

And Krzysztof Miklaszewski wrote about this performance⁹:

The mystery of being *homo sapiens* may not be as complex as Joyce wanted it to be in *Finnegans Wake*, say the authors of the play, but it is hidden in a continuous interplay of delight and disappointment, tranquillity and turmoil, assurance and anxiety, prediction and surprise. 'Cosy and traditional theatre it is not' wrote the *Irish Independent* when Zenkasi performed *Finnegans Make* at the Dublin Fringe Festival. Just like real life, which enjoys glittering with theatre, though theatre it is not. We feel it only when madness calms down, the characters return from frenzy to their ascribed roles and the audience is again enveloped in oppressive and bitter darkness. We feel it only when we are not inclined to laugh any more, as the action goes back to the starting point. The Fajfers do away with the "wake". We have swallowed our own tail and we can start again from the beginning. Maybe next time we will be able to understand more...

⁹ *Dziennik Polski*, Kraków, 28th February 1997.

Włodzimierz Bolecki

Post-modernising modernism*

I should start with a few points that are self-evident.

Post-modernism was discovered in Poland almost at the same time as Communism was overthrown. In the early 1990s, political change went hand in hand with change in the aesthetic and artistic sphere. A new era required a new name, and when this could not be found in politics, it was found in literature and art. The statement that we were living in a new era, in the "post-modern era" – a statement that had already become seriously banal in the West in cultural studies and the sociology of culture – sounded like a revelation in Poland at the beginning of the 1990s. The political system had changed, the role of literature and art was changing, and a new generation of writers and artists had entered public life. Some critics identified these two areas of change, the political and artistic, so literally that they associated post-communism automatically with post-modernism.

Polish literature in recent years has however produced very few works that could be unquestionably categorised as post-modernist, and so the critics, especially the younger ones, like to search back for examples from the past. This means, to simplify things greatly, that it is not recent writing that is regarded as typical of Polish post-modernism, but the work of three of the best-known writers of the twentieth century: Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz. Just recently, even Karol Irzykowski has been included amongst the post-modernists. A few

* This is a somewhat revised version of a text which will appear in French under the title "Postmodernisme? Peut-être modernisme méconnu?" in a volume edited by Marie Delapierre, *La Modernité en Europe Centrale. Art et Littérature*; first published in Polish in *Teksty Drugie* 1996, no. 1-2.

years ago I called this situation "the hunt for post-modernists"¹. And since in various articles on post-modernism in Poland I keep coming across references – usually polemical – to that text of mine, I would like to return to the subject, but this time from a slightly different perspective.

Clearly, the idea of calling these three writers post-modernist did not start with the fall of communism. In the 1980s, it was possible to find Gombrowicz's name in American discussions of post-modernist literature.² The first critic in Poland who called Gombrowicz a post-modernist was Zdzisław Łapiński.³ Shortly afterwards, the names of Witkacy and Schulz also began to figure in this context. Nearly all the critics consider these three writers to have been forerunners of Polish post-modernism, because of certain characteristic elements in their poetics: parody, inter-textuality, anti-mimeticism, multiple signification, puns, mixing high and low culture, making fun of the existing cultural hierarchies etc.⁴

At first glance this argument seems to make sense, for it would be difficult to argue that features of this kind cannot be found in the work of these writers. But I would draw a different conclusion. If Witkacy, Gombrowicz or Schulz can be treated today as forerunners of post-modernism, this means only that phenomena which are today called post-modernist were components of Polish modernism. And so: is this post-modernism? Or should we rather call it unexplored modernism?

3

More than a decade ago, I myself pointed out the parallels between Witkacy's "nasylenie formą" (satiation with form) and the criticism of the realist novel formulated by the surrealists, and also John Barth's concept of the "literature of exhaustion"; I also pointed to the extraordinary similarity between the aesthetics of the two writers. At that stage I had not yet come across the term "post-modernism"⁵.

Many authors have adopted the thesis that Witkacy, Gombrowicz and

¹ "Polowanie na postmodernistów (w Polsce)", *Teksty Drugie*, 1993, no. 1.

² B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987; C. Nash, *World Games: the Tradition and Anti-Realist Revolt*, 1987.

³ Entry under "Gombrowicz" in *Literatura Polska po roku 1939*, vol. 1, ed. M. Witkiewicz [Marek Drabikowski], 1989.

⁴ Z. Łapiński, "Postmodernizm – co to i na co?" in *Teksty Drugie*, 1993, no. 1.

⁵ W. Bolecki, "Witkacy et les Problèmes du Romain Moderne", *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis*, no. 690, *Romanica Wratislaviensis XXII*, Wrocław 1984, pp. 163, 165.

