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SYNOPSIS

The present monograph deals with modernist tendencies in Polish literature of the 20th century, i.e. approximately until the year 1939. Modernism is here understood as a set of different responses to the same problematic, regarding the essence and the consequences of modernity in the spheres of social life, culture and art.

A scholar of Polish modernism (in the sense of a coherent cultural formation) has few studies of the subject at his disposal. Therefore, his or her situation is entirely different from that of researchers inquiring into the Western European or American variety, since the latter may consult hundreds of books devoted to modernist tendencies in practically all fields: art, literature, culture, social life, the media, etc. What is more, they can resort to analyses of historical formations (e.g. modernism and romanticism, modernism and the enlightenment, modernism and postmodernism), anthologies of primary sources, and – most importantly – guidebooks to navigating the colossal store of texts regarding modernism: paper and digital publications, but also special collections in archives and museums.

The discourse concerning modernism describes issues dissimilar from those touched upon in historical analyses of 20th century literature. For this reason, in this book I constantly change the ‘focus’, the perspective from which various literary phenomena are analyzed. Beside essays addressed to specialists, *The Modalities of Modernism* contains university lectures and interpretations of particular works – the reader will find both analysis and synthesis; fruit of my own academic research next to overviews and popularizations; critical and theoretical discourse alongside essayistic reflection.

The general hypotheses set out in the present study with regard to Polish modernism are as follows. Firstly, literary historians do not treat modernism as a single, unified phenomenon, and hence the term ‘modernism’ is used throughout the text as a *plurale tantum*. Thus, in this book, ‘modernism’ is always to be understood as a ‘set of modernisms’, a singular configuration of invariably dialogic, contradictory and mutually exclusive tendencies, phenomena, programs or attitudes, of which each and every one aspired to being the true marker of modernism. Most of these were in fact polar opposites, e.g. the quest for universality on the one hand, and for locality on the other; cultivating national traditions and identities, juxtaposed with a fondness for multiculturalism; lauding urban civilization versus

the cult of nature and rusticity; an interest in radical subjectivism and individual psychology, set against social psychology, i.e. inquiries into the attitudes and fates of collective entities, groups or families (hence the popularity of sagas).

From its very beginnings, modernism featured a strong current associated with the emancipation of women (the roots of which were crucially different from contemporary feminism), an interest in the other, the different, the transgressive, as well as the liminal, trespassing beyond established social (esthetic, moral, etc.) norms.

In the light of the above, modernism is to be understood not as one proposition, marker or phenomenon, but as a dense web of relations between contradictory, and most often mutually exclusive responses to the problematic of the essence and consequences of modernity. In this sense, modernism becomes an analysis and criticism (also self-criticism) of modernity. Modernism – as a label for a particular phenomenon – is a polyphony of contrary concepts, programs, values and their realizations.

Secondly, like any other cultural phenomenon, modernism emerged and developed within a variety of social, historical and cultural traditions, as well as in different political or religious systems. Central-European and Eastern-European modernism – a term which I believe encompasses the Polish modernist tradition – is markedly different in numerous respects from the Anglo-Saxon variety in all its incarnations. Among factors contributing vitally to the emergence of these differences in Poland (Eastern Europe) I include, among others, the strong Futurist tradition and its consequences (ludic assaults on language), as well as specific historical experience. When industrial societies were formed in Western Europe, the Polish state was non-existent; furthermore, Eastern Europe was affected simultaneously by two totalitarian regimes (the Nazist and the Communist rule), which were exterminatory in nature and which caused a radical shift in national boundaries. Last but not least, we should consider the emigration (after 1945) of a considerable part of the Polish pre-war elite (e.g. illustrious writers such as Miłosz, Gombrowicz or Herling-Grudziński), and the concurrent trauma of the so-called ‘socialist realism’, which became the only form of art allowed by the Communist authorities in the motherland (1949-1956).

