

STEFAN MORAWSKI

*IS THE MODERNIST WORLD-
VIEW ALIVE TODAY?**

I

I put the question deliberately in general terms because I consider it pertinent to contemporary European culture as a whole. This introductory statement is not intended to ignore national differences, however, and I shall dwell on Polish examples, which constitute a special case. Let me stress at the outset that my approach to the problem is the exact opposite from that of the currently fashionable practice of the so-called "retro-wave." To go back to the turn of the century means, first of all, to treat it as an historical past which came to be seen only, or primarily, as a set of stylistic devices, i.e., beauty admired at a distance. Second, this return to the past is of a sentimental character. According to this superficial perception of Modernism, Art Nouveau appears to be an irretrievable oasis of aesthetic harmony which is, nonetheless, somewhat perverse and obscure. My contention leads to considering the essential structure of the Modernist life-style in order to reveal the arresting recurrence of its dominant features. If we assume that not formal values but the worldview is the primary component to be examined, such a premise implies the need for an analysis of artistic (aesthetic) phenomena from an ideological perspective. In other words, in asking about the Modernist worldview, we touch as well upon art, seeing it both as an objective domain under particular influences and an active, forceful subject co-shaping the main ideology of the epoch.

We must keep in mind that "Modernism," like all terms and concepts employed in the humanities, is ambiguous. The twofold meaning of Modernism should be pointed out at the beginning of our deliberations. The term refers to the cultural period of approximately 1890 to 1914. In this sense, it also covers the remnants of Naturalism or Realism as well as the politically engaged art that appeared under the banner of Marxism or Anarchism or reborn nationalism disguised as folklore. Modernism, within this framework, is only the new and dominant element of a larger mental structure and creative en-

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vironment. In another sense, Modernism refers to a definite artistic trend with philosophical, anti-Naturalistic underpinnings. It is by no means unequivocal, since it comprises Symbolist and Expressionist currents, as well as Jugendstil (Secession) and sometimes Neoromantic elements. There are no clear-cut boundary lines between the Modernist trend and the rest of the creative efforts in the Modernist era. Thus analyses of one and the other very often criss-cross. I shall focus my attention on the Modernist worldview because it encompasses the main attitudes and also the entangled interrelationships of the philosophy, art, religion, life-style, and so on, of that time.

II

Any synthetic presentation of a worldview will be a risky venture open to the objection of its being arbitrary. I run the risk with premeditation, since there are a number of solid studies on the topic and my viewpoint pretends to no originality. I have collected to my best knowledge and understanding the topical issues which seem to be reiterated in all important works on Modernism. Let me state it succinctly. The natural realm was no longer a shelter for the top thinkers of the *fin-de-siècle*. They realized that man lives fettered by civilization and culture and the Rousseauesque approach was a sheer dream. At most, for them nature was a barbaric, primitive force which, through a return to it as a source, might eventually facilitate the re-establishment of the social vitality of humankind. History was no credible harbor either. They regarded its substance as mythopoetic since tradition, ongoingly selected and remade, gave no guarantee of truth. Science became suspect in all spheres. The axioms of Determinism were turned into a laughing stock. The idea of progress could only be sneered at. No prediction of the future stood the test of critical thought. The crucial stimuli of culture, they thought, were conceived by heroic individuals or the elite. The relation to the absolute, to transcendent elements, as well as the irrational contact with a mysterious reality, became fundamental. Mysticism or gnosis replaced the preceding Naturalist attitudes which, at that time, were regarded as mystified dogmas, or even the prejudices of sterile intellect. The world, they found, was deprived of meaning. Existence seemed to be shaky and vulnerable to satanic influences. Philosophy resigned from any systematic reflection, being aware that life, that is, its chaotic impenetrable rudiments, resists all conceptual description and imposed order. *Lebensphilosophie*, then in vogue, was developed in a literary, essayistic form. It corresponded to the preconceived accidentality and fragmentariness of being.

The socio-political realities and civilizational turmoil ushered in a rebellion against the hollowness of a totally alienated existence. The search for authenticity in opposition to sham-harmony was a constant motif in intellectual and artistic manifestos or programs of the time. The anti-bourgeois attitudes

went well with the conviction that only sovereign and outstanding individuality in an irrevocable clash with philistinism (including the ruling class and subservient bureaucracy) is able to warrant the survival of spiritual values. The growing, bursting crisis of European culture then found its first heralds and also certain thinkers began trying to pin down the new phenomenon. An anarchistic mood prevailed among the creative intelligentsia and was imbued with a tragic tone.

