

## **A Genealogy of Modernity: Schulz, Witkacy, and Gombrowicz, and the Ventures of Polish Writers of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century and the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

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The writers from this article's title are most often treated as "icons" of Polish modern prose. Undoubtedly, their quests, experiments, and discoveries established paths for the development of Polish and European novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, for all their greatness and individuality, Schulz's, Witkacy's, and Gombrowicz's oeuvre did not appear all of a sudden; they were deeply immersed in the works of their predecessors: those with whom they argued and fought, and those whom they followed more or less consciously. The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a crucial moment for the formation of a Polish modernist literary grouping<sup>1</sup>.

Asking about genealogy of Polish modern prose, we obviously ask questions about modernism. Gombrowicz, Witkacy, and Schulz belong to its peak. In a broad sense, as a set of intellectual, artistic, and political tendencies responding to the challenges of modernity, modernism undoubtedly determines the horizons of Polish literature even earlier – at least from the middle of the nineteenth century on. Modernist questions emerged from the late 1870s on, when the generation of Polish "positivists" reached their maturity. That is the reason why we should start any reflection upon Polish modernism from analyzing the very middle of the nineteenth century.

It was the generation of Polish positivists that first started to experience modernizing processes in Poland of the second half of the nineteenth century – as in the rest of Europe – despite undoubted delays connected with the historic situation of the Polish people. Representatives of the generation debuting in 1870s put their heart and soul into redefining the tasks of our culture and its being open for modernity<sup>2</sup>. Often called by their contemporaries "progressives", positivists formed their social and artistic program – especially

<sup>1</sup> See: R. Nycz, "Modernistyczna formacja literacka". *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie*, Wrocław 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See: Maciej Gloger, "Pozytywizm: między nowoczesnością a modernizmem," *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 2007, 1, p. 5. See also: Janusz Maciejewski, "Miejsce pozytywizmu polskiego w XIX-wiecznej formacji kulturowej", *Pozytywizm. Języki epoki*, Ed. G. Borkowska, J. Maciejewski, Warszawa 2001.

the one connected with an honest description of the world – in a constant discussion with conservative visions of Polish history and the present. They tried to be future-oriented, reminding us that while discussing old novels – *Ogniem i mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*) by Henryk Sienkiewicz – history testifies that we only were, not that we are. Gombrowicz's struggle with "the Polish form" originates from the works of such positivists as Bolesław Prus and Aleksander Świątochowski.

The perspective offered here is not always accepted in studies of Polish modernism. Polish "modern writers" are located beyond the turning point of the nineteenth century, although the most important features of their works are connected with much earlier discoveries, and, to a large extent, they follow them. The scope for the philosophical and artistic ventures of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz is determined by their experiencing a crisis, the effects of which were perceived by the whole generation of Polish positivists. Polish readers of Buckle and Spencer were the first to experience a disappointment with illusory axioms of positivist knowledge, and to discover that language is not and does not want to be a "copy of things" (according to Comte), and to doubt in cognizability of the world. In *Dumania pesymisty* (*A Pessimist's Deliberations*) (1876), Aleksander Świątochowski claims that "language is the worst bondage which a human mind has ever experienced"<sup>3</sup>; the narrator is bored with analyzing the "riddles of knowledge", and chooses pessimism and Schopenhauer's skepticism. Pessimism or "negativism" permeate the most important works of the late 1880s – *Nad Niemnem* and *Melancholicy* (*Melancholics*) by Eliza Orzeszkowa, and *Lalka* (*The Doll*) and *Emancypantki* (*Suffragettes*) by Bolesław Prus. They feature a character lost in the present, dissatisfied with the effects of the positivist promise of human happiness, lonely in a world without God, and often desperately looking for Him.

Positivists experience a crisis, an experience crucial for the modernist community, as strongly as the next generation of artists, who were affiliated with the Young Poland movement, demonstrating its disappointment and rebellion in the 1890s. Already in Prus's *Lalka*, we can find the characteristic vision of a fluid world, subject to constant metamorphosis, with basic parameters and points of reference continually changing. An important point for the discoveries of the end of the century was reading Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson – they diagnosed the modern world and tried to redefine and deconstruct culture, which they considered barren and empty; so they were looking for "a new man" and new models of identity.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Świątochowski, *Dumania pesymisty*, Ed. E. Paczoska, Warszawa 2002, p.40.

## Following Modernity

As my initial comments suggest, Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz must have examined the dilemmas, questions and diagnoses of the writers from the second half of the nineteenth century – after all, they started describing Polish modernity. At this point of my discussion, it is also worth beginning with Prus. It was not an accident that one of the first serious analyses of his works was written by a young critic of the next generation, Stanisław Brzozowski (whose name will appear in this article several times). He observed that Prus's novels start the process of recognizing modernity in Polish literature:

"[Prus] feels [...] labour, pain and sadness which accompany this constant transformation, but also feels its joy and power"<sup>4</sup>.

"He perfectly understands that in the vast majority of cases, an individual feels pain and tiredness of a change, whose meaning he cannot comprehend"<sup>5</sup>.

In Brzozowski's article, Prus appears as a writer looking for the "psychology of a modern man", asking questions about how modernity has changed interpersonal relationships, about the way of thinking about the past and future, and about the tasks of culture in general, and of Polish culture in particular.

Prus's novels present a modern "Faustian man", who lives in the world destroyed in terms of the human condition and of individual and collective identity. In this way, Wokulski from *Lalka* foreshadows Witkacy's and Gombrowicz's characters, whose "personality and physiognomy [...] are 'loosened,' have blurred boundaries and contradict the conviction about relatively constant features and qualities"<sup>6</sup>.