Schulz are Polish post-modernists, but most of them do no more than use the term in a generalised way. At the same time, literary historians have undertaken the task of placing the work of these writers in the context of post-modernism, both in Poland and abroad. I will first therefore reconstruct their common viewpoint, and will then explain my own standpoint.

According to Zdzisław Łapiński, Witkacy, the oldest of them, was a writer from an age of transition, and because in his work he formulated the basic contradictions of contemporary art which post-modernism tries to draw out, he can be called a "forerunner" of the post-modern. Neither Witkacy nor the post-modernists hesitate to turn art into anti-art. But Witkacy, while he discovered these contradictions, was at the same time their victim. Witkacy, writes Łapiński, sensed the impossibility of metaphysics in the contemporary world, while at the same time hankering for their presence. He was fascinated by mass culture, which he nevertheless at the same time hated. He treated the conventions of art with the least possible respect, but nonetheless at the same time accepted only absolute art, the synonym for which was for him Pure Form. His work is governed by tragi-farce, and his favourite techniques are pastiche, parody, auto-referentialism, and the interweaving of fact and fiction. But in Łapiński's opinion, the most post-modern element in Witkacy's writing is the "any-old-how" aesthetic of his work, even though precisely this aesthetic anti-value is the value most sought-after and prized by the post-modernists.

The writing of Witold Gombrowicz also tends to be held up as another example of post-modernism in Polish literature. Łapiński was already writing in the early 1980s that Gombrowicz deserves a place in the history of world literature as one of the great post-modernist authors.⁶ More or less at the same time, the German critic, D. Scholze, claimed that play with stereotypes, clichés, and kitsch in the work of Gombrowicz exemplifies post-modernism and deconstruction.⁷ Łapiński finds evidence of Gombrowicz's post-modernism in his agnosticism and the sacral symbolism that he uses in bad faith, the connection of tragedy with farce, the multi-faceted nature of the eroticism, the "inter-personal" concept of the individual and the literary work, the revolt against the classics of the canon, doubt about the cognitive capacity of fiction, and the resulting turning in of the narrative on itself, in the omnipresence of parody and the autobiographical nature of his narrative. Gombrowicz, like the post-modernists, handed over his works into the power of the reader, although in fact he tried to control the reader's every step. There was in this something of a clever conjuring

⁶ *Literatura Polska po roku 1939*, vol. 1, op. cit.

⁷ D. Scholze, *Zwischen Vernügen und Schock. Polnische Dramatik im 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1989, pp. 150-177.

trick, pretending that it was the reader alone who decided about art, while all the time his sole faith was in art and the Author as Artist. In this sense, Gombrowicz, like Witkacy, discovered the post-modernist contradictions of art.

All of these phenomena, Łapiński claims, simultaneously provide a definition of post-modernism.

Łapiński supplemented this argument in an afterword to Gombrowicz's short stories, which he called the

advance charge of post-modernism against modern culture, or in other words, modernism (understood as the period from the end of the 19th century to the 1960s). Of course, it is possible to find more advance notices of the epoch that we now call post-modern, but they were rarely totally artistically successful. Usually they were only the outline of an attempt, an experiment, even if they were as brilliant as Witkacy's dramas. This is after all not surprising, since certain characteristics of the post-modernist stance from the beginning brought the danger of self-destruction – in the cognitive, ethical, artistic organisational plan. And Gombrowicz, who was more astute and bold than many later flag-carrying post-modernists, emerged from this unscathed. Maybe because, in reaching to the limits of the philosophy that he professed, he showed its inner contradictions and its risky consequences? ... The modernists wanted to construct an objective world of culture. ... For the literary modernist, the aim of writing was to create a work liberated from the person of the author, or to put it in more uncompromising terms, a masterpiece; the perfect reader was the "ideal reader" from a textbook of poetics. ... The modernist, objectivised world of culture, the crowning feature of which are masterpieces, became in Gombrowicz's eyes an isolated world. We have no proper access to it: in having to do with this world, we have to play a comedy, pretend to be someone that we are not, giving up various shameful desires and fears, which at the same time are very largely our own. It was for this reason that Gombrowicz sent his various strange creations out against this world: epileptics, monomaniacs, sado-masochists. ... Popular culture sets out to satisfy what elite culture does not want to take on. ... [Gombrowicz] was carrying on his flirtation with kitchen sink literature more skilfully, so that in the future he would even be able to serve as a mentor for our post-modernists as they flirted with mass culture.

