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Introduction

In the long history of Polish culture, periods of openness toward Europe frequently intertwined with times of xenophobia and inwardness. Streams of ideas, values, philosophical thoughts and aesthetic trends ran constantly from France, Italy, German)' and England, leaving traces on Polish architecture, art, economy, politics, literature and philosophy. Sometimes the stream ran back to Europe, or even to the East — (Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania) -bringing Polish ideas, original Polish strands, reflections, symbols and images to other Europeans.

During the past two centuries the cultural communication between Poland and Western Europe was affected by the ideas of Modernity. In different waves, the ideas produced by the Enlightenment and Romanticism, by Positivism, by Modernism and Avant-garde influenced Polish mentality and lifestyle, changed the Poles' aesthetic taste, and altered their conception of democracy, politics and the economy. There was a chain of Westernizers in Polish culture, philosophy and politics; a string of modernizers who worked for the idea of the modern Poland; who attempted to graft new values onto the Polish mentality. The acceptance of these new ideas was never slavish; it always occurred in an atmosphere of questioning and dialog, through creative transformation and assimilation.

In the present book I focus on the main strands of responses to those modernizing efforts in Polish culture in the 20th century. The

choice of period is not accidental: the transformation process leading to the 'Europeanization' of Polish mentality was intensified in the last decades of the 19th century and continued through the following century. It starts with the Positivist movement that aimed at reorienting Polish mentality from the post-Romantic, nationalist position toward a more pragmatic, rationalist and even scientific direction, and ends in the recent debates on attitudes toward Europe on the eve of Polish EU-membership, in 2004.

The encounter with, and reception of, Modernity ran somewhat differently in East Central Europe, including Poland, when compared with the West and North. To begin with, the pace of changes was different. While in England, Scandinavia, or France the civilizatory changes initiated by the Enlightenment had gradually incorporated still new areas of life and embraced ever-broader segments of society, in Poland, in Hungary or in Bohemia the changes came rapidly and collided with the premodern, traditional social structure. There are numerous ways of explaining that condition: e.g. no middle class, lack of political sovereignty in the form of a national state, lack of the Protestant ethics of enterprise and responsibility. One point, however, remains obvious: the civilizatory transformations in that area occurred at an accelerated pace, leaving no time for changes of mentality. People there did not have time enough to get used to new lifestyles and systems of values. For that reason the first intellectual debates on Modernity did not appear in Central European countries until the end of the nineteenth century: the first serious responses to the challenges of Modernity; the first mature attempts to become familiar with and grasp that new phenomenon of modern civilization.

The next difference consisted in the 'insular character' of modernizing processes in the region. Modernity developed relatively quickly in the big cities: in Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and Vilnius. Mass culture, industrialization, democratization and individualization of choices: all these processes were expressions of catching up to the Western standards of life. The provinces, however, remained nearly untouched by these processes. In the books of Czesław Miłosz, who was devoted to his 'land of childhood', that is today's

Lithuania, one can clearly observe the deep contrast between the premodern countryside of his early youth submerged in old-fashioned lifestyles, and the modern cities — in his case Vilnius and Warsaw, with their 20л-сепшгу atmosphere: cars, factories, films, mass culture, emancipation, all apparently very similar to Western centres. And last but not least, the most significant difference: in the 20th century Central Europe experienced the darkest face of Modernity, in the form of totalitarianism and war. Small Central European countries and their citizens thus associate Modernity not only with democracy, tolerance and emancipation. For them Modernity also means 'the iron cage' of totalitarianisms; it means Hider's tanks and Zyklon B in Auschwitz. It was epitomized by coercive secularization and coercive industrialization (in the form of five-year plans) that resulted in people being uprooted from their local traditions in the name of proletarian revolution and progress. Ambivalent attitudes toward Modernity were deeper and more tragic here, especially when compared to those experienced by the citizens of Western Europe. Here, Modernity was much more a forced form of life: forced by the invader, alien power, or the party functionary. That imminent alienation toward Modernity acted as an obstruction in recognizing its positive sides, and often distorted its perception. That is why the Central European responses to Modernity, despite certain similarities, differed in most cases from their Western counterparts.

In some recent diagnoses of Modernism, a new concept of 'Modernity with the feeling of loss' has been launched, as opposed to the optimistic, progressive understanding of the term. It seems that 'the feeling of loss' does dominate the discourse of Central European intellectuals, for whom Modernity often appeared tangled in ambivalence. That 'feeling of loss' makes these intellectuals very cautious apologists of Modernity. The citizens of small countries are truly aware of the fragility of existing forms of life; they are attentive to new civilizatory risks. And that is why, in their longing for a modern Poland, Hungary or Slovakia, a great deal of scepticism is discernible. In the affirmative cult for Modernity they see a threat to local identities, already jeopardized by the totalitarian ideologies and praxes. Are these identities about to be devoured by global uni-

versalism, represented nowadays by modern capitalism and postmodern culture? In the post-modern projects the local elites often see their self-destructive, undermining forces. That explains why the deconstruction of Eurocentrism, that self-critical attitude of some European intellectuals (Foucault, Derrida), had almost no response there. From the viewpoint of the Central European intellectual, that kind of criticism is suicidal, and leads to destruction of sound grounds of our civilization, To him, defending the West, and not its deconstruction, remained the only possibility for moral survival in the midst of totalitarianisms. It was the steady belief in Western norms and values that enabled him to preserve his dignity and hope for a better future.

It was definitely the feeling of belonging to Western civilization, and not the shining promises of Modernity, that constituted the main horizon for Polish intellectuals in their search for a new Polish culture; a new Pole. The numerous breaks in continuity were the greatest challenge for that culture. Crises have occurred in other cultures, too, but in Poland the state of crisis was practically a permanent experience throughout the past 200 years. The lack of continuity in political life has often been compensated by efforts to keep the culture alive. Keeping it alive meant maintaining its ties to Europe, to the West. These ties were epitomized by an affirmative attitude: recognition of common European values, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Humanism, Classicism. That was the reason why the Polish intelligentsia, in its role as mediators between the West and Polish culture, had a tendency to soften the radical discourses of Modernity. The reception of Nietzsche, whose intellectual hammer broke apart the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its legitimacy in the European heritage, was rather insignificant in Poland and did not initiate any lasting intellectual debates. Marxism did not play any significant role, either, at least until 1945. Only for a few did it constitute a new revelation, remaining a rather marginal discourse.

Nevertheless, Modernity as a new life-world, or as a challenge, in the 20th century, evidently became part of the Western discourse and moved into its center. Liberalism, socialism, urbanization and industrialization, autonomy of the self, science and technology, uni-

versalism and globalization: all these processes were transmitted to Poland during the 20th century and demanded some kind of response, critical reflection, and 'domestication'.

The idea of change, of transforming the Polish mentality, has preoccupied Polish intellectuals since the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. From the Positivists[1] at the end of the 19th the questions were posed: what new identity is about to appear on Polish soil; how to invent or construct the modern Pole? Is it possible for him/her to be set free from the burden of the Romantic spell that has defined the mainstream of Polish culture? Will he/she be able to reconcile the respect for individual freedom, for autonomy of the self, with his/her obligations toward community, toward the republican or Romantic 'common goods'? Is the awareness of a radical change caused by Modernity compatible with traditional Polish anti-intellectualism and idyllic dreams? There were a number of such questions, and a multitude of answers. From these questions and answers, posed by Brzozowski and Dmowski, Żeromski and Słonimski, Gombrowicz and Miłosz, a new profile of the modern Pole has gradually emerged. That image has been postulated, imagined, criticized and ironized at the same time. Has that image, represented in novels and essays, in ideological programs as well as in poems, influenced the actual mentality of the average Pole; his attitude toward Modernity, toward the West and its ideas of progress, globalization, secularization? Apparently that was the case, but a closer examination of those links exceeds the frame of my present work.

The idea of this book came into existence, and was influenced by, the work of Jerzy Jedlicki, entitled *A Suburb of Europe: Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilisation*[2] The 19th century Polish arguments and debates around civilization, Europe and the

[1] The first Polish wave of modemizers, influenced *b y* the thoughts of Comte, Spencer, Mill and Darwin, active in Warsaw in 1870-80. See p.33.
[2] Jedlicki, J., 1999, *A Suburb of Europe: Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilisation*, Budapest

West were presented in a new tight and profoundly analysed in that brilliant book. Initially, my ambition was to continue the work of Jedlicki into the 20th century, to write a sequel to that intellectual adventure story about Polish encounters with Modernity. However, it turned out to be too great a task, considering the multitude of texts and ideas, and the diversity of perspectives. Hence the fragmentary character of my work. I am fully aware that some great names partaking in that debate are missing here: Roman Dmowski and his *Thoughts of the Modern Pole;* Stefan Żeromski and his reflections on the conflict between the universal and the national in culture. I 'neglect' the Polish Avant-garde in the 1920s and its efforts to remake the aesthetics, and, definitely, the most influential modernistic movement in the '30s, focused around *Wiadomości Literackie,* a literary magazine gathering a number of Polish modernizers like A. Słonimski, T Boy-Żeleński and I. Krzywicka, who attempted to promote a new model of the modern Pole (Polish women included) that would be receptive to Western culture and civilization, meaning science, technology, and a new mentality. What remains, then?

My book starts with a look at Poland from a distance, from outside: I refer to the Danish intellectual G. Brandes and his *Impressions from Poland* from the late 19th century. In his essays and reports, Brandes studied the Poles, their culture and mentality, from the viewpoint of the European intellectual who was engaged in the pan-European movement. His observations on the Polish efforts to catch up with Modernity and the West at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries make a good point of departure for the following chapters. The philosopher and writer S. Brzozowski, the ideological promoter of the modernist movement at the beginning of the 20* century, and his idea of modernising the Polish soul, are the subject matter of the next chapter. This chapter is followed by an analysis of Polish Modernism, both in its early variant from the turn of the centuries and in its mature form represented by two great antagonists: W. Gombrowicz and C. Miłosz. These two names form the center of gravity of my book. In my opinion, these intellectuals have created two important paradigms of responses to Modernity in 20th century Polish culture, and any serious work on Modernity in Poland cannot

ignore them. The chapters on Polish visions of Europe and on the future of the Polish intelligentsia *anno* 2000 conclude this book.

It is possible to discern two sources causing trouble for the Polish modernizers; two dilemmas they were forced to face. Firstly, the profound traditionalism of Polish culture, resulting from long periods of lacking sovereignty, made it scarcely receptive to the ideas of the Western Enlightenment. Defensive cultures often 'choose' conservatism as a response to the condition of being threatened, being convinced that conservative attitudes would better facilitate preserving national identity, of saving national culture. Thus, the first task of the modernizers was often to persuade the Poles to think differently; to choose radical change, or a transformation of their mentality, in order to face the new reality of the modern world. At the same time they searched for a middle ground between the new and the old, between tradition and Modernity.

Secondly, after Marx, Nietzsche, and Weber, it was impossible to uncritically accept the ideas of progress; of salvation through reason, technology or science. Hence, in the suggestions of modernizers one can observe a dose of scepticism and caution. That scepticism has been further amplified by experiencing the 'modern' totalitarianisms. Consequently, the Polish modernizers were hardly ever the radicals; and that lack of radicalism marks the common ground for thinkers as different as Brzozowski, Miłosz, Kołakowski, or Gombrowicz. It does not mean, however, that the radicals were quite absent from the Polish dispute on Modernity; 'uncritical apologists' like T. Boy-Żeleński, A. Słonimski or J. Kott contributed to the discussion as well. But most of them have gradually moderated their views during their intellectual journey.

The main intellectual inspiration for this book comes, though, from the writings of Leszek Kołakowski. His vision of Modernity, presented in a number of articles, but most explicitly in the book *Modernity on Endless Trial,* influenced my understanding of the issue. Kołakowski starts his reflection on Modernity from the feeling of *Unbehagen in der Kultur,* the dominant experience of modern man, and expressed or summed up by the Weberian concept of *'Entzauberung.*

The modern disenchantment with the world and various efforts to reverse that process (secularization and attempts to avoid its harmful consequences) all indicate the inherent dilemma of Modernity: the tension between the ongoing, irreversible processes of rationalization, individualization and autonomization of human experience, on the one hand, and awareness of loss — of value horizons, of meaning, participation and continuity of culture — on the other. Kołakowski sees that tension as the inherent conflict within Modernity, not as the tension between modern and anti-modern. He also warns against exaggeration of both the affirmative and the condemning attitudes towards Modernity:

> It would be silly, of course, to be either 'for' or 'against' Modernity tout court, not only because it is pointless to try to stop the development of technolog)', science, and economic rationality, but because Modernity and anti-Modernity may be expressed in barbarous and antihuman forms.[3]

Let us have that sentence in mind as a warning against any form of ideological myopia.

[3] Kołakowski, L., 1990, *Modernity on Endless Triol*, Chicago, p. 12.

The Wall a century ago:

Georg Brandes' travelling in Poland

The division that runs across Europe, the demarcation line between East and West that until 1989 was epitomized by the Berlin Wall, the Iron Curtain, still remains the object of political negotiations, academic debates, and cultural deconstructions. The border is persistently crossed by travelers, real men and women, who compare, observe and evaluate. Among these real and metaphorical travelers remains a conviction that in spite of numerous efforts the Wall still exists; that the mental border between West and East has not yet been erased from the cultural map of Europe.

One is able to discern three models of explanation in the debate on the origin of the Wall. In the first model the differences between East and West are explained by pointing to the respectively different cultural heritages. Here are we dealing with two variants: more and less radical. The first one distinguishes the Orthodox countries — Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia, Belarus and Romania — with their dominant religious Orthodox influences that produced values incompatible with those of Latin Europe (criticism, mediating institutions, individualism, and enterprise drive). In the second variant all the countries east of the Oder are treated as a cultural entity. In spite of varying religious options (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) there is homogeneity; a common denominator between Poland, Russia, Serbia and Estonia. The similar historical devel-

opment in these countries has produced particular forms of society, a different cultural symbolism and mentality. The peculiarity of that part of Europe is grounded, according to these models, in ethnicity (Slavonic mentality), or in resistance against all invigorating streams flowing from the West, or in the local traditions, or in a specific mode of supra-confessional religiosity — pre-modern, anti-rational, and popular. In this approach, that can be called Huntington-like, it is the culture (and religion) that is the source of diversity and, moreover, it is the cultural differences that produce untranslatability. The border, the Wall, the gap can be grasped here as the famous 'clash of civilizations'.

The perspectives of overcoming, of crossing the borders and deconstructing the Wall, are — according to that way of thinking — rather vague and distant, if not quite impossible. Its protagonists live on both sides of the Wall: the opponents of the Westernization process in Russia, Poland, Serbia; the populist defenders of ethnic and cultural identity, but also Western adversaries of the European Union's enlargement to the East: the so-called Eurosceptics.

Another, more optimistic, way of interpreting that difference leads through political arguments. The lands of Central Europe, having been in the past fifty years politically raped and conquered by the exterior powers (totalitarian, brown or red), have lost their identity, have deteriorated and degenerated both politically and economically. Their links to the West have been broken; their cultures have been corrupted by totalitarian systems. The political renaissance after the fall of the Wall, the renewal of liberal and democratic values, the development in economy and trade, ought to lead to a hasty destruction of the detested ideology, resulting in removal of the *homo sovieticus'* uniform, and putting on a yuppie's elegant suit. And since the whole of Eastern Europe was periodically affected by various forms of political corruption (communism, despotism, nationalism, national socialism) the consistent renewal and radical modernization of political institutions is the best remedy against the ideological disease; the best way to break up the Wall. A free market and democracy are the shortest paths to a unified Europe. The cultural

differences play only a secondary role. In the case of the borderline countries of Poland, Bohemia and Hungary, it is argued that they have belonged to the West during extensive periods of their history and have thus been permeated by Occidentalism.

The intellectuals and technocrats from Eastern Europe remain die key protagonists of that standpoint. They yearn for the immediate reunion with mother-Europe; they believe in the commonwealth of European cultures (and economies). Living in the realm of elite modern culture, in the area of high technolog)', they marginalize the importance of local (ethnic, mentality-related, religious) differences and underline instead common values (Latin Europe, the Europe of the Enlightenment, and liberal Europe).

The third way of explaining the otherness of Eastern Europe consists in applying die perspective of 'cultural constructivism'. According to that view, the entire responsibility for the division of Europe rests with Western Europe and its intellectuals. They — the philosophers, writers, travelers — have imagined, created or constructed the stereotype of Eastern Europe. Ignorance, ideological blindness, a conviction of one's own civilizatory superiority and domination, have shaped the Western image of the East, as was identified and described by Larry Wolff in his eminent book *Inventing Eastern Europe*. The process of inventing consisted, according to Wolff, of constructing representations of Russia, Poland, Bohemia and other countries in that part of Europe on the basis of preconceived assumptions and prejudices that harmonized neatly with the messianism of the civilizatory mission cherished by the apostles of the Enlightenment.

Overcoming the otherness consists, in this vision, of radical de-construction; of disclosing the hidden presumptions underlying the discourse; in unveiling the mechanisms of cultural mastering. Here the ultimate objective can only be the unconditional acceptance of differences, the ideal vision of communication free of prejudices, based on a mutual tolerance. What remains is a remote and tolerant acceptance — from a secure distance.

The last vision appears to be the domain of Western, left-wing intellectuals. They find their calling in revealing violence and bad conscience in the Western discourse. The deconstruction of Eastern European representations harmonizes here with the entire paradigm of other deconstructions — of male domination, Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, phallocentrism...

All these types of discourses on the Wall are hopelessly undermined by the ultimate dualism that accepts and confirms a black/white division of the world: good and bad, progress and backwardness, construction and deconstruction, the body and the head. It seems, however, that the only way to escape such a dualism is the strategy of dissemination of ambivalences, the strategy of drawing the dividing lines in a subtler way; the lines running sometimes across the old dichotomies, or parallel to them; the lines that proliferate the dilemmas and complicate rather than explain and make clear. It seems that Georg Brandes, with his philosophy of mutual cultural communication epitomizes that ambivalent option in the approach to Eastern Europe.

In his analyses and records from Poland, Russia and Hungary, written at the end of the 19th century, Brandes shows his disapproval of the definite answers, undisputable assumptions, radical divisions, and axiological dualisms. On the contrary, he often presents the complexity of the situation; he searches for different strategies of explanation. In his book on Poland, which is the main objective of the present chapter, this tendency is apparent. Brandes applies here all the codes I mentioned before: the political, the economic, the cultural and the civilizatory, but being attached to neither of them. Cultural constructions (stereotypes) distort the image of Poland; they are, however, inevitable and no communication is possible without them. Politics and the economy serve as the proper tools for explaining Poland's backwardness, but do not exclude other perspectives. Polish culture, with its evident divergence from Western Europe's standards, is a 'readable' culture; a comprehensive culture partaking in the European project. We can already observe that the dissemination of ambivalences is the favorite technique of Brandes.

Brandes and "the Polish Case'.

Georg Brandes, the famous and controversial Danish intellectual, visited Poland four times in the last two decades of the 19th century. The book *Indtryk fra Polen (Impressions from Poland)*, published in Denmark in 1888 (full edition 1902), was the result, the written trace of those journeys.[4] Records of Polish reality, descriptions and observations, intertwine here with political analyses, reflections on Polish culture and mentality, information on Polish history, literature, and social life. The majority of editions also include the supplement — the record of lectures on Polish 19th century literature Brandes held in Warsaw in 1886 (originally in French). Brandes' book, having soon been translated into several languages, published in Germany, Sweden, Poland, Great Britain and the United States, became at the turn of the century a major source of information about Poland and Poles. Z. Ciesielski wrote about it in his book on Polish-Scandinavian relations:

> It was due to Brandes that the Polish cause was widely presented in the international forum at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century. The international audience was able to share Brandes' unshaken belief in the political revival of independent Poland. At the end of his book Brandes placed the following apostrophe: Oh, Poland! You are a great symbol. The symbol of violated freedom, the symbol with no victory in sight, yet with a hope for victor)' against all odds, in spite of everything.[5]

Brandes played an enormous role in the intellectual life of Denmark, Scandinavia, and Europe at the end of the 19th century. The ideas he promulgated concerned Positivism, social, moral and cultural radicalism, and Nietzscheanism. This proud and uncompromising Dane of Jewish origin became the forerunner in the struggle for a renewal of Danish culture and mentality, and played a leading role in the radical wing of Danish intellectuals and their efforts towards a

[4] Brandes, G., 1902, *Indtryk fra Polen*, *Samlede Skrifter*, vol. III, Copenhagen. (Polish translation: Brandes, J., 1898, *Polska*, Lwów, transl, by Z. Poznanski.). The following quotations from Brandes come from that edition and are all my translations. Numbers in parentheses refer to the Danish edition.

[5] Ciesielski, Z., 1972, *Zbliżenia skanaynawsko-polskie*, Gdańsk, p.38.

modern and tolerant culture and society. Brandes, with his widespread interests — from Hippolyte Taine's Positivism to Nietzsche's nihilism and cult of the individual; from literary criticism to feminism, socialism and 'aristocratic radicalism' — provoked and inspired his contemporaries, triggered intellectual movements and openness toward the new, unknown, and unpredictable. His negative, critical attitude toward the Danish hypocritical, bigot mentality, and against the whole Protestant culture of duty and self-limitation, resulted in a ruined academic career and self-chosen exile in Germany (1877— 1883).

Brandes'status as the uprooted intellectual, the outsider, the citizen of the world, makes his viewpoint on Poland and Polish culture exceptional. His distance to his own nation, to other nations, enables him to grasp Poland from a non-nationalist, almost pan-European point of view; the point of view of the enlightened cosmopolitan. Trouble with one's own identity will often make you open and sensitive to the dilemmas of the other; that is why the otherness of Poles does not disturb the writer. It turns out to be rather a challenge for his intellect and empathy, and. leads to an understanding of the other. The distance is a feature that is equally uncommon in Polish culture; hence Brandes' critical reflections appear to be significant even for the Poles, especially when put side by side with sympathy and admiration. The young Bolesław Prus noticed the importance of the famous Dane for the Poles, when he put down in his diary:

> We, Poles, dwell in our literature like in a dear home. If we look around into the external world it is only through the air-hole. Brandes is the traveler who observes our house from the outside, and who has seen a number of houses.[6]

[6] Prus, B., *Kroniki*, vol. 9, quoted after Z. Ciesielski, op. cit., p. 28, my translation.

Stereotypes and demystifications.

The most exciting parts of Brandes' *Impressions* concern stereotypes about the Poles and the Polish national character. However, that field of reflection is fairly dangerous; one can easüy fall into various traps — of simple generalization, historicism, or emotional distortion. Brandes eagerly applies the stereotypes; they form a significant level of his discourse. It appears that their role always remains inside the rhetoric of introductory presentation. Brandes starts from the draft, he draws a thick line around his topics, with all the simplifications and generalizations, in order to break down and deconstruct the stereotype afterward, or at least to make it ambiguous or uncertain through the confrontation with the actual state of affairs. The very beginning of his book contains the epitome of that technique. Brandes arrives in Poland via Berlin and Vienna. Especially the fresh impressions from the capital of Austria, grasped through stereotypes and clichés, become the excellent contrasting background for the first meeting with Poland. We are thrown straight into the mythology of the 'cultural Europe':

> Vienna is a city of unrestricted ease. What an explosion of words, colors and music one experiences there! Whereas the residents of Berlin [...] have acquired dignity, the Viennese are the heirs to grace. For this is an exceptional city, a city where everything turns into beauty and charm[...] (p. 11)

Fulfilled with Viennese beauty and charm, with fresh memories of Austrian tolerance and multi-ethnicity, Brandes crosses the Austro-Russian border. Crossing the border appears to be a cultural shock; stepping down to Hades, the traumatic experience of the radical difference between West and East. The brutal control at the border results in the confiscation of all his books and notes. The first encounter with the system of coercion and violence provokes the following commentary:

> Right away at the border one had the feeling of having left behind the domain of proper European civilisation, (p. 12)

That stereotypical enunciation, resemblant of a number of similar Western descriptions, will be reinterpreted afterwards. Brandes, during all his travels to the East will be very careful in distinguishing the anti-civilizatory uniform — a product of the Russian occupation — from the European body/head of the sound Polish culture.

After the first impressions of Warsaw in which awareness of past glory intertwines with descriptions of present decline, degeneration and ugliness; after a short lecture on Polish history explaining the reasons behind the present misery, Brandes considers the Polish national character. He makes use of numerous stereotypes, quotes second-hand opinions on Poles and Poland and produces his first, general portrait of the Polish 'soul'. The portrait seems to be a balanced one; there are both advantages and disadvantages, shadows and light, more or less fortunate comparisons with other nations:

> The Poles have the lively temper of Southerners, but they are not a people skilled in Machiavelli's political cleverness like the Italians who have let the French pull the chestnuts out of the fire for them. They are a people who have died in legions for Napoleon just because the national flag with the white eagle was carried in front of them.

Such youthful or maybe childish enthusiasm surely is not a winning trump in the great struggle of the nations in the age of industrialism and militarism. It does not agree with thrift, {discipline, moderation and middle-class shrewdness — all of which are qualities that guarantee the survival of individuals as well as societies.

> Earlier accounts of the Polish nation often had it that while one could always count on their chivalry and personal bravery, there was a certain portion of vanity in their generosity and something superficial about their magnanimity. It was said that they were self-willed, headstrong and quarrelsome, quite incapable of recognizing any law above their own will, but at the same time that very same will all too often proved itself incapable of persistency. It is generall)' believed that they are poor housekeepers and, no matter how vast their income, usually short of money; and that they flick through hundreds of books without ever reading one. They try to do everything at once only to end up wasting their time and talents. For all their love of freedom, they have often been accused of acting as tyrants with their peasants

> [...]. In short, the)' have been found to contain a mixture of Western and Eastern peculiarities.
>
> This well-known opinion carries a great deal of truth and correctness, (pp. 29-30)

The age of industrialism and militarism, named thus by Brandes, is known today as the epoch of Modernity: a wave of modernization sweeping violently across Western Europe in those times and continuing until now. Is the Polish mentality capable of coping with the challenges of Modernity? Is the Western way a universal, normative paradigm, and the Eastern (Polish) way a deviation, backwardness? The horizon of these questions is not directly present in the texts of Brandes, but still we are able to pose them from our perspective of the 21st century, after the readings of Said, Wolff, Bauman and Gellner. The traces of answers dwell in Brandes' records.

The Polish portrait drawn by Brandes is more or less reminiscent of the self-stereotype dominating Polish culture in 19th century. The virtues and values linked to the European warrior-code dominate here: courage, honor, self-sacrifice. All these values are rooted in Polish history and are still preserved in the mentality, in spite of the totally different, modern spirit of the age. The warrior mentality, anachronistic but admirable, is not the only trace in the Polish collective portrait. The mentality of a child is another source for comparisons: Poles, like children, are curious, light-minded and spontaneous; they admire the exterior signs of prestige, like clothes, uniforms, ornaments, and glitter. This sphere is much more ambi-valent and, on the one hand, it produces the myth of a light-minded, hilarious companion, loving Life here and now; on the other, an irresponsible citizen, showing symptoms of political immaturity, and not capable of coping with the crude reality.

There is certain dialectic in Brandes' portrayal of the Polish 'soul': he often completes the bright side with the dark, shadowy one. The Polish mentality as depicted by him also contains disrespect, or even contempt, for work and working people; for the pragmatic values of the middle class; insensitivity toward the lower classes and their

Misery; no sense of order and no respect for the will of the majority; Polish stupidity and dilettantism - it would be an act of mercy to close that list. It appears that that admirer of Poland and Polish women is capable of bitter criticism; moving into the world of stereotypes, he is able to shade every picture. He discloses the negative stance in the myth of the chivalrous, well-mannered Poles, but on the other hand defends them against the stereotype of 'Europe's III man':

> And still, a Polish nation remained. A nation that had plenty of heroic, chivalrous and splendid qualities of little use, but not too many useful and civil virtues. A spirited and impractical nation; generous and un-reliable; splendor-loving and superficial; lively and extravagant; a nation that has always loathed dull hard work, but always loved intense sensual and spiritual pleasure, and above everything else independence bordering on insanity and freedom all the way to the Liberum veto; and now, that independence and freedom had been lost, it remained true to its old loves, (pp. 27-28)

The patterns that underlie the production of these stereotypes are apparent — they almost shine through the text. The oppositions: mature-immature, Modernity—anachronism, pragmatism-idealism, rationality-superstitions mirror the paradigm of the Enlightenment. According to Larry Wolff,[7] that paradigm — the cultural construction produced by European intellectuals — has been distorting the image of Eastern Europe through the 18th and 19th centuries, generating simplified and mystified records and analyses of that terra incognita. Brandes himself, though immersed in the Enlightenment project, does not fall into that constructivist trap; he is capable of seeing reality beneath the cultural horizon of a Western intellectual. Making use of the stereotypes, he is not captured by them; he can see details that undermine the common and abstract judgments, or exceptions that resist the rule.

This European Dane frequently underlines the strong presence of the idea of European identity in the Polish mentality. The Poles are

[7] Wolff, L., 1994, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilisation on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, California.

European through the way that they care for the heritage of the European culture — they see it as their own intellectual and spiritual background, and view it as the 'obligatory reading' in their education. A hundred years later two writers, Milan Kundera and Czesław Miłosz, will point out a similar phenomenon, arguing that the intellectuals from Central Europe are the sole bearers of the European idea. In both cases — in the 19th and 20th centuries — the dreams of Europe are enforced by the political circumstances, namely by the totalitarian coercion coming from the East and threatening the national and European identity. The appreciation of European culture as the organic entirety and the civilizatory foundation of the continent appears, as a rule, in a situation of danger, among small nations with jeopardized identities.

Brandes starts his 'Polish portrait' with a depiction of the Polish gentry woman. After reading that it seems that feminism is quite unnecessary in Poland; the Polish women are born feminists, feminist by nature, aware of their power and status, their beauty and intelligence:

> What can be said of the women of the higher and lower aristocracy is that their qualities, virtues and vices alike, are generally not those of the middleclass. They are not domesticated and they are not petty-minded. The best among them have a pride that, high and rare as it is, is due to a feeling of strength and purity stemming from spiritual life. These women were born to rule and even under straitened circumstances they retain the great pride that is in their blood. Their intellectual life is completely absorbed in the national cause. Several are still eager Catholics, but most of the bright ones value Catholicism highly only because of its status as the shrine of national feeling, (p. 51)

The stereotype of the Polish woman is being constructed here with the help of both positive and negative features: she is independent and proud, devoted to her children and their patriotic education, but also a bad housekeeper, too sociable, over-idealized. The main reason for the last trait is the myth of the Holy Mother that permeates Polish culture. It generates an archetype of a Madonna like, ideal femininity, without body or sensuality. The Polish Woman

has become, through literary and cultural construction, a bodiless and asexual 'angel'. In literature, but also in real life, she has got 'a burning head but restrained sensuality'. Especially the Polish literature of Romanticism has desexualized both woman and love. Brandes, himself a passionate lover, dislikes that distortion in the Polish collective imagination, and describes is as a cultural reductionism, turning women into an object of collective admiration, glorification and respect:

> Indeed, the women here are very much admired and glorified, but hardly ever observed or explored. Neither as mistress nor daughter, sister nor mother, does a woman appear as a complete individual of complex personality. The vision is immediately glorified and is always stereotyped, (p. 231)

The Polish Man is portrayed afterward, and with not so many details. His depiction begins with the appearance:

> The men are tall and often bony; usually with clear-cut features and long moustache. This type is common among the peasants and aristocrats alike. A frequently found sub-species is the overweight and childishly open landowner who kisses his neighbors hello and goodbye and wears his heart on his sleeve, but is nevertheless endowed with a manly conduct and natural dignity. This is the type that Mickiewicz immortalized in several characters of *Pan Tadeusz.* (p. 54)

The words of severe criticism ensue straight after: the Poles (men) lack civil virtues. In contrast to Germans (and other Germanic people) who sacrifice, albeit with pain, the best part of their nature for the sake of the state or another social organization, the Pole is not capable of subordinating his will to any external institution. The sense for politics and the economy is non-existent here; in that field the Poles belong to the East rather than to the West, appear more like the Russians than the Danes. Paradoxically, they have succeeded in creating a highly-developed culture with no (or poor) material basis. According to Brandes, in that aspect they resemble the ancient Greeks:

> Hence, it was possible in Poland (just like in ancient Hellas) to create a high level of civilization without the material basis that could ensure its survival and a high degree of personal freedom was developed (like in Judea) at the expense of the state's external power, (p. 54)

From the perspective of modern, industrious Europe, the Polish mentality has another trace of illness: the lack of respect for work. In his analyses, sometimes reminiscent of Weberian thought, Brandes explains the development of the work ethic in Europe with the phenomenon of 'the spirit of Protestantism' with its virtues of self-control, thrift, pragmatism and economic awareness. In Poland, on the contrary, money and work have never been valuated higher than life and pleasure, 'money was the means, never the goal; work — a shameful exception, never the center of one's life'.

Life as a perpetual celebration — here lies the deepest trait of Polish mentality. One celebrates everything here, even the war, the Polish performance of which resembles a theater spectacle with rich settings and wonderful costumes. The glitter of superfluity everywhere: ornaments and decorations, uniforms and plumes, horses and sabres.

The Polish hospitality, open-minded and honest, is yet another form of celebration. This hospitality, experienced personally by Brandes, is admired and appreciated. That Polish trait is a derivative of historically expressed magnanimity and generosity toward other nations and people: Brandes reminds the reader of Polish tolerance toward the Jews, expressed in history by the opening the Polish borders for Jewish settlers. Another expression of generosity is the political action performed by Johannes Sobieski during the Turkish siege of Vienna:

> And just as a single Polish man of might has never lived for himself alone or in self-elected isolation, the same can be said for the entire nation. Just remember two events from the past: that Poland opened its borders to the Jews in the Middle Ages and that Jan Sobieski saved Vienna from the Turks — two rare occurrences in the European history of religious tolerance and political chivalry, (p. 56)

The celebration does not agree with industriousness. This is the result of the historically rooted disrespect for work. In the Polish mentality, Brandes observes contempt for 'lower' occupations such as trading, craftwork and industrial production. In high society the occupational work is always condemned as a lower, dirty, not-so-good form of human activity. Brandes quotes a woman from Warsaw high society: 'what a people, all of them workers; only doctors, entrepreneurs, lawyers, who charge three rubles a visit!'

The economic indifference goes hand in hand with that very same disrespect for work. Brandes, as many other observers of the Polish scene, then and now, poses the question: how do they make a living? They make money on their estates, anachronistic and backward, exploiting their serfs. These pretending democrats treat their subjects as sub humans; the lack of respect for servants is a typically Asiatic trait in the mentality of the Polish gentry. Brandes is constantly surprised by such a prodigality of human resources; by whole swarms of servants, valets, footmen who wait in vain for hours, only to open or close a gate twice a day. What a waste of human potential, unnecessary over-abundance, with no calculation of costs! — all that awakens the sober, pragmatic Dane in Brandes.

