

never had a breakthrough in Sweden at all. To do exactly the same at two different moments can in fact be to do something entirely different.

## Modernism in Poland: The Troublesome Subject

By *Włodzimierz Bolecki*

### I. Overview of Twentieth-century Polish Literature

Twentieth-century Polish literature is traditionally divided into a number of major periods. The first covers the years 1918–1939 and is called the “literature of the Two Decades Between the Wars”. The following period (1939–1945) has been termed the “literature of the war and occupation”. The third period lasted from 1945 to the collapse of communism (1989) and is called the “literature of the PRL (People’s Republic of Poland)”. In that third period, there are several internal demarcations. The years 1949–1955 were called the period of Stalinism or of socialist realism (soc.-realism), because the only artistic doctrine allowed by the communist authorities was so-called socialistic realism. The year 1956 was called the “thaw” (the name comes from the title of a book by the Russian writer, I. Erenburg), because in that year the Communist Party announced the end of Stalinism and relaxed censorship. The year 1968 marks another demarcation. In March of that year student strikes started in Poland, as well as the anti-Semitic campaign organised by the Communist Party as a result of which many Poles of Jewish origin left Poland. The year 1976 marks yet another demarcation, when, after the workers’ strikes, publications independent of state censorship appeared. The years 1982–1989 are called the “martial law period” (despite the fact that martial law was officially lifted in 1983).

This division of literature into three periods is still used in school and university education and by literary critics. The division also applies to literary generations; the rhythm with which they appear in twentieth-century literature was equally subordinated to political events. It is said that after 1918 a generation of innovative writers appear in Polish literature, first of all the Skamander group (Tuwim, Wierzyński, Lechoń, Iwaszkiewicz, Słonimski, Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska) and the so-called avant-garde (Przyboś, Peiper, Ważyk, Wat). After 1930, the generation of writers of the so-called Second Avant-garde makes its debut (Miłosz, Czechowicz, Sebyła, Gałczyński, Schulz, Gombrowicz, Choromański, Straszewicz), and after 1939, writers of the so-called “war generation” appear on the scene (Baczyński, Gajcy, Trzebiński, Stroiński, Borowski).

After 1949, the generation of the so-called “pimpled ones” (i.e. young people with acne) introduces the Stalinisation of Polish literature (soc.-realism), including Woroszyński, Mandalian and Konwicki. In 1956, on the other hand, the “Modern Times” generation (who took their name from the title of a literary weekly published at that time) enters literature, including Herbert, Białoszewski, Grochowiak, and in 1968 – the so-called New Wave generation appears (i.e. Barańczak, Krynicki, Zagajewski, Kornhauser, Karasek). Because there was neither a “Solidarity generation” nor a “martial law generation” literature in Poland, the literature of the eighties is divided into “official” (i.e. published by state-owned censored publishing houses) and “unofficial”.

At the end of the twentieth century, this periodisation of literature – despite its didactic efficiency – is outdated and quite useless for any description of Polish twentieth-century literature as a whole. Its greatest drawbacks are 1) The random choice of dates, and subordination of the history of literature to political events; 2) The failure to include émigré literature; 3) Difficulties with presenting the history of Polish literature in categories of Western European literature.

Polish twentieth-century literature originates from the so-called anti-positivistic turn of the late nineteenth century, known as symbolism and modernism in art. The generation of Polish writers and artists of that period, called *Young Poland* (1890–1918), brought about the assimilation of the main artistic and philosophical ideas of the West into Polish art, including the writings of Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud; the idea of the autonomy of art (its media, objectives, ideas, values); the idea of links between different fields of art (literature, music, painting, theatre, architecture); the idea of a connection between literature and knowledge about mankind (philosophy, psychology, ethnology); the idea of the supranational and cross-cultural character of artistic motifs and media (secession), and, first and foremost, the idea of the multiplicity of meanings of the work of art. The contribution of this generation of artists was to draw attention to the presence of conventions in art, to the social character of its forms (especially the language), to the connection between the language and the representation of reality, and the discovery of folk sources of art.

The first period of creative work of those writers occurred at the time when Poland did not exist as a state, which is why the establishment of the Second Republic (1918) radically changed the character of literary life. After 1918 new magazines, publishing houses, literary associations, groups and programs appeared, and the geography of literary life was

transformed because, in addition to Warsaw and Cracow, Vilnius and Lvov (in the east) and Poznań (in the west) began to play an important role in literature. On the other hand, in the artistic sense, interest in the major ideas of European “modern art” continued in the twenties. The understanding of art as a metaphysical absolute (typical for Young Poland) disappeared and ordinariness, colloquialism, experiment, play, deformation, parody, the city, technology, the future, and form became the main slogans in literature. Despite the fact that those ideas were already popular around 1910 (e.g. in such programs as cubism, futurism, dadaism), after 1918 they were generally considered the determinants of a radical break with the literature of the previous decade. This was an illusion resulting from the “artistic struggles” which were taking place at that time between the literature of the previous epoch and the new artistic groups.

After 1918 the great writers whose outlook was shaped in the previous decade were still writing – Irzykowski, Berent, Witkiewicz, Nałkowska, Boy-Żeleński, Staff, Leśmian, Kasprówic, Żeromski, Kaden-Bandrowski, Strug, while others – such as Iwaszkiewicz – remained under the direct influence of Young Poland. The meaning of their works – and their origins – becomes clearer in the thirties when interest in constructivist experiments and modern art diminishes. In the thirties interest develops in the sphere of metaphysical values and experiments related to the new knowledge about mankind appear – i. e. psychoanalysis, social psychology and interactive psychology, sexology, the theory of imagination, perception, new concepts of history, etc.

