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The Interwar Years – 1918-1939

Having been parceled up among the three neighboring powers and erased from the map of Europe in 1795, Poland only regained its independence as a result of peace treaties signed at the end of WWI. On 11 November 1918, Marshal Józef Piłsudski, a legendary underground hero and the leader of Polish military detachments during the war, came to power in a newly-reestablished Polish state.

The initial years following the end of WWI brought neither peace nor stabilization to this state, set up within new borders, on territory carved out between Germany and Russia. The war had taken a huge toll of human life, and left devastation in its wake (despite rapid industrial development, in percentage terms production in 1939 had still not regained the level seen before 1914). For two years following the country's liberation, its eastern borders remained under threat; the Polish-Russian War was waged (the Bolshevik army even managed to approach Warsaw in 1920), battles were fought in Ukraine and Lithuania, and the affiliation of non ethnically uniform areas was determined by plebiscites. The democratic Second Republic of Poland had to be rebuilt from the ground up – in an atmosphere of constant conflict, exacerbated by economic difficulties, raging inflation, and nationality issues. Political friction culminated in the assassination of the first Polish president, Gabriel Narutowicz, followed soon thereafter by Marshal Józef Piłsudski's contemptuous withdrawal from power (1923).

In May 1926, backed by the military, Pilsudski again seized power. A few prosperous years ensued, but ended with the European economic crisis of 1929. The territory-hungry policies of the two rising totalitarian powers, Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Communist Russia, posed a growing threat to the sovereignty of Poland, tucked as it was between them.

Józef Pilsudski died in 1935. The new constitution enacted prior to his death veered away from the democratic system and bolstered state authority. Protests were raised by opposition groups, the stances staked out by political parties became alarmingly polarized, and rising public unrest was further fanned by renewed economic trouble and mounting unemployment.

The international situation became increasingly more foreboding. Germany's unpunished seizure of Austria and Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland made it clear that Nazi expansion would turn next to Poland. In the face of impending war, domestic political disputes faded in significance and all available measures were taken to reinforce the army – yet without much consequence. Nazi forces invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. England and France declared war on Germany on 3 September, but this did not halt the Nazi invasion. The Red Army next invaded Poland from the east on 17 September. Poland's defensive efforts lasted one month. On 30 September, President Ignacy Mościcki conferred power onto the Polish government-in-exile then being formed. The Second Republic of Poland thus ceased to exist.

Writers under the new conditions after 1918. Post-WWI literature developed differently in Poland than in the countries of Western Europe. Tragic wartime events found reflection in works written during the war itself and in later retrospective prose, but for Poles, unlike for many nations of Western Europe, the end of the war marked the thrilling start to the task of setting up the framework of a newly-formed state. There was no place or time for the settling of intellectual scores with the recent past, as was so important in France and Germany; it was not wartime grudges but rather the thought of the future that imparted shape to new artistic agendas.

In art and literature, there was almost no place for the brutality of European postwar Expressionism, and the pacifist trend developed poorly in Poland – a meager reflection of it can be found in Józef Wittlin's *Hymns* (*Hymny* – 1920), in his sketches *War, Peace, and the Poet's Soul* (*Wojna, pokój i dusza poety* 1925) and in the short stories of Kazimierz Wierzyński collected as *The Boundaries of the World* (*Granice świata* – 1933). Alongside memories of the horrors of war, a sentimental image of legionary soldiers or Uhlans, the heroic defenders of the Polish homeland, took root in Polish culture.

Polish post-WWI literature developed under the influence of convictions deeply rooted in Polish tradition, of literature's moral and social mission. Writers, especially older ones, set themselves the task of coming to better understand the nation's situation and cultivating a forward-thinking vision of its future. Such tasks could not be relegated to publicist writings. Rather, writers drew upon the novel, which imparted a wider temporal perspective to current problems, and also possessed more profound and longer-term persuasive force.

Important political novels were written. The most outstanding works of this current are *General Barcz* (*General Barcz* – 1923) by Juliusz Kaden Bandrowski (1895-1944) and *Early Spring* (*Przedwiośnie* – 1924) by Stefan Żeromski (1864-1925). Both authors sought an overall reckoning of contemporary times, on behalf of faithfulness to old ideals rooted in the patriotic tradition, which had dwindled in confrontation with the mundane reality of establishing a functioning Polish state. Such political novels combined a censorious tone with deliberation about the potential for state reform, and their final tally diagnosis of the situation was propped up by an image of the elite's moral turpitude.

This was a diagnosis, not a prognosis; instead of a vision of the future, these political novels espoused pronounced hierarchies of values which should constitute the foundation for the state system then being developed. For Kaden this was a system of strong authority, while Żeromski propounded a state whose overarching value would be respect for the rights of the individual.

Following the traditionally-rooted novel schema, whereby action centers on the trials and tribulations of the main character, the plots

of both works were secondary to the contrasted ideological arguments that emerge in the descriptions and dialogues. *General Barcz* is made more intriguing by references to authentic, publicly shocking events and by allusions enabling the characters to be identified as depicting real politicians. Although developed as a *roman à clef*, the characters' guise was imprecise enough to prevent their referents from being unambiguously identified; this protected the book from turning into a political pasquinade, yet its scathing reference to current events was nevertheless clear.

Żeromski appealed to a patriotic ethos, confronted with the menacing danger of Communist ideology to the east. The denunciatory manner of such prose was reinforced by traits of style, in which realistic descriptions were colored with a naturalist bluntness in *Early Spring*, or with the expressionist brutality of the behavior and language of the characters in *General Barcz*.

The apotheosis of strong authority required the consistent imposition of lines circumscribing state institutions, and the inviolate boundaries of political freedom. The path towards dictatorship is portrayed in Kaden's novel as something necessitated by the moral turpitude of the elite, who thwarted the ideals that were supposed to be enshrined in the independent Polish state. The novel's title character, modeled in large part after Józef Piłsudski, is developed against this backdrop, as a leader personifying strength and ruthless authority.