What kind of educational background is characteristic of a Polish gentleman? The Dane is not easily deceived. Under the surface of good manners and familiarity with the most important and fashionable intellectual trends, he detects an incorrigible dilettantism. Polish education is immensely superficial and never in-depth. A certain lack of persistence, an aversion to laboriously extending one's competence lies at the root of an unheard-of profession mobility. Very much astonished, Brandes cites the careers of his Polish acquaintances — from medical studies to journalism, from journalism to farming, from farming back to journalism.

Just as brilliant dilettantism is a twisted, degenerated form of in-depth knowledge, socializing the Polish way becomes a substitute for genuine public life. The salon fulfils the functions of different public institutions: a parliament, a free press, a university, a school, a church. This ersatz form is highly demoralizing as it creates a

deceptive but comfortable illusion of participation and commitment, while remaining, in fact, a barren phenomenon incapable of generating any effect on society. Several years later, S. Brzozowski, one of the most severe critics of Polish underdevelopment and the offenses of Polish mentality, will make socializing the object of his most furious assaults, and consider it the main threat to the nation's mental health. This diluted, inauthentic and unproductive form of social bonding, often a source of fascination to foreigners (as part of the paradigm of Polish hospitality), would also turn into one of the main subjects of Polish self-criticism and return with a vengeance in the writings of Wyspiański, Gombrowicz, Andrzejewski and Konwicki.

Trying to find a common denominator and a single structure for the main features of Polish mentality, Brandes recognizes the importance of abundance and extravagance. The Polish love of honor and glory, of adornment and a lavish way of living, goes hand in hand with a readiness to risk everything for others; with the generous custom of hospitality; with the propensity for welcoming foreigners and fighting for a noble cause, be it one's own or somebody else's. Poles are not easily categorized and do not fit into any rational structures. Something always seems to be sticking out or running over. Anything from magnanimous gifts to sacrificing one's own life — for an idea, for honor or for freedom:

> In accordance with this notion it is, after all, only necessary to pay for what is unnecessary and superfluous. Nowhere else is the superfluous regarded as it is here. The finest young men in Poland are products of luxury [...]. (p. 59)

And Polish heroism has at all times been distinguished by a tendency to do the superfluous. Poland's great men have always participated in all sorts of European wars, wherever there was a cause that appealed to their heart.

> With such virtues and vices one cannot expect to gain recognition in the 19th century world. Not much will be thought of one, not to mention power or greatness being attributed to one. The charm of

> magnanimity and carelessness does not pay off nowadays in the age of German shrewdness and Russian might, (p. 59-60)

Summing up Brandes' strategy in his description of Polish mentality and its commonplaces, we detect his ambivalent attitude towards cultural stereotypes. In his portraits and sketches the author is not shy of quoting stereotypical views, making good use of them. He combines different national characteristics and then sets them against each other. Quoting second-hand opinions and generalizations, the author attempts to polish the rough surface of reality and frame it, thus turning the unknown into the known and sometimes even the banal. But somewhere underneath, when actually confronted with reality, the accustomed views are being undermined and deconstructed. It is not as much the stereotypes themselves that are being undermined, but rather their ideological fundament. And this ideology is called: homology. From that perspective, Polish commonplaces make Poland - with all her shortcomings, belatedness, underdevelopment and provincialism -appear as a negative double of civilized Europe. It becomes a caricature of the West. By reconstructing the complex nature of the Polish psyche, Brandes - and this might be his greatest achievement — makes this image dialogical.

Polish national characteristics become a product of difference, not inferiority. This is a nation that has put life above work, sensibility above sense, excess above order. Again and again Brandes stresses that the Polish way is not and cannot be particularly popular in today's Europe, dominated as it is by the cult of Modernity and engrossed in chasing financial and pragmatic values. The Polish project is not exactly compatible with the Enlightenment project, as a matter of fact; it is very much removed from it. However, this does not deprive the Poles of their right to be themselves and to search for their own way, and also learn from their mistakes. The Brandesian sympathy is put to a severe test. This believer and prophet of the European project, a project by nature emancipating and liberal, is well aware of the fact that Poland does not fit in and that a great abyss separates Polish mentality from the modern mentality prevalent in the West. But, with ah their faults, that

sometimes in the long run turn out to be an advantage. Poles (and especially Polish women) still appear to be engaging and occasionally even capable of evoking awe and admiration. Yes, to a certain degree Poland is the shadow and the alter ego of the West, a territory where secret dreams have come true: dreams of an authentic community and transparent human interrelations, dreams of a life lived for its own sake rather than for the sake of career, profit, interest or the good of society. And yet the most significant source of the Polish difference is the distorted nature of reality; the political, semiotic and cultural space inhabited by the Poles. This world displays many a sign of degeneration, of reversed values and goals, of interrupted normality. The situation of non-freedom has created a space of Unreal in Poland.

Encounter with the Unreal

Reflections on Polish mentality are naturally ahistorical. They dwell in a space of prolonged longevity and deliver descriptions of structures resistant to time and circumstances. Still, at the same time Brandes is an avid observer of the historical and social reality that is palpable as well as concrete. In Poland this reality is marked by a lack of sovereignty and freedom. The political non-freedom is not a mental construction, nor does it belong to the sphere of ideas; it manifests itself very concretely and painfully in human destinies, disfiguring the relation with reality and creating a wall of impossibility between human wishes and dreams on one hand and the world on the other. The condition of over 100 years' complete political dependence on the partitioning states has created an illness otherwise known as living in the Unreal. Dependent on interaction and requiring a participation in what is Real, the natural communication between man and the world has, along with the capability to understand the world, been radically altered and reduced in Poland. Because of their non-freedom, Poles have lost contact with reality and according to Brandes they tend to 'deceive themselves and others with make-believe half-truths'. This schizophrenia, evident in mentality as well as in the spiritual life and Hterature, has its deepest source in the structure of reality itself — a reversed world.

The reversed values of the real world are visible at the most basic semiotic level. In the heart of Warsaw stands the Russian-built Citadel. Its purpose is not the defense of the city from an outside enemy, but, by order of the tsar, its guns are pointed at the city itself. The city center, a place highly charged emotionally, would under normal circumstances be filled with symbols of national identity, meant to tie people together and give the city its particular character, but here it is occupied by a symbol of the enemy power. (This situation will repeat itself some years later when another symbol of the enemy — the Stalin Palace of Culture — will be situated in the heart of the capital.) Something similar manifests itself with the monuments of Warsaw. The finest are the Paskievitj monument in the Krakowskie Przedmieście (one of the city's main streets), dedicated to the Russian general who had crushed the November uprising and in Polish eyes became the symbol of a period of harsh persecution (the Paskievitj's night), and a monument to the Polish traitors who were killed by the insurgents of 1831, but who are officially described as the 'Poles who died for remaining loyal to their monarch'. The outer symbols of social position and hierarchy — uniforms, honors or distinctions so valued and revered everywhere else — are here always the uniform of the enemy or the stigma of the traitor. And the ensemble that is especially venerated, almost as something sacred, is the shirt and chains of a prisoner.

> And perhaps there is no situation more educative for a nation than one where no man of excellence will ever receive an outer mark of honor, a tide or a decoration, and where the official tinsel of distinction is considered a disgrace, while the official attire of disgrace — the prison uniform of a political prisoner — is considered an honor, (p. 46-47)

Such a disturbance of the semiotic space cannot leave upbringing unaffected. On one hand Brandes stresses the positive effect of the situation of non-freedom, where only true, authentic values are appreciated while the outer signs of prestige, fame and glory are rejected. It allows for a distinction between 'what is truly great and what is shallow'. But the system of double, conflicting signals produces a certain kind of schizophrenia, with the world of the

Unreal leaving a mark on the human psyche, deforming it and creating torn personalities forced to choose between conflicting loyalties.

The children are taught at home. For as long as possible the mothers try to keep their youngsters away from any official educational institutions. So the first contact with learning is confined to the safe space of the home, a space of intense glorification of everything that is Polish. Polish culture — the best, the only, the universal — becomes the ideal, while the role of the enemy and the dark forces of evil are naturally placed on Russia and Russians. So unshakeable is the child's conviction of everything great and wonderful being Polish that it experiences a chock when coming upon areas not connected to Poland, e.g. geography. 'Is it really possible that Columbus was not Polish — a young boy asked his mother in my presence'.

> A real experience of chock ensues when the child is confronted with the Russian school. Suddenly it seems that all he has been told is not true, that Polish children dressed in Russian school uniforms do not only have to speak Russian and think Russian, but also feel Russian. Images of what being Polish means, books and poetry read by the mother not only seem unimportant, but their reminiscence is likely to bring about repression, punishment or expulsion from school. For everything Polish is a forbidden area, suspect and ever-absent from the Russian school. 'What confusion is born in the child's soul! The boy is forced to play the hypocrite and keep silent. The seeds of defiance and shamming or deceitfulness and opportunism are planted in his mind. Desperate questions — what is the use of resistance; is there any justice — are bound to arise.' (p. 63—64)

This twisted, trapped personality is behind many a Polish paradox. Several times Brandes emphasizes the paradoxical character of Polish mentality; something that is only reinforced in confrontation with an unreal world, a world marked by reversed values and lack of freedom. The paradoxes become very obvious in the sphere of ideas and politics where ideological Weltanschauung choices are made. Here Brandes' observations seem particularly interesting.

The traditional Polish mentality, that of a conservative nobility and of national patriotism, presents a sort of mystery to Brandes. Among his acquaintances he comes upon very 'European' personalities, very open and critical of tradition as such, and strongly anticlerical (in conversation with Poles, Brandes finds himself defending the Jesuits). No one in the circles close to Brandes represents extremely conservative, nationalist views, and yet it is clear that the 'Polish cause', with its whole political and psychological conservatism, dominates the entire Polish atmosphere. It is the central archetype of Polish mentality and it indicates a horizon no one really dares to trespass.

With great insight Brandes describes different political groupings of the 1880s: the conservatives, the Positivists, the socialists. Already during his first stay he perceives a certain paradox in the whole situation: Georg Brandes, Europe's number one liberal and anticlerical freethinker, has been invited to Poland by the conservative party. But his appearances draw members of all parties and thus create an opportunity for the different fractions to meet, exchange thoughts and engage in a dialog. While in Poland, Brandes remains very cautious of expressing radical views. And it is far from being in any way caused by a fear of censorship; rather, it is the result of an analysis of the country's political situation, done with great insight and a prejudice-free mind.

During his next trip, the Dane's views on the perspectives of Polish politics take decisive shape. Ever more clearly, he eyes the basic, insoluble dilemma of the progressive element of the Polish intelligentsia: a consistent, progressive radicalism would be tantamount to the end of the Polish cause. Only conservative, proreligious attitudes aiming at upholding the present state of things can contribute to the survival of the Polish culture and national consciousness.

How does Brandes, the liberal, arrive at such a paradoxical conclusion? After all, he does give a deeply sympathetic account of the Polish democratic party led by Aleksander Świętochowski. These 'first Polish free thinkers' are fighting prejudice and religious superstition; they are fighting for the rights of women, Jews, peasants, i.e.

all groups of outlaws, and they would seem to be obvious ideological 'allies' of the radical Dane. But the specific Polish situation calls for alternations to this vision — anyone opposing the Catholic Church in Poland is supporting the partitioning power and is an ally of Russia. The relatively lenient stance that the censorship has taken toward the main organ of the Positivists - the Warsaw *Prawda* -clearly proves to Brandes the fact that the tsarist authorities secretly support the democrats 'because anything that smells of cosmopolitanism and undermines the Catholic Church seems less dangerous to Russia than national-religious aspirations.' (p. 66)

An almost prophesy-like quality can be attributed to Brandes' warnings regarding the consequences of socialism in Poland. He admits that the socialist ideas are winning over the best-educated part of the youth, 'the best educated and most generous youth'; that repression carried out against this group is unbelievably harsh, that the ideals are beautiful and moving. But the consequence of a social revolution, the nationalization of factories and agriculture - all this leads toward a total and irreversible dependence upon Russia! That is why 'no Pole should risk his freedom and life for the sake of socialist ideals':

> For what does socialism mean? What else but indirectly or directly forced surrender of the capitalist and landowner wealth for the benefit of the state! But translate this into Polish and, as conditions are at present and as they will remain for a long time, it cannot mean anything else but a forced surrender of Polish property for the benefit of the Russian state. And what the Russian state once has taken will hardly ever be recovered, (p. 67—68)

Views that are radical, progressive, liberal, democratic — and to Brandes that is the same as 'European' — at the end of the day work against the Polish cause. Polish political thought and Polish mentality are trapped, or rather faced with an insoluble, aporetic dilemma:

> This is the terrible dilemma of the Polish intelligentsia. It seems doomed to either choose progress and thus unwillingly aid the worst enemy of Poland and all true progress, or choose stagnation and risk

> that the nationality thus preserved and of which one has always been so proud, lags behind in the European culture and appears hopelessly out of date. There is something truly tragic about this situation, (p. 69)

This double thinking, the split between the yearning of the heart and the mind and the world of realpolitik that has been observed by Brandes, was to repeat itself decades later, during communism, in the attitudes of the Polish intelligentsia, where it would once again become the source of tragic choices, unfulfilled' hopes and general schizophrenia of the political and intellectual life.

Polish paradoxes bring out the entire complexity of human life, revealing the contradictions that every single human is tied up in and making them visible in a radical way. In that sense Poland appears to be a catalyst of hidden tensions, present in every culture and every individual. Thus Poland is not so much an alter ego as the id of Europe — the Polish example exposes the paradoxical nature of life, its extremes and intense vitality, and the steady reunion of insoluble or contrasting oppositions. Hence the whole Polish situation is a prediction of what is about to ensue in the form of the post-Nietzschean vision of culture and humanity that will uncover the oversimplifications of the harmonious and optimistic Enlightenment project. In elevated, solemn style Brandes emphasizes the symbolic character of the Polish fate:

> Poland is a symbol — a symbol of everything that the finest among humankind have loved and struggled for. In Poland everything is condensed: everything that is most despicable and contemptible along with everything that is most loveable and glorious. Here all the contrasts of earthly life are thrown in relief; the essence of the world is condensed, extract-like. (p. 48)

Poland in dialog with Europe

What can we learn from Brandes' book today, amidst the postmodernist constructivisms and eruptions of nationalism, at a time when a new European identity is coming into being, bringing along

with it the destruction of old walls as well as the making of new ones? More than anything else, probably the art of dialog and understanding other forms of culture.

Doubtless, Brandes' greatest achievement was to, create a breach in the invisible wall separating the cultured Western part of Europe from the barbaric, non-civilized East; a wall that had been constructed by cultural stereotyping. In his controversial book on 'imagining' the countries to the East of the Vistula (or Elbe), Larry Wolff has thrown light on the Enlightenment origins behind the construction process of this intellectual wall. Not only the unshakeable conviction of Western civilization's superiority, but also the use of the Enlightenment notion of 'civilization' as a measure of 'cultural correctness', gave rise to a whole string of stereotypical views on Eastern Europe as a peripheral, barbaric region situated between the kingdom of order and reason on the one hand, and, on the other, the domain of chaos and barren land demanding a cultural fertilizer and painstaking cultivation. This bipolar view had influenced the reception of Poland and its culture in 19th century Europe. Polish Catholicism, for many centuries the link between the country and West European culture, did not prove itself to be an argument carrying sufficient conviction when confronted with a fact much more appealing to the imagination — that being Poland's disappearance from the political map of Europe in 1795.

Trying to present the 'Polish cause' to a Western audience at the end of the 19th century was no mean feat. The sympathy for Poland expressed by the 'people' of France, Scandinavia and some representatives of public opinion in the rapidly developing Europe was countered and repressed by the attitude shared by a majority of politicians and Poland-hostile Western intellectuals of rightist as well as leftist orientation (e.g. Proudhon).

Brandes' political arguments in favor of Poland's right to sovereignty and freedom emerge first and foremost out of a broadly understood ideology of liberalism that puts emphasis on the individual's right to freedom when faced with the suppressive structures

of oppression. Not because of a timeless code of international ethics or natural morality (as was claimed by the majority of Polish Romantics who demanded freedom for Poland in the name of a universal moral law or justice defined on Christian terms), nor on the basis of an analysis of the political situation in Europe, but because the idea of freedom was the superior idea in the fundamentally Romantic 19th century European civilization. Let us recall his argument:

> The historical development has been such that Poland has become synonymous with the human right to civil and spiritual freedom and with the nations' right to independence. Poland has become one with our hope or our illusion of our times' cultural progress, (p. 94-95)

Linking the name of Poland with the idea of cultural progress has to imply a conception of cultural interaction and a vision of the East-West cultural communication that differs radically from those of the Enlightenment.

The vision of European culture appearing in Brandes' writing is an incredibly modern one. First and foremost it is a Europe without any strong dividing lines between the national cultures. Indeed, it is a vision of complementary multiplicity, where differences are more about style than ideological basis and where the surface can differ, but not the substance. The specific character of the national cultures consists in the different answers that they can give to the fundamental questions posed by the ideological backbone of the European culture. Such an ideological backbone in the 19th century is Romanticism. Romantic, liberal, democratic and aesthetic ideas are circulating around Europe and fertilizing the national literatures and cultures, and in the process they are refracted by different 'environments' and different 'historical situations'. This is also the vision appearing in Brandes' most significant and most quoted work *Main Currents of the 19th Century's European Literature* and we recognize the same strategies in his analysis of Polish culture. In accordance with Brandes' conception, Polish Romanticism is a recreation of the ideas of European Romanticism: a 'creative translation' of the Romantic ideas of freedom, creativity, loneliness, rebellion, authen-

ticity and poetic genius to the language of the Polish cultural symbols and the specific political situation.

According to Brandes, the Romantic poets of Europe were 'working on' certain common issues:

> Those poets have opened up a whole realm of love and hate for us; they have given us an image of all passions struggling with each other and the society; they contemplated the human mind's ability to comprehend and grasp the universe; the sense and future of religious belief, and the stands of different social classes on the class struggle, the laws of genius and its importance to its nation and humanity; finally, the contrasting views of different generations.

This Romantic paradigm took a particular shape in Poland. Some of its ideas were intensified or translated into a Polish context, while others, such as the conflict of the generations, would be completely omitted from the Polish version of Romanticism. But for Brandes there is no such thing as a center of Romanticism, its main branch. Rather, different national cultures fill this paradigm of issues with their specific contents and cover it with a unique texture. Let us take a look, for instance, at the idea of the will to act, that in the European Romanticism collides with the longing for pleasure and amusement (Musset), while in Poland it clashes with a real political obstacle, which is the oppression of the country and its individuals by foreign powers. Which one of these conflicts is more authentic, more true and more painful? Brandes asks rhetorically.

By showing that Polish Romanticism is no peripheral culture, nor a derivative and deformed reflection of Western ideas, but an original creation, Brandes reinscribes Poland on the cultural map of Europe. Not Eastern Europe, but Europe. When comparing Polish Romantics with their Scandinavian, French and German counterparts Brandes contributes to the construction of a complementary, non-hierarchical model of European culture, where values complement rather than exclude each other and can have a mutually inspiring effect on each other without succumbing to the temptation of creating hierarchies. Of course, this is not the same as cultural rela-

tivism or nihilism because in the process of the dialog cultures will expose their own blind spots, which would not have come to sight if the cultures had not been submitted to a mutually critical viewing.

Such a blind spot are the escapist tendencies of Scandinavian Romanticism, which tends to situate its protagonists in safe, faraway historical space. Adam Oehlenschläger and Esaias Tegnér create characters in a 'loose, almost intangible relation to the political events of their times'. The comparison with Polish Romanticism is to the advantage of the latter. Mickiewicz, Słowacki or Krasiński are in their main works concerned with the political here and now: they place their characters in the midst of modern dilemmas; they make them take a stance in current political and social conflicts dominating Poland or Europe. Thanks to the lesson from the politically-minded Poles, Brandes is made aware of the blind spots of his own culture and can look at it from a critical distance.

The reverse is of course also true of the Poles themselves. The comparison between their own literature and that of other nations allows them to realize the limitations and flaws of their own culture. Such a flaw, Brandes notices, is the want of psychological reflection in the works of Polish Romantics. The generation conflict, the propelling force behind 19th century European prose, is completely lacking in Polish literature. This lack will have far-reaching consequences — the entire future Polish literature will remain blind to the problems and transformations within the family, to psychological conflicts leading to dissociation from the parent generation and a search for one's own identity and autonomy in spite of the family, society or culture. Only Gombrowicz will break with this trend, but without leaving a permanent trace in the always political and always symbolic, often cryptic and allegorical, Polish literature of the 20th century.

Reading Brandes today, over 100 years later, we can ask ourselves; where lies his strength, whence comes his unprecedented ability to think of cultures in terms of dialog, to undermine stereotypes an demolish the walls separating the cultures of the tragically divide

Europe? Does it arise from a specifically interpreted idea of Enlightenment progress, or from the idea of European unity, or maybe from the idea of cultural radicalism of which Brandes was an eager propagator in his native Denmark? It seems that what comes closest to the truth is a 'multitude of applied measures'; the fact that he examined the Polish phenomenon with a multitude of instruments of comparison and confrontation, thus allowing for a fuller, more than one-dimensional viewing. The accounts and analyses of Polish culture and society have always been, and still are, fatally dominated by a one-dimensional view. In the accounts of the enlightened travelers and philosophers it was usually the measure of civilization and rationality. With other 19th century critics of the Polish cause, e.g. Proudhon, the idea of universal social progress and historical peacekeeping; in the 20th century the idea of Modernity and economic progress, and during the communist era the idea of a Western-style democracy. When applied in a one-sided and 'mono-logical' way, each and every one of those measures resulted in stereotypical images of Poland and other Eastern European countries — images that were not necessarily false; on the contrary, for the most part they were correct and true. But their inadequacy stemmed mainly from their hyperbolic one-sidedness, either from a magnified economic point of view or a narrowly understood idea of progress which made it possible to overlook the achievements of Polish culture, the moral-ethic search, the excitement of intellectual life. It took a multitude of measures and multiple angles to bring out what at first sight was invisible. Not many observers of the Polish scene have been capable of that.

Apart from the multi-dimensionality, Brandes is also aided by his particular understanding of historicism. During his visits to Poland and Russia, Brandes revisits his own understanding of the idea of progress, in particular progress in the realm of culture. The idea of cultural progress, dominated by the internal logic of history, of partly Hegelian and partly positivistic provenance, is slowly undermined and abandoned by the Danish intellectual for the sake of outstanding ideas and outstanding individuals in whom history manifests itself and through whom the ultimate meaning of history is revealed. Seen from that angle, Polish culture is a splendid illus-

tration of the idea that the forces of history have a creative effect and result in producing strong, proud personalities. In this context Polish nationalism also takes on a different appearance:

> Just consider his views on nationalism! His stays in Poland make him formulate an opinion on this phenomenon. And he does so on a speculative as well as political level, and these are new ways of thinking. Cultural progress is an illusion, he claims now, the idea of progress is a religion that has replaced the religions of revelation, but it does not work. Some day in the far-away future all life will disappear from the globe, but it is an agreeable thought because it shows us that the purpose of humanity cannot lie at the end of the road, but has to be found in its foremost personalities. The fact that humankind will eventually become extinct does not make true culture less valuable, less worth fighting for. Its value depends not on its ongoing existence throughout eternity. It does not matter whether a symphony is long or not, but whether it is beautiful. Whether the Polish struggle for sovereignty will be crowned with success is questionable. It has now been over a hundred years since their country perished and one can wonder whether a free Poland is but a chimera not worth the sacrifices, but what truly matters is the opposite: it is the sacrifices that make the cause a worthy one. The freedom struggle creates character and develops talent; it gives rise to magnanimous ideas, heroic actions and a great literature. It is a civilizing force that creates proud, High-minded individuals.[8]

The historicism often manifest in Brandes' writings is not a historicism for its own sake, viewing and evaluating the world from the perspective of a perfect future millennium utopia. Rather, it is an ability to see the historical conditions of culture as a source of difference, not inferiority; an ability to use the past in order to explain the present, but not in a deterministic way; an ability to adopt the insider perspective on a particular culture without yielding to complete cultural relativism.

The lesson to be learned from Brandes is a simple one. Above all else, a true dialog requires both sides to speak to each other and be

[8] Knudsen, J., 1883-95, *Georg Brandes. Symbolet og manden,* I, p. 275, my translation.

ready to give up their monological point of view for the sake of polyphony and multi-perspectives. It also takes a willingness to open up and change one's convictions, and when meeting an other to see one's own hidden heart of darkness, filled with the inexplicable and threatening. And least, but not last, it calls for believing that dialog can enrich and multiply one's own resources.

In his book on Brandes, Jorgen Knudsen gave the title 'My intensified self to the chapter dealing with Brandes' visits to Poland. These were exactly the same words the Danish traveler used toward the end of his life when summing up his impressions of Poland in his memoirs. And the result of an authentic dialog is indeed an intensification of the self, a multiplication of the perspectives from which one views the world as well as oneself.

Against legends and myths. Stanisław Brzozowski and his psychoanalysis of the Polish soul

Toward the end of the 19th century one sees among Polish intellectuals a growing conviction that a revaluation of the Polish culture model is indispensable. Its hitherto center — the patriotic and religious landowner culture of the manor house — is no longer applicable to reality; its anachronisms are disclosed in all their absurdity when faced with the ever-evolving outside world. In his brilliant book on the idea of civilization in 19th century Poland, Jerzy Jedlicki gives the following description of the decline of the nobility's traditionalism:

Meanwhile, traditionalism marked the final stage of a culture which was still gentry-based. This culture was becoming increasingly less authentic, having less and less to do with the gentry's everyday lifestyle, their motivation and behavior; and their utilitarian mentality and morality. Of course, there is a gap between the sacral and the real in every culture, and it was particularly glaring in the gentry culture all over Europe. Chivalrous myths were often invoked by merchants and usurers, the ideals of brotherly equality were exploited by magnates, and the idyll of the serene life of simple villagers was cultivated by courtiers and townsmen. Nevertheless, for a long time this sacred and symbolic sphere stood as a strong canopy over the crumbling edifice of the noble estate. The moment this estate ceased to exist, both de facto and de jure, the problem for the younger gentry was how to find their place in the structure and culture of the society which was becoming increasingly middle class. This untouchable deposit of

> tradition and myth revealed its impracticality and fundamentally compensatory nature. The result was a growing breach between the sphere of practical activity which was concerned with individual adaptation to a new economic and social situation, and the sacred sphere of shared cultural symbols in which the various deposits of passive nostalgic patriotism, piety and fear for change found sustenance.[9]

The changes in the economic and social reality, along with their accelerating speed, were visible in Polish cities that were going through an intensive modernization period, as well as in the — because of travels, contacts, studies — more and more accessible Europe. Those changes gave rise to a great deal of minking and forced the Polish elite to radically reconsider their own traditions, search for a recipe and an answer to the challenges of modern times.

The first radical concept was put forth in the 1870s by Polish Positivists. Belief in the saving power of science and the progress of civilization could, according to the ideology of the 'young', expiate the Polish sins of backwardness, xenophobia, stagnation. Those pioneers of Modernity, prophets of progress, were firm believers in the miraculous power of science and technology; they were convinced that 'Polish miseries' could be conquered with the assistance of new inventions and social adaptations. Social engineering and technical engineering were supposed to provide the instruments needed to obliterate the gap between the antagonized social classes, eradicate poverty, illiteracy, injustice, and lay a new foundation for a revitalized Polish culture.

The modernization of Polish society, as propagated by the Positivists, was founded on two emotional attitudes of a very different and seemingly contradictory nature. The first was an admiration for the achievements of European civilization, paired with a dislike of their own familiar, yet provincial culture. The need for catching up with Europe seemed not only obvious to the 'young', but also

[9] Jedlicki, J., 1999, *A Suburb of Europe*, Budapest, p. 209.

necessity, arising from the logic of progress. When admiring (with their own eyes or through the eyes of the 'apostles of progress') the factory chimneys of Manchester or Lyon, the railway system, the development of medicine or humanization of prisons, Positivists saw a vision of a future Poland and a space gap became a time gap. Images of neighboring countries became a vision of the future.

The second source of the 'premodernists' eagerness stemmed from allowing the low everyday reality into their sight. Romantic culture had dwelled in the high sphere of ideas and visions, but Positivists took a look at Poland from the perspective of the peasant hut and the city filth; of everyday worries, prejudices, lack of education. They saw and expressed what was visible to the naked eye — the fact that 'the king is naked'; that underneath the idyllic picture of the 'larch wood manor' and under the cover of the chivalrously heroic vision of the defenders of civilization, Poland and culture there is an abyss of poverty, humiliation, barbarism. This concern, this looking from below at culture and society, led to the much-contested postulate of 'lowering the ideals': it was necessary to lower the ideals — to the 'ground level'. This 'lowering of ideals', often identified with trivial materialism, became a reproach that would frequently be thrown at the Positivist liberals from the right as well as from the left. The lowering came from the somewhat banal discovery that Poland not only lacked independence, but also soap and textbooks, places of work and learning, water pipes and sewers, but more than anything else a common cultural denominator without which a 'nation' is but an abstract image. And maybe the construction of this infrastructure of civilization should not be left until better times because the causal relation can show itself to be the opposite. That is why Świętochowski encouraged society to 'work where the field is open'.[10]

The Positivists — Świętochowski, Prus, Orzeszkowa — never became uncritical apostles of civilization progress, or mad prophets of

[10] See in Jedlicki, op. cit.,p. 222.

Modernity. What saved them from falling into the trap of unconscious Utopian thinking was a few factors: the fact that the 'Polish cause' (the idea of independence) did not fit with the idea of Modernity, the Romantic, in spite of all appearances, roots of their vision and plain common sense.

The efforts of the first generation of Polish modernizers did not really meet the expectations. The handful of young enthusiasts did not succeed (and could not have succeeded) in setting Poland on the tracks of Modernity, in revolutionizing the mentality of the average Polish intellectual. But the consequences of this 'sacrilegious revolt' proved to be far-reaching and rich in consequences. Foremost, for the first time ever 'Polish dilemmas' seemed universal and became part of a larger, European civilization context. It became clear that Poles are a nation subject to the same laws and criteria as other Europeans; that Polish worries, problems and hopes correspond with the worries and hopes of the French, English or German. The idea of the exceptional character of Poland's fate, of the rare qualities of the Polish national character, had been, if not completely ridiculed and overcome, then at any rate weakened and undermined by rational arguments.

In the following period, called Young Poland or simply Modernism (1890-1914), one can observe an even growth of Europeanization in Polish culture. The reception of Western thought and art intensifies; the ideas of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Marx, Sorel, Bergson, the works of Strindberg, Ibsen, Dostoevsky and Wilde deeply influence the Polish cultural arena. Questions about the role of the artist in modern society, about the autonomy of art and literature, interlace or collide with the social and political questions. The future of art, of philosophy, of society, of Poland: all these issues are to be grounded in the concept of the modern man, capable of acting in response to all the challenges that the modern world brings about, The most fruitful vision of the modern Pole, modern man, has been' presented in the writings of Stanisław Brzozowski, the most promising and profound thinker of the period.

The Legend of Young Poland[11] — one of Brzozowski's last books, published in 1910 — is really a showdown with the entire Polish culture, tradition or rather traditions; with the contemporary state of culture as well as with the accumulated historical patterns. This unbelievably radical crusade against the diseases of the Polish soul is undertaken in the name of Modernity, and at first sight it is reminiscent of the Positivist revolt 30 years earlier. But Modernity is different now: the boundaries of this idea are tilled with different contents; it has been extended and complicated. The Positivist view of the world with its optimistic faith in progress and civilization has been undermined by the tragic vision of a radical division between what is human and what is non-human, of what is creative human effort building a human world and what is the blind and dark forces of chaos pressing upon man and threatening his existence. Brzozowski's vision is not unique; he is simply expressing the essence of fin-de-siècle with all its doubt regarding the hmitlessness of progress, the morally unambiguous nature of the progressive message and the optimistic faith in the ability of civilization and technolog)' to wipe out or cure all human worries, longings and ambivalence:

> Modern thought has a more tragic idea of man's situation in nature. Man stands alone facing chaos and he is not supposed to become a logical result of the chaos, but has to save himself and his irrational self in spite of it. Man is not a continuation of evolution, but on the contrary a discrepancy in the plot, an opposition to it.[12]

Let us take a closer look at the vision of Modernity emerging from Brzozowski's writings; a complicated and contradictory vision, a vision containing moments of enthusiasm and horror, but without any doubt a European, reflective and critical vision that is far from naive. Brzozowski recognizes with incredible acuteness both the splendor and misery of the 'European project', choosing the elements that fit into his vision and suit his intellectual preferences.

[11] Brzozowski, S., 1983, *Legenda Młodej Polski,* Kraków.

[12] Brzozowski, S., 1982, *Legenda Młodej Polski,* quoted after C. Miłosz, 1982, *Człowiek wśród skorpionów,* Warszawa, p. 75.

First and foremost he recognizes the emancipating radicalism of Modernity, which frees man from the rule of outer heterogeneous powers trying to constrain his freedom. Modern Europe, the Europe of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, is in his eyes a scene of humankind's intense struggle to overcome the blind forces inherent in the threatening outer world as well as in man himself.

The importance of the 'European project' lies in the libération of man's creative powers, in 'freeing the intellectual representatives and the masters of the creative process from the rule of the feudal and clerical forms of society'.[13] Only a mind set free in such a way was capable of taking creative possession of reality, of the juridical and political constructions that made modern Western societies possible. The growing efficiency, the perfecting of the legal and social structures, are not a goal in themselves and do not automatically lead to a growth in happiness. The basic principle of the broad modernization process is for Brzozowski the emergence of a 'new type of man'. Science and technology are as a rule derivative in relation to the new Promethean vision of man: 'not in comprehending existence, but in creating man lays the fundamental task of humanity'[14] Creating man, enlarging the domain of the humanized world: in Brzozowski's quasi-rustical vision the dark nameless side of reality shrinks and makes way for the Promethean fire of human activity (not knowledge, not epistemological insight, but activity, action, deed): 'there has never been a time where so much of what is human was acclaimed'.[15]

Human activity, with the help of modern technology, will transform the world and by the same token will liberate the true human nature. Brzozowski's philosophy of human work *(filozofia pracy)* situates

[13] Op. cit., p. 223.
[14] Op. cit., p. 78
[15] The concept of self-creating man (autokreacja) lies at the heart of Brzozowski's anthropology and has been analyzed by A. Walicki, 1977, *Stanislaw Bnçpepivski - drogi mysli*, Warszawa, pp. 105-118. This book is one the best approaches to Brzozowski's original philosophy and situates his thought in the European dialog of ideas in the shift of the 19th and 20th century.

human 'above' nature, history and progress. His anthropocentrism is radical, hence his negative attitude to alienating structures and abstractions, to cold abstract speculation. Brzozowski is not an enemy of science, he is only against scientism — a dogmatism of science, the conviction that science alone will save humankind, establish its objectives, plan and outline its fate: 'the dogmatism of science is always identical with an estrangement from life, a detachment from it, subordination to mechanism'. The threat comes from an absolutization of the scientific vision of the world and a tearing of science and technolog}' from the rule of man. Such a scientism is an alienating scientism; it causes 'a renunciation of the spiritual autonom)' of one's own, hidden deep in the soul, insight that every T is something singular, irreplaceable, a lonely post at the mercy of one's own heroism'.[16]

Science — as an instrument in the struggle with the non-human, as an instrument in the struggle with nature, as 'productive rationality' - is thus acceptable, is simply an inevitable necessity. However, it should always be understood as part of life, of the *hebensmlt,* as 'different forms of human activity every one of which possesses its own instruments, e.g. its own ideas'.[17] But any idea of the unity of science, any Positivist belief in science — 'the religion of Modernity' - is a myth. Science trying to become ideolog)', the 'leading force' in the progress of civilization, is yet another fetish of humans, a fiction threatening the autonomy and unity of the human being.

