

Polish Literature in 1864-1914 – an End and a Beginning

The years 1864-1914 mark an important period in the history of both Poland and Europe. A Polish insurrection was launched in January 1863 against the authorities in the Russian partition. But despite the heroism and sacrifice shown, and despite the impressive efforts made by the underground National Government bodies, this January Uprising faltered one year later, having failed to secure wider public support. Yet again, Polish independence-minded aspirations were undermined by the still unsettled issue of peasant rights (a failure to adopt a clear stance on land ownership reform) and by internal disputes among various political groups.

This abortive and bloodily repressed uprising did much to alter the Polish mindset. The Romantic model of political action was rejected once and for all – no one would any longer vest the nation's hopes in winning independence through armed action, by staging plots or revolts. Another model of action was necessitated, one aimed at making systematic efforts to promote civilizational development and modernization, which would in turn – the leading figures of the new epoch believed – help to foster independence-minded aspirations. Nonetheless, such a spontaneous upsurge was hampered by the repressive policy pursued by the distrustful authorities in the Russian partition, who imposed restrictions on free economic activity, and above all reigned in Poles' freedom of speech, press, and beliefs, as well as the use of the Polish language. Faced with such circumstances Poles developed an

elaborate system of methods for sidestepping restrictive governmental bans. Such phenomena were at times quite valuable and even constitutive for Polish culture (e.g. the development of figurative speech, including Aesopian language), at times very theatrical (e.g. specific vogues or social boycotts). The situation in the Prussian partition was not any better: here the authorities imposed increasingly repressive measures on Poles, not just limiting their civil liberties, but also resorting to such extreme measures as deportations (dubbed “rugi”). In multinational Galicia, in turn, the political autonomy that had been won during the Springtime of Nations was by no means absolute, and functioned only within Austria-Hungary’s wobbly and inefficient system of parliamentary monarchy.

Yet the Polish problems were not just caused by the authorities in the three partitions; they also stemmed from various social issues that escalated with unprecedented force in the latter half of the 19th century: the socialist and workers’ movements, the issues of Jews’ and women’s rights, and the awakening of national awareness among the Belarusians, Lithuanians and Ukrainians. The holistic vision of society as an efficiently functioning organism was crumbling, and newly emerging conflicts demanded urgent resolution. The political order in Europe and in the world was tottering as well. The agreement sealed at the Congress of Vienna by Europe’s most powerful countries ceased to correspond to the new distribution of political forces, particularly to Germany’s aspirations. Russia’s defeat in its war against Japan gave rise to hopes that the old balance could be revamped, and the atmosphere of WWI gradually crystallized. Poles harbored their own hopes, yet faced equally serious dilemmas: where did their future lie, whom should they rally behind, and would Poland succeed in regaining its freedom?

1. “Polish Literature in 1864-1914”? Is there any rationale behind selecting such a period for study? Can we actually treat the literature of these years as constituting some kind of whole?

This is a complex issue. On the one hand, a very appealing perspective has been developed in both traditional studies (Antoni Potocki, Wilhelm Feldman, Kazimierz Czachowski) and more contemporary

(Polish) academic research, which takes the literary works of the latter half of the 19th century and of the “Young Poland” period together, treating them as proximate – yet not identical – literary periods that sprung from common intellectual sources. Arguments in favor of such a depiction can be found, for example, in the analysis of Young Poland literature propounded by contemporary historian Kazimierz Wyka and in the periodization proposed by Jerzy Ziomek. Yet on the other hand, there is an equally strong conviction that a chasm separates the two epochs (the latter half of the 19th century vs. “Modernism” or “Young Poland”), one even wider than the divide between Romanticism and the new literary concepts that emerged in the mid-19th century. Many researchers, such as Ryszard Nycz, perceive a kind of twofold caesura falling at the end of the century – i.e. a turning point between literary movements, coinciding with a higher-order, inter-era watershed – separating not only the literature of the latter half of the 19th century (also termed “Positivism” or “Realism”) from that of the subsequent Modernism period, but also the entire 19th-century era from the broadly-defined modernist era, covering almost the entire span of the 20th century.

It seems to me that neither of these approaches should be discounted. Only taken together do they reflect the inner dynamism of the artistic and consciousness-arousing processes that typified the five decades under analysis here. I propose that we should view the literature of both these periods as manifesting features characteristic of both the 19th and the 20th centuries, and as being oriented in two directions: towards the past, which this literature tries to preserve, question, syncretize or surpass, as well as towards modernity, variously expressed through unprecedented reflection on culture, language, the duties incurred by a writer, or the complications of the human psyche.

What unites all the literature of the period in question, therefore, is this duality: often expressed in an oblique and pseudonymous fashion, becoming lucid only when considered in retrospect and with the wisdom of hindsight. It is seemingly of secondary importance that Young Poland literature gravitates conspicuously towards modernity, while writers one generation older tend to identify more strongly

with the 19th-century span. Still, the heart of the matter remains unchanged: the literature of both epochs commits itself to two cultural models, albeit to a different extent in either case. The 19th-century model stems from the specific Polish condition and revolves mainly around the question of how to survive in a state of subjugation, how to cope with the restrictions imposed by history and nature. The 20th-century model moves beyond this condition and poses questions about the limits of art's autonomy, about the rules for social communication, about the relations between the cognitive horizon and artistic language, and about the very essence of the expressibility/inexpressibility of extralinguistic phenomena. Even though independence remained only a postulate all the way until 1918, and even though the Young Poland generation did manifest patriotic sensibilities as well, the issue of political sovereignty became subordinate to artistic endeavors.

To conclude these introductory notes, it will be useful to note that elements of both models did in many cases appear within the *oeuvre* of the selfsame author, but whether such dualism is discerned hinges upon the competence of the reader or researcher.

2. The January Uprising (1863-1864) was the last in a series of national insurgencies incited by Poles in the 19th century, and was just as bloody and abortive as the previous ones (the November Uprising in 1830-1831, the Springtime of Nations in 1848). It did, however, effect one important change: even though the insurrectionists were widely revered and even though the partitioning powers still instilled hatred, it became clear that plans of gaining independence through armed action could no longer be taken into consideration. It was not sensible to encourage people to stage yet another uprising; indeed, very few Poles would have responded to such an appeal. The Romantic model of behavior was defunct, once and for all. Other paths of social action would be necessitated.

This change resulted not only from a feeling of defeat. It was also related to an overall endeavor of setting Polish culture on a new course: instead of developing a wide conspiratorial network, building overt public institutions was prioritized. Consequently, the center of attention shifted from the émigré community to the home country, and

there was increasing debate about the need to lay solid foundations for erecting an edifice of high culture. These foundations would consist of social prosperity, material resources, buoyant industry, a stable economy, and universal education. The framework of this program had already been put together prior to the January Uprising, yet it was not until after 1864 that this way of thinking began to attract broader interest.

