's Republic
Working together and honest,
may it long prosper and flourish!

And it cost so many years of imprisonment
so many misinterpreted thoughts
to become Host of this land
for everyone here, for each of us.

Who else but comrade Bolesław
has more right today
to grasp in his hand
our glorious and bloodied banner?

Clearly, the poet did not rise above the panegyric standard of the period.

includes only one completely unknown author (Kowalczyk¹²) and two more who obediently served the communist authorities for decades (Gaworski and Koprowski). The rest are well recognized, some among them actually remarkable poets who in the years to come actively engaged in the fight against the totalitarian regime. The very fact that the anthology includes more than literary hacks or poets with a schedule, as labeled by Przyboś, makes the entire thing even more fascinating. This is not only because we could ask ourselves why great authors decided to fulfill the order for poems and, consequently, participated in the jubilee ritual (an important question, especially considering the fact the list of fourteen authors is not dominated by party activists but rather poputchiks). What seems more important here is the issue of how those poets situated themselves within the framework of conventions and obligations resulting from the ritual and whether they attempted to moderate or circumvent them somehow.

Their impersonal character is a striking feature of the poems in question. This should come as no surprise, as they were all created to order. In addition, some of the authors might have viewed the task of writing these poems as something to be done for this or that reason, and also something not to be taken seriously. But while this explanation is not to be completely excluded, it seems that there were also other issues at play. The fact that poems about Bierut – with only one exception – are all characterized by such a high level of impersonality (and, consequently, representative of occasional literary production for jubilees, regardless of the addressee) is not motivated, or at least not entirely, psychologically. It was not caused by the fact that the poet, regardless of whether they were a renown author with years of experience or a third-rate beginner, was unable leave a personal mark in their work; of course they were able to do so – even if what they felt toward the work was barely contained disgust, because a personal mark in a literary work is not (or does not have to be) a matter of honesty or real engagement (emotional, intellectual, or any other), but also an element of literary convention in and of itself – a convention which was not used here (with a few exceptions). This, most certainly, was not an accident. It seems that leaving a personal mark, in other words, reaching for that particular convention, was not expected of the poets, as whoever placed the order needed something else. Naturally, it was important to be able to put a name of a well-known and recognized author above the poem praising Stalin, Bierut or Dzierżyński, regardless of the actual value of the work. Such a gesture strengthened the propagandistic message

12 Actually, Teofil Kowalczyk has earned himself an entry in *Słownik współczesnych pisarzy polskich* [Dictionary of Contemporary Polish Writers], series 2, vol. 1, ed. Jadwiga Czachowska (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977).

and utility. But it was less important (or not important at all) to emphasize that it was the poet as a person – Słonimski, Iwaszkiewicz, Gałczyński, Dobrowolski – who praised the brilliant leader of the revolution, or of the entire progressive mankind, and sang his glory. This was not only because of the underlying assumption that the poet was not to be viewed as a partner of the praised person, as a comrade or interlocutor. Social realist panegyrics went even further: it did not matter that comrades Stalin or Bierut were praised by a particular person, even if that person happened to be a famous poet. What mattered was their being praised by the entire progressive mankind, by the working class, by the laborers of the country, which does not mean, of course, that the discussed works belong to choral poetry; a collective subject was not necessary and was rarely created. Concealing or de-individualizing the poem's speaker sufficed.

This phenomenon has a broader field of reference as it is related to another typically social realist practice of using general categories for the spheres normally reserved for the individual. In the case of the discussed poems, generality is expressed in several aspects of the work whose only remaining individual element is the praised hero. This very generality determined the fundamental qualities of the poem. In lyrical works, the clarity of the speaker results in the clarity of the situation of utterance; consequently, one is usually able to reconstruct the speaker and the circumstances of the act. But in the poems following the rules of the communist ritual only one thing is clear and certain, namely, the direct addressee of the work (if the poem approaches the so called *Du-Lyrik*) or the person described by the work (in the case of narrative poems). The situation of the subject is unimportant. Hence, the unnaturalness found at the very foundation of these poems, and the vagueness of their rhetoric. The latter may seem slightly odd as the tradition of laudatory poems strongly imposes a rhetorical structure, but the panegyric works of the past corresponded to other kinds of rituals and did not share the obligations highlighted earlier in this text. The blurring of the rhetorical situation takes place even when the address itself constitutes the basic element of composition:

Mud covered outskirts of Lublin
painfully seared in your memory,
but perhaps you reminisce also about this land,
which you had to abandon early.