At the bottom of such a science fetish lies a blind belief in rationalism. A radical rationalism is according to Brzozowski a disease of Modernity, not its healthy core. The philosophical concepts of pure reason, Cartesianism and its continuations cause man to lose his personality, take away his will, truth, power, courage and throw him into the arms of relativism and determinism:

> Rationalism taunted us with an illusion of the world where risk, courage become unnecessary, where it is possible to live without

[16] *Legenda,* p. 270.
[17] Op. cit., p. 270.

> being able to depend on oneself; unconscious bankruptcy of character, an undermining of what is the source of a sense of persistent and unrelenting individual responsibility. Rationalism melts us down in some depersonalized process; sttuggle, fight — these are the individualizing elements par excellence. We must learn to look at the world with a conquering eye; we must wrest from it our own destiny, our future.[18]

For it is not in science, not in the rule of the instrumental reason, that Brzozowski sees the driving force behind the civilization process that has been sweeping across Europe for the last few centuries. Rather, it is the will and the labor, the intensification of forces taming nature that are at the heart of the civilization process. Modern Europe is the result of the labor and the sacrifices made by generations of 'creators that have imposed upon themselves sacrifice and discipline in order to be able to produce ever increasing amounts of everything that is human: culture, civilization, and its products'. This energetic activist vision of culture — the vision of a dynamic process creating values and transforming matter — permeates all of Brzozowski's diagnoses and it speaks a language of bombastic passion:

> Modem culture, modern cultured society is a result of man's fierce fight with nature, it is a victor)' of will over the incoherent and chaotic nature in us as well as beyond us, it is in self-control and subjugation of one's own psyche, its organization. And the moral structure of society, the inner strength of nations is held together by this inner organization, this common will that infiltrates the life of individuals. [...] A society living by the modern culture is a work of tough, intensified will, an assault on our entire passive and lazy nature.[19]

Brzozowski's mission leaping off the prophetic pages of *The Legend of Young Poland* seems at first to bear resemblance to the program of the Positivists: lead Poland into Europe, transform Poles into modern Europeans, and forge the provincial Polish mentality into

[18] Op. cit., p. 278.
[19] Op. cit., p. 265.

an open, reflective consciousness. Yet, unlike the Positivists Brzozowski opens Polish eyes to the ambivalence of the European civilization, to the contradictions and paradoxes of Modernity. His slogan 'catch up with Europe' does not involve cheerful optimism and positive faith in the future; catching up to Europe means, if anything, maturing enough to be able to face the grave questions put forth by Modernity, the tragic nature of human destiny and its insoluble contradictions mercilessly exposed by the modern world. Having considered the consequences of Marx's, Nietzsche's or Simmel's thoughts, it is no longer possible to yearn for the promised land of progress, science and technolog)'; after the anti-positivist reaction, Europe and its civilization becomes a difficult and tragic challenge for the Poles, a necessity full of danger and uncertainty. More and more often Modernity discloses its apocalyptic aspect:

> Wheels are rumbling, transmissions are purring, the monstrous machine is moving and the mightier this licentiousness of the impetuous human will becomes, the smaller it seems compared to its own outcome: and our entire Western culture begins to seem a horrible, intoxicating disaster. It is so powerful and so mighty that it is no longer possible to resist it: one has to race, rush along with it. The maneuver room becomes narrower, the sense of responsibility begins to vanish, and as the basis of the horrible iron apparatus of will the modern European appears — a creature that increasingly attempts to renounce his own will, flee it, he tries to transform his life into a subjective, lyrical experience of an objective, independent destiny.[20]

Being separated from Europe has not only cast Poles into evergrowing civilization backwardness; first and foremost it has deprived them of a sense of responsibility for the fate of humanity, of a possibility of partaking in the creation of the new man and a new vision for the future.

> For one should not harbor any illusions: the lack of freedom has already engendered in us a whole magnitude of organic poisons; it has forced chaos upon us and has installed in us a sense of irre-

[20] Op. cit., p. 194-5.

> sponsibility: we live in the shadow of Western culture — but we are not aware of the tough common effort that culture arises from. In rebellion against coercion we have lost a sense and understanding of discipline towards ourselves, towards the great common work of culture. It would be hypocrisy not to admit that an understanding of these efforts, this persistent curbing of instinct, this overcoming of whims, without which no autonomous society can exist, is vanishing from our psychology.[21]

‘We live in the shadow of Western culture' does not just mean backwardness and provinciality, but hints at the parasitic nature of Polish culture, the drawing on this civilization's heritage without taking part in it in a responsible way. Brzozowski accuses his countrymen of a 'philosophy of cultural consumerism' — they want to benefit from Western culture, but not contribute to it.

Thus the struggle for the modern Pole must begin here and now, with a reckoning of the 'weaknesses of the Polish soul'. Only a radical reorientation of the Polish mentality will enable Poland to — for good and for bad — become an active part of the European history. Brzozowski's crusade against the 'Polish disease' is one of the most radical attempts in the history of Polish culture to rebuild its main pattern and deconstruct its hidden assumptions, its unspoken idiosyncrasies, its soporific 'legends'. This critique takes places on many levels and is launched from many perspectives. It touches on the most sensitive issues that characterize the Polish soul's disease. The demythologization of Polish culture undertaken by Brzozowski is reminiscent of a search for the reason of an illness and sometimes it takes the shape of a psychoanalytical séance uncovering deeper and deeper levels of common subconsciousness. Complex historical background and socio-historical self-images shaped under the influence of a highly particular historical development form this mosaic of Polish mentality, adorned with the figures of the knight, the high-priest, the seer, the insurgent, the progressive, the liberal, all of which co-exist in the muddle of cultural imagination.

[21] Op. cit., p. 264-5.

At the root, the very bottom of the 'Polish soul', Brzozowski discovers die complex of the priest-knight shaped in the Noble Republic, whose development it hindered for centuries. This is a sort of archetypal Polishness, a pattern of behavior and reaction to the world that has been formed in the course of Polish history. The noble knight living in the borderland of European civilization was somehow forced by the historical circumstances to be constantly 'prepared'; to live his life while being ready to defend the borders of the state, culture, civilization, religion. Contrarily, he was not interested in the process of creating the very same civilization, building its foundations, institutions and forms. The Antemurale complex[22] has, according to Brzozowski, had an enormous impact on the formation of the entire Polish culture and became the source of its centuries-old lack of productivity and backwardness. The noble knight 'does not create life but shields it' and this role separates him from reality; submerged in the space of bravery, honor and 'carelessness', he loses touch with the labor process, the hardship of taking on the fury of nature:

> The knight can think whatever he pleases of nature and people as long as he is brave; as long as the herd of subjects labors the nobleman can decide what he graciously wishes to receive and what he wishes to decline among the products of human labor. The unpredictability generated by the constellation of historical circumstances, which it has never learned to master, and upon which it had depended without — as long as the circumstances allowed it to live on - ever perceiving it — this is the concrete meaning of the nobility's arbitrariness beyond good and evil.[23]

This old-fashioned archetype of knight and nobleman produces a conservative society of nobility — the center of Polish culture, its spine, toward which Brzozowski harbors an almost obsessive dislike. His radical renunciation of noble culture is in places reminiscent of Proudhon's pamphlet from 1860 that denies the Polish

[22] *Antemurale Christianitatis* (the Bulwark of Christianity) was the self-image of Poles produced around die 16th century as a moral justification of their struggling against the Ottoman Empire.
[23] Op. cit., 235.

nation (i.e. the nobility) its place in the European family, first and foremost because of its far-fetched degeneration and extreme conservatism. (Proudhon considers the Polish nobility to be the main obstacle in the development of a free, democratic and liberal Europe.)

Brzozowski's disapproval of the nobleman mentality has roots in a feeling that this mentality is irreconcilable with the reality of the modern world; the world that has taken shape in Europe in the 19th century — one of science, critical thought, democracy and liberalism, and above everything else one of 'manufacturing labor'. This new world does not translate to the notions and values of the nobility culture. It comes from outside (from Europe) and it awakens distrust, skepticism and horror.

The greatest sin of the post-noble Polish intelligentsia in Brzozowski's time is the staple of lacking belief in intellect:

> Both the old layering of sociability and the political defeat produced in the post-noble intelligentsia a disregard for thinking because it does not really amount to much. This hierarchy of values was implanted in the young generations unconsciously and unnoticed, it was the air one breathed.[24]

The description of the post-noble formation in Poland given by Brzozowski reveals an extremely conservative culture built on a profound faith in a 'better' already existing world. By this I mean a philosophical conservatism, conservatism in general attitude rather than a pohtical conservatism in the strict sense of the word (even though the last is usually a consequence of the first).[25]

[24] Miłosz, C, 1982, *Człowiek wśród* skorpionów, Warszawa, p. 13.
[25] Conservatism of attitudes can, however, be present in political doctrines that consider themselves progressive, e.g. the real socialism. The nihilistic underpinnings of such conservatism are brilliantly described by Kołakowski in his essay Ethics without a code', Kołakowski, L., 1967, Etyka bez kodeksu, *Kultura i fetysze*, Warszawa, p. 154.

The 'idea of a world for ever frozen in its disabilities, an incorrigible world' is the very same that lies at the heart of the post-noble mentality, claims Brzozowski. He discovers that at its heart lies a notion of a 'readymade world' with no room for initiative, creativity or risk-taking, because the delicate balance of the 'perfect world' could be distorted and cause a total conapse. The mentality of the nobility is soaked in pastoral optimism. Again and again Brzozowsld asks himself how an attitude of a 'clear unruffled perspective' can be maintained despite a number of inner catastrophes and revolutionär)' changes. The vision appearing from all the different forms expressing this mentality is a symptom of a deadly disease:

> Have you ever wondered what and in what manner is felt by vanishing nations? Do you think that signs and warning specters — as in a novel by Sienkiewicz — actually appear? On the contrary. Clarity, cheerfulness and sweetness overflow the soul. It is no longer necessary to think, it is no longer necessary to work. There are no dilemmas on the horizon; evetything is clear, accessible, and apparent. [...] Nothing seems as clear and apparent as the future of useless classes and people: time will not impose any demands on them; they will not give it anything. Hence the atmosphere of self-confidence, the atmosphere of comforted hearts [...].[26]

The vicious reference to The Połaniecki Family'[27] is emblematic of Brzozowski's attitude to the most notorious and popular spokesman of the post-noble cultural formation, Henryk Sienkewicz. Sienkiewicz's works, opposed uncompromisingly by Brzozowski, are the best illustration of the idyllic, no-conflict 'ready-made world' that is representative of this formation. In Sienkiewicz's novels everything ends well, the hardships and contradictions of the world are conquered; the evil that attempts to sneak from the outside into the manor house is stopped or tamed. Ancient traditions and virtues triumph: good-nature, honor and innocence. Sienkiewicz, in his novels, rejects tragedy, Europe, Modernity, and thus vaccinates Poles against the diseases of Modernity — without questioning any-

[26] Brzozowski, S., op. cit., p. 68-9.
[27] The late novel of H. Sienkiewicz (1894) glorifying the rural life of the Polish gentry *(szlachta).*

thing and at same time filtering the world: 'no mystery had ever popped in, because no one had questioned anything — that was for the elders to take care of [...] and here you are living in a cheerful settlement in this Vistulaland: almost Hellenic conditions — everything transformed into one uneventful moment'.[28]

The conservative, ready-made world lying at the heart of this mentality and the source of its self-knowledge is a world of dogmas, an unhistorical and anti-intellectual world resisting change and transformation, 'foreign' influence. It is also an 'enslaved world', condemned for the past 100 years to political non-existence, bereft of the possibility of full expression. How, asks Brzozowski, has the condition of political subjugation influenced the view of the world of the noble culture — how has it changed, transformed or digested it? It appears that subjugation has served in this culture as a kind of alibi, as a justification for its conservatism. The victimization complex' that the Poles have cultivated within themselves has effectively conserved them in their Messianic sauce, has made them resistant to thought and change. The mythology of occupation and pleading the injustice of history allows the Poles to perform in 'the majesty of the victim that entitles one to reside on the Olympus of martyrdom', to rebuff all questions with a short answer: it is not our fault!

In case anything should attack the carelessness, thoughtlessness and slackness, bloody and grievous ghosts were evoked: the apparition of Rejtan[29] guarded every Polish pantry and every national bedchamber. Right away they plead their unfair destiny; bitter tears fall on the moustache because, alas, we can do nothing — and soon afterward the pantry nirvana of an existence where any thought of the past, the future or the present, or anytiiing but Apukhtin, Hurko[30] etc., is not allowed — the only thing to do is optimistically gain weight, beyond space and time. Thus one was simultaneously a victim, with the splendor of the role, and continued to dwell on the

[28] Brzozowski, S., op. cit., p. 236.
[29] A symbol of resistance against the Russians. In September 1773, as member of the Partition Sejm, Rejtan famously tried to prevent the legalization of the first partition of Poland.
[30] The names of the vicious tsarist 'russificators' in the 19th century Poland.

Sienkiewiczean Olympus. Out of love for this unfortunate country, lives were changed into one huge messianic sinecure.[31]

Brzozowski's diagnoses are not permeated by solid, historical argumentation. Rather, they are fervent philippics, poetical sermons, and not calm, socially and historically well-considered analyses. They are very personal and at the same time extremely common, abstract, not backed by historical evidence. This concerns in particular the attacks on the 'post-noble intelligentsia mentality'. Details crop up in connection with the descriptions of the different formations of the 'Polish soul' — Romanticism, Positivism/scientism and Young Poland. Here the accusations become still more concrete; the precision of argument, a rarity with Brzozowski, becomes slightly better.

Settling scores with Romanticism fills a considerable part of *The hegend of Young Poland.* According to Brzozowski, it is in this period that modern Pohsh culture becomes firmer, here the patterns and archetypes of modern Polish mentality take form. Romanticism is an answer to two of the most burning problems of modern Poland: the loss of independence, and the culture and civilization challenge pouring from the rapidly modernizing Europe. The first aspect of Romanticism has often been noticed and commented upon. Noticing the importance of the other makes Brzozowski a pioneer. Polish Romantics who emigrated, he claims, partook in the building of the spirit of the new Europe; a creation that aimed at 'freeing the intellectual representatives, masters of the creative process, from the rule of the feudal and clerical forms of society'.[32]

The postulate of the unrestrained freedom of the mind, that makes freedom of science and freedom to create a more fair social order possible, co-existed with the Polish Romantics' search. Their freedom, however, their idea of freedom that had been painfully elaborated in great loneliness, dwelled in a social vacuum and did not ; encounter any resistance from reality, as it had in the case of

[31] Op. cit., p. 70.
[32] Op. cit., p. 224.

German, French or Italian ideologists. That is why Polish Romanticism bequeathed PoHsh culture a 'dislocated freedom', meaning an exclusively internal, spiritual freedom incapable of asserting itself in contact with life and the world.

These scientific and social tests whose pressure restrains German and French ideologists did not affect Polish Romantics in the same measure. They considered this loose tie of theirs to the scientific tradition, this muddy sense of reality — a typically Polish trait — and because it let them ignore the difficulties that the representatives of the West were struggling with, they saw therein a supremacy of Polishness, its particular mission.

When the Romantics forged their own personal tragedy into common cultural laws (messianism) they separated the Polish culture from Europe. When they stressed its uniqueness, the exceptionality of the Polish destiny, they created a 'protective shield' around Polish culture, one that secludes it from Modernity, from life, from 'productive reality'.

Brzozowski partly grants the Romantics, especially Mickiewicz, absolution for the sin of 'lacking contents regarding the cultural consciousness'. Historical circumstances have caused PoHsh freedom to develop exclusively in the area of spirit, of ideas; because of the political subjugation it simply never got a chance to confront reality. The Romantics bequeathed Polish culture their enormous potential of will — 'intensity of the heart'; a belief in the creative powers of man (Prometheanism). These very same Romantic values should be taken up by modern Polish thought in order to create a new type of Pole — 'one capable of living at the highest level created by the European culture'.[33]

Young Poland considered itself the heir of Romantic ideas and values. With unbelievable sharpness Brzozowski sees all the weaknesses of this formation — first and foremost its secondary, dériva tive character. Brzozowski's contemporaries began their intellectul

[33] Op. cit., p. 182.

travel with the same negation of the Positivists' naive optimism as he did; with a rejection of the determinist view of the world and history which was a consequence of Darwinism, scientific Marxism and scientism. The artists of Young Poland went even further: they rejected (undoubtedly under the influence of Nietzsche) any possibility of external reality making sense, thus disappearing into their own universes created *ex nihilo:* 'There is no permanent reality, there is only psyche that figures out for itself how to find ground for a life lifted above all circumstances'.[34] Such a philosophy and anthropology is unacceptable to the activist-minded Brzozowski; it is for him a token of decadence, nihilism, extreme relativism and, above everything else, it cannot contribute to a profound restructuring of Polish culture that Brzozowski is calling for. Young Poland exists in a social vacuum; it Hves on legends and myths of the past. It represents a 'disarmed, loosened Polish soul'. It produces a culture of consumers, not creators; it distances itself from life and labor, instead of creating and 'strengthening' them. The spiritual autonomy won by the Young Poland is useless; it is incapable of taking up cudgels for an expansion of the human area, of participating in a humanization of the world which for Brzozowski is the only reflection-worthy goal of human activity. The rejection of Young Poland — radical and uncompromising — is at the same time a rejection of the 'lyrical Polish irrationality', just as damaging as the blind, de-humanizing rationality of the instrumental reason:

> Our culture of unconsciousness leads in another direction: nothing forces me to see what I am, I can dream of whatever I want if I please to — that is how the source of this enslaving lyricism could be described. Lyrical Polish irrationality is really the same spiritual attitude as the one expressed in the progressive rationality. There a confidence in the comprehended mechanical process is expressed, here an impulsive, nondescript becorning. [...] We use our tradition in order to extract something to comfort ourselves, an aesthetic illusion whose aim is to ornament the subjective flow of days, years, life. We

[34] Op. cit., pp. 274-5.

> do not think of ourselves as actual creators of the future, soldiers of the historical truth. [35]

What makes Brzozowski's construction of a model modern Pole particularly interesting is his lack of consequence and his contradictions. There is herein a deep distrust of easy, obvious solutions that create an illusion of a black and white system of values. Brzozowski's eclecticism is somewhat reminiscent of R. Rorty's concept of the 'informed dilettante' — a mediator in the dialog of ideas, critical towards the arguing parties and not giving in to the herd instincts. Brzozowski moves in a territory between tradition and Modernity, between the Enlightenment project and Romanticism, between Marxism and nationalism: he moulds his dialectical philosophy and anthropology from contradicting elements that are at odds with each other. His ideal of the Polish human (or rather the human Pole) is a creative, autonomous individual who struggles for his autonomy, transforms and humanizes the world through the arduous effort of labor. An individual who is tied to society and the nation, but not prone to giving in to its myths and 'legends', an individual capable of independent and nonconformist diinking, in spite of fashions and herd instincts. It is also a human submerged in history, who in his creations draws on the strength of the conquests of generations, the 'accumulated effort' of his predecessors. He does not, however, believe in any iron laws of history and rejects the ready-made concepts of the meaning of the world (e.g. providence, class struggle, *Weltgeist).*

What Brzozowski wants to do is to awaken the Polish nation from a centuries-long dream of its own greatness and the good nature of the world; from an idyllic mirage that hitherto has allowed the Poles to live in isolation from Europe and Modernity; from the great, grave questions of Modernity. Apart from some anachronisms in language and ornamental rhetoric, his words sound still very modern:

[35] Op. cit., p. 274.

The conscious Polish thought has but one road lying open in front of it: to become an organ of the self-creating Polish force that keeps itself alive by an effort of the will, and build on this fundament that cannot be expropriated; when Polishness becomes synonymous with an intensified, active and creative energy, when Polish atmosphere is permeated by elements that ensure every Polish worker — from the highest to the lowest fields of labor — a technical, economical and existential superiority — then Poland will be grounded for all eternity in an element that laughs in the face of all assaults, all upheavals, all storms. Let the Polish language become a mysterious spell and talisman that assures a continuous circulation of energy, courage, wisdom and endurance. Let it become not just an expression of longing, but a privilege in the life struggle of the entire Polish labor spread all over the world. Consequently, the power that already exists in the dark processes of life, will recognize itself in the sun and Poland will be as eternal and everlasting as the victory of man dependent on his own labor.[36]

[36] Op. cit., p. 156, my expanded style.

Construction of the Self in Polish culture — a neglected context of Polish Modernism

The general intuitions of those who study Polish literature confirm a troublesome fact that something is wrong with Polish Modernism and our understanding of it. Contemporary attempts to redefine and reorient our comprehension of it, undertaken throughout the last decades by Polish scholars as diverse as T. Burek, S. Eile or W. Bolecki, have revealed a semantic inadequacy. The literary period traditionally called Modernism or Young Poland raises rather unmodern connotations: anachronism, a poor literary voice and low impact. Polish modernist texts contradict our simple intuition connected with the word 'modern': contemporary, pointing toward the future, current. In one word — Polish Modernism does not correspond with our understanding of the idea of Modernity. That strange paradox has been evident for quite some time. In the poetry of Jan Kasprowicz and Kazimierz Tetmajer, in the prose of Karol Irzykowski, Wacław Berent and Stefan Żeromski, one is able to discern all the main features of modernist literary aesthetics: traces of symbolism, a revolution in narration techniques, internalization and dialogization, the focal position of language, 'deregulation' of literary genres. But still, something is missing.

There have been various answers and explanations as to what was missing and why in Polish Modernism. The most frequently repeated diagnoses consist of pointing out that the writings of Young

Poland were flawed by the anachronisms of its language (Miłosz) and that the movement lacked maturity in coping with the main issues of Modernity. The post-Romantic immediacy of expression, the lack of linguistic discipline and clarity (a sort of logorrhea) — all that made the confessions and articulations of Polish modernists, with their predilection for unmediated expressions of [the] naked soul, unintelligible. Czesław Miłosz describes this as the fallacy of unsublimed poetic language; Stanisław Brzozowski uses the term 'the intellectual slovenliness and negligence' *(intelektualne niechlujstwa).*

Some scholars have underlined the importance of the non-literary factors. Poland's political non-existence, a dissonance between the integral ideology of nationalism, which at this point is growing in intensity, and the modernist idea of *l'art pour l'art,* made Polish Modernism a cultural movement causing only a poor response in society, with no anchor in the underlying problems of the epoch. Other critics, for instance W. Gombrowicz, found the reasons for this discrepancy in the fact that the reception of Western philosophy and Western ideologies in Poland was a superficial one. According to him, the Polish intelligentsia did not understand the radical, revolutionary force dwelling in the writings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Marx — the fathers of modern thought. Neither did the Poles grasp the significance of the philosophy of subjectivity and its radical break with the optimistic faith in progress and civilization.

In this chapter I will attempt to reconstruct a certain, partly forgotten, perspective on the intellectual background of Polish Modernism. This perspective is based on the notion of the modern self.

Modernism, apart from its aesthetic, social and ideological grounds, had another strand and, according to Charles Taylor,[37] it was the ultimate one; namely the modern expansion of autonomy of the human self. In revealing new spaces of autonomy and authenticity,

[37] Taylor, C, 1989, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA.

in rejecting the old sources of fulfillment and integrity of the self (be it God, nature, family, collectivity or local community), Taylor identifies the essence of the culture of Modernism. It seems that in the case of Poland at the turn of nineteenth/twentieth centuries, from the perspective of the potential conceptions of the self as they were expressed in the West, there are some important elements or ideas that are missing. Here are some of them: the idea of disengaged critical reason as the ultimate source of the self; seeking for the grounds of the self in the ordinary life, in work and the family, and the Kierkegaardian idea of the singularity and unique character of the self *(den Enkelte),* anchoring the self in the human body with all the consequences. I do not maintain that the Polish culture of the nineteenth century, on the eve of Modernism, did not develop the ideals of personality, individuality or selfhood, nor do I claim that it did not partake in the modern process of emancipation (consisting of 'building up respect and understanding the dignity of one's own human personality, which is a thing unique and which must be cared for and developed to the full'[38]). However, the proportions of various strands of development were different in Poland; the frontiers of struggle for the self were often drawn in another way.

Charles Taylor and the sources of the self

Taylor's book is about the sources of modern identity; that is, it tells a story about how the modern understanding of the self developed out of earlier images of human identity, among others those of Plato, Augustine, Descartes, and Locke.

There are, according to Taylor, three major facets of this identity: 'first *modem inwardness,* the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depth, and the connected notion that we are 'selves'; second, *the affirmation of ordinary life* which develops from early modern period; third, the expressivist notion of *nature as an inner moral source',* with its roots in Romanticism and Rousseau. As regards the first issue, the modern inwardness, the first stance here is the disengaged reason

[38] Taylor, ibidem, p. 13.

and its keywords are: punctual neutral self[39] and the rationality of its following activities, self-reflexivity, self-mastery, self-responsibility, and self-exploration. The main figure here is John Locke, who, by developing the Cartesian philosophy of subjectivity in a radical direction, establishes the grounds for the ultimate human freedom. In his conception of 'demolition and rebuilding' the self, Locke places the subject in the third person as the object of introspection. That profound introspection allows us to get rid of all our unconscious restrictions coming from the instincts, emotions and prejudices. The ideal self is thus neutral, rational and self-governing. The separation of the self, postulated by Locke, placed the subject in the role of the object of exploration. It enhanced scientific critical rationality. The disengaged reason became the source of many new critical trends on the European path to Modernity: Positivism, Marxism, Nietzscheanism and certain branches of psychoanalysis. It influenced the Puritan practices of moral self-improvement; it emerged in the ideals of the modern science, as well as in the political creed of liberalism. It was a pivotal force in all sorts of radical reflexivity, and in all sorts of radical criticism based on suspiciousness and deconstruction.

The awareness of the existence of inner depths derives from yet another source, another dimension. Taylor calls that second dimension 'the affirmation of ordinary life' and means by it 'those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labor, the making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and family'.[40]

The turn towards ordinary life occurs, according to Taylor, in the beginning of the nineteenth century and comes as a result of the growing mistrust toward the preceding morality of citizen-warrior:

> The citizen ethics was in some way analogous to, and could at time partially fuse with, the aristocratic ethic of honor, whose origins lay in the life of warrior castes [...] It involved a strong sense of hierarchy, in

[39] See explanation of the punctual self on p. 50.
[40] Taylor, ibidem, p. 211.

> which the life of the warrior or ruler which turn on honor or glory was incommensurable to that of men of lesser rank, concerned *only with life.* Willingness to risk life was the constitutive quality of the man of honor. And it was frequendy thought that a too great concern with acquisition was incompatible with this higher life. In some societies, engaging in trade was considered a derogation of aristocratic status *(my italics).*[41]

The gradual rehabilitation of the ordinary life, initiated by Francis Bacon, was particularly strengthened in Protestant cultures. Rejecting authorities as mediation left the human being face-to-face with God, and opened the way for the glorification of everyday life, The sources of satisfaction and morality were discovered more and more often in everyday human activities, in the sphere of values of family' life and wealth. The ideal of fulfillment, found in everyday life, beyond the sphere of glory and honor, was gradually being spread throughout Europe. It was essential for the ideals of the new legal state, in which the values of social order, political stability, and good life were becoming more and more significant.

The revaluation of everyday activities was strongly connected with the discovery of the importance of family life.

> Starting among the wealthiest classes in the Anglo-Saxon countries and in France in the late seventeenth century we see a growing idealization of marriage based on affection, on true companionship between husband and wife, and on the devoted concern for their children.[42]

The sphere of privacy within the family slowly increases, while the family gained independence from local communities and patriarchal ancestors. In this process of the transformation of family life, the sense of moral autonomy gradually expanded, enhancing individualization and internalization of values. The family space became

[41] Taylor, ibidem, p. 211-212.
[42] Taylor, ibidem, p. 289.

transformed into the space of intimacy and privacy, the substance in which one can mould one's own way of life and destiny.

The rehabilitation of ordinary life is being expressed in the modern novel, and leads to its growing significance. The focus is being shifted to the details, and to the uniqueness of human life. The modern novel broke with the classical preference for the general and universal.

The Romantic era empowered us with yet another source, a very powerful one and pregnant with consequences. Taylor calls that feature 'the romantic expressivity' and means by it a whole complex of ideas which made human creativity the supreme goal for the self. The Romantic self rediscovers nature, not as the object of penetration and conquest, but as the realm of meaning, of hidden messages, of reunification:

> And so among the great aspirations which come down to us from the Romantic era are those towards reunification: bringing us back to contact with nature, healing the division within between reason and sensibility, overcoming the divisions between people, and creating community.[43]

Taylor's Self and the Polish Modernism

Polish literature of the nineteenth century, seen from the perspective of the sources of the self, in the context of creation of the modern identity, appears in a particular light. The most significant trace here is the shift from the individual to the collective self that constitutes the center of the cultural paradigm. This disregard for the individual, particular, self-reflexive dimension for the benefit of collectivity and generality has been observed by many Polish intellectuals; some of them (as, for instance, W. Gombrowicz) made it the main issue of their critical crusade against the Polish cultural paradigm.

[43] Taylor, ibidem, p. 384.

By applying the Taylorian model to the framework of Polish culture on the eve of Modernism, one is able to observe more detailed differences in the development of the conception of modern identity. The most striking feature is the lack of critical and self-exploring reason, called by Taylor 'the disengaged reason', or punctual self. The ideal of 'disengaged reason' produced in Europe a whole chain of critical reflection about various types of coercion. The dominant restraints discussed in early Modernity were those directed against free subjectivity, and originating from religion, society, and the family; one's older generation or inner limitations. It appears that the whole energy of the quest for freedom in Poland was directed against the external political enemy, leaving very little space for another, subtler dimension of freedom. The 'subtler languages' in the exploration of the self, which according to Taylor developed in Western Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, were generally absent here.

It seems that the development of the Polish cultural outlook, from Romanticism onward, was conducted in a somewhat one-sided way. The Polish self, as expressed in literature and philosophy, was not exposed to the differentiating, autonomizing processes that led to a growing separation of the reflexive self from various communities, from various terms of coercion. The insufficient critical reflection, as well as insufficient self-reflection, or psychological self-penetration, did not promote the expansion of the frontiers of the inner depths that, according to Taylor, was the ultimate ground for the emergence of the modernist understanding of the self. It does not mean that the ideas of individuality and peculiarity of human agents were not actualized in the Polish culture on the eve of Modernism. Rather, it means that some of its components were missing; some types of discourse and narrative that were significant in the West were not fulfilled here. On some crucial points the Polish way runs differently.

Charles Taylor describes the second half of the nineteenth century as the epoch of 'subtler languages', in which the sources of modern self, disengaged reason and the Romantic epiphany were subjected to further complications. In Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, in the

naturalist school of Flaubert and Zola, in Marx and Nietzsche, we clearly see the differentiation of languages in the quest for the ever-expanding and ever more authentic subjectivity. Some illusions of disengaged reason were rejected, the optimistic trust in its normative power was apparently dropped. Naturalism and its followers (for instance Schopenhauer) undermined the belief in the restoring power of nature in a radical way. Nature lost its metaphysical power of fulfillment; it was understood more and more as a source of alienation. Its role as the ultimate source of unifying expression was partly exhausted. These changes led to the situation in which a need for some new 'turning points' gradually emerged. The quest for new ways of understanding ourselves, introduced by Modernism, developed toward the deepening of reflection over the self, and toward exploring its inner depth to the radical limits of fragmentation, deconstruction of subjectivity. At the same time it radically changed our relation to nature, made it more problematic and less transparent. In that development Taylor sees a growing respect for human experience, and a longing for rehabilitation of various forms *lebenswelt.*

> The modernist retrieval of experience thus involves a profound breach in the received sense of identity and time, and a series of reorderings of a strange and unfamiliar kind. These images of life have reshaped our ideas in this century of what it is to be a human being.[44]

My argument is that the radical reshaping of the modern self, which according to Taylor was the ultimate condition of Western Modernism, occurred much later in Polish culture and did not coincide with the literary epoch called Polish Modernism or The Young Poland (at the torn of the 19th and the 20th centuries). In spite of some apparent traces of modernist poetics, in spite of the presence of the dominant modernist ideas, Polish culture from the turn of the century does not catch up with the West.

[44] Taylor, ibidem, p. 465.

There were some significant intellectuals or critics, whose remarks on the Polish cultural scene on the eve of Modernism I am going to rely upon in my further considerations. Brzozowski, Brandes, Miłosz — they all have one thing in common: when describing the Polish intellectual atmosphere at the end of the nineteenth century, they focus on the problems concerned with the self. They all observe a split between the Western model of modern identity and its Polish counterpart; they all trace the sources of that breach in the Polish Romantic heritage. In their analyses, they stress the fact that the transformations of the literary techniques and conventions should be subjected to some more profound processes, which should occur in the depths of the collective mentality of Poles: in the paradigm of their conception of the self, in relation to their heritage, and in their reactions to the modern world.

The dominant foci of these three diagnoses are slightly different. For Brandes, it is the gap between the modern industrial and middle class Europe, governed b}' strong state structures and the sense of civil rights and duties, on one hand, and the traditional, anti-economic and idealistic mentality of Poles on the other. There is no room here for the ideals of productivity, efficiency and pragmatism. For Brzozowski the main fault of Polish culture lies in the Poles' conformist attitudes that in a self-defensive gesture produced the ready-made world, thus leaving no room for radical changes or for inter-cultural communication, and the dissemination of the new ideals of modern man. According to C. Miłosz, Polish culture has never touched the depths of serious modern religious reflection, which in Western Europe and in Russia had the ultimate significance for the emergence of the new forms of modern identity. It is astonishing that in Poland, a deeply Catholic country, theological reflection has always been superficial and has produced no serious ideological conflicts or debates, as occurred, for instance, in Russia, where Dostoevsky and Soloviev started an intellectual movement opening the way for both modernist art and literature (Russian symbolism, acmeism). Miłosz also emphasizes the linguistic fallacy of Polish Modernism, its uncritical attitude toward literary forms and an inadequacy and anachronisms of language. 'The language of

the formation of Young Poland was not sublimed enough to become modern', the great poet argues.