Nevertheless, the realization of this modernization program proceeded with difficulty, if not to say in hopeless fashion. Firstly, it was not abetted by the official authorities – while they may have differed in each of the three partitions, they were on the whole reluctant to allow Poles to gain too much autonomy. The censorship restrictions in the Prussian and particularly the Russian partition even made it impossible to fully air one’s true opinions and attitudes. That is why “Aesopian” language was employed, meaning a variety of figurative speech that required its addressees to know how to read between the lines and grasp the actual meaning of the symbols, euphemisms, and allegories used. The autonomy enjoyed by the lands under the Austrian partition, however, had a rather soporific effect on the Poles there. The greater freedom of speech was not seized upon to present truly new ideas for the future.

Secondly, the modernization program did not meet with the approval of a considerable segment of the public: although they did not proffer any counterproposal, such individuals feared that openness to the West, changes in the set of national values, the ostentatious abandonment of Romantic ideals, interest in the material aspects of life (previously present, yet not put on public display), and finally radical endeavors to enfranchise the peasant strata of society would shatter the image of Polish society and the social order they held dear.

The clash between these two stances, these two informal political camps, dominated Polish public life mainly during the 1870s. However, it did not die down in later periods, continuing to divide writers, journalists, and the social circles that sympathized with them. This division cannot be automatically equated with the conflict between liberals and conservatives present in other European countries. Under Polish circumstances, the clash between these two stances in-

volved an additional, national component. Polish supporters of modernization, who advocated that independence-minded aspirations, being unattainable, should be reigned in, risked being accused of treachery, recreance, apostasy and Russophilia. Those who supported tradition, in turn, were accused of intellectual shallowness, short-sightedness, superficial religiousness and “facile patriotism,” which boiled down to a cult of the past kept within the family circle, or to extolling the Polish landscapes in newspapers.

The modernization camp, particularly strong in the Russian partition, where its organ *Przegląd Tygodniowy* was published, was especially active in the 1870s. The proponents of modernization, who were frequently and mockingly called “Positivists,” proposed a model of action that would transform Poles into enlightened and autonomous citizens of Europe and of the world (obviously, within the bounds of possibility). This was to be achieved through universal education, which would also encompass the poorest strata, through social action aimed at helping others, through efficient and well-organized economic activity, through greater rights for women and Jews, and through the idea of mutual aid. Independence-related issues receded *perforce* into the background, yet never faded from sight. I believe that the Positivists were wrongly accused of being servile and loyalist. They perceived independence as a long-term goal to be achieved by means of a drawn-out process of self-advancement, and as the fruit of civilizational development, not armed action.

The traditionalists were particularly afraid of change. They believed that a nation affected by such a disaster as losing its independence should have no objective more urgent than evoking history. Religious beliefs were yet another issue of paramount importance. Catholicism ranked among the major determinants of national identity, especially in the Russian partition, where it contrasted against the Orthodoxy of the authorities. This pronounced social conservatism was motivated not only by angst over what the future would bring, but also by a specific view that social order should be based on patriarchal relations between lords and peasants. The traditionalists were reluctant to accept newfangled philosophical ideas, viewing materialism and Darwinism as confirming the verdicts of history. In

both these philosophies, the laws of development seemed inescapable. It was rightly pointed out, however, that blind worship at the altar of monism and materialism deprived both life and art of one of their greatest values, namely the ability to arouse metaphysical and esthetic feelings.

Historians of literature mainly direct their attention to the pro-modernization camp. There is indeed a certain rationale behind this, in that the stance of the modernization supporters formed a characteristic *signum temporis*. It was they who formulated a truly new program, offering a serious alternative to political Romanticism. Still, I myself would advocate restoring the inner proportions of the post-uprising period, i.e. taking both its wings, positivist and conservative, into consideration. The least complicated way of doing so involves abandoning political divisions in favor of deliberating the individual authors.

There are two strong arguments in support of this. Firstly, the positivist program did not win many supporters or imitators: the agenda was excessively difficult, and entailed coming into conflict with the national tradition. Until its very end, it remained an ideology of the social elite. Popularity and social trust continued to be garnered by the so-called middle-of-the-road writers, such as Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (1812-1887), a sagacious journalist and the author of much sought-after historical novels, who extolled both the Polish and the Lithuanian past, or Teofil Lenartowicz (1822-1893), one of the creators of the folklore idiom in Polish literature. Secondly, the literary figures of the period defy categorical classification into either of the two conflicting groups, especially when the entire epoch is taken into consideration, not just its outset. Rather, it is possible to discuss characteristic conversions and shifts motivated by different factors: a desire to win public acclaim, inner transformations, or a process of maturity. All these shifts were occasioned not only by the passage of time; they were also a function of the increasing seriousness with which the role of the writer and of literature were being viewed.

3. Ideological formulas cannot even be found to successfully encapsulate the works of Aleksander Świętochowski (1849-1938), the most politicized writer of the epoch, the only liberal amongst the advocates of modernization. In his superb journalistic commentaries,

published first in *Przegląd Tygodniowy* and *Nowiny*, and after 1881 in *Prawda*, a publication he himself founded, Świętochowski above all defended his own independence and right to propound the most controversial views. No external considerations, such as the perceived need to remain silent on issues that might undermine public solidarity, posed any serious obstacle to him. He wrote critically about Polish tradition, the Polish uprisings, and the Polish historical calamity. In his political calculations, he stuck to a realist tack: not perceiving any chance for armed resistance, he encouraged the kind of social activity that would turn Poland into a post-feudal, modern European state, founded upon law, prosperity, and knowledge.

Of course, he realized that given the increasingly more restrictive policy being pursued by Russia and Prussia, this program could only be partially implemented. Yet these inconveniences did not stop him from speaking out in the official press, and when the principle of acting overtly temporarily failed, he also engaged in underground action. He wrote over long decades, including in the time of independent Poland, which he, the Nestor of Positivism, lived to see. Aside from a short episode in the 1920s, when he became associated with the right-wing press, he stood by his liberal principles, and also demonstrated an exceptional sensitivity to social issues.

It seems that Świętochowski can be aptly labeled an “aristocratic liberal,” meaning someone who, in defending the principles of liberty, recognizes the primacy of intellect over ignorance, of the elite over the mob, and of talent over mediocrity. In this he is reminiscent of John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville and Jacob Burckhardt.

Świętochowski was not, however, as modern a writer as he was a public commentator. In his dramas – *Antea* (1876), the trilogy *Immortal Souls* (*Nieśmiertelne dusze* – 1876-1889), as well as in his novellas – the cycle *Fairytales* (*Bajki*), he depicted the pressure of social norms that constrain the liberty of the individual, but his literary works grew old quickly. His publicist writings, however, remained a superb example of autonomous political and social thought which can be compared in many regards to later statements by Brzozowski and Irzykowski. Further support for this comparison can be found in the influence of Nietzschean thought, important in all three cases.

Świętochowski's last novels are surprising, especially *Twinko* (1936), in which he underscored the internal, spiritual dimension, shaped by experiences of sacrifice and suffering, clearly drawing upon Romantic thinking. And another thing about Świętochowski is surprising: an anti-Semitic bent which appears at the turn of the century and lasts through the 1920s. What can this change be put down to: to the writer losing his way, to the solitude of a doctrinaire?

