

CLASSICS AND CLASS

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Veni, Vidi, Verti:

Jacek Bocheński's Games with Censorship

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[...] ancient history is happening now.
Jacek Bocheński, *Naso the Poet* (1969)

10 December 1961.¹ The People's Republic of Poland. In power are Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KC PZPR), Władysław Gomułka. The country is behind the Iron Curtain, under the domination of the USSR. Only two years

1 The paper contains the research results obtained in the framework of the Mobility Plus Grant from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Poland I received for the project *Romances with Cicero: Cicero's Afterlife and its Transformations in the Historical Fiction of the 20th and 21st Century*, which I conducted in Berlin in 2012–2014, at the Collaborative Research Centre 644 "Transformations of Antiquity" that "unites eleven disciplines from the social sciences and humanities at the Humboldt University of Berlin, as well as one each at the Free University of Berlin and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Sciences" (www.sfb-antike.de). I would like to express my gratitude to my Host at the Centre, Professor Ulrich Schmitzer from the Humboldt University of Berlin, for his kind support and for offering me the possibility to present some of my research results regarding Jacek Bocheński's works in the form of a lecture and workshops. I thank also Jacek Bocheński for his generous help in providing the materials.

earlier Nikita Khrushchev paid a visit to Warsaw. In spite of censorship and unfavourable conditions, *Musae non silent*. All interested in cultural life impatiently await the upcoming issue of the popular weekly *Nowa Kultura* [*New Culture*], which will announce the winner of the journal's literary award. It quickly turns out, however, that not even the barest mention of the award is made in the issue. Instead, a huge photo of the writer Jacek Bocheński is published on the first page, along with a review of his book *Boski Juliusz* [*The Divine Julius*], in which Bocheński presents the famous Roman's ascent to divinity through the narrator's commenting on and paraphrasing ancient sources: mainly the works of the protagonist himself, Julius Caesar, along with Cicero, Nepos, and Catullus.

The review triggered a scandal, for in fact it was the laudation for the prize winner, albeit deprived of his prize, as it had been blocked at the last moment by the Party. The author of that "unsuitable" laudation – Alicja Lisiecka – was dismissed from her job at the personal request of Edward Ochab – a prominent member of the Politburo of the KC PZPR. The weekly's editor-in-chief, Stefan Żółkiewski, thereupon resigned, followed by his entire staff, and the Party abolished en masse the prizes awarded by the literary press.² All this because of a book which turned out to be "mischievous." For although it dealt with Antiquity, it was dangerously modern – too modern, in fact.

THROUGH THE MIRROR OF ANTIQUITY

For two thousand years a community of people flourished for whom the heritage of Antiquity constituted a strong reference point in their contemporary reality. They made use of the code built on ancient culture to discuss current events. During that time a classical education – the only natural and possible education at the elementary and middle levels – permitted dialogue above the borders dividing different lands, disciplines, and generations. Among the members of that community were

² See Jacek Bocheński, "Przypis do Boskiego Juliusza," in Jacek Bocheński, *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 116–154.

Saint Jerome, fascinated as he was with Cicero; Benvenuto Cellini, who turned Perseus with Medusa's head into stone to strengthen (or to question subtly) the power of the de' Medici family; the American inventor Charles Goodyear, who dedicated the patent for rubber heat treatment (vulcanization) to the Roman god of fire, Vulcan; the German actress Agnes Straub, who played the black Medea while Hitler was issuing the Nuremberg Laws; and T. S. Eliot, who prescribed reading *The Aeneid* as a cure for a Europe devastated by the Second World War in his famous speech of 1944, *What is a Classic?*³ References to ancient culture, whether made from behind teachers' desks, in the works of artists, or in the nomenclature devised by industrialists, fulfilled similar functions: they shaped people's identity, domesticated the world, helped to break various taboos and censorship, and expressed what seemed impossible to express. Classical Antiquity was still such a vital and attractive reference point in the sixties that NASA chose Apollo as the patron of its most important space programme – a decision which, by the way, reveals a gender issue from those times; after all, it would seem only obvious to have summoned a lunar deity in regard to the Moon landings. Nonetheless, apparently neither Selene nor Diana as female beings had seemed serious enough to the programme's coordinators.⁴ Antiquity served as a mirror in which the world looked at itself.

The sixties in the West, with its giant technological leap, the definite fall of colonial empires, and the reactions of the new generations to the two world wars, brought not only Apollo to the Moon, but also a rebellion against ancient culture in many parts of the Earth. One of its slogans was: "À bas le latin!" Graeco-Roman Antiquity, and perhaps the Humanities

3 For further reading see, for example, the bibliographical hints in Katarzyna Marciniak, *Mitologia grecka i rzymska* (Warsaw-Bielsko-Biała: wesz PWN, 2010), 452–456.

4 See Alan Dundes, *Parsing Through Customs: Essays by a Freudian Folklorist* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 45. See also Katarzyna Marciniak, *The Ancient Tradition in the 21st Century – cui bono? in Antiquity and We*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak (Warsaw: Faculty of "Artes Liberales," 2013), 209–281, available also online.

as such, lost their privileged status. Classical education nearly vanished from schools and the mirror of Antiquity became dull. The countries behind the Iron Curtain also experienced a regression in teaching ancient culture, though for different reasons. References to Antiquity (except for certain ideologically useful episodes, like Spartacus' revolt)⁵ were deemed by the authorities a superfluous bourgeois supplement. This included Latin, that suspicious language used by the Church, considered one of the enemies of the new regime. What is more, in the Cold War Era, when aversion to the "decadent" West fomented, the communist authorities did not want Polish citizens to feel a sense of belonging to the Mediterranean community. Thus, they tried to remove the sheen from the mirror of Antiquity by force, eliminating all potential vessels of Graeco-Roman culture. Many scholars and admirers of Antiquity in Poland wanted to stop that process⁶ by means of educational and popularizing activities. With this aim in mind, a group of classical philologists, historians of Antiquity, and archaeologists in 1945 created the journal *Meander*.⁷ Their efforts, fostered and strengthened by the attractiveness and importance of ancient culture as the foundation of Mediterranean civilization, contributed to the preservation of the spiritual connection with the democratic West. The scholars'

5 See Elena Ermolaeva, "Classical Antiquity in Children's Literature in the Soviet Union" in *Our Mythical Childhood ... The Classics and Children's Literature Between East and West*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak, forthcoming.

6 See *Classics and Communism: Greek and Latin behind the Iron Curtain*, eds. György Karsai, Gábor Klaniczay, David Movrin, and Elżbieta Olechowska (Warsaw: Faculty of "Artes Liberales," 2013). See also Barbara Brzuska, *Sytuacja łaciny jako przedmiotu szkolnego w PRL w latach 1944–1970*, available online.

7 See Jerzy Axer, "Vita magistra historiae: Dwie glosy do dziejów miesięcznika *Meander*," *Meander* 64–67 (2009–2012), 348–357. One of the journal's founders, Professor Kazimierz Kumaniecki, former soldier of the Home Army, which was persecuted by the communist regime, faced the real threat of imprisonment; see Jerzy Axer, "Czas próby: Znaczenie Kazimierza Kumanieckiego dla losów filologii klasycznej w PRL," *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 6/435 (2012), 3–19, and Jerzy Axer, "Kazimierz Kumaniecki and the Evolution of Classical Studies in the People's Republic of Poland," in *Classics and Communism: Greek and Latin behind the Iron Curtain*, eds. György Karsai, Gábor Klaniczay, David Movrin and Elżbieta Olechowska (Warsaw: Faculty of "Artes Liberales," 2013), 187–211.

actions were further supported by artists who drew inspiration from Classical Antiquity.

Moreover, sometimes certain concurrences of events took place (and maybe they still do), ones that, in artists' hands, restore the full sparkle to the mirror of Antiquity – at least for a while. So it happened in 1961, after the publication of *The Divine Julius*, and later, with the appearance of the two further volumes that together formed Bocheński's *Trylogia rzymska* [*The Roman Trilogy*]. This is probably one of the most slowly emerging series in world literature – the second volume: *Nazo poeta* [*Naso the Poet*] appeared in 1969, and *The Trilogy* was completed with *Tyberiusz Cezar* [*Tiberius Caesar*], finished by the writer not until December 2008 and published in 2009.⁸ Therefore *The Roman Trilogy* embraces nearly fifty years of unprecedented and intense transformations in Poland and in the world as observed by Bocheński, who – thanks to his involvement in opposition activities at home and artistic scholarships abroad – had never been isolated from current events on either side of the Iron Curtain. Furthermore, since 1989 he has continued taking an active part in public life, including blogging and participating in various debates on pressing current issues.⁹ Throughout these years Bocheński has taken care of the mirror of Antiquity. He polishes it, makes it shine, and places his readers before it, so that they may come to know better both this fascinating period and (what is particularly difficult) themselves. *Gnôthi seauton*,¹⁰ as Apollo

8 Bibliographical data for the first editions: *Boski Juliusz: Zapiski antykwarusza* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1961), German edition *Göttlicher Julius: Aufzeichnungen eines Antiquars*, trans. Walter Tiel (München: Ehrenwirth, 1961); *Nazo poeta* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1969), German edition *Der Täter heisst Ovid*, trans. Peter Lachmann (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1975); *Tyberiusz Cezar* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2009).