At the other ideological extreme is Stefan Żeromski's *Early Spring*, the "most eminent political novel of the entire period" (according to Tomasz Burek). The hierarchy of values and the model system portrayed here differ from those in *General Barcz*: the form of the state should chiefly take account of the rights and good of the individual. Hence, Żeromski concentrates his attention not so much on the problem of power, as on the mechanisms that govern the collective mindset; under this concept the future is determined not by those who are at the helm, but rather by the attitudes of the entire intelligentsia stratum of society. And so – to employ the terminology coined by Michał Głowiński – the style in which ideological arguments are presented in *Early Spring* can be described as engaging in a democratic discourse: they emerge from behind the ostensibly objective portrayal of the

views professed by various sides in the political disputes. Żeromski's scathing denunciation is leveled most harshly against Bolshevism/Communism, yet Socialist ideals closer to the author's views are also subjected to criticism and portrayed through parody, as anachronistic traditions of the nobility.

The unresolved end of the novel, which cuts off at the culminating moment, harks back to Romantic schemas, and provokes the reader to seek answers to the unsettled questions posed in the book. There is no heartwarming prospect whatsoever for the future here; the only remedy seems to lie in the utopian postulate of a universal return to moral principles as the basis for political activity. An authentic danger to the sovereign existence of the Polish homeland is posed by the Bolshevik ideology encroaching from the east, which the intellectual elites, weak and passive or plunged into internal dispute, will not be capable of halting.

Polish political novels of this period – be it *General Barcz*, *Early Spring*, or works by other authors (above all Zofia Nałkowska and Andrzej Strug) – took a denunciatory tack and deftly unmasked the human and systemic weaknesses of the Polish state then being established. At the same time, the genre voiced a certain conviction deeply rooted in Polish tradition: that the edifice of the new polity had to rest firmly upon a reinterpretation of old patriotic ideals within the new system. This made it significantly more difficult to accept the “normal” state then emerging, which was glorious and represented a long-cherished dream, yet was not devoid of the weaknesses that typify periods of transformation. Under such conditions, the writer was ascribed a role as guardian of the national conscience.

Kaden continued the trend of reckoning with current affairs, but shifted the center of gravity towards social issues; his two novels from the *Black Wings* cycle (*Lenora* 1928, *Tadeusz* 1929) are set in the center of conflict at that time, i.e. Silesia.

Kaden referred to the hopes and disappointments experienced during the recovered Polish state's first pre-WWI years as “the euphoria of the liberated rubbish dump.” This ironically apt description, which became a popular stock phrase, nevertheless narrowed and trivialized the scope of the phenomenon, boiling it down to such

simple concepts as elation and coming to terms with recovered statehood. In fact this mental turning point would have lasting consequences; it would determine public attitudes, the public approach to art and literature, and the hierarchies of values through the entire interwar period.

One particular novelty in postwar Polish literature was the pursuit of historical themes. When the Polish lands had been under partition, censors had prevented topics pertaining to the history of Poland from appearing in print (the harshest restrictions were imposed in the Russian partition). After 1918, therefore, work was done to make up for this lost time, and historians acted as seconds to writers. Works chiefly addressed historical themes from the modern era – such as Zofia Kossak-Szczucka's *Conflagration* (*Požoga*, published in English as *The Blaze*), an account of the Polish-Russian war based on her own experiences, and Stefan Żeromski's drama *I Shall Become Whiter Than Snow...* (*Ponad śnieg bielszym się stanę...*) – but writers also aimed to reinterpret the national tradition and fashion it anew. They advocated the need to return to the roots of the national language, to long-professed cultural values, so as to defend Polish culture from revolutionary and futuristic savagery (Stefan Żeromski's *Snobbery and Progress – Snobizm i postęp* – 1923), and sought confirmation in history for modern-day territorial claims (Żeromski again, in his stylized 1923 novel *The Wind From the Sea – Wiatr od morza*, portraying the brutality of 1,000 years of German rule in Pomerania).

Nevertheless, the 1925 Nobel Prize in literature was awarded not to Stefan Żeromski, who exercised the strongest influence upon the attitudes of the Polish intelligentsia, but rather to Władysław Reymont (cf. the previous chapter), for his epic novel *The Peasants* (*Chłopi* – 1899-1909), composed at the turn of the century.

Young poetry. Writers of the older generation, especially Żeromski, espoused a view of the writer's role that still lingered in the Romantic spirit: someone who pointed the way for the nation and shaped minds. Young artists making their debut won the public over by euphorically hailing Poland's regained independence, by joyfully accepting the day-to-day reality of the polity then under construction. War-

saw and Kraków were the sites of their early appearances. One group of writers formed around the student journal *Pro Arte* in Warsaw, constituting the embryo of the subsequent poetic group called “Skamander” (Julian Tuwim, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Kazimierz Wierzyński, Jan Lechoń, Antoni Słonimski). The movement of futurism was represented in Kraków by Bruno Jasiński, Tytus Czyżewski and Stanisław Młodożeniec, and in Warsaw by Anatol Stern and Aleksander Wat.

Both these groups, even though the first took a traditionalist tack and the later an avant-garde approach, shared an enthusiasm at state-building. They also had in common a complete transformation of poetic strategy: a new kind of art, intended to accompany the normalization of life in an independent country, was supposed to reach wide masses of addressees, and was modeled after such an intended audience. This was a turning point in highbrow culture – or, to put it differently, an attempt to elevate the day-to-day. In thematic terms this meant the apotheosis of modern civilization and interest in the “ordinary” person, and in terms of language it entailed communicativeness and stylized spontaneous emotionality.