The modernists demanded of words that they should marvel at themselves (because they appear in such surprising but at the same time apt configurations); Gombrowicz, and in his wake the post-modernists, demanded that they should mock themselves (because they are all randomly free). Isolation from a culture is for a writer primarily isolation

from language. ... The modernists had their uncompromising principles, which were not all the same, but were always uncompromising. ... Not so Gombrowicz. For him, everything was provisional, inessential, relative. This approach covered people, the world and himself. ... Modernism was above all the tradition of symbolism, and symbolism is represented mainly by poetry. Post-modernism finally puts an end to the enthronement of lyricism, and represents the victory of narrative – even if carried out in bad faith – over the epiphanic.⁸

A post-modernist reading of Schulz is given today by many authors: Krzysztof Stala, Jerzy Jarzębski, Aleksander Fiut, Michał Markowski may serve as just a few examples.⁹ Stala found in Schulz's narrative all the figures and rules of post-modernist discourse which had been analysed by Lyotard, Derrida and Barthes. The uninitiated might assume that Schulz's stories were written under the influence of the deconstructionists, or as illustrations to their discussion of "dissemination" in verbal discourse. Other scholars have noted in Schulz's writing such standard post-modernist motifs as trash¹⁰, the "paradox of representation" (Markowski), or degraded mythology. Jarzębski put it most clearly when he wrote that there is nothing to prevent us finding in Schulz's work the defining characteristics of post-modernism listed by Ihab Hassan, or to place him alongside the masters of post-modernist plot, metafiction and metaprose described by Robert Scholes¹¹.

These post-modernist readings depend on certain specific methodological operations, which the critics however avoid naming. I will try to list them now.

Firstly, these critics have not discovered any new characteristics in the works of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz. They only reinterpret them. In other words, none of the earlier descriptions of the poetics of Witkacy, Gombrowicz or Schulz, or of the problems that they deal with, has been questioned or rejected, nor has any new analysis been put forward. The traits which were described earlier are simply given a new name – post-modernism – and are included in a new language of interpretation. I call this operation the "post-modernisation" of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz.

⁸ Z. Łapiński, "Zachwycająco złe opowiadania" in W. Gombrowicz, *Bakakaj*, Kraków 1997.

⁹ Krzysztof Stala, *On the margins of reality*, Stockholm 1993; Jerzy Jarzębski, "Schulz: spojrzenie w przyszłość" in *Czytanie Schulza*, ed. J. Jarzębski, Kraków 1995; Michał Markowski, loc. cit.; R. Brown, *Myths and Relatives. Seven Essays on Bruno Schulz*, Munich 1991.

¹⁰ A. Schoenle, "Cinnamon Shops by Bruno Schulz; the Apology of Tandeta", *The Polish Review*, 1991, no. 2.

¹¹ R. Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Urbana 1980; Jarzębski, op. cit.

Secondly, the critics use a term to describe the work of these writers which is – and this should be stated clearly – a theoretical abstraction. The definition of post-modernism depends after all on several typological features which are treated for no clear reason as universal, and typical of all the literatures of the world. On the basis of the everyday use of the term “post-modernism” one could therefore conclude that all post-modernists are identical, that is, that they were brought up on the same literature, that they had the same aesthetic tastes and the same intellectual problems, or in other words that their literary traditions were identical. It is significant that in “post-modernising” Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, none of the critics has stated whether he is thinking of French post-modernism, or Italian, American or German post-modernism, as though this was of no significance. And after all there are fundamental differences between writers like Italo Calvino, David Lodge, John Barth, John Fowles, Vladimir Nabokov or Milan Kundera. And moreover, is it not true that these Polish writers had entirely differing (!) literary, aesthetic and intellectual tastes?

Thirdly, the critics who have “post-modernised” Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz do not explain what concept of post-modernism they are invoking in their discussion. And after all, there are several different concepts of post-modernism.

Fourthly, the most debatable question of post-modernism in art concerns, as we know, the defining characteristics of a post-modernist text. Some scholars believe that a post-modernist text can be precisely distinguished from a modernist text. But others – like Ihab Hassan or Brian McHale¹² – make the reservation that even the work of one author can present a problem to the critic. For example, one can regard Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a modernist work, while *Finnegans Wake* is already post-modernist. Daniel Bell, in asking the question of whether we really need the concept of post-modernism, claims that although some people discern a complete break between epochs or movements, it is in fact possible to speak of little more than a re-grouping of certain elements. He adds that almost everything that the post-modernists talk about can basically be found in earlier epochs, and above all in modernism. Patricia Waugh simply includes post-modernism in modernist aesthetics, the origins of which she finds in Kant.¹³ We therefore have to agree with Stephen Connor that “the contours of

¹² Ihab Hassan, *Towards a Concept of Postmodernism*, 1993; Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 1992.