S. Piętak "Pozdrowienie znad Sanu"
["Greeting from the Banks of the San"]

In some cases, despite the clear recipient and destination of the poem, generality is a key aspect:

Who has found his true self in the fight, defeated and broken down
 - even with hands stiff with cold - retained a hot burning heart,
 who knew he cannot be thwarted by the shadow of prison bars,
 that people will rise the next day and break the bolts on the door,
 who was free even when captured in the cells of Sanacja
 he, who in Nowa Huta, knew Częstochowa awakens the new dawn,
 he is the first one among us. And may the song fight alongside,
 a song raising the man and an unidolatrous one.

J. Ficowski, "Kto znalazł siebie..."
 ["Who Has Found His True Self"]

I am quoting this eight verse essay in its entirety, as it may serve as a particularly good illustration of the discussed phenomenon. The speaker has been moved to the background and the way the sentences are formulated suggests that they convey eternal, unquestioned and undisputable truths, even though they simply praise a specific individual and were written in specific circumstances, per order.

Broadly understood, depersonalization and its crucial consequences constitute the main feature of social realist ritual poetry, such as can be found in the poems about Bierut, and even more pronounced in the works devoted to Stalin. This is why exceptions to this rule must be noted carefully, exceptions such as Iwaszkiewicz's *List do Prezydenta* [*Letter to the President*] found in the body of poetry celebrating Bierut's birthday. Today the poem evokes disgust, as do other works collected in the volume, but it cannot be denied that it stands out from the rest and, in fact, is the only text in the collection which can be treated seriously. This is how Tomasz Burek approached "List do Prezydenta" in his interesting analysis. The critic admits that the poem fulfills the numerous demands of social realist poetics:

The author of the cited poem, already a well-respected author of considerable literary output and achievement, chastised nonetheless for his tendency for aestheticizing contemplation, seems to agree and internally identify with the imposed, rather unflattering image, or model. It is a model of a sinful egotist and aesthete who prefers the seven-colored rainbows suspended in the skies to the epic of collective history. The author takes his eager and exaggerated self-criticism of his interwar past so far that he forgets - or skillfully pretends to have forgotten, in order to cast even more severe self-accusations and to humble himself even more in front of the victorious and empowered Common Man - that as a writer he is always engaged in debates concerning the teachings of others.¹³

13 Tomasz Burek, "Mądrość daremna," in *O twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza*, ed. Alicja Brodzka (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1983), 37-38. In the context of this particular

Burek reveals how the poem resounds with echoes of Iwaszkiewicz's postwar poetry and how it revisits the problems reappearing on various occasions and in several forms in Iwaszkiewicz's other works. We are dealing here with a poetic tribute which nonetheless retains a personal character. This fact precisely contributes to the poem's particular position: it was undoubtedly written to meet the demands and follow the principles of the social realist ritual, but at the same time it breaks the most important one. As a consequence, it is a gesture of both acquiescence and transgression, and being such an unusual phenomenon, worth a closer look.

Such act of stepping outside the rules of the ritual was perhaps not demanded, but certainly implied by the epistle as a form. A poetic letter taken seriously – and this is how Iwaszkiewicz approached his text – assumes a clarity of the situation of transmission and an individual character of the subject who addresses or, in fact, communicates with the receiver. Both are presumed equal, even if the speaker means to honor the addressee while remaining self-critical. “List do Prezydenta” fulfills the basic criteria of the genre: it is indeed a poetic letter locating itself within the tradition of a very ancient literary form. This can be seen particularly clearly when the poems is compared to another literary tribute to Bierut: *List kwietniowy* [April Letter] by Gaworski. Differences in their literary culture and poetic craft require no commentary, as they are self-evident; Gaworski's subject makes various promises and swears oaths to the addressee, but never expresses nor negotiates his own case, even while pretending to do so. The poem can hardly be described as an epistle in the classical sense. In another sense, it becomes an unintentional caricature of Iwaszkiewicz's work.