Bolesław Prus (1847-1912), whose true name was Aleksander Głowacki, poses a kind of riddle for scholars. Our knowledge about him is meager: he was an orphan, was wounded in the January Uprising, and spent a short time in prison. He was a publicist in Warsaw newspapers, a would-be graduate of the university, and an enthusiast of the hard sciences. He debuted by writing none-too-brilliant humoresques, yet unexpectedly matured into the most eminent writer of his age. He was modest, spoke of his private life infrequently, and was concealed behind the label of an ordinary journalist.

There are many indications that this enigmatic nature constituted an element of a broader philosophy of life, not necessarily identical with the later *Lebensphilosophie* of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Stirner or Georg Simmel, although not unlike them. In the ideologically-charged and troublesome ambiance of the post-uprising epoch, Prus foremost valued the phenomenon of life. Of course, this included Polish life, a specific sort of life linked to these times, but it above all encompassed life in general, viewed as a disorderly, superficially chaotic phenomenon of enduring, existing, and passing on. This was of fundamental value for the writer, even when it involved the most ordinary beings, the commonplace people who move through the world unnoticed – as in the novella *Shadows* (*Cienie* – 1885). In his latter essays he wished to identify the principles of leading a fortuitous life – as in *Some Very General Ideals of Life* (*Najogólniejsze ideaty życiowe* – 1901). It irked him that people could sometimes ruin their own lives or those of others by following rigid rules, stereotypes, and prejudices – e.g. *Souls in Bondage* (*Dusze w niewoli* – 1877).

Prus' philosophy of life chiefly bore upon his mature stories: *The Outpost* (*Placówka* – 1886), a study of post-enfranchisement villagers, dramatic despite its coarseness; and above all *The Doll* (*Lalka* –

1890), the masterpiece of the epoch, the best Polish novel, not just of the 19th century. *The Doll* is a multifaceted work, with a complex topical and narrative structure. It portrays a panoramic picture of society in the late 1870s. It offers insight into the social processes then underway (the consolidation of the Polish middle class, the emergence of the socialist movement, economic relations with Russia). It also provides modern psychological analysis, which does not always rationalize the mechanisms that determine the behavior of individuals, leaving some room for the subconscious.

In order to portray the chaos of life, Prus created a riskily opened form of novel: the narrator's assertiveness is weakened, and his knowledge is not complete. Readers have to reconstruct the course of events themselves, to compare information derived from different sources. The essence of these techniques was not initially understood, and the novel met with a critical reception. Prus was thought to have written in a haste and failed to keep control of the huge material of the novel. Perhaps he was not fully understood on purpose: Prus was as far removed as he could be from the Romantic stereotypes. He presented the main character's involvement in the uprising as a negative experience, and his later business dealings and Russian friendships as something permissible. For *The Doll's* Wokulski, life was the same thing as it was for Prus: a realm of personal choices, surprising situations, and not fully rationalized steps.

By appreciating the various forms of existence, Prus was an ally to the time of maturation. His novella *Sins of Childhood* (*Grzechy dzieciństwa* – 1883) demonstrates a child's helplessness with respect to the phenomenon of maturity, the mystery of gender, and power. Throughout his works, Prus paid special attention to two phenomena: ordinariness and *distinctness*. He himself liked to wear the mask of an average Warsaw journalist, who took an interest in everything: sewage systems, orphanages, hackney coaches, etc. (reflected in his excellent *Chronicles*, written over the course of many decades). Only once, provoked by an article of Świętochowski's, did he admit that he realized his own greatness.

Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841-1910), on the contrary, was a writer with many complexes. In her excellent correspondence (*Collected Let-*

ters / *Listy zebrane*), she repeatedly betrayed a sense of dissatisfaction that her colleague writers (particularly Sienkiewicz) were earning more and were more highly esteemed among publishers and readers. In truth, however, she had no reason to complain: her writing career was a great victory of the spirit over matter. Orzeszkowa managed to emerge unharmed from all of her life's oppressions (involvement in the January Uprising, a divorce, and a period spent in Grodno, a small town in the eastern borderlands of the former Republic of Poland), to consciously choose the writing profession and achieve success.

Her first works are not very well-written and may only be of interest as testimony to the author's sympathy for the trends of modernization, although certain ambitious exceptions can be found among them: *The Memoirs of Waclawa* (*Pamiętnik Waclawy* – 1871), *Mr Graba* (*Pan Graba* – 1872), *The Brochwicz Family* (*Rodzina Brochwiczów* – 1876). *Marta*, her 1873 novel promoting the emancipation of women, was almost immediately translated into many languages and became the bible of German feminist movements. However, Orzeszkowa would only achieve true artistry in her novel *Meir Ezofowicz* (1878, published in English as *The Forsaken*), a statement on the condition of the Jews. Here she couched a concrete social problem within a mythical structure, the age-old conflict of good and evil, love and hatred, lightness and darkness. This method of rendering reality in a discretely exalted fashion would thenceforth be inextricably tied to her creative work. The writer availed herself of it above all in *On the Banks of the Niemen* (*Nad Niemnem* – 1888), a great national epic, presenting the condition of Polish society 25 years after the failure of the last uprising. The author relates the disintegration of social bonds and the crisis of a multiple-generation family to a state of forgetting, effacing the events of the heroic past in the minds of the characters. Her restoration of national symbols, chiefly from the period of the January Uprising, which Orzeszkowa had participated in as a courier for the dictator Romuald Traugutt, aims not only to pay respect to history, but also to foster social consolidation.

On the Banks of the Niemen marks the outset of Orzeszkowa's period of maturity. The writer did not break with the program of

the Warsaw Positivists; she continued to value knowledge, labor, technology and democracy; yet she grasped the limits of the modernization ideology, especially under Polish circumstances. And so, she expanded her point of view to include the historical perspective, and augmented her realistic narrative with forceful symbols that enabled her to say exactly what she had to say, even under censorship bans.

Aside from people and history, *On the Banks of the Niemen* also has another protagonist that would accompany the author in all her work thenceforth: the natural world. Orzeszkowa imbues her descriptions of nature with all the poetry words can offer. Nevertheless, nature does not merely serve an ornamental function; it is not exclusively an accompaniment or a witness to human activity. Her sensitivity to the beauty of nature is associated with a departure from the anthropocentric dimension of the world. Mankind is not lord of creation, but rather only an element in the great unfathomable whole that that God created. In Orzeszkowa's work, rapture at nature is a form of religious expression.

The stature ascribed to nature also leads us to other lines of inquiry. The young Orzeszkowa always recalled her father with deference, although she could not have known him; her relations with her mother, on the other hand, were difficult – the two women were in some sense disappointed by one another. The complex of being a “bad” daughter and a luckless lover taught Orzeszkowa to treat femininity with reserve. In the epoch's discourse on emancipation, her voice resounded firmly and austerely – *A Few Words About Women* (*Kilka słów o kobietach*, 1870). I do not believe that it will be excessive to assert that the revalorization of her attitude towards the natural world reconciled Orzeszkowa with her own gender. Her later essays invoke the image of Mother Earth. This not just a rhetorical mannerism, the use of a lexicalized expression. In her dissertation *The Countenance of the Mother* (*Oblicze matki* – 1899), the author clearly remarks that close contact with nature, e.g. contact not underpinned by any pragmatic need, can only be achieved by a special sort of being: a child or a woman. By taking rapture in nature, Orzeszkowa also achieves self-identification.