Why so? Because the revolt led to Prometheian and utopian thinking, but the "utopian" projects did not transcend the nostalgia for cosmic or social unity. Indeed, the Modernist ideology rested on antinomies between culture and nature, history and the universe, collectivity and the individual, good and evil. These were antinomies which could not be overcome and thus bore witness to the Manicheian bedrock of all being and human existence. Hence, among other things this resulted in a pessimistic atmosphere, of which the most extreme expression was the anticipation of catastrophic apocalypse. Hence, moreover, we find the basic and crucial trait of the tragic in the sense of irreconcilable opposites: the human longing for unity and harmony which are essentially unattainable.

The artist shared all the above assumptions. His main context was metaphysics and if he referred to history the response was one of utmost skepticism, repulsion, or rejection. The artist looked for a harbor in open aestheticism, but then he adopted this as the supreme value of humankind and thus gave it a religious coloring. He scorned the stupid masses and yearned to be a genius, i.e., the priest and prophet of a personal (but nonetheless universally relevant) truth in direct touch with the Absolute. What he appreciated the most was irrational intuition, flashes of revelation or imagination as the genuine foundation stone upon which anything truly immortal is anchored. His life-style was aesthetic. He dedicated himself to the ongoing challenge which was sometimes scandalous or blasphemous. He also exercised self-analysis, or self-adoration (*Schöngest*) in extreme cases, because he sincerely believed that a counter-nihilistic pattern of being could be generated solely through an expressive, creative existence. He did so in opposition to the philistines who mistakenly saw in him merely a nihilist, whereas, indeed, it was the surrounding socio-political and civilizational realities which were deprived of any genuine value.

The synopsis I have drawn here is necessarily simplified and provides only a limited grasp of the Modernist aura. I would, however, still insist that it hits the mark. I have taken into account all of the pivotal Nietzschean ideas which supported the spiritual movement of the years 1890-1914, while the alternative shore of Zarathustra is presented here as the utopian horizon. My chief concern is with the destructive, meaningless culture which causes one's own existence and the principles of human history to become problematic. Man lives in a void, or, less radically stated, he is imprisoned by an "in-between" epoch which turns life into quicksand.

III

Two salient factors are symptomatic of the Polish version of Modernism. First of all, the emphasis on the autonomy of cultural values and the modeling function of art and the artist in attempts to save what is most precious in the thesaurus of human values was much more poignant than in the remaining expressions of European Modernism. Second, the liberating tendencies took a different shape, i.e., either that of a persistent messianic belief in Poland's spiritual mission (Artur Górski's or Stanisław Szczepanowski's views), or an ethical, Christian twist of thinking, which could, in a providential way, bring about Poland's salvation and proper status (Tadeusz Miciński's and Marian Zdziechowski's writings), or else socialist revolution, which would turn Poland into a sovereign and fully efficient state (Stanisław Brzozowski's standpoint in the middle stage of his evolution), or finally, folkloristic-plebian endeavors to stimulate cultural vitality through the country's archaic, indigenous treasures in the domain of painting, architecture, music, dance, and spectacles (Stanisław Witkiewicz's prospectus for the Zakopane Mountain style, carried out by an applied arts cooperative of Kraków artists, and also Karol Szymanowski's best music). All these issues were underscored in such a strong manner that to some degree they demoralized the Modernist vision.

The two factors above seem to be contradictory, but in fact they mingled in a dialectical nexus, stemming from the ever present idea of striving towards national independence, which naturally allotted definite duties to art. The more dramatic the seemingly stabilized pressure of the alien oppressor's rule became, the more obvious the Modernist arguments appeared. According to these arguments, the endurance of the Polish national identity was determined precisely by the country's cultural riches, and artists could and should be the bearers of the Polish spiritual endowment beyond or against tyrannical history. At the same time, the Modernist ideology was altered here because of the inevitable thrust towards a better future. The overriding pessimism receded to give place to certain kinds of eschatological meditations. Thus the primary assumption of autonomy of art and the artist's life-style as a model had to defer in the face of patriotic demands. That is why the structure of the Polish Modernist worldview, in comparison, say, with the German, Scandinavian, and Italian trends or the English and Russian paragons, is simultaneously much more compact and impure.

On the one hand, it is impure because the very contradiction outlined before boils down to the constituent tenet of this particular Modernist ideology (the socialist-minded and Christian-minded conceptions as well as the folklore trends were counterparts of Messianism, and this in turn was paradoxically linked, among other things, to the aesthetic metaphysics of the "naked soul" which enters into existential mysteries). It is compact, on the other hand, because due to this criss-crossing of contradictory drives it is easier to discern

the Modernist core in the views of Zenon Przesmycki and Stanisław Przybyszewski, who were leaning less than their compatriots towards the Messianic approach.