9 See his website at jacekbochenski.blox.pl.

10 Interestingly enough, one of the research projects focused on tracing the fortunes of classical scholars in communist countries alluded to this maxim; see *Gnôthi Seauton – Classics and Communism: The History of the Studies on Antiquity in the Context of the Local Classical Tradition of the Socialist Countries (1944/45–1989/90)*, initiated by Jerzy Axer, György Karsai, and Gábor Klaniczay.

himself, not on the Moon, but in Delphi, once encouraged humankind.

Indeed, Bocheński found an original way to talk about Antiquity and about our own epoch, a way that both eluded political censorship in the People's Republic of Poland and that today exposes new forms of mind restriction in our ostensibly free times, when, as Bocheński shows, the battle for hearts and minds is still being waged, albeit on other fronts. The three volumes of *The Roman Trilogy* present different stages of this battle, while Bocheński's references to Antiquity mirror the social, political, and cultural transformations of our own times, for – to quote the narrator of *Naso the Poet* – “ancient history is happening now.”¹¹

STAGE ONE: ANTIQUARIAN

Jacek Bocheński was well prepared for the games with censorship, although he had had no intention to play along, nor had he planned to write *The Divine Julius*, not to mention *The Roman Trilogy* as a whole. He was born in Lwów (today's Lviv) in 1926. His father was the classical philologist and poet Tadeusz Bocheński (1895–1962). One of the first childhood readings of the future writer was his father's translation of the *Shield of Hercules*, attributed to Hesiod. What most imprinted itself in his memory was the mythological love triangle, although the nature of this “affair” was unclear to the boy he then was:

I tried to read that rhymed translation of the Greek poem attributed to Hesiod. I did not understand anything. But I could hear perfectly well the intriguing sound of the words. A certain Amphitryon went to a certain Alcmene, and along the way he stirred up desirous love in his “members,” because he anticipated a sweet reunion with Alcmene. What could that mean? I imagined a society of mysterious members, gathered on the field gladly greeting Amphitryon along the way. The

11 Jacek Bocheński, *Nazo poeta* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1999), 9. All subsequent quotations are based on this edition. All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

weather was marvellous, it was very sunny. I stopped probably within the second page. What Alcmena performed with the men, Amphitryon, and Dzeus (my father adhered to the phonetic spelling), and how Hercules came out of this; all that was an absolutely dark riddle for me. However, no other reading was ever to impress me more.¹²

Bocheński also read source texts from the famous series “Biblioteka Filomaty” [“The Philomath’s Library”], established especially for young readers by Professor Ryszard Ganszyniec (1888–1958), the classical scholar who – together with Poland’s regaining independence after the partitions and the First World War – took up the mission to educate young people in reference to classical values.¹³ Bocheński was most overwhelmed by the parts of Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* published in the series – in particular, by the fragment that one should not be afraid of death.¹⁴ No doubt, those early readings helped Bocheński overcome his dangerous meeting with History and laid the foundation for his *oeuvre*.

In 1958, two years after Stalinism had ended in Poland with the October “Thaw,” the system in the countries behind the Iron Curtain seemed to be petrifying once again, and at high speed. For Bocheński, who, as many people in Poland, had initially believed in communist ideas, it was like an awakening: “I was thirty-two, I had the nightmare of being a youth possessed by Marxism far behind me, I overcame it like a drug addiction [...]”¹⁵ The writer found himself in a Dantean situation. *Nel mezzo del camin di sua vita* he decided to leave the weekly *Przeгляд Kulturalny* [Cultural Review], where he had a full-time job.

12 Jacek Bocheński, “Książki dzieciństwa,” *Dekada Literacka* 22–23 (1993), quoted after Bocheński’s blog.

13 In a certain sense, the founders of *Meander* followed his footprints in reference to adult public.

14 See the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming). More on Bocheński’s childhood in his most recent book *Zapamiętani* (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2013).

15 See Konrad Zych, *Eseistyka maski*, 6 December 2010, www.literatki.com, available on Bocheński’s blog.

He followed, however, the request of the then editor-in-chief Gustaw Gottesman and agreed to remain for some time in the journal's team as a contributor, to avoid an atmosphere of scandal. This decision, analysed from the perspective of the upcoming events, acquires a strong tone of irony. This irony is all the stronger in that Bocheński as a contributor intended to write "neutral" feuilletons, as remote from politics as possible. And what could be more remote than Antiquity? Bearing this idea in mind, Bocheński, called by his friends "Jacek Horacek" (after the poet Horace), took Caesar's *De bello Gallico* from the bookshelf and started reading. As he recalls, the text shook him; it seemed completely different from what he had remembered from his reading as a youth. First of all, he felt struck by the "modern mentality" of the ancient Roman. Bocheński assumed that he simply had not noticed this as a teenager, or that it "had vanished from his mind during Stalinism."¹⁶

Bocheński wants to share his discovery, but not only with the *mystai* – those readers who would be inclined to reach for ancient culture. He therefore searches for a method of speaking about Antiquity that would permit him to achieve that ever-elusive success, as far as demanding literature is concerned – namely, contact with the recipients of popular culture. Bocheński foresees the obstacles in achieving this aim, and seeks to overcome the process he would later describe in his *Trzynaście ćwiczeń europejskich* [*Thirteen European Exercises*]: "[...] the kitsch and the masterpiece switch places. The difference between a cookbook, *The Divine Comedy*, and a football player's biography is disappearing, [...] everything is equal, the point is: how many copies and for what price might they be sold?"¹⁷ Furthermore, he realizes that the two thousand years separating us from Antiquity "build a wall that is difficult to breach,"¹⁸ for the old ways of presenting that epoch do not work in modern times:

16 Jacek Bocheński, "Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*," in Jacek Bocheński, *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 120.

17 Jacek Bocheński, *Trzynaście ćwiczeń europejskich* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2005), 214.

18 Jacek Bocheński, *Boski Juliusz* (Warsaw: nowa – Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1991), 7. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition. See also

“Humanists, mainly in the nineteenth century, filled [...] entire libraries and, together with schoolmarms, thoroughly annoyed whole generations.”¹⁹ In view of this, Bocheński decides to write feuilletons that include translations or paraphrases of ancient sources to make the Greeks and Romans speak a “living word.”

It turned out that the biggest challenge awaited the writer precisely in this field. Having read the available translations, he felt disappointment: “[...] they seem to render the original line by line, but they mean something else. [...] Caesar in Latin sounds extremely modern [...]. Yet, his affairs are dull, distant, and ancient, when translated,” Bocheński would recall in the essay *Rzeczy stare i nowe* [*Things Old and New*], which he wrote in 1973, summing up the experiences he had gained during his work on the first two volumes of *The Trilogy*.²⁰

Bocheński understood quickly that if he wanted to overcome the distance of two thousand years, he had to break with the devotional attitude to Antiquity so typical of the majority of classicists and teachers.²¹ In the conversation relevant to my project *Romances with Cicero: Cicero's Afterlife and its Transformations in the Historical Fiction of the 20th and 21st Centuries*, the writer explained to me his methods for working with ancient sources:

I read a Latin sentence and I reflect on how I would say it if I were this Roman, or I imagine how somebody else would say it, and if this version convinces me, I use it in the translation. If not, I search for other possibilities, until I am satisfied with the final result. But later I often make amendments, because

Leszek Szaruga, “Różnica i tożsamość,” in Leszek Szaruga, *Współczesna powieść polityczna* (Warsaw: PWN, 2001), available on Bocheński's blog.

19 Jacek Bocheński, “Z Herbertem w labiryntach” (2001), in Jacek Bocheński, *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 86, in regard to the image of Greece in Zbigniew Herbert's poetry.

20 Jacek Bocheński, “Rzeczy stare i nowe” (1973), in Jacek Bocheński, *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 8.