In the 1880s, the writer experimented with forms of naturalist narration in *The Underdogs* (*Niziny* – 1885), *The Dziurdzia Family* (*Dziurdziowie* – 1886). In the novel *The Boor* (*Cham* – 1888), she managed an impressive feat of fusion: a study on the psychology of a promiscuous woman, perhaps modeled after the Goncourt brothers' *Germinie Lacerteux*, combined with an evangelical story, as rigid in its ethical message as the biographies of the saints. It would seem that this confrontation of realism with the need to idealize had to end in fiasco. But it did not: *The Boor* is, alongside *On the Banks of the Niemen*, Orzeszkowa's best novel. The success of the experiment was determined by the topic, rarely taken up by a female writer. *The Boor* holds its own as a story about love, understood as a bond that links that which is different.

Intentionally or no, Orzeszkowa was a writer of the eastern borderlands; she was excellently aware of this patch of land's multiethnic and multicultural milieu. She was interested in language and culture, both Belarusian and Lithuanian, as well as Ukrainian and Jewish. She learned the Ukrainian (Ruthenian) tongue as an adult, but was familiar with Belarusian from her childhood, and the dialogs of her rural novels are replete in calques from the latter language. The writer also drew upon the local folklore, which, like everything else in these environs, was multiethnic, a Polish and Belarusian amalgam. Thus Orzeszkowa helped create the specific phenomenon of borderland culture: like the inter-uprising poet Władysław Syrokomla, like Jan Nieśluchowski, she belongs not only to Polish, but also to Belarusian culture. She is identified by Belarusians as "their" writer, like Adam Mickiewicz or the aforementioned Kraszewski are seen as writers belonging in some sense to Lithuanian culture as well.

The determining factor in this classification is not language: only Nieśluchowski was essentially bilingual (producing Belarusian poetry under the pseudonym Janka Łuczyna). The other writers mentioned here knew the languages of their co-compatriots to a limited extent, and cannot be said to have written in Belarusian or Lithuanian. The fact that they were within the orbit of a literature other than Polish stems from the inspirational role that they played for their "younger" brothers, from their sanctification of these lands of coexistence.

This phenomenon does have a mirror image, although perhaps it is not entirely symmetrical: many writers professing a specific national identity (Lithuanian or Belarusian) encountered Polish literature closely, and wrote in Polish, or began by writing in Polish. An example can be found in Karolina Proniewska (Praniauskaitė), who began by writing poems in Polish but in time became a writer in the Lithuanian language; another in the sisters Maria and Zofia Iwanowska, who entered Lithuanian literature under the pseudonym Lazdynu Peleda (Maria wrote in Polish; Zofia translated her works into Lithuanian). The most eminent Lithuanian writer of the period, Žemaitė, also began writing in Polish. This special overlapping of the Polish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian perspectives (with various additional components) constitutes the phenomenon of borderland culture.

Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916) was always more problematic for critics than for readers. The public, which gave good receptions to his journalistic accounts – Portrait of Ameryka (*Listy z podróży do Ameryki* – 1876-1878), Letters From Africa (*Listy z Afryki* – 1891-1892) – began to harbor true worship for the writer following the publication of successive parts of his *Trilogy*, a boldly written cycle set in 17th-century Polish history: *With Fire and Sword* (*Ogniem i mieczem* – 1884), *The Deluge* (*Potop* – 1886), and *Pan Michael* (*Pan Wołodyjowski* – 1888). Critics, on the other hand, raised various objections about the historical and ideological substance of his works. Years later, Sienkiewicz's literary output, his both historical and modern novels – among which we should chiefly make mention of *Quo vadis?* (1896), *The Teutonic Knights* (*Krzyżacy* – 1900) in the former category, and *Without Dogma* (*Bez dogmatu* – 1891) and *The Polaniecki Family* (*Rodzina Polanieckich* – 1895, rendered in English as *Children of the Soil*) in the latter – were the subject of sharp dispute among representatives of the young generation of writers and journalistic commentators, such as Brzozowski and Nałkowski. The writer stood accused of intellectual shallowness, corner-cutting, superficiality, and catering to coarse tastes. This opinion was later supported by the outstanding Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who dubbed Sienkiewicz a first-rate second-rate writer, the Homer of the B category. And so, on the one hand we have a bronze statue of Sienkiewicz

the Nobel laureate (1905), statesman, diplomat, and patriot, in command of the Polish national imagination, and on the other hand an image of a crafter of clever swashbuckling novels, at best of the caliber of Alexandre Dumas. This discrepancy is fascinating and inspires reflection. We can say, beyond all doubt, that Sienkiewicz is a master of plot, that he possessed a vivid imagination cinematographers find so alluring (most of his novels have been filmed: the *Trilogy* directed by Jerzy Hoffman; *Quo vadis?* in its latest adaptation by Jerzy Kawalerowicz in 2001; *The Połaniecki Family*), an exceptional linguistic ear grounded in erudition and able to faultlessly find an idiom of archaisms, which nevertheless differed from the authentic sound of 17th-century Polish. The formula applied to Sienkiewicz of “writing to make a splash,” although still not the full story, now does seem to be the aptest description of this writer’s magical work.

4. Sensibilities of a different sort were addressed by naturalistic inspiration, something that writers of both epochs clearly had in common. This Polish naturalism can be interpreted broadly or narrowly. In the narrow interpretation, it was an interesting albeit marginal phenomenon, chiefly limited to the social milieu novel, concentrated on the life of a closed community, although not necessarily a human community (the novels of Adolf Dygasiński, 1839-1902, Artur Gruszecki, 1852-1929). In the wider view, this was a movement for the autonomy of art, drawing upon the concepts of Flaubert and others, as well as an endeavor to implement Zola’s formula of literature as a “human document.”

Aside from Gruszecki, a campaign to liberate art from obligations external to it was waged by two prominent critics, publicists, and writers: Antoni Sygietyński (1850-1923) and Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851-1915). In their studies and sketches they demanded that the artist demonstrate courage in depicting nature in an unpretentious way, free of stereotypes, and that the critic manifest competence and knowledge about the rules of the creative process. They postulated that the greatness of a work of art should be determined not by its theme, even the most dignified, but rather by the professionalism of its artistic rendering. They rejected tendentious art: the message of a work of art should flow from its construction; all ideological or

moral commentaries were unacceptable. Thus Sygietyński held up as a model the writings of Flaubert, free of direct interventions by the author; Witkiewicz in turn did not hesitate to challenge the authority of painter Jan Matejko and his universally-acclaimed historical canvasses of scenes from Poland's great historical past, to argue that what should matter in art is not just theme, but also artistic perfection: perspective, the means of depicting space, color, and contour.

The naturalistic campaign was of huge import in Poland; this was the first time clear artistic aims and the postulate of autonomous art were formulated, paving the way for modernist appeals and all later 20th century trends viewing works of art as auto-telic. New tasks were also ascribed to critics for the first time; they were to be guardians of an artistic rather than ideological canon. We should add that both these commentators demonstrated great social and patriotic sensitivity. In their judgment, taking a professional approach to artistic endeavors did not clash with a national attitude. On the contrary, it aided it, enriching it with social experiences of a new caliber.