The protagonist of *Lalka* feels lost and lonely, which can be interpreted as an effect of the paradigm of positivist knowledge which separates the soul and body. This is how Boniecki summarises this process, writing about the philosophical dilemmas of an artist from the next generation, Stanisław Przybyszewski:

"Degraded by Descartes and treated in a mechanistic way, the body could have become the object of empiric research whose results were absolute. [...] In this way, the degradation of a human being occurred"<sup>7</sup>.

Even the late works by positivists (Świętochowski, Orzeszkowa, and Prus) under the influence of Kant try to move beyond the *cogito* formula and look for other indicators of identity connected not only with thinking, but also with feeling and experiencing,

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<sup>4</sup> S. Brzozowski, *Współczesna powieść i krytyka literacka*, Ed. J.Z. Jakubowski, Warszawa 1971, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ż. Nalewajk, *W stronę perspektywizmu. Problematyka cielesności w prozie Brunona Schulza i Witolda Gombrowicza. Prolegomena*, Gdańsk 2010, p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> E. Boniecki, *Struktura „nagiej duszy”. Studium o Stanisławie Przybyszewskim*, Warszawa 1993, p. 37.

that is, the sensual perspective. In his best known novels (e.g. in *Katarynka*), Prus ridicules sight as a means limiting the image of reality and reducing sensitivity to its stimuli.

There are a lot of ways of looking for spiritual-corporeal whole in the works by writers of Young Poland, and they are located between the discoveries of naturalists and evolutionists and the provocative Nietzschean statement that “body is the big mind”. Discovering the body is also connected with recognizing repressed bourgeois culture, its corporeal “taboo” and its consequences. In his reflections on sex, Schopenhauer casts a new light on discourse relating to the body and, in Weininger’s version, this reflection approaches aggressive and extreme misogyny. In the works of Young Poland writers, this discourse takes the form of dramatic tensions; freed from cultural lies and convictions, sexuality puts people in the insoluble dilemma of being in the trap of nature and of individual dreams about absolute freedom.

Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz continue their artistic ventures, whose aim was to restore the anthropological whole once broken by rationalism and an atomization of theories based on the positivist paradigm. Like Przybyszewski, Schulz is fascinated with paintings by Rops, Munch, and Beardsley, depicting the demonism of sex, which is best illustrated by the *femme fatale* figure. Erotic obsessions and leitmotifs present in Schulz’s literary and visual work are deeply rooted in a world of the fascinations of writers from the modernist period.

This fascination undoubtedly results in Schulz’s but also in Gombrowicz’s interest in corporeality. Of course, the latter is keen on sexuality as a sphere of dynamic relations between nature and culture, and as an opportunity for defense (which is suppressed by culture) against the terror of “form”. Body images in Gombrowicz and Schulz lead to transgression: as Żaneta Nalewajk demonstrates, the latter is especially touched by metamorphosis and disintegration<sup>8</sup>. Modernist bestiaries are, without doubt, an important context for Schulz – amorphous features placed between nature and culture. In the novels by all three writers, the story worlds are shaped by the techniques of somatopoetics – according to Nalewajk, somatization and dehierarchization are Gombrowicz’s and Schulz’s basic techniques of building their fictional worlds. The reflection on building “the form” is always connected with corporeality<sup>9</sup>.

When we consider the search for “the whole” at the turn of the twentieth century, we must refer to the interest in psychology, dynamic psychiatry, and, finally,

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<sup>8</sup> See: Żaneta Nalewajk, *W stronę perspektywizmu. Problematyka cielesności w prozie Brunona Schulza i Witolda Gombrowicza. Prolegomena*, Gdańsk 2010, especially the chapter “Ciało jako metafora epistemologiczna modernizmu”.

<sup>9</sup> See: the entry *Demonolodzy/Demoniści*, in *Słownik Schulzowski*, Ed. W. Bolecki, J. Jarzębski, St. Rosiek, Gdańsk 2006.

psychoanalysis, areas that are so typical of the intellectual landscapes of those times. It is worth noticing that the first phase of researching the unconscious begins in the 1870s by Wundt, the patron of the positivists' philosophical initiation. We can identify marks of this interest in Prus – actually one of the first Polish readers of Bergson. At the turn of the twentieth century, at the time when Freud lays the foundations for psychoanalysis, Stanisław Przybyszewski explores “the bare soul” – the substratum of the hidden, unconscious and dominated by culture. The influence of psychoanalysis on the new type of novel-writing in the inter-war period generated a lot of writings – it is worth mentioning Witkacy's and Gombrowicz's contribution to the discussion of the Polish psychoanalytical environment from the 1930s<sup>10</sup>.

On numerous occasions, Witkacy characteristically refers to the fashion for psychoanalysis – for example in *Pożegnanie jesieni* (Farewell to Autumn). The narrator speaks about a character in love with the demonic Hela Bertz in the following way:

“Obviously he “subconsciously” fell head over heels in love with her, and that was the only reason why he fought indomitable mental difficulties to save her soul – this is how every pseudo-intelligent Freudian would put it”<sup>11</sup>.

However, a certain distance to the fashion for Freud does not hamper Witkacy's attempts at drawing a character's specific “mental map”. The writer undoubtedly uses psychoanalytic discoveries connected with the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. This psychological or psychoanalytical basis obviously determines also Gombrowicz's characters and narrators looking for the truth about their own desires, and Schulz's works with their various aspects of poetics of dreams. Here it is worth mentioning the “diver of one's own inner life” metaphor, which Schulz used to determine writer's activity. His philosophy of being a writer is incomprehensible without understanding the unconscious. As he repeatedly wrote:

“Artists comment on what their unconsciousness hides, and because they cannot fathom the secret to the full, their next works only draw us to the original text, the ambiguity of which will never be eliminated”<sup>12</sup>.