From this perspective of many attempts to diagnose the malady of Polish culture on the eve of Modernism, I will concentrate on only a few: those especially interesting from the viewpoint of constructions (or ideals) of the self or due to their relevance from the Polish-Scandinavian perspective.

The first thesis consists of pointing out the lack of critical self-reflection in premodernist Poland. Self-reflection, with its roots in the Enlightenment, is one of the ultimate 'frontiers of exploration' in the processes described by Taylor, and consists in: 'being aware of my activity of thinking on my processes of habitation so as to disengage from them and objectify them'.[45] This individualistic self-reflection was 'invented' in Western Europe in the struggle with the governing political systems, under pressure from institutions and superstitions, in the struggle with the coercion of communities and families. This struggle took a different shape in nineteenth-century Poland: the political enemies — mostly Russians — were the main target of that struggle. The external and distant enemy epitomized the metaphysical and moral evil. In Polish mentality, constructed in the nineteenth century, evil (and its sources) was thrown out beyond the frontiers of one's own community, outside the moral collective self. In this way a moral space of collective solidarity slowly emerged out of political circumstances. That space, however, left no room for internal critics of group mentality, no room for a generation conflict, for rebellion against national norms and paradigms, for cultural radicalism. Paradoxically, the presence of the visible, actual and brutal political enemy in the metaphysical sphere of Evil blocked the way for a more individual struggle for personal, individual autonomy, There was only one source of oppression and resistance, and it made the other sources invisible and less painful. That lack of resistance from the real world did not encourage the emergence of the radical, autonomous, liberated self.

[45] Taylor, ibidem, *p.* 175.

Stanislaw Brzozowski describes this aspect of Polish mental and intellectual limitations in his *Legend of Young Poland,* with its significant subtitle *Studies on the structure of the Polish cultural self.* According to him, the main fallacies of Polish Modernism, its ideological hollowness *(be^treściowośc)* and anti-intellectualism, are rooted in a distorted reception of the Romantic heritage, which is characteristic of the Polish culture. In his diagnoses Brzozowski seems to be surprisingly similar to those made by Georg Brandes: they both agree that the Romantic era and its ideology in Poland produced room for unlimited cultural freedom, idealistic and spiritual. That freedom had very httle to do with reality, and it had never been confronted by the life-grounded, existential limitations. Polish literature in the nineteenth century creates the heroic personality in constant struggle with ideas: with God, with political oppression, with the ideas of honor and glory; but never with actual living subjects: never with fathers, mothers, wives, children, neighbors. In contrast to Scandinavian literatures, which, on the eve of Modernism, were permeated by this kind of issues (especially by the conflict of generations symbolizing the conflict of ideas, die recurring motive of the family as the object of radical suspicion) Polish writers seem to have remained in a family space untouched *b y* conflicts and struggles, in a paradise-like co-existence and solidarity between all family members. The angry young men and women searching for their identity and struggling with their fathers and mothers, as well as with the values represented by them, were apparently non-existent here. The lonely Polish individualist — from Mickiewicz's Gustaw/Konrad to the heroes of Żeromski — dissolves sooner or later in the space of the real or imagined collectivity, in Polishness. This sort of individualism does not coincide with separateness, moral autonomy and alterity, or with self-reflexivity. Brandes, an observer from the outside, notices that feature — the imprisonment of Poles in the Romantic paradigm — and tells them that revealing the modern self consists above all in overcoming Romanticism (which, nevertheless, according to him, is a 'mission impossible').

The way to overcoming this goes through discovery of the modern dimensions of tragedy. Here we are dealing with one of the most

interesting remarks made by Brandes: in Polish literature the stage for tragedy is always provided by the world outside, never by the inner reflective self:

> They *(Polish literary heroes,* my clarification) never reflect on that sense of radical separateness which is present in ordinary, humble people. That's why in spite of enormous political repression they cannot ever be unhappy enough. Here one finds a lot of misery, situated in the outer world, but we can never witness the tragedy that takes place in the depths of the human self, with no intervention of the evil destiny from outside.[46]

More ordinary life, deeper reflection, more heroes of flesh and blood, more conflicts between men, more of a sense of comedy and humor — this is the advice that Brandes offers to the Polish writers on the eve of Modernism.

Both Brzozowski and Brandes underline the strange attitude toward the human body, corporeality and sexuality present in Polish culture. That sphere has been completely neglected, they maintain. Polish heroes and heroines are made of the subtle tissue of symbols and allegories, their selves are in no way grounded in the body. The corporeal dimensions of the self, so important for the processes of individualization, remained taboo for a long time in Polish literature; were considered an issue forbidden by religious norms and cultural restrictions. Brzozowski wrote openly about Polish neglect of sexuality, as it was expressed in literature. Without a sound relation to the human body and sexuality, Polish culture would remain fragmented and limited.

Brandes is particularly worried about the lack of psychological literary portraits of women in Poland. For a feminist who follows the traces of dominance of the masculine and patriarchal elements in Polish culture, these remarks of Brandes might be of value:

[46] Brandes, G., 1902, *Indtryk fra Polen*, København, p. 316.

> They adore and worship woman here, but they hardly study and observe her. Whether she appears in literature as a daughter, sister lover or mother, she is never an integral human being, endowed with a great personality or individuality. Her image immediately turns into an ideal and remains within that stereotype.[47]

Conclusions

We should remember that the Taylorian self is not necessarily limited to cognitive subjectivity. It includes a moral dimension; that is, the ideals of good Hfe, the quest for self-reflection that makes life worth living. His vision of Modernism is the vision of recovering or uncovering of these spiritual sources, that sometimes lie inside, sometimes outside the existing cultural paradigm; mostly outside. And that is why one may understand Modernism as the epoch of the invention of some new, radical moral sources beyond the traditional metaphysics. These moral sources are to be understood as *empowering* sources.

Here one is able to find the positive stance of Modernism, its creative metaphysical potential. Are we, the readers of Polish literature, not able to recognize such empowering effects in Witold Gombrowicz's idea of inter-human church or in Bruno Schulz's idea of mythologization of reality, with its deep ontologicai and aesthetic consequences? Does the idea of keeping the past alive through poetry that permeates Milosz's writings sound familiar enough here?

The modernization of culture, as it is understood by Taylor, consists in the quest for alternative sources of the self. In his vision, the modernist claim for the 'subtler languages' results in the pursuit of sources of meaning *exprès deluge*, after the various disillusions caused by the Enlightenment and its heritage. Thus understood, the outlook of Modernism does not appear in Polish culture until the 1930s and it is associated with such great authors as Gombrowicz, Schulz and Witkacy. They were the first to ask the questions that sound

[47] Ibidem, p. 239.

modern even today, and their works still constitute the centre of gravity for Polish Modernism. The ultimate question of Modernity — a question of a 'sovereign individual, who is by nature not bound to any authority' — dwells at the center of their works. And out of that center emerges a new quest — a quest for new authorities stemming from within:

> Disengagement from cosmic order meant that the human agent was no longer to be understood as an element in a larger, meaningful order. His paradigm purposes are to be discovered within. He is on his own. What goes for the larger cosmic order will be eventually applied also to political society. And this yields a picture of the sovereign individual, who is by nature not bound to any authority. The condition of being under authority is something which has to be *created*.[48]

[48] Taylor, ibidem, p. 194.

Czesław Miłosz and his ambiguous Modernity

As the 20th century approached its end, it was easy to detect a trend of summing up; attempts at grasping and analyzing the essence, or the spirit, of the period. Through the perspectives of Z. Bauman, A. Giddens and E. Hobsbawm, we learned to see Modernity as the age of paradoxes. On one hand, we could witness an enormous civilizatory progress; on the other — great calamities and cruelties that revealed the vulnerability of Western civilization. Numerous reexaminations of Western culture and its hidden premises have been undertaken, revealing hidden germs of evil and violence.

During the Second World War, in the midst of the totalitarian nightmare, a book of that sort appeared in occupied Warsaw. Its major concern was to rediscover some new intellectual foundations for the European civilization *après deluge*. Czesław Milosz's *The Legends of Modernity* was a personal response to the fundamental dilemma of Modernity: what went wrong in the history of modern European culture and what might have been responsible for the horrors of Nazism, communism, and both World Wars. The book was a desperate attempt to re-examine the heritage of European culture from the viewpoint of its tragic contemporary outcome: the collapse of humanism, disappearance of moral feelings, and eruption of animal instincts. In his literary essays, Miłosz tried to answer the question: how and where did the European culture 'go wrong'. According to him, the ideology of naturalism could be blamed for that decay; a shift in modern thought which replaced the sound, rational criticism

with glorification of non-reflective, spontaneous action in the name of the natural instincts and free, pure will. It also substituted the idea of free, self-assured man with the philosophy of the *Übermensch* that gradually liberates himself from his cultural and moral bounds.

The period Miłosz is investigating, the past two hundred years of Western history, is in current terms called the age of Modernity; The process of human emancipation, initiated by the Enlightenment and its philosophers, has brought about the liberation of man from self-created restraints, and has led to increased autonomy and self-assurance. Simultaneously, it is also a time when more and more areas of human activity have been governed by ideas and ideologies: 'something in this century submits to thoughts', as Miłosz wrote in a later poem. These ideas, or thoughts, gradually transform into the myths that begin to govern the realm of collective imagination. The most malicious among these myths are, according to Miłosz, those that glorify the natural foundation for human morality and law:

> The core topics of my book [...] consist in getting rid of the convictions on the natural impulses of man, or on the natural conditions of his life. There is a hope in that endeavor, that after destroying these naturalistic legends one would be able to find a solid ground for morality.
>
> The chapter on Daniel Defoe has been directed against the trust in the innate human goodness, beyond civilization. The chapter on Balzac depicts the evil spell that civilization casts onto the society; civilization that is understood as automatic process governed by the biological laws of evolution. Chapters on Stendhal and Gide deal with these moral outlooks that equalize the laws of Nature with the laws of Morality and, thereby, lead to the glorification of Power. The fragment on William James criticizes his tolerance against the fictions and legends we live by, believing that it is the normal condition. The fragment on Tolstoy's *War and Peace* epitomizes the disillusionment towards civilization and its perils.[49]

[49] Miłosz, C, 1996, *Legendy nowoczesności,* Krakow, p. 3.

Why do those particular myths concern Miłosz? Why does he choose the myths of natural human innocence originating in the philosophy of Rousseau; or ideas of the natural development of communities, inspired by Darwinism, but not the myths of the omnipotent human rationality and creativity, his power over nature (the Faustian set of myths)? In order to answer those questions we have to take a closer look at the second part of the book, namely Miłosz's correspondence with another Polish writer, Jerzy Andrzejewski. Their dialog deals with the crisis of European culture that both writers examine here and now, in Nazi-occupied Warsaw anno 1942. Both explore how that extreme situation has changed their views on philosophy, culture, and religion. These letter-essays are interesting as personal records of the epoch, of individual spiritual doubts in the eye of the storm. They are about personal choices and re-examination of the existing values in face of the collapse of European civilization. The consequences of that disaster have been viciously evident in their experienced reality.

Miłosz intends, as he himself mentions in the text, to write a new *Confession of a Child of the Centuîy*[50]. The second source of inspiration is Descartes and his pursuit of the rational grounds for human knowledge. There is nevertheless a fine difference between doubting in the Cartesian way and Milosz's skeptical attitude. Milosz's doubts are *by* no means of epistemological nature — they do not originate, as for Descartes, in the hypothesis of the Evil Genius who deceives our sense. The entire European culture, with all its specific fields, currents, and symbols, turns out to be the object of suspicion. We stand, according to Miłosz, 'on the ruins of Europe, the ruins that are even more severe in the moral, not the material dimension'. Hence his moral proposition: the European intellectual should reexamine his own culture through a process of weeding out all dangerous and equivocal ideas. When faced with the total destruction of civilization, one should preserve its sound values, learn how to sort the wheat from the chaff, and lay grounds for a new world that hopefully will emerge after the disaster:

[50] The self-reflective book of A. Musset, written in the middle of the 19th century epitomizing the fears of Romantics. '

> My intellectual task is directed towards construction, if not of the new edifice of the unknown tomorrow then at least its grounds; towards the new systematic doubts that could have lead to restoring those few positive values. And hence a novel melody of the peaceful reflection, lingering in times of grieving, anger and pain. [...] Facing basic questions in the human life one should not deceive oneself.[51]

The Evil Geniuses of the collectivity

In order to discover the sound currents in European thought, one has to undertake an amputation. Its goal is to recognize and get rid of the miasmas of the moral disease dwelling in Modernity. Miłosz traces the symptoms of that disease to the ongoing process of "de-rationalization' of modern attitudes. This process started at the end of the 19th century and consisted in rejecting reason and common sense, human conscience and trust in common values; it was undertaken in the name of the cult of power and the apotheosis of the dark instincts. The worship of immediate action, epitomized by bloody revolt or revolution, turned out to be a vicious consequence of these irrational forces. 'The Evil Geniuses of the collectivity': Nietzsche, Sorel, Bergson, Freud, the Futurists and Surrealists 'turned the gravity of human mind into dust', contested the notion of Truth, and deprived the idea of man of all substance. Those concepts were disseminated in Europe and became popular in their simplified forms, which led to the emergence of mass ideologies: Nazism and communism 'whose meaning consists in blind trust in natural instincts, in the call of blood and race, in infallibility of animal desires'.

Art and literature were also affected by these processes. In the artistic currents of the 20th century (in Surrealism, in Futurism, in the modern psychoanalytic novel) all these inclinations come into sight. The new literary hero was now liberated from all the petrifying, fossilized forms of culture (bourgeois, Christian, humanistic);

[51] *Legendy Nowoczesności,* p. 4.

the propaganda of Future Man emerged from some new streams of art (in both Socrealist and Nazi option?). All these tendencies form a pattern of *the modern anti-intellectualism*^ which is expressed by contempt for the reflecting and doubting thinker and derision of the notion of truth. A radical, new vision of man, a new anthropology, emerges as the result of these processes: a depersonalized and objectified, 'naturalized' human being:

> On one hand, by studying man as a biological creature one was able to discover instincts and desires that govern inside him. The conclusion was that consciousness is barely a supplement into that pandemonium of desires and efforts that in fact govern our will. On the other hand, by identifying the man as a social product, one was able to distinguish and name all these collective forces, struggles and resentments that inform the self and identity of classes and individuals. *The human self appears to be just a tool* (my italics).[52]

In his early War essays, Miłosz seems to exaggerate the impact of the 'naturalistic fallacy' in European culture. His interpretations of Defoe, Balzac, Stendhal, Gide, and Tolstoy are in a sense mis-readings: Miłosz's passion for disclosing the seeds of evil makes him a biased, simplifying reader. He is able, however, to focus our attention on these naturalistic traces in Western culture that started with Rousseau, and resulted in a deep commitment to nature and the cult of human natural authenticity. It is a broadly defined naturalism which is responsible for the present atrocities.

Balzac, for instance, in his *Human Comedy* presents economic desire as the natural force governing communities. His Hobbesian vision of civilization as constant economic struggle anticipates and glorifies Social Darwinism; economic survival of the fittest and strongest. Stendhal and Gide elevate the individual's right to radical self-fulfillment, at the cost of other people and against social norms and rules. These literary and artistic visions prefigure, claims Miłosz, the voluntarist ideas of Nietzsche, and the atavistic concepts of the Freudians, Surrealists, or Dadaists. Consequently, the modern totali-

[52] Ibidem, p. 246.

tarianisms emerge, with their populism, activism, and revolutionär)' spirit. And the final outcome is the state of affairs *anno* 1942: the ruins of Warsaw, the horrors of Auschwitz. The reasoning is convincing, the conclusions are striking...

Could it possibly be that Miłosz in his early essays expresses his cultural conservatism by denouncing Modernity due to its ambiguity toward the good old moral rules, social order, toward the classic standards? At first that hypothesis seems to be right. Still, Miłosz always remains true to his key intellectual attitude: To be skeptical, to doubt. His skepticism towards certain outlooks of Modernity is not grounded in nostalgic longing for a better world of pre-Modernity, with its stable moral, religious and social order. It is rather Descartes and Kant, not de Maistre and Burke, who are his intellectual masters. The Cartesian hypothesis of the evil genius that may deceive human senses and may distort his representation of the world is transferred by Miłosz from the field of epistemology to morality. Miłosz reveals the evil genius of naturalism dwelling in modern European culture, and that idea is surprisingly close to the Christian concept of original sin, recognized by Miłosz. That evil genius of moral decay is present in every doctrine of radical human autonomy, and has been set free by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who, while elevating human freedom, autonomy, and self-reliance, liberated man from the coercion of prejudices, primarily from the prejudice of original sin, and consequently from the oppression of all forms of culture and civilization. The hypercritical bias of Miłosz thus departs from the inherent antagonism of the Enlightenment philosophy, or rather from distortions of the modern project observed by him. As a prominent Polish expert on Miłosz expresses it: 'He is concerned with ambiguity and perfidiousness of the noblest ideas or attitudes. That is why he regards the reflexive doubt as the basic obligation of every poet, of every intellectual [...] and that attitude as more productive than that of the committed believer'.[53]

[53] Błoński, J., 1998, *Miłosz jak świat,* Kraków, p. 114.

It is remarkable that Miłosz in his diagnoses on one hand resembles the postmodern critics of culture and Modernity (by tracing the hidden antagonisms in the Western discourse), but on the other hand — his thought is radically different. While those critics (from Husserl and Weber to Derrida and Bauman) find the origins of modern Western civilization's misery in the hypertrophy of instrumental reason, Miłosz (from the 40s) traces the seeds of evil rather to the 'naturalizing' ideologies. Significantly, in the same period a similar set of ideas appears in his poems: cruelty in nature; the human helplessness when faced with our own animal corporality; a drama of non-communication with nature, of unreturned love for its beauty...

Throughout the 1940s, Miłosz appears to be a fervent critic of a certain thread of the emancipatory movement of Modernity. That alternative track of the modern discourse starts with Rousseau and Defoe, runs through Nietzsche to the Naturalists, Sorel to the Futurisms, and Surrealism, impacting ultimately the ideas of communism and Nazism. We should emphasize again that it is not emancipation from the irrational superstitions and from social coercion that is at stake here. It is rather a case of liberating 'natural man' from the yoke of corrupted community, soft morality and rationality. The outcome of that ideology is a man who creates his own morals on the grounds of his own instincts, who holds the intellectuals in contempt; who is receptive to ideas of immediate action and authenticity of expression, who believes in the laws of nature governing human beings. The 'blonde German Beast' seems to Miłosz to be the logical outcome or the last link of that process.

The intellectual stance against that naturalist fallacy is for Miłosz the sound, skeptical rationalism which respects certain traditional values. The stability of the cultural heritage, faithfulness toward the established norms, trust in the universal dimension of human nature, constitute for Miłosz the intellectual reliance in his struggle against the 'naturalized' man. Religion appears to be a significant issue here. It is, however, religion comprehended as a continuous searching, continuously inflicted with doubts. And by no means a blind commitment or a pure devotion. Here Miłosz differs from his adversary,

Jerzy Andrzejewski, who chooses Catholicism as an ultimate remedy for the collapse of civilization. Milosz is more cautious, and skeptical of everything, even Catholicism.

Zeitgeist as temptation

Milosz's attitude towards Modernity was, as the result of his experience of 1945—51, subjected to a significant transformation after the war. Witnessing how totalitarianism is being imposed on Poland, he becomes to some extent involved in the structures of power. Partaking in that new situation, and scrutinizing the Polish intelligentsia infected by this new ideology, makes the writer re-valuate his view on the 20th century and its culture. The Hegelian concept of *Zeitgeist* appears frequently in Milosz's diagnoses as the epitome of historical determinism, of the 'iron laws of History and Progress'.

His personal life experience also played a significant role. In the post-war period Milosz cautiously approaches Marxism. He finds in it a painful but inescapable remedy for the crisis of values observed by him in the contemporary world. The symptoms of that crisis reside not only in the calamities of the war and Holocaust; Milosz detects, as well, the local symptoms of crisis in pre-war Polish nationalism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and backwardness. The traces of Milosz's ambiguous attitude towards Marxism — both critical and affirmative — can be observed in his writings from the period, both discursive and poetical. The most fervent critical tones sound in the two major works from the '50s: in the revealing and accusing (even self-accusing) essay *The Captive Mind*, and in the philosophical poem 'The Poetic Treatise'.

The Captive Mind is remembered as the book on the mental traps awaiting the intellectuals who choose Marxism. Milosz's famous Ketman-theory describes the techniques of self-manipulation performed by 'Marxism-infected' intellectuals who look for excuses and rationalizations when trying to justify their ideological choice. It is by the same token an attempt to describe the very process of

indoctrination, with all its phases and doubts. Let us, together with Milosz, follow this process.

According to Milosz, the trauma of war is the key factor in understanding the changing attitude of the Eastern European intellectual. The trauma has been experienced not only on the emotional level but even as an intellectual challenge. Revaluating the European legacy is one of its evident outcomes. We can recognize here the very motifs that have already appeared in Milosz's war essays: the European culture contains in its core 'the seeds of evil'; it has de-generated and thus created room for Nazism, and the obligation of the intellectual is to re-read the European cultural tradition:

> The Eastern intellectual is a severe critic of everything that penetrates to him from the West. He has been deceived so often that he does not want cheap consolation which will eventually prove all the more depressing. The War left him suspicious and highly skilled in unmasking sham and pretense. He has rejected a great many books that he liked before the War, as well as a great many trends in painting or music because they not stood the test of experience. The work of human thought should withstand the test of brutal, naked reality. If it cannot, it is worthless. Probably only those things are worth while which can preserve their validity in the ***eyes*** of a man threatened with instant death.[54]

The compliance with historicism, comprehended as die iron logic of history fueled by the idea of Progress, has its roots in a radical disillusionment with the established forms of culture. The Eastern European has learned cultural relativism to his cost; has experienced it in his own life, not at the university. In war situations, when the values and norms of behavior were subjected to erosion, one could easily consider them as dependent, liquid, or historically determined. When the value of a human being is determined by the shape of his nose or the color of his eyes, when killing the enemy is regarded as a heroic deed, when 'the proximity of death wipes out the restraints of shame', then 'everybody gradually comes to look upon the city as a

[54] Miłosz, C, 1953, *The СфiimMЫ,* transi. J. Zielonko, New York, pp. 40-41.

jungle, and upon the fate of twentieth-century man as identical with that of a cave man Hving in the midst of powerful monsters'.[55] The implications of those experiences are thus as follows:

> AH the concepts men live by are a product of a historic formation in which they find themselves. Fluidity and constant change are the characteristics of phenomena. And man is so plastic a being that one can even conceive of the day when a thoroughly self-respected citizen will crawl about on all fours, sporting a tail of brightly colored feathers as a sign of conformity to the order he lives in.[56]

From there it is only one step to the acceptance of the Doctrine. Only Marxism is able to offer a radical consecration of History. Its rules and order dwell in the external space of logic, like the Christian God, and are inexorable. Marxism glorifies Change, Becoming, and Future while rejecting the past, present and duration. It appears to be the remedy for absurdity and nihilism; it endows man with a feeling of belonging to a powerful community that creates a new meaningful and rational world. As the remedy against alienation, Marxism becomes a wonderful solution to all the problems and dilemmas harassing the modern, not only the Eastern European, intellectual.

The processes described by Miłosz have by no means only local significance. The whole civilization of the twentieth century is permeated by historical determinism. Modern man believes in obligatory and inevitable progress, and replaces the God of Metaphysics with the Hegelian *Weltgeist,* which is identical with the cult of Progress. The case of the post-war Eastern European intellectual is interesting because he has dwelled in the eye of the storm, in the center of the transformations in which the world has been shaped.

The ironic style dominant in *The Captive Mind* hinders an exact understanding of Milosz's political attitudes from that time. We realize that he is one of those who have been pricked by the

[55] Ibidem, p. 28.
[56] Ibidem, p. 29.

Hegelian sting; one of those who have become blind believers trusting historical necessity. In the recentiy published volume *After the War* that consists of the correspondence between Milosz and Tadeusz Kroński, the leading Marxist of the time, the poet's hesitation and ambivalence toward the Marxist historicism becomes apparent. The role of *advocatus diaboli* is here performed by Kroński (later ironically depicted by Miłosz under a fictitious name in *The Captive Mind)* who is pushing his friend, little by little, but consistently, into the arms of the Marxist Doctrine.

Post-war Miłosz swings between extremities: on one hand, thinking in categories of historical determinism, on the other - having to confront the cruel reality of communist praxis, with all its deceit-fulness, treachery and terror. The legendary essay 'NO!' published in the political exile-magazine *Kultura* in May, 1951 marks the poet's break with the communist Poland. But it still contains the whole ambivalence of Milosz's attitude. He dramatically accuses the regime of political crimes, condemns its ideological praxis, while simultaneously justifying its underlying reasons: 'I was satisfied with the fact that the old, semi-feudal nature of Polish society was being broken, I enjoyed the fact that the workers' and farmers' children entered universities en masse, that the agrarian reform was performed in Poland and transformed the country from the agrarian into the industrial-agrarian land'.[57]

The ultimate break with the Hegelian sting, the liberation from the yoke of historical determinism crystallizes in the philosophical *Treatise on Poetry* from 1957.[58] A number of critics consider that poem to be the sign of a profound shift in Polish post-war thought. That shift consists in breaking with the ideology? of the deterministic laws of history; the ideolog)' that had been grafted onto Polish souls during the war and the communist yoke:

> The Treatise appears to be a text of an enormous significance, because it is the first conscious attempt to grasp the man in a different

[57] Quot. after Mencwel, A., 1997, *Przedwiośnie czy potop* p. 380 Milosz, C, 2001, *A Treatise on Poetry,* transi, by author and R. Hass, New York.

[58] Milosz, C, 2001, *A Treatise on Poetry,* transi, by author and R. Hass, New York.

framework, in the supra-historical dimension of his existence; it is an attempt to describe human consciousness that transcends [the] history, that searches for its grounds beyond history, elsewhere, and mobilizes all its powers in order to find that 'elsewhere".[59]

A Treatise on Poetry is evidence of the poet's struggle with his own entanglement in history; of the process of liberation from 'the compulsion of dwelling in History, from the imagination entangled in the historical change, from the choices determined by the variable contexts, from a fatalism that alienates man from his own nature and forces him to abandon his ideas and vocation'. The Spirit of History, the Hegelian *Weltgeist,* is depicted here as a cruel pagan God of Death, relentlessly devouring his victims:

> Where wind carries the smell of the crematorium
> And a bell in the village tolls the Angelus
> The Spirit of History is out walking.
> He whistles, he likes these countries washed
> By a deluge, deprived of shape and now read}'.
> [...]
> A poet has already recognized the walker,
> An inferior god to whom time and the fate
> Of one-day-long kingdoms is submitted.
> His face is the size of ten moons. He wears
> About his neck a chain of severed heads.
> Who does not acknowledge him begins to mumble.
> Whoever bows to him attracts his scorn
> [...]
> He asks for more. He asks for flesh and blood.[60]

The Spirit of History from the 'Treatise' can be seen as a logical continuation of the Spirit of Nature, a merdless exterminator who controls the struggle for survival among species. The biological evolution occurring at the cost of billons of lives finds its continuation in the theory of historical progress; that is, accepting social radical

[59] Maciąg, W., 1992, *Nasę wiek XX: przewodnie idee literatury polskiej,* 1918-1980, Wrocław, p. 390.
[60] Miłosz, C, 2001, *A Treatise on Poetry,* transi, by the author and R. Hass, New York, pp. 30-31.

change at the expense of millions. The idea of historical determinism, constantly present in contemporary thought, not only in academia but even in the minds of ordinär)' people, distorts the view of die world, and projects the values, people, or phenomena onto the screen of overwhelming history: Progress, March, Change. The ontological sense of unity with Being, passion for the present moment, respect for Reality: all that becomes undermined, abolished by the omnipotent Movement: 'the Golden Home of the word IS melts into air, and BECOMING starts to reign' *(A Treatise..).*

The historically determined process of Becoming that is devouring everything singular and unique and is represented by the conquests of Modernity, will remain an obsession for Miłosz. In his poems the author frequently juxtaposes the momental epiphany with the heavy march of History, with the iron cage of Reason. The healing role of poetry, of all creative diought, should consist, according to the poet, in retaining the single moment, the particular tree, man: living Being.[61]

The Land of Ulro — the traps of instrumental season

> I think I can detect a certain logic pervading die age as a whole. Unfortunately, it is the logic of precipitous decline, one so remarkable in its constancy as to be without historical analogy.[62]

In the 1960s and '70s Milosz's literary style becomes calmer and more mature. His essay coHections are published in the exile magazine *Kultura: Native Realm, The Garden of Science, Visions from San Francisco Bay, The Land of Ulro.* Despite the varying topics of the essays, there is a common denominator in all of them; namely, the sense of disinheritance that permeates the texts. That sense can be primarily associated with the writer's exile, but it has deeper motifs.

[61] Cf. an explanation of the poet's call from The Land of Ulro: To swim upstream through history, reducing it not to Hegelian categories, but embracing the multiplicity of human lives, in all their particularity, Miłosz, C, 1985, *The Land of Ulro,* transi. L. Iribarne, New York, p. 266.
[62] Ibidem, p. 229.

It is rooted in the experience of modern civilization that Miłosz has been confronted with during his years in California. The latest technology, post-industrial society, mass-culture, and the hippie revolution — the poet attempts to grasp all these issues, inscribe or include them into his own mental horizon; a horizon that he himself calls the mentality 'of a naive child from the Lithuanian woods'. In his *Visions from San Francisco Bay* from 1969, Miłosz attempts to understand America — the modern melting pot of civilization with all its ambivalence and antagonisms. The earlier figure of 'the essence of Being melting into air' reappears once again: the American reality has an imaginary nature; it is woven from dreams, myths, desires, made of collective representations, 'the network of highways and airports'. It lacks gravity or substance; that quality of things that Miłosz later on calls 'essentiality'. The corresponding feature in human subjectivity consists in the virtue of 'mindfulness'.

The American experience depicted in *Visions from San Francisco Bay* develops into more reflective expression and results in the poet's philosophical summa, *The Land of Ulro,* from 1977. The spiritual landscape of modern man presented in the book is essentially pessimistic, and leaves almost no hope. Miłosz depicts the spiritual desert produced by Western civilization at the threshold to the third millennium. He traces the origins of that process, recalls the Cassandric thinkers and artists who tried to avert the danger, to reverse the process, and warn humankind fast approaching a disaster. In the interview-book, *Traveler of the World,* Miłosz explains the reasons behind this book to his interlocutor, Ewa Czarnecka:

> My opposition against the world and the Western civilization is constantly present there *(in the book, my explan).* This civilization is the product of the scientific Weltanschauung. We are now in the latest phase of that process of scientification of our minds and we are experiencing the consequences of it, as for instance die permissive society we live in, or the strain on the individual right to happiness, even against society, at the cost of common good. Would you like to hear in one sentence the essence of *The Land of Ulro;* it is a book about those who at the cost of madness tried out other alternatives. In other words, they dreamed of a new path, a new railway... maybe we have taken the wrong train? Maybe other options were available? The

writers like Blake, Swedenborg, Mickiewicz, Oskar Miłosz, Goethe looked for new answers, new possibilities.[63]

The past two hundred years of European culture represent, according to Miłosz, a period of rapid disintegration of values, of a civilizatory breakdown. The 19th century has created a myth of humanitarian rational progress. The 20th century, with all its calamities, has turned that statue into a dummy that has gradually been torn to pieces. The disintegration has many reasons, and all of them are rooted in the heart of the civilizatory process that has affected the Western world during the last 200 years. That process is nowadays called die Enlightenment project, or simply — Modernity.

In the dense, digressive and multifaceted text, Miłosz touches on a series of questions about Modernity that are common to other great thinkers in that area: Weber, Adorno, Giddens, Bauman. Dis-inheritage and a sense of emptiness, disenchantment and surplus of rationality, abstract thinking devouring all the particular and unique: all these diseases of Modernity are filtered tiirough Miłosz's personal experience, and are free from scientific dryness. Let us follow some of the strands of that critical inquiry.

For Miłosz, the core of the disintegration process dwells in the traps of instrumental reason. The Land of Ulro — a literary symbol created by William Blake — is a land ruled by the evil Urizen, an epitome of the Law of Reason. Its modern incarnation can be found in modern science and philosophy that idolizes intellect at the expense of imagination, corporality and heart. Blake, Swedenborg, Mickiewicz were the pioneers in the rebellion against the dry rationalism of the Enlightenment. They looked elsewhere for the roots of humanity. Miłosz, while discussing that alternative anti-rationalistic stream, stresses that it is not Reason itself that is responsible for the evil kernel of nihilism, but rather the dogmatism of scientific explanation. The rational *Aufklärung* of the world gradually degenerates into simplistic scientism, into the mythologization of Reason.

[63] Czarnecka, E., 1983, *Podróżnj świata. Rozmowy swiata. Rozmowy z Miłoszem*. Komentarze, New York, p. 198

Having abandoned metaphysics, we are not able to grasp Being in its totality. Biology, chemistry and physics become dogmatic languages, the only codes for understanding the world. Poetry, transcendental Thinking and moral values disappear: 'melt into the air'.

Science and Reason form merely the first link in that process of forgetting the values. The consequences seem particularly worrying with regard to the disenchanting process affecting the world. What does the disenchanted world look like, is there any method to reenchant the world, can poetry act as a remedy for that disease; all these themes appear constantly in Milosz's poems and essays. Miłosz understands disenchantment in the same way as Weber does, as the process by which the world in its daily experience is being deprived of all its sacral, enigmatic dimensions.

The disenchantment is epitomized mainly by the disintegration of religious representations (heaven and hell, angels and devils, etc.). The consequences are deeper: the degradation of Reality, that having been bereaved of all sacral, divine dimensions turns out to be plain and de-symbolized — a world where things lose their substance. The process of de-substantialization is closely related to the process of anomie — disappearance of names, predicates, of Logos. In the following poem Miłosz describes such an anomic world:

> I did not expect to live in such an unusual moment.
> When the God of thunders and of rocky heights,
> The Lord of hosts, Kyrios Sabaoth,
> Would humble people to the quick,
> Allowing them to act whatever way they wished,
> Leaving to them conclusions, saying nothing.
> [...]
> Roads on the concrete pillars, cities of glass and cast iron,
> Airfields larger than tribal dominions
> Suddenly ran short of their essence and disintegrated.
> Not in a dream but really, for, subtracted from themselves,
> They could only hold on as do things that not last.
> Out of trees, field stones, even lemons on the table,
> Materiality escaped and their spectrum
> Proved to be a void, a haze on a film.