Zola's inspiration in Polish literature must be understood in two-fold fashion: it may involve the conscious application of this writer's concepts, or an involuntary, intuitive attempt at shifting the boundaries of art towards drastic phenomena of life. This attempt was not always associated with a familiarity with Zola's works; it stemmed from the atmosphere, was in the air. This path of entry to the group of naturalists can be seen as applying to many writers and their works, sometimes very prominent. Closest to Zola's concept of literature as a "human document" are the novellas of Maria Konopnicka (1842-1910), those in which the writer gave the floor to her protagonists (e.g. "Miss Florentyna" from the volume *Novellas* – 1897), while not concealing her own cultural distinctness, her surprise at their biographies. The approach of delving into the guts of life, as experienced first-hand, was also postulated by Gabriela Zapolska (1857-1921), the author of the superb novels *Kaśka Kariatyda* (1886), *A Foretaste of Hell* (*Przedpiekle* – 1889), and *Love in the Season* (*Sezonowa miłość* – 1904), as well as dramas that continue to be staged: *Tootsie* (*Żabusia* – 1897); *Mrs. Dulski's Morality* (*Moralność pani Dulskiej* – 1906); and *The Four of Them* (*Ich czworo* – 1907).

Zapolska was exceptionally sensitive to deciphering the social and biological subjugation of women. Interestingly, this was not coupled with any emancipation-minded reflection. The writer was averse to both patriarchic institutions and feminism. This stance is not clear-cut and is in need of research. It seems that the model of womanhood in force at the time did not enable Zaposka to reconcile her artistic ambitions with her personal ones. She desired freedom, yet at the same time longed for sweet submissiveness to her lover. She desired men, yet at the same time, repeatedly shoved away and deceived, she scorned them. She found herself in a trap that she repeatedly depicted. Writing did not bring Zapolska satisfying liberation.

Writing out of first-hand experience, in drastic fashion, without sparing the reader, forms the basis for the works of Władysław Stanisław Reymont (1867-1925), including *The Bitch* (*Suka* – 1893), *Death* (*Śmierć* – 1894), which are shocking tales of rural life; *The Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana* – 1899, screen adaptation by Andrzej Wajda, 1975, reedited 2000), a brilliant epic portraying the birth of an industrial city in the late 1800s; and *The Peasants* (*Chłopi* – 1904-1909, screen adaptation by Jan Rybkowski, 1973), a novel that earned Reymont a Nobel Prize in 1924. Reymont imbued the narrative of *The Peasants* with a strong lyrical element; his language is no longer an implementation of general Polish norms, but clearly bears an artistic stamp imparted by stylization techniques of various sorts. This form altered the status of the world he portrayed; it belongs to two orders: the real and the mythical, the social and the cosmic.

Lyrical narration frequently taking the perspective of the protagonist was practiced by Stefan Żeromski (1864-1925), an exceptional example in Polish literature of a writer with a wide range of emotions: amatory, patriotic, and social. He was not always able to keep them under control, and those works in which emotional tensions were subjected to disciplining techniques have best passed the test of time. This chiefly means *Sisyphean Labors* (*Szyzyfowe prace* – 1897), drawing upon the author's own youth and the repression he experienced at a Russian school; *Homeless People* (*Ludzie bezdomni* – 1899), portraying the loneliness of an intellectual with a social mission; the historical narrative *Ashes* (*Popioły* – 1904), and the magnificent, caustic

Early Spring (*Przedwiośnie* – 1924, screen adaptation by Filip Bajon, 2000), in which the writer accused the powerful elite in free Poland of betraying social ideals.

The Zolaist ideal of literature as a “human document” would develop along its own path in the interwar and postwar period: the psychologically and lyrically charged depiction of the world produced by the Young Poland writers faded. The model of narration prevalent in the work of the authenticists, the writers from the “Przedmieście” group set up in the 1930s, the masters of Polish reportage (from Zbigniew Uniłowski to Ryszard Kapuściński), involved and still involves a more or less reserved model of narration, concentrated on the subject, free of the sin of entering the protagonist’s minds and dissecting their emotions. One thing has remained unchanged: the desire to depict marginalized, subjugated strata, those deprived of a voice.

5. The poetry of the second half of the 19th century did not generate any new concept of language (if we do not count Norwid – see the Romanticism chapter); it did not produce writers of Mickiewicz or Słowacki’s caliber. Nevertheless, lyric poetry cannot be omitted from the final tally of the 1864-1914 epoch. Firstly because, contrary to the established hierarchy of genres, the leading poets won huge public respect and popularity, and secondly because their works, especially the later ones, constitute a plane of convergence between Positivism and Young Poland.

These remarks hold for both Konopnicka and for Adam Asnyk (1838-1897). After her unfortunate, freethinking debut, Konopnicka made herself guardian of the cultural canon, in which an important role was played by the models of Romantic poetry, biblical stylization, allusions to eastern exoticisms and Provençal poetry, and also, most originally, attempts at establishing a model for folk poetry. The collection *Voices of Silence* (*Głosy ciszy* – 1906), plus projects known to have been planned by the poet but which remained unfulfilled, attest to her interest in Słowacki, chiefly in his mystical period. Konopnicka shared this interest with many writers of Young Poland, above all with Antoni Lange (1861-1929) as the author of *Meditations* (*Rozmyślania* – 1906). The direction of borrowings (if we can

speak of them) is clear here: Konopnicka was first. I stress these facts in order to demonstrate how close the bonds were between the two epochs of literature on the verge of the 1900s.

The work of Asnyk also fits within this field of similarities. Living in the shadow of the failed January Uprising and in the shadow of prophetic Romantic poetry, the poet learned to speak with a lowered voice. Despair, close to the experiences of the decadents, took the form of melancholy in his poetry, and it is these nostalgic poems, speaking clearly about being maladjusted to the world, of living in the wrong age and missing one's true ideals (including ideals of love), that constitute the vivid portion of Asnyk's work.

Somewhat different was the fate met by Felicjan Faleński (1825-1910), the son of an infamous father disgraced by his servility towards the partitioning authorities, a loner and eccentric. Perhaps it was Faleński's isolation, his falling outside the aesthetic ruts of both epochs, Romanticism and Positivism, that gave his writing such an autonomous character. A certain philosophical intuition is important here, which forced the poet to question the essence of being and to draw attention to the multiformity of existence, the fluidity of the boundaries between life and death, existence and nothingness. In the plane of ideas, Faleński is a philosophical-existential poet, availing himself of various intuitions, including Schopenhauerism, to construct a dynamic order of existence. His poetic technique is equally interesting; this broadly educated writer, well-read in world literature, drew upon the classical model, tempered and refined by Parnassian experiences.