21 See Anna Kamińska, “Poetyka ironii,” *Tygodnik Kulturalny* 50 (236), 10 December 1961, available on Bocheński's blog.

my taste changes during the process of writing. In fact, the translational and original creative activities hardly differ.²²

With the aim of establishing contact with his modern readers Bocheński therefore resigned from *verbum de verbo* translation. Moreover, he decided to try and transfer entire contexts, by making use of anachronisms as a “deliberate literary means of generalization,” as well as of highly modern vocabulary, like “the shameful psychosis of fear,” “the sovereign society,” and “a better system.”²³ This style evoked certain controversies because of its modernity – which was all the more shocking as it clashed with the ancient content, dug up from the fossilized past. Its full force manifested itself, however, when Bocheński, encouraged by the legendary editor of the publishing house Czytelnik, Irena Szymańska, reworked his feuilletons into a book – *The Divine Julius*. As the poet, translator, and literary critic Aleksander Wirpsza (pen-name Leszek Szaruga) observed after its publication:

It does not only smell like Latin: it smells like a newspaper, a propaganda brochure. [...] So we are dealing – at least in the linguistic layer – with the creation of a situation that is improbable from the historical perspective: it consists of constructing the statements of the protagonists from the period of the fall of the Roman Republic with the application of expressions which could not have been in use at that time. [...] Caesar’s statements are dominated by mental constructions based on the modern understanding of state institutions.²⁴

22 See also Szaruga, “Różnica i tożsamość,” and Bocheński, “Rzeczy stare i nowe,” 5–53.

23 For the use of these anachronisms see Szaruga, “Różnica i tożsamość.” See also Jacek Bocheński, “Rzeczy stare i nowe,” 9, and my conversation with Jacek Bocheński. Its fragments were published as “O Cynceronie, czyli dlaczego stoicy źle wychodzą na swym stoicyzmie, rozmowa z Jackiem Bocheńskim,” in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 20–21 December 2008, and in the collection of interviews with the writer *Wtedy: Rozmowy z Jackiem Bocheńskim* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2011), 248–262. The full version is in preparation for print in my *Romances with Cicero: Cicero’s Afterlife and its Transformations in the Historical Fiction after 1945*.

24 See also Szaruga, “Różnica i tożsamość,” and Kamińska, “Poetyka ironii.”

Thus, the individual feuilletons, once brought together, “took on a sharp allusive character,” as Bocheński recalls, “and they [...] were deemed to be a camouflage creation used by the author to criticize communism.”²⁵ It should be noted that one of the writer’s opponents in regard to the publication of *The Divine Julius* was a classical philologist working at Czytelnik. He told the writer: “Don’t imagine that I will risk losing my job for you.”²⁶ However, thanks to the cleverness of the editorial board the book was published, though in a reduced number of copies (7,000, which today still sounds like a quite an impressive result). Szymańska tried to give *The Divine Julius* a “safe cover” by directing it not to the *belles-lettres* department, but to that for historical essays.²⁷ As we have already learned, this did not help the management of *Nowa Kultura*, which – in spite of the Party’s objections – decided to go ahead and publish its praises of the book. None of this, however, could have allowed the book’s agenda to go unnoticed, because at that moment the mirror of Antiquity was shining too strongly. And it showed the reflection of ... a bald womanizer. Indeed, it was exactly the bald head that offered the key to various political interpretations of the book, and was even discussed at a meeting of the KC PZPR. *The Divine Julius*, although it was about Antiquity – in particular about Caesar’s career – all of a sudden turned out to be dangerously up-to-date. The most prominent politicians behind the Iron Curtain in Poland, Józef Cyrankiewicz and Władysław Gomułka, were bald. And so was the kingpin of the region’s politics, Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow. The conclusion seemed obvious: Bocheński had written a pamphlet about the communist authorities.²⁸

25 Bocheński, “Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*,” 124.

26 See the full version of my conversation with Bocheński, forthcoming.

27 In fact, *The Divine Julius* is not easy to be categorized, as observed by the German critic Willi Fehse, “Cäsar nach modernen Mustern,” *Deutsche Zeitung*, 16–17 February 1963, available on Bocheński’s blog: “Bochenskis Buch ist ein Kreuzungsprodukt aus Roman und philosophischem Traktat, aus Essay und Biographie. Die Vermählung nüchterner Wissenschaftlichkeit mit den Impulsen der Phantasie brachte es zustande.” See also Arkadiusz Morawiec, “Sine ira et studio,” *Nowe Książki* 8 (2009), available on Bocheński’s blog.

28 See Bocheński, “Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*,” 133–138 (the first review of *The Divine Julius*, published by Zofia Kwiecińska in *Nowa Kultura*, 19 November

Literary criticism in Poland was restrained by censorship and it was not possible to discuss that thread openly.²⁹ However, it was taken up by Western media. The American magazine *Time* even published Caesar's bust next to Cyrankiewicz's photo. Ludwig Zimmerer in the daily newspaper *Die Welt* referred to German cultural and political experiences and focused on the similarities between Bocheński's vision and the one by Bertolt Brecht in *Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Caesar*. Wanda Brońska-Pampuch in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* analysed the book as a universal study into the phenomenon of tyranny ("Caesar or Stalin, the difference is of no importance"). Willi Fehse in his *Cäsar nach modernen Mustern* – a review of the German edition of the book – compared the ironic allusiveness of Bocheński with the style of Petronius.³⁰

Never mind that Bocheński distanced himself from the "political" interpretation in the *Foreword* to the German translation, declaring that "the book contains what it contains."³¹ Never mind that Hansjakob Stehle, the journalist with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, indicated the "touchiness" of the men from the KC PZPR as the reason they regarded *The Divine Julius* as a pamphlet.³² Never mind that Cyrankiewicz

1961, was entitled "Łysy pan w todze," "A Bald Gentleman in a Toga"); and Zych, "Eseistyka maski."

- 29 As Bocheński remarks, this was, paradoxically, good for the book, for Polish critics, and – what is rare – eminent writers who also praised *The Divine Julius*, focused on its deep linguistic and formal analysis. See Bocheński, "Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*," 132.
- 30 The collection of press cuttings has been gathered on Bocheński's blog. See in particular Fehse, "Cäsar nach modernen Mustern": "Oft muß man zwischen den Zeilen lesen. Vielleicht hinkt der Vergleich mit Petronius, weil er zu hoch gegriffen ist; aber wenn der römische Satiriker am Hofe Neros die Literatur aus ihrer 'silbernen Latinität' herausführte und zu einer 'Lebenskunst' erhöhte, dann hat Bocheński hier im Bereich einer kommunistischen Diktatur etwas Ähnliches versucht und mit verwandten Mitteln erreicht." See also Bocheński, "Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*," 133–138.
- 31 See Bocheński, *Göttlicher Julius*, 6: "Daher ist im 'Göttlichen Julius' auch nur davon die Rede, wovon die Rede ist." See also Bocheński, "Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*," 139.
- 32 See Bocheński, "Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*," 136. See also Zych, "Eseistyka maski."

had no complex about being bald (reportedly, he had made a habit of shaving his head after his imprisonment at the concentration camp in Auschwitz, where he had been put in 1942). After the scandal with the *Nowa Kultura* and the abolishment of all literary prizes, few critics had the courage to openly defend the value of *The Divine Julius*.³³ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (1894–1980), the eminent poet and writer who managed to cope well with life in the People’s Republic of Poland and could dare more, “made use” of his parrot to praise the book. The bird, allegedly at random, pulled out a piece of paper with the title *The Divine Julius* written on it when Iwaszkiewicz was looking for the book of the year. In his feuilleton, he “simply” described the bird’s choice, justifying its decision with the book’s great perspicacity and distance from overly facile analogies:

There are no intrusive allusions to today’s reality in Bocheński’s book, no coarse parallelisms – nor schematic comparisons between the protagonists of Roman history and the prominent politicians whether of yesterday or of today. But still you can feel in each sentence of *The Divine Julius* that Bocheński is thinking about us.³⁴

In the opinion of Anna Kamińska (1920–1986), the esteemed Polish poet and translator (also of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, who is Bocheński’s favourite author),³⁵ that strong link between An-

33 One of the first positive comments was made by Jan Brzechwa, mostly famous now for his brilliant children’s poetry. Brzechwa had Jewish roots – his real name was Jan Wiktor Lesman – and was criticized at that time for allegedly anti-Polish tone in his poems; see Mariusz Urbanek, *Jan Brzechwa nie dla dzieci* (Warsaw: Iskry, 2013). The only negative voice on the part of good writers was the one by Ernest Bryll, “Bóg czy polityk,” *Współczesność* 5 (109), 1–15 March 1962; Brzechwa’s and Bryll’s texts available on Bocheński’s blog.

34 Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, “Co papuga wyciągnęła,” from the cycle “Rozmowy o książkach,” *Życie Warszawy*, 304–306, 23–26 December 1961, available on Bocheński’s blog. See also Bocheński, “Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*,” 132.

35 See Jacek Bocheński, “Noster,” in his *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 54–65. The essay was presented as the opening lecture at the International Conference on the occasion of the 100th Congress of the Polish Philological Society in 2004, and published also in *Owidiusz – twórczość, recepcja, legenda*:

tiquity and the present times stemmed from the writer's "constant contact with classical Latin literature from early childhood and the bitter experiences of the history he had lived."³⁶ Of course, the readers, according to the rules of reception, are authorized to invent and to use whatever kind of interpretative keys they fancy, independently of the writer's will, no matter how hard he might try to project a model reader. Bocheński is fully aware of these rules and he observes the reception of his *Trilogy* with nearly stoic calm.³⁷ Besides, references to Antiquity had always built up an Aesopian language in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, thereby helping to overcome censorship in the flight (at least imaginary) from the land of real socialism to the world of true democracy.