Skamander. A group of poets with an active civic stance, gathered around the journal *Skamander*, created a new model of poetry that found immediate approval with readers. The “Skamandrites” ostentatiously rejected Romanticism’s model of the messianist and Tyrtæan tradition, in favor of an apotheosis of contemporary times. The ordinary intellectual was their addressee, their hero, and the subject of their works. Professing the credo of freedom for art and for the artist, they did not produce programmatic manifestos, yet the model of their creativity was coherent and easily recognizable. Lyrical sentimentalism mingled with ridicule in their verses, a tone of Dionysian madness blended with a satirical passion, but they also wrote exalted and lofty texts such as Jan Lechoń’s *Pilsudski*. Composed in honor of the hero who had become head of state after returning from captivity only several days previously, this work was recited in the “poets’ café” betwixt a joke and a political satire, and moved listeners to tears. And it was perhaps the best embodiment of the Skamandrite model of

poetry: even when brought down to level of current events, it remains true to elevated poetry; it becomingly upholds the stature of art and the artist within the newly emerging world. Such was the aim of the Skamandrites' apology of talent, something they viewed as distinguishing the poet from among the crowd, and also of their ostentatious harking back to the roots of Polish tradition, albeit a tradition treated somewhat eclectically.

The Skamandrite model of poetry found its fullest expression in the works of **Julian Tuwim** (1894-1953). In his poems, the everyday world and ordinary colloquial language became a new source of lyricism. Poetry came to know a new protagonist, one who is sentimental and joyous, and rapaciously affirms life. New themes appeared: marginalized people, horrible city suburbs and their horrible residents – and alongside them, likewise within urban scenery, there is the crazed and tender happiness of the poet in love. Julian Tuwim's experiments in coining words (as in a volume of verses with the title *The Czarnolas Matter – Rzecz czarnoleska* alluding to the poetry of Jan Kochanowski), plus the wit that was characteristic of the Skamandrites' work, their penchant for the absurd and the grotesque, and their rapid reactions to current events – all these virtues ensured the Skamandrites a lasting place at the center of cultural life.

Later they would each go their separate ways, even though after their superb common debut critics and readers continued to view them as a close-knit literary group throughout the two interwar decades. Julian Tuwim gained fame as the author of lyrical verses, satirical works and cabarets. Jan Lechoń made a dazzling poetic debut with *A Crimson Poem (Karmazynowy poemat)*, but would only publish one more volume before falling silent; he would return to poetry only during WWII. Kazimierz Wierzyński consistently worked to earn the position of leading poet of the moderate right; the verses in his *Tragic Freedom (Wolność tragiczna)*, written after the death of Marshal Józef Piłsudski, represented the culmination of his prewar work. Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, an intellectual immersed in European culture, poetry, and music from Ukraine to Italy, wrote prose as well as poetry, was the author of avant-garde novels and excellent novellas. Antoni Słonimski became the leading publicist of the times, as the

author of feuilletons, the outstanding *Weekly Chronicles* (*Kroniki tygodniowe* – 1927-1939) and theatrical reviews.

The Polish **Futurists** drew upon the manifestoes of both Italian and Russian artists. Nevertheless, the programmatic credos which endeavored to bring about a breakthrough in the field of social life and art in those societies did not find substantial validation in Poland. The weight of the past was not overpowering here. There was no excess of historical relics (as was being protested in Italy); to the contrary, the substance of national culture had been terribly devastated by the war. The issue of rejecting the national tradition served young writers as a touchstone of demonstrative innovativeness, yet – aside from the poetics of provocative declarations – this was not sensed as something necessary (as it was in post-revolutionary Russia). Polish futurism was therefore devoid of even the seeds of political rapaciousness, being more of a provocation and entertainment undertaken to shock the public, not very distant from a cabaret version of dadaism. It was a kind of entertainment, but with important consequences in terms of shattering stereotypical thinking about art. In the Young Poland era, art had been set atop a high pedestal only accessible to the intellectual elite; the futurists brutally knocked it down from these heights, together with the “stale mummies of the Mickiewiczzes and Słowackis” (*“nieświeże mumie mickiewiczuw i słowackih”* – in the irregular orthography of their manifesto). They professed that art should play a part in liberating mankind from pressure of all kinds: tradition, custom, and aesthetic conventions. The Polish futurists’ chief achievements lay not in their poetic output – which was rather meager – but rather in the brutal poetics of their artistic manifestos and scandalous behavior.

Polish futurism was short-lived, drawing to a close in 1922. Bruno Jasiński became a staunch Communist, producing the poem *Song on Jakub Szela* (*Słowo o Jakubie Szeli*) and the novel *I Burn Paris* (*Pałę Paryż*). His political activities led to his emigration to Soviet Russia, where after enjoying a stunning career for a few years he was arrested in 1937 and was killed as a traitor in the Stalinist purges. Another Communist-leaning author was Aleksander Wat – imprisoned in Rus-

sia during WWII, he would die in Paris in 1967 as a respected poet and the author of works including his final tally memoirs *My Century* (*Mój wiek*) and anti-Soviet sketches. Anatol Stern became associated with film. Two artistic disciplines, poetry and painting, were practiced within the futurist movement by Stanisław Młodożeniec and by the long under-appreciated formist painter Tytus Czyżewski (the same combination of disciplines was similarly practiced by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and later by Bruno Schulz). Czyżewski introduced the principles of formism, drawn from painting, into his poetry: he gave his poems “formist” graphical layouts, and linked the two disciplines thematically. For example, the metaphors in his poem “sun in metamorphosis” (“słońce w metamorfozie”) seem close to the concept behind his painting “Nude with a Cat” (“Akt z kotem”). The painter Henryk Berlewi (who spent most of his life in France) engaged in joint artistic, advertising, and publishing ventures with the Warsaw group in the 1920s. They initiated an artistic phenomenon that was later continued by avant-garde groups throughout the interwar years, one which is highly interesting but has yet to be sufficiently studied: the relations between poetry and the fine arts, marked by bonds of friendship and cooperation that extended across Poland’s borders.