> Dispossessed of its objects, space was swarming. Everywhere was nowhere and nowhere, everywhere.
>
> *Oeconomia Divina*[64]

In the realm of human actions, the consequences of anomie are devastating as well: human life has been deprived of any metaphysical dimension and turns into a chaotic pursuit of material goods, sexual satisfaction, or entertainment. Milosz the moralist considers the Christian ethics to be an indispensable part of our Western heritage. For instance, in his essa)'s on the cardinal sins (from the same period) he calls for a reinterpretation of their meaning from our modern perspective.

In Milosz's diagnoses one can find traces of thought that are similar to another great investigator of Modernity, Anthony Giddens. Milosz employs the term 'disinheritance' in the same way as Giddens uses his notion of disembedment. Both understand thereby the process of removing man from his secure premodern location, both in space and time, and throwing him in the time-space of high-risk and unstable conditions. Milosz blames modern science and philosophy for producing the abstract ideas of space and time, and by that depriving the represented world of all the human traits. Space devoid of symbolic meanings (heaven, hell, center, margins, etc.) turned into an abstract structure that was totally uninhabitable. According to Milosz, who here follows William Blake's critical thought, it was Newton who started that malevolent process and thus became a Prophet of Devouring Abstraction:

> For times and spaces are, as it were, the Places as well of themselves as of all other things. All things are placed in Time as to order of Succession; and in Space as to order of Situation. It is from their essence or nature that they are places; and that the primar)' places of things should be movable, is absurd.[65]

[64] Miłosz, C, 1996, *Poeye wybrane. Selected Poems*, Krakow, p. 225.
[65] *The Land of Ulro,p.* 201.

The Newtonian world of science had been contested by Blake, Swedenborg, Dostoevsky, and now by Miłosz himself. He suggests a possible rebirth of the meaningful, symbolic space, endorsed/marked by human representations, dreams, and values. It is impossible to completely restore the sacralized premodern space of religion. Nevertheless, modern poetry and reflection should attempt to rebuild the human space by endowing it with symbolic meanings; by restoring its structure and hierarchy. Miłosz postulates a new poetic Genesis, a creation of a new humanized representation of the world.

Milosz's viewpoint on poetry as a post-religious activity, as a postmodern remedy for the disenchanted world, appears in a number of poems and essays from the '80s and '90s. The affinities with Heidegger, observed by J. Sadzik in his introduction to the first Polish edition of *The Tand of Ulro*, become ever clearer: Building, dwelling, thinking (the tide of a significant essay by Heidegger from the '50s) could have acted as the philosophical credo of the late Miłosz. Commenting on the theology of Swedenborg, Miłosz writes:

> Swedenborg's work [...] is a vast honeycomb built of the bees of imagination and obeying a central imperative. A man must abide somewhere, a physical roof over his head is not enough; his mind needs its bearings, its points of reference, vertically as well as horizontally. Do we not speak of edifying readings?[66]

The opposition of universal versus particular becomes yet another reference for Milosz's reflection on modern civilization. One of the effects of modern instrumental rationalism is that the world has been inscribed in the grid of abstract notions. That process, forced by scientification, leads to 'the waste land': things lose their roots in-the-world and our contact with the living world is about to be interrupted. William Blake noticed the beginning of the process:

[66] Ibidem, pp. 151—2.

Blake, in other words, drew a definite analog)' between the vision a mechanistic universe and religion conceived of as a moral code. Both proclaimed the universal at the expense of the particular, be it a particular moment in time, singular and irreducible, the shape and color of a particular plant, or the life of a particular man. Urizen, in effect, is a god of reduction who reduces everything to quantitative terms.[67]

The universal devouring the particular — that question appears much earlier in Miłosz, and becomes his obsession, both in his poems and his essays diagnosing Modernity. The Devil of Universality has allowed the sacrifice of millions of individuals on the altars of the Idea of History. A similar theme appears in Miłosz's poetry as well. He attempts to freeze the particular moment, to prevent an image or a detail from falling into oblivion. How to elevate the moment, how to save the thing from the linguistic and historical abyss of generalization? How to transform them into 'eternal moments', into epiphany? — those questions preoccupy Miłosz constantly.

Summing up, one may claim, while following Milosz's thought, that the modern world is the realm of the god of Reason — Urizen. That world is split into the realm of Science, graspable in logical terms, but insensible to human values, and the inner human world devoid of metaphysical support (due to the death of God). The outcome of that split is the disinherited mind of the modern man, interiorly divided: on the one hand he experiences his own nothingness in the face of the universe, of the Natural laws; on the other — he feels his omnipotence and newly-won autonomy (as a God-man). The result of that is the modern hubris, but this time it is not God who metes out the punishment, but our own existential Angst. We live in a world dramatically marked by negation:

> Now, on the mass scale, was born the realization of man's new metaphysical condition, summarized by a single word: NO. No voice reaching from the cosmos, no good and evil, no fulfillment of the promise, no Kingdom. But that was not all. The individual, proudly

[67] Ibidem, p. 171.

> pointing to itself as 'I', proved as much an illusion, a bundle of reflexes covered by a uniform epidermis, Love was an illusion, friendship an illusion — because both premised on the possibility of communication, and how to communicate when language is reduced to a babble bespeaking the solitariness of each? So what is left in the presence of this huge NO? Only time, absolute time measured by gradual deterioration of organic cells. Whatever man does in the face of time, death's portent, amounts to divertissement.[68]

Л positive program?

Modernity has constantly troubled and fascinated Miłosz, starting from his early years as a poet of the catastrophic in the Zagary-group until his latest writings from the '90s. He was one of those few Polish writers who early on recognized the challenges of Modernity and strived to find a suitable answer. Disinherited mind, collapse of the high culture, instrumentalization of human lives, universality and abstraction devouring everything (the early name for today's globalization!) — all those features were recognized by Miłosz as threats; first and foremost as threats to poetry, but even to the condition of modern man (since, according to him, poetry is the supreme and constructive expression of human spirituality).

In his approach, Miłosz is both a follower and an opponent of Western Modernism. The confrontation with Modernity has not led him to total repudiation of its achievements. Miłosz's ambiguous attitude towards Modernity has been skillfully identified by Adam Zagajewski:

> [...] it was their attitude towards Modernity that often determined the choices made by writers [...] The generation of 'violent angry writers' who were disgusted by the tedious, horizontal world of modern democracy and society [...] called for action on a grand scale. They played the roles of knights, aristocrats, seducers, revolutionists, nationalists, Bolsheviks. The Movement, no matter of what kind:

[68] Ibidem, p. 241.

> revolutionary, aristocratic, erotic, or military became a metaphor for high diction, a rhetoric of fervent activity. The main objective of that activity was to reject the modern world, or to transform it into the nobler gestalt. A revolution — no matter of what kind: left-wing or conservative — should be a radical one.[69]

In the great controversy about modern Western culture, Miłosz can be situated in-between, as a mediator. In the dispute between Naphta and Settembrini that has led to the dilemma — either the affirmation of the rationality of Enlightenment with its humanism, trust in progress and human emancipation, or a return to the 'old' metaphysics with the religious, premodern, or Romantic traces — Miłosz stops half-way. As Zagajewski observes, Miłosz is able to reconcile his active engagement on the behalf of the liberal civilization with strong metaphysical nostalgia.[70]

How does Miłosz formulate his affirmative response to the traps of Modernity? He proclaims trust in the restoring power of human Reason and Imagination. In spite of all the calamities of the 20* century, he declares his belief in the solid common grounds; in the. common human horizons of values, marked by the ideas of Truth, Sacrum, Dignity, and Reason. In opposition to all forms of relativism, he declares a trust in human nature, in its solid core.[71] That does not, however, lead him to abstract universalism: human cultural roots and uniqueness produce the blessed differences; they enable us to grasp the individuality of man, of a bird, of a landscape. Hence the following belief: Reality, Being exists and is endowed with substantiality, with ontologicai density. The poetic word is for him, like for Heidegger, a guard of Reality, 'a shepherd of Being'. There are hierarchies in that powerful, 'strong' reality; some things are below and some things are above, certain truths and ideas are

[69] Zagajewski, A., Pochwała wysokiego stylu, http://zls.mimuw.edu.pl/ZL/zagaj/ pochwala.php. (my translation)
[70] Zagajewski, op. cit.
[71] One may consider if Milosz's Human Nature cannot be to a certain extent interpreted as human condition, i. e. community in destiny, or common 'fate', not as an essentialist notion. The recurring figure of the naked bodies, appearing in poems, would disclose the commonality of the human condition.

central for our culture. In the last instance, there is no conflict between human rationality and imagination. In our disenchanted world, both reason and poetry are able to reclaim their spiritual values and save humanity. That faith in human reason and poetry 'in the service of the good' has been firmly articulated in one of Milosz's late poems:

Incantation
Human reason is beautiful and invincible,
No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,
No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
It establishes the universal ideas in language,
And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.
It puts what should be above things as they are,
Is an enemy of despair and a friend of hope.
It does not know Jew and Greek or slave from master,
Giving us the estate of the world to manage.
It saves austere and transparent phrases
From the filthy discord of tortured words.
It says that evetything is new under the sun,
Opens the congealed fist of the past.
Beautiful and very young are Philo-Sophia
And poetry, her ally in the service of the good.
As late as yesterday Nature celebrated their birth,
The news was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo.
Their friendship will be glorious, their time has no limit,
Their enemies have delivered themselves to destruction.

Catching up with Witold Gombrowicz: Between Modernity and Post-Modernity

Modern Western civilization finds its identity in the framework of the Enlightenment project, an intellectual process that, as we already pointed out, over the last two centuries has arranged the structure of norms, goals and values for European culture. The final stage of this process, or its complete fulfillment, is often called Modernity. The idea of Modernity acquired importance and a descriptive power especially in recent years, surrounding the dispute over the idea of Postmodernity, i.e. the project of overcoming Modernity while simultaneously continuing it and reflecting it upon itself.

The modern project is a manifold structure, hard to grasp, sometimes incoherent or composed of various sub-systems and antinomies. Its core, however, is profoundly influenced by the idea of ultimate freedom:

The idea of Modernity implies a number of convictions; the most ultimate of them is expressed in the need for freedom. The individual has the right to freedom because only as a free being is he able to fulfill his humanity. Freedom is not the only value in our lives, but it is the ultimate one. The obvious consequence of this is that all social evil comes from coercion. Thus, economic coercion renders man a small cog in the system of production, political coercion makes him a blind instrument of power, and religious coercion thrusts him into the realm of superstition and prejudice. Modernity consists of believing in the unlimited potential of liberating progress,

in the quest for new systems of governing — other than authoritarian — that accomplish liberal democracy in the best way. Modernism means the development of new systems of production and work — technology, industry, and banking. And last but not least, secularization. Modernity means that people no longer seek their identity in religion; even the state and its laws need no supernatural legitimacy.[72]

One must add that free, autonomous reason is the main instrument for accomplishing this project. Only liberated reason is capable of producing new rational solutions that render freedom real. Science and technology, and new political and economic systems, are the products of a reason that is autonomous and free of prejudice. The history of the Enlightenment project can be described as the perpetual growth of the areas in which prejudices may be traced and demystified: religion, society, the economy, Judeo-Christian culture, the super-ego, systems of language, etc. In these new fields the febrile pursuit of the sources of uncertainty, non-truth, deformations, illusions and phantasms took place. The path staked out by the great masters of suspicion and démystification — Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Freud — leads straight to Witold Gombrowicz, one of the least known and most amazing precursors of the postmodern turn in Europe.

Witold Gombrowicz's writings and thought have permeated Polish culture since the 1930s, found their way to Europe and the world in the 1960s, and still puzzle and provoke the reader. Born in 1904 to a wealthy noble family, he spent a half his life in Poland and the other half in exile. His biography and work fulfilled the pattern of 'postmodern' contingency and paradox: this born-and-bred aristocrat became a protagonist of 'low', second-rate culture; this writer-gendeman appeared as a radical rebel against the 'tyranny of Forms', and the exile author attacked his own Polish culture and Polish xenophobic nationalism, enhancing his alienation and distance from his homeland.

[72] Tischner, J., 1995, O myśleniu i doświadczeniu w królestwie wiary, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 7/1995, my translation.

Gombrowicz's most prominent novel, *Ferdydurke,* published in 1937, found no substantial critical response and influence among Polish readers before the 1950s, then becoming a bible for open-minded, modern Polish intellectuals. In this book one can trace all the premises of the postmodern style: the multiplicity of identities within the narrator and hero, play with genres and hybrid constructions, games with the reader. Its main topics — the struggle with Forms (with culture, morality and customs, with social fixed roles and with modern ideologies) — was presented in a very unusual and even grotesque form and was ahead of its time, auguring the subsequent diagnoses of, for instance, Sartre or Goffman.

On the eve of the Second World War Gombrowicz left Poland for Argentina, spending the next twenty-three years there. He moved to France in 1963 and in the last six years of his life enjoyed the growing popularity of his novels, which had by then been translated into many languages, and that of his plays, which were performed on the best stages in Europe. His three-volume *Diary,* published in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrated his philosophical and discursive *credo,* a kind of summary of his work and thought.

At the beginning of his Polish and international career, in the 1950s and 1960s, Gombrowicz was read as a political writer, a sort of anti-totalitarian prophet. In the late 1960s his ideas begin to resonate with the ideolog)' of the flower-power generation. Recently his position has become more universal, as his readers attempt to trace in his works a diagnosis of modern and postmodern culture, with all their positive and negative consequences. In his *Diary,* his ambivalent attitude toward Modernity is most evident and the premises of a postmodern attitude are very clear.

The most important threads of postmodern thinking — the deconstraction of totalizing narratives, the problematization of identity, relativism, ahistoricism, creolization, etc. — are all consistently exercised and tested in Gombrowicz's work, especially in the *Diary.* There is, however, one substantial difference between the end-of-the-century acolytes of Postmodernity and Gombrowicz: his daring experiment points not to a new beginning but, rather, to the end of

culture. His ambiguous attitude toward Modernity, his paradoxical arguments and theses, are the main topics of this chapter.

Conversations with Dominique de Rou[733] provides Witold Gombrowicz with the occasion to unfold the entire archeology of his thought and to trace not only its continuity and consistency, but also its sudden turning points, contingencies and paradoxes. During this interview he views his artistic pursuits against the biographical and philosophical background, whose recurrent motif is the quest for identity. 'On what grounds can I found my self?' asks Gombrowicz, 'where is the rock of certainty on which I can build my personality, constantly jeopardized, undermined by doubts and unreality?' The history of this quest is essentially a history of rejecting uncertain grounds, unreal foundations, illusions, and fictive and deforming patterns epitomized by family, tradition, national culture and, last but not least, Culture — understood as the 'conspiracy of forms', an attack of unreality threatening the autonomous and the individual.

For Gombrowicz, the process of démystification of culture which — coming from without and, in effect, bringing about distortion — obstructs the individual's contact with reality, assumes the form of the gradual liberation of the self from the terror of Western civilization's 'Great Narratives'. Gombrowicz's mode of thinking, unfolded in *Conversations,* is as follows: for the sake of ultimate freedom, and of direct, authentic, unmediated approximation to reality, I have, he argues, to repudiate all the exterior encrustations that constrain me: my family and my social environment, my own, Polish culture and finally European culture, with all its ideologies, religions, and intellectual currents (Christianity, Marxism, Existentialism, etc.).

Within such a horizon the issue of the relationship between national (Polish) and universal (West European) culture appears in Gombro-

[73] de Roux, D., 1969, *Rozmowy z Gombrowiczem*, Paris, (eng. transi.: Gombrowicz, W., *A Kind of Testament,* Philadelphia 1973, transi. By A. Hamilton) All subsequent quotations from *Rozmowy z Gombrowiczem* are marked by R and have the page numbers in parentheses.

wicz's discourse. This conflict-ridden relationship is deeply entangled in his philosophy of forms, with its paradoxical logic of maturity/immaturity and with its interactional concept of man and culture. The concise, compact expression of the tension between the self and 'Polishness' appears in a letter to Miłosz, published in Gombrowicz's *Diary:*

> I attack Polish form because it is my form, because all of my works desire to be, in a certain sense (certain because this is only one of the senses of my nonsense), a revision of the modern man in relation to form, to form which is not a result of him but which is formed 'between' people. I do not need to tell you that this thought, together with all of its ramifications, is a child of our times, when people have intentionally set out to remake man. It even seems to me that it is the key to understanding today's consciousness. (DI, 16)[74]

In Gombrowicz, conceiving man in terms of identity — national, European, cultural — has a paradoxical nature: the forms of culture simultaneously create identity and jeopardize it or, to put it différend)', construct the self and deconstruct it. In other words, the forms produce an unhappy consciousness, forcing it to self-identification and at the same time arousing distrust of evetything that comes from outside, from the realm of radical alterity.

In the archaeology of the artist's maturation emerging from *The Conversations with Dominique de Roux,* the Polish form is condemned and demystified as the 'weakened form': inferior, second-rate, backward and peripheral. Its weakness consists of the fact that it cannot act as a support in the struggle with the world, with reality. The essence of the Polish form is best rendered by Gombrowicz's favorite prefix *'niedo-',* 'not-enough'; Polish culture is thus 'not European enough', 'not civilized enough', 'not mature enough':

[74] Gombrowicz, W., 1988, Diary, Vol. 1, translated by Lillian Vallee. Evanston, IL, (Vol. 2 1989, Vol.3). All Subsequent quotations from Diary vol. 1 are marked by Di, from vol. 2 by Dii, from vol. 3 by Diii and have the page numbers by parantheses.

> I was Polish. I happened to be in Poland. What is Poland?
>
> It is a country between the East and the West, where Europe starts to draw to an end, a border country where the East and the West soften into each other. A country of weakened forms. ... None of the great movements of European culture has ever really penetrated Poland, not the Renaissance, not the wars of religion, not the French revolution, not the industrial revolution. Of all these phenomena Poland has felt no more than a muted echo.[...]
>
> So those plains, open to every wind, had long been the scene of a great compromise between Form and its Degradation. Everything was effaced, disintegrated. ... Poland, deprived of those great cities (and their bougeoisie) where life can be concentrated and complicated, where it can arise and flourish, had a rural, peasant culture, yes, a culture represented by squires and priests. The nobleman sitting in his farmstead made the peasant do the work, and the village priest was the oracle. This feeling of formlessness tortured the Poles, but at the same time it gave them a strange sense of liberty. It was one of the basic causes of their admiration for their 'Polishness'. (R, p. 53-4)

What can be done in a situation in which your sight has been so weakened by your heritage that it imprisons you, forces you to sacrifice yourself? The only solution is to reject it, to abandon, to break down all the bonds. In these words Gombrowicz sums up his 'polonoclastic' gesture:

> Let us start with Poland. I had to break with Poland and turn against it. Like France for the French, Poland for the Poles is a treasure worthy of the greatest sacrifice. Well, it was absolutely necessary to state that Poland, that intermediary creature between the East and the West, was doomed, by its geographical position and by its historical development, to imperfection, to a minor role, and that Poland must be passed over because it could not guarantee any fully authentic value for the Poles. It is not right diat a Pole should sacrifice all his individual development, all his humanity, to Poland. The Pole, formed by Poland, by the Polish environment and tradition, is necessarily a less sophisticated man than the westerner. [...]

> No, even 'constructive' criticism of one's country's faults — undertaken in a patriotic spirit, in order to improve it — was no longer sufficient. Such criticism was itself conditioned by the country. To break away! To keep one's distance! The writer, the artist, or anyone who attaches importance to his spiritual development, must feel no more than a resident in Poland or the Argentine, and it is his dut)' to regard Poland or the Argentine as an obstacle, almost as an enemy. That is the only way to feel *really* free. And only those people for whom their country is an obstacle rather than an advantage will have a chance of becoming truly free spiritually, and, in the case of Europe, truly European. (R. p. 56-7)

Arguing with Goran, who considers a writer uprooting himself from his own culture to be tantamount to degeneration and decay, Gombrowicz points out that distance to one's own cultural heritage has a stimulating power. Only the displaced, uprooted writer (and *every* writer is, by definition, uprooted) is able to reach an intellectual freedom, to resist "the familiar warmth' of his own culture, 'which was a mixture of spinsterish goodness and a cynical neglect of values, all hierarchies disintegrated'. Only a writer (or any human being for that matter) thrown into the waters of the boundless world can cope with it, stand up to the challenge of the future. Cultural universalism is contrasted here with the backwardness and incompleteness of national cultures:

> Only a universal culture can come to terms with the world, never parochial cultures, never those who live only on fragments of existence. Only he who knows how to reach deeper, beyond the homeland, only he for whom the homeland is but one of the revelations in an eternal and universal life, will not be incited to anarchy by the loss of his homeland. The loss of a homeland will not disturb the internal order of only those whose homeland is the world. (Di, 40)

What we have here is the pattern of 'accusation' similar to that described earlier; another 'loss' or fault also appearing is that of partiality, incompleteness. A national culture (particularly that of peripheral nations, not only Poland) explains only part of Reality, closed and peripheral, and is not capable of embracing the vastness

of the world, with its complexity of existence, the manifold quality of modern life.

Romanticism formed the core of Polish culture; the Polish spirit was shaped by Mickiewicz and through two centuries imprisoned successive generations of Poles. According to Gombrowicz, the worst sin of Romanticism was that the romantic-national idea put Poles together into "community, governed by an abstract and burdening 'We'. Romanticism forged a 'half-baked Pole', imprisoned in his homeland as in a cage, imprisoned in community, in the duties of Prophet, Martyr and Warrior. Marked by seriousness and tragedy, the Romantic façade of Polish culture appears monumental, shows all the qualities of 'maturity' in Gombrowicz's sense of the word. One is tempted to say that, in their struggle with history Poles have been forced to create a hyper-mature, 'overripe' culture, over-responsible and over-stylized. In the Polish super ego, obedience to the Father (God, Nation, and Authority — all masculine in Polish) was strengthened by submission to the Mother (Poland, Homeland, and Madonna — all feminine in Polish). A new tone can be traced here: the opposition mature/immature, previously describing the relationship between the universal (European) and the peripheral (Polish) cultures is now internalized in the 'Polish form'. Polish culture, maturing in the embrace of history and Romanticism, producing its official facade, neglected its Other, the Other Pole: immature, childish, and clownish — 'You forgot that a man not only is himself but also pretends to be himself. You threw everything that was acting and theatre in you into the trash can and you tried to forget it'. Discovering that Other Pole, liberating the alter ego of the official Polish culture, appears to be the main task for Gombrowicz; his historic mission:

> In a way, I feel like Moses. Yes, this is an amusing characteristic of my nature: to exaggerate on my own behalf. In my daydreams, I puff myself up as much as I can. Ha, ha, why, you ask, do I feel like Moses? A hundred years ago, a Lithuanian poet forged the shape of the Polish spirit and toda)', I, like Moses, am leading the Poles out of the slavery of that form. I am leading the Pole out of himself. (Di, 36)

And here begin Gombrowicz's famous dialectics, or rather para-doxology: difficult to grasp, escaping all categories and oppositions. Rejecting the official Pole, the official, mature Polish culture, Gombrowicz discovers the alternative, immature Pole who depreciates not only Polish myths and stereotypes but also Form as such. The loose relation to Form, the anti-idolatrous attitude toward culture, Europe and the world, provides a chance for the Polish intellectual, but only under the condition that he can rediscover his cultural *alter ego;* that he can reach a level of primordial naiveté, innocence, a gaze free from presuppositions and prejudices:

> With the deepest humility, I confess that I, a mere worm, had the Spirit appear to me yesterday and hand me a Program, made up of five points:
>
> 1. To restore confidence, pride, momentum, and flight to a Polish literature that is fatally one-dimensionalized, weak, and pusillanimous.
> 2. To base it solidly on the 'I', to make the 'I' constitute its sovereignty and power, to finally introduce that 'I' into Polish...but emphasize its dependence on the world.' [...]
> 3. To switch it to the most modern tracks and not at a snail's pace, but with a jump, like this, straight out of the past into the future *(les extremes se touchent).* To draw it into the most complex issues, into the most painful complexities...yet to teach it lightness and how to maintain distance...To teach it contempt for the idea and cult of the personality.
> 4. To change its relation to form.
> 5. To Europeanize it but, at the same time, to exploit all its possibilities to oppose it to Europe.
>
> At the bottom appeared the ironic: sausage is not for dogs![75] (Di, 104-5)

At the heart of this program lies the concept of the 'immature Pole' who positively employs the inferiority of his own culture, as a shield against various European -isms. The only thing to do is to find inside oneself — and in one's own culture — that loose, alternative

[75] A Polish idiom that means 'you ate not up to it'.

Polishness. After the gesture of repudiation (of Poland, of 'Polish Form') a dialectical reconciliation takes place. J. Błoński, in his essay on the *Diary*, describes all the entanglements of this process:

> 'Freedom from' appears for Gombrowicz as an empty freedom; in order to create a work (and by the same token conquer the reader) one has to regain 'positive freedom', 'freedom to', to all that creates "Gombrowicz'. He was, after all, formed by thousands of experiences and circumstances. He has never abandoned any potentiality that dwelt inside him — being a Pole, a gentleman, a sexual aberrance. For the sake of what, one may ask? But he cannot accept any form of violence, of persuasion. This is the task: to regain one's own Polish-ness, tradition, the enigmatic manifold of libido. But this has to be done originally, in one's own way, with one's own signature. [...] What is the most Polish attitude, the attitude you can never find in the world? The sarmaticisml Out of sarmaticism, thrown by Poles into the trash-can along time ago, Gombrowicz forms the blossom of his originality.[76]

Is Sarmaticism really a convincing antithesis for the nihilistic gesture of rejecting 'the Great Narratives'? Are we really concerned here with a dialectics of repudiation and reconciliation, with a process of creative transformation that neutralize the oppositions? We will turn to these questions in the following.

First, however, let us return to Europe. In Gombrowicz's struggle with Polish form, Europe often appears as a goal, a destination. 'European citizenship', universal culture, works in his texts as an alternative to Polish backwardness and provinciality. This postulated 'Europeanization' of Poles is, however, totally different from the attitude of 'philoeuropeism' dominating modern, progressive Polish intellectuals. The 'Europeanizing' Pole cannot be absorbed by Europe or merge into Europe. He cannot simply take over the European modern paradigm — the ideology of progress, Modernity and the discourse of liberty, equality and individuality. Here, Gombrowicz employs paradoxical logic: the original way to Europe

[76] Błoński, J., 1984, O Gombrowiczu, *Gombrowicz i kiytyçy*, Kraków, p. 221. (my translation)

leads only through the authentic separation of one's own nation, through the sharpening of its identity, essence and cultural alterity. Like a man, who by opposing himself to external forms discovers at last his own true form, only a nation opposing itself to Europe — understood as a universal overarching of civilization — is capable of attaining European citizenship.
The deconstruction of the 'European Form' is another great issue in Gombrowicz's *Diaty* that also forms the ideological horizon of his other works, like *Operetta, Wedding,* and *Cosmos.* Gombrowicz's attack is directed against all the repressive forms of high European culture; its 'Madonnas, cathedrals, libraries' that force the human subject into submission, into subjugation, into collective adoration. The human being becomes a supplement to culture. Always a redundant supplement, he humbly serves the great institutions of culture and tradition. Gombrowicz passionately demystifies these 'patterns of collective adoration', seeing in them elements of collective possession that contradict human freedom. One can place in this context his ironic 'crusades' against poets, fine arts, and against Dante, with his crusades struggling with the collective character of admiration. Even the European woman appears to be a product of this official culture. She is a Parisian woman, in love never naked, only undressed:

> The Frenchman has agreed to the ugliness of civilization, he has even come to like it. That is why a Frenchman does not relate to a naked woman, but to a dressed or undressed one. The French Venus is not a naked girl, but a Madame with a beauty mark who is *fort distinguée.* It is not the smell of the body that excites him, but perfumes. He has come to adore all the artificial beauties such as *charme,* elegance, distinction, wit, costume, *maquillage* — the beauties with which biological decadence and middle age mask themselves. French beauty, therefore, is a forty-year-old beauty. (Di, 121-2)

Another deformation of modern culture results from its scientification. Gombrowicz keenly observes symptoms of omnipotence and the superiority of science in modern society. After the bankruptcy of all Great Narratives, it is only Science that is able to bring

some order to the world, to provide modern man with orientation and support: 'on the corpses of Faith, Nation, and Marxism only Science and Technology can proclaim their reign'. This support is, however, very problematic. Science is becoming, more and more frequently, liberated from human control, turning itself against humanity. 'Science stupefies. Science diiminishes. Science deforms the beaut)'. Science distorts.' In this aphorism Gombrowicz reveals the evil nature of Scientism, of instrumental reason. His diagnosis converges with other diagnoses of Modernity: those of Weber, Husserl and Adorno. All of them perceive that modern science becomes detached from the human being and turns itself against the individual. 'You will be deprived of beauty, passion and bliss... cold, boring and dry times are waiting for you. And all that happens due to your Wisdom which separates itself from you and becomes un-graspable, even rapacious'. In these words Gombrowicz's Cassandra speaks to Socrates, pointing out to him the consequences of a philosophy that deifies reason.

The huge factor)' producing ideologies and trends: this metaphor best renders the nature of modern civilization. Its 'products' intrude upon man, acting as goods for increasingly confused consumers:

> Look at the white-hot oven where existentialisms are cooked up; here Sartre turns molten lead into his freedom-responsibility. Over there is a poetry workshop, where a thousand workers, dripping with sweat amid the dizzying speed of assembly lines and gears, work a sharper and sharper electromagnetic knife in harder and harder material; and over there are bottomless cauldrons bubbling with ideologies, world-views and beliefs. Here is the cavern of Catholicism. Further down the foundry of Marxism; then the hammers of psychoanalysis; Hegel's artesian wells and the looms of phenomenology; and further yet are the galvanized and hydraulic pyres of surrealism or pragmatism. The factory, groaning and speeding in the clatter and whir of production, produces more and more perfect instruments, which, in turn, serve to improve and speed up production so that all of this becomes mightier, more violent, more precise. (Di, 92)

Underneath this image of modern civilization as producing trends, forms and ideologies that impose more and more limitations on

human freedom, there is a latent, more profound and dramatic reality. It is the reality of the modern world breaking violently with traditions, myths, metaphysical values, and with God. Another metaphor of the enigmatic future appears here, that of a ship rushing onto the open sea.

There is nothing more shocking than the sight of mankind during the past two hundred years, pulling up all anchors in order to pass from static into absolute dynamics, from man and the world of given reality to man and the world in endless becoming, like a ship sailing from port into open sea. After having demolished heaven, after having demolished all stability, we revealed ourselves to ourselves as a volatile element, and our loneliness and singularity in the cosmos, that incredible unleashing of our humanity in a space filled with nothing except ourselves, can appall and horrify — the boldness of this thrust has no parallel. (Di, 86-7)

We find here the real, tragic vision of Europe, of the Western modern world; a fearful vision of a world aiming at empty space, but yet an inescapable vision. This 'empty space' of modern culture also worries another great Polish writer, Czesław Miłosz. Miłosz's answer to the crisis is nevertheless totally different. He discovers a remedy for the 'modern disease' in the creative mythopoetic imagination, capable of filling that empty space with a new order, with meaning, myth, history, remembrance. He aims at the reconstruction of lost order and hierarchy. For Gombrowicz, as for other postmodernists such as Rorty, Arendt and Derrida, the empty space created by Modernity is a challenge and an opportunity for the rebirth of humanity, for free creativity and play, for building up from the foundations.

Gombrowicz's radical rebellion against these coercive orders is really astonishing, and borders on obsession. In the core of his worlds there is always difference, antinomy, struggle; never an ordering principle, a positive meaning. Tragic freedom grows out of his démystifications. It is tragic, firstly, because it is unattainable; recall his T am told, I am thought', T am always artificial, dependent upon my formal necessity, upon other people and culture'. Secondly,

it is tragic because after rejecting forms, demystifying ideologies, dethroning God, Father and King, a human being is left alone with the pure, chaotic presence of things. This is a possible way of reading Gombrowicz's *Cosmos:* as a tragic attempt at ordering the world with the help of the pure, liberated self. It can be seen as an experiment that consists of creating reality through a pure, non-metaphysical consciousness, producing in vain its own orders and causality.

The idea of man creating himself in the void, in a space with no signs, norms or values, links Gombrowicz to both Existentialism and Marxism. His affinity with the former has already been noted and described by both critics and Gombrowicz himself. His self-willed affiliation to Marxism has never attracted much attention, however. Gombrowicz admired in the Marxist project its radicalism in liberating mankind from all prejudices and fetishes:

> I who demand a humanity without fetishes; I, a 'traitor' and 'provocateur' in my 'milieu'; I, for whom modern culture is a mystification... when my hand tears masks from my own face and that of others, when the very desire for an unfalsified reality lives in me so intensely — because I love the painful birth of the new world that has been trampling paths for itself for practically the past two hundred years, assailing one position after another — I greet it with joy. How can I be in contradiction with Communism? I really believe that I passed through the introductory phase of this process on my own and more authentic than many Communists. I subtracted God from myself, I learned to think ruthlessly. What's more, I learned to discover beauty and love in parting from former lovers. Other ties, of a material and social nature, which could have bound me were dissolved long ago. Today there is no honor, no authority, no bond that could stop me. I am free, free, et cetera free! (Di, 84)

In his book on Gombrowicz, Łapiński[77] quotes Martin Buber's opinion of *Wedding*, according to the author of the philosophy of dialogue, Gombrowicz's idea in this work is 'an almost dangerous

[77] Łapiński, *2,., Ja, Ferdydurke,* Kraków 1997.

experiment'. The whole of Gombrowicz's writing is worthy of that name. His novels, his plays and his *Diary* display that 'almost dangerous experiment' by revealing the various traps and paradoxes of Modernity, of modern European culture and ideologies. That 'almost dangerous experiment' is inscribed in the broader philosophical horizon, in the desire, appearing here and there in modern thought, for the absolute origin, for the ultimate subject transparently for itself, for ultimate creativity and self-construction. For Stimer, Nietzsche, Husserl and other vanguards of the twentieth century, the most important goal is to abandon the world of tradition, the existing art and values, in order to discover a 'zero degree' — the ultimate origin of art and cognition. Leszek Kołakowski, another Polish researcher of Modernity, writes about this:

> My acts of bestowing things and facts with meaning, the acts of so-called establishing values would have grown out of every single act of unconditioned spontaneity and every time would have raised me to the level of the Creator who calls his own world into being.[78]

Modern culture is marked by this Utopian quest for the ultimate subject who, rejecting all internal and external coercions and limitations, dreams about the role of an Absolute Demiurgos. On the other hand, modern reflection reveals also the void of these attempts, condemned to failure or leading to a dream (fascist, communist) of absolute power. Both these directions — affirmation and anxiety — are present in all Gombrowicz's books, perhaps most strongly in *Wedding* and *Cosmos.* Here, Gombrowicz unfolds the dreadful consequences of the project of total self-creation, revealing its nihilistic or authoritarian alter ego. To Kołakowski also, it appears that the pursuit of the absolute origin leads always to Utopian thinking:

> Values inherited under the coercion of authority are inherited in the form of myths, not as information about social or psychic facts but as information about what is, and what is not a value. *Idola tribus* goverrn

[78] Kołakowski, L, 1994, *Obecność mitu,* Kraków, p. 26, my translation.