You dwell in Warsaw, Comrade, we all know,
 But I keep seeing you away from the capital,
 Crossing country roads and forgotten paths,
 Wearing your light coat and worries shadowing your face.

(...)

My song is still awkward,
 like an unqualified worker.
 But, Comrade, I will take better care of it now,
 I will feed it my heart and refine it with work,

poem Balcerzan speaks of “doing away with pathos of the genre” but what he has in mind is not the epistle but the panegyric. See Edward Balcerzan, *Poezja polska w latach 1939-1965*, part I: *Strategie liryczne* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1982), 152.

And, like windows, I will keep my words wide open,
to the people's struggle, their worries and love.

H. Gaworski, "List kwietniowy" ["April Letter"]

One could simply comment that this was how poetic letters used to be written and lay the matter to rest. But the form cannot exist without a clearly indicated addressee, which reveals yet another question of fundamental significance. Namely, what were the ways to present the recipients of not only the epistle, but of the ritual celebratory poem? What traits were they attributed with and how were they positioned? While the matter requires a detailed analysis, one could already posit that it would reveal issues similar to those concerning the construction of the subject – the problem of the relation between the general and the particular, between that which undergoes generalization and that which remains unquestionably individual. The problem, however, is resolved differently than when the matter concerns the poet who can remain silent about himself, remove himself out of the spotlight, limit his own presence to an extreme degree, almost annihilating it. Nothing of that kind can be done to the addressee of a poem written to celebrate the addressee: here Stalin has to remain Stalin, Bierut has to remain Bierut and Dzierżyński has to remain Dzierżyński, and even the humble Świerczewski cannot be replaced or transformed into someone else. This is the crux of the problem: how to conciliate between writing a tribute to the leader, (part of the phenomenon euphemistically referred to during the political thaw as the cult of the individual) and the collectivism inherent to Marxism-Leninism?

This is also where the problem of what I call communism's personal code reveals itself.¹⁴ Its deficient and schematic nature can be seen in panegyrics, and other poetic tributes written for leaders. This schematism and attendant deficiency constitute a universal quality of communist discourse, one which dominated both poetic production and pseudo-historical accounts to an almost identical degree. Even speaking about the dictator (especially on special occasions, such as anniversaries which turned into public holidays) had to be contained within the borders delineated by ideology and the ritual spawned by the ideology. As a result, the leader receiving the tribute remains a depersonalized figure, be it Bierut, Stalin or anyone else (either in Polish or Soviet poetry). Naturally, the poets do not go so far as to regard the person of the leader as a replaceable figure or an example, as a role played by a particular person due to some sort of a coincidence. If that were the case,

¹⁴ See Michał Głowiński, "Wielka przebieranka," ["A Great Masquerade"] in *Nowomowa po polsku* [*Newspeak in Polish*] (Warszawa: Open, 1990), 139.

the panegyricism of social realism would become pointless. No, the process is much more complicated.

The celebrated leader is presented as an embodiment of the communist ideal of a man, a person whose biography fulfills all conditions required to become a communist activist, consequently transforming into a kind of model. Working class roots of the praised champion are emphasized wherever possible, including detailed accounts of his life of hardship and poverty, as well as class instinct; supported by the party, the teachings of Marxism-Leninism has shaped the hero into what he has become, a leader. When this is impossible, when it would require presenting an image clearly contrary to biographical realia, various types of substitute sub-plots are created, as in the case of Dzierżyński (who came from the gentry, in other words, from a kind of background generally frowned upon by Bolshevik propaganda). In a lengthy poem about the founder of Cheka, Leopold Lewin enumerates, among the factors determining the life choices made by the hero, softness of his heart and the desire to continue the work of Polish freedom fighters (the poem makes references to the uprisings).¹⁵ Bierut, posed no such difficulties to his panegyricists and the proletarian elements of his biography were repeatedly emphasized, for instance by Ważyk in his epic laudatory poem, written [originally] in hexameters.