However, while the life of a pamphlet is ephemeral and shallow, limited to one breath of History, eminent books remain universal and their impact does not end with the fall of a given political system.³⁸ My private test of *The Divine Julius* took place in the mid-nineties, when my Latin teacher Barbara Strycharczyk recommended that my high school class read it. That was at the dawn of the new millennium, and well after the Transformation of 1989, so it was a time free from censorship and totalitarian authorities. We were sixteen years old and knew nothing about the political keys to the book, and nevertheless it moved us deeply. As far as I can tell, it enjoys a similar reception today when I recommend it to my stu-

Referaty wygłoszone podczas międzynarodowej konferencji z okazji Setnego Jubileuszowego Zjazdu Polskiego Towarzystwa Filologicznego, eds. Barbara Milewska-Ważbińska and Juliusz Domański (Warsaw: PTF Koło Warszawskie, 2006), 17–23. By the way, the author particularly appreciates Kamieńska's review; see Bocheński, "Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*," 132.

36 Kamieńska, "Poetyka ironii."

37 See the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming).

38 As only rarely happens, the book enjoyed favourable reactions both on the part of the critics (Bocheński received the First Prize of the Radio Free Europe, *ex aequo* with *Mit śródziemnomorski* [*Mediterranean Mythos*] by Mieczysław Jastrun, 1962) and of readers, who chose *The Divine Julius* the Book of the Year in the plebiscite of *Polityka* – the weekly that had particular relations with the Party and this permitted the second edition, which made up for the reduction of the first one (13,000 copies).

dents at the University of Warsaw.³⁹ The power of Bocheński's writing, which also permeates the subsequent volumes of his *Roman Trilogy*, consists in prompting the reader toward deep reflection on the present, and does so not with moralizing, but rather with strong references to classical values. Lisiecka, who lost her job for her praises of the book, placed Bocheński in one category with the historians of literary talent and philosophers of history Ernst Cassirer, Guglielmo Ferrero, and Theodor Mommsen, who "did not treat historical documents as simple 'physical facts' [...] but insisted that they should be read as symbols of attitudes and social processes: the symbols of History."⁴⁰ How truly contemporary ancient history may become in such an approach may be seen in the example of the paraphrase of one of the most famous openings in Roman literature:

Galia est omnis divisa in partes tres. All Gaul is divided into three parts (we will make more of these parts in the future; let them gobble each other). But for now we must accept the following division: the Belgians, the Aquitani, and the Celts. The Belgians are the bravest of all the inhabitants, because they live the furthest from the civilized world. In general, the Belgians maintain no commercial relations with the Roman province; the ideas and objects that weaken the spirit's force seldom reach them. (Yes, it's not Egypt). Moreover the Belgians are usually involved in war against the Germans. But similarly, the Celtic Helvetians also get into skirmishes with the Germans nearly every day – good exercises in virtue. And it is they who are preparing themselves for mass emigration. As yet, they have been sitting in a sack, as it were, beyond the mountains and the rivers (neither do they import much merchandise that weakens the spirit, though they neighbour the Roman province). It is

39 What is more, I met with a similar and positive reaction on the part of Classical Philology students – Professor Ulrich Schmitzer's seminar group – at the Humboldt University of Berlin to whom I had the opportunity to present the book in January 2014.

40 Alicja Lisiecka, "Boski Cezar," *Nowa Kultura* 50 (611), 10 December 1961, available on Bocheński's blog.

plain that they are fed up with the Germans, and they want to leave their seclusion and find a better place to live. The question is: which way will they choose?⁴¹

Bocheński combines his innovative method of translating – paraphrasing ancient sources, enriching them with daring remarks and comments – with highly original narration in the poetics of internal monologue, as when the narrator “enters” the given protagonists and speaks with “their” words, ones extracted from the sources. Moreover, internal monologue is a literary technique typical of “the utterly modern psychological novel,” as Kamińska observed in her analysis of the book: “It is like the internal eye of the narrator who observes the historical figures from inside, who observes the mechanisms of their actions.”⁴² That is why – although *The Divine Julius* evokes natural associations with great historical novels of the twentieth century, e.g. *The Ides of March* by Thornton Wilder, *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves, *Mémoires d’Hadrien* by Marguerite Yourcenar, *Der Tod des Vergil* by Hermann Broch – Kamińska compared Bocheński’s book (quite unexpectedly, though accurately) with the revolutionary writing of the Prince of Prose, Anatole France.⁴³

The narrator in *The Divine Julius* is the Antiquarian, a perfect choice from the perspective of the expectations of the modern public: for he evokes their trust, as he knows both the ancient texts and the world of today’s readers who do not feel like fumbling through forgotten books in dusty libraries (a “perhaps futile” effort, as the narrator himself states ironically). With time, however, he makes us aware of a terrifying truth: if we give up our efforts to acquire knowledge on our own, we become fully dependent on the Antiquarian. And yes, he will provide us with pleasures; he will extract the most sensational

41 Bocheński, *Boski Juliusz*, 11.

42 See Kamińska, “Poetyka ironii.” See also Szaruga, “Różnica i tożsamość.”

43 See Kamińska, “Poetyka ironii.” For the comparisons, see also Lisiecka, “Boski Cezar”; Artur Międzyzrzecki, “Rzecz o triumfie Katona,” in the series “Książki i ludzie,” *Świat* 47 (535), 19 November 1961; Anna Nasilowska, “Kto chce być bogiem?” *Gazeta Wyborcza* 163 (6076), 14 July 2009; texts available on Bocheński’s blog.

threads from the past – but he will also interpret these threads. Likewise, he will introduce to us historical protagonists, and he will let them perform monologues taken from ancient sources, but it will be him who paraphrases the texts. There could hardly be a more serious and urgent warning on the threshold of times when access to knowledge and information leads to absolute power.

STAGE TWO: CONFÉRENCIER

Ever since *The Divine Julius* Bocheński has been considered an anti-regime writer – “a cunning critic of the current political situation, even if he seemed to talk about ancient history.”⁴⁴ And he was in fact engaged in opposition activities. In 1966 he protested against the expulsion from the Party of the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, the future research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. In consequence Bocheński was also expelled from the Party. He finished the second volume of *The Roman Trilogy – Naso the Poet* – in April 1968, which was a stormy year in Poland as well (especially the so-called March events), though for different reasons than in the countries of Western democracy. Years later, Bocheński summed up those events as follows: “In fact, it was a violent exacerbation of the never finished war of the communist regime with the intelligentsia.”⁴⁵ At that time Bocheński supported the rebellion of Polish youth against the removal from the National Theatre of the play *Dziady* [*Forefathers’ Eve*], written by the Polish national poet of Romanticism, Adam Mickiewicz (the play, directed by Kazimierz Dejmek, was considered anti-Soviet by the authorities). He also took up the defence of the Jewish students expelled from the University of Warsaw – Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer. No wonder he wound up on the index with a total ban on his publications.⁴⁶

44 Jacek Bocheński, “Przypis do *Nazona poety*,” in his *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 164.

45 Bocheński, “Przypis do *Nazona poety*,” 162.

46 The work on the novel was so intense, taking into account the circumstances, that it surprised even Bocheński’s wife, Lidia Wan-Bocheńska. See the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming).

That spring Bocheński presented the manuscript of *Naso the Poet* to Czytelnik, the very same publishing house which had published *The Divine Julius*. Ryszard Matuszewski, the editor-in-chief of the contemporary literature department (and privately Irena Szymańska's husband), read the book: "It is well written, indeed, but of course its publication is out of the question at the moment."⁴⁷ Matuszewski therefore decided to wait and did not formally submit *Naso the Poet* then, for he was sure that the Party would not permit its publication. The future, however, turned out to be more favourable than Bocheński could have expected and Matuszewski's cautious way of proceeding yielded good results. A year later, in 1969, the ban on Bocheński's books was removed, as the authorities wanted to make a show of how there were no repressions in Poland. Even so, the number of copies of *Naso the Poet* was limited to the (then) shockingly small 5,000. The way to publication, however, resulted in such pain that at a certain moment Bocheński wanted to withdraw the book; as he recalls, "it was massacred by the censors, who were afraid of what a dangerous author they had been given and what tricky allusions must have been hidden in the text."⁴⁸

Again Bocheński's original technique of translating the sources with the use of modern vocabulary, anachronisms, and twentieth-century contexts, resulted in the same dangerous allusiveness that had manifested itself in *The Divine Julius*. The case of *Naso the Poet* was, however, peculiar, as the main field in which the writer applied his technique was poetry that he needed to render into the realm of prose. Such an audacious procedure initially evoked certain controversies even in circles favourable toward Bocheński, who was dubbed "the barbarian without any respect for classical poetry."⁴⁹ However, it quickly turned out that Ovid's verses not only did not lose their poetic power, but indeed gained greater expressiveness, while the rules of *oratio vincta* did not always permit the free

47 Bocheński, "Przypis do *Nazona poety*," 162–163.

48 See the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming).

49 The first reproaches and the "etiquette of the barbarian" fell on Bocheński in regard to his prose versions of Catullus' poems in *The Divine Julius*; see Bocheński, "Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*," 138–145. See also Zych, "Eseistyka maski."

choice of vocabulary in traditional translations, not to mention creating the impression of a parallelism between the worlds BC and AD:

Could misfortune break a great writer? The convicted is a great writer.