Schulz's dreamy worlds have been repeatedly compared with Kafka's, who created similar images and a similar character – one with characteristically scattered or decomposed identity. Such an image of the subject in modernist literature was the result of many reasons, one of them being a local change in the experience of modernity. The life and works of Schulz are organically connected with Lviv (Lwów) and Drohobych,

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<sup>10</sup> See: Paweł Dybel, *Urwane ścieżki. Przybyszewski – Freud – Lacan*, Kraków 2000, p. 36, 41.

<sup>11</sup> S.I. Witkiewicz, *Pożegnanie jesieni*, Warszawa 1985, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> M.P. Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna. Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy*, Kraków 2007, p. 182.

that is, the part of the Polish lands that till the end of the First World War was called Galicia. Lviv/Lwów was then the capital of Polish modernity, which flourished in the backward region. Polish Galician literature of the fin-de-siècle had characteristic features which foreshadowed Schulz's creations. It developed within the dynamic meeting of cultures, in a multilingual environment, which gave the characteristic impression of "inhabiting two worlds"<sup>13</sup>. With regard to *The Street of Crocodiles*, it is worth recalling the forgotten novel by Antoni Mueller entitled *Henryk Flis* from 1908. It is set in Drohobych, a small Galician town, which, thanks to the discovery of oilfields, is going through an economic boom and experiences the changes described later by Schulz in *The Street of Crocodiles*. Here modernity meets Polish conventional tradition; languages describing reality merge and reality escapes the form. The place subjects the life of the protagonist of *Henryk Flis* to constant disintegration; his metaphor in the novel is mud – the element which makes the reality unreal and which is a frame for the character's phantasms. We can follow Jerzy Jarzębski's words, who analyses Schulz's storyworlds, that also Mueller's city is "a device for watching another reality" and "the most characteristic process of this kind is transforming the urban order into the labyrinth-like space of wandering"<sup>14</sup>.

Galician literature is also open to the grotesque and the fantastic. We can mention here, for example, Stefan Grabiński, five years older than Schulz, author of a fantasy novel, the semantic center of which describes the meeting with modernity, and especially with the motion demon turning the old world out (*The Motion Demon* collection was published in 1919). Grabiński's characters, such as the mad engine driver Grot, passengers craving for change, or a signalman guarding a sidetrack, experience the disintegration of the world, and contact with forces independent of them, and these experiences take place at dreamy Galician stations or simply once the characters enter the carriage. We can say that this Galician fantasy with the modernist spirit embodies Schulz's foundations.

Experiencing modernity undoubtedly took specific form in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth in East-Central Europe: it coincided with a characteristic series of historical and cultural events. The anxieties and dilemmas of modernizing Europe – which announced the end of the old order and a fear of a Nietzschean world of "the last people" with the voices of artists, politicians and philosophers – resulted from characteristic and diverse phenomena. It is worth using the contemporary

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<sup>13</sup> See: M. Berman, „Wszystko, co stałe rozplywa się w powietrzu”. *Rzecz o doświadczeniu nowoczesności*, translated by M. Szuster, introduction: A. Bielik-Robson, Kraków 2006. "The nineteenthnineteenth century modern society remembers how it is to live in the world which has nothing in common with modernity in spiritual and material terms" (15).

<sup>14</sup> J. Jarzębski, *Prowincja centrum. Przypisy do Schulza*, Kraków 2005, pp. 94–95.

metaphor by Yuri Andrukhovych, who calls East-Central Europe “the space of extreme and chronic existential uncertainty”<sup>15</sup>. The world was subject to “lifting the spell”. We can say that identity belonged to the sphere of negotiations in a somewhat “natural” way. Because of those processes in East-Central Europe, artists’ response to modernity’s challenges took the form today associated with the essence or center of literary modernity; these challenges shape, among others, the works of Schulz, Gombrowicz, and Witkacy. In this context, it is worth remembering their predecessors.

### **Following the Marks of Reality**

Even in the nineteenth century the question of “Polish form”, so important for Gombrowicz and Witkacy, was essential for thinking about modernity. It is connected with the shape of national history in the collective consciousness. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Cyprian Kamil Norwid made surprisingly modern discoveries in his literary works and essays (*Zwolon*, *Rozebrana*, *Rzecz o wolności słowa*). He considered form as an outer layer applied to a changing spontaneous content. “Polish form”, this collective imaginative construct of our culture and meaning of history, shaped during the period of the Partitions, presented Poland as a chosen and damaged nation. Even for Norwid, this image of “enslaved Poland” was suspect and ambiguous, because it replaced “form with the aim”, as he wrote in *Zwolon*. Stabilizing “Polish form” – a kind of consolation and therapy in the period of the Partitions – blocking Polish creative thinking and actions, locked culture in a sterile circle of unchanging images. This process is perfectly portrayed in Norwid’s *Rozebrana*. The title is ambiguous – Norwid’s contemporaries might have associated it predominantly with the Partitions, and only subsequently with a woman deprived of her clothes. The mysterious “rozebrana” (undressed woman) from this ballad does not come out to greet her guests; she is locked in a role considered permanent and unchangeable. Choosing this mode of acting, she voluntarily gives up participating in naturally motivated reality<sup>16</sup> – thus, she cannot influence it. The concept of the “rozebrana” or the “enslaved” functions as an indication of inhibited development and somehow exempts Poles from any individual responsibility for the shape of their lives. Stopping progress, it makes them immature, and they lose contact with reality. What is worse, they do not need it, because they build their own national phantasm above or against it.

This thread of reflections determined by the questions: how to free oneself from the oppression of “Polish form”? what is reality? how to reach it? how to describe it?