Thirdly, it is impossible to speak of one modernism in literature because of the inherent difference in various writers’ experiences and definitions of modernity, as well as in the conclusions drawn by them from the latter in different periods (also with regard to fundamental artistic issues). Furthermore, modernism cannot be narrowed down to certain literary occurrences, because literature constituted only a small portion of this phenomenon. Thus, literary modernism is not so much a matter of certain conventions, expressions,

manifestos or theories, but a set of diverse phenomena occurring within the entire culture and social life at least since mid-19th century, and in a broader perspective since the Renaissance era. This is so because literature records the search not for one response, but for several different ones, which most often lead it into extra-literary areas, including those that put the very existence of such a response into question. Therefore, the modernist aspect of literature cannot be described by recourse to only one set of characteristics; after all, many such sets, mutually exclusive and producing different varieties, co-existed at the same time. Hence, the fundamental goal of my book is not to adjust certain Polish literary phenomena to an abstract formula with which to describe modernism in general, but to indicate discourses capable of representing the specificity of the Polish strand.

Nearly all authors of Polish publications on the subject tirelessly avoid qualifying modernism as ‘national’, and apply this term (i.e. ‘modernism’) exclusively to universal, or at least pan-European, phenomena. Adopting such a perspective is obviously valid, and even necessary, when discussing issues of a general, metahistorical or comparative nature, crucial to the multilingual culture of Central Europe. In practice, however, it abets mechanical transitions from general considerations to interpreting particular phenomena within Polish literature, which then become mere illustrations of modernism as a universal trend. Yet contemporary research into the historical variants of modernism deals first and foremost with national or regional varieties (e.g. in Austria under the Habsburg Monarchy in the 19th and 20th century). Such is also the perspective assumed in the present study. Modernism is indeed an international (i.e. European and North American) phenomenon, but its local characteristics, concerns and interpretations are determined by particular nations’ cultural, linguistic and artistic traditions, as well as their transnational, regional and multicultural contexts; an apt illustration of the above is the so-called ‘Vienna secession’ (which radiated north and east to Kiev, Petersburg or Moscow, and south to Ljubljana, Zagreb or Trieste, proliferating especially in the vast central part of this region).

But what does ‘national’ actually mean? Polish modernism towards the close of the 19th century existed in a strikingly different cultural, geographical, national and ethnic reality than after 1945, or at the dawn of the 21st century. Without elaborating on the above, I assume the obviousness of the fact that the concept of nationality in Polish literature is historically ‘multinational’, multid denominational and multicultural, whilst the sole classificatory criterion is the writer’s choice of a particular language as the tool of literary expression: thus, Singer will be considered a Jewish writer, whereas Schulz will be regarded as a Polish one; analogously, Conrad’s writing will be seen as English, Bienek’s as German, and Wat’s as

Polish. Far from invalidating research into the complex issues of origin, cultural and linguistic osmosis, or multiple identities (where ethnic categories do not overlap with linguistic or artistic ones), the above perspective enables and fosters such investigations.

Importantly, the concept of modernism presented in this book is my own proposition. The term is not used to describe a certain epoch, current, trend or program, the existence of which can be proved empirically, but denotes instead a certain literary-historical reconstruction, composed both of empirical literary phenomena and theoretical premises, as well as interpretive theses and hypotheses. Thus, it is simultaneously a literary-historical model, a reconstruction and a map of certain phenomena (which I collectively describe as modernist), based on several different critical premises.

The writers whose works are analyzed in the present study belong to various literary generations and can be credited with creating the masterpieces of Polish modernism. Although the term ‘modernism’ encompasses all phenomena occurring within the modern civilization, in my book I focus almost exclusively on examples culled from so-called ‘high’ literature. For sheer lack of space, I do not take into consideration modernist texts of the popular variety. It must be borne in mind, however, that this vast area of what Gombrowicz described as “literature for canteen cooks” (*literatura dla kucharek*) was not only an integral element of all modern literatures, but also the central and even decisive component of modern culture – a multidirectional phenomenon of 20th century writing, which, repeatedly inquiring into the nature of modernity, proved the most durable, supra-generational experience of the century’s principal artists and thinkers.

The book’s first part offers a set of theoretical propositions which supply the methodological foundation for researching Polish modernism. In the second part I reconstruct ‘modernist currents’ which functioned uniquely in the Polish context, treating them as units of literary-historical continuity in 20th century literature (Parnassianism, the Decadent Movement, Expressionism, Symbolism, Futurism, the Avant-garde, Neoclassicism, Catastrophism). The third part brings a discussion of modernism in the first half of the 20th century, based on analyses and interpretations of outstanding works and phenomena (e.g. the writings of Przybyszewski, Irzykowski, Nałkowska, Gombrowicz, Schulz, Berent, Mackiewicz, Miłosz or Szymborska).