¹³ Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism. Reading Modernism*, London, 1992.

the post-modernist paradigm are much less clear in literary scholarship than in any other field”¹⁴.

Moreover, fifthly, none of those writing about the Polish “forerunners of post-modernism” has asked the question of how it was possible that writers who until recently were considered “modernists” and members of the “avant-garde” (Witkacy) suddenly became “post-modernists”? Or how it is possible that Gombrowicz, who called himself a “structuralist” (!) and “existentialist” (!) suddenly became a “deconstructionist”?

What happened to make these three writers suddenly leap outside the bounds of their own era?

Sixthly, and most importantly: we do not know what advantages can be drawn from calling these writers “post-modernists”, or even forerunners of post-modernism.

The Polish theoreticians of post-modernism, Nycz and Łapiński, believe that thanks to use of the term post-modernism one can reinterpret Polish twentieth century literature. J. Jarzębski in turn writes that “a great writer makes a new appearance in every new era”, and so there is nothing strange in bending new concepts and categories to fit his work. This is all true. But there is still no answer to the question of why we are speaking about post-modernism and not about modernism. Was more really known about Polish 20th century modernism than about post-modernism? In other words, as Stanisław Eile, whom we have already quoted, so aptly puts it: “critics sometimes forget to explain what exactly is so innovatory in post-modernist literature in comparison with the techniques already introduced earlier by the modernists”?

The reason for all these methodological manoeuvres seems to me obvious. In Polish literary criticism, the term post-modernism has no connection at all with modernism, since in Polish literary history there is no concept of modernism that would explain the specific nature of the work of these writers. To put it briefly, interest in post-modernism in Poland was not preceded by studies of modernism, which traditionally has been restricted to the years of *Młoda Polska*, or in other words, has been treated either as the first phase which covered the period roughly from 1885 to 1903, or as a synonym for the whole literary epoch which came to an end with the first world war.

¹⁴ Quoted from S. Eile, *Modernist Trends in 20th century Polish Fiction*, 1996, p. 9. Łapiński has therefore correctly noted in his polemics with me that there is a fundamental difference between the meaning of “postmodernism” in architectural theory and its connotations in the language of literary historians and theorists, where it is much less clear.

As a result, there is a gap in Polish literary history between, roughly speaking, the year 1918 (the end of *Młoda Polska*) and the 1980s and 1990s, which are currently seen as the period of post-modernist literature. Łapiński even speaks of a "post-modernist aura", the beginnings of which he detects in 1956. I have my own serious doubts about this, but that is another matter.

The work of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz therefore serves today to root Polish post-modernism in the past – but is this not a mistake? Does the work of these writers not simply reflect the three most important variants of the tradition of mature (for it is not even possible to call it late) modernism, which has never been analysed in Poland?

4

The primary defining feature of post-modernism in literature is "shattering the illusion of realism", or as the post-modernists say, the "crisis of representation". In the Western European tradition, modernism is de facto the end phase of the great realist literature with which the names of Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dickens, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Dostoevsky or even Proust are associated. But the point is that in Poland it was the first generation of modernists who shattered the illusion of reality, and not the post-modernists.

Eile writes that because the 19th century novel was not uniform and had many formal differentiations depending on national traditions, the writers of the 20th century often entered into polemics with various local traditions, and sometimes sought new inspiration in what was considered in another country to be already outmoded. It was for this reason that the loose and digressive structure of the Victorian novel, which was derided in England, proved exceptionally interesting for some French scholars (for example, M. Raimond, the author of *La crise du roman*, 1966), while Percy Lubbock (author of *The Craft of Fiction*, 1957) preferred Flaubert, Tolstoy and Balzac to Thackeray or George Eliot.¹⁵

This choice of differing national traditions was of fundamental significance for 20th century ideas about the new novel, and for relations between modernism and post-modernism. In Eile's view, for Anglo-American scholars, modernism, and also realism, in the novel was synonymous with the death of the author. For French scholars "authentic realism" endorsed subjectivity and the individual perception of the narrator, while rejecting realism as scenic representation. The book by Raimond that I have referred to, or Georges Blin's study of Stendhal (*Stendhal et les problèmes du roman*, 1954), may serve as examples. This also stemmed from French fascination with the Russian novel, and especially with

¹⁵ Eile, op. cit., pp. 2-3.

the discovery in France of the work of Dostoevsky at the turn of the century.