In the twenties literature was dominated by the feeling of expansion and of unlimited possibilities for both art and culture (expressed in the renewal of the language and the themes of poetry), whereas in the thirties new artistic techniques were taken as given. In the twenties Polish literature was fascinated by the theme of the city and future development, in the thirties, the interest in suburbia and the provinces appeared, as well as in the psychological and social complications of the human being, the feeling of a crisis facing civilisation and the premonition of imminent catastrophe. In the thirties it became evident that the debuts of poets (Miłosz, Czechowicz, Gałczyński, Sebyła), prose writers (Gombrowicz, Schulz, Parnicki, Malewska, Choromański) and essayists (Stempowski, Miciński) were great artistic achievements. Also in the thirties the works of Leśmian and Witkacy, who started writing as early as around 1910, came to be appreciated.

In the Second World War all the institutions and the whole social structure of the Second Republic of Poland were destroyed. One should remember that Poland experienced two occupations – a German one from the west and a Soviet one from the east –, which originated in the secret treaty between Stalin and Hitler of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1939 (the so-called Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty). During the war most of the writers who had made their debuts during the Young Poland period were either killed or died (including Irzykowski, Berent, Boy, Komornicka, and Witkiewicz). Younger writers also died or were murdered during the war: Schulz, Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, Czechowicz, Sebyła, Piwowar, Baczyński, Gajcy, Trzebiński, Stroiński. Many writers were forced to remain in exile (including Gombrowicz, Wierzyński, Lechoń, Straszewicz, Stanisław and Józef Mackiewicz, Hemar, Herling-Grudziński, Bobkowski, T. Terlecki, Chmielowiec, Haupt, Leo Lipski). Some of them returned to Poland (Wańkiewicz, Parnicki, Słonimski, Cat Mackiewicz, Gałczyński, Tuwim, Międzyrzecki, Broniewski), others left Poland for the West (Miłosz, Stawar, Wat, Hłasko). However, the literature created during the war both in Poland and outside its new borders was a natural continuation of the literature of the Second Republic.

The situation was different inside the People's Republic of Poland, i.e. after the end of the war, when the communist authorities forced writers to sever all ties with pre-war literature. During the years 1945–1948, there was relative liberalism in Poland. However, in 1949 the continuity between Polish literature and the artistic ideas and techniques of previous decades was completely broken due to the political “experiment” called “socialist realism”. It was actually an attempt at sovietising the whole of Polish culture – a process identical throughout the whole of Eastern Europe. The beginning of that attempt were the Polish Stalinist writings in Lvov in 1939 and in Vilnius in 1940. In this situation the continuity of Polish twentieth-century literature was preserved by émigré literature. On the other hand, after 1956 literature in Poland, now freed from communist censorship and intellectual restrictions, discovered new areas of social, individual and artistic experience. The differences between émigré literature and the local Polish literature were significant:

1. Literature in the Peoples' Republic of Poland (PRL) was censored, the émigré literature benefited from freedom of speech.
2. Literature in the PRL was marked with the stigma of Stalinism (socialist realism in the years 1949–1955), which became a taboo subject after 1956. Contemporary experiences, e. g. the Stalinist terror, were presented in historical costume – i. e. people wrote of the Great Inquisi-

tion or Tsarist Russia but these were allegories of Stalinism in Poland (Andrzejewski, J. J. Szczepański, Terlecki, Szczypiorski).

3. The discovery of the tradition of poetry of the baroque period (seventeenth century) and of symbolism (Bryll, Grochowiak, and Rymkiewicz) played a great role after 1956. The popularity of those traditions was a reaction to the earlier destruction of the poetic language by the political propaganda of Stalinist literature. A similar function was played by the popularity of psychological subjects, translations from Western literatures, mainly French (existentialism), American (Hemingway, Faulkner), English, Italian, Scandinavian (rediscovery of Strindberg). All this meant initiating contacts between the broken tradition of the pre-war literature and the latest phenomena in art. The martyrdom of the Polish Jews, or Holocaust, became a new subject in Polish literature (Nałkowska, Strykowski, Rudnicki, Grynberg).
4. The literary system in the Peoples' Republic of Poland was subordinated to the policy of the Communist Party (institutions, editorial offices, publishing houses, awards), whereas in émigré literature all institutional relations, decisions and evaluations were the effect of a free choice made by writers. (The magazines *Culture* and *The News* were the most important for literature in émigré circles).
5. In the literature of the People's Republic of Poland the German occupation was the basic subject (Borowski, Kossak-Szczucka, Bratny). In émigré literature, it was otherwise – the description of the experiences of people who lived in the Soviet system (arrests, deportations, camps: Czapski, Herling-Grudziński, Mackiewicz, Obertyńska, Grubiński, Swianiewicz) became the most frequent theme of writing.
6. Emigré literature was based on the dominant position of the author's “self” in his work. This form of creativity was developed in essays or journals (Stempowski, Gombrowicz, Herling-Grudziński, Jeleński, Vincenz, Wat, Miłosz) as well as in the realistic novel (Mackiewicz). At the same time in the literature of the People's Republic of Poland various formal experiments produced outstanding results (Różewicz, Mrozek, Terlecki, Konwicki, Odojewski).
7. The ambition of émigré literature was to preserve the memory of the multicultural and multinational Second Republic (Jewish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Russian, German subjects), the ambition of PRL writers was to show the society and the reality of a communist state. By 1968 – remembering the destruction of literature by the communist ideology during the years 1949–1955 – writers in the PRL searched for lit-

erary sources in Mediterranean culture, in theories of myth and the aesthetics of form (Jastrun, Kuśniewicz, Parandowski).