I am! So let them kill me, but I will live eternally in my works.

The convicted maintains that he rethought the attitude of a great writer toward posterity. There is still the chance to speak the truth about what happened. The convicted may use this chance or he may not. Soon it will be too late.

*The reason for my doom is known to everybody only too well. I shall not give testimony in the matter. I say these words to posterity: the reason for the conviction was a mistake, not a crime.*⁵⁰

The censors to whom the manuscript had to be delivered worked in the infamous office on Mysia Street in Warsaw. As Bocheński recalls, those “petty clerks were afraid of losing their jobs, they were not familiar with the topic, nevertheless, among them there were experts as well.”⁵¹ They “must have noticed, not without reason, that I summarize Ovid in my own words. The tone that arose from the modern sound of these words would be dangerous for the communist authorities, and of course for the censors on Mysia Street, if they did not detect and annihilate that tone.”⁵² As the novel talked about “Ovid, the man of letters, and Augustus, the ruler,”⁵³ the censors concluded that Bocheński “had tried to smuggle a text about the ancient poet, persecuted

50 See Bocheński, *Nazo poeta*, 210–211; spaced font, signifying emphasis, in the original.

51 See the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming).

52 Bocheński, “Przypis do Nazona poety,” 165.

53 See the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming). See also Bocheński, “Przypis do Nazona poety,” 164.

for an unknown reason by Octavianus Augustus – no doubt an allusion to the contemporary situation in Poland.”⁵⁴

Today the examples of the censors’ interventions seem bizarre. One of the clerks questioned the sentence: “The poet published a book.” He was very agitated: “What kind of a book? [...] But this is about a poet from two thousand years ago and there were no books then, only papyrus rolls. This Bocheński is making allusions to our times. We do not agree with this. The word ‘book’ must be removed from this historical novel.”⁵⁵ Another type of intervention concerned moral issues, about which the following passage evoked objection: “The cult of sex is spreading widely and I could mention any city, Rome, Sodom, Warsaw, yes, you’ve heard well, who knows, maybe Babylon would be a fitting example, Rome is beyond all doubt.” The censors chose to erase Warsaw and Sodom.⁵⁶ Interestingly, they were also sensible to all potential allusions to censorship as such, demanding for example that Bocheński change the plural “the poets” to the singular “the poet” to avoid the suggestion that the conflict between the authorities and the artist concerned more people than just Augustus and Ovid.⁵⁷

Bocheński managed to avoid some changes, mainly thanks to the help of the courageous editor from *Czytelnik* – Zula Kulmowa, who inter alia wrestled the right to preserve the word “book” in the novel and tirelessly mediated between the writer and the censors’ office. Much of the original version was restored in the second edition (1974), but the novel as fully approved by Bocheński appeared not until 1999, a decade after the end of the People’s Republic of Poland. Interestingly enough, the writer kept in this edition some corrections that he had made under pressure from the censors – the ones he had considered good for the book. In light of those events the ancient saying, *habent sua fata libelli*, sounds surprisingly

54 Bocheński, “Przypis do *Nazona poety*,” 164.

55 Jacek Bocheński, “Literatura nie zaginie,” *Magazyn Bibliotek Mokotowskich “Sowa Mokotowa”* 4 (14), Winter 2010–2011, available on Bocheński’s blog. See also Bocheński, “Przypis do *Nazona poety*,” 168.

56 Bocheński, “Przypis do *Nazona poety*,” 166.

57 See Bocheński, “Przypis do *Nazona poety*,” 167.

up-to-date.⁵⁸ *Naso the Poet* – which became the object of such a battle, written in circumstances when not only artistic, but also personal freedom was at risk – is in Bocheński's opinion his best book.

The suspicions of the censors were not unfounded. Indeed, in the previously mentioned conversation in regard to my Ciceronian project, Bocheński confessed for the first time publicly that his model for Augustus had been ... Gomulka:

You know, so many years have passed that perhaps I can dare be honest, though I'm not sure I won't get hit in the head from some very unexpected direction. Of course, Augustus enjoys a good reputation in world historiography [...]. I, on the other hand, had to find a model I knew from real life when describing the old ruler. And here's my shocking confession: I used Gomulka as my model! Not exclusively, but among other figures. What was I supposed to do? Where was I meant to find examples? Gomulka, bearing in mind the proportions, also enjoyed a good reputation, he was also a saviour, he was "as good as Nature itself;" when he arrived after Stalinism, he also brought people peace and bread and butter, even much-desired ham, wouldn't you know. He let people play jazz and [stage] Beckett, but he was [...] "phony," he started arresting people, and then Holland's corpse fell out the window,⁵⁹ and [Gomulka] frothed at the mouth and threatened people, and sentenced people to death for trading in meat, and he went berserk and grew senile. And there I was, watching him and listening, mostly to how he justified his conduct, how he defended himself from various charges, I followed his speeches, I asked about his speeches

58 See also Kamińska, "Poetyka ironii," and Anna Nasilowska, "Tyberiusz Cezar, Bocheński Jacek," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 14 July 2009, available online.

59 In 1961, Henryk Holland, the father of the filmmaker Agnieszka Holland and Gomulka's opponent within communist circles, was arrested and interrogated. The reason behind his subsequent death was subject to various hypotheses (political murder and defenestration of the body, or suicide). For more on this case see Krzysztof Persak, *Sprawa Henryka Hollanda* (Warsaw: ISP PAN-IPN, 2006).

and hunted for rumours about them. Writing *Naso the Poet*, I took Gomulka's line of defence, his train of thought, processed slightly as far as the language was concerned, and put it into Augustus' mind.⁶⁰

Naso the Poet is a universal study on the relation between the artist and the authorities. In one of his texts Bocheński quotes the following words by the Polish essayist Jerzy Stempowski (1893–1969): “In the eyes of all dictators, starting from Julius Caesar, taming the artistic and literary milieu was considered necessary and useful.”⁶¹ The image of Augustus in the novel – the absolute, not to say totalitarian ruler – differs from his common reception in Western culture as the bringer of peace and patron of the arts. Bocheński reads ancient sources “on the East from History”;⁶² he observes that totalitarianism, including Nazism and Communism, “under the appearance of revolutions beyond human imagination, in reality strives to maintain a certain order never to be changed and it wants to impose it on the whole world.”⁶³

With this warning Bocheński wants to reach the reading public at large, as was the case of *The Divine Julius*. Ovid – that defiant artist – is presented in the novel as a rock star. Theodore Ziolkowski, the eminent scholar of Ovidian reception from Princeton University, calls this creation “the most dazzling metamorphosis of Ovid” in twentieth-century literature.⁶⁴ This kind of frame permits the writer to start “an ironic love affair”

60 Bocheński's statement in the conversation in regard to my project *Romances with Cicero* (full version forthcoming; this fragment translated by Joanna Dutkiewicz).

61 Jacek Bocheński, “Opis dzieła niestworzonego (Owidiusz w twórczości Jerzego Stempowskiego),” in his *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 71. See also Helena Zaworska, “Boski Nazo,” *Twórczość* 1 (294), January 1970, available on Bocheński's blog.

62 See Jerzy Axer's expression in his paper “Aleksander Puszkina zginął pod Filipinami,” *Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. A. Mickiewicza* 32 (1997), 132.

63 See Bocheński, *Rzeczy stare i nowe*, 43–44, and “Przypis do *Boskiego Juliusza*,” 153.

64 See Theodore Ziolkowski, *Ovid and the Moderns* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 159.

with popular culture.⁶⁵ And this is when a new narrator enters the stage, because the Antiquarian from *The Divine Julius* no longer keeps up with such a protagonist. He is *passé*, if one may use a word that is *passé* itself. Ovid may be introduced and presented “only by somebody who today mediates in the professional exchange of information between the artist and the public” – the Conférencier.⁶⁶ Ziolkowski describes him as “a Shandyeian figure closely resembling the whimsical *skaz* who relates many of Gogol’s tales,” adding: “It would be difficult to find a more brilliant fictional treatment of Ovid’s life than this hilariously serious entertainment.”⁶⁷ Indeed, the simple parody of ludic stylistics, as the translator and poet Stanisław Barańczak remarks, “would be too easy a trick. Here the point is rather in creating the full opposition between a certain state of reality and a certain way of speaking about it; the opposition which could be at the same time the criticism of both that reality and that way of speaking.”⁶⁸ At a certain moment, the Conférencier transforms into the investigator and starts interrogating the poet. Thus Bocheński uncovers how – beneath a layer of superficial entertainment and cabaret – a battle is taking place between the artist and the authorities, and that the hearts and minds of the public are at stake.