However, in Polish as in Russian literature, the destruction of the realist "illusion of representation" took place not in opposition to modernism, but within its framework. The base camp for this battle against realism fought by modernist prose in Poland and in Russia was, as we know, provided by symbolism and the cult of the grotesque. The specific characteristic of Polish and Russian modernism was its internal contrasts, and even artistic and intellectual contradictions. Already in its earliest phase, which I consider to be the era of *Młoda Polska*, modernism was a system of non-congruent poetics, attitudes and traditions. After all, it was the product of both naturalism and expressionism, of pathos and parody, of literalness and symbolism, of realism and the grotesque. The artistic dynamics of Polish and Russian modernism meant that diametrically different movements, styles and aesthetics existed alongside one another, and the specific nature of this *modernité* lay in their co-existence.

What price must the Polish literary historian pay today when he starts to employ post-modernist terminology to describe the literature epitomised by the names of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, or Irzykowski? In my view, the price is a totally unnecessary "post-modernising of modernism"¹⁶.

What does this post-modernising consist in? The brightest threads are stripped out from the multi-coloured fabric of modernism, and classified as elements alien to modernism: that is, they are called post-modernist and not modernist. In this way, a stripped-down modernism proves to be a movement deprived of inner energy, while post-modernism is in turn treated as a fully vigorous extension of it. Łapiński believes that "post-modernism will prove to be not so much a contradiction of modernism, as an attempt to resurrect its vitality, which in Europe was already exhausted", and he adds that, "the best examples of what lies at the heart of post-modernism, that is, its art and philosophy, grew out of the inner logic of attempts to overcome the canon of modernism"¹⁷. But

¹⁶ It is significant that in the 1930s, Stefan Napierski and Kazimierz Wyka, the authors of the most violent attacks on the prose of Schulz, but, we should note, very careful analysts of *Cinnamon Shops* and *The Sandglass Sanatorium*, applied the opposite criteria for historical and literary evaluation. While today's critics like to "post-modernise" Schulz, Napierski and Wyka "modernised" him. Whereas today, Schulz is seen as a forerunner of postmodernism, Napierski and Wyka saw him only as an epigone of modernism; where today a new (postmodern) note of literature is heard in his stories, Wyka and Napierski heard in them only outdated variations on the theme of modernism. For them, Schulz was only "postmodern" in the sense of "neomodern", and so continued modernism, without being aware of the short lead on which the modernist Art Nouveau tradition kept him.

¹⁷ *Teksty Drugie*, 1993, no. 1, p. 76.

the point lies in the fact that this modernist canon means something different in France, something different in Britain and the United States, and something different yet again in Poland and Russia, or in other words, in Eastern Europe. One can of course see Irzykowski, Miciński, Witkacy, Gombrowicz or Schulz as fore-runners of post-modernism, but this does not change the fact that their work belongs to the canon of Polish modernism!

Eastern European modernism, irrespective of its links with the West, was formed under the influence of its own, separate traditions. At its heart, as has been described so often, was to be found a *grotesquerie* containing multiple meta-artistic functions: linguistic, parodic, and inter-textual. Examples of this can be found in Russia in the work of Bely and Khlebnikov, and in Poland in that of Lemański, Miciński, Jaworski, or Irzykowski. After 1918, this grotesque was to be a characteristic ingredient of the most original literary developments in both countries. It is true that in Poland the parodic-grotesque trend was not as typical as in Russia, where there was a strong tradition of the German Romantic grotesque ("Hoffmannesque"). Above all, there was the grotesque of Gogol or Saltykov-Shchedrin, but nonetheless, in both countries *grotesquerie* prepared the ground for the sudden development of the anti-realist trend after 1918.

Irzykowski's novel, *Paluba*, the radical auto-referentiality of which completely destroyed the "realistic" illusion in the novel, played an important role in Poland. Today, however, in "post-modernising" the auto-referentiality of *Paluba*, people completely forget that the narrative motivation of Irzykowski's discourse was not to play games with conventions and detach words from things, but the most literal possible of attempts to arrive at truth (of feelings, thoughts, statements, patterns of behaviour, and so on).

Paluba is, after all, the most programmed and probably the most literal apology for reality that exists in Polish literature, and all its meta-critical, meta-fictional, meta-narrational and meta-literary elements are a criticism of the language of literature for over-simplifying, mystifying or falsifying reality. To this extent, Witkacy was Irzykowski's most faithful pupil, although neither of them saw it that way.

Irzykowski and Witkacy were linked by the modernist conviction of the necessity for precise presentation (yes!) of reality, and not by the post-modernist idea that it is fundamentally impossible to "represent" the world. They were linked by their criticism of the existing means available for that presentation (above all at the level of language and narrative structures), which were already completely exhausted, banal or semantically empty, but also by their faith in the possibility of apt, adequate and precise expression.