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<sup>15</sup> J. Andruchowycz, „Atlas. Medytacja”, *Sarmackie krajobrazy. Głosy z Litwy, Białorusi, Ukrainy, Niemiec i Polski*, Ed. M. Pollacka, Wołowiec 2006, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> See: S. Sawicki, *Norwida walka z formą*, Warszawa 1986; and Z. Stefanowska, *Strona romantyków. Studia o Norwidzie*, Lublin 1993.

is present from Norwid through Polish literature from the second half of the nineteenth century to Gombrowicz's provocations. Those questions appear in numerous articles and essays by Prus, who often portrayed Polish society as limited by national self-definitions and as doomed to immaturity, hidden under the garb of "maturity" and seriousness. This so-called "immaturity of civilization" is connected with specific features of Polish culture: the tendency to yield to the hypnotizing power of images of the wonderful past, and a disposition toward large words and gestures not accompanied by collective actions; in one of his chronicles, he claimed that "although we have verbal creativity, we lack creativity in action"<sup>17</sup>. This results not only in backwardness in terms of civilization, but also in a waste of effort – this is an extremely important diagnosis for a positivist, who employs a criterion of social utility.

Polish problems with recognizing reality have been fully presented in the story "Ze wspomnień cyklisty" (From the Memoirs of a Cyclist). Its protagonist is at the same time anecdotal and tragic: Anastazy Fitulski is a little man lost in the world of form; he tries to match the events from his life with some model. Hence we have the model of romantic love to an angel-woman, an elevating social act, and heroic courage originating from the epoch of Polish conspiracies. Prus demonstrates the uselessness of those life models, continuously humiliating his character and shattering his illusions. Absorbed in reconstructing and constructing his unreal projects, Fitulski cannot notice reality, or recognize basic interpersonal relations; he has problems with communication and decoding interpersonal signs. He needs other people only to paint idealist pictures. During one of his suburban bike excursions (prescribed by his doctor as a cure for melancholy and disintegration of personality), he meets people in need, and instead of concentrating on that situation, he imagines some abstract action which would result in future anniversary celebrations and a tribute to the "great son of nation".

Looking for the origins of the character's addiction to beautiful form, Prus indicates education models. The school Anastazy attended refers us to the school from *Ferdydurke*. As during Bladaczka's classes, students consider the axiom, saying that "Stowacki was a great poet"; they discuss which of the Romantic poets should have his monument first. Those questions excite, however, only Polish students, while their peers, the Jew Baruch Holzenkopf and German Fryderyk Szulc, diligently learn mathematics and French. After graduation, they start studying in Berlin, whereas the Poles gathered in the Polish Circle still discuss "the Eastern question" and "modernist literature". As a result of such educational models, Anastazy Fitulski becomes an adult who will never mature; he is an involuntary victim of Polish form based on dysfunctional myths and fear of reality.

<sup>17</sup> B. Prus, *Kroniki*, vol. XIX, Warszawa 1969, p. 84.



Using the grotesque, in his *Wspomnienia cyklisty*, Prus presents situations in which confrontations with reality expose the ridiculousness of the costumes and masks chosen by Fitulski. This rule is similar to the one according to which Gombrowicz organizes tensions in the storyworld of *Ferdydurke*. Like Fitulski, the protagonist of this novel is afraid of “the nonsense and the lack of meaning where we expect it”<sup>18</sup>. Józio is regularly freed from the trap of form by “kupa”, closing subsequent sections of the book, or by a swarm of other students’ bodies. During acts of “psychomachia”, he frees himself from the form of “Polishness” and “maturity” and from the oppression of patriotic terror. Presenting a man suspended between reality and the convention of its experience, Prus is not as radical as Gombrowicz. Also, he proposes different measures; although Fitulski cannot find the way out of the world of futile form, Prus believes in the possibility of being freed from the toxic oppression of culture and starting the way of progress. In the world of *Ferdydurke*, “there is no chance of finding the pure ‘self’”. Each attempt at escaping ends with getting addicted to others and being trapped between them, not with setting free”<sup>19</sup>. Gombrowicz contradicts the terror of form with lack of form, constant immaturity, unreadiness – and this solution is obviously impossible for Prus. Recognizing in his contemporary culture the syndrome of “constant Polish minority”, the writer does not stop believing in maturity – he cannot afford to doubt it, not only as a positivist, but also as a Polish writer in the period of partition. In Gombrowicz’s world, this idea is rejected and the effort of “getting mature” is considered absurd. What we are left with is provocation and play, that is, actions which will not allow us to solidify in form; in his *Diary*, he writes: “[...] a nation truly mature should judge its own merits with temperance, then a nation truly vital must learn to disregard them”<sup>20</sup>.

We can also find a reflection of Polish immaturity and difficulty of reading the signs of reality in Stanisław Brzozowski’s way of reasoning. It is worth mentioning here that he begins his struggle with “Polish form” with Henryk Sienkiewicz – it is no accident that Gombrowicz compares this writer with the master of *Polish salon de beauté*, accusing him of Polish “chronic disbelief in the full reality of existence”<sup>21</sup>. The author of the series of historical novels, very successful in that epoch, is, according to Gombrowicz, a perfect make-up artist, offering Polish people a sort of patriotic make-up. A question similar to Gombrowicz’s – how to read Sienkiewicz in contemporary culture? – appears in Brzozowski’s first article, opening a fierce anti-Sienkiewicz campaign at the beginning of the twentieth century. Brzozowski presents Sienkiewicz as the promoter of a traditional model of culture based

<sup>18</sup> Z. Łapiński, *Ja Ferdydurke. Gombrowicza świat interakcji*, Lublin 1985, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> See: J. Margański, *Gombrowicz. Wieczny debiutant*, Kraków 2001, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, Northern UP 1988, pp. 7–8.

<sup>21</sup> W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1953–1956*, Kraków 1986, pp. 363–364.

on a simple opposition: “same” – “other”, fossilizing reactions of fear. “We suppress any foreignness, we declare war against German books, strengthen the Great Wall of China, and sanitary cordons separating us from Europe” – that is why each independent thought becomes “an importation [...], perhaps invented to torment the childishly good-willed, never-aging people”<sup>22</sup>. Defending ourselves from terrifying strangeness, we lose the chance to participate in culture, because – according to Brzozowski – a nation separating itself from all the others, exposes itself to cultural impoverishment<sup>23</sup>.