65 See Jacek Bocheński and Zuzanna Grębecka, “Pojechałem do Rzymu, żeby w nim побыć – rozmowa z Jackiem Bocheńskim,” *Nowe Książki* 8 (2009), available on Bocheński’s blog.

66 The readers are addressed as “Ladies and Gentlemen”; see Stanisław Barańczak, “Oczy Lizawieyty Prokofiewny” (1971), in his *Ironia i harmonia* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1973), available on Bocheński’s blog, and Ziolkowski, *Ovid and the Moderns*, 159–163, especially a fragment in the scholar’s translation on page 161: “Cigarette break. Refreshments are at hand, relax, grab a little fresh air, this is the intermission. A brief pause for reflection, a blue cloud of smoke in the air, how did it please you? You, sir? You, madam?” Interestingly, Matthew M. McGowan has recently referred to Bocheński’s book and Ziolkowski’s analysis in his study *Ovid in Exile: Power and Poetic Redress in the Tristia and Epistulae Ex Ponto*, published in *Mnemosyne Supplements: Monographs on Greek and Roman Language and Literature* 309 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 57, note 79.

67 See Ziolkowski, *Ovid and the Moderns*, 159 and 163.

68 See Barańczak, “Oczy Lizawieyty Prokofiewny.”

STAGE THREE: PILOT

Having finished the second volume, Bocheński felt the pressing need to continue *The Trilogy*. He intended to pass chronologically to the next ruler of Rome, hence the title – *Tiberius Caesar*. However, he had no idea for the book. That writer's block lasted nearly thirty years. It affected only this particular volume. Indeed, Bocheński was very active throughout that whole period. He was engaged in the opposition's ventures (including initiating and signing the "Memorial of 101" – the protest of Polish intellectuals against the changes in the Constitution that were to bind Poland in an everlasting alliance with the USSR), he travelled a lot, he got involved in editing the underground journal *Zapis* [*The Record*] and he wrote and published (mainly illegally) numerous books without immediately evident ancient threads.⁶⁹ In 1973, moved by the events of the *Anni di Piombo* in Italy, which he witnessed while staying in Rome, he decided, in parallel with his work on *Tiberius Caesar*, to prepare a study on terrorism to examine how these two worlds relate to each other.⁷⁰ As a result *Krwawe specjały włoskie* [*The Bloody Italian Delicacies*] came into being, published for the first time illegally,

69 Classical Antiquity is, however, at the background of Bocheński's broad literary activity. Next to *The Roman Trilogy* he authored novels, including documentary ones, presenting daily life in the People's Republic of Poland (such as *Stan po zapaści* [*In the Wake of the Collapse*], published in 1987, of course in the underground, winner of "Solidarność" Cultural Prize), and essays inspired by his travels to various parts of Europe and Africa or by his experiences at home in Warsaw, like his flat renovation etc. In this rich literary work there are comics based on ancient mythology (he published *Sąd Parysa* [*The Judgement of Paris*] anonymously, for he was banned at that time and the comic had been commissioned by his friends who had wanted to give him an occasion to gain some money for living), as well as the lyrics to the huge hit in the sixties, known and beloved until today in the interpretation by Helena Majdaniec – *Rudy rydz* [*Red-headed Mushroom*], which he wrote under the *nom de plume* Adam Hosper (because of financial regulations at that time, the song did not bring much money to Bocheński). In 2013 he published *Zapamiętani* [*The Remembered Ones*] – a collection of essays on the greatest figures from Polish culture that he had personally known, like the writers Tadeusz Borowski or Jan Parandowski.

70 See Jacek Bocheński, "Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara," in his *Antyk po antyku* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2010), 188–193.

in *Zapis*⁷¹ – a book still relevant today, in which Bocheński extracts the paradoxes of democracy and the insane drive by certain media for sensational topics.

At that time Bocheński had completed only a fragment of *Tiberius Caesar: Prospekt* [*The Prospect*], which he submitted to *Tygodnik Powszechny* [*Catholic Weekly*] – then the only journal enjoying a certain independence. Its editors belonged to Bocheński's opposition milieu. (He knew he would stand no chances of publishing *The Prospect* in the main literary press, strictly controlled by the Party). However, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, which expressed the worldview of the so-called Catholic intelligentsia, refused to accept the text for moral reasons. It was considered improper.⁷² Hence, Bocheński encountered for the first time censorship from “the same side,” and this was a difficult emotional experience for him. *The Prospect*, in fact, is a text that can be misunderstood under certain circumstances. In it Bocheński describes, again on the basis of ancient sources, an account of Tiberius' orgy on Capri. Next, he advances the hypothesis that such accounts were the product of Roman biographers who were not interested in the truth, but in pure sensation. Finally, he offers the reader identification with Tiberius, asking provocatively: “And you? Would you enjoy being him?”⁷³ This way of addressing the audience, typical of the first two volumes, gains a special meaning in the last one. Bocheński encourages the reader to forego the position of observer and to enter the realm of the novel, which appears not to be fictional at all. Although more than two thousand years separate us

71 Bocheński intended to publish *The Bloody Italian Delicacies* in chapters in *Literatura*, the journal edited by Gustaw Gottesman; however, as they were heavily censored, or even suspended, in spite of Gottesman's efforts, the writer withdrew the manuscript. The book was legally published only in 1982, paradoxically during Martial Law, for the authorities wanted to prove there were no repressions (Bocheński was an internee then!) and to use the essays to suggest that Polish opposition were like terrorists.

72 See Bocheński, “Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara,” 190–196. The censors did not permit the publication of *The Prospect* in the journal *Literatura*. Bocheński published a small fragment in *Zapis*; however, he felt embarrassed by the rejection on the part of *Tygodnik Powszechny*.

73 See Jacek Bocheński, *Tyberiusz Cezar* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2009), 15.

from Tiberius' epoch, and despite the fact that *The Prospect* was written by Bocheński circa thirty years ago – during which time a moral revolution took place, perhaps greater than any change during the preceding two millennia – the fragment still scandalizes with its drastic character. And that was the author's intention. Indeed, it seems that Bocheński anticipated reality shows, crossing ethical borders for fun, and the tabloidization of culture. He feigned to play along with the flow, while he strove to trigger objections against that direction of the transformation of the world.⁷⁴ Yet he was not understood then.

Nor did he understand himself. He knew, however, that his approach to Antiquity up to that point, which had worked so well in the first two parts of *The Roman Trilogy*, did not work anymore. While writing those parts Bocheński had believed in the affinity between Antiquity and present times. Technological differences were for him of secondary importance: vital was the identification of one person to another,⁷⁵ he used to say. He was also convinced that owing to that kind of affinity we could better understand our own epoch: "Antiquity and today are sufficiently far away from each other to make the contrast between them become well visible, so that various related issues take sharp outlines."⁷⁶ During a year-long scholarship in Germany (DAAD's Programme *Künstler in Berlin*) and several visits to Italy in the seventies, Bocheński could observe the changes that in the twenty-first century completed themselves in the countries once behind the Iron Curtain, as well. The writer talked a lot to young people, whom he calls "a seismograph of transformations."⁷⁷ All of this made him put into question his vision of the world:

After the publication of *Naso the Poet* in 1969 I went, in the spring of 1970, to Rome. It was the last year of Władysław

74 See Morawiec, "Sine ira et studio."

75 See Bocheński, "Rzeczy stare i nowe," 6 and 37. See also Elżbieta Konończuk, *W poszukiwaniu dostępu do przeszłości: O powieściach warsztatowych Hanny Malewskiej i Jacka Bocheńskiego* (Białystok: Trans Humana, 2009, Diss. habil.).