When, in turn, we speak of Schulz's "post-modernism" we would also, in order to be consistent, have to talk about the "post-modernism" of the poetry of

Bolesław Leśmian! For the concept of the "word" and the language of literature are identical in Leśmian and Schulz. And the source of this identity is not post-modernism, but symbolism.

And so I repeat the question: post-modernism? Or is it rather unexplored modernism?

The common characteristic of the Polish modernist writers was a rejection of the stylistic "transparency" of realist prose (Irzykowski, Berent, Lemański, Jaworski, Miciński, or the young Witkacy). In their work, narration became a theatre in which the director used literary conventions like mannequins. Nothing is actually happening here: there is no traditional plot, action, problems presented, conflict. It is not story telling that provides the sense of a prose work, but meta-fiction.

The first phase of Polish modernism brought two types of *grotesquerie*: the non-parodic and the parodic. The former gave rise to Wojtkiewicz's paintings, Leśmian's poetry and Schulz's short stories. The latter, in different variants, produced Witkacy and Gombrowicz. Irrespective of both types of the grotesque (the non-parodic and the parodic), Polish and Russian literature gave rise in this period to new phenomena, the further development of which was to be of fundamental significance for the contemporary understanding of modernism. In Polish literature they were inspired by the internal evolution of the Art Nouveau movement, while in Russian literature the source was futurist cubism, which anticipated similar developments in Poland by about ten years.

The common defining characteristic of these phenomena was the questioning of the rules of literary expression which had operated to date. This consisted firstly in the removal of illusion from narration and plot, and in questioning the world being represented and the status of the characters – something which is called today the "crisis of representation", even though what is being talked about is exactly the same.

Secondly, the questioning of the earlier rules of realist fiction consisted in a parody of literary motifs, themes and symbols which revealed the inter-textual character of literature.

Thirdly, already in the first phase of Polish modernism, a linguistic grotesque appeared, in which the "theme" of a given work became the language itself. In other words, in Poland and in Russia, one of the sources of the modernist formula of the parodic grotesque was the discovery that a linguistic statement does not convey neutral meanings which are outside it, but that the language employed and the conventions of expression themselves create these meanings. In poetry before 1918, it was the Russians Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov who drew the farthest-reaching conclusions from this fact, postulating the formation of a new language, even for the purposes of one poem. The subject of literary expression therefore became literature itself. Story-telling and representation be-

gan to be driven out by playing with conventions, by intellectualism and by meta-fiction.¹⁸

5

I wish to recall here the destruction of realist conventions within Polish and Russian modernism because it was modernism that was the historical source of the work of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, or Irzykowski, and not the much later ideas of the post-modernists!

According to Christopher Nash, all the terminological concepts used to describe post-modernism can be reduced to rejection of the defining characteristics of the broadly understood realist tradition, and above all, its basic category of mimesis. These rejected characteristics, in the view of the post-modernists, created in realist (mimetic) writing an illusion of the represented world, which in a sense existed independently of the words.¹⁹ The point is that this destruction of the illusion of realism was carried out in Polish literature by the modernists: Lemański, Jaworski, Miciński, Irzykowski, Berent, Leśmian, and later Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz, and a few years earlier by Aleksander Wat in his famous prose poem, *Mopsożelazny piecyk – The pugiron stiff stove* (1919).²⁰

From today's perspective, the writings of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, or Irzykowski and Wat, may appear to be running out ahead of the field – towards post-modernism. It is however difficult to forget that Witkacy could not see any future for art, and that the central idea of Schulz and Wat (futurist!) was the idea of return, and that Gombrowicz considered Rabelais and Montaigne as his masters. This backward glance – full of distance and free playing with tradition – was one of the characteristics of Polish modernism.

18 I have written in more detail about these questions in an article, "Od potworów do znaków pustych. Z dziejów groteski: Młoda Polska i Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne" in *Pre-teksty i teksty. Z zagadnień związków międzytekstowych w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, Warszawa 1991; this also contains a bibliography of the subject.

19 C. Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction. A guide*, op. cit. I have written about this in more detail in my book, *Poetycki model prozy w dwudziestolecu międzywojennym. Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz i inni*, Kraków 1996, second edition.

20 The critics today write about this, too, as a postmodern work. But this approach from a contemporary perspective should not be allowed to obliterate its strictly modernist context. I have written about the modernist (Art Nouveau and the grotesque) pedigree of this poem in the article, "Od potworów do znaków pustych", op. cit.