Already during the performance of *My młodzi* (*We, The Young*) (1902), Brzozowski diagnosed the situation of Polish culture as hypocritical, based on the common pact of dishonesty called “tact”. Sienkiewicz is the symbol of a culture of “tact” that receives everything as a set of ready-made products. It is the culture of those trained to be silent and to use oblique statements, and of a superficial synthesizing experience of reality.

“Thoughts of our audience sometimes seem to me a creature wrapped with cotton wool and flannel, and before anything reaches them, it becomes dull, deaf and mute”<sup>24</sup>.

“To me, the life of all the strata of our society seems to be some unpleasant, hard and chronic dream [...]. And all the people around us tiptoe, whisper, as if in fear of waking up someone who is sleeping and suffering in this humiliatingly mindless and hopelessly chronic dream”<sup>25</sup>.

In his anti-Sienkiewicz campaign, Brzozowski presents the idea of “hysterical Polish culture” in order to restore its vitality and freshness of experience. Also, to learn its consciousness and, to use the expression of the epoch, the unconscious. He writes:

“Our consciousness, thoughts, and beliefs are most frequently only a cunningly and wisely systematized escape from our own self, a protection from meeting and facing it. Conscious convictions should be always considered as a document written with a code, as a set of symptoms”<sup>26</sup>.

It is worth recalling here that, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, hysteric discourse demonstrates the advent of truth in speech; the attempt at making the subject hysterical is used in psychoanalytical therapy to go from empty speech to full speech, which is supposed to lead to the patient’s self-knowledge<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, we can determine the aim of Brzozowski’s subject’s creation into which he inscribed a reflection on culture.

<sup>22</sup> S. Brzozowski, “Kultura narodowa i chińszczyzna”, *Wczesne prace krytyczne*, Introduction by A. Mencwel, Warszawa 1988, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> “All-human, international culture must derive from national trunks whose roots are directly in the soil of interpersonal relations creating all we call culture” (ibidem, 91). Brzozowski refers here to Stammler’s definition of culture.

<sup>24</sup> S. Brzozowski, “*My młodzi*”, *Wczesne prace krytyczne*, op.cit., p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Idem, “Rozproszkowanie dusz”, *Wczesne prace krytyczne*, op.cit., p. 116.

<sup>26</sup> Idem, “Henryk Sienkiewicz i jego stanowisko w literaturze współczesnej”. *Wczesne prace krytyczne*, op.cit., p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> B. Fink, *Kliniczne wprowadzenie do psychoanalizy lacanowskiej*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 188–194. See also: H. Lang, *Język i nieświadomość. Podstawy teorii psychoanalitycznej Jacques’a Lacana*, Gdańsk 2005, especially the chapter: *Język w rozmowie – rozmowa w języku*.

Following Brzozowski, Gombrowicz also recognizes Polish culture as suppressed (he also often used the strategy of a hysteric), presenting projects signed with provocative slogans – “A Pole should look down on Poland” or “We should not surrender to Poland”. We can observe what is characteristic of Gombrowicz, a recognition of a culture hypnotized by outdated models dependent on the “bland soup” of anachronistic schemes and, therefore, not demonstrating an appetite for life. However, reading Miłosz’s book on Brzozowski entitled *Człowiek wśród skorpionów* (A Human Being among Scorpions), Gombrowicz himself does not admit any such affinities.

“I have not met Brzozowski to this day, I have been able to manage my life so that nothing of his or about him has ever come into my hands.[...] Such oversights do happen; he is one of those Polish authors who are most perfectly unknown to me”<sup>28</sup>.

This judgment matches Brzozowski’s struggle with the Polish “ready world”. Describing Polish form, Brzozowski repeatedly wrote about “a superiority complex transformed into an inferiority complex”, which disturbs the recognition of reality. Following this way of reasoning, in *Narcotics*, Witkacy pointed to the Polish wasting of energy on making collective illusions, phantasms, which block development and doom culture to mediocrity and stagnation. Like Prus in *Wspomnienia cyklisty*, he considered active contact with reality as the only opportunity for Polish culture.

“There are two ways of escaping the disastrous situation caused by a web of backwardness [...] **one way – reality** – goes through the real difficulty to acts justifying – even in pain – the existence of a particular creature on Earth and the rest of space, and lets it remain itself as a mark of its being valuable to itself and, directly or indirectly, to others; the other way – the way of unreal pompousness caused by imaginary greatness [...] goes through ugly fiction to disgraceful end which can be compared to unstitching an empty, ridiculously inflated balloon”<sup>29</sup>. (emphasis added)

## The Model of the Artist

In the discussion of “Polish form” conducted by Gombrowicz and Witkacy, the issue of the social role of the artist and his role in culture becomes central. The nineteenth century in Poland produced the image of a writer who carried out a national mission – be it either the Romantic version, or the positivist “tutor”, the social teacher. A writer was a social institution, which was connected with subordinating the individual need to create: the task of literature in an enslaved culture was determined by the obligation to serve. Modernist artists rebelled against this task, distancing themselves from social expectations and severing the pact of duty. In artistic manifestos from the late nineteenth

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<sup>28</sup> W. Gombrowicz, trans. by Lillian Vallee, *Diary*, vol. 3, Northwestern UP 1993, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> S.I. Witkiewicz, *Narkotyki. Niemyte dusze*, Warszawa 1975, pp. 58–59.

century, we still hear about the writer's tasks originating from independent art, which translated into the imperative of independence or even hostility towards social expectations. Such an image of an artist was planned and used by Stanisław Przybyszewski, who influenced the Polish artistic mood of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in Kraków – through his texts, but also his provocative life which he considered an integral element of his work. Witkacy created his artistic identity in a similar way, but, in his case, the rebellious image was connected with his relationship with his father.