76 Bocheński, "Rzeczy stare i nowe," 5–6.

77 Bocheński, "Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara," 198.

Gomułka's rule [...]. I had in my mind the March of 1968 and the attempt at extinguishing "socialism with a human face" with the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In the meantime, here in the West I am hugely and surprisingly impressed by the Marxist ideas of academic youth. When I meet with such young people, they all turn out to be admirers of the revolution in the spirit of Mao Zedong.⁷⁸

This was a shocking experience for a man from behind the Iron Curtain, who had observed the attempts at putting communist ideology into practice. Bocheński realized then that the inter-subjective community, the humanistic faith in the constancy of human nature, and the heart-warming conviction of the existence of affinity with previous generations were far from obvious.⁷⁹ Thereafter he understood that his approach to Antiquity no longer worked, because in the meantime the evolution of humankind had taken place. We changed from the species of *Homo iterans* into *Homo novans*. The value of repetition, cultivating tradition, and following patterns from the past was questioned. This process was so quick and so profoundly did it reach Western civilization that the old conviction – namely that the tried-and-tested paths of tradition are the best and new ones are to be chosen only under pressure of necessity and with the highest reluctance and trepidation – evokes our scepticism.⁸⁰ The consequences of this evolution, as Bocheński makes us realize, are serious:

Namely, with the moment in which progress is considered the upper value, as tradition was previously, everything is subjected by force to re-evaluation. [...] Questions seemingly bizarre must surface, but they are nevertheless real: what is better, a locomotive or Plato? Electricity or charity? The answer is that such things cannot be put together. In practice humankind gives another answer ...⁸¹

78 Bocheński, Grębecka, "Pojechałem do Rzymu, żeby w nim pobyc – rozmowa z Jackiem Bocheńskim."

79 See Bocheński, "Rzeczy stare i nowe," 7.

80 See Bocheński, "Rzeczy stare i nowe," 39–47.

81 See Bocheński, "Rzeczy stare i nowe," 41.

The writer notices that ancient culture, Latin, and Greek require sacrifice and engagement, and this is very difficult in the epoch when there is no time for anything and life should be easy.⁸² Facing the choice between a locomotive and Plato, more and more frequently we choose a comfortable journey: “One may fear that we will sever the continuity dating back to Palaeolithic times simply for comfort and thrift.”⁸³ What is more, Bocheński comes to the conclusion that the present is also disappearing at an accelerating speed: a Roman emperor, a French king, and people from the first pages of last year’s newspapers – “they all belong to an alien past, without distinguishing marks, there is no reason, no will, no time to occupy ourselves with them.”⁸⁴ Antiquity is no longer a reference point, as everything melts together: Marxists, Jimi Hendrix, Paris in May 1968, March 1968 in Poland, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Tiberius’ visit to Rhodes ...⁸⁵

In 2005, during his visit to Capri on Tiberius’ trails, Bocheński understood that he could not have finished the book earlier, because “he had waited for the transformation of the world and of himself.”⁸⁶ He acknowledged said transformation and accepted the impossibility of presenting Antiquity unequivocally⁸⁷ – and only then did he close *The Trilogy*. An interesting coincidence: the publication of the third volume took place in the very same year, 2009, as the renewed printing of *The Bloody Italian Delicacies*, which made plain certain parallelisms foreseen by the writer between these two texts, these two worlds: the crisis of civil societies, growing anxiety, and the lack of a feeling of security.⁸⁸ The narrator in *Tiberius Caesar* undergoes

82 See also the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming).

83 See also the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming).

84 Bocheński, “Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara,” 199.

85 Bocheński, “Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara,” 199.

86 Bocheński, “Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara,” 198.

87 Bocheński, “Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara,” 201.

88 See Jacek Bocheński, *Krwawe specjalty włoskie* (Warsaw: Agora, 2009), in the series *Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej*, with an introduction by Adam Michnik. See also Jacek Bocheński, *Tyberiusz Cezar*, 172; Leszek Szaruga, “Prawda czyli półprodukt,” *Nowa Polska* 12 (2009); Bocheński and Grębecka, “*Pojechałem do Rzymu, żeby w nim pobyc* – rozmowa z Jackiem Bocheńskim”; Katarzyna

another metamorphosis. After being the Antiquarian and the Conférencier, he puts on the mask of a Guide – or rather of a Pilot, because this is a more modern word and everything that is modern seems better from the point of view of *Homo novans*.⁸⁹ In consequence, as the critics observe, the tourists, namely “the readers complete in the novel two journeys through time under the care of the Pilot: the first one through the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the second one circa two thousand years backwards.”⁹⁰

The Pilot, however, quickly feels tired and exhausted,⁹¹ and at a certain point the tourists enter the role that had temporarily been taken up by the Conférencier in *Naso the Poet* – they start interrogating the Pilot.⁹² At that point we may observe the fusion of all three of the narrator’s incarnations. The readers expose, or they seem to expose, the truth: “Generally speaking, it is assumed that all this ancient Rome of yours is a camouflage, because in reality you were interested in politics, not in history.”⁹³ So Bocheński alludes to the settlements with the past, typical of post-communist countries, when accusations are thrown and judgements are often made without deeper reflection. The conclusion is pessimistic:

Maybe the conformists are always wiser than the Ciceros and other Brutuses, killed long ago, the futile defenders of the Republic? Everybody knows how they ended up, along with the Republic. Does not the wisdom of epochs express itself each time in mimicry, opportunism, cynicism, and the servility of the multitude? Does it not?⁹⁴

Marciniak, “Tyberiusz all inclusive – wycieczka z Jackiem Bocheńskim,” *Meander* 62 (2007), 139–146 (texts available on Bocheński’s blog).

89 See Bocheński, *Tyberiusz Cezar*, 24, and Bocheński, “Rzeczy stare i nowe,” 47.

90 See Nasiłowska, “Kto chce być bogiem?” Elżbieta Konończuk, “Historia w ofercie turystycznej: Opowieść Jacka Bocheńskiego o Tyberiuszu,” *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 1 (2010), 29–47; see also Marciniak, “Tyberiusz all inclusive – wycieczka z Jackiem Bocheńskim,” 139–146.

91 See Bocheński, *Tyberiusz Cezar*, 261.

92 See Bocheński, *Tyberiusz Cezar*, 272–276.

93 Bocheński, *Tyberiusz Cezar*, 274.

94 Bocheński, *Tyberiusz Cezar*, 161.

And yet Bocheński does not formulate his conclusion in the affirmative. Neither does he give the readers an answer on how they should live “in the world of galloping transformations,”⁹⁵ even though it seems he does have a certain idea in the matter. He prefers posing questions that are to make readers try to obtain answers on their own. And no matter if they do not succeed. They will start thinking independently and they will break with the comfortable way of living, where information and knowledge are given. Because no narrator should shape our life, even with the best of intentions. This is why Bocheński calls the seemingly “outlandish” interest in Antiquity a rebellion against one’s self, disagreement with automatism, and a path leading to intellectual freedom.⁹⁶

GAME NOT OVER

At the end of the collection of essays *Antyk po antyku* [*Antiquity after Antiquity*], nominated for the Nike Prize, the highest literature award in Poland, Bocheński notices that Antiquity in its traditional form, as known from the optics of European humanism, has ceased to exist. However, he suspects that the heritage of Antiquity is being cultivated in a new shape, with his participation in this phenomenon as well.⁹⁷ He is therefore cautiously optimistic, though he does not exclude the possibility he might be deluding himself. The roots of Bocheński’s optimism should be sought in his faith in the power of the unpredictability of things and the impossibility of fully explaining the world: “Each art is in fact an attempt at doing something that cannot really be done, for not particularly clear reasons, and in a not particularly clear aim [...] and this is in a way the law of human life.”⁹⁸ He also believes that the world, when it arrives at the verge of catastrophe, will make a “salvatory somersault,” and this will save us.⁹⁹

95 See also the full version of my conversation with the writer (forthcoming).

96 See Bocheński, “Rzeczy stare i nowe,” 52–53.

97 See Bocheński, “Przypis do Tyberiusza Cezara,” 207.

98 Bocheński, “Rzeczy stare i nowe,” 46.

99 See Jacek Bocheński, *Kaprysy starszego pana* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie,

Avoiding patronizing tones and moralizing, Bocheński has become an authority for intellectuals of differing milieux and generations. Much has changed since the times when he was banned. In 1997–1999 Bocheński was the President of the Polish PEN Club and he organized the PEN International Congress in Warsaw (1999). In 2006 he received the prestigious Jan Parandowski Prize of the Polish PEN Club, bearing the name of the most famous promoter of Classical Antiquity in Poland; he was awarded the Commander Cross of the Order *Polonia Restituta* (1997), the Award *Merited for the City of Warsaw* (2006), the Golden Medal *Gloria Artis* (2009), and in 2013 he received one of the highest decorations of the Third Republic of Poland – the Grand Cross of the Order *Polonia Restituta*. He still participates in public discussions, and he places us in front of the mirror of Antiquity. He does not avoid the most difficult issues, even if facing them means admitting our helplessness. Neither is Bocheński afraid of confrontation with the “utilitarians” who reject Antiquity as useless. For as Bocheński stresses, Antiquity gives us something undetermined, like ancient Greek itself, about which he writes in *Kaprysy starszego pana* [*The Whims of an Elderly Gentleman*]: “I cannot say what exactly, but it gives us something that lets us live more calmly, [...] a cushion, into which you may always snuggle your head.”¹⁰⁰

Have marvellous ancient dreams!

2004), 251–253. See also the full version of my conversation with Bocheński (forthcoming).

100 Bocheński, *Kaprysy starszego pana*, 9.

DOCUMENTS

Veni, Vidi, Verti:
Jacek Bocheński's Games with Censorship

Jacek Bocheński at the age of four (personal archives).



Jacek's parents, Maria and Tadeusz Bocheński (personal archives).



Tadeusz Bocheński



Bookcover of the first Polish edition of the novel *Boski Juliusz*, 1961.



Cover page of the magazine *Nowa Kultura*, 1961 (personal archives).



Caesar's bust (Altes Museum, Berlin).



Józef Cyrankiewicz.



Władysław Gomułka.



Nikita Khrushchev.



Bookcover of the German edition of *The Divine Julius* (1962).