The same, perhaps in a more spectacular fashion, can be discovered with regard to Polish art and literature of the period. Przybyszewski's mature novels or Waclaw Berent's *Moldered Wood* are manifestly characteristic of Modernist ideology, whereas Stanisław Wyspiański's dramas can be located only on its margins and Jacek Malczewski's pictures on Polish martyrdom are much farther from the essence of the Modernist worldview than are Witold Wojtkiewicz's cycles, *Circuses*, *Ceremonies*, and *Puppets* (also his significant *Children's Crusade* of 1905 remains equivocal) (Fig. 1). Kazimierz Tejmajer's reflective lyrics confronted with Jan Kasproicz's can be judged as more Modernist to the same extent as Miciński's historiosophic visions in his dramas juxtaposed with Stefan Zeromski's stories or novels. Xawery Dunikowski's Expressionist sculpture (e.g., *Fate*, *Breath*, *Dante*) or that of Konstanty Laszczka, corresponds more closely to the discussed ideology than, say, Józef Mehoffer's stained-glass windows or the landscape painting of Leon Wyczółkowski, Julian Fałat, or Stanisław Masłowski. In the history of music, Mieczysław Karłowicz's symphonic poems are by no accident cited as typically Modernist compositions while his colleagues (Szymanowski's *Second Symphony* included) went in different directions. There is always a need to exemplify any constructed concept (any "ism") by works of art which are more or less appropriate to it. In the present case, the differences of degree are quite considerable and they shed light on the distinctive qualities of Polish Modernism. In contradistinction to other European or Russian examples, decadence was exclusively a side-effect in this country. That also explains why the Prometheian trend which transcended the worldview's demarcation lines grew to be pervasive. This has, finally, a bearing on the somewhat confused nature of the Polish "art for art's sake" movement, which, as I already underlined, was rather more metaphysical or ethical than aesthetic in the strict sense of the term.

IV

Granted that my explanation of the seminal Modernist features is convincing, it is not difficult to make an argument for why this worldview is alive today. After all, we are the melancholic, if not despairing, heirs of the critical situation that was already crystallized then, which initiated the process the dangerous momentum of which we experience now. We are conscious that the mere continuity of culture is threatened, and the crisis which was expanding and maturing over the last seventy years has robbed us of the myths that might still have flourished on the basis of their Prometheian stance against the catastrophic prognostications of that time. I mean the myths of

Science, Technology, Socialist Revolution, and the Welfare State, which promised man's self-fulfillment. The rationale of the scientific ethos went bankrupt. The specific, that is, epistemological, determinants (criteria) which were to define the distinctiveness of truth achieved by the sciences turned out to be unsatisfactory. The purported beneficial function of the sciences associated with advancing technology became even more irrelevant. It brought, as we know all too well, ecological troubles, many painful queries, and endangered mankind's fate. Technology not only enhanced pragmatic, instrumental values but caused the increased menace, real and potential, of ruthless, ubiquitous dictatorship, or managerial rule thanks to microprocessors, electronic systems, computers, and so on. The gloomy vision of Zamiatin's *We* seems, alas, to be embodied to a great extent. Instead of equality and freedom we have rather an Orwellian society of citizens manipulated, directly or indirectly, by Political Bureaus or Big Corporations disposing of mass-media networks.

Science plus technology offer no redeeming concept of the meaning of existence; the liquidation of poverty and burgeoning of comfort did not cancel the question of how to live in a worthy way. To the contrary, it intensified the problem of rootless existence without any guiding principles. History is a cruel goddess swallowing its victims and giving hypocritical excuses always *ex post facto*. That is why we have witnessed a religious revival symptomatically related to the Far Eastern heritage, because its religion was and is more philosophical (cosmos-oriented) and less institutionalized. Mysticism and gnosis returned. Systematic thinking is abandoned because we are aware of passing through the critical phase when changing mosaics of events gain priority over any cohesive and stable whole. Some artists of today look for support in science and technology, but the major wave flows elsewhere. Metaphysics seems to be the most promising context for creation and, if history provides a frame of reference, then it is challenge, revolt, and questioning which come to the fore. The irrational powers are again fashionable and reason, to our chagrin, has become in all respects suspect. The wasteland around us calls for the artist's most lucid self-awareness and the need to identify his role in the predominant chaos. In short, all that remains of gigantic blueprints and aspirations is stifling ashes, and the hopes invested in human commonwealth have been changed into involuntary participation in an anthill.