Stanisław Witkiewicz senior was a painter, critic, writer and unquestioned moral authority. Having debuted in the 1880s as an independent aesthete affiliated with naturalist inspirations, he was very critical about Polish images of the place of art in society. In a well-known article “‘Największy’ obraz Matejki” (Matejko's “Greatest” Painting) (1887), he exposed the mechanism of artistic inclinations towards satisfying social expectations. He presented a great artist, who satisfying social needs, paints great scenes of Polish glory such as the battle of Grunwald, thereby betraying art and his own talent<sup>30</sup>. After some time, Witkiewicz changed his mind: at the beginning of the twentieth century, he acknowledged the true value of Matejko's and Sienkiewicz's works and admitted that they stimulated the national spirit in the epoch of captivity and created Polish “tribalism”<sup>31</sup>. In his letters to his son, he shapes his view of the tasks of Polish art precisely in this way – he encourages him toward social engagement. Towards the end of 1912, he writes about the spiritual condition of Poles.

“Today we are dust crushed under the weight of life. The idea of Poland has been lost; the idea which is, as it were, an interatomic power which makes a national whole of loose individual little desires”<sup>32</sup>.

The father often criticizes the son's social indifference; he is afraid of the kind of art which is separate from thinking about national community that is focused on caring about identity and difference.

Distancing himself from his father's model of upbringing and from his standards of creating art, Witkacy did not abandon a common perspective in his mature cultural project. I mean here *Narcotics* – a “manual” in which he uses simultaneously the convention of *serio* and *buffo*. Witkacy diagnoses contemporary culture, warns us against mass culture and relativism. This strange manual's social address is very distinctive – and here,

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<sup>30</sup> See: S. Witkiewicz, “‘Największy’ obraz Matejki”, Idem, *Sztuka i krytyka u nas*, Ed. J.Z. Jakubowski and M. Olszaniecka, Kraków 1971.

<sup>31</sup> This is how he wrote about historical novels by Sienkiewicz: “From those pages burst immediately an impetuous tribal power. [...] To live and act, a nation, like an individual, needs to have an intact elementary life energy”. *Juliusz Kossak*, Lwów 1900, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> S. Witkiewicz, *Listy do syna*, Ed. B. Danek-Wojnowska, and A. Micińska, Warszawa 1969, p. 573.

paradoxically, the son encounters his father. This is how Małgorzata Vražić writes about it, indicating the surprising meetings of both father and son:

“Witkacy chose a way of the drastically didactic, convinced that traditional teaching methods will fail; that is why it is easy to accuse him of buffoonery and the dandyish wearing of the masks of a community worker for a disinterested game. [...] Similarly to Stanisław Witkiewicz, he noticed the need for human profound transformation”<sup>33</sup>.

Similarly to his father, he asked questions about the possibilities of culture versus the threat of unification, looking for some spiritual center in a reality transformed by modernity.

Returning in his “manual” to the role of writer-teacher, Witkacy presented diametrically opposed views concerning his favorite model of the artist – *l'enfant terrible*. We can talk about a similar dichotomy in designing artistic identity when it comes to Gombrowicz, who, declaring that he is interested only in his own “ego”, and not in correcting society as was the nineteenth century literary duty, in fact struggled with the “Polish form” not only for himself. The specific social teaching presented by the two authors is inclined towards the idea of a tutor-writer; however, not in the national, but in the Nietzschean sense, in the name of the slogan “become who you are”. Such an attitude of a tutor was adopted by Stanisław Brzozowski, who promoted ethical demands for social maturity originating from a disagreement with the “ready” world. At the same time, Gombrowicz emphasized the difference between the writers of his generation and Brzozowski’s.

“We are so bored by all these ultimate and profound truths that have to be fed to our own blood that, not really knowing how to reconcile our yawning with the profundity of our undertaking, we began to care only about maintaining appearances”<sup>34</sup>.

Witkacy and Gombrowicz often ridiculed the period of Young Poland and their characteristic image of the writer as a priest of higher secrets – they often caricatured the language of this period, full of grandeur and obscurity. However, they were not the first scoffers. Literary *topoi* and symbols of the last decade of the nineteenth century quickly lost their appeal, got trivialized, and came in for harsh criticism. At the same time, the images of a sensitive, neurotic artist-decadent, discussing ego and his own mental problems found themselves in popular clichéd romances. Such grotesque characters often appear in Gombrowicz’s, and especially Witkacy’s works – starting from his first novel *622 upadki Bunga* (*The 622 Downfalls of Bungo*). Marek Kochanowski interestingly writes about the author’s games with modernist linguistic clichés in Witkacy’s works.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> M. Vražić, *Stanisław Witkiewicz i Witkacy. Dwa paradygmaty sztuki, dwie koncepcje kultury*, Warszawa 2013, p. 230.

<sup>34</sup> W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, vol. 3, translated by Lillian Vallee, Northwestern UP 1993, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> See: M. Kochanowski, *Powieści Witkacego wobec schematów powieści popularnej*, Białystok 2007.

Gombrowicz's and Witkacy's open distance toward the modernist "obligatory set" of symbols and characters fits the inner contradictions and dilemmas of the artists of Young Poland. Brzozowski, Irzykowski, and Wyspiański, not to mention satirists (Lemański, Nowaczyński, Strug – the author of *Zakopanopticon*). We can find the trend of distance towards the lifestyle and literature chosen by modernist artists. This distance is particularly strong right after the revolution in 1905, when intellectuals demystify and deconstruct myths popular especially in the last decade of the nineteenth century, under the influence of a new political and social reality.