Eile has noted that concepts of modernism differ more in the interpretations that they offer than in their choice of examples. There is no one formula for modernism which is common for different countries. There do exist however many national versions of modernism, which were decisive for the further development of literature. And for that reason, what in terms of, for example, American literature, may seem like a radical break from modernism was in Polish terms simply one of the stages in the modernist view of literature.

The similarity of the work of Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz to post-modern literature undoubtedly presents tempting prospects, and, as Łapiński has cleverly shown, it is possible to build up a great many arguments. And yet I think that to draw an analogy between post-modernism and the literature of Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz, or Irzykowski and Wat, completely misses the point. It is based on a misunderstanding and seems to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Let us try to enumerate what Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz owe to modernism. The fragmentation of narrative, which is so typical of Witkacy and Gombrowicz, was introduced by Irzykowski. The mixing of fact and fiction, of high and low culture, of styles and languages, the concept of the "sack novel", the mixing of autobiographical narration and mystification, linguistic grotesque and the carnivalisation of genres and forms of expression – all of these characteristics can be found in the aesthetics of Polish modernism: in the work of Miciński, Faleński, Lemański, Witkacy or Jaworski. The patron of Schulz's concept of the multi-dimensionality of the world, the fluid obliteration of boundaries, is the modernist non-parodic grotesque and also symbolism, where Leśmian's poetry and essays constitute an example.

We need to add literary and philosophic traditions to this list of ingredients of modernism. Gombrowicz was fascinated by Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, Dostoevsky and Dante. Schulz was fascinated by the work of Rilke, Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka. Witkacy was a philosophical realist and monadist. He saw his inner world as a totally objective reality (!). And then Gombrowicz's later work is an attempt to draw conclusions from the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: but in a different way from each of them. Gombrowicz took from Schopenhauer the philosophy of suffering, pain, pessimism and subjectivism. From Nietzsche he adopted the dionysian symbolism of death and rebirth, and criticism of the institutionalisation of Christianity, and he parodied the dreams of the modernist artist about building the world anew.²¹ Gombrowicz was interested by the Cartesian dilemma of how to move

21 E. Sabato, Introduction to *Ferdynand* (1964), in *Tango Gombrowicz*, Kraków 1984, ed. R. Kalicki; M. Legierski, *Modernizm Witolda Gombrowicza*, Stockholm, 1984.

on from the products of our intellect to objective judgements about reality. Witkacy, on the other hand, rejected in philosophy the tradition of subjectivism and relativism, although he practised relationism in his work. Gombrowicz was fascinated by epistemology, and Witkacy by ontology. In their personal philosophy, both Gombrowicz and Witkacy would have been closest to existentialism.

Schulz's connections with modernism, and also with expressionism and surrealism, are even more obvious. Schulz's distaste for everyday language was equal to that of Leśmian, and was typical of all the symbolists, as was the cult of metaphor, onirism, the motifs of – mainly German – Romantic fantasy. Ontological instability, the motif of metamorphosis, messianic symbolism, Greek and Christian symbolism, the concept of the writer as liar, or in other words, the teller and reviver of ancient myths, and finally the search for the primordial golden age, make Schulz the writer who is closest to both Polish and German modernism.²²

What I have said about these three writers is therefore, as we can see, not only fundamentally distanced from post-modernism, but also in several aspects fundamentally contradictory to it. To put it briefly, the differences between the works of Irzykowski, Witkacy, Leśmian, Gombrowicz and Schulz and post-modernist literature seem to me decidedly greater than any kind of similarities – if indeed it is worth treating the latter seriously at all.

I will repeat again what I have written elsewhere. The fundamental difference between post-modernism and the work of these writers lies in their treatment of the subjectivity of man. For the post-modernists, "subject" and "subjectivity" are empty words, for the subject does not exist – this is one of the slogans of post-modernism, being at the same time a defining characteristic of its negative anthropology. Meanwhile, for Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, the subject, the individual, individuality, are the most important categories of their thinking and their art.

For the post-modernists, art is merely artificiality. Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz obviously make use of artificiality, but in their work serious and sometimes dramatic problems are concealed behind masks of convention, games and misrepresentation. The post-modernists reject utopias in literature, but Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz create them, even if they are of a different kind in each case.

Above all, however, they do not treat artistic techniques as mere literary technology, for behind the masks of convention, games and misrepresentation in their work, something further is concealed: Mystery. Each of these writers –

²² See *Bruno Schulz – in memoriam*, ed. M. Kitowska; *Czytanie Schulza*, ed. J. Jarzębski.