8. The basic difference between émigré literature and domestic literature lay in the attitude to language, to the convention of speech (irony, grotesque, parody) and to the literary tradition (mainly a romantic one). Emigré literature cultivated tradition, the literary language and the numerous languages characteristic of the culture of Polish territories incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1945. In the meantime, in the literature of the People's Republic of Poland, a polemic game with the tradition was undertaken: folkloristic and cognitive (Gałczyński, Mrozek, Różewicz, Lem) as well as an interest in language as a mechanism of communication and a bearer of philosophical meanings (Wirpsza, Karpowicz, Bieńkowski, Szymborska, Świrszczyńska, Białoszewski), the language of people from the social margin (Hłasko, Nowakowski, Orłós) and the influence of propaganda on the contemporary Polish language. These linguistic interests resulted in the parody of the communist Newspeak in the poetry of the so-called '68 generation (Barańczak, Zagajewski, Krynicki, Karasek), and soon they became the common currency of the whole of the domestic literature (Anderman, Siejak, Głowacki, Iredeński, Schubert, Łoziński).
9. Emigré literature was not very well known in Poland, although writers in Poland were strongly influenced by the works of Gombrowicz (Dygat, Konwicki, Musiał) and Miłosz. After 1976 a slow process of osmosis between the two literatures took place in Poland and its culminating point came in the nineties when the works of émigré writers published several decades earlier became, paradoxically, partners in the most recent domestic literature (Miłosz, Gombrowicz, Herling-Grudziński, Haupt, Bobkowski, Leo Lipski, Józef Mackiewicz, Wat, Mostwin, Romanowiczowa). In the nineties, the division into domestic and émigré literature ceases to exist (Grynberg, Herling, Głowacki, Odojewski). Despite the appearance of a new generation of writers, the last decades of the twentieth century were for Polish literature the continuation of many subjects introduced by earlier generations, i. e. the '56 generation and the '68 generation – (Herbert, Szymborska, Białoszewski, Hartwig, Lipska, Terlecki, Myśliwski, Białoszewski, K. Brandys, Bocheński, J. M. Rymkiewicz, Nowakowski).

The literary system of the People's Republic of Poland ended with the abolition of censorship in 1990. Starting from 1945 until the end of the century, the most important tradition for émigré writings were the 30s, and for the literature of the PRL – the avant-garde of the 20s (and the negative tradition in PRL literature was soc.-realism). In the 80s and 90s, attempts were made to go beyond those traditions in literature, which was the purpose of the adaptation of the main ideas of post-modernism to describe the most original phenomena of the history of Polish literature over the whole of the twentieth century. The main problem here is as follows: there is no common term in the history of Polish literature for the phenomena outlined above, which would allow these various phenomena to be presented from one consistent perspective. And it is obvious that the main artistic ideas and traits of the poetics of twentieth-century Polish literary texts were similar and even identical to those which are known as "modernism" in western literary criticism. Let me enumerate some of them: Experiments with time, space, composition, the objective or subjective perspective of the story-teller (stream of consciousness), the rejection of the realistic idea of representation, and disillusionment with narrative in the novel; breaking all limits and linguistic experimentation in poetry; challenges to the audience by means of artistic scandals, as well as by the refusal to make concessions to the so-called average reader; the involvement of many artists in politics; the never-ending experiments with the means, subjects and themes of art, and the abolition of individual as well as social taboos.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peter Faulkner, "The Era of Modernism" in *Modernism*, London, New York 1977, p. 13–29; Peter Childs, *Modernism*, London-New York, 2000, p. 1–12; Émile Poulat, "Modernism" in *Encyclopedia Universalis*, Paris 1985, p. 421–422; Edward Mozejko, "Literary Modernism: Ambiguity of the term and Dichotomy of the Movement", *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, March–June, 1998, p. 123–143; Irwing Howe, "The Characteristics of Modernism" in Barbour, Scott (ed.), *American Modernism. The Greenhaven Press Companion to Literary Movements and Genres*, San Diego 2000, p. 28–35; "Modern" and "Modernism" in Wendell V. Harris, *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory*, p. 237–247; W. R. Everdell, "What Modernism Is and What It Probably Isn't" in *The First Moderns. Profiles in The Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought*, Chicago-London, 1997, p. 1–12; Margaret Drabble (ed.), "Modernism" in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford 2000; Douve Fokkema, Elrud Ibsish, "What is Modernism" in *Modernist Conjectures. A Mainstream in European Literature 1910–1940*, London 1987, p. 1–47; Malcolm Bradbury & James McFarlane, "The Name and nature of Modernism" in

In my book, I try to describe the great variety of artistic ideas and experiments in Polish literature and their identical nature to those processes in Western literatures of the twentieth century by using the term "modernism". The problem is that this term (modernism) is not an obvious one to use for Polish readers nor for literary historians. So first of all I am going to explain why "modernism" is a troublesome term in Polish literary history.

## II. Modernism and Traditions of Modernity

Almost one hundred years after the term "modernism" appeared in Polish writings, this term is still not applied consistently in relation to specific phenomena in Polish literature, nor does it have a stable meaning – one accepted by historians of Polish literature. In a nutshell, in the Polish history of twentieth-century literature the term "modernism" causes two problems: 1) one connected with the term itself and 2) a problem concerning the subject. I will consider both jointly.

To begin with, I would like to recall briefly how the term "modernism" is employed in Western cultural studies, although these issues are well known and have been written about many times in Western scholarly writings. Generally speaking, "modernism" is considered to be a cultural consequence of civilisation and historical processes called "modernity". The term itself is, however, far more ambiguous. It is used either 1) as a term to designate historical events in a particular century, 2) as a name for certain processes of civilisation occurring over many centuries, or 3) as a name for a universal attitude on the part of humanity towards the world – unrelated to any particular epoch. In general, the term "modernism" is used both in a broad and a narrow sense. In the broad sense, "modernism" means a set of phenomena, the dynamics of which were created by opposing the "old" to the "new" or, in other words, the "traditional" and the "modern" (modernity).

In Europe this opposition is a permanent element of the history of culture. Historians list various phenomena which – from around the fifteenth century – decided what was "new" and "modern" in European culture. The facts most frequently listed are as follows:

1. The Reformation, which was the first large change in civilisation in post-medieval Europe. From this point of view, after the Reformation, Europe became "new".
2. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century (Galileo, Newton, Leibniz, Descartes).
3. The dispute of the so-called "moderns" with the "ancients" which concerned co-existence between antique and modern culture in the seventeenth century. The dispute had a great influence on the development of modern French literature.
4. Enlightenment ideology, understood as a link connecting institutions and norms of social life with thinking based on rationalism (on ideals of equality, the new organisation of the state, morality, etc.) and on questioning the model of the world based on the Christian religion. The problem of modernity in the Enlightenment was also related to the crisis of the philosophy of life at the end of the eighteenth century, i.e. the so-called conflict between civilisation and nature (criticism of the idea of progress, social institutions and culture in the writings of J. J. Rousseau).