Witkacy's and Gombrowicz's games with Young Poland can be treated as an element of "inner" discussion with the modernist background. It is worth emphasizing that when attacking and ridiculing the artistic myths of Young Poland, both writers use them in their own ways. Shaping their public images, provoking and scandalizing – these are the strategies which belong to the repertoire of artists of the Young Poland movement, such as Stanisław Przybyszewski, the hero of his own self-legend, which was followed in the 1890s by half of Europe. Although we tend to connect Witkacy's and Gombrowicz's practices with the poetics of "camp", after all they fit the strategies of dandies and decadents from the end of the nineteenth century. In their self-promotional games or antics, we can find the "deadly serio" characteristic of the modernist period. Dandyish dressing-up and masks function in the same tragic cognition. Within the trend of Young Poland, they shape their distinctive image of the artist's "obligation to self-legend", originating from the imperative of struggle with uniformity of social life and standardization of cultural practice. In this respect Edward Boniecki is right, writing that "with his pompous ego, Witold Gombrowicz found himself in Przybyszewski's procession"<sup>36</sup>.

Obviously Schulz's, Gombrowicz's and Witkacy's affiliations with the Young Poland movement are much deeper. As has been underlined by Małgorzata Szpakowska, all writers of Young Poland "practised not aesthetics, but metaphysics or anthropology, and art was for them a specially favored form of human activity, which was important not only because it was art, but because it was human"<sup>37</sup>. This is undoubtedly the most important perspective that determines the artistic experiments of late modernism. Distancing himself from the style of the Young Poland movement, Gombrowicz noticed the groundbreaking character of his projects and actions, writing in the *Diary* of Przybyszewski – one of the leaders of the artistic movement of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – that "His was the first ruthless art in Poland: an art that accommodated

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<sup>36</sup> E. Boniecki, *Struktura „nagiej duszy”*. Studium o Stanisławie Przybyszewskim, Warszawa 1993, p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> M. Szpakowska, *Światopogląd Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, Warszawa 1976, p. 89.

nothing, being an unmerciful spiritual unburdening. He was the first among us to demand a voice"<sup>38</sup>.

## Transformations of Prose

Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz are writers whose works summarize an important step in the development of prose, especially realist prose. The attempts at its redefinition (connected with looking for "real realism") started in the 1880s.

In the very middle of this process Prus's *Lalka* comes as its most important effect – the novel which would not have been written without the author's critical thinking about nineteenth century ways of representation. As has already been mentioned, presenting the destruction of the world built on hard models of identity, Prus's novel offers an innovative clash of various narrative viewpoints; it used Zola's technique of point of view, distancing itself from Balzac's independent description, to the benefit of personal description connected with a character's mental state. The writer gave up here (in a way that is often confusing and controversial to readers) from ordering various events, and presented, as Flaubert did, the role of coincidence; he followed the influence of stereotypes, which inhibited communication. *Lalka* left its readers with questions about understanding the world and the representability of reality. Read together with Prus's *Notatki o kompozycji* (Notes on Composition)<sup>39</sup>, it defines the way writers of subsequent generations will follow – abandoning chronological and spatial linearity, the omniscient narrator, closed composition, and building instead the image of a world woven from various voices impossible to unify.

Certainly the authors from the Young Poland movement more radically than Prus disturbed the model of the classic realist novel, transgressed generic boundaries, replaced characters' adventures with narrators' events, presenting a fluid reality, marked with a constant, elusive change. Polish experiments with novels of the early twentieth century were inclined towards lyrical and dramatized description, and the bravest ones (e.g. Waclaw Berent's fiction) towards polyphonic or even simultaneous narration. Those ideas questioned reading habits, required a new type of vigilance, and invited readers to a game which led to a completely different way of thinking about a text – treating it as an unfinished work, open for readers' intervention and decontextualisation.

In the experiments with prose from turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in the demands of literary criticism concerning refreshing a novel coming from the early twentieth century, we can observe various concepts of a literary text not

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<sup>38</sup> W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, vol. 1, Translated by Lillian Vallee, Northwestern UP 1988, p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> See: B. Prus, *Literackie notatki o kompozycji*, oprac. A. Martuszewska, Gdańsk 2010.

as a ready “product” with its structure and appearance, but as a differently conceived transaction between the author and readers. This opened up the way for experiments which we now call hypertextuality, and which were distinct in Tadeusz Miciński’s and Karol Irzykowski’s works<sup>40</sup>. These ideas remain very close to Witkacy’s and Schulz’s prose and to intertextual games by Gombrowicz.

It is worth considering the question of novelness for a while – all these writers choose it, obviously modifying it to suit their own needs. In the late nineteenth century a novel was treated, also in Polish criticism, as a *passé* model, because it was associated with realism – with the contract with representation which was breached by modernist artists. They departed from classic novel-style plot, changed the status of an “event”, abandoned the rules of games with a reader determined by the generic canon. At the same time, the novel remains an elementary (despite the success of drama in Young Poland!) genre suitable for the basic cognitive tasks of literature: those connected with discovering the secrets of the psyche and inclined to the demystification of social stereotypes. One of the most radical destructors of the model of the novel, Tadeusz Miciński (young Witkacy’s master) in *Nietota*, a book encompassing various literary genres, negates and ridicules novelness, and then returns to it. Novelness is connected with “wholeness”, a concept very important for modernists for compositional and philosophical reasons. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Stanisław Brzozowski summed it up in the following way:

“It is easy to understand why nowadays a novel [...] has been the genre which produced the greatest and most characteristic works. [...] The nervous character of the contemporary novel, constant change of setting, masterful transition from lyricism to irony, from narrative to almost drama – all these reflect the elementary psychic basis which originates from the development of contemporary culture”<sup>41</sup>.