So began the youth of a student, a builder and a typesetter,
 Behind a lime-filled cart, lettercase, deprived of sleep and meal
 at gatherings of youths ready to storm skies,
 bustling and busy, passionate, the world became clearer to him,
 masses of people transformed into a nation and class.

15 Leopold Lewin, *Poemat o Dzierżyńskim* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1951). Lewin's lengthy work remains an interesting curiosity even against the backdrop of social realist poetry, as it was written in the perfect style of the early Romantic verse novel. Lewin skillfully displays literary craft of a fifth-rate poet of the previous century (not even using assonance!). He was a prolific author in the early fifties, catering efficiently and without delay to various party celebrations and political events (he did not miss even the one discussed above, producing "Kantata o Bierucie" ["Kantata about Bierut"]) and it would seem had a great chance of becoming a key social realist verse-maker, one praised and celebrated widely. This never happened; Lewin did not receive recognition even in that period and remained only a producer of poetry. His case seems interesting as it illustrates certain kind of epigonism; even though impeccable from the ideological perspective and always ready to serve his masters, Lewin did not receive the approval and appreciation from the social realist lawmakers. His poems about Dzierżyński, included in *Wieczny płomień* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1951), an anthology edited by Wiktor Woroszyński, are discussed by Z. Łapiński in the already referenced essay (85-90).

Now armies are in the trenches. And before Lublin's typesetter
 manages to hear Lenin's words over the noise of the battle,
 he prints the truth about war as if already knowing them.
 This is how adulthood begins, hounded
 by four different types of police, dragged through the prison cells,
 but never alone. The party knows, and remembers.

A. Ważyk, "Droga pokoleń" ["The Path of Generations"]

The praised leader transforms into an exemplary hero and his biography into that of an ideal of a party activist. This is evidenced not only by the biographical plot, which I have emphasized here, but also by the way all aspects of the hero's life are treated. His praises are also praises directed towards the communist party (because it managed to produce such a leader, but also because it is him and no one else, him – the magnificent and unequalled one – who stands at the helm). The hero's actions are faultless because he understands the laws that govern history, revealed by the party, but at the same time he also shapes them; he is a creation of history but also its creator. The image of the hero's biography is infused with general assumptions of historical and material dialecticism, and one continuously finds in it direct references to their theses and recommendations.

The problem we are facing here is the one we have faced discussing the issue of the sender. Here, too, tensions between the particular and the general resurface. Poems written for Bierut contain a multitude of general sentences; however, it is not a property of these poetic works only; a similar tendency can be found in the entire corpus of social realist poetry, including poems about other heroes. On the one hand, general sentences convey the truths evident from the hero's biography, and on the other, the hero's teachings, directed at the people, the working class and so on. Ważyk's poem, for instance, contains aphorisms such as this one:

Who looks through the eyes of the Party, can separate wheat from chaff
 mend the mistake, cut off traitors, calling them what they are.

Other authors follow the trend with even more zeal, gifting the reader whole bunches of general truths:

Undefeated is he who has been molded
 with all that is honorable and human.

He will enter the ruins like the sun does,
 building a common man's joy.

He will mete just punishment for the enemies
of the motherland as the world watches.

With a determined and brave hand
he will bring closer people's victory.

T. Kubiak "18 kwietnia 1892-1952"
["18 April 1892-1952"]

The first couplet plays a special role in Kubiak's poem (as its incipit and coda), creating a frame for the praise of Bolesław Bierut that follows; the poems generally teem with communist generalities of this kind.

However, generality as a quality cannot be reduced to generalizing sentences, such as those above. Sometimes, it takes a different form when the panegyrist does not focus on the celebrated person as an individual, but on the party. Woroszyński's poem is a fervent praise of the latter. The reasons to praise the party are numerous, and include, for instance, its teachings:

Who else if not the will of the Party
gave a beginning to new life?
It was its voice that kept calling:
"Comrade, stay vigilant!"

W. Woroszyński, "Sierpień" ["August"]

Woroszyński's poem as a whole focuses on the fight against imperialism, titonism and right-wing nationalist tendencies. This very fight becomes an occasion to praise the leader who excels in it.