Another more innovative experiment is associated with the name of the futurist Aleksander Wat (1901-1967): the first trace of surrealism. His little volume of poetic prose entitled *I From One Side and I From the Other Side of My Pug-Iron Stove* (*Ja z jednej i ja z drugiej strony mego mopsożelaznego piecyka* – 1920) was written concurrently and independently of André Breton’s first surrealist experiments, published in France one year later; Wat nevertheless did not furnish his volume with the theoretical program that was so important for the French movement. Wat’s work, which the author insisted he had written with a high flu-induced fever, introduced important elements of style that were close to later surrealism: linguistic stylization that parodied the language of modernism, images arising in the imagination, based on absurd associations of objects stripped of their natural context – among them constantly recurring bizarre self-portraits: “I as beautiful as the blue beauty of cracked antiquity (...)”

("Ja piękny jak niebieskie piękno pękniętego antyku"). Against the background of Polish poetry, this volume was something so different that it went almost unnoticed, and its author himself did not then ascribe it much significance.

Hopes of a utopian bent similar to those of the surrealists in the West were coupled in Poland with great imaginative power by the **poets of the Kraków Vanguard** – whose programmatic manifestos were composed by Tadeusz Peiper, and whose poetic model was set forth by the works of Julian Przyboś (1901-1970). They, too, were convinced that the way to effect the necessary change in mindset was to make a breakthrough in people's imagination. Nevertheless, their concepts concerning the methods and objectives of stimulating the imagination were diametrically different and closer to the precepts of abstract painting than to surrealism, as were their concrete artistic postulates and achievements – so innovative that painter Władysław Strzemiński could cite Peiper as the precursor to his theory of constructivism. The highly interesting ties between the Polish Vanguard of the interwar decades and European and Polish avant-garde art seem to have been established early.

Somewhat later, the Kraków Vanguard's theoretical precepts (and poetic practice) seem to be obviously related to such concepts as Kandinsky's abstractionism, Mondrian's geometric abstraction, or even Malevich's suprematism. They might not have actually seen the paintings; here it was the theoretical publications that were important. Some of this material had presumably been read by Peiper, who spent the years of WWI in Western Europe. The poets themselves were also certainly aware of it later, if not directly than via the Polish constructivists Henryk Stażewski and Władysław Strzemiński. And so, group appearances by painters, sculptors, and poets took place in the mid-1920s, united by the common ideas of rejecting imitative and "decorative" art, of treating construction as creation, of producing art that responded to the logic of modern civilization – these were, in succession: *Blok* (1924), *Praesens* (1927), the Communist-leaning *Dźwignia* (influenced by the Soviet *Lef*), and *a.r.* (standing for "*artyści rewolucyjni*" or "revolutionary artists," 1929), as well as

L'Art contemporain, a periodical published in Paris by Jan Brzękowski. Within the crucible of such ties, there were also closer contacts with foreign artists from France and Germany, including Fernand Leger, Hans Arp, and Max Ernst – which in turn led to the establishment, from their donations, of the modern painting collection at the Art Museum in Łódź.

In these two domains of art – the fine arts and poetry – there was an endeavor to move in the same, abstract and constructivist direction. The cult montage of concepts in Peiper's manifesto "Metropolis. Mass. Machine." ("Miasto. Masa. Maszyna.") expressed an apology of modern technical civilization – and hence the postulate of a profound transformation in art, which was intended to take part in shaping this new world. Poetry was thus supposed to liberate the word from the meanings and duties traditionally ascribed to it, to abstract away and to create new linguistic bonds, not to name or to describe reality, but rather to shape reality by heaping metaphor upon metaphor. The very same words placed in new arrangements will evince new meanings; construction becomes creation. This was not far removed from the theory of abstract painting posited by Wassily Kandinsky: it expressed a faith that freeing oneself from objects, perceiving the changing system of tensions between swooping lines, intensified by color contrasts, would impart dynamism to a work of art, as well as to the world.

Peiper's theory was even closer to the geometrical abstraction of Piet Mondrian and to the Polish constructivist painters. But consistently rendering poetic creativity subservient to the principles of structure, channeling its energy into the process of building verse and boiling the artist's tasks down to the maximal simplification of this structure, all led to the same pitfalls as were encountered by Malevich's suprematism and blurred-background paintings, or by Strzemiński's unism.

Next, the free flow of associations guided by the artist's perception of the world, a poetic escape from excessive rigor of abstraction, such as that of Mondrian, seems to lead to the theories of Kandinsky, to his concepts of energetic connections between beams running in different directions and swooping lines – a bit like the deceptiveness

of directions in Julian Przyboś's *Notre Dame* ("Who conceived of this abyss and cast it upward" – "*Kto pomyślił tę przepaść i odrzucił ją w górę*"). Imagination did take the dominant role in Przyboś's theoretical precepts and poetry, but it was intended to be bridled and subservient to the rigors of structure. Creativity grew closer to realizing artistic theories, authenticity and flashes of creative individuality were to exist only in the act of perception, suddenly revealing phenomena in a new countenance.

Such inspiration drawn from the modern world, from the city and civilization, also lead us to think of the Polish avant-gardists in the context of Le Corbusier and his projects to practically adapt art to meet the needs of modern man. The genesis was similar – although for Julian Przyboś and similar writers, their fascination with machines and labor did not translate directly into poetry written for the "man of labor."

Metamorphoses of imagination. Bolesław Leśmian (see previous chapter), the Vanguard, Witkacy, Czechowicz, and then Bruno Schulz – these are writers whose artistic agendas ascribe a dominant role to imagination, albeit functionalized differently by each of them. The avant-gardists desired to keep imagination ancillary to the act of creating the world, stipulating that it should evolve after the model (in other words: within the domain) of the advance of technical civilization. Other outstanding figures of the epoch, on the other hand, pinned high hopes on letting imagination take free flight.