An interesting commentary to the history of the genre is offered by the case of narrative works by Witkacy, who located the novel beyond the possibilities of Pure Form (he reserved it for a drama). He treated the novel as a genre of the mass culture that was abhorred by him and devoid of meaning. At the same time, he used the novel to carry out his teaching program – to establish some form of contact with a wide audience, whom he still wanted to influence. Distanced from novelness, and especially from its realist canon (which in his epoch determined models and choices of mass literature), Witkacy artfully used novelistic strategies and exposed their superficiality in describing the world,

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<sup>40</sup> See my article: “Hipertekst przed hipertekstem w powieści początku XX wieku”, *Prawdziwy koniec XIX wieku. Śladami nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2010.

<sup>41</sup> S. Brzozowski, *Współczesna powieść i krytyka*, Introduction by T. Burek, Kraków 1984, p.72–73.



which can be observed by a careful reader. In this sense, Witkacy's novels, starting from *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo*, have distinct autothematic features. Already in this novel the repertoire of ready-made descriptive and plot solutions connected with the convention of "a novel about an artist" undermines the idea of embarrassment, which is present in this novel in the ending written after some years. Playing with the convention also appeals to the poetics of the grotesque – similarly to Miciński's *Nietota*. However, Witkacy's games are also inclined towards Irzykowski's *Pałuba* (1903), in which the semantic centre is determined by further destructions of descriptive models, *topoi* and plot clichés connected with the realist and naturalist convention.

In the prose of Young Poland, especially after 1905, when the new language of Polish modernity was shaped, we can find the characteristic "novella novel", or a loose series of short stories with distinct compositional features (e.g. *Ludzie podziemi* by Andrzej Strug or *Dziecko salonu* by Janusz Korczak). This characteristic feature is predominantly the way of experiencing the world, which is easier to capture thanks to novella's specific epiphanic character. Eliza Orzeszkowa noticed it in the early 1890s and called the novella "a lightning flash" which enlightens what was formerly hidden or repressed<sup>42</sup>. Difficult to classify in terms of their genres, the series of novellas from the Young Poland period are sets of such lightning flashes or discoveries. It is worth saying that this way of presentation – or rather this method of generic play – often appears at the beginning of the twentieth century in literary portraits of the city. Certainly Schulz is close to those models in *The Street of Crocodiles*.

New types of prose, which include Schulz's works, are obviously connected with "seeking reality". Polish modernist writers of the early twentieth century abandon mimetic, realist convention, which did not bring any cognitive effects; ambitious modernist prose demonstrates "the incompatibility of the world and narrative"<sup>43</sup>. However, although according to Franczak, "realism was rejected as a certain *system of marking* regarding itself to be the a window on the world"<sup>44</sup>, modernists do not stop looking for the truth; they distance themselves from realism in the name of an approaching reality. It is characteristic that we can find this distance towards realist representation in such "classics" of Polish realism as those of Bolesław Prus!

Specifying his and Schulz's position in Polish literature of the 1930s, Gombrowicz wrote in his *Diary* that "we both roamed Polish literature like a flourish, ornament,

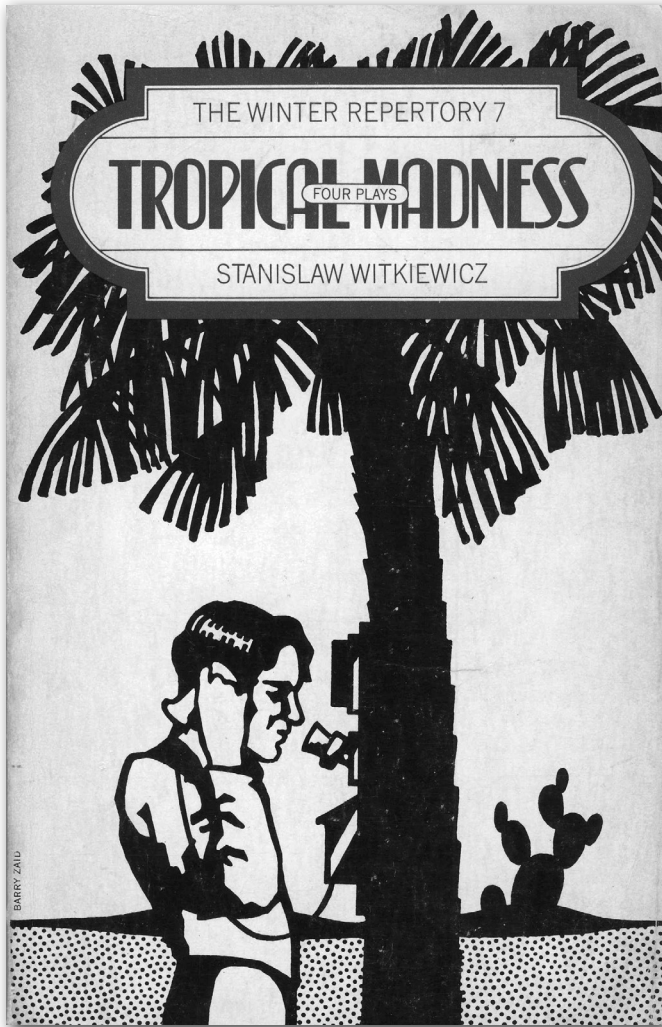
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<sup>42</sup> E. Orzeszkowa, *Powieść i nowela*, Eadem, *Pisma krytycznoliterackie*, Ed. E. Jankowski, Wrocław-Kraków 1959.

<sup>43</sup> J. Franczak, *Poszukiwanie realności. Światopogląd polskiej prozy realistycznej*, Kraków 2007, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

chimera, griffin"<sup>45</sup>. His image of a completely "separate" writer was also repeatedly designed and demonstrated by Witkacy. In the light of my analysis, the place of these three authors looks different: it is located at the center of the search that the literature of Polish Modernism was about already from the middle of the nineteenth century.



The cover of an American edition of Wikacy's plays (New York 1972)

<sup>45</sup> W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, vol. 3, Translated by Lillian Vallee, Northwestern UP 1988, p. 4.