6. It seems that the literature of the Positivist epoch, encompassing the years 1864-1890, can be most easily characterized by pointing out the various self-restrictions that were consciously or unconsciously adopted. Firstly, the subjective perspective was avoided; as literary historian Antoni Potocki says, a "cult of collectiveness" then prevailed. The value of a hero was measured in terms of his attitudes on public issues. Secondly, the "ethic of obligation" towered over the "ethic of love." Private, amatory matters took a back seat to issues of a social nature. Thirdly, the Positivists rarely ascribed art an autonomous value. Much more highly prized were common sense and adherence to the

general rules of development. Fourthly, forms of depiction that would violate the realist mimesis were avoided. The dynamics of the post-uprising epoch were such, however, that these restrictions ebbed. Prus in *The Doll* and Orzeszkowa in *The Boor* ascribed fundamental significance to individual existence. The fantastic visions in Prus' stories broke the monopoly of realism – including *Jakub's Dream* (*Sen Jakuba* – 1875), *Reformed* (*Nawrócony* – 1881), *The Mold of the World* (*Pleśń świata* – 1884), *The Dream* (*Sen* – 1890); *Vision* (*Widzenie* – 1900), *War and Work* (*Wojna i praca* – 1903), *Revenge* (*Zemsta* – 1908), and *Apparition* (*Widziadła* 1911). Naturalism posed questions about the autonomy of art.

The old generation reaffirmed its stance, while the young one turned towards the repertoire of common readings and philosophical inspirations. New masters appeared, such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Ola Hansson, and Oscar Wilde, although the writings of Ernest Haeckel, Herbert Spencer, Arthur Schopenhauer, Charles Robert Darwin, and Ernest Renan continued to be widely read. Both generations sought inspiration in Immanuel Kant, and both, to varying degrees, were fascinated by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Stirner, and Marie-Jean Guyau. Both generations worked to make up the distance separating Poles from Western Europe. Translation activity flourished, oriented more towards works of science and prose in the 1870s-80s, but devoted chiefly to translations of poetry in later years (including Alphonse Lamartine, José-Maria de Heredia, Jean Arthur Rimbaud, Theodore de Banville, Stephane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine).

There is an approximation here, but no similarity – wrote historian Stanisław Tarnowski when comparing the later work of Konopnicka to the verses of Young Poland poets Lucjan Rydel (1870-1918) and Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer (1865-1940). The same thing could in essence be said about other comparisons: of Prus to Żeromski or Orzeszkowa to Żeromski; of Świętochowski to Brzozowski or Świętochowski to Irzykowski. Without violating the protocol of divergences between these pairs of writers, we can speak of their proximate attitudes, and thus of a mild, gradual shift from realistic (Positivist) literature to that of Young Poland. An important element in this evolution is the need that writers of both generations shared to refer to

Romanticism, understood not only just an artistic epoch, but chiefly as the domain that shaped all of Polish 19th-century experience.

This mild transition, however, does not exhaust the relations between Positivism and Young Poland. The epoch of modernism also spawned artistic proposals that exceeded beyond 19th-century thinking, and which would only gain currency in the 20th century. A few words should be devoted to such proposals here.

In the field of colloquial language, such proposals comprise more than just the theory of symbolism, understood as replacing description with indirect expression, appealing to emotions that only act as an equivalent of utterly inexpressible content. Symbols viewed as such are an inseparable element of literature, and as Lange – the most persistent advocate of reconciling the stances of the Positivist and modernist generations – wrote, the natural environment also employs symbols, meaning signs to be read and interpreted. The modernist breakthrough, therefore, consisted not in just exploiting symbols and symbolism interpreted in this or that way, but rather in intensifying linguistic reflection, in heightening language awareness, in showing the relations between the nature of languages and the boundaries of cognition, and finally in questioning the metaphysical content of literary symbolism. The most acute and at the same time the most momentous experience of Young Poland involved demonstrating that symbols are empty, that they do not refer to any transcendence, that the moral and artistic order is an attack of free will, not a realization of the existing order of the world.

A good example of the vitality of modernist proposals is to be found in the work of Leopold Staff (1878-1957). The poet puts up a heroic and Nietzschean defense against the feeling of metaphysical emptiness, not just in his young collections *Dreams of Power* (*Sny o potędze*– 1901), *Day of the Soul* (*Dzień duszy* – 1903). A disturbing definition of reality also appears in subsequent volumes, frequently read as examples of classical harmony: “What will remain after everything is gone” (the poem “*Reality*”/”*Rzeczywistość*”, from the volume *Tall Trees / Wysokie drzewa*, 1932) and a faith, articulated in colloquial language, in the existence of the world’s “other side” takes on an ironic tenor (the poem “*Bow*,” “*Ukłon*” in the same volume).

In his postwar collections of verse *Dull Weather* (*Martwa pogoda* – 1946), *Osiers* (*Wiklina* – 1954), and *Nine Muses* (*Dziewięć muz* – 1958), Staff grows even more distinctly closer to colloquial Polish, articulating the experiences of internal disorder and disharmony. He admitted that yearning for a higher world is not a key that opens any sort of door. In his skepticism and self-restraint he was akin to modern poets such as Herbert and Różewicz.

The proposal of Bolesław Leśmian (1877-1937) headed in a different direction. Born in Warsaw but raised in the Ukraine, he bequeathed Polish literature his memories of the exceptional beauty of the Dnieper basin and splendid knowledge of Russian poetry and culture. In his youth he wrote in Russian, and his work in Polish retained certain traces of Russian verse – melodiousness, the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes.

As an artistic theoretician and practitioner, Leśmian contrasted poetry to prose and ordinary speech. Only when freed of the obligation to communicate specific content or ideas, of the accepted means of expression, can words be truly poetic. The poetic word is subordinated to rhyme, to a pre-established melody, which rules the internal structure of verse and determines its buoyancy and beauty; it is a magical word, set dancing and singing, capable of receiving “communion with the cosmos.” In Leśmian’s theoretical concepts, one can perceive the influence of Nietzsche, Bergson and Solovyov, as well as precursory articulations of elements of avant-garde thought, which would in truth push aside the issues of musicality, but would stress the autonomy of poetic language and the semantics of inter-lexical space.

Further collections of poetry also offered original artistic proposals, drawing in a creative and unconventional fashion upon turn-of-the-century symbolism, yet at the same time transcending this perspective. As early as in the volume *Orchard at the Crossroads* (*Sad rozstajny* – 1912), metaphysical desires grounded the poet in the palpable and the concrete, evidencing an attachment to the earthly domain (the verses “Metaphysics,” “Song on the Bird and on Shade”). The 1920 volume *Meadow* contains a superb cycle of ballads and erotic poems (“In the Raspberry Thicket”/”W malinowym

chruśniaku”). Here we see the crystallization of Leśmian’s philosophy, closely bound up with innovation in both language and versification: a desire for an integral union with nature, understood not as *natura naturata*, but as *natura naturans*; an accusatory tone struck in his dialog with God, frequently through adopting the perspective of a hero or heroine who has met with injustice; the desacralization of the metaphysical realm; and a sensuality rarely encountered in Polish poetry. In his latter volumes, *A Drink of Shadows* (*Napój cienisty* – 1936) and *Forest Happenings* (*Dziejba leśna* – 1938), Leśmian builds his own philosophy of being. Existence and nonexistence form a continuum, filled with various incarnations of the will to live, to move, and to love. Death is also a form of being; and so we can speak of an afterlife and a “manifested otherworld.” This characteristic expansion of the philosophical and existential perspective would not be so intriguing if it were not accompanied by countless neologisms and lexical inventions. The poet calls a world of his own into being, and does so by means of original, concrete language, full of neologisms, negated constructions, verbs recast as nouns. The absolute in Leśmian’s poetry is motion, desire, lust, love. The absolute is from this world.