It was through fight, struggle and hardship
that the cadre grew, wise and brave,
And it
 appointed
 Bierut
To reach for the victory under His lead.¹⁶

What the cited passages highlight is the following: despite an extremely schematic character with regard to the presentation of the sender and the addressee, we cannot speak of one standard model for the panegyric poem. In other words, as a poet, you cannot praise the communist leader exactly

¹⁶ Typically, the theme of cadres resurfaced in other poems as well. For instance, Ważyk writes: "Once, imprisoned in Rawicz, he thought about saving the cadres."

the way you would like to, but you can do it nonetheless in various ways. The praise may remain hidden – it does not have to be expressed in a direct and clear rhetorical construction proper to a panegyric. Wążyk and Kubiak's poems resemble biographical expositions and present, via poetic abbreviation, a model biography of the president. Woroszyński's poem, referenced earlier, is different: it seems to depart from a single biographical element, a detail, and endows it with a general sense. Some of the poems were preceded by notes explaining the described events, as in "Noc noworoczna", where Międzyrzecki writes, "On New Year's Eve of 1943 in Warsaw, Bolesław Bierut led the first historical meeting of the State National Council". The poem itself resembles a ballad, recounting the event, classified as historical from the very beginning, and alluding to the Romantic tradition (Słowacki, among others). Międzyrzecki's poem also manages to praise the leader:

Liberate Warsaw, O swift labor leader,
you were prophesized in their deeds and song!

They did not come to see you from any romantic cloud,
But from the hungry suburbs and humble fields,
Led by the son of this earth
Who called, through the fire and smoke,
And people joined their strong arms
Listening to the New Year's Eve's sounds.

A. Międzyrzecki, "Noc noworoczna"
["New Year's Eve"]

However, the described event is not a detail from the hero's biography, regardless of how many profound details it may have contained – the poet attributes everything in the text with a symbolic dimension. The place itself – Warsaw¹⁷ – is symbolic, and so is the time. New Year's Eve is not an ordinary night – it foretells the coming of a new time, a new era. One would think that a poem about a particular event should assume a narrow temporal frame, but this is not the case here. Since the celebrated event is of historical significance, the inclusion of a broad temporal perspective becomes unavoidable, and this was especially a common practice in social realism.

17 Warsaw plays the role of a symbolic place also in other poems – it is a widely ranging phenomenon of social realism, and naturally not restricted only to the poems about Bierut. Warsaw becomes a sacral space where the new can triumph; Kamińska's poem *Warszawa* from the Bierut-cycle may serve here as a good illustration.

Międzyrzeczki's poem constitutes a transition to celebratory poems where the historical dimension becomes a dominant factor. Among the works featured in the anthology in question are also poems by Słonimski, Kamińska and Słobodnik (to a certain degree). All of them aim to depict the worshipped activist, but also highlight the "future's marble outline" (to borrow from Kamińska). Poetic praise may be anchored in a particular object, and when it is, the panegyric discourse transforms into a historiosophical discourse: the author expresses in rhyme the teachings of historical materialism. The evil past fades and gives way to the bright future. Praised be the drivers of the locomotive of history (to reference Broniewski's famous formulation from *Słowa o Stalinie* [*Words about Stalin*]) and among them also is he whose gentle eyes look down from the portrait adorning the walls of every classroom:

And so, walking into oblivion, it disappears in the deep mists of history:
 The retinue of princes and kings, and of lords, noble and bloodthirsty,
 But at school, from the frame of the portrait, his eyes – gentle and bright
 look down on your young days and want to protect them from all harm.
 Do not mourn the days which are long gone, today you have much better hosts!
 Poland belongs to you now as it grows to pickaxes' melodious songs.

A. Słonimski, "Portret Prezydenta"
 ["The President's Portrait"]

Słonimski's poem presents the arrival of the new and bright future through a series of worn-out archetypal images which do not cease to surprise in a poet of such experience and unquestionable poetic proficiency.