The key question is to distinguish here between the main categories that are involved in all considerations concerning modernism – that is the terms of "modernity", "modernisation", and "modernism". Before I present my idea as to the possibility of describing modernism in Poland, I would like to differentiate between the meanings of the terms.

First of all it is necessary to differentiate between the terms "modernisation", and "modernity". By "modernisation" I mean long-term social development, the changes in civilisation which begin in Europe in the sixteenth century (in Poland in the eighteenth). The term "modernisation" refers to the phenomena of so-called social history, while the term "modernism" concerns the artistic phenomena of the twentieth century. In my book the terms "modernism" as well as "modernity" refer exclusively to the latter issue. It is obvious that neither of the terms "modernisation" and "modernism" has anything in common, although the term "modernity" can be applied to both.

In a narrow sense then, the term "modernism" refers to those literary and artistic ideas that are based on the search for the "essence of modernity" in art understood as the *modern time, the present day, the current age*. The basic facts of civilisation for those ideas were the formation of

---

Bradbury & McFarlane, (ed.), *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, p. 19-56.

the *capitalistic system* in the nineteenth century, i.e. *industrialisation*, the striving for economic progress, the management of the development of social institutions by law, and the formation of parliamentary democracy, that is, briefly speaking – the *modernisation* of social life in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside the question of “modernisation”, one can say that from the mid-nineteenth century, the following phenomena are among the most important traditions shaping the contemporary understanding of the term “modernism”.

1. The Enlightenment-Romantic concept of the “aesthetic revolution” (Schlegel, Schiller, “Letters About the Aesthetic Education of Man”) leading to the idea of the autonomy of aesthetic values and the emancipation of mankind through art.
2. The *modernité* concept (Gautier, Baudelaire), i.e. the idea of art presenting modern time and themes of everyday life in their natural, local colouring as opposed to a historic art which used costumes and “timeless” requisites. According to this concept, the aesthetics of “modernity” consist in finding beauty in that which is transitory, short-lived, defined by time and place. The consolidation of the changeable and the local in the present became the ideal of modern art. In painting, this ideal was realised, among others, by the Impressionists.<sup>3</sup>
3. French symbolism in its two main variants, i. e. in the variant created by Rimbaud’s poetry and by Mallarmé’s poetry.
4. The so-called anti-positivistic turning point, which was the most important philosophical background for modernism at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century (Nietzsche, Bergson).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Childs, “Modern, modernism, modernity” in *Modernism*, London-New York, 2000, p. 12–17; Matei Calinescu, “The Idea of Modernity” in *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch*, Bloomington-London 1977, p. 11–92; Ronald Schleifer, “The Second Industrial Revolution: history, knowledge, and subjectivity” in *Modernism and Time. The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880–1930*, Cambridge, p. 108–148; R. Squillace, “From Modernity to Modernism” in *Modernism, Modernity, and Arnold Bennett*, London 1997, p. 15–35; P. Luthersson, *Modernism och individualitet* (English summary, trans. A. Bladh), Stockholm 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Modernité” in *Encyclopedia Universalis*, Paris 1985, p. 424–426. *Les oublies de la modernité*, ed. C. Debon & H. Cudak, Warszawa 1997.

5. The avant-garde movements in Europe which started around 1909 (cubism, futurism, expressionism) but which developed and gained popularity after 1918. The last concept is especially characteristic of Anglo-Saxon critics today.

Modernism understood as a set of such traditions appeared then as an artistic current in Europe and the USA in the second half of the nineteenth century and it developed in the first half of the twentieth century. According to some researchers, modernism reaches its culminating point in the 1930’s, disappears in the mid 1960’s (in the USA, already in the 1950’s) and is replaced by so-called postmodernism/post-modernity. According to others, modernism develops differently in individual countries and continues throughout the twentieth century – this refers, for example, to Eastern Europe.

However, there is a major controversy in studies on modernism.

There are two standpoints which are mutually exclusive and which lead to different concepts of modernism. According to the first, the term “modernism” concerns various artistic phenomena in twentieth century art which have nothing in common. According to the other, despite the fact that phenomena included in “modernism” are different, certain common features may be pointed out, and these allow the term “modernism” to define a consistent artistic current.

It is obvious that there are a multitude of arguments justifying both the former and the latter point of view. In preparing my book on modernism in Poland, I am trying to avoid this controversy by pointing out that it masks answers to two quite different questions.

The first question is of a historical nature and goes as follows. “What was modernism as a concrete historical phenomenon in Europe or in a particular country?”

The second question is of a methodological nature. “Is the term ‘modernism’ an appropriate term for describing phenomena in the European culture of the twentieth century which are extremely varied?”

Despite the general artistic ideas of that trend, which were identical in many countries, modernism in one country differed from modernism in another, both from the chronological as well as from the cultural point of view, depending on the national traditions and historical events in each country. For that reason differences between the national varieties of modernism were often more distinct than their similarities. In my opinion, this affects the differences between West and East European modernism,

an example of which is modernism in Poland, as well as the differences between modernism in Anglo-Saxon countries and in Scandinavia.<sup>4</sup>

I am now going to discuss the issue of modernism in Poland.

### III. The Various Concepts of Modernism in Poland

The term "modernism" is often used in Poland. However, it does not have a fixed meaning, and that is why the main problem encountered by Polish literary historians causes so many difficulties. The key problem is that in the literary history of the twentieth century several different periods are described, but the term "modernism" has never been used as a general concept to encompass the phenomena surviving beyond each period.