> in an unlimited way, the ultimate emancipation is only the tyranny of another phantasm. Universal godlessness is a utopia. Myths teaching us that something simply has value are inescapable.[79]

In his transgressions of Modernism, in his passion for seeing the extreme consequences of emancipation, Gombrowicz approaches this famous *post-* that encloses and simultaneously overcomes (or at least claims to overcome) his own epoch. Is it possible to find in Gombrowicz some seeds of Postmodernism? By shifting a perspective it is possible to find in his writings some premises of the postmodern philosophy of culture. Gombrowicz's diagnosis of modern European culture consists of tracing in it processes of liberation from the tyranny of forms, ideas and Great Narratives, and consequently results in the author's courageous participation in these same processes. Is it not possible to place Gombrowicz among those who disclose the space of Postmodernity, in which all traditional meta-narratives not longer pretend to have absolute significance and value? Gombrowicz's deconstruction of various meta-narratives — national, religious and historical — is quite evident. He questions, furthermore, the whole discourse of Modernity, deconstructs its manifold forms: from the démystification of the modern lifestyle in *Ferdydurke* (Mlodziak's family), through critical remarks in his *Diary* on modern science and technology, to the derision of Ludwik, the modern, progressive reformer and the hero of *Cosmos.*

In his manner of employing various ideologies, Gombrowicz reminds us of the 'agonal' vision of modern culture (Lyotard's term), in which discourses struggle with one another without pretending to the throne of ultimate truth. Paradoxical and aporetic logic really does govern Gombrowicz's argumentation. He employs ideas only as strategic units: with the help of 'Polishness' he struggles with Europe, and vice versa; Marxism is used to fight against Existentialism. Discourses are indispensable for Gombrowicz, but only as a means in his struggle for identity, for his own 'self.

[79] Ibidem, p. 32.

Gombrowicz's decentration is nevertheless not quite consistent. In the center there is his own 'self; stable and solid, making fun of everything. Through all the batdes and paradoxes it never surrenders, it always remains above or on the side. We face here probably the deepest enigma of the Gombrowiczean attitude. In the ruins of the deconstructed world of form and ideologies, deconstructed culture and myths, he remains himself, with his freedom and autonomy preserved and — as if in spite of his nihilistic beliefs — with a smile on his face!

Is his nihilism really convincing? Gombrowicz 's intellectual partners and critics — detecting his obsessions, his negative attitude toward culture, nationalism, Europe, values and individual moral conscience — always believed that there was a remedy in his work for the hopelessness of the diagnosis. Miłosz saw it in the purifying power of laughter, in the writer's attitude of never being serious; Błoński found it in Gombrowicz's rootedness in the Sarmatian tradition, understood as affirmation of Polish positive immaturity, light-heartedness. Jarzębski located it in the strateg)' of the game that abolishes the ultimate quality of all proclaimed truths. All these attempts to 'soften' the tragic split in Gombrowicz's philosophy grow from a common intuition: that there is an affirmative layer, a positive trace, in his discourse and thought.

These traces are apparent in the *Diary,* in fragments affirming a 'man of lukewarm temperature', a man of natural rationality, of everyday life. Gombrowicz prefers the everyday, kindly villager, 'eating morning bread', tasting ideologies with caution, distrustfully — aren't they too sour, too bitter, too hard? This apotheosis of immaturity, of naive wonder, is, however, hidden under the gravity of diagnosis. It appears that this longing for the positive world is a desperate effort that is undermined by various contradictions. How is it possible for Gombrowicz — with his tragic consciousness, with his erudition (burdened with Form, in his words) — to accept that Sarmatian naivete, the simplicity of hopeful affirmation? His dramas and novels, perhaps excluding *Ferdydurke,* hardly bear witness to this affirmative attitude.

The 'blind, stubborn affirmation of worldliness [...] as the only space that makes life possible', hidden in paradoxes and in games, reminds us slightly of wisdom of Socratic origin. In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty depicts a postmodern intellectual as an informed dilettante mediating between the manifold discourses in the Socratic style. In his parlor the hermetic thinkers become disenchanted, and discrepancies in their conversation become abolished. Does not Rorty tell us, in different words, the same thing Gombrowicz says about himself: that he, and his writings, are like 'aspirin which rids one of excessive cramps'; relieving tension between different forms, deconstructing all discourses that aim at limiting my freedom?

Another possible intellectual horizon for Gombrowicz's 'man of lukewarm temperature' is Husserl's idea of the *Lebenswelt* (life-world). In his 1937 lecture, The Crisis of European Sciences', Husserl discovers a remedy for the disease of a European civilization threatened by the degeneration of reason in the idea of the life-world. According to Husserl, the human world, the world of human values really experienced, 'shrinks' under the pressure of progressing rationalization. The reconstruction of the life-world, its defense against the ruthless progress of instrumental reason, appears to be a primary task for modern philosophy. The idea of *Lebenswelt* becomes a response to the crisis of Modernity, to the crisis of European culture. It appears that Gombrowicz's positive quest is also governed by the profound urgency for the restitution of the human space of life against all abstract systems, not only those of science and rationalization, but also those inherent in culture and ideologies. Does that Sarmatian, Polish immaturity, Gombrowicz's remedy against the excesses of Modernity, not coincide with Husserl's idea of rediscovering the natural attitude as the foundation for our human activity, defending us against the terror of instrumental reason?

The intellectual program offered by Gombrowicz has not lost its topicality; on the contrary, Modernity is catching up to Gombrowicz, strengthening his diagnosis and paradoxes. It appears that his ideas have their strongest validity in a world marked by the

Catching up with Witold Gombrowicz experience of coercion. In such a world — a world of authoritarian dictatorship, for instance — the sharpness of Gombrowiczean discourse can aid in regaining lost freedom, in defending the self against the devouring abyss of authority or phantasm. We are still experiencing the various forms of coercion. In the foreground, however, there is another dimension of the crisis — the crisis of a lost meaning of life, a lost sense of responsibility, a disintegration of the inner structures that order our lives. We are longing more and more for a world of order, values, and myth. In this quest — which is also our way of discovering Europe, inventing Poland - Gombrowicz has not so much to say to us.

Freedom from...or freedom to...? On the idea of freedom in the writings of Witold Gombrowicz

Not many ideas become the motor of history and define the center or chief points of a culture. In Western cultures such a principal concept has, at least since the Enlightenment, been the idea of freedom. Freedom is one of the constitutive goods described by Charles Taylor; goods that determine the horizon of values which do not only make life worth living, but are also worth dying for. In Polish culture the idea of freedom has its place at the very top of constitutive goods. It has its own history, where the comprehension of that concept and the extent of its meaning underwent many changes influenced by political conditions, altering lifestyles and dominant currents in culture, social thought and philosophy. The history of this idea displays many turning points, revaluations and reinterpretations. The writings of Witold Gombrowicz are very much one of the turning points in the Polish interpretation of this idea. After Gombrowicz it is no longer the political, collective dimension of freedom that really matters, as it did for generations of Poles extremely concerned with national sovereignty and independence. The focal point is transferred toward individual freedom, freedom from coercion coming from many sources: plainly speaking: liberal freedom.

In his search for a radical freedom, Gombrowicz is part of the contemporary debate regarding the limits of individual freedom. Can we — in the name of a demand for radical individualism — allow

ourselves to renounce all the narratives we are made of? And are there — once the blackboard has been wiped clean — any positive values left?

Educator or nihilist

In an essay reflecting on Gombrowicz's importance in modern Polish culture, Michal Głowiński arrives at the following conclusion:

> Gombrowicz remains such an important artist [...] because he is a writer who can remain free in any situation. [...] His works are apparently read as if they could [...] teach us how to be free and instill in the reader categories that make him aware of all kinds of limitations. And then, they teach how to attain distance from them. Thus they provide protection from collectivist threats. [80]

Gombrowicz, who teaches us how to be free... can this mischief-maker, desecrator and jester (in the sense of the word employed by Kołakowski) teach the Poles anything; can he be confined to the form of a teacher or bard, a role he hated and ridiculed repeatedly? Recently it seems that Gombrowicz is gradually becoming part of the Polish national pantheon. Screen adaptations of his dramas and novels, plays performed on the stages of the finest Polish theaters, no longer signal an atmosphere of Avant-garde and artistic periphery; they signal something completely opposite: Gombrowicz's writings are entering (or have already entered) the canon of Polish culture. *The Mamage* is performed and received as a classic — modernist classic? Classic Avantgarde? Or maybe a classic of the modern comprehension of freedom, a freedom tied up in paradoxes of Modernism and its new languages: identity and what threatens it, globalization, narcissism and consumption, mass culture and the fragmentation of the self.

[80] Głowiński, M., 2002, *Gombrowicz i nadliteratura,* Kraków, p. 277.

Lately, the positive interpretation of Gombrowicz as a teacher of freedom has been increasingly juxtaposed with a negative reading of Gombrowicz the nihilist. Already some thirty years ago, Wojciech Karpiński argued that the writings of Witold Gombrowicz were 'a very brave attempt to depict the crisis provoked by the emergence of consistent skepticism in European culture'. Karpiński and later Błoński both saw Gombrowicz's experiments as a road leading to an absolutely empty freedom, devoid of any values; a failed attempt to reach the space of redeeming sources (youth, symbolic porno-graph)', defectiveness, fluid personality). The accusations went even further. In a series of articles in 2002, Czesław Miłosz called Gombrowicz the patron saint of harmful deconstruction, which, according to the poet, obliterates the authentic values of Polish culture and submerges it in chaos, tearing it away from its sources. Gombrowicz's legacy would thus amount to a 'dried-up source of values' (Karpinski's term).

A similar diagnosis (although not negative) appears in Michał Paweł Markowski's latest book, bearing the significant tide *Dark current. Gombrowicza world, literature*[81] Markowski discovers a 'gloomy, mumbling and mysterious' Gombrowicz and reconstructs the writer's dark side, his struggle with the inability to express himself and his 'truth' (unattainable, hidden and forever escaping the agent). This is not so much Gombrowicz the nihilist, but rather a dark and tragic Gombrowicz, horrified at the sight of the 'dark current' taking over the tamed world: dark current, i.e. the world losing meaning and coherence when confronted with the extraordinary. The Gombrowicz emerging from this book does not exactly fit the role of 'freedom teacher'.

A very well-researched aspect of the question of freedom in Gombrowicz's work concerns its negative side. Freedom from all kinds of heteronomy (ethnicity, family, religion or culture) is a freedom Gombrowicz himself postulated and practiced on the pages of the *Diary*, and it has long been an object of researchers' interest,

[81] Markowski, M. P., 2004, *Czarny nurt. Gombrowicz, świat, literatura*, Krakow.

awakening many emotions, polemics and critical verdicts. Let us attempt to systematize this negativity (but bear in mind that any systematizing is at odds with the discourse in question), and ask, what is the target of Gombrowicz's criticism? It seems that Gombrowicz's works contain most aspects of the modern philosophy of freedom: its anti-collectivist, anti-system and anti-historical perspective and — it would seem the most basic — anti-heteronomous.

Against heteronomy

Gombrowiczean freedom is deeply rooted in the writer's philosophy of form. The ambivalent character of freedom has its roots in the ambivalent character of form. Form is simultaneously an enslaving device and the very basis of human creativity; it is both degrading and creative. The struggle with the degrading power of form is a struggle for personal freedom, individuality and authenticity. We must bear in mind that the drama of Gombrowiczean anthropology consits in the assumed fruitlessness of this struggle: there is no escape from form; all attempts at cutting oneself off from the heteronomy of social pressure and traditions inevitably lead to more heteronomy, vide *Ferdydurke*, the short stories of *Ђacacay* — really all of Gombrowicz's work. All that is left is a stubborn endeavor to break free from the prison of form, a 'tragic revolt against deformation':

> If I am condemned to deception, the only honesty to which I have access is the admission that honesty is inaccessible to me. If I can never be entirely myself, the only thing that allows me to save my personality from annihilation is my will to authenticity, that stubborn-in-spite-of-everything 'I want to be myself, which is nothing more than a tragic and hopeless revolt against deformation. I cannot be myself, yet I want to be myself and I must be myself — this is the antinomy, one of those that do not let themselves be resolved [...] and do not expect me to provide you with medicine for incurable diseases. (Dii, p. 11)

The fact that he challenges the external influence threatening from the outside, from the world, places Gombrowicz in the long line of modern thinkers indebted to the Kantian tradition. The famous knife Gombrowicz used to cut off one deformation after another, and in the final and radical step — to cut off himself, is nothing but a late variation of Kant's practical reason that strives to clear the moral field of all kinds of heteronomy, particularly the ones originating from a naturalist interpretation of the human being. In the case of Gombrowicz, however, it is not nature - or dependency on its laws, determinism and moral indifference - that stands in the way of human autonomy. Rather, it is all kinds of forces we encounter outside: the pressure of social norms, collectivist behavior, common discourses, and high authority. This rendition of individual, radical self-knowledge is reminiscent of Kant, but also of Fichte and his obsession with the negative exteriority: for Fichte, 'I' — identity or self-knowledge - is a result of clashing with a power that offers resistance. It is 'I' clashing with what is outside of me: a power I must resist, but which at the same time makes me realize that I am who I am, and makes me aware of my goals, my nature and my essence.

From what is written so far it would seem that Gombrowicz can be situated in the mainstream of modern reflection on freedom, in its positive, humanist variant. In the variant of Settembrini, one could add, that combines reason and democracy, freedom and justice, faith in progress and faith in pure autonomous subjectivity. Here, however, the doubts set in. These doubts give rise to the aforementioned 'nihilist' readings of Gombrowicz. Their source lies in the split Gombrowiczean vision of man and his vision of the world lined with fear, Cosmos, non-sense, disorder, shame, pain and immaturity.

The positive freedom project, carved out by the mainstream of Enlightenment thought, is dominated by the notion that an agent can achieve absolute purity and free himself, through reflection on nature, institutions, prejudice and tradition, and achieve absolute autonomy. This vision is not totally unfamiliar to Gombrowicz. It is possible to discover traces of a partiality for cleaning the agent's field of operation from negative limitations: religious, ideological,

nationalist, and provincial. But the stubborn dialectics of his thought do not allow hirn to believe in the pure and positive nature of the agent, completely free and radically emancipated. I cannot be myself, yet I want to be myself — this aforementioned aphorism best renders the incurable antinomy inherent in Gombrowicz's reflection on freedom and authenticity.

He sees the whole dark side of the modern freedom project. After Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Freud, it is infeasible to believe in the possibility of an absolutely transparent self. The masters of suspicion have uncovered the indelible character of certain limitations that apply to free will and transparency of the agent — the consciousness' dependence on libido, the body, and emotions. This inner heteronomy is clear to Gombrowicz when he describes immaturity, pain or shame as enduring limitations. The ambivalence of the philosophy of form expresses that very same ineradicable character of limitations. We cannot free ourselves completely of our common human shortcomings. The human condition is lined with imperfection, incoherence and weakness of everyday existence, and the whole lower stratosphere of life that manifests itself in foolishness, childishness and periphery. We must remember that with Gombrowicz all attempts to radically tame the world and submit it to the will and ratio of the agent always end, if not in tragedy, then at least with a grotesque loss. Extremely autonomous subjects like Zyta of *Ferdydurke,* Iwona from *Princess of Burgundy* , Ludwik of *Cosmos* or *Pornography's* Fryderyk — all lose and end up dead, trapped or paranoid.

Freedom as a declared value, as the definitive horizon of human self-assertion and self-creation, is undermined by Gombrowicz in yet another way — through the perspective of Europe's latest, gloomy history. The ruins and the smoke rising from the crematoria should make modern man aware of how fragile his condition is and how weak his proud emancipation project can turn out to be. Arguing with Sartre's philosophy of freedom — 'It is a little like having smoke rising from the ruins and crematoria to the appropriate height and forming the word 'freedom'' (Diii, p. 109) — Gombrowicz accuses him of absolutizing the concept of con-

sciousness. A philosophy of freedom based upon consciousness neglects the entire sphere of feeling, in particular pain and suffering:

> But pain (and thus pleasure) of its very essence contradicts the concept of freedom. To say that we have the slightest possibility of freedom in suffering (which would be tied to the sense of purpose delineating our sense of values, even if it were only freedom 'in a given situation'), one has to scratch the meaning of the word. Suffering is something I don't want, that I must 'get through'; having no choice is its essence, that is a lack of freedom. It is hard to come *by* greater opposites than suffering and freedom. (Diii, p. 122)

Against collectivism

The anti-conectivist aspect of Gombrowicz 's works is the one most often noted and perhaps most often misunderstood. The principal cause of these misunderstandings was, of course, the political horizon against which Gombrowicz's writings were understood during the communist era; a reading far too one-sided and focusing on the writer's radical individualism as opposed to the general collectivization of thought and deed. The herd-like nature of human behavior as a threat to individuality: what else could be the major theme of *Ferdydurke*, *Operetta, Yvonne,* and above all the *Diary.* The coercion exercised by all collectives: school friends and teachers, family, social class and nation has been presented by Gombrowicz with incredible literary precision and charm, not devoid of humor and irony. The best example thereof is probably the final heap of *Ferdydurke* that reappears in *Trans-Atlantic,* the image of intertwined human beings, forming an accelerating ball, where individual differences disappear and where the only thing that counts is the might of advancing collectivity, rolling blindly ahead. In such images it was difficult not to recognize an allegory of all sorts of totalitarianism and collective madness of the 20th century.

On the other hand it is impossible to hail Gombrowicz as a prophet of radical individualism. In his anthropology, individuality is always created through relationships, hence the idea of the inter-human

church as a collective instance that endows me with value and renders me with meaning. Only through interaction does the self and morality come about: remember the famous 'I kill because you kill' — the quasi-cynical commandment of modern morals. Those of Gombrowicz's characters who try to save their authenticity and their unique character, like Józio and Henryk, are losers in the struggle against the ever-assaulting forces of coUectivity, and the coercion to copy. Is any opposition to these forces not doomed to fail from the outset? In this paradox context, is it at all possible to speak of freedom?

Freedom from collectivist temptations seems, after all, to be the undeniable horizon of values in Gombrowicz's universe. The difference between the negative and the positive lies in the personal pronouns: for Gombrowicz there is a positive force in the *I versus you* encounter; a dialogue between authentic, although different, individualities. The *We versus them,* though, signals collective coercion, where one is glued to another in a herd that confines and imprisons. The continuous stress in the *Diary* on the quasi-messianic mission of leading the Pole out of himself, i.e. out of the prison of enforced Polishness, clearly confirms the anti-collectivist edge of the Gombrowiczean thought. It is not, however, tantamount to making him a believer in pure individualism and a herald of unrestricted subjectivity; rather, it expresses a tragic split between one and the other attitude. The answer is neither the tragic existential individualism of making choices and being 'condemned to freedom', nor the comforting Communitarianism of 'healthy community ties'; rather, an acceptance of 'living astride', within the space of moral antinomy. Let us repeat — T cannot be myself, yet I want to be myself and I must be myself — this is the antinomy, one of those that do not let themselves be resolved.'

Against the systems

Another enemy of freedom are abstract systems, golden cages of instrumental rationality. In his struggle with them, Gombrowicz is as merciless as in his crusades against the discourses of enslavement. I

have already mentioned Gombrowicz's negative attitude toward science as a system: 'Science stupefies. Science diminishes. Science deforms the beauty'. Other instances of such system-cages are modern ideologies, fashionable philosophical theories or the market. The)' all evoke collective fervor, a herd-like rush, and as such they annihilate individuality and freedom of choice. With the passion of a *demasquateur,* Gombrowicz attacks intellectual fashions of the day: Marxism (in particular Western Marxism, and especially the French one), structuralism and existentialism, uncovering not so much their inteUectual lacks as their seducing power and the coercion inherent in collective enthusiasm. Best known are his analyses of the collective frenzy of Nazism, included in his *Berlin Diary* and other fragments of the *Diary.*

His dislike of ideology, his cautious approach to total systems that claim to explain the world, made Gombrowicz and his works an antidote to totalitarianism, and made liim a fast fixture on the censor's blacklist in communist Poland. This fact explains the Głowiński quote cited at the beginning of this chapter praising Gombrowicz — the teacher of freedom. It seems, though, that his instruments of intellectual distrust of systems affect a far more ranging scale of possible enslavement to any broadly-defined ideolog)'. Gombrowicz turns out to be a vaccine against such thinking.

According to G. Schöpflin,[82] the post-communist mentality is characterized by a tendency to false totalitization of reality; to comprehend reality as a coherent system of connections, where everything is explainable and has its predetermined motives and logic. Ideologies thus created relinquish contact with reality and begin to live autonomously (emancipation from reality). Experience is submitted to an all-embracing idea (conspiracy, an internal or external enemy, Modernity, cosmopolitanism, capitalism — whatsoever), while elements not fitting into the scheme are erased from discourse. Chance, spontaneity or the illogical character of reality are

[82] Schöpflin, G. *Nations, Identity, Power,* London 2000, pp. 99-116.

marginalized. The world is divided into the one that is explainable — our own, tamed, and the other: illogical, beyond comprehension and experience, ill-fitting with the dominant view.

Gombrowicz, steadily stressing the surprises brought by everyday experience and the discrepancies in the image of the world that stem from human confrontation with the unknown and untamed, does indeed seem to be a universal antidote to excessive ideological thinking. And thus understood, his experience of negative freedom can be an ever-fresh source of strength in the struggle for autonomy, dignity and authenticity.

Against history

History appears but rarely in Gombrowicz's writings. His early work shows man outside of history, in a space unaffected by the historical process. In a way it is a perfectly synchronic space. The protagonists of *Ferdydurke, Cosmos* or the short stories are not products of history, but rather products of their own choices and the choices of others. They are the objects and subjects of interaction, timeless reflectors of a sharpened consciousness. Gombrowicz's world is equally devoid of traces of historicism; there are hardly any references to a reality shaped by external events. The exceptions here are *The Marriage* and *Pornography* (as well as the unfinished play *History),* where war, the Second World War, appears, but more as a pretext, a far horizon of events, a horizon of inter-human psychomachia.

The rejection of history as a meaning-generating discourse is particularly striking when compared to his contemporary Polish artists or the entire Polish culture, submerged in history and drawing strength from it. Herein lies another focal point between Gombrowicz and Poland. According to Gombrowicz, history is a burden far too heavy for PoHsh shoulders: something that restrains their freedom. The moral obligations enforced by past generations — the fatherland as a great collective duty of which one is reminded through symbols, monuments and anniversaries — is a concept of history that deforms rather than enriches one's personality:

> Seeing our value not in what we are but in what we are capable of overcoming in ourselves, our current form, we could relate to the history as an enemy.
> I am the result of my history. But this result in no way pleases me. I know, I feel, that I am worthy of something better and I do not intend to give up my rights. I base my value on my dissatisfaction with myself as a historical product. In which case my history becomes the history' of my deformity and I turn against it — thus freeing myself from it. (Dii, p. 18)

Hence his advice to the Poles: 'to get at least one foot out of history... and thereby regain our footing, we who are so swiftly borne under by the vortices of our past. [...] to begin our life from the beginning and our ceasing to be only a consequence of the past'. (Dii,p.l8)

To start life all over again... This is what the main character of *Ferdydurke* tries to do, with dubious success. This is also what Henryk in *The Marriage* longs for. Henryk's rejection of the past can be interpreted as an attempt to gain independence from his personal history. By rejecting the deforming elements — institutions, the church, family authority — the character tries to recreate rrimself: marry him to himself in the Inter-human Church.

Similarly with Gombrowicz: the history described in the *Diary* is a process of breaking with the past, starting anew, beginning with the symbolic emigration to Argentina and rebirth in Retiro. But is it a clean break, a radical freedom from everything, which would make it exclusively a consequence of the past?

In the final volume of the *Diary,* also known as *Conversations with Dominique de Roux*[83], Gombrowicz re-constructs his own history in a more positive way. The events of his childhood and youth are depicted as the overshadowing context of Gombrowicz's writings. History — personal and collective — is thus helpful in the final reckoning of self-understanding and understanding the world; the

[83] de Roux, D., 1969, Rozmowy *z Gombrowiczem,* Paris.

break must not be complete, as personal biography and work merge into a meaningful narration.

The possibility of rebirth

Is freedom to..., positive freedom to be found in the Gombrowiczean discourse? Is it possible to find an interpretation of Gombrowicz that transgresses the horizon of negativity and finds seeds of positive projects and a language of affirmation?

In an article written a few years ago (an earlier chapter in this book) I arrived at a negative answer to that question. I wrote:

> It appears that his ideas have their strongest validity in a world marked by the experience of coercion. In such a world — a world of authoritarian dictatorship, for instance — the sharpness of Gombrowiczean discourse can aid in regaining lost freedom, in defending the self against the devouring abyss of authority or phantasm. We are still experiencing the various forms of coercion. In the foreground, however, there is another dimension of the crisis — the crisis of a lost meaning of life, a lost sense of responsibility, a disintegration of the inner structures that order our lives. We are longing more and more for a world of order, values, and myth. In this quest — which is also our way of discovering Europe, inventing Poland — Gombrowicz has not so much to say to us.[84]

At this point I would like to modify the severity of that statement.

Along with the 'tough' language of break, opposition and destruction aimed at the enslaving discourses, there is in Gombrowicz, particularly the late Gombrowicz of the *Diary,* a softer language where the key word is 'loosening-up'. The strategy of loosening-up erases pure negativity, and the attitude toward the ever-pressing Form loosens up. Late Gombrowicz does not need to

[84] Stala, 1C, 1999, Inventing the Wheel? The Post-modern Catching up with Witold Gombrowicz, *The Postmodern Challenge: Perspectives on East and West*, Strath, B. and Witoszek, N., eds, Amsterdam - Adanta, p. 217.

struggle against the obtrusive Great Narratives — Polishness, family, class, the West, Art — he can allow himself some distance and humor. His 'man of average temperatures', a peasant from his native Sandomierz-area or a Sarmatian, walks in the garden of modern discourses and tastes: 'is it not too sour, is it not too bitter'? Positive freedom would appear to be nothing else but mere carving out of a space where a healthy distance to the enslaving, heteronomic forces is possible.[85]

The first traces of such thinking appear in the first volume of the *Diary*, in connection with the discussion on Mascolo's book. It is one of the few fragments of the *Diary* where Gombrowicz talks explicitly about freedom. Mascolo, with his Marxism, is for Gombrowicz one of the participants of the European spiritual process that consists of 'cutting the cables', rejecting the static for the dynamic. This is, of course, a vision of Modernity where the radicalization of freedom holds an important place; where getting rid of restraints and limitations has led us to a peculiar tête-à-tête with the world:

> This thought, having demolished, as we have said, the old metaphysical order, suddenly glimpsed itself alone with the world. This was a world immeasurably easy to control by thought, it seemed, because all restraints on thought had vanished and it had become the sole arbiter of reality. (Di, p. 87)

Mascolo, who personifies the progressive European intelligentsia, has gone too far in his attempt to clean the field for human freedom. The current of radical criticism and solid skepticism fascinates Gombrowicz. It is familiar to him and he feels akin to it, but at the same time he cannot accept it. Why? Because it absolutizes freedom, making it an abstract and almost metaphysical category, and removing it from the common human foundation:

[85] Here my approach is close to Błoński and his dialectics of rejection and assimilation. But I do not agree with his claim that these dialectics mark Gombrowicz's return to the rejected discourses of the forms; rather, he keeps them at bay, never allowing Леr to devour him or rob him of the gained authenticity. Gombrowicz plays with them, pitting them against each other, but not for the sake of regaining or returning

> He got stuck but he could have saved himself if he had maintained his freedom, a freedom that allows us to retreat when we get stuck. This possibility of retreat, this 'slowing down', this extraction of oneself from excess into a more human dimension, a freer one, this, for me, is the only real freedom. *But today even freedom became rigid and excessive.* (Di, p. 89)[86]

Excessive freedom can become another trap... thus Gombrowicz tries to loosen-up the definition of freedom itself. A radical worship of freedom can manifest itself in many ways: its diametrical opposition, like communism, but also an absolutization of abstract freedom, paper-made and intellectual. Searching for elements of enslavement in any discourse and situation, seeing the menace of heteronomy everywhere — in language, religion, family, state, economic systems — can in the end lead to the death of the self and make the very possibility of human freedom unrealizable. Radical criticism can lead to radical nihilism.

> Freedom cannot be an ideology, it has to fit us. In order to serve men, and open rather than close the space of the positive existence project, it must be a 'loosen-up' freedom:
> My freedom, the ordinary, everyday, normal freedom, needed by us to live, a matter of instinct rather than cerebral meditation, is a freedom that does not want to be anything absolute — a freedom that is devil-may-care and free even in relation to its own freedom. The Sartres and Mascolos seem to forget that man is a being created to live in an atmosphere of average pressures and median temperatures. Today we know the mortal cold and the living fire, but we have forgotten the secrets of a light breeze, which refreshes and allows one to breathe.
> Freedom! In order to be free one needs not only to want to be free. One must not want to be free too much. No desire, no thought taken too far will be capable of opposing extremisms. Mascolo killed the freedom in himself at the very moment he subordinated his ordinary, direct feeling of freedom to intellectual reasoning. (Di, p. 117)

[86] The cursivized sentence is missing in L.Vallee's translation.

The language of 'loosening-up' appears frequently in connection to Poland. In the *Diary*, Gombrowicz's attitude toward anything Polish is usually depicted in the context of breaking away, separation, waging war on Poland. This is the negative freedom that destroys community ties for the sake of freedom and authenticity. Gombrowicz portrays himself as a Moses who will lead Poles out of the Babylonian captivity of the Romantic Form. But it is important to notice that this tone is present in the fragments depicting young Gombrowicz and the period around the completion of *Ferdydurke.* Later, whenever Poland is concerned, Gombrowicz avoids the language of absolute negation; he prefers to speak of 'loosening-up' his attitude toward Poland, of alternatives and of discovering a Polish alter ego.

Poles have always had a deficit of freedom, claims Gombrowicz. And he is not speaking of political freedom, aimed at the outside world and making use of a clear and transparent image of an enemy to be hated, betrayed and overcome: we have always restricted our spirit, voluntarily or because we were forced to. Our entire literature, all of our art is a symptom of this. Restricting one's spirit is a synonym of inner slavery, a Polishness enforced through myths and political obligations.

The struggle against this inner slavery is carried on in the *Diary* in two languages. One is the language of maturity:

> ...beyond that artificial, childish, substandard timid reality, there is another penetrating, sharp, sober knowledge in Poland which does not want to cheat itself, the tone is different, more reasonable, more cruelly mature. My task was to get to exactly this Polish sound, get to this tragic and aware Pole. Not to stuff him with other delusions or make anything easier for him. I want to express the ruthlessness of this Polish task, which clamors for full awareness and a full existence. (Di, p. 189)

Meaning: the Pole must become more mature, conscious, modern and decisive.

But it is not the only strategy. A renewal of Polishness can also happen through a discovery of 'our alter ego that desperately wants to be heard'; another, different Pole who is hiding in the area of neglected Polish immaturity. Freedom here would mean reaching the realm of shadow, a potential hitherto not exploited by Polish culture. Gombrowicz is quite enigmatic in this passage; the only clue regarding this shadowy realm is the neglected anima, the female side of the Polish nature:

> It is this fear of femininity that causes us to make rigid decisions which tum against us, and that marks in us the clumsiness of persons who fear that they will not be up to their theory; we want to be' like this, rather than that, too much, and the result is that we 'are' too little. (Di, p. 109)

The call to search for new identity patterns in areas that to this very day remain the dumping ground of Polish culture, its lateral branch and periphery, could seem provocative and ambiguous (if they are understood as an apotheosis of fake loosening-up, silliness and thoughdessness). But it is impossible to deny that Gombrowicz is right and acute when longing for another type of Pole — a defiant and more feminine one, relaxed and immersed in reality rather than politics and culture, for a Pole who *is* before he is Polish:

> We will discover that other Pole when we turn against ourselves. At that time contrariness should become the dominant characteristic of our development. We will have to give ourselves over to contrariness, seeking in ourselves that which we do not want, before which we recoil. [...] Poor is a Polish culture that only binds and shackles; worthy of récognition, creative and alive is one that binds and liberates in a single stroke.' (Di, p. 109)

In this somewhat schoolboy-like moralizing aphorism we encounter the Gombrowicz of 'average temperature'; Gombrowicz as an aspirin that cures the cramp.

To loosen-up rather than break off; to weaken the form, not to destroy it. This is how the loose deconstruction Gombrowicz-style manifests itself, not entirely radical and still trying to maintain the

values inherent in the discourses under fire: Polishness, Christianity, morals, culture. In *Conversations...* Gombrowicz thus defines the essence of his writing:

> Perhaps, the greatest moral of my literature is this: try to weaken all constructs of premeditated morality and other inter-human dependencies to such extent that the voice of our simplest and commonest moral instinct can be heard. R.: — For such constructors you will be a de-constructor. G.: — That I can't help, can I? '

The techniques of loosening-up are expressed in Gombrowicz's discourse through suggestive metaphors — aspirin curing a cramp, the man of average temperature, water slowly eroding the rock. But above all, Gombrowiczean freedom must prove itself in action, and here we ought to search for an opening of positive freedom making a realization of the existential project possible. Freedom to..., a loosened-up freedom translated into the language of action is realized in the practice of a game.

This practice has been described by Jerzy Jarzębski in his book on Gombrowicz.[87] He distinguishes between two variants of the Gombrowiczean game: firstly, the spontaneous game, where one toys with forms, a game aiming at 'freeing oneself from social and artistic determinations'; secondly, 'playing by choice and on purpose', game as intended action, at the core of which lies a 'framework of ideas', a bunch of positive values, In my terminolog)" the first variant of the game would represent negative freedom, while the other freedom to..., stands for freedom of the existential project.

When does a game serve the purpose of creating a space of freedom? When, thanks to the loosening-up, can we allow ourselves freely to try on different masks: social roles, languages of diverse discourses or attitudes towards the world? When do they cease to suppress, and instead become existential opportunities? Gombrowicz's games, recapitulated in the *Diaiy*, are at times nothing but plain provocation, irony and fun. The infamous episode where he

[87] Jarzębski, J., 1982, *Gra w Gombrowicza,* Warszawa.

impersonates an aristocrat in a fictional Stockholm salon is an instance of such a deceptive game; a loosening-up of the corset by candidly playing the game and breaking / deconstructing its rules Numerous examples of that strategy are present in the *Diary,* as well as in *Ferdydurke* and *Bacacay.* This variant of the game is dominated by jest and carelessness: a carnivalized or postmodern space where the agent has no stable center and becomes an array of roles, a meeting point for inner forces which he juggles rather than controls. It is a space of negative and anarchistic freedom. Another instance of that type of game is the aforementioned juggling of discourses: Poland, Europe, Marxism, existentialism, well aware of the lack of a fixed point or a single horizon.