Foremost amongst the latter was **Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz** (known as **Witkacy** – 1885-1939). The state-building quandaries dealt with by both the Skamandrites and the avant-gardists were alien to him; his aesthetic theories stemmed from a catastrophic conviction that the world was rushing headlong towards annihilation, caused by both the atavist impetuosity of the masses (which Witkacy knew from his own experience, having spent the years of the war and Bolshevik revolution in Russia), and the blind advance of technological civilization. The aim of art was to assuage man's intellectual anxiety; it should arouse "metaphysical feelings" and clarify the Secret of Existence.

Art, therefore, had a particularly important role to play, as an instrument of cognition enabling one to draw nearer to this Secret, by cracking the shells of false appearances, shattering the conventional order, and reaching the authenticity inherent in situations and in mankind. The shattering of forms was supposed to lead to the emergence of a new Pure Form, stimulating the mind and imagination, suggesting new, unexpected meanings. Witkacy explicated and pursued his aesthetic theory in various forms of art concurrently: in painting, literature, and theatrical experiments.

Of key significance here was the development of tension between a work of art and mankind. On the one hand, by thwarting old habits, by seemingly introducing chaos and chance, by shocking, provoking, and undermining patent truths, art attacks its addressees, forces them to revise their beliefs, and offers an opportunity to experience “metaphysical feelings.” On the other hand, by shattering the established order, art should reveal what lies hidden behind external form: the truth. The absoluteness of these two actions require that brutal measures be employed: the language of irony, parody, the absurd and the grotesque – generating a style that offers the possibility of maximally strong expression.

In his own literary work, Witkacy frequently betrayed the tenets of his own artistic program, overextending his characters’ dialogs and overly verbalizing their intellectual dilemmas; the necessary logic of deduction could work together with a brutalization of form, but it prevented form from being shattered. And so, the “metaphysical anxiety” in his dramas was sometimes introduced by less radical means: for example, by undermining the sense of a rational interpretation of the world. The drama *Country House (W małym dworku)*, replete with perverse charm, questions the entire system of customary truths: the inviolable diving lines between life and death and between body and soul, all recognized conventions and moral stereotypes, including the gravity with which such ultimate matters are considered.

In 1925 Witkacy founded his own Portrait Company, which was intended to generate income but also became a workshop for the graphic externalization of human instincts and passions. The artist

drew his portraits in strong, fitful black lines, and stressed the subordinate nature of the space filling the canvass by sustaining it in uniform, monotonous hues. Deformations of the model's appearance served to expose his or her internal experiences (similar ideas guided the painting of such German expressionists as Otto Dix and George Grosz), to capture the authenticity of his or her instincts and passions, concealed under the mask of convention and falsity. Witkacy demonstrated the sense of such measures in the painting "A Woman's Falsehood" ("Falsz kobiety"), containing an image within an image – a beautiful, conventional portrait is contrasted with a grotesque beast, the truth emerging from a mirror. In order to stimulate the imagination, one must – according to the artist – first reach authenticity: to strip things bare and to perceive what has been revealed. Witkacy would thus act scandalously, provoking strange and embarrassing situations, removing all masks in but a moment, and revealing people's true countenances.

As the artist's metaphysical anxiety grew, so the expressionistic style of his works evolved – from absurd and surrealist painting compositions and the poetics of the drama *Country House*, his style came to be dominated by a harsh grotesque, reaching the brutal poetics of *The Shoemakers* (*Szewcy*), shocking in sensuality, perversity, and refined vulgarisms.

Witkacy's novels – *Farewell to Autumn* (*Pożegnanie jesieni*, 1927), *Insatiability* (*Nienasycenie*, 1930) – express catastrophic visions of the future, composed in the convention of a grotesque vision of the world. Criticism of modern civilization, the breakdown of social bonds, lead Witkacy to the conviction that inevitable doom awaited the world of individualistic culture, which would be swept away by oncoming tyranny. In *Farewell to Autumn*, the protagonist's death symbolizes the annihilation of all higher values by the victorious mob; the hero of *Insatiability*, intentionally experiencing extremely strong impressions ranging from drugs to sexual debauchery and murder, becomes a symbol of the disappearance of values, leading the world to its ruin.

The most full-blown form of negating modernity is to be found the parodistic and grotesque play *The Shoemakers* (completed in

1934), described as a “theater of great political metaphor” (Jerzy Kwiatkowski). It is set in an unidentified (although not far-off) future time, after the ultimate triumph of mechanical civilization and the complete stupefaction of mindlessly laboring humans – even the perverse Duchess comes to be afflicted with a shoemaker-like zeal for work. Fascist and revolutionary coups only hasten this flight towards annihilation. In this play Witkacy realized the theory of theater he had conceived of more than a decade earlier, as an art that reduces the world to the shape of Pure Form: it can ignore laws of probability, deform psychological truth, espouse a theory of coincidences, and thwart schemes of composition based on the likelihood of the events portrayed. All of this taken together disrupts the order of things and spurs the imagination. Yet unlike for Peiper/Przyboś, this is not for constructivist purposes, but rather for the moment of revelation, cognition, the evocation of “metaphysical feelings.”

Like most of Witkacy’s novels and plays, the drama *The Shoemakers* was never published or staged during the author’s lifetime. The fate met by his works, flagrantly underrated during his lifetime yet raised to the highest level of the Polish Parnassus not two decades later, serves as the best evidence of the thorough transformation taking place in the hierarchization of art in those years.