Accurate descriptions of "modernism" were provided by K. Wyka, H. Markiewicz and J. J. Lipski. They were all restricted, however, to the literature of the Young Poland period (1890–1918). Despite the fact that many authors have used a broader meaning of the term "modernism" in recent years (Danek-Wojnowska, Eile, Legierski, Możejko, Neukerken, Nycz, Przybylski, Ritz), the lack of a stable denotation of that term in Polish literary history can still be felt.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Peter Nicholls, "At a Tangent: Other Modernisms" in *Modernism. A literary Guide*, London 1995, p. 193–222; B. G. Carter, "Modernism" in *Encyclopedia of World Literature*, Farmington Hills, 1999, p. 278–279; P. M. Mitchell, "The Concept of Modernism in Scandinavia" in *Facets of European Modernism*, Norwich 1985, p. 243–256; Julian Symons, "American Modernism Is Distinct from European Modernism" in Barbour Scott (ed.), *American Modernism*, The Greenhaven Press Companion to Literary Movements and Genres, San Diego 2000, p. 36–43; J. Gierus, *Russia's Road to Modernity*, Warszawa 1998.

<sup>5</sup> K. Wyka, *Modernizm polski*, Warszawa 1959; H. Markiewicz, "Młoda Polska i izmy" in Wyka, *Modernizm polski*; J. J. Lipski, *Twórczość J. Kasprówicza*, Warszawa 1975; B. Danek-Wojnowska, *S. I. Witkiewicz a modernizm. Kształtowanie się idei katastroficznych*, Wrocław 1976; S. Eile, *Modernist Trends in Twentieth-Century Polish Fiction*, 1996; A. Korniejenko, *Próba periodyzacji procesu historycznoliterackiego*, Kraków 1998; M. Legierski, *Modernizm Witolda Gombrowicza*, Stockholm 1996 (Warszawa 1999); Edward Możejko, "Literary Modernism: Ambiguity of the term and Dichotomy of the Movement", *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, March–June, 1998, p. 123–143, Polish version: "Teksty Drugie" 1994, nr 5–6 (*Modernizowanie modernizmu*); A. van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna*, Kraków 1998; R. Nycz, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie*, Wrocław 1997; R. Przybylski, "J. Iwaszkiewicz i modernizm" in *Eros i Tha-*

Before I put forward my own proposal – which owes much to the authors mentioned above – I would like to say a few things about the problems encountered by a historian of twentieth-century Polish literature who is going to apply the term "modernism" to the literature of that epoch.

1. When using the term "modernism" Wyka had in mind the dominant phenomena of the early phase of the Young Poland period, which were more or less covered by the term decadentism (1890–1905). Thus, Wyka drew a distinction between the term Modernism as an artistic movement at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century and the period known as Young Poland (1890–1918). Undoubtedly, one can continue today to use the term "modernism" in the way proposed by Wyka, and this is what researchers of Young Poland literature do (e. g. M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, A. Makowiecki) by making a distinction between the meanings of those two terms. In this concept, however, there is no possibility of using the term "modernism" in any broader meaning.<sup>6</sup>

2. The meaning of the term "modernism" may be extended to cover the whole of the Young Poland period as critics between the two World Wars (1918–1939) did, and many historians of literature still do this. The advantage of this point of view is the possibility of a clear separation of Polish Modernism from other periods in Polish twentieth-century literature. It allows us to establish in the literary discourse a sharp opposition between Modernism as the entire literature of the Young Poland-period (1890–1918) and the avant-garde period in Poland after 1918 as with all new artistic movements. This is the crucial opposition in the theory of modern literature and art in English-speaking countries.

This idea, however, implies a serious problem. It makes the application of the term "modernism" in the discourse on Polish literature of the Second Republic impossible because "modernism" in Polish writings has always been a pejorative term.

On the other hand the term "avant-garde" might be extended to cover the whole period between the two World Wars. According to that periodisation, the Polish literature of 1890–1939 would be split into a period of Modernism, and then of the Avant-garde. In consequence, however, the

*atos*. Warszawa 1970; G. Ritz, *J. Iwaszkiewicz. Pogranicza nowoczesności*, Kraków 1999.

<sup>6</sup> M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Literatura Młodej Polski*, Warszawa 1992; A. Z. Makowiecki, "Modernizm" in *Literatura polska XX wieku*, vol. I, Warszawa 2000.

troublesome issue of Modernism would be transferred onto the problem of the avant-garde in Poland.<sup>7</sup>

3. However, one could set aside the meaning of the term "modernism" used in Polish literary history and – by analogy with many Western European studies on Modernism – accept that the term "modernism" simply means avant-garde movements.

This standpoint possesses certain advantages.

First, this idea lets us establish a distinct opposition between the literature of the Young Poland period (1890–1918) and the literature of the Second Republic (1918–1939/1945).

Second, according to this concept the term "modernism" is a synonym of the term "modernity" in line with the programmatic content of avant-garde movements.

Third, this concept allows us to reconstruct "modernism" as an avant-garde phenomenon in all its durability throughout the subsequent decades of the twentieth century.

Fourth, the identification of the term "modernism" with the term "avant-garde" allows us to present Polish literary history in an analogous way to that practised in Western countries (also with respect to the history of art).

Fifth, the identification of the term modernism with the term "avant-garde" lets us apply the category of "postmodernism" in the meaning of "post-avant-garde" to Polish literary history.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time that idea would be the source of two further problems, however.

First, it radically changes Polish literary terminology, and therefore must lead to confusion in the meaning of the term. The term "modernism" will then become a homonym. It will mean both the Young Poland

<sup>7</sup> G. Gazda, *Słownik europejskich kierunków i grup literackich XX w.*, Warszawa 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Behler, "Modernism and Postmodernism in Contemporary Thought" in *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle-London, 1990, p. 3–36; M. Alexander, "From Modernism to Postmodernism" in *Flights from Realism. Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction*, London 1990; Peter Brooker (ed. and intr.), *Modernism/Postmodernism*, London-New York 1992; Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde. Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*, Cambridge 1998; S. Eile, *Postmodernizm: przedłużenie czy opozycja wobec modernizmu*, w: *Kryzys czy przełom. Studia z teorii i historii literatury*, ed. by M. Lubelska & A. Łebkowska, Kraków 1994.

period (1890–1918) and the avant-garde movements (1919–1939), i. e. aesthetics which are diametrically opposed. When using the term "modernism" in that sense we should always explain that this term does not refer to the works of Przybyszewski and Berent, but to those of Peiper or Ważyk, or vice versa. Let us suppose that the same term refers to the works of August Strindberg and of Salvador Dali, or to the works of Henrik Ibsen and of André Breton. Thus, a conflict between two different ways of interpretation would be inevitable.