In *The Modalities of Modernism* I offer a set of methodological and literary-historical premises, tools for analysis and interpretations of a few selected examples, concentrating on the themes and ideological aspects of modernism as well as on issues of esthetics, poetics or language. The objective is to establish the category of modernism as the key marker of

continuity in literary phenomena from late 19th century until recent times. Apart from literary-historical aspects (such as particular trends and their dominant characteristics, motifs or themes) we must take into account the general qualities of modern prose in its many variants – e.g. the new approach to plot; recognizing the relative nature of time, space and causality; analyzing the relation between the individual and the world; analyzing cognition (the scope of the characters' consciousness); depicting the perception process along with various acts of its verbalization; representation of the functioning of thought and memory; rejecting mechanistic theories of causality; emphasizing the role of chance in life and art; foregrounding language as the material and the means of epistemological actions; questioning extant conventions of expression (e.g. languages, styles, genres, media); metatheoretical reflection; abandoning the opposition between the subject and the object in the cognitive act. These elements constitute a shared poetics for many early modern writers.

Among other ingredients of modern narrative poetics one can enumerate the 'polyphonic' structure of the work; temporal-spatial simultaneity; the interchangeability of roles between the narrator, the protagonist and the author (the so-called 'authorial narration'); the analysis of narrative credibility (which depends on consciousness, scope of knowledge, social status, the narrator's reliability, etc.); striving to grasp the object in an epistemic act. These were accompanied by experiments with various elements of prose poetics, made possible by such techniques of the modern novel as montage, retrospection or association.

A special position among these characteristics is occupied by the poetics of the interior monologue, which reveals the "dark currents of consciousness" that Henry James warned against. The interior monologue became one of the most advanced devices developed in modern prose, the authors of which strove to represent psychological processes in their nascent state. All of the above features of the modern Western European novel's poetics are easily discernible in 20th century Polish novelistic practice; after all, those features can be counted among the supranational achievements within the genre. They can be observed in the works of Irzykowski, Berent, Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz, Choromański, Buczkowski, Andrzejewski, Czeszko, Konwicki, Odojewski, Terlecki, and many others.

It could be argued that the ideal outcome of the above notion would have been prose marked by 'absolute mimesis', since it sought to represent the world exactly as it appeared to human consciousness. Nevertheless, this concept – albeit marvelously illustrated by the English-language novel – fails to explain the developments in Polish modernist prose. For instance, Irzykowski's novel *Paluba* initiated a markedly different approach to debunking the realist model; the fundamental characteristic of his proposition was the so-called '**authorial**

narration', which then developed alongside the so-called 'personal novel', another challenge to realism. The principal novelty in the contribution of Irzykowski and his followers is the appearance of the author himself (in some cases only of his voice), who proceeds to dispel the entire illusion inherent in the act of telling the story. Thus, the author does not pretend to be absent from the novel, and does not suggest that the reader perceives objective reality only because it is presented from a character's perspective. It is as if the author were addressing the reader directly and saying: "Actually, I have created the world of this novel, I have created the fictitious narrator and the fictitious characters, and I refuse to deny this fact". To borrow a term from Max Weber, it could be argued that what Irzykowski enacted in *Paluba* was a 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*) of literature, simultaneously establishing one of the principal starting points for modern Polish prose. Although novels employing the personal perspective were considered by theoreticians of prose to embody the only possible model of modern narrative, there was – as can be seen from the above – a parallel, intense tendency, exemplified in *Paluba*, but also in the prose works of Nałkowska (*Choucas*), Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Miłosz, Herling-Grudziński, Haupt, Andrzejewski, Rymkiewicz, Konwicki, Białoszewski, Woroszyński, Chwin, Huelle, Libera as well as many other writers who blurred the boundaries between the roles of the narrator, the protagonist and the author. Paradoxically, from the perspective afforded by the end of the 20th century it is clearly visible that authorial narration proved more attractive to writers of modern Polish prose than personal narration – a fact attested to both by the popularity of the former in prose written after 1956 and its high regard within the postmodernist esthetic.