Psychological prose, chiefly the domain of women writers, was an avenue for expressing a commitment to public affairs in the early post-WWI years akin to the political novels. Social themes were most prominently treated by Zofia Nałkowska (1884-1954) in the novels *The Romance of Teresa Hennert* (*Romans Teresy Hennert*), whose heroine, lost in the new reality and ensnared in political affairs in spite of herself, dies tragically, and *Boundary Line* (*Granica* – 1935), about a girl from the lowlands who is seduced and brought to suicide. Maria Dąbrowska (1889-1965), in her volume of excellently composed novellas about the lives of poor villagers, *Folks From Over Yonder* (*Ludzie stamtąd*), was able to depict the extent of their humanity, manifest in existential situations common to everyone, in love, unhappiness, and oncoming death. These works were written within the domain of socialist ideology, which was important to both au-

thors: Nałkowska encountered it within her family home, while Dąbrowska was associated with the circle of philosopher and cooperative theorist Edward Abramowski from her university days and through her husband.

It was these two women writers, plus Maria Kuncewiczowa (1895-1989), who were at the forefront of women's literature in the two interwar decades. All three were talented, and worked with determination towards a literary career. And they achieved it, choosing the paths of social themes (Nałkowska), the *roman-fleuve* of family history (Dąbrowska), and psychological prose (Kuncewiczowa). Their novels shared an analogous depiction of the world, in which the heroines live in the shadow of men and are entirely dependent upon their presence – or are alienated from their environs. The writers drew inspiration and stylistic novelties from the works of Freud, Joyce, and Proust. But the way in which they treated the problems they addressed did not diverge from traditional convention; the authors did not incorporate their own life experiences into their work and did not externalize their own internal world. The process of emancipation, spurred by the war, had a weak impact upon literary prose; heroines lingered in the same traditional realm of unfulfilled psychological and erotic desires, suffered personal defeats, fell victim to men and to social injustice, and paid the price of neurosis – as in Maria Kuncewiczowa's most eminent novel *The Stranger (Cudzoziemka)* – for their maladjustment. Quiet, modest, and selfless, adhering to the anachronistic model of the traditional Polish mother, they assumed the roles imposed upon them, at most making a timid attempt at shattering this stereotype – such as Maria Dąbrowska's autobiographical persona, Agnieszka from *Nights and Days (Nocy i Dnie)*.

These stories were considered a reflection not just of the views, but also of the personalities of their authors, especially since autobiographical leads were discovered in them: the emotional trials and tribulations in Nałkowska's prose and Dąbrowska's own family history in her work, while Kuncewiczowa left an autobiographical trace behind by allowing settings and events to be identified. This had an impact on how biographers interpreted the life story and even personality of the novelists themselves.

The works of Maria Dąbrowska and Zofia Nalkowska are excellently complemented by the intimate journals they kept. Comparing these two types of writings – personality as reflected in the persona of their novelistic heroines and in the first-person persona of their diaries – provide superb material for a study of Polish feminism during that age, not only in its literary incarnation.

What is most striking in the self-portraits of Maria Dąbrowska and Zofia Nalkowska that emerge from these diary entries is their profound pondering of their own sexuality; their view of the world and of themselves is determined by sexual matters (this, according to the assessments of modern criticism, enables the journals to be classified as feminist works). These journals seemingly consist of two layers of text; the first is a self-portrait addressed to an audience that will read the work someday – pursuant to Maria Dąbrowska’s own will, these writings first appeared as fragments, followed by the entire journal contents only 50 years after her death.

This careful self-depiction portrays a woman concerned about the world and unable to cope with day-to-day matters, needing a strong masculine arm to lean on. A woman sensitive to public affairs yet careful to guard her privacy, and thus prone to painful dilemmas when choosing between following her desire to express support and refusing to take a stand on current issues. A woman who is caring towards her own – quite tedious – family. All the volumes of this journal emanate a strong conviction on the part of their author, waxing more powerful as the years passed, about the high caliber of her own writing ability, to which she must make her own life and environs subservient. Hence her incessant torment – torn between the scale of expectations in this regard, and a fear that meeting them is an impossible task. And hence her grievances towards critics (described by Grażyna Borkowska), that they dealt with her work too superfluously and were unable to judge it. “I have revealed to people a spring of beauty they never suspected, but instead of drinking from it, they pee in it,” she wrote about *Nights and Days*. In order to prevent similar misunderstandings, Dąbrowska even made attempts at writing her interpretation of her own works. Creative torment and a fear of not coping with the challenges she sets for herself, traits incorporated in

the autobiographical persona, mingle here with a struggle for acknowledgement, with career-minded rivalry. A growing distance from other writers led to a painful awareness of alienation.

At times it may seem that the chief addressee of Dąbrowska's journals are the author herself, that they are clearly written to herself. Yet in their most intimate confessions the diary entries seem to slip out of control; they introduce elements into the persona that shatter this assiduously constructed image. For example, when the writer contemplates her own body in the looking-glass, when she is fascinated by her own sensuality, and when her sexuality (which gives her a sense of dominance, of life satisfaction) or aesthetic disgust even undermines her traditional loyalty to her partner.

Such dominant sexuality yields completely different effects in Zofia Nalkowska's journals. From her first novel, sensual desires were the most crucial issue for her heroines, and were the subject of the young writer's penetration and analysis. And so, there is no gulf between her novelistic personas in her prose and her own persona in her journals; here the first-person "I" seems to be liberated, in full acceptance of life, including as manifested in the description of relations with nature; it is coupled with an acceptance of sensuality as the dominant characteristic of her image. If one were to define the phenomenon of feminism based on Nalkowska's journals, it would be an all-encompassing, voracious, possessive, and suffering-laden kind of self-realization (exhibiting the torment of infidelity, rejection – and satiating happiness). For Nalkowska, self-acceptance determines the nature of how her relations with the world develop – tending toward extraversion, easily made friendships, but also sympathetic acceptance. It is telling that the young Witold Gombrowicz detected and particularly appreciated the author's vein of "egoism and egotism" even in the novel *Boundary Line*.