Second, employing the term "modernism" in that manner will have the following consequence: we will have to accept the paradigm of the avant-garde as the criterion of "modernity". In this sense the term "modernity" would be understood in the same way as Polish avant-garde authors did (e. g. the futurists, Peiper, Przyboś, or Sandauer). Thus, "modernity" would be understood from one privileged historical perspective (the literature of the Second Republic, 1919–1939, versus the literature of the Young Poland period, 1890–1918).

In consequence, the authors who rejected the concept of modernity in terms of "modernism", as well as the "avant-garde", would remain outside the clear opposition of modernism and the avant-garde, e. g. Leśmian, Gombrowicz, Nałkowska (her novel *The Impatient Ones*, 1939), Miłosz, or even Schulz.

4. There is another concept of "modernism" that has appeared in Poland in recent years (its origins can be found in Sławiński's and Lipski's excellent studies of, respectively, Leśmian and Kasprówicz).<sup>9</sup> Their gist is as follows. The term "modernism" means a literary trend which originated at the end of the nineteenth century but still exists in Poland. This idea means a radical broadening of the term "modernism" to include the whole of Polish literature in the twentieth century. Undoubtedly, this meaning of modernism brings a remarkable advantage. It enables us to consider modernism above and beyond all divisions into periods in Polish literature. Nevertheless, it also contains a serious drawback, because the explications of this meaning of the term "modernism" are simply very inaccurate. (I may say this because I wrote about modernism in several articles in the same general way).

In the light of the problems arising from the application of each of the concepts of "modernism" mentioned above, I now propose a different solution in my book. On the one hand it is a compromise between all possible applications of the term "modernism" in Polish literature presented above and, on the other hand, it implies their rejection.

<sup>9</sup> J. Sławiński, *Przypadki poezji*, Kraków 2001.



The key question to bear in mind is that the term "modernism" is applied to the various fields of literary history, e. g. epoch or period, current or movement, school or program. Generally speaking, the most frequent application of the term "modernism" was linked to the term "period", i. e. the Young Poland period (1890–1918) although historically, in these years, the term "modernism" meant "the movement". In the broader sense the term modernism means a current lasting throughout the various periods of Polish twentieth-century literary history or one epoch, i. e. the twentieth century.

At present, when reading about modernism in Polish literary history we meet the following problems.

1. We do not know whether "modernism" is a name for one separate current/trend, or whether it defines the whole twentieth century as one epoch.
2. We do not know what the relations are between "modernism" and other currents in Polish twentieth-century literature – because these relations were never explained in terms of "modernism".
3. We do not know either what the main traits of Polish "modernism" are.

Let me differentiate the meanings of some of these terms.

By "modernity" I mean various ideas of what modernity is or what it could be – from the point of view of each artistic movement or even of each program in twentieth-century art.

As to the terms "period", "epoch", "movement", "current" and so on – their application to literary history depends on the concrete perspective of the given interpretation. I distinguish between the terms "movement" and "current", however. The former concerns the actual artistic program of the concrete group or of each individual artist; the latter is the generalisation of similar artistic features lasting throughout the different periods of literary history.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, "modernism" in Poland can be understood as an epoch or as a period, as a movement or as a current because the phenomena of real modernism in Poland were of such a nature.

The basis of this perspective is the following premise. As the key feature of modernism I adopt not one of the historical "modernisms", e. g.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Childs, "Periods, Generes, Models" in *Modernism*, London–New York, 2000, p. 18–25.

the modernism of the Young Poland period or modernism as the avant-garde movement, but the general term *modernity* – regardless of its different meaning in various periods. In twentieth-century literature there were many ideas of modernity. From this point of view Polish literature does not differ from other literatures at all.<sup>11</sup>

All the ideas of "modernity" in Polish literary history conveyed radically opposed meanings. That is why the contents of those various concepts of "modernism" cannot be reduced to a common meaning (or a common denominator), but it can be used as a set of different answers to the same question: "What is modernity in Poland in the twentieth century?"

According to my proposal, such terms as "novelty", "modernity" and "modernism" are not synonyms. "New" does not necessarily have to mean "modern" and, conversely, the term "modernity" does not have to be based on the meaning of novelty. "Modernity" may be understood as a radical and, at the same time, paradoxical polemic with "novelty". The conflict between "modernity" and "novelty" was the basic element of the works of many great Polish writers of the twentieth century, e. g. S. I. Witkiewicz, Leśmian, B. Schulz, Cz. Miłosz, W. Gombrowicz, G. Herling, J. M. Rymkiewicz, W. Odojewski, T. Różewicz and many others. I believe that this conflict was one of the most interesting features of modernism in Poland.<sup>12</sup>

The question I have formulated – "What is modernity in Poland in the twentieth century?" – was a historical fact in the previous century. We may discover it both in the writings of Young Poland, of the Second Republic, of the People's Republic of Poland, as well as those of the last decades. Therefore, "modernity" – as the proposition of works of such different writers as Przybyszewski and Irzykowski, Berent and Brzozowski, Witkacy and Przyboś, Nałkowska and Gombrowicz, Wat and Schulz, Miłosz and Białoszewski, Herbert and Szymborska, Haupt and

<sup>11</sup> Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity*, Cambridge 1992; R. Brandon Kreshner, "Modernism and Modernity" ("Modernism"), in *Encyclopedia of the Novel*, vol. II, ed. by Paul Schellinger, Chicago-London, 1998, p. 854–861; Robert B. Pippin, "The Modernity Problem", and "Modernity and Modernism" in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem. On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, London 1999, p. 1–77.