Ukrainian roots also had an impact upon the work of another modernist writer: Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (1894-1980). Debuting in 1919, Iwaszkiewicz was part of the interwar poetic group “Skamander,” and indeed, his sensibilities, tastes, and literary models were informed by modernist culture and its cult of beauty, sublimation of erotic instincts, and metaphysical longings. The exceptionally artistic poems in his premiere collection, *Octostichs* (*Oktostychy* – 1919), conceal a metaphysical void. Symbols are defunct, they cannot be resuscitated by any absolute, by any other-worldly content. An attempt at balancing the void against the greatness of art, following Oscar Wilde’s model, will not cut off the metaphysical sapping. In his next volumes, *Dionysiads* (*Dionizje* – 1921) and *Cassidas Ending With Seven Verses* (*Kasydy zakończone siedmioma wierszami* – 1925), Iwaszkiewicz shifts his field of interest to a realm closer to daily life. This day-to-day existence, however, is very special, perceived in Rimbaudian fashion, as a nexus of sensual images and pure visionariness.

In subsequent poetic tomes, *Return to Europe* (*Powrót do Europy* – 1931) and *Summer 1932* (*Lato 1932* – 1933), which include a fascination with German culture in its Romantic and modern embodiments, Iwaszkiewicz achieves his peak form. He would ascend to it yet again in his last volume of poetry, *Weather Map* (*Mapa pogody* – 1977). His verses become a masterful expression of the inexpressible – the tedious and fascinating duality of being, which contains everything: life, love, fear, and death. Iwaszkiewicz's world is unfathomable. Individual experience exceeds beyond the reality of sensations, but the opening to metaphysics that so ensues manifests itself in a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. It does not bring any fulfillment, any knowledge or any comfort. Iwaszkiewicz's poems are related to the birth of apophatic metaphysics, where the concept of sacredness and religiousness rests not upon faith, but upon vague anxiety, upon a wearisome yearning for the unknown.

Modernism developed modern artistic projects not only within the field of poetry, but also in the realm of prose. Here we can speak of two important proposals. The first of them involves the polyphonic novel, understood as an epic form maximally liberated from the narrator's function to regulate and assess, a form open to the words of the characters, to their mutual dialog. This narrative technique was employed by Waclaw Berent (1873-1940) in *Rotten Wood* (*Próchno* – 1903), a novel that presents the mental history and types of modernist artists, and *Winter Corn* (*Oziminy* – 1911), depicting the state of mind among Polish society in the late partition period. Berent was also the author of historical novels: *Living Stones* (*Zywych kamieni* – 1918), set in the late Middle Ages and addressing the role of the artist in a time of transition, and the three volumes of innovative sketches *The Current* (*Nurt* – 1934), *Diogenes in a Nobleman's Coat* (*Diogenes w kontuszu* – 1937), and *Twilight of the Commanders* (*Zmierzch wodzów* – 1939). It was these sketches, called biographical stories at the author's suggestion, that institute a completely new formula of historical narrative, close in essence to the polyphonic novel. Berent does not retell history and does not philosophize about it, rather, almost before readers' very eyes, he attempts to reconstruct it out of documentary fragments, out of statements made by charac-

ters, further adding to this polyphony with the distinctly different voice of the narrator. The writer is interested in a particular period of Polish history, running from the final years prior to the loss of independence up to the November Uprising (1790-1830); he appreciates not only the ingenuity and heroism of outstanding individuals that comprised the Polish homeland's first generation of "rescuers," but also the civil empowerment of all of society that occurred by dint of their effort. Berent's inspiration, which involved demonstrating that historical narrative is not a ready-made whole, but rather a subjective kind of creation, drawing upon documentary forms, autobiographical accounts, family memory, and of course plot, would become an important element of contemporary historical works by Teodor Parnicki, Hanna Malewska, Marian Brandys, and Władysław Terlecki.

The second important modernistic project in the field of prose is comprised of novels that centered their cognitive and philosophical inquiry around the category of gender. This project was furthered by the prose and poetic works of Maria Komornicka (1876-1949), for whom the question of her own sexual identity gave rise to artistic and existential searches, and determined her very ability or inability to speak.

The category of gender should not be exclusively placed within the scope of theme, as we are not just concerned with works that gave eroticism a thematic prominence. For both Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868-1927) and Zofia Nałkowska (1884-1954), sexuality was a fundamental category that concealed not only the riddle of life, but also the secret of creativity. Przybyszewski, a graduate of a German gymnasium and a student of a Berlin university, was one of the most intriguing figures of not only the Polish but also the European *Modernism*. His unconventional, frenzied life, and above all his bilingual German and Polish output, were conducive to contacts with eminent modernist writers and artists: August Strindberg, Richard Dehmel, Edvard Munch. Numerous admirers and opponents clustered around Przybyszewski in Poland as well, in both Kraków and Warsaw.

The language of Przybyszewski's novels and essays bear the stamp of the epoch, with its pathos and penchant for expressiveness, emotional effusiveness, and verbosity, but the deeper structure of these

works fits in well with modern psychoanalytical theories (Z. Freud, J. Lacan) and the themes explored by feminist criticism (B. Johnson). In his demonic characters, selectively endowed with single-gender sexuality, as in the German *Totenmesse* (1893, Polish version *Requiem aeternam* – 1904), *By the Sea* (*Nad morzem* – 1899), and *Androgyne* (1900), Przybyszewski perceives the tragedy of people doomed to endure not only eternally unquenched erotic desire, but also an unsatisfied metaphysical need to embrace the whole.

The young Nałkowska attempted to treat womanhood as the sexual category that binds a being to the spirit of the world, through its closeness to nature. She quickly perceived, however, what Przybyszewski also discerned: that gender is a flaw, a rift, an unhealed wound, that it is hard to shed this stamp, and even harder if one is not a man. Her early novels *Women* (*Kobiety* – 1906), *Contemporaries* (*Rówieśnice* – 1909), *Narcissa* (*Narcyza* – 1910), and also her later *The Romance of Teresa Hennert* (*Romans Teresy Hennert* – 1924), *A Bad Love* (*Niedobra miłość* – 1928), and the drama *House of Women* (*Dom kobiet* – 1930), portray female characters at a loss when facing various existential situations (a lack of love, betrayal, old age), as well as their heroic efforts to bring chaos under control and to build a solid bond with the world, transcending their own misfortune – as in *Boundary Line* (*Granica* – 1935).