Witkacy and Gombrowicz, Leśmian and Schulz – like other modernists, represents a programmed search for this.²³

If we were to take seriously – and I see no reason not to do so – the claim that the social genesis of post-modernism lies in the crisis of industrial civilisation, in other words that post-modernism is the aesthetic and philosophic expression of post-industrial society, then the key Polish examples of post-modernist literature (Witkacy-Gombrowicz-Schulz) are exceptionally badly chosen. For it is obvious that the social formation against which Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz were in revolt was late Eastern European feudalism and not industrialism, while Schulz in turn – if we wanted to describe him in these categories – is barely a witness of the first, modest phase of industrialism (the symbol of which in *The Cinnamon Shops* is ulica Krokodyli), from which the author escapes, and into the past at that. Leśmian and Schulz escape from reality into the hiding places of symbolism and myth, treated as forgotten reservoirs of true Sacred Sense. And these are supposed to be post-modernists?

Post-modernism, leaving aside the question of its different variants, presupposes that literature does not make any sense, that it is simply a game of conventions, that it is a collection of words isolated from things, and that words do not have anything to say about the non-verbal world. But the work of Irzykowski and Witkacy, Wat, Gombrowicz and Schulz is full of meanings, ideas and many of the most important problems which shaped the European formation of modernism.²⁴ Is it therefore worth post-modernising them?

7

I would like to save potential polemicists, who may read this text as an expression of disbelief in the existence of Polish post-modernist writing, a little time. Works of this kind have long been in existence, and already have their place on the contemporary literary map. One of these places is occupied by Leopold Buczkowski, another by Teodor Parnicki; one place by Piotr Wojciechowski, another by Henryk Bereza with his concept of "artistic revolution"; one place by the journal "brulion", another by the journal "Fa-Art"; one place by pop culture film, another by contemporary post-modern literature (of which two novels

²³ The difference between the metaphysical and technological concept of the novel within the framework of apparently the same postmodernism has been written about recently by K. Bartoszyński. See "Dwa modele powieści – Eco i Kundera", *Teksty Drugie*, 1996, no. 2.

²⁴ I have compared the work of these writers in an article, "Witkacy-Gombrowicz-Schulz", *Dialog* 1995, no. 10. A shortened version appeared in *Periphery. Journal of Polish Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1/2, 1996, translated by Valerie Laken.

published in 1997 can serve as examples: Anna Burzyńska's *Fabulant – The Fabulist*, and Tomasz Mirkowicz's *Lekcja Geografii – The Geography Lesson*). And others have found post-modernism in life itself: for example, Manuela Gretkowska in her vision of the world as total kitsch.

But to tell the truth, while enjoying the post-modernist ideas of the interpreters of Polish literary history, it is a waste of time to try to prove that Irzykowski, Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz were already, long ago, post-modernists. It will probably not do any harm to remind the post-modernists, who do not greatly value Cartesian clarity of discourse, that Gombrowicz himself read Descartes carefully, and said of his writings, that they were "written for the Clearer and not for the More Murky".

To sum up, it is a waste of time to post-modernise the modernists. But maybe I am wrong. Can anything be a waste of time for the literary historian?

George Hyde

Afterword

Lublin, 1976

An abrasive wind from the East; a sense of intellectual oppression growing stronger and stronger; a spreading and pervasive mindlessness; the daily battle with manipulative females; hardnosed Marxist ideologues laying down the law or stabbing one another in the back – these were just some of the compelling reasons for wanting to make a break from Norwich in that memorable long hot summer of 1976. But this was no ordinary holiday departure. With six trunks packed, a two-year-old in a pushchair and dragging a four-year-old by the hand, we took off not for the South of France, but for the People's Republic of Poland, on a one year contract that turned into three. When people there asked us why we'd come, I used to answer that I'd been trying to get to Russia and had got lost. This was greeted with wary approval and cautious mirth as a plausible allegory: and of course, I did, and do, speak Russian, and I had written quite a lot about Russian literature, and published translations of some Russian texts, which made it both easier and harder to learn Polish. Paradoxically, perhaps, I had to agree to the British Council striking my Mayakovsky translation from my CV "in case it caused offence", since it was written by a Russian Communist...

A cold wind was indeed blowing from the East, and the spectre of Communism still haunted Europe. It wasn't our first time in the "people's democracies", but this time it was more or less for real: a little flat in a concrete block, and by comparison with Hungary, where we'd recently had a rollicking good holiday, there didn't seem to be much to eat. Only to drink: if you like vodka. I do. That was something. I soon discovered that vodka was used to slake most cravings. It is the metaphysical booze, bar none. Then someone told us the classic metaphys-