<sup>12</sup> W. Bolecki, "Post-modernizing modernism" in *From Norwid to Kantor. Essays on Polish Modernism dedicated to Professor G. M. Hyde*, ed. by G. Bystydzieńska & E. Harris, Warszawa 1999. Other arguments see my book: *Polowanie na postmodernistów (w Polsce)*, Kraków 1999.

Herling, Mackiewicz and Odojewski, Terlecki and J. M. Rymkiewicz and many others – existed.

Application of those extremely different concepts of “modernity” to the common term “modernism” must bring about a radical change in the discourse of Polish literary history of the twentieth century. “Modernism” understood in this way never existed as an empirical fact. This concept of “modernism” is only a *theoretical model*. As a term, this “modernism” constitutes my interpretation. Such a concept, however, enables us to represent Polish literature in the twentieth century without becoming entangled in the contradictions resulting from the different historical meanings of the term “modernism”.

This concept, however, implies a new problem. It requires that the historian of literature define the subject of that “modernity”. The key thing is that in the empirically existing modern art movements the term “modernity” referred to various issues, e. g. in the paradigm of the “avant-garde”, “modernity” was defined as the modernity of an aesthetics of the new literature. On the other hand, in the paradigm of “symbolism”, “modernity” was defined as the expression of transcendent values.<sup>13</sup>

To put it briefly, I include in the concept “modernism in Poland” several artistic movements that existed during the twentieth century, although they were of varying intensity. They are as follows. 1) Decadentism, 2) Parnassianism, 3) Expressionism, 4) Symbolism, 5) Futurism, 6) Avant-garde, 7) New Classicism, 8) Catastrophism. Characterising them is beyond the scope of the present article.<sup>14</sup>

Some of these movements originated at the end of the nineteenth century, others in the following decades, but their continuation can be found even in the last decade of the twentieth century. The essence of the concept referred to herein is that none of those trends could be a criterion of modernity and, thus, of modernism in Poland. All these ideas of modernity need to be combined together as oppositions, mutual exclusions, artistic polemics and conflicts. In sum they create a phenomenon called “modernism in Poland”.

<sup>13</sup> W. Hilsbecher, *Wie modern ist die Literatur*, München 1965 (Polish transl. 1972); Andrea Gogroff-Voorhees, *Defining Modernism. Baudelaire and Nietzsche on Romanticism, Modernity, Decadence, and Wagner*, Peter Lang 1997.

<sup>14</sup> P. Nicholls, *Modernism. A Literary Guide*, London 1995, p. 24–164; Malcolm Bradbury & James McFarlane, “Literary Movements” in Bradbury & McFarlane, (ed.), *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930*, London 1991, p. 191–310.

Here, however, I have to make this explication even more complicated. The artistic movements I have mentioned were of an empirical nature; they existed in the history of Polish literature as concrete artistic programs. But although their programs were often mutually exclusive, similar artistic ideas may be found in them. In my book I call them “the dominants” of Polish modernism. I mean by this term that the dominants are the generalisations of the main ideas and not the ideas contained in the concrete artistic programs of Polish literary history. In the model of Polish modernism mentioned above the most important dominants could be termed as follows: *Symbolism, Vitalism, Essentialism, Relationism, Conventionalism, The poetic function of language – Poéticité, Constructivism*.

Let me give here a brief characterisation of each.

**Symbolism.** By using this term I mean the idea that sense is transcendent in relation to the sign. In other words, sense exists outside of language, – e. g. as in Plato’s ideas – and literature is only the medium of its circulation or symbol.

**Vitalism** (from the Latin word “vita”). This term refers to all those literary works in which the category of “life” (existence) is the dominant feature, e. g. the present, past, memory, love, death, illness, existence, character, human personality, the identity of man, and so on.

**Essentialism.** By essentialism I understand the search for the essence of artistic phenomena. In art, the idea of essentialism existed as the subordination of artistic issues to the question of the essence of poetry, prose, theatre, language, painting, sculpture, music, etc.

**Relationism.** By this term I mean the representation of reality dependent upon the viewpoint adopted. In fiction, the most characteristic feature was the limitation of the representation of reality to the consciousness of a single character, to its place in space and time, as well as their memory, vision and even hearing – in other words, always to the restricted perspective of a specific subject. The Anglo-Saxon concept of the modernistic novel, originating with the works of H. James or V. Woolf is based on relationism.

**Conventionalism.** This term refers to the following idea: the essence of modernity is to shatter the illusion that art can represent the real world. Art is only a game of conventional elements, meanings and themes.

**The poetic function of language; poéticité.** This term has been used previously by Russian formalists. It is used here in the sense that meaning in the text is created as a result of a play between signs (the play of

words), and not as the relation between sign and reality. In Polish literary history this phenomenon has been described with reference to both poetry and prose.<sup>15</sup>

**Constructivism.** I mean by "constructivism" an idea that the new sense in art exists not as a consequence of new elements being applied but as a new arrangement of already given elements. In this sense, e. g. Witkacy was a constructivist, though he rejected the foundations of constructivism as a specific direction in art.

*Each of those dominants may be treated as an attempt at solving the contradiction between the key problems of modernism. That is, between what is "old" in the culture and what is "new"; between what is "traditional" and what is "modern"; between what is "natural" and what is "artificial"; between "mimesis" and "construction"; between what is individual in literature and what is social, or conventional, etc.*

In my opinion, modernism in Poland consisted of several phases, which differed from each other due to such dominants. Those phases are not aligned with subsequent periods in Polish literary history. The dominants of modernism changed their character in each period, e. g. the elements of "vitalism" during the Young Poland period in the thirties or after 1956 differed from each other but the overriding idea was the same all through the twentieth century.