Today, look! Although our road is still difficult and covered in mists,
 The spring can be smelled in the air, brought by the eastern warm wind.
 The snow and mud are still here, but they cannot make the frost come back.
 The heart feels lighter when the first gusts of early spring winds start to blow!
 It is easier for the eyes and hands, and with ease the air fills the lungs,
 Hark, hark the sounds of the wind of the new centuries to come!

A similar development can be found in Kamińska. Her descriptions envision a world where better future is about to come, and the recipient of the praise is portrayed as a mythical creator of the new era.

He who said to the ashes of Warsaw: Rise!
 And to the nation: Build your capital!
 Has now carved his name in its living plan
 where the streets pulsate with the steps of the youth.

A. Kamińska, "Warszawa"

Historicist discourse dominates the description – becoming a part of the panegyric whole as the references to Słowacki's *Uspokojenie* anchor it within a literary tradition. In Słobodnik, the historiosophical dimension is related to a sort of conceptism:

In Łazienki, the empty eyed statues
 Look at new history which comes,
 With peasant and worker steps,
 Singing the people's song.

Having offered his own heart in sacrifice
 To Poland of hammer and plough,
 The people's son entered the Belvedere -
 The country's servant and host.

W. Słobodnik, "Syn ludu" ["The People's Son"]

I believe that a broader phenomenon is revealed here, one I have decided to refer to as social realist conceptism. It has many sources. Among them probably is the fact that panegyrics of the discussed kind, unified and schematic in so many dimensions, had to retain a degree of uniqueness, otherwise they would transform into repetitions of the same, accepted truths. This uniqueness was easiest to achieve through the multiplication of curious ideas under the umbrella of grand praise: the need to describe the celebrated hero in an original manner resulted in a competition for the most elaborate and unusual presentation. In fact, this conceptism in naming follows the tradition of panegyric as a genre (its historian mentions the "ostentatious or magniloquent element"¹⁸). However, the conceptism in question encompasses more than panegyric names, determining in some cases the entire structure of the poem – for instance in Teofil Kowalczyk's highly stylized poem. His imitation of gestures from the folk poetic tradition produces truly curious effects:

The tractor and the harvester thunder in the fields
 Our granaries are bursting with bread and meal.

If only I could soar like a nightingale in the skies
 I would fly to Łazienki and sing to him every night.

If only I could turn to a moon of pure silver
 I would shine down with bright light in Warsaw on the Belvedere.

¹⁸ Hanna Dziechcińska, "Panegiryk," in *Słownik literatury staropolskiej* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1990), 545.

I can't turn to a moon and I am no nightingale
 But on my tractor I will plough harder the field.

[...]

And one day when a chance comes to visit the capital
 I will take these flowers with me to lay in the Belvedere.

And as the stars glitter over darkened skies
 I'll be thinking: it is for Him that they're shining so bright.

T. Kowalczyk, "Piosenka ludowa"
 ["A Folk Song"]

This is indeed a completely new level of the panegyric acrobatics, where the volume and number of tricks replace quality and the panegyric transforms into an unintended grotesque. Kowalczyk's poem, located in the final reaches of poetry harnessed to serve the ritual, borders on the laughable. The range of possibilities available to such poetry varied: in a certain way, it was extremely narrow and meager, tolerating only procedures strictly regulated by the doctrine and the social realist custom; elsewhere it was relatively broad and extensive, allowing for varied, diversified and, at times, even surprising solutions. This duality determines the properties of panegyric ritual poetry, highly conventionalized and yet permitting – if not innovation – then at least certain oddities and eccentricities.

Poetry's subordination to the ritual in the period of social realism constituted its main property and characteristic, determining all of its remaining features. It was precisely this subordination that expressed the subjugation of literature, poetry in particular, to the mechanisms of propaganda – and consequently, its status. Naturally, poems were written and published outside the communist liturgy of enslavement and lies, but the landscape was dominated by those created for the schedule. Bierut's birthday poems from the collection presented in this article may serve as an example, a point of departure and a form of documentation of the discussed phenomenon and while they may not present the full extent of the phenomenon, they nonetheless give a certain idea of its range and properties. My goal here was to emphasize its ritualistic character, role and place; to present its whole extent would require a more voluminous text encompassing the poetry of Polish social realism in all its pathetic fullness.

Translation: Anna Warso