Despite the huge differences between the female autobiographical personas evidenced in the journals of Maria Dąbrowska and Zofia Nalkowska, they do have much in common. Above all, the final image that ultimately emerges from them, that of a woman who is feminine and seeks support from close men as before, yet in reality no longer needs such support. But autonomously making all crucial de-

cisions, autonomously guiding their partners' decisions as well – seemingly premature in light of the mindset of the age – nevertheless gives the authors a deepening sense of solitude over the years.

In Maria Kuncewiczowa's psychological novels, music brings solace for the sadness of solitude. Immersion in the world of art becomes an alternative to the real world, and it leads, in *The Stranger* as well as in many other of her works, to an acceptance of alienated distance, recognized as evidence of dwelling in a world of higher aesthetic values.

The 1930s also saw the peak prose achievements of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, the author of several psychological novels. Influenced in his youth by the philosophy and aesthetics of modernism, he maintained a convention of realism in his mature works. He published superb short stories – *The Maidens of Wilk (Panny z Wilka)*, *Birch Grove (Brzezina)*, *The Mill on the Utrata (Młyn nad Utratą)* – in which a sensual perception of the beauty of nature and art stands in contrast to somber experiences, approaching death, and the inevitability of the fate awaiting the protagonist.

The 1930s – transformations and new debuts. The political situation in the 1930s, the threat entailed by the European economic crisis and rapidly rising totalitarianisms (Nazism to Poland's west and Communism to its east), Hitler's rise to power and the Stalinist purges all cast a shadow of doubt and apprehension, which also had an impact on the mold of literature.

This found expression in the radicalization of ideological stances. Interest in sociopolitical issues led to the development of reportage and factual literature (the Communist-leaning "Literary Monthly" journal (*Miesięcznik Literacki* – 1929-1931), and later to the appearance of the "City Outskirts" literary group (*Przedmieście*) founded in 1933 by Helena Boguszevska and Jerzy Kornacki; its members included Zofia Nałkowska and Bruno Schulz. The program called for writers and scientists to work jointly to study the condition of the proletariat and national minorities, for their life to be registered and described in journalistic fashion.

The radicalization of attitudes found reflection above all in publicist writing. Antoni Słonimski's *Weekly Chronicles* became a school

of astute thought for the young generation, evidencing the need and sense of a writer's personal intervention in the matters of politics and ideology.

The outstanding poet of the late 1920s and the subsequent decade was **Józef Czechowicz** (1903-1939). A visionary poet, for whom verse was a matter of imagination, a kind of play with the consonances of words, dreamy associations, music and painterly vision, he wrote: "The poetry of imagination is a waking dream."

Czechowicz's background lay in futurism, he was an avant-garde poet, but his concept of poetry and style were diametrically different from the avant-gardism of Pieper and Przyboś's trend. Forging his own artistic path, set forth in the small volume *day like any other* (*dzień jak codzień* – 1930), he strove towards a pure poetry. He drew upon the Romantic and modernist tradition, departing from realism towards a visionary poetics. Jerzy Kwiatkowski, the most illustrious expert on the literature of the interwar years, drew attention to the exceptional conception of Czechowicz's poetic language: "It can be described as symbolic and magical. Symbolic: because the word is supposed to mean more here than it does in the dictionary, it refers to hidden content, strives to capture that which is «unnamable, unclear.» Magical: because the word plays the role of a spell here, a formula that transforms reality, with the power to destroy and to create."

Czechowicz was a poet of the city, of provincial towns – as in his cycle of verses *province night* (*provincia noc*) – whose landscapes he deformed through unusual, lyrical metaphor. The supernatural character of this world is augmented by personifications, encompassing nature and elements of the landscape. The village or small town, rendered unreal, the contours of walls emerging from the murkiness, saturated with emotionality of metaphor – all of this creates a magic, fairytale world. Czechowicz's eschewal of punctuation and capital letters further enhances the atmosphere of ambiguity and mystery, the meaning and mood of his works.

Czechowicz accentuated his striking harmonious musicality through phonetic instrumentation, onomatopoeia, and sonorous neologisms (Wisława Szymborska took delight, for example, in his replacement of the dumb-sounding "*bim bam bom*" conventionally used to de-

scribe the ringing of a bell in Polish with the metallic-sounding “*ang ang ang*”) and through his selection of originally harmonious rare rhymes and assonances.

The lyrical tones of Czechowicz’s poems underwent a startling collapse in the mid-1930s: the gentle musicality vanishes, ominous words appear, and harsh contrasts disturb the harmony of the portrayed world. In the volume *the music of man* (*nuta człowieka* – 1939), a catastrophic, prophetic vision of the oncoming apocalypse appears, of the “harvest-time of the boom and the flash,” (“*żniwa huku i blasku*”) and he envisages himself “struck by a bomb” – such was the death he truly met on 9 September 1939.

The work of a **new generation of excellent debuts**, marked by the atmosphere of impending catastrophism, showed a countenance that was different to that seen in the post-WWI period. These poets’ beginnings lay in the “*Żagary*” group formed in Wilno (Vilnius) in 1931 by Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Zagórski, Teodor Bujnicki and Aleksander Rymkiewicz. The dialectical word “*żagary*” refers to dry twigs for lighting a fire, and the program they composed had just such fiery passion, although their poetic works deviated from it. Social credos were overshadowed by catastrophic visions of the future.

The most outstanding poet of this group was later Nobel Laureate **Czesław Miłosz** (b. 1911). Prior to 1939 he published two small volumes of poetry, *A Poem on Time Frozen* (*Poemat o czasie zastygłym* – 1933) and *Three Winters* (*Trzy zimy* – 1936). The *Żagary* group’s catastrophism was described by Kazimierz Wyka as a phenomenon involving “a symbolic and Classicist presentation, at times with hints of surrealism or expressionism, of themes that suggested and augured an inevitable historical and moral catastrophe.” These characteristics can be observed, for example, in Miłosz’s poem “Assizes” (“*Roki*”). The dramatic nature of its theme – conflict between the pleasant present and impending disaster – stands in contrast to its Classicizing, well-ordered and harmonious structure and linguistic organization. The work is further dramatized by the prominently highlighted dialogic nature (“I” vs. “you”), and by its transparent reference to the

vision of the *Revelation of St. John*. Already then one can notice a later characteristic of Miłosz, his proclivity for biblical reflection and tones, calming catastrophic apprehensions and leading towards a stoic acceptance of the inevitable.