A comment on *The Divine Julius* by Hansjakob Stehle, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Nr. 291, December 12, 1961.

Schreckschuß auf Polens „Nowa Kultura“

Der Fall Zolkiewski und die „Neue Welle“

WARSAU, im Dezember. Überbrückungen und schwebende Paradoxe hören zu den Eigenheiten des polnischen Lebens. Noch am vergangenen Dienstag konnten wir an dieser Stelle notieren, daß auch die „Nowa Kultura“, die führende, parteibundene literarische Zeitschrift, sich mit über 100000 Professorenschulungsdiktatoren der neuen Welt“ gestriger Bewegung in Polen abgeschlossen hatte. Man erfährt nun, daß der Chefredakteur der Zeitschrift, Stefan Zolkiewski, am Montag zu einem Mitglied des Politbüros berufen und kurzzeitig abgesetzt wurde. Noch vor Monaten hätte man nie solche Maßnahme eindeutig als Rudimentsinterpretation missen, denn Zolkiewski alt seit Jahren als der Verfechter eines Kompromisses zwischen der Intelligenz, den hierheim miträumlich begrenzenden Kulturpolitik der Partei und einem allen Neuen zugehörigen aufgeschlossenen Trend (das auch in zeitiger Aufnahme der westlichen Kultur ermöglicht). Daß die Partei diesen Kompromiß gerade jetzt, da der Moskauer Konflikt sich grundständig antasten will, lassen sollte ungeschicklich gelten. Was bedeutet über denn der Fall Zolkiewski?

Von Ende hinter die Kulissen zeigt, daß er durchaus, freilich in ganz anderer Weise, mit der „Neuen Welt“ in Verbindung steht. „Partei“ Gemalt ist entstanden, sich diese nicht mehr, wie 1956, in eine Situation manövrieren zu lassen, in der jene symbolischen Schriftsteller des Ton der öffentlichen Diskussion anboten, die ihren — oft ständigen — Eifer aus Damaskusreisen bezog. Die Debatte soll diesmal von dem politisch mehr und weniger weniger „schwimmenden“ Fühler, zumal von den Arianern der Wissenschaft, geführt werden. Die Abschnitte des Chefredakteurs der „Nowa Kultura“ ist somit als ein Schreckschuß gedacht, für den sich allerdings eine Reihe von Anlässen bot, die der Partei gerade folgen konnten.

Zolkiewski konnte sich seinen Chefredakteurspflichten nicht genug widmen, weil er zugleich Sekretär der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften ist. In der Redaktion des

literar. in Moskau unabh. wachen war, answortet seinen Kritikern“
 Sie sagen zu mir: Meinet, du bist meigil. Das ist nicht wahr: Mut war nie meine. Ganz einfach meinet ich, daß es unweinig Mich zu ernüchtern bis zur Feigheit des Die Welt aus den Angeln zu heben, verlaube ich nicht. Ich schrieb: Kann mich? Keine Anseige. Lächerlich! Kann mich das Aufgebissene vor Und das fahst du verlobt ich, und genug zu sagen, was ich dachte, damit Du nicht wegstehst sich die Nachfahren er — und die Scham wird dann brünnen — Wenn sie schon Schindl gemacht haben mi (Lust und Trau
 An diese sehr modernste Zeit, Denn seltsamen Zeiten, Als man die allereinstufige Bekanntheit als
 Das Gedicht trägt die Unbewusstheit „Die sprech“: Die polnische „Literatur“ (die nur in ihre zentrale, sondern die nur in ihre Kleiner Ausgabe geistig, die was Warschau gelangte, Gerade recht, um d schickwichtigen zur Bekanntheit und die Anzahl digem zur Kultivität zu ermutigen. Denn was einmal hier sind „diese seltsamen Zeiten schon ganz vorher.“ HANSJAKOB STEHLE

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A review of *The Divine Julius* by Willi Fehse,
Deutsche Zeitung, February 16-17, 1963

Cäsar nach modernen Mustern

Göttlicher Julius. Aufzeichnungen eines Antiquars. Von Jacek Bochenki. Aus dem Polnischen übertragen von Walter Tiel. Ehrenwirth-Verlag, München. 254 Seiten, 14,80 DM.

Jacek Bochenki gehört zu der Gruppe polnischer Autoren, die mit ihren Veröffentlichungen den parteipolitischen Instanzen immer zu schaffen machen. Sein „Göttlicher Julius“ verursachte im vorigen Jahr fast so etwas wie einen politischen Skandal. Zwar wehrt sich Bochenki in seinem Vorwort zur deutschen Ausgabe gegen die Unterstellung, das Bild Cäsars, darin gewissermaßen nach modernen Mustern umgemünzt zu haben. Aber er wehrt sich mit halben Verneinungen und mit vieldeutigem Lächeln. Anders ist sein Hinweis auf die Unmöglichkeit, „als Autor geschichtlicher Bücher“ den Einflüssen der Gegenwart zu entrinnen, wohl kaum zu verstehen. „Hat jemand von Ihnen Lust, ein Gott zu werden? Das läßt sich machen.“ So beginnt das Werk, und in diesem kecken, herausfordernden Tonfall, der Bochenki gestattet, wie Mephisto „mal wieder recht den Teufel zu spielen“, entwickelt er dann auch das Geschehen. Er verrät da-

bei eine subtile Kenntnis der Antike. Zugleich zeigt er sich, wenn er die Anatomie der Macht am Schicksal Cäsars veranschaulicht, mit allen Abgründen der menschlichen Seele vertraut. Bochenkis Buch ist ein Kreuzungsprodukt aus Roman und philosophischem Traktat, aus Essay und Biographie. Die Vermählung nüchternen Wissenschaftlichkeit mit den Impulsen der Phantasie brachte es zustande. Es stellt darum zugleich Analyse und Interpretation dar. Seine Lektüre setzt eine besondere Bereitwilligkeit voraus. Der „Göttliche Julius“ erschließt sich nämlich nicht leicht, weil die Handlung verschachtelt und mit Hilfe einer Zwischenfigur mehrfach „gebrochen“ wird. Oft muß man zwischen den Zeilen lesen. Vielleicht hinkt der Vergleich mit Petronius, weil er zu hoch gegriffen ist; aber wenn der römische Satiriker am Hofe Neros die Literatur aus ihrer „silbernen Latinität“ herausführte und zu einer Lebenskunst erhöhte, dann hat Bochenki hier im Bereich einer kommunistischen Diktatur etwas Ähnliches versucht und mit verwandten Mitteln erreicht.

Willi Fehse

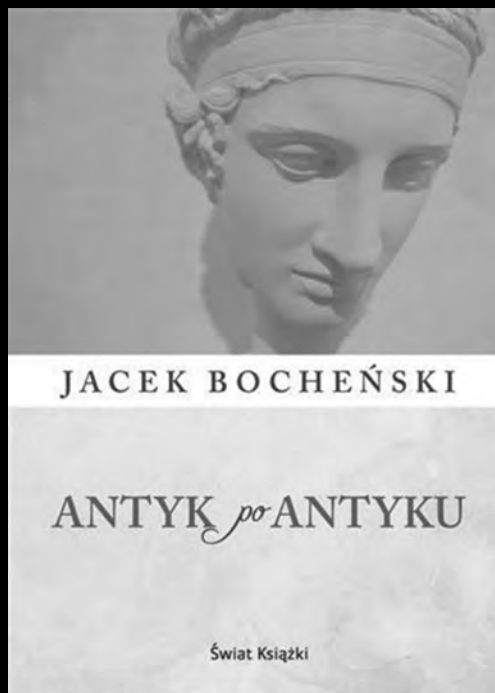
Bookcover of the first Polish edition of the novel *Nazo poeta*, 1969.



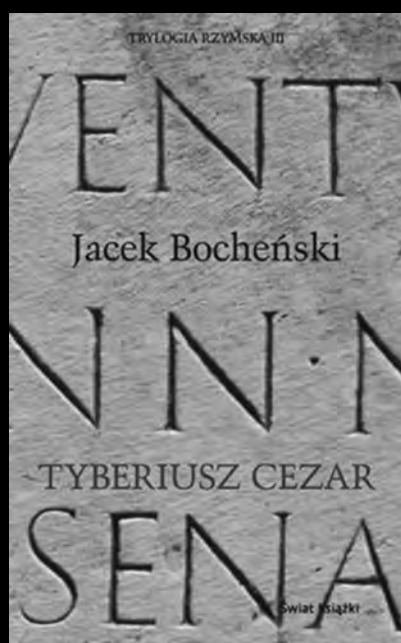
Bookcover of the latest Polish edition of the book
Krwawe specjalny włoskie, 2009.



Bookcover of the Polish edition of the collection of essays
Antyk po antyku, 2010.



Bookcover of the first Polish edition of the novel
Tyberiusz Cezar, 2009.



Jacek Bocheński with Suetonius
(personal archives, photo Włodzimierz Wasyluk).