Modernist literature was greatly influenced by the discovery of biology's impact on the human psyche (Freud); the theory of evolution (Darwin); the consequences of political events for societies and nations (the shift in national boundaries), public life (totalitarianism, racism, xenophobia), art ('anything goes'), civilization and science. These ideas implied certain questions as to the scope and reliability of the narrator's knowledge about the characters, about individual identity and consciousness. The individual seemed to be afflicted by a variety of deviations (having to do with the psyche, biology, society, civilization and cultural phenomena) – he was uncertain of his identity, full of dread and anxiety, completely vulnerable to the irrational powers of instinct and the hypostases of the mind. Modernist literature took it upon itself to both reproduce the mechanisms governing those deviations, and diagnose as well as reconstruct the subject's identity in a world devoid of stable reference points.

Modernist prose relied not so much on rejecting realism along with the notion that reality should be represented in literature, but on abandoning extant literary conventions, which – according to the modernists – either belied, deformed or ignored this reality. Thus, the fundamental ambition of modernist writers was to reveal this misrepresented or silenced reality. In Poland, this approach to modern prose was embodied most fully in Karol Irzykowski's *Pałuba*, and continued by Witkacy and Gombrowicz. Thus, the modern novel was in fact supposed to adhere to realist tenets, but to do so differently than previous novelistic practice would suggest: namely, realism was to uncover new areas of reality and human experience, and among the methods of achieving this goal were the new forms of storytelling – formally intricate (it had been established that cognition was not a singular act but a complex process), and simultaneously related to the subjective perspective of the narrator and the protagonist (it had been established that cognition was always subjective).

Finally, a few words must be said about the second part of the title, namely “modalities”. Modality is a linguistic occurrence, and it has been described in this manner for several centuries. It is also a complex textual phenomenon, found especially in literary works. Nevertheless, this area of modality is not directly available, and depends on equivalents of linguistic modal categories in an area which I have provisionally labeled “modalities of culture”.

A literary theoretician assumes that communicating personal emotions and feelings belongs to the area of textual modalities as well as cultural ones. Feelings and emotions may be regarded not as transient or chimerical affects of particular individuals, but as repeatable and – more importantly – conventionalized modalizers of expression, constituting one of the key anthropological markers of culture.

An example of such modalities, at the heart of which lie particular historical events and which clearly determined the nature of Polish literature and other types of writing, are the various ‘sorrows’, ‘complaints’, ‘threnodies’, ‘jeremiads’, etc. occurring after the fall of the First Republic (*Pierwsza Rzeczpospolita*) in 1795 and, in comparison, after the 4th partition (of the Second Republic, or *Druga Rzeczpospolita*) in 1939. In contrast to the above, one ought to consider all verbal forms of expressing joy or enthusiasm that typified various strands of modern Polish literature after the regaining of independence in 1918, or the modalities in Polish literature after the end of World War II in 1945. Futurist euphoria and historiosophical catastrophism are thus two inseparable modalities of the same modernism.

Modernism sanctioned ambiguity and polysemy in epistemological and esthetic concepts, in historical experience and its representations, and in the languages of artistic expression.

Therefore, having established a dialog between contradictory, polemical notions of art and models of culture, it solidified a permanent dispute as regards the attitudes which produce the former and the interpretations which they enable. In this way, the place in the realm of art for the multiplicity of experiences and the diversity of expressive means (in narration, language, poetics and esthetics) was permanently secured.

It is sufficient to juxtapose, within a broader temporal perspective, the titles and/or topics of works of literature and art which reference such modalities as fear, screaming, dread, waiting, farewell, doubt, regret, or uncertainty, to notice the characteristic differences between particular epochs and between the currents or phases within those. It is enough to compare the different modalities in various phases of Polish modernism, e.g. the early period (soulsapes, *Gemütszustand*, *Stimmung* and atmosphere), the avant-garde (delight in civilization, technology, movement and speed) or the late period, after 1956 (irony, innuendos, distrust and polysemy) to discover in these various modalities of Polish literature the dynamic of modernism as a general 20th century phenomenon.

Translated by Krzysztof Majer