Of course, the Heraclitean warning that we cannot enter the same river twice in the same spot holds true. The present-day crisis is deeper and the lessons we have learned make us a little bit wiser. There are no ventures calling for a return to barbaric and primitive impulses to serve as the springboard for a humanist republic, because we possess better knowledge of the dark effects of the Nazis' chthonic upsurge. It was a logical consequence that it led to the "orderliness" of Auschwitz. The concept of utopia has also been significantly remodeled now. It means no more alternative realities, planned in

advance and envisioned as paradisaic harmony. The Soviet example taught us how facile it is to start with angelic intentions and build a devilish system. Utopia is understood instead as a *Prinzip Hoffnung* (in the sense that the German philosopher, Ernst Bloch, gave to it); thus we find a gradual transcendence of *is* towards *ought* through permanent self-control, openness to withdrawal from erroneous ideas, self-government, and the consciousness that the principles of equality, freedom, brotherhood, and justice cannot be ideally reconciled in a perfect unity. Hence, today the Modernist feeling of the tragic (unsolved antinomies) is no opposite pole of moderate utopianism.

Last but not least, the artist's status and position underwent a radical transformation. The initial self-critical thought already had emerged with the Dadaists and the Russian Constructivists. Currently, aesthetic values do not serve as the most adequate tool and test of the human ethos. They are, if not played down, considered to be illusionary and self-deceptive. The artist representing the recent avant-garde realizes that he cannot carry out the functions of a guru. As a prime mover or messenger of the proper life-style he is one among peers, i.e., engineers or workers, philosophers or clergymen, students or judges who, like him, try to corroborate ultimate values and show the way out of the engulfing labyrinth. All of them have the same potential of illumination. The ways out of the labyrinth are different; they may be religious, political, or moral, or sometimes play is meant to be the new Ariadne's thread, sometimes love, and so on.

In Poland the revival of Modernist thought with the modifications mentioned above is by all means palpable. Again, the particular form that it would take depends on the confused character and shakeability of Poland's status. The experience of cultural crisis bears a special imprint here, combining as it does the dramatic lots of Europe, the whole world, and the nation. It can be traced in the para-novels of Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Konwicki, or Kazimierz Brandys. It pulsates in the theatrical pieces of Sławomir Mrożek. In the so-called para-theater (carried out mainly by student teams), say, in Leszek Raczak's "Theater of the Eighth Day," it becomes the skeleton and flesh of the message. Andrzej Wajda's reading of past and present history is another instance of the same tendency. Some Polish conceptual artists as well as those who produce happenings or performances (e.g., Jerzy Rosołowicz, Jerzy Beres, and Zbigniew Warpechowski) are equally sensitive to the universal traits of crisis and the historical misfortunes of their own country. In the new wave of creativity after December 1981, the sacred signs of Christ and the emblems of the White Eagle of Solidarity had a glorious, or rather lugubrious, return.

To conclude our short presentation of a complex topic, we could say that the Postmodernist mood persists as long as the world remains out of joint and the tragic aspects of individual (plus national) existence are sharpened. Nonetheless, as I pointed out earlier, there is no surrender now to satanic Apocalypse, for we are more enlightened than our Modernist predecessors. We know

that we must and can survive the dark era by cunningly building many small bridges to a brighter future. Today artists (Polish among them) contribute to this effort by employing their own stratagems and joining hands with all dissidents who have already passed from subculture through counter-culture to an alternative life-style.



Fig. 1: Witold Wojtkiewicz. *In Limbo*, 1908. Photograph from the Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw. Photograph by Walentyna Madroszkiewicz.

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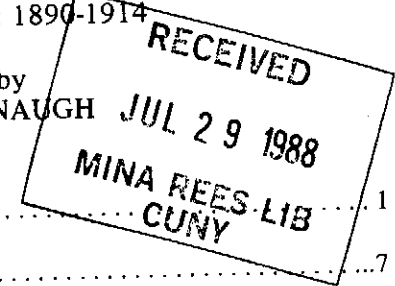
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THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC
IN POLISH ART: 1890-1914

Edited by
JAN CAVANAUGH



<i>Introduction</i>	1
Jan Cavanaugh	
<i>The Twilight of Modernism</i>	7
Wiesław Juszczak	
<i>Myth and Normality</i>	35
Jacek Wozniakowski	
<i>A View from the Window</i>	57
Agnieszka Morawińska	
<i>Polish Artists at the Vienna "Secession" and the "Hagenbund"</i>	79
Hans Bisanz	
<i>At the Sources of Polish Modernism</i>	99
Maria Olszaniecka	
<i>Man as a Creative Subject in the Aesthetic Theories of the Polish Modernists</i>	111
Jadwiga Ciszewska	
<i>Is the Modernist Worldview Alive Today?</i>	123
Stefan Morawski	

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTEs RENDUS

Barry P. Scherr, <i>Russian Poetry: Meter, Rhythm, and Rhyme</i> (Michael Sosa)	133
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7 464NY2 338
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