Jarzębski (and I with him) still upholds that there exists a variant of the Gombrowiczean game where values or a 'scheme of ideas' are at stake, and where the price is one's own identity: a strong identity that is central, not given to constant fluctuations of choice and rejection. 'The game is supposed to be an instrument of self-assertion, a mirror, where the writer can look at himself; it allows him to escape Form and consciously try it on to see whether it fits his personality'.[88] Self-assertion is a sort of creation or construction; in consequence it should be possible to form an identity in a positive way, consisting not in eternal rejection and toying with the possibilities (as is the case in the postmodern discourse), but in a chance to create new horizons of meaning that could be maintained, Thus, the strateg}' of game does not have to lead to a destabilization of the agent[89]; it can just as well lead to self-assertion and upholding of the established self. The passage quoted by Jarzębski in this very context confirms the estabhshing aspect of the Gombrowiczean game:

[88] Ibidem, p. 70.
[89] Jarzębski is sometimes inconsistent in his interpretation; he wavers between a self-affirmative and postmodern understanding of Gombrowicz's game 'in this vicious circle the only solution seems to be to accept the unstable personality which is as spontaneous as it is determined, capable of satisfying the yearning for freedom as well as the yearning for shape' (p. 70).

> I keep playing different parts, selecting different attitudes. I attach various meanings to my life and if any of those meanings should win recognition among other people I choose it as my own.[90]

Next to the language of loosening-up and the game is another vocabulary uncovering the perspective of positive freedom: the vocabulary connected to the concept of creativity. In Gombrowicz's diagnosis, Modernity often appears as the affirmation of the new dynamics of Modernity subjugated to the law of constant recreation of the world and man. The idea of permanent creation is perfectly at ease with Gombrowicz's philosophy of form: in the *agon* of my own forms and those of others, my self takes on its authentic shape. The emergence of an authentic self is a dramatic and contradictory process, coherent with the drama of modern spiritual process:

> The spiritual process of which he *[Mascolo: an epitome of the modern intellectual]* is a product: what splendor! There is nothing more shocking than the sight of mankind during the past two hundred years, pulling up all anchors in order to pass from static into absolute dynamics, from man and the world of given reality to man and the world in endless becoming, like a ship sailing from port into open sea. pi, pp.86-7))

The vocabulary of creation and its affirmative approach to the creative processes has, without a doubt, Romantic ancestry. Among some of the latest moral sources emerging in this period is a phenomenon that Taylor calls Romantic expressivity: man's faith in his own ability, freedom achieved through creative activity, the Faustian-Promethean complex. It seems that Gombrowicz, with his affirmation of man creating himself, is part of this extensive tradition. Perhaps the distance between the characters of *The Marriage* and Conrad of the Great Improvisation[91] is not so overwhelming after all.

[90] Ibidem, p. 70, my translation.
[91] Conrad: a symbolical Promethean character from the great Polish Romantic drama of A. Mickiewicz, *The Forefather* (1832). The Great Improvisation is the essential part of the drama.

Gombrowicz makes use of the concept of creation on multiple levels: commenting on his own work, explaining his vision of man and diagnosing the contemporary world. In *The Marriage* he focuses on 'the mechanisms behind the creation of man and humanity', and Henryk's will 'should be God's creative will'. *Trans-Atlantic* i_s according to the author, an expression of the dilemma 'between remaining faithful to the past and gaining freedom to arbitrary self-creation'. Among Gombrowicz's 'shattered horizons of meaning' this one seems untouched: freedom is realized through creativity of autonomous choices, despite the fact that the consequences of these choices often prove themselves to be ambiguous, to say the least.

What is the difference between the anthropology of self creating itself and the idea of development, dominant in the post-Romantic culture and fully expressed in the technique of the *Bildungsroman}* Gombrowicz's affirmation of creation is related to the culture of post-modernism, described by Bauman, Giddens or Taylor. In cultures ruled by self-determining freedom, new identities are chosen in the same way one changes out of a suit, as a combination of different possibilities and rejection or adaptation of new languages: fashion, ideology, moral positions, sexual orientation. We are very far from Mann's or Proust's ideas of consistent development and a maturing process that lead to depositing of experience and the establishment of a stable center of the self. Gombrowicz's heroes create themselves with the help of or against the obstruction of others; in a series of folding and unfolding options or roles one can take on and off. One thing seems permanent - faith in the might of creative powers and in the possibility of exercising this might on others.

Henryk tries to create a space where he can play his own wedding-game; Fryderyk and Witold direct their own liberation through youthful eroticism in *Pornography;* the narrator and Ludwik create the meaningful space of cosmos — they all choose the option of self-creation and form the world and self at the same time.

Are the sources of this affirmative attitude, this realization of freedom and authenticity, to be found in the self alone, or beyond it, in

a world transgressing my personal will? This question I 'borrow' from Charles Taylor's book *The Ethics of Authenticity.* Pondering the limitations of the modern culture of self-fulfillment ruled by values of authenticity, self-expression, self-determined freedom and radical autonomy, Taylor notices that the crucial issue in the discussion of postmodern ethics is the role played by the horizon of values. In the 'culture of narcissism', such a horizon is non-existent: my choices are the results of my will alone. A freedom realized in such a way is nothing but a trivial freedom; identities thus created are 'weak', they do not relate to anything beyond our immediate needs. Only awareness of the existence of a strong horizon of values, i.e. feeling that something matters for others as well, in the space of culture, makes those expectations meaningful:

> The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. That is what is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfillment in opposition to the demands of society, or nature, which shut out history and the bonds of solidarity. [...] Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but I can find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of the nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order that matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.[92]

In the twisted space of modern freedom, can Gombrowicz be found on the side of the horizon that matters, or rather on the side of trivial mask-juggling? In this chapter I attempt to defend the first option by showing that his world is all about a radical reconstruction of the horizon of meaning (defining a new space of freedom), rather than annihilation and deconstruction of that hori-

[92] Taylor, C, 1989, *Sources of the Self : the Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, pp. 40-41.

zon.[93] In my search I have pointed to the vocabulary of loosening-up, the practice of playing a game where one('s)self is at stake and the values connected to creativity, as the instances of affirmative values.

If the game is a further development of the idea of loosening-up the forms, as well as its existential practice and personification, then in the discourse of creation such practice would be the activity dubbed by me *the secondary sacralization.* Here follows the clarification of that term.

For some time the interpreters of Gombrowicz's work have been in different ways striving to bring out some kind of a metaphysical longing from his discourse. After the death of God, high culture, ideology and faith in progress, moral sources seem dried-up; there are no transcendental powers capable of filling the world with meaning. Gombrowicz's idea is desperate in its radicalism and Nietzschean in its ancestry: why shouldn't I sacralize the world anew, direct my metaphysical need outside and contaminate reality with it?

Naturally, these attempts are easily recognized. There is the experiment of Cosmos, the famous tempest scene from the *Diary*, the story spun around the waiter's hand. Gombrowicz *needs sanctions* in order to establish a space of freedom. By choosing an object, a gesture, an action, I must fill them with meaning, pump them up with sui generis sanctity. Only if so do those constructed worlds -thanks to mythology of the hand, thanks to the religion of the inter-human church — begin to bear some reminiscence to Taylor's horizons of ultimate, sacralised values. So what if even they escape me, become independent and start to operate against me, what if they try to trap me again, possess me and put me under tutelage? Jarzębski is right when he remarks that Gombrowiczean demiurges are always crowned with failure, and new enslavement. According to him these 'awkward' endings signal a compromising of the demiurge, its final

[93] Deconstruction of the meaningful horizons is described by Taylor in the chapter on the inescapable horizons.

undermining: thus, the godliness that Gombrowicz reaches out for in order to shape a new world in the end turns out to be unnecessary or inedible to him.[94]

I do not believe that the idea of secondary sacralization can be dismissed so easily. I believe that it is a manifestation of a firm need for a strong horizon of values that in the end can sanction my freedom. Without the strong horizon, in a flattened world, any attempt to establish a freedom based solely on the self can only turn out to be trivial. Then the story of the waiter's hand could be interpreted as an invitation to thoughtless idolatry where any given object, figure, slogan or word can suddenly become sacred and worshipped.

Looking at Gombrowicz's demiurge more seriously, one could conclude that they signal our postmodern condition as described by Bauman. Left all alone in the universe, we are condemned to delineating the space of our freedom and the space of our moral choices. We are also condemned to permanent ambivalence — we cannot be certain that the horizons we create are the right ones. The need for sanctions, the need to sacralize anew, the need for strong horizons, still seems to be a need we cannot get rid of. And literature, according to Gombrowicz, is the most suitable instance of re-sacralization of reality. The writer, the poet, is being allowed, or even encouraged, to play a role of the demiurge rendering the world meaningful anew.

[94] Jarzębski, op. cit., p. 73.

The visions of Europe in Polish post-war culture

The image of Europe has been produced in Poland by generations of intellectuals, mosdy émigrés, who recorded and analyzed their impressions and experiences, thus informing their Polish readers and creating stereotypes as well as a net of notions and symbols which made Europe and its nations graspable for the Poles. Throughout the 19th century a number of Polish writers, artists and thinkers, living in Paris, Rome, London or Berlin, generated an ambivalent image of Western Europe. In the writings of Mickiewicz, Lelewel, Słowacki, Norwid and Brzozowski modern Europe was described and judged with astonishment or reverence, with fear or acceptance, with feelings of alienation or a sense of familiarity. These Polish responses to the modernizing Europe have been thoroughly analyzed in Jerzy Jedlicki's book *A Suburb of Europe*[95] — a book that throws light on the diversity of reasons tying behind Polish ambivalence toward Western Europe.

In the second half of the 20th century we witnessed a sort of déjà vu. After the Second World War a great many Polish intellectuals left Poland and continued their intellectual life in the West. Their writings, which once again had to be smuggled into Poland, shaped and influenced Polish attitudes toward Europe. At the same time there were a handful of Polish travelers who were allowed to visit

[95] Jedlicki, J., 1999, *A Suburb of Europe: nineteenth-century Polish approaches to Western civilisation*, Budapest.

the countries behind the Iron Curtain. They too produced diaries and essays which recorded their European impressions.

This chapter intends to analyze the most significant records of both kinds. The *Diaries* of Witold Gombrowicz and Andrzej Bobkowski and Czesław Milosz's *Native Realm,* represent the exile wing-Zbigniew Herbert's *Barbarian in the Garden,* and Miron Bialoszewski's *Mapping up Europe* — the 'home' wing. I attempt at first to outline the main horizons of "their' Europe and discern the discourses that govern the representations of the West. Then, I will reconstruct different strategies toward Europe that we encounter in those writings,

The dark image of the West

The image of the West that takes shape in the Polish consciousness after 1945 is definitely dark. It is the color of betrayed hopes, lost moral order and a major civilization disaster. And a profound sense of having been abandoned, betrayed and left at the mercy of the Kremlin. 'Europe has abandoned us, left us at the hands of the Soviet Beast that has swallowed half the continent': such emotions were common among the Poles immediately after the war. No illusions, no hope. The Poles had always taken pride in being part of the European civilization (although underneath the pride lurked a poor-relation complex), but in Auschwitz, Majdanek and Warsaw that civilization had shown itself capable of the most horrifying crimes, of completely denying its own ideals and values, of once again assuming the part of the grim barbarian — and delivering a war victim into the hands of yet another executioner. This understandable and profound post-war Euro-skepticism was generally manifested by the public and was also expressed in the writings of the intellectuals and cultural opinion makers.[96]

The fiercest criticism of the European civilization comes from young writers and poets who have lived through the hell of German

[96] Loew, P. O., 2004, *Polskie wizje Europy w XIX I XX wieku, Wroclaw, p.27.*

and Soviet occupation. After the experience of Auschwitz, not only was Poetry no longer possible, but faith in the redeeming powers of culture was falling apart, along with belief in the Western humanist tradition as a source of values and moral norms. Tadeusz Borowski, the twenty-something with the soul of an old man, showed in his Auschwitz stories that humanity is but a fragile frame beneath which there lies a whole abyss of barbarism and raw instincts. The ideas of Darwin, Freud and Nietzsche found their startling confirmation in the reality of concentration camps: not only the executioners, but also the victims had forsaken their humanity and accepted the inhuman system that reduced man to nothing but a thing. In this other world all veils are torn, high culture is no longer convincing, and the entire European heritage becomes suspicious:

> You know how much I used to love Plato? Today I realize he was a liar. For the things of this world are not a reflection of the ideal, but the products of human sweat, blood and hard labor. It was we who built the pyramids, hewed the marble for the temples and the rocks for the imperial roads, we who pulled the oars in the galley and dragged wooden ploughs while they wrote dialogues and dramas, rationalizing their intrigues with appeals in the name of the Fatherland, made wars over boundaries and democracies. We were filthy and died real deaths. They were 'aesthetic' and carried on subtle debates.[97]

Borowski was not alone in his vision. Another young poet, Tadeusz Różewicz, expressed a profound lack of belief in the healing powers of culture. T look for the master and the teacher, who shall bring me back my hearing, talking, seeing' , wrote Różewicz at 23, right after the war, when he had lost all illusions regarding culture's ability to help him regain his lost innocence.

Unbelief, suspicion, a sense of abandonment, disproportion between experience and art — these are the predominant attitudes among the majority of young artists. Czesław Miłosz, ten years Borowski's and Rozewicz's senior, expresses a somewhat more

[97] Borowski, T., 1976, *This Way for the Gas, 'Ladies and Gentlemen,* trans. B. Vedder, New York, pp. 131-132.

complex position in his post-war poems. The Western civilization's crisis of which Europe anno 1945 is a telling proof is not a fina] crisis that cannot be overcome. Poetry and art should rethink its philosophical and moral attitude; learn how to take new responsibility for the world. What is poetry unless it has the power to save nations and people?' asks the poet rhetorically in his first post-war volume. Salvation as a moral program is also expressed in the affirmative attitude toward the healthy trends of European tradition, its sound core inherent in a sensibly interpreted religious and philosophical tradition. The task awaiting the poet and the intellectual is to separate the sheep from the goats, take a critical look at the Western heritage and remove from it the pernicious miasma that has led to totalitarianism, the downfall of culture and humanity. Some years later the same thread will be taken up by Hanna Arendt in *The Roots of Totalitarianism*, where she searches for answers to similar questions.

An ambivalent attitude toward Europe is visible in Milosz's earlier poems, where admiration for the achievements of culture and enthusiasm for the landscape co-exist with the bitterness awakened by memories of recent events. 'My sweet mother Europe, the butterfly that sits on your flowers taints its wings with blood', writes the poet in Washington in 1949, full of ambivalent nostalgia for the Old Continent. Europe gradually becomes 'a land where the poison of history lurks at the bottom', where the admiration for achievements and feats is mixed with bitter irony. This is a poem about the contemporary heir of Western values, about the child of the 1950s Europe:

> Treasure your legacy of skills, child of Europe,
> Inheritor of Gothic cathedrals, of baroque churches,
> Of synagogues filled with the wailing of a wronged people.
> Successor of Descartes, Spinoza, inheritor of the word 'honor',
> Posthumous child of Leonidas,

These words take on an ironic and dark force when another part of the same poem is read:

We, whose lungs fill with the sweetness of day, [...]
are better than them who were buried.
We, from the fiery furnaces, from behind barbed wires
On which the winds of endless autumns howled
[…]
We, saved by our own cunning and knowledge.

A Child of "Europe

Western civilization that is on trial in the poems of post-war Polish poets is condemned because of its visible effects: Auschwitz, the ruins of Warsaw. Its image is constructed out of historical effects rather than built on reports from the inside. But there were exceptions. There was a group of Polish writers who, during the war or right after die war, found themselves in the West. In their accounts they expressed an ambivalent attitude toward European values. The post-war West viewed by the newly-arrived Polish emigrants is often shaped in the convention of dark stereotype. The diaries of Jerzy Stempowski written in 1945—46 expose the chaos of post-war Europe, its helplessness in the face of the recent catastrophe, ground zero of Western civilization. Right after the war, Germany and Austria experienced huge migration as enormous human masses uprooted by the war and its consequences moved east and west in search of a permanent and stable place. It is a Europe of *displaced persons,* displaced not only physically, but also mentally uprooted and incapable of finding their ideological standing. This skepticism regarding a possible rebirth of the European spirit is exemplified by the title of Stempowski's most popular collection of essays written in the 1950s: *Essays for Cassandra.*

Somewhat different seem *Pen Sketches* by the young prose writer Andrzej Bobkowski, who at the outbreak of the war found himself in southern France. His cycling tour through a France marked by war and capitulation is full of enthusiasm for the culture and nature, and a discovery of the beauty of the cradle of Western civilization. All that makes the signs pointing toward the end of that culture even more painful for the author: the fall of France, the victor)' of Nazism, the political and moral chaos of the post-war era. For

Bobkowski, who between 1945 and '48 lived in Paris, the ideological landscape of the West is one of 'spiritual disaster'. In fictional letters and dialogues with a friend who thinks about returning to Communist Poland, Bobkowski presents a scorching critique of Europe's powerlessness and the impotence of European civilization. Lasting faith in Western values and their creative powers is no longer possible. The West is no longer a coherent political system. It is split, torn between communism (a mixture of fear and admiration for Soviet Russia) and Americanism. The idea of establishing anything on the so-called values alone is a vanishing utopia: values crave cultivation, but there is a lack of gardeners:

> No. 'Culture', 'individual freedom' and West are no ideology. Neither are they political ideas. They are delicate plants that can grow only on the basis of some value system or whatever you choose to call it. At the same time those are great truths which nevertheless need to be supported by a huge amount of lesser truths for lesser men. But you know you do not possess them. You know that you have no system and that everything you say is actually rootless. So you quibble over these concepts like over precious remains of a sunken ship [...]. (56—57)[98]

The allegory of the sunken ship is a fitting illustration of Bobkowski's feelings for European civilization. The young writer observes a post-war France that is increasingly enthusiastic about Stalinist Russia and leaning to the left. He notices then that Europe is distancing itself from values that to him are decisive: respect for the rights of the individual, individualism, private enterprise. Postwar Europe is falling into the trap of childish dependence upon others: America, Russia, the Marshall Plan, the welfare state. The abundance of tutelage is harmful and makes one incapable of managing one's own affairs: 'A man who is overtly protected quickly ceases to see his protector as a benefactor. He sees a tyrant' According to Bobkowski, precious Europe becomes incapable of managing its affairs; homo europaeus enters a state of ideological

[98] Bobkowski, A., 2007, *Szkice Piórkiem, Dziennik z lat 1940-44* , Krakow, pp. 56-7., my translation.

and motivational lethargy. That is why it is necessary to leave the sweetheart and try one's luck in the free world. Such are the motives behind Bobkowski's decision to leave Paris for Guatemala in 1948, quit writing altogether and become a man of business. At least he stayed true to his Western ideals.

Tales of European Beauty and the Beast I Barbarian

The 1960s and 70s bring about the first contacts between die Polish intellectuals and the real, not imaginary, West. Foreign scholarships, scientific contacts, but also the increasing availability of émigré periodicals and writings, lead to an ever-growing 'leak' of information about Europe and America through the Iron Curtain. Diaries, travel books and journey accounts become popular. The re-Europeanization of Polish culture being initiated after 1956, thanks to an eruption of published translations of the latest literature (Sartre, Camus, Hemingway and Butor), and the hungry assimilation of the latest trends in poetry, theater, philosophy or painting, is now continued 'live' through direct contacts. Pohsh periodicals begin to publish reports from Western Europe, the magazine *The World* conveys stories from outside the Eastern bloc, the colorful magazine *Ameryka,* published by the American embassy in Warsaw, premieres at newspaper stands.

The attraction of the West as a cultural and political model for the Moscow-kidnapped Eastern Europe was never questioned among the Polish émigré intelligentsia. In the Paris-published *Kultura* or in the London-based *Wiadomośń (News),* the argument of the historical ties between the Polish and the European cultures was constantly repeated, and the obviousness of these ties was defended. In his brilliant essay 'Europe — the Polish Dream', Peter Oliver Loew[99] talks about a process of 'intellectual reconstruction' of the unity between the Western and the Eastern parts of Europe. Partakers in this process were Polish émigré intellectuals like O. Halecki, C.

[99] Loew, P. O., ed... 2004, *Polskie wiye Europy w XIX IXX meka,* Wroclaw, pp. 7-39.

Miłosz, S. Vincenz and J. Stempowski, who on one hand stressed Poland's European character and on the other were critically disposed to the Western short-sightedness. This short-sightedness was supposed to manifest itself in, among other things, careless forgetting and intellectual ousting of the continent's eastern half from the common consciousness of (Western) Europeans, in the leftist disease of Western intellectuals, and the fact that they had given up on independent thinking.

In Poland itself the situation was more complex. Since the 1950s the communist propaganda had spread the stereotype of the 'rotten West'. Movies, caricatures, publicist activity all attempted — without much success — to install in the Poles a dislike for the Western world. It was to be done by pointing out the flaws and shortcomings existing in the West: inequality and social injustice, the imperialist aspirations of 'certain Cold War circles', consumerism and moral decadence. The part of enemy number one was of course reserved for imperialist America, the personification of all kinds of evil. A deeper philosophical reflection over the faults of Western culture and the consequences of the Modernity that had been launched by young writers after the war and was a result of personal reflection, was now replaced by vulgar black-and-white propaganda. A majority of Polish writers and intellectuals let go of a further critical reflection regarding Europe because they (correctly) assumed they would then be incorporated into the dark trend of negative propaganda against the 'rotten West'. A new tendency emerged: an idealization of Europe, especially its deep roots in the Mediterranean, Christianity and Antiquity. As a reaction to the dark propaganda of decay, a new image of Europe appeared; one of the lost Arcadia, a fairytale, timeless 'Beauty' that takes a stand against the barbarian beast — now as well as in ancient times.

A trip to the West was available only to the chosen few. The first to go are elder and distinguished writers. In their travel diaries and books, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Mieczysław Jastrun and Zygmunt

Kubiak[100] take on the role of initiated wise men who show the reader the beauty of the inaccessible European world: the world of 'high culture'. Iwaszkiewicz describes the exotic beauty of southern Italy and Sicily. Jastrun reconstructs the Mediterranean myth in his 1962 book of the same title. Kubiak's poems and essays[101] as well as Jan Parandowski's Greek exegesis and Roman mythology[102] try to retrieve for the Poles their temporarily lost antique heritage. What is amazing in these travel reports is the complete absence of any reference to contemporary Europe; a modernizing and dynamic Europe tor-mented by political contradictions. The eye of the wise old man sees only cathedrals, museums and remains of the past.

There can be at least two explanations for this particular reduced view. Firstly — censorship and self-censorship. Writing about Mediterranean culture was, of course, safer than reflecting on civil society, democracy, political conflicts, the splendor and shadows of Modernity that were naturally visible for the visitor. That is why the 'eye of the beholder' was open exclusively to the aesthetic dimension of European civilization. Museums and Madonnas were at least in the 1960s politically neutral — it was all right to write about them, admire and analyze historical processes and search for the sources of European culture and civilization. It was possible to do this without coming into conflict with the regime's official policy that criticized the contemporary, rotten West. This explanation by conformism or by Milosz's ketman does not, however, seem to be entirely fair. In the essays of Kubiak, Iwaszkiewicz or Jastrun one can sense an authentic need for a saving norm, a clear point of reference. Europe of the Mediterranean tradition, Europe of Antiquity and Humanism seemed at that time the only guarantee for surviving the 'new Middle Ages', i.e. the communist barbarism aptly expressed in the idea of *homo sovieticus.* The cathedrals, museums, Madonnas and Greek philosophers satisfied the hunger for European norms and braced Central European intellectuals against the

[100] A few titles: J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka o Sycyili,* (1956), M. Jastrun, *Mit śródziemnomorski* (1962), Z. Kubiak, *Półmrok ludzkiego Świata* (1963).
[101] Kubiak, Z., *Półmrok ludzkego świata***,** Kraków 1963.
[102] Parandowski, J., *Godzina śródziemnomorska***,** Kraków 1949; *Z antyecznego świata***,** Kraków 1959.

meaninglessness and chaos of the present. At the same time they reaffirmed the illusion and hope of belonging. Hence the tides of books and essays that were sometimes provocative: *Poland lies at the Mediterranean Sea* (Parandowski)[103], sometimes full of hope and expectation: *Native Realm* (Miłosz)[104], *Return to Europe* (Mazowiecki)[105]. Re-calling and reclaiming the European tradition was supposed to re-establish a sense of continuity that had been lost in the Polish culture, and thus restore its ties to Europe, that date back to Kochanowski and Mickiewicz, and are visible in the architecture of Kraków and the writings of Polish modernists.

The most remarkable and at the same time well-known example of this idealizing trend is Zbigniew Herbert's essay collection *Barbarian in the Garden* from 1962.[106] This guide to the history of European art, written in the form of travel notes, covers the period between Paleoliticum and the Renaissance, from the paintings of Lascaux to the Siena masters. Translated into many languages, it was part of the reason for the poet's popularity in the West. It is in a sense a cultural manual for his classically inspired poetry model that often draws on the topos of European culture, and is often compared to the poetry model associated with Eliot's early poems. *Barbarian...* is a declaration of faith in the continuity and the normative power of European culture. It is a journey through the land of human imagination and expresses a longing for Beauty. Herbert reconstructs the aesthetic adventure of European culture that begins symbolically with the primitive drawings in the caves. Being near the origins of human creative expression causes an increased sense of belonging to the human family:

> I went back from Lascaux the same road I have arrived. Although I have looked in the abyss of history, I have no feelings of being in the

[103] Parandowski, J., Polska leży nad Morzem Śródziemnym, [in:] ed. P.O. Loew, *Polskie wicje Europy w XIX i XX wieku,* Wrocław 2004.
[104] Miłosz, C, 1981**,** *Native Realm: a Search for Self-definition,* London. The original title: *Rodzinnia Europa,* Paris, 1980 (A family Europe).
[105] Mazowiecki, T. Powrót do Europy, [in:] ed. P.O. Loew**,** *Polskie myе Europy w XIX i XX wieku,* Wrocław 2004**.**
[106] Herbert, Z., 1986**,** *Barbarian in the garden,* transl by M. March, J. Anders, San Diego.

> foreign land. I have never been so clear in my mind: I am a citizen of the World, not only a descendant of Greeks and Romans, but of Infinity. [107]

The culture that fully accepts the challenge of the prehistoric time is the Mediterranean culture. When contemplating Doric columns, Roman temples, Provencal *poetry* and medieval Madonnas, Herbert recognizes the continuity of the great road that began in the Paleoliticum: 'The road was open to the Greek temples and Gothic cathedrals. I have been approaching them feeling the warmth of the Lascaux painter's hand'[108]

The existential attitude dominant in Herbert's essays (also in the ones on Dutch painting written in the 1980s) is a state of revelation with the achievements of the human spirit, creativity and imagination. The historical context is, of course, extremely important here. A young scholar from an occupied European country, whose periphery-like character has been reinforced by the grayness of the real socialism, stands in front of the greatest masterpieces of the European genius and is paralyzed by their beauty, dignity and wealth.

What connects and what separates Herbert's idealization from the mythologization of Europe undertaken by his elder colleagues — Iwaszkiewicz, Jastrun, and Parandowski? Seemingly the formula is similar: a travel diary relates the experience of discovering the roots of European culture that intertwine with an erudite analysis of mutual influence, continuous processes or historical placing of the masterpieces of art. Herbert tries to unite Beauty and Life: he is not only interested in the aesthetic value of Gothic cathedrals, but also in what went on behind the scenes; the struggle against financial difficulties, the life of the builders. In Herbert's sketches there is also a historical dimension of the West as a point of reference — a standard for our times. In the essay on the Albigensians and their sad end — mass murder — he reminds us of the timeless barbarism

107 Ibidem, p. 20.
108 Ibidem, p. 21.

that is present throughout history: the urge to destroy everything that is different, Herbert says, is not an exclusively modern specialty Shoah, the murder of the Armenians, Bosnians or Gypsies have their precedents in the medieval crusades against those unlike us. In the text on the Knights Templars and their trial by the Inquisition we can easily find echoes of the recent Moscow trials or an allegory of persecutions of dissidents in the Eastern Bloc.

But it is not the references to our times that make Herbert's notion of the West special. Rather, it is the clear sense of being on a mission the young narrator of the *Barbarian...* is about to fulfill. This impression of a man on a mission is further enforced when Herbert's essays are read in the context of his poems.

In the face of the European heritage, Herbert feels himself to be a messenger of his generation. The poem 'Mona Lisa', written in the same period as the essays from the *Barbarian...*, illustrates the ambivalence the writer feels toward this arch-symbol of high culture: on the one hand it is a declaration of faith in the strength of European humanism paired with a feeling of being under obligation to those of his countrymen who, betrayed by modern history, could not mix with European culture and could not go on the Great Journey. What stands between them and the famous painting is death, war and one of history's unjust verdicts. So, on the other hand, the sublime beauty is clearly contrasted with the tragedy of life. Beauty — personification of the values inherent in European Humanism, the Promised Land for all Central European intellectuals — is separated from the author by a long road:

Through seven mountain frontiers
barbed wire of rivers
and executed forests
and hanged bridges
I kept coming -
through waterfalls of stairways
whirlings of sea wings
and baroque heaven
all bubbly with angels

— to you
Jerusalem in a frame

Mona Lisa[109]

The 'Herbertian Return' to Europe seems to be an extremely dramatic effort. One is able to trace in the poem the ambivalent feelings of hope, doubt, and desperation. In his mistrust against Mona Lisa, who epitomizes pure beauty while being simultaneously separated from life — 'cut off from the meat of life, kidnapped from home and history' — Herbert is here reminiscent of his contemporaries, Różewicz and Borowski. In his interpretation, however, disastrous modern history does not entirely undermine the importance of European heritage; on the contrary, it appeals for more responsibility and trust. Andrzej Kaliszewski, a Polish interpreter of Herbert, thus comments on the poet's dilemma:

> In Herbert's poem the anti-thesis Mediterranean — Poland stands for the anti-thesis Beauty — Suffering. This is an anti-thesis that was never captured by Różewicz, who consistendy rejected its first segment — Beauty. Herbert, on the contrary, feels no shame or anger in confrontation with Mona Lisa; rather, he feels himself to be chosen, an emissary of those who are dead or have been marked by Fate. His journey is a symbolic return to Europe on behalf of all those who for ever remained in the Polish forests or buried under the ruins of Warsaw. The fact that it is possible for him to return to Europe is in a way a victory for those Poles who passed away during the War.[110]

[109] Herbert, Z., 1985, *Selected Poem,* trans. C. Miłosz, P. D. Scott, Manchester, p. 85.
[110] Kaliszewski, A., 1982, *Gry pana Cogito,* Kraków, p. 167. Herbert himself often commented on his interest in classical culture. In an interview given to Trznadel, he talks about escapism and self-censorship: 'The first motif is escape. While Stalinism was going on I thought that it would last till the end of my life. [...] That's why one had to live in internal emigration and concern oneself with Greek architecture or Rubens [...]'? Expounding on his ambivalent feelings toward European art in the essay 'Acropolis and animula', he writes: "Because I had been chosen - I thought -without having deserved it in any particular way, chosen by blind Fate, I have to make this choice meaningful and strip it of its fortuitousness and randomness [...] Imust imagine I am a delegate or an envoy of all those who have not had similar luck. And as it befits a delegate or envoy, I must forget myself and strain my entire sensitivity and intellect, in order to reproduce Acropolis, the cathedrals or Mona Lisa in me, of course on a scale appropriate to the limitations of my mind and heart' (Kaliszewski, op. cit., p.168).

Not only the essays from *The Barbańan...*, but his entire literary production may be seen as a prolonged effect of Herbert's early journey to Western Europe and his later stays in Paris, in the Netherlands and in Italy. His poetic program obviously goes against the current; the poet attempts to reconstruct a modern form of Classicism. Through that attitude he searches for strong axiological and moral grounds, some base upon which one could ground one's life. Modern life is constantly jeopardized by the processes of disenchantment, modern technology, modern genocide, and modern barbarity. It is by no means the apologetic attitude that uncritically affirms the whole legacy of the West. The readers of Herbert's most famous book of poems, *Mr. Cogito,* are aware that the title hero struggles severely with the demands of the Western cultural heritage, at the same time discovering barbarian in his own self and in the world. Watching his own face in the mirror, Mr. Cogito discerns there some traces of the barbarian, 'the forehead not too high, only a few thoughts in the head'. Exercising and enjoying high culture, partaking in its demanding legacy of classical values and beauty, does not automatically grant one moral and aesthetic superiority. Mr. Cogito says:

> I used to buy in the salons of art
> Lipsticks for dignity
> I rubbed my ears with Mozart

— but it does not help; the features of the barbarian are still there, impossible to wipe out. Western culture, with all its tales and symbols from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Humanism, challenges the modern everyman, epitomized by Mr. Cogito. Sometimes it even overwhelms him completely. One day he decides to fight the Dragon, the Beast, and having taken the shape of medieval Saint George, he enters the streets of the modern city, looking for the beast that he is courageously willing to take on. But the only thing he encounters is the Void; horrendous in its mdefiniteness, hard to grasp or fight:

> The monster of Mr. Cogito
> Has no measurements

It is difficult to describe escapes definition
it is like an immense depression spread out over the country
It can't be pierced
with a pen
with an argument
or spear

The Monster of Mr. Cogito [111]

Merged into the vagueness of the modern world and condemned to it, Herbert's protagonist searches for a dialog with the past. Prometheus, Apollo, Minotaur, the Bible and the old masters of European arts and thought become for him a source of support in his attempt to understand the contemporary world. Witnessing the decomposition of tradition, values being resolved in the muddy water of mass culture, ideologies and political correctness, Mr. Cogito recalls the Western heritage in order to escape the modern forms of barbarism lurking everywhere. His classicism consists of a creative dialogue with the great symbols of Humanity, in erecting the ethics of faithfulness towards one's own roots:

Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize
go upright among those who are on their knees
among those with their backs turned and those toppled in
the dust
you were saved not in order to live
you have little time you must give testimony
[...]
go because only in this way you will be admitted to
the company of cold skulls
to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland
the defenders of the kingdom without limit and the city
of ashes
Be faithful Go

The Envoy of Mr. Cogito[112]

[111] Herbert, Z., 1985, *Report from the besieged City and Other Poems*, trans. John and BogdanaCarpenter, New York, p. 45. "2
[112] Ibidem, pp. 88-9.