To put it briefly, in western writings Modernism is divided into three phases, i. e. early Modernism, high Modernism and late Modernism. This is a biological vision of Modernism as something that is alive. Its life begins, then develops and ends in death. That figurative way of representing modernism is possible if we mean by modernism a trend that has already ended. But the trend I call modernism still exists in Poland, so it would be difficult to make sharp divisions between its phases. One could of course call the period of 1890–1918 "early modernism", then the period of 1919–1956 "high modernism", and the period of 1956 – to the present day "late modernism". Such a periodisation is very useful, but it presents many difficulties in the historical representation of the whole current – or epoch – in Poland.

This problem requires a more detailed analysis, however a simplified scheme of dominants in each of the phases of modernism in Poland may be adopted as follows. In the modernism of the Young Poland period symbolism, essentialism and vitalism were dominant. In the modernism

<sup>15</sup> W. Bolecki, *Poetycki model prozy w Dwudziestoleciu Międzywojennym: Witkacy Gombrowicz-Schulz*, Wrocław 1982 (Kraków 1996); Rainer Emig, *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures, and Limits*, London-New York 1995.

of the twenties and thirties vitalism, essentialism, constructivism, symbolism, relationism and the poetic function of language were dominant. The modernism of the second half of the twentieth century (after 1956) is dominated by vitalism (such as philosophical existentialism), conventionalism and the poetic function of language.

The crucial point is here that Modernism in twentieth-century Polish literature cannot be defined only through the paradigm of modern art – i. e. through the modernity of the language – because this way of defining belongs to the paradigm of avant-garde modernity. In other words, there were different ideas of "modernity" in Polish literary history outside the paradigm of avant-garde art. Those ideas were realised without accepting the language of literature as a criterion of "modernity". For example, for Miłosz, one of the key features of modernity is the rejection of the utopia of science. For Joseph Mackiewicz, the feature of modernity was the multicultural character of nation and the rejection of communism as a criminal utopia; for Gombrowicz, the key feature of modernity was individualism opposed to all forms of collectivism in culture.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century up to the present day different issues have belonged to the paradigm of "modernity". Some of them were identical in the literature of the whole of Europe, most of them, however, were different in each European country. History in the twentieth century, as we know, was different in England, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, Russia or the Balkans. And the concrete events of history in various regions of Europe were some of the most important motive forces behind modernism in those countries.

The term "modernity" then encompassed various questions of modern thought and social issues. In Poland they include new psychology (psychoanalysis), the emancipation of women (the feminist movement), multiculturalism, totalitarianism (communism and nazism), nationalism, various forms of genocide (e. g. the Holocaust), stereotypes propagated by the media, censorship as a source of taboo in discussions on public issues, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, Manchester-New York, 1988; Tyrus Miller, "Theorizing Late Modernism", *Late Modernism. Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*, Berkley, p. 3–25; M. Jay, "Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism", *Modernism/Modernity* 3.2 (1966), p. 93–111; M. North, "The Public Unconscious" in *Reading 1922, A Return to the Scene of the Modern*, Oxford 1999; W. R. Everdell, *The First Moderns. Profiles in The Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought*, Chicago-London, 1997; C. Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism. Decentering Literary*

In this concept of modernism there is room for radically different models of "modernity", e. g. for the poetry of Przyboś and Miłosz, or Grochowiak and Białoszewski, as well as for the "modernity" of Przybyszewski, Berent, J. Mackiewicz, Odojewski or Herling and other writers. However, this is not a question of names but of the stabilisation of the meaning of the term "modernity" in Polish literary history, which would not be entangled in one, arbitrarily meaning of "modernity". Over the past century, various concepts of "modernity" existed in Poland. But a literary historian who is going to present modernism in Poland must take all of them into consideration, because only all these concepts together – as radical contradictions and complements – create a phenomenon, which may be called Polish "modernism".

Today, none of us can know which meaning of twentieth century "modernity" will inspire future generations of writers. It is worth remembering that the history of twentieth-century literature, including Polish literature, is also the history of the rapid devaluation of successive concepts of "modernity/modernization" in art, and even their rejection by later generations of artists.<sup>17</sup>

---

*Dynamics*, Berkeley, London 1993; B. Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*. Vol. I: *The Women of 1928*, vol. II: *Postmodern Feminist Readings of Woolf, West, and Barnes*, Bloomington 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Burger, "Literary Institution and Modernization" in *The Decline of Modernism*, Cambridge 1992, p. 3–18; Hugh Witemeyer (ed.), *The Future of Modernism*, Michigan, 1997; Robert B. Pippin, "Unending Modernity" in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem. On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, London 1999, p. 160–179.

## From Depersonalisation to Personal Literature

By Ryszard Nycz

### I. A glance back and some doubts

#### 1.

Modern literature does not really encourage us to deal with the actual writer-author. Regardless of whether or not we take into account what is said by writers themselves (such as Eliot or Valery), by critics of the then contemporary culture (such as Ortega y Gasset or Simmel) or by historians of modern literature (such as Friedrich or Culler); regardless of whether we turn to poetry, narrative or drama, or else yet, taking our cue from others, to other areas of art – everywhere we can observe the same general tendency summarized in a well-known formula of escaping from personality.

Quite possibly, the formula owes its popularity first of all to Eliot, who in his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent* (one of the most important documents of modernist consciousness), observed that "poetry ... is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality". Naturally, credit is not exclusively his. Likewise, Ortega y Gasset, in his no less important essay on *Dehumanization of Art*, observed the same tendency on a much broader scale: "In all kinds of art, we face the same: an escape from personality". In his opinion, even during romanticism "the poet desired simply to be man", whereas for modernists, "the poet starts where man ends", the modernist poet "has to disappear, to die, to become transformed into a pure impersonal voice, that breathes into space the words which constitute true subjects of lyrical action. This pure impersonal voice, the acoustic vehicle for poetry, is the voice of a poet who can soar above his humanity". Hence in modern poetry, and in Valery's opinion, in all poetry, "the one who speaks seems to be different from the one who actually speaks to someone other than the one who listens. In a word, it is a language within language". The aesthetic and poetic awareness of this kind was sanctioned around mid-century by Friedrich's influential analyses. In his opinion – let me remind the reader of another "common place" of that tradition – "depersonalization in lyric