Nałkowska put her art to the test with respect to her own life. This is evidenced by her work of a lifetime – her magnificent, inexhaustible *Journals*, kept from 1899 until her death in 1954. This was the place where the chaos of biography and history changed into the order of style. We should not expect, however, that the problem of form was an exclusively aesthetic problem for Nałkowska. To the contrary, form was also an ethical duty, and entailed the adoption of a certain discipline and rigor. This becomes most clear when we read her journal entries from the WWII period. Nałkowska spent the period of German occupation in Warsaw, earning a living by selling cigarettes in a small shop she ran together with her sister, a sculptor. Unaccustomed to physical effort, hungry and frequently ill, facing at least the same danger as other Poles, she remained firm in her resolve of systematic work, solidarity with others, and internal elegance. The

modernist experience of uncertainty and danger – although admittedly encountered under other, seemingly incomparable conditions, i.e. those of the gender struggle – prepared her for taking on the wartime ordeal.

Among many very prominent modernist critics, at least two names deserve more thorough discussion. Stanisław Brzozowski (1878-1911), a philosopher, writer, and publicist, possessed both vast knowledge (philosophy, the history of European literature, sociology) and expansive ambitions to create a cultural project that would engender a transformation of Polish reality. Regardless of all his changes and his critical assessment of the authorities he successively embraced, then abandoned (Nietzsche, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georges Sorel, Karl Marx), Brzozowski consistently strove to move beyond the 19th-century model of culture, encompassing the heroism of Romantic protagonists, the prudence of the Positivists, and the individualism of the *Moderna*. In numerous sketches and treatises, he passed a harsh, although not always unambiguously negative, judgment upon the past – *Ideas* (*Idee* – 1910), *Voices in the Night* (*Głosy wśród nocy* – 1911), *The Legend of Young Poland* (*Legenda Młodej Polski* – 1911). Nevertheless, he repeatedly returned to the philosophy of Polish Romanticism, frequently understood very broadly, as a synthesis of 19th-century cultural and social activity. Seeing Poland's civilizational backwardness, he understood modernity as a mission aimed at transforming every human action (not just artistic or intellectual activity) into a deed that enriches the social fabric.

Brzozowski was not an excessively consistent writer; he began his journalistic writings with ideas not far removed from late Positivism, yet ended, prematurely, with a glorification of Catholicism and the concept of nation. He was not only a critic and philosopher, he was an cultural ideologue, practicing the model of publicist commentary that the 20th century would further develop.

Karol Irzykowski (1873-1944), a writer, critic, and publicist, raised at a Galician school on Hebbel and German literature, shared Brzozowski's maximalist approach, although Irzykowski's was of a different sort: oriented towards diagnosing culture, rather than setting forth its design. Irzykowski understood the tasks of the critic in

uncompromising fashion: as an obligation to analyze and call into question all of vital cultural activity. This did not just entail being disagreeable and skeptical, although these were indeed traits Irzykowski did not lack. Rather, it involved ruthlessly unmasking myths and stereotypes, getting to the bottom of the true, not falsified motivation that drives the creators and recipients of culture (this problem also appears in Irzykowski's innovative novel, *The Hag (Paluba* – 1903). Nevertheless, without objecting to the current way of thinking, Irzykowski would never have written his most outstanding critical books: in the collection *Deed and Word (Czyn i słowo* – 1913), he opposed the military wave and heroic bent, drawing attention to the autonomy of culture. He continued to defend art's independence in the interwar years, adopting a stance akin to Julien Benda's "clericism." Struggling to ensure the autonomy of culture did not mean abandoning its social functions. Irzykowski identified these functions with the dictate of communicativeness, circumvented by many avant-garde artists, with the author's responsibility for his words and the public reception of a work of art – e.g. *The Battle for Content (Walka o treść* – 1929), *Bull in a China Shop (Słoń wśród porcelany* – 1934). He himself did not shrink from intellectually exploring marginal or new terrain. He wrote about popular literature, and authored one of the world's first monographs on film and cinema, *Tenth Muse (Dziesiąta Muza* – 1924).

Irzykowski's critical campaigns caused a true intellectual ferment in interwar Poland. The author himself did not profit from this – he lived in conditions that were not even modest, and was seriously ill of heart. His critical passion, however, did not go to waste: these debates crystallized the postulate of art as an discipline that is autonomous, yet at the same time sensitive to social context, that is free of ideology, myth-building, and the direct interference of the authorities, and woven into the communicative order and the social fabric.

Finally, we should mention the Great Reform of the theater, which in the Polish context was realized by the work of Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907), a playwright, poet, and painter. Wyspiański cast off the tradition of veristic theater, and inspired by the works of Richard Wagner and Nietzsche he resurrected a visionary Romantic theater,

infusing its elements with new concepts, both in stagecraft (the combined interaction of acting, scenography, lighting, movement) and in historical interpretation, which takes on mythical underpinnings – such as in *November Night* (*Noc listopadowa* – 1904), where Elysian myth cited alongside historical scenes from the November Uprising constitutes a prediction of the homeland’s rebirth. Wyspiański also monumentalized contemporary events; in *Judges* (*Sędziowie* – 1907) he imparted the haughtiness of Greek tragedy to a bleak story read in a newspaper (about the murder of a young boy). In another instance, a social gathering, the wedding of the poet Lucjan Rydel, a friend of Wyspiański’s, to a young village girl from nearby Kraków, Jadwiga Mikołajczykówna, served as the pretext for composing *The Wedding* (*Wesele* – 1901). This play was an entrancing reckoning with current times and history; it depicted both the state of mind of the *fin-de-siècle* Galician intelligentsia, as well as the partially squandered hopes of resurrecting great Poland. In Wyspiański’s analysis, this goal faced the obstacles posed by the still-unforgotten injustices committed by the nobility, the memory of the bloody revenge exacted by the Galician peasants in 1846 (not without provocation by the Austrian authorities), and the political immaturity of all the social strata. The readings of *The Wedding* do not, however, end with the political layer. Wyspiański plunges deeper, into the fabric of mythical beliefs that personify Poland’s past, as well as into the subconscious of his characters, who dodge taking action or historical responsibility. The drama unfolds at a fantastic pace, the mythical layer (recalling, for example, the figure of the prophet Wernyhora) becomes divested of the monumentality so characteristic of Wyspiański. The appearance of fantastic figures can be explained by the intoxicated revelry of the guests. Historiographical diagnoses intermingle with “common sense” interpretations, just like the language of myth and prophesy (as in a national mystery-play) mixes here with the crude language of ordinary life (akin to a nativity-play). Wyspiański’s drama served as a ready-made film script, which Andrzej Wajda filmed in 1963. The director took advantage of the strengths of the original: he showed how important the questions posed by Wyspiański are (does Poland have the strength to be reborn?), as well as how he gives them a modern form.

7. I do not believe that the Polish historical (cultural) experience is of a hermetic (untranslatable) nature. It suffices to be aware that the Polish lands were partitioned amongst three foreign powers, that an insurgent spirit lay dormant in Poles, and that injustices had been committed against the peasants, who were granted land rights by foreign authorities rather than by the native nobility, for one to be able to comprehendingly follow narrative about 19th-century Polish culture. The issue always lies in choosing a language, meaning a way of delivering this narrative, that is capable of intriguing a modern-day reader, especially a foreign one. It seems that this involves striking a sensible balance between Polish culture's ties to the European context, and its distinctness.

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