Another artist to debut at the same time was **Bruno Schulz** (1892-1942, debut 1933), a prose writer, painter, and drawer (his paintings did not survive the war). He died several years after his debut, shot in the ghetto by a Nazi officer.

A poor Jewish merchant family in a small town – such are the boundaries that circumscribe the world of Schulz’s childhood, a world of Jewish culture and the spirit of The Book. He published two volumes of stories, *Cinnamon Shops* (*Sklepy cynamonowe*) and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (*Sanatorium pod klepsydrą*), which are written in the first person and set in realities drawn from the author’s biography, from the mythologized time of his childhood, when rationality had not yet stifled inspired visions: “I stood with limbs outstretched, in rapture; with extended and elongated fingers I pointed, I pointed in anger, in fierce excitement, tense like a signpost and trembling in ecstasy.”

Schulz records an oneiric reality prone to incessant, fascinating transformations. The house of his childhood forms a fantasy space, dark and awe-inspiring; the members of this household metamorphose, becoming monstrous or sprouting wings, like the father who transforms into a bird before his son’s very eyes. Time is not bound to flow in linear fashion in Schulz’s works; either it is the mythical time of The Book, or it is suspended as if in a street snapshot, with everyone frozen in unnatural, fleeting poses. The world portrayed in his works is unsightly, at times repulsive; imaginative phantasmagorias lead to confusion, to disintegration. Murkily, strangely, and menacingly, a silhouette of modern civilization emerges. This gloomy feyness, forebodingly disfiguring, seems to reveal a path that leads towards knowledge about the secrets of existence. Despite this, Schulz’s visions are fascinating, they draw the reader’s imagination into this extraordinary, mythologized world. Creating myth (following the model of God’s creation of The Book) seems to be the only means of penetrating the sense of existence.

Witold Gombrowicz, a brilliant prose-writer who also debuted in the 1930s, the author of the novels *Possessed* (*Opętani*) and *Ferdydurke* and the drama *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*, all published prior to WWII, rationalized his catastrophic fears in a fashion all his own. Under the degenerating form of the modern world, he discovered a universal structure of interpersonal relations, within the framework of which we all exist, and which is also inscribed in the current and future course of history. Gombrowicz succeeded in reaching what Witkacy had at best come close to in his moments of metaphysical revelation: he discovered that what is laid bare when form breaks down is not chaos, but rather an overarching structure for mankind – meaning something cognizable, clearly depicted in *Ferdydurke* and *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*. Seeing the mechanism of this structure for what it is does not make it easier to accept, nor offers any possibility of influencing how it develops. Individuality, ever more ruthlessly incapacitated, vanishes as an independent entity.

The intellectual problems of *Ferdydurke* seem closely akin to Witkacy's apprehensions: fear of assimilation, the product of modern civilization, fear of the mob. But while for Witkacy the finale brings the inevitable death of the intellectual longing for this lost freedom, for Gombrowicz the tragedy consists in the fact that the individual, whether he or she submits or struggles, will still ultimately fit into the structure and function well within its reifying fold. While for Witkacy the world is annihilated by an invasion of blind chaos, for Gombrowicz such annihilation is brought about by the perfection of universal structure. For the former the grotesque was a reflection of chaos, for the latter it resides within the general order; it stems from man's voluntary flight away from unstable form, away from freedom, into the illusory order of totalitarian structure. This image of the world develops a conception of humanity that ostentatiously thwarts the idealist stereotypes cultivated by Polish tradition, chiefly by the Romantic cradle of heroic and noble models. Gombrowicz treats them derisively and parodies them, ridiculing anachronistic attitudes and language that is artificial in its pathos.

Already at the outset of *Ferdydurke*, when the main character appears, his identity undergoes rapid distortion: he was a mature man,

but he becomes a 17-year-old, not because of some sort of fancied transformations, but rather because of having come face-to-face with a collective mass that constitutes a cohesive whole. Treated like a schoolboy, thrust into the role of a schoolboy, he experiences a transformation of his own mindset, emotions, and behavior; he occupies the place that is allotted to him, as if by a higher authority. When confronted with the world of the new ideology, freedom turns out to be problematic, and relinquishing it defends one from existential apprehensions, enables one to find the meaning of life in communal existence, in a common subjugation to schemas. The protagonist's battle to retain his own identity ceases to be important at all, once he comes to know the rules, once he begins to manipulate them himself, to play the game imposed upon him by the system. An individual example exposes the principles by which the whole functions. The individual comes to fit within the framework of the system, performing the assigned functions.

Gombrowicz portrayed this mechanism even more lucidly in the drama *Iwona, Princess of Burgundia*, published several years after *Ferdynand*. Here the situation is reduced to the simple schema of a conclusively well-ordered and functioning mechanism, which itself disposes of the element that disturbs it. All the characters in the drama, like puppets, play their roles excellently: the queen follows the stereotypical image of the queen, the chamberlain that of the chamberlain, and young lads behave entirely in keeping with expectations. Iwona, an unattractive girl brought into this well-ordered world by chance, does not conform to convention, to form, and this threatens the existence of the whole: she is ousted, and the puppet world regains its balance.

Witold Gombrowicz's philosophical diagnosis of history, precursory and prophetic, caused an extraordinary sensation in interwar Poland. The fact that it came in the shape of fiction was even more extraordinary, and shocked the imagination. Owing to this, Gombrowicz's concept was not a merely theoretical utopia, cut off from reality, but instead found support in its discourse with tradition and in the sphere of individual and social human psychology.

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