The difficult, demanding trust in one's own culture, the Western culture that has been constructed in a laborious process of assimilation of the legacy, brings Herbert close to those anti-ironic thinkers who consider modern Western culture to be in danger and find the remedy in strengthening its base. Like Hannah Arendt, like Charles Taylor, like Alain Finkielkraut, Herbert is anxious about our common symbolic tissue, about the horizon of common meaning in our (Western) world. He attempts, furthermore, to reconstruct that lost community through the dialog with the Old Masters. Only through 'the signs of humanity accumulated in the masterpieces of culture' is man able to approach himself, to achieve insight about himself: the source of our human condition. Herbert thus creates a model of broad Classicism, defined rather in terms of modern anthropology or philosophy than a literary current:

> What does it mean in living terms to say that the classic is what survives? How does such a conception of a classic manifest itself in people's lives?
>
> For the most serious answer to this question, we cannot do better than turn to the great poet of the classic of our own times, the Pole Zbigniew Herbert. To Herbert the opposite of classic is not Romantic, but barbarian; furthermore, classic versus barbarian is not so much an opposition as a confrontation. Herbert writes from the historical perspective of Poland, a country with an embattled Western culture caught between intermittently barbarian neighbors. It is not the possession of some essential quality that, in Herbert's eyes, makes it possible for the classic to withstand the assault of barbarism. Rather, what survives the worst of barbarism, survives only because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs that is the classic.[113]

It is possible to determine how the Herbertian idea of Classicism gradually takes shape. Starting from the juvenile poet's fascination with medieval cathedrals and paintings of Siena and Florence, it develops into the concept of Classicism conceived as protection

[113] CoetzeeJ. M., 2002 *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999*. Viking, New York, p.l-17

against the (real and potential) barbarian. To begin with, the Herbertian barbarian wears the colors of red or brown totalitarianism. Later we can observe a significant shift: the barbarian lurks everywhere, he epitomizes diverse threats looming over Western culture. His position and character constandy fluctuate. He can strike from different and unexpected places: mass culture and martial law, terrorism and ethnic cleansing... Herbert makes us remember that a barbarian can reside inside us, as a malicious option of human violence, of vanity, of self-complacency or plain stupidity. Fighting the barbarian is the essence of his ethics of commitment.

While discussing the European or Western link of Polish post-war culture, one should not leave out the work of Czesław Miłosz. He epitomizes the figure of the Central European writer — an émigré who spent a huge part of his life in the West (France and the United States) and nevertheless remained a truly Polish author. The topics of identity of Western civilization, the significance and participation of small nations in that horizon and the West — East borderline, reappear incessantly in his essays and poems. What is most remarkable, Miłosz sees the field of tension between the two segments of the East — West opposition differently. The struggle between West and East goes on in human minds, in individual preferences for certain values rather than in the geopolitical sphere or the field of political correctness. Western values may rule in the minds of inhabitants of Vilnius or Ljubljana, while the East may infect the mentality of Parisians or New Yorkers. Those categories belong rather to intellectual history, not to geography, even if it is the cultural one,

The earliest discursive record of that mental confrontation between East and West is to be found in Milosz's book *Native Realm (Rodzinna Europa)*[114], a self-biographical reflection of a Central European writer on his own roots, his identity, and his dwelling in the modern world. Miłosz wrote this book during his early exile years in France, in the 1950s, shortly before his departure for America. Here

[114] Miłosz, C, 1981, *Native Realm: a Search for Seff-definition,* London. The original title: *Rodzinna Europa* , Paris, 1980 (A family Europe)..

he recalls his childhood on the periphery of Europe, in Polish-Lithuanian-Jewish Vilnius; his first juvenile trip to Paris in the '30s; his first contacts with the New World in the Polish embassy in Washington after the war, and the last years of exile existence in the somewhat hostile Paris of the '50s.

The main strategy of Miłosz's book consists of restoring the broken cultural identity of Europe. Miłosz is calling for recognition of the small nations in Central Europe that have been unwillingly displaced, 'captured' into the East, behind the Iron Curtain. The conflict of ideologies has divided Europe into the Soviet-dominated East and the democratic, free West. Miłosz does not understand that divide as obvious and irreversible; on the contrary, he rejects it as a result of the evil fate of modern history, similarly to Kundera, Michnik, Havel and Konrad some years later. His vision of a culturally united Europe goes against the fate of geopolitics, and attempts to reclaim the lost, or rather cynically rejected (by Western opinion), cultural identity of the continent. Europe without Vilnius, Krakow, and Prague remains a fragmented, incomplete Europe. In that way it neglects a great deal of its legacy; a legacy that is extremely significant considering Central Europe's particular position at the crossroads of cultures, in the long-lasting dialog/confrontation with the Other, with the East that can be defined in various ways. The memory of that encounter may be constructive for Europe, both by enriching its core culture and by making it aware of the dangers.

Miłosz starts with some ostensible evidence. He reconstructs his intellectual biography, proving that a similar civilizatory process took place both in his native cities of Vilnius and Warsaw and in Paris or Berlin in the '20s and '30s. Modernity in the form of ideological debates, of early mass culture, industrialization and experiments in fine arts, reached the inhabitants of Central Europe only after a minor delay. Consequently, young Miłosz's journey to France in the '30s turned into a discovery of the same familiar Europe: a friendly, common, domesticated Europe. There are of course traces of intimidation and fascination in the record of that trip, a desire or hunger for high culture, high diction. One ma}' trace there, however, a critical attitude combined with humor and irony.

In his European journey, Miłosz rediscovers the cultural foundation of his European heritage, whose symbols and signs have already been familiarized and assimilated in the Latin and Ancient History classes in his home town of Vilnius, and in his early poetical production that was stimulated by European tradition, his juridical studies and working for the Polish Radio.

When comparing Miłosz to Herbert one may notice a significant difference in their definitions, or rather intuitions, of all things European. While with Herbert the dominance of Westernness consists of masterpieces, cathedrals and ancient symbols, for Miłosz the links to Europe dwell in everyday Hfe, in the creative contacts between ordinary people and nature, resulting in the process of civilization. In his poems from the '50s, the often rural landscapes of Europe resemble those of his native Lithuania, of images from his childhood. It is the beauty of humanized nature; of landscapes affected by human activity that evoke a sense of familiarity, the idea of Native Europe. The Polish critic Jan Błoński thus sums up that European inclination in Miłosz:

> For Miłosz the European means the dialogue between the sacred and the secular, between the natural and the supernatural [...] Hence Milosz's obtrusive imagination filled with towns and landscapes whose natural beauty is affected by man. The most convincing examples are Mitosz's epitomes of the infinite ecstasy: the Alsatian Mittelbergheim, Bon at the Geneva Lake, the Vézère valley in Gascony.[115]

The poet's strateg)', in *Native Realm* and in the poems from the '50s, consists of a process of domestication of Western culture by recognizing the common patterns of behavior:

> Europe herself gathered me in her warm embrace, and her stones, chiseled by the hands of past generations, the swarm of her faces emerging from carved wood, from paintings, from the gilt of embroidered fabrics, soothed me, and my voice was added to her old

[115] Błoński, J. 1998, *Miłosz jak świat,* Kraków 1998, p. 189.

> challenges and oaths in spite of my refusal to accept her split and her sickliness. Europe, after all, was home to me. And in her I happened to find help: the country of Dordogne is like a Platonic recollection, a prenatal landscape so hospitable that prehistoric man, twenty or thirty thousand years ago, selected the valley of the Vezère for his abode (was he, too, moved by a Platonic recollection of Paradise?). And while I climbed the hills of Saint-Emilion near a place where only yesterday the villas of Roman officials had stood, I tried to imagine, gazing out over the brown furrows of earth in the vineyards, all the hands that had once toiled here. Something went on inside me then. Such transformations are, of course, slow, and at first they are hidden even from us. Gradually, though, I stopped worrying about the whole mythology of exile, this side of the wall or that side of the wall, Poland and the Dordogne, Lithuania and Savoy, the narrow litde streets in Vilnius and Quarüer Latin, all fused together. I was like an ancient Greek. I had simply moved from one city to another. My native Europe, all of it, dwelled inside me, with its mountains, forests, and capitals; and that map of the heart left no room for my troubles. After a few years of groping in the dark, my foot once again touched solid ground, and I regained the ability to live in the present, in a 'now' within which past and future, both stronger than all possible apocalypses, mingle and mutually enrich each other.[116]

In the Miłoszean vision of the West it is possible to isolate two factors. One, already mentioned, is a feeling he shares with Kundera, Konrad and Kis — a feeling that the center of Europe belongs historically to the Western Latin heritage.[117] The other

[116] Miłosz, C, 1981, *Native Realm. A Search for Self-definition*, trans, by C. S. Leach, London, pp. 293-4.
[117] The Central Europe of Miłosz and Kundera lacks ostentation, messianism and a sense of mission; it is devoid of mysticism and imperialism. It is a Europe of small fatherlands. This is exactly what captivates Finkielkraut, who in *Ingratitude*, paradoxically, admits to a feeling of gratitude toward the Central European writers who have changed his perception of Europe: That centre (Central Europe) has not been affected by gigantomania [...]. It did not see itself as the metaphysical hub of the inhabited Universe. [...] Its position did not give rise to a mission whose goal was salvation. Neither history nor the Holy Ghost bestowed any particular privileges upon it. It was simply [...] a certain piece of the West that had been taken away from it: the abducted West. For the indulgent French intellectual that I am, there could be no claim more provocative or paradoxical. That original twist was an offence to my deepest rooted convictions, as I believed at that time that the West is omnipotence and power'.

factor, — and here Miłosz is in line with Herbert and other Polish Euro-idolaters — is the expression of trust in and gratitude toward the main classical, Mediterranean core of European civilization. 'Human reason is beautiful and invincible' — for Miłosz this means our European rendition of critical wisdom going back to the Greeks and enriched by the Judeo-Christian culture. It is a wisdom that is non-universalist and rooted in a Herder-like interpretation of the Romantic tradition.

The way the Polish writers view the West makes it easy to identify them as culturalists, heirs to Herder, according to whom 'man is an incomplete creature, far too weak to survive in nature without the aid of culture. The meaning of this sentence was very much reinforced by the traumatic experience of the 20th century's catastrophes that had had such an impact on the inhabitants of Central Europe. After the experience of totalitarianism, Western culture proved to be the only mainstay in a world of broken horizons. It was the only horizon of values worth discussing and cultivating.

This affirmative attitude toward Europe was often a result of simplified idealization and an aesthetic vision of Antiquity and the Mediterranean culture. In the case of many writers it was a kind of enforced reductionism, a long-distance perspective that idealized the *aesthetic* and moral strands of our civilization. In a sense, the Europe of Iwaszkiewicz, Kubiak or Parandowski is a manifestation of escapism in die face of an unbearable totalitarian reality. With Miłosz and Herbert, however, it is difficult to track any uncritical idealization: their visions of Europe are lined with caution, irony and profound criticism. 20 years after the publication of *Native Realm,* Miłosz produced the philosophical *Land of Ulro*, a harsh reckoning with the ultra-rationalist current of the European civilization.

Of course, at the very heart of this cautious affirmation of the West, found in the writings of Polish culturalists, lies the experience of totalitarianism; it is a reaction to the (experienced, not constructed) threat to the world of values, humanity, freedom. In a sense it is a generalized response that views the West as the only identity source available. This vision does not know of any contradiction between

Europe and its national cultures. The cultures of the minor Central European nations had always looked upon the European heritage as the decisive horizon for the development of their local cultures; it was stimulating and hope-providing rather than enslaving. In this vision of Europe/the West there is no room for de-constructivist undermining of this culture's legitimacy or Eurocentric hegemony, expressed in the writings of Milosz's contemporaries, Foucault and Derrida — the masters of European post-suspicion and self-irony. In a way, Polish, Czech or Hungarian intellectuals are the allies of the new conservatives, such as Alain Finkielkraut or André Gluckmann, who express grief over the collapsing Western pride and self-esteem. Western culture needs to be cultivated, its continuity is not given; it is necessary to keep it in a state of creative tension — this opinion, voiced by Hanna Arendt, is a neo-conservative motto and it also lies at the heart of the attitudes expressed by Miłosz, Herbert and others. This common concern for the fate of the threatened humanity binds together the attitudes of the Polish intellectuals, Finkielkraut, Arendt, Weil and many others.

Europe disenchanted

Parallel to the mythologizing processes that made Europe and its heritage the figure of Beauty fighting the Beast, there were critical tendencies in Polish culture which aimed at demystifying the 'high style' of writing and thinking about Europe. Elements of criticism towards contemporary Europe became prevalent already with the mythologizing writers like Herbert and Miłosz. But theirs were usually accusations of the tradition or the ideals having been betrayed. The healthy core of European tradition still remained untouched by criticism.

A true disenchantment does not begin until Gombrowicz. His analyses in the *Diary (1953—69)* undermine the European core itself as an emanation of high, sublime culture. In his crusade against all forms of official culture, against enslavement through compulsion to admire and imitate, Gombrowicz challenges the mythologies of Art, Poetry and Refinement. I write more on this specific mode of de-

constructing 'the idea of Europe' in the chapter on Gombrowicz and Modernity.

It seems that Gombrowicz is perceived by his readers first and foremost as a leader of the crusade against the fossilized Polish culture that extinguishes and restricts the human (in me) for the sake of the Pole (in me); a faithful member of a community that is compliant with the myths of his own culture. The writer's crusade is, however, of a much greater extent: it is directed against all kinds of collective enslavement. In this context European culture is particularly enslaving for a representative of its peripher)', because it inevitably causes an inferiority complex. As their greatness is overwhelming, the Madonnas, cathedrals and masterpieces ultimately give rise to the complex of the 'poor relative'. The Europe of cathedrals provokes Gombrowicz to sacrilege and rebellion. This rebellion takes place in the name of the 'man of average temperature'; an ordinary person who wishes to free himself from the pressure of high culture. The pressure manifests itself in the compulsion to nicely admire and adore the cultural heritage of Europe. People admire Dante, Brahms or Raphael because the others admire or affirm them. But the massive compulsion is sure to eradicate authenticity and freedom of choice. Gombrowicz, on the other hand, stubbornly proclaims that man is above his creations.

The Polish and the Argentinian point of view allow Gombrowicz to look at Europe from the perspective of younger, immature cultures. The notion of immaturity, however, is clearly a positive and creative concept in the Gombrowiczean dictionary. It is from the perspective of immaturity that we can allow ourselves to be critical towards high ideals and discover their rigiclity, megalomania or dogmatism. To free oneself from the curse of influence! To be capable of authentic creativity... Only when the higher nature of Europe is 'forgotten' can authentic talent come into its own and 'create a personal image of the world'. This is Gombrowicz's appeal to Polish artists:

> Do not waste your precious time in pursuit of Europe. You will never catch up with her. Don't try to become Polish Matisses, you will not spawn a Braque with your deficiencies. Strike, rather, at European art. Be those who unmask. Instead of pulling yourselves up to someone else's maturity, try instead to reveal Europe's immaturity. Try to organize your true feelings, so that they will gain an objective existence in the world. Find theories consistent with your practice. Create a criticism of art from your point of view. Create an image of the world, man, and culture which will be in harmony with you. (Di, p, 26)

Admit your immaturity compared to the West and turn it to your advantage: this is the program Gombrowicz is trying to carry out in his crusade against the dominant position of high European culture. His provocative articles against poetry, painting and Dante, or his ridiculing accounts of a Paris obsessed with the cult of Sartre, all manifest a need for decentralization of Europe's conceited hegemony. But this decentralization is not undertaken from a Polish perspective, one of a peripheral culture dominated by others and struggling for its dignity and a place at the joint (intellectual) table: rather, it is a struggle undertaken from the perspective of a strong and self-contained individuality unwilling to yield to anyone or anything. It is not so much a struggle with Europe as with the Polish attitude of kneeling down and admiring, an attitude of idolatry and idealization propagated by mainstream Polish intellectuals. Rise from your knees and look into the eye of the new reality emerging from the wreckage of the old European civilization — a reality that comes into being in full view right in front of us; the world of the modern man who has inevitably lost his trust in the great narratives and has to create his humanity himself in the midst of the ruins of civilization. In this dramatic anthropological vision Gombrowicz appears as heir to Nietzsche, Stimer and Brzozowski; yet there are no cassandric cries here, appearing so frequently with someone like Miłosz. According to Gombrowicz, modern Europe, without its former points of reference, is a place of opportunity, freedom and recreation of individual autonomy:

> Here's a possible scenario: the dignified edifice of a thousand-year-old civilization collapses. It is quiet and empty and a swarm of

ordinary little human beings, who cannot recover from the shock, stand on the ruins. Their church has fallen, along with the altars, paintings, stained-glass windows, and statues before which the)' knelt. The vaults that protected them have long since changed into dust and rubble and they are revealed in all of their nakedness. Where should they take shelter? What should they worship? To whom should they pray? Whom should they fear? Where should they locate the source of inspiration and strength? Would it be strange if they saw the only creative force and the only accessible Divinity in themselves? This is the way that leads from the worship of human products to the discovery of man himself, as the decisive and naked power. (Di, 21)

A more relaxed approach to Europe must be based upon a sense of self-assurance. Getting rid of complexes toward the West becomes a profound need for an ever-growing group of Polish intellectuals on their way to claiming their own language, their own identity and their own vision of the world. A sort of a Gombrowiczean school emerges: writers and intellectuals reject reverent homage and admiration for Europe in favor of irony. This irony can assume different forms — from Sławomir Mrozek's grotesque and Gombrowicz's own mockery, to attitudes of ambivalence and uncertainty that manifest themselves in a decomposition and dissolution of the homogenous image of an Antique-Renaissance-Enlightenment Europe of Humanism and Progress. A growing number of writers begin to notice the antinomy and diversity of Europe, and begin to view the European project as Europe's effort to overcome itself and continuously undermine its own assumptions.[118]

One of the most interesting Polish travel books, Kazimierz Brandys' *letters to Mrs.* Z.[119], depicts a Polish intellectual's struggles with Western Europe in the 1950s. In Brandys' narrative we encounter a Europe of mass culture, modern industry and mass consumption. There is no such thing as one Europe. This voluminous novel is a

[118] This vision of Europe has been comprehensively outlined in the essays of Milan Kundera, the Czech writer, who sees Europe's specific character and strength in its ability to continuously revise its own assumptions; cf. Kundera, M., 2003, *The Art of the Novel*, New York, (= Perennial Classics). Leszek Kołakowski expresses similar convictions in *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago 1990.
[119] Brandys, K., 1987, *Letters to Mrs. Z.*, transl, by M. Edelson, Highland Park, 111.

whirl of diverse motifs', concludes Brandys and gives an account of the polyphonic character of Western Europe:

> To put it simply, the essence of Europe is a need to overcome itself. In spite of the profusion of crime and primitive lack of moral restraint, the idea of form, a higher order or the ultimate purpose and meaning has never been annihilated. I am always deeply moved by the co-existence of good and evil in our history. [...] European history is a tale we know all too well in order to pretend that it consists of morals alone. What is going on here is a sort of ceaseless ambition to rise above evil - and that ambition has never been satisfied. Rarely do authoritative declarations regarding the marble-like character of European culture fill me with enthusiasm. Let us not drag the lady onto the pedestal, she is no statue yet, she is still alive lustful flesh.[120]

Another traveler, Miron Białoszewski, chooses a slightly different strategy toward Europe. In his travel diary, intricately titled *Mapping up Europe,* he does not devote many paragraphs to the viewed works of art, monuments and other classic icons of European civilization. His strategy is reminiscent of the one applied in *Л Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*[121]*:* going below the mythologized heroic tale to the level of impressions and experiences of the ordinary man. Spontaneous memory, rejection of ready-made discourses, attention to details — those are the parameters of Biaioszewski's stance on reality.

The sailing trip around Europe is not the writer's first contact with the West. Sailing around the continent is a symbolical conquest, but it is an incomplete and sporadic one. The ship calls at several sea ports, glimpses of which can be caught for a moment in chaotic, casual sightseeing, only to be replaced by the sea. Hence the title of the diary: *Mapping up Europe.* The starting point is a geographic icon, a map, or a contour seen from the outside, from the ship. This map gradually begins to **ful** out — in the points of contact: the mapping.

[120] Brandys, K., 1964, *Listy do pani* Z., Warszawa, p. 56.
[121] Białoszewski, M., 1977, *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising,* ed. and transl, by M. Levine,Ann Arbor.

One after one the separate bricks of an abstract puzzle are revealed on the canvas: Copenhagen, London, Gibraltar, Athens, Istanbul ...

> We are sailing around Europe. Sailing around the map. A map well-known since childhood. It hangs next to the exit onto one of the upper decks. The latest itinerary is always added onto it [...]. It is rocking heavier than before.[122]

This strategy of scanning the surface, of mapping, also governs the contact with experienced reality. Białoszewski gives a surface account of depicted reality, an account that does not go deep into the nature of Europe: into its history or myths. It confronts reality with common perceptions of it, with stereotypes acquired from books, movies, photographs or reproductions. In London the city icons, Hyde Park and Piccadilly, merge with red buses, multi-ethnic crowds, shivering cold and a search for a urinal. The entire account is dominated by a chaotic, disarranged stream of associations: sometimes the author attempts to tame the observed pieces of reality *b y* comparing them to Poland, sometimes pure wonder is allowed to take over (oranges in Valencia in March); at other times he embarks upon personal historiographie musings. The latter expose the writer's erudition, and it turns out that underneath this seemingly carefree attitude toward the 'European heritage' lie learning and reflection. But it is as if the learning is unveiled accidentally, somewhere between watching homeless dogs and making remarks on the fellow travelers' talent for the mercantile. Sailing around the Balkan Peninsula provokes reflection on the perishability of European powers: 'Bulgaria stretched from one sea to another. Then Yugoslavia came. [...] Szczecin used to belong to Sweden. Strange things... It is not possible to reconcile all the borders. '[123]

With Białoszewski it is difficult to talk about conscious demythologizing processes. Unlike Gombrowicz he does not present any

[122] Białoszewski, M., *Obmapywnie Europy*, quot. after Fiut, A., 1996, Białoszewski podróżnik, *Narodowy i ponadnarodowy charakter literatury*, ed. M. Cieśla-Korytowska, Kraków.
[123] Ibidem, p. 201.

conscious strategy in his face-off with Europe. But he definitely avoids showing off his erudition, loftiness and admiration that dominated the mythologizing discourse of his predecessors: Jastrun, Herbert, or even the critical Miłosz. The mixture of sacrum and profanum, and the distance separating Białoszewski from his predecessors, are best exemplified by the following record of sightseeing in Athens:

> I want to visit the Areopagus; at a crossroad I stop to make sure and ask some Greek woman who's knitting [...] I am climbing some slippery, very slippery steps. Was it the fathers of the city that slicked the way, the philosophers, those Platos and Socrateses? But if it was they then how on earth did they get up here? [...] I am very careful because it would be ridiculous to get killed at the Areopagus.[124]

As noticed by A. Fiut, Białoszewski is not interested in great European ideas, but rather in the people behind them, in their frail humanity, in their everyday life, 'the intimate bond which by means of art we may establish with those who have come before; not the Stones but the men who modeled them'.[125]

In his perception of Europe, Białoszewski is far from mytho-logizing, but neither is he related to the angry demystifiers, like Różewicz or Borowski, who when faced with disaster were prone to discard the value of the European heritage.[126] What links him to Gombrowicz is the perspective of the temperate man who is not easily impressed, but is also far from judging severely or con-

[124] Ibidem, pp. 206-7.
[125] Ibidem, p. 232.
[126] Ibidem, pp. 233—4: The memory of the historic catastrophes of the twentieth century by no means induces Białoszewski, as it does Różewicz, to dispose of the European cultural heritage on the rubbish up. He never sees it, as Borowski does, as two-faced morally, since it has been redeemed by the blood, sweat and tears of millions of nameless slaves. He is separated off from Herbert by the acceptance of the present state of civilization and by the absence of any attempt to contrast an idealized past with the present, which only deserves contempt. That is why he regards tradition with an indulgent wittiness, never with iron)' or sarcasm. A world of degraded myth, of the culture in which the sublime has been mixed with the mundane, he seems to be telling us, is what we have been fated to, and all our protests and nostalgic sighs are useless. '

demning anyone or anything. The perspective of the ordinary man enables Białoszewski to avoid the trap of objectifying discourses.

Conclusions

In the strategy applied by Polish intellectuals in their encounter with Europe, two strivings are distinguishable. On one hand, they seek to reconstruct an image of European unit)', manifested by the Western character of Polish culture in spite of historical injustice and negative stereotypes produced in the West. It is a task consisting of a mental mending of the divided Europe as a source of values and the horizon of Western identity. On the other hand, they had to struggle with their own inferiority complex regarding Europe; a complex developed a century before and severely reinforced by the civilization gap caused by the Iron Curtain. The struggle to retain some dignity in a world degraded by communism was contested on two fronts: the intellectuals fought against the deformations caused by the totalitarian system forced upon their country from the East, but also against their own feeling of a growing dissonance between the high aspirations of PoHsh culture and the abominable and degrading reality of real socialism. Shame, inferiority complexes and a sense of rejection and disappointment co-existed with a feeling of pride; a sense of spiritual belonging and an affirmative attitude toward Western values.

In an article on the meanings of Europe in the Polish national discourse, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa[127] argues that the basic problem for the Poles in their attitude toward Europe is reminiscent of the complex of unwanted child. Ambivalent attitudes, ranging from exalted, uncritical affirmation to disappointment, fear or resentment, are rooted in a historically reoccurring lack of reciprocity. At many moments throughout their history the Poles expected Europe to acknowledge, help or respect them, but they were usually met with

[127] Törnquist-Plewa, B., 2002, 'The Complex of the Unwanted Child. Meanings of Europe in Polish National Discourse', B. Stråth, M. af Malmborg, eds., *The Meaning of Europe: Variety and Contention within and among Nations,* Oxford, New York.

indifference, humiliation, disapproval, at times even hostility. The love for Europe remained an unrequited love, a difficult love, at times even a tragic love. The second half of the 20th century was a period when this ambivalence became particularly strong. That is why the reactions of the intellectuals to this schizophrenia-generating situation were so diverse and sometimes contradictory. In this chapter I have tried to portray this diversity.

My key thesis is the claim that besides Euro-enthusiastic mythologists, and discontented Euro-skeptics, there was in Polish culture of the end of the 20th century a group of writers to whom these options did not apply. While affirming European values, these writers did not simultaneously renounce a critical outlook on them and did not give in to the temptation of mythologizing the past. In such a creative way, Miłosz, Gombrowicz, Herbert and Białoszewski become part of the European debate and formulate their own image of Europe without renouncing constructive criticism; a criticism that after all, according to Kundera, is the essence of everything European.

Conclusions: The Polish intelligentsia and Modernity: the search for new paradigms.

The Polish intelligentsia has been confronted with a tough dilemma throughout the 20th century. Its members have had to find out the middle ground between their civilizatory mission: the task of modernization of the social, political and cultural life in the country, and their 'expected' role as the guardians of Polish values. In moments of peril they were expected to deliver the space of trust: to create symbolic spaces of hope, continuity, and firm moral values. The whole discourse of the Polish intelligentsia has thus been haunted by that ambivalence: on one hand, affirmation of Modernity as the emancipatory power leading to Change; on the other hand, anxiety toward the negative consequences or side-effects of Modernity, as, for instance, totalitarianisms, the coercion of abstract systems or traps of instrumental reason. That dilemmas preoccupied the European discourse on Modernity as well — in Poland, however, they were informed by the particularity of historical experience.

The Polish 'national sake', the lack of national sovereignty, doubtless acted as the primary obstruction to the reformative, civilizatory efforts. The paradigm of national identity shaped by 19th century Polish Romanticism was permeated by idealism and messianism, incompatible with everyday life and politics; close to ethnic xenophobia. Andrzej Mencwel, a Polish modern historian, describes that paradigm as follows:

> The archaic and stagnant social structure with the constant domination of Gentry; the repressive and absolutist regimes, the persecutions against national and the religious faith, very poor education among people: altogether contributed to the particular historical model. The national identity has been reduced to the 'tribal' level, cultural identity merged with the religious (Catholic), the Manor on the eastern border has become a symbol for the national Martyrs expecting the next resurgence. The historian of ideals called that form the 'Polak-katolik' mentality. His literary portrait can be found in the novels of H. Sienkiewicz [...] That socio-psychological pattern of personality was deficient in a very significant point, namely in the field of civilizatory values.[128]

The modern Polish approach that was gradually emerging at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries urged a reinvention of the national discourse[129]. The new mission for the Pohsh intelligentsia gradually took shape: to understand the consequences of Modernit)' for culture, society and everyday life. That new situation needed the invention of new languages capable of expressing the dilemmas of the modern world; capable of showing the pathos and force of the civilizatory process without, however, an uncritical admiration. The intellectuals had to find a middle way between culture and civilization, to be precise, between promoting and defending their own Polish tradition (concurrently with a creative transformation of it) and encouraging the Change; increasing the modernizing impulses. They never entirely abandoned the national Polish culture, with its religiosity, historicism, and traditionalism. They attempted to adjust its premises to the modern project: to construct the mental

[128] Mencwel, A., 1997, *Przedwiośnie czy Potop? Studium postaw polskich w XX wieku*, Warszawa, p. 16.
[129] 'AU that began to change at the end of the 19th century, and there Polish Modernity is being born. The economic, social, political, and cultural changes are the marks of civilizatory acceleration. Industry and commerce are growing in significance; the rapidly developing cities are 'the promised lands' of that acceleration. The emancipation movement grasps not only the bourgeoisie; it encloses as well workers and peasants, who establish their own political parties. In spite of political limitadons, education and culture are subjected to deeper and deeper democratization. Those changes are followed by the mental transformations, the new type of mentality is about to be born', ibidem, p. 18, my translation.

bridges between Poland and Western Europe, accommodating Modernit)^ into the Polish conditions, to the definite historical moment. In that light, the mainstream of the Polish intelligentsia operated as mediator between the (transformed) Polish national culture and the European civilizatory project. The Polish Positivists, Brzozowski, Żeromski and the modernists, Słonimski, Boy-Żeleński, and Gombrowicz in the inter-war period; Miłosz, Kołakowski, Herbert and (the late) Gombrowicz: they all attempted to create their own formula in which those two elements maintained the state of equilibrium. It was the stream of reformers with a sense of internal limitations who attempted to create a synthesis of civilization and culture, of liberal individualism and the 'sound' modern collectivism, or communitarianizm.

If in the first half of the century the reflection on Modernity was marked by the opposition (national) culture — (universal) civilization, the period after 1945 triggered flunking around the aporias and paradoxes of Modernit)'. Were the totalitarianisms, wars, and Holocaust modern products as well? What about mass culture, media and globalization? Observing and experiencing the disadvantages of Modernity, the Polish intellectuals attempted again to find a middle way: that time between the permissive society and axiologically structured world; between the perils of untamed technolog)' and human values; between the false 'promised lands' of modern utopias (communism) and respect for human dignity. That is why there were so few 'modern radicals' in Polish reflection on Modernity. Radical freedom, unlimited autonomy, deconstruction of hierarchies, dreams of far-reaching authenticity: all those ideas triggered suspicions and mistrust in Miłosz, Herbert or Kołakowski. The)' 'knew better' after the experiences of genocide, extermination, suffering, lost illusions about the 'new brave world', and moral betrayal by the Western world.

What do the)' accomplish in the field of the collective mentality of Polish intelligentsia and society, especially on the eve of Polish freedom and sovereignty in 1989? Have they succeeded in 'preparing' Polish elites for the huge task of transition? To what extent

were they able to generate ideas and concepts enabling Poles to modernize not only the economy and political structures, but their 'mental map' of the world?

Those 'teachers' of Modernity, the main characters in my essays, were as a rule writers. They tried to fulfill the paradigm of Polish intelligentsia by creating visions, discussing values, launching models. They had, however, relatively weak political and sociological knowledge and their contact with real daily problems was also fairly weak. Their task was primarily to express and witness the changes in the modern world, the modern self. They delivered mental maps, generated broad attitudes, but no pragmatic political solutions, no patterns of response. They succeeded however in a few areas, in forming the modern profile of the Polish intelligentsia on the eve of the second millennium.

First and foremost, they preserved Polish bonds to Europe. Polish society and culture kept its strong ties with Western culture throughout the 20th century as a result of cultural dialogue maintained by Polish intellectuals, even in the times of political dependence. The European identity was a remedy against the totalitarianisms, sovietization, but even against the temptations of xenophobia and isolationism. Georg Brandes, 'discovering' the Poles as Europeans a hundred years ago, would probably find respected partners to converse with among Polish intellectuals *anno* 1980 as well.[130] They launched and discussed the light and shadows of the European emancipatory project, with its focus on human freedom, human rights and dignity. They reflected on the limitations and paradoxes of that project. The tension between affirmation of radical freedom and the necessity of a stable cultural frame, between the culture of rights and the culture of moral obligations, were discussed and negotiated in the works of Brzozowski, Gombrowicz, and Koła-

[130] In his book from the '80s ***(Solidarity and solitude),*** A. Zagajewski 'invented' a fictive young Danish writer who had visited Poland during that period and established deep intellectual links with Polish dissident intellectuals, learning much from them. The reference to Brandes' visits in Poland at the end of 19th century is evident.

kowski. Michnik and Miłosz (together with Kołakowski) negotiated another tension: between the modern trend of secularization and the universal need for transcendence, religion or metaphysics. They also launched conciliator)' attitudes towards others: Jews, Germans, Russians, and doing so outlined the frame for the modern Polish national identity, free of xenophobia and provincialism. By analyzing the sources and consequences of totalitarianisms the)' made the Polish intelligentsia aware of its dangers and traps.

The Polish intelligentsia and the challenges of democracy

At the beginning of this new century, in the changing political and social world, the Polish intelligentsia is being confronted with challenges quite different from those of the communist era. Its traditional role — the defender of the victimized nation — has to be redefined and rethought. The debates of the past decade have proved the urgent need of some new directions in the paradigm for the Polish intelligentsia; some new 'moral sources' that go beyond the old inherited dichotomies, like idealism versus realism or Romanticism versus Positivism.

To my generation, Witold Gombrowicz and Czesław Miłosz were more than just two great names from the pantheon of modern Polish literature. They defined the horizon of moral stances. In finding our own identity, in forming the intellectual space of discussion, in articulating the resistance to enslavement and violence, we thought in terms of Gombrowicz or Miłosz. Was it possible to think in terms of them both without risking schizophrenia, without being trapped in contradictions? Are there schools of Gombrowicz and Miłosz in the mentality of the Polish intelligentsia in the late 20th century? Do these two names form the alternative paradigms for the future; do they have something to offer in view of the new challenges facing Poles on the threshold of the new century? These questions will demand an answer in my conclusion.

First, however, I would like to sketch a map of the problems concerning the role of intellectual elites in post-communist Poland. The

situation of the Polish intelligentsia has been the topic of many political and intellectual debates dealing with our modern-postmodern era. After 1989, there was a certain crisis in regard to this group's role in public life and society; the identity and dominating position of the intelligentsia was called into question. The new political situation, the true normalization of political life, on the one hand caused the absorption of many groups of the intelligentsia into professional politics. On the other hand, there occurred a gradual disappearance of the demand for the so-called 'intelligentsia values', inherited from 19th-century tradition, such as dedication to the national and public cause, defense of cultural goods under threat of enslavement (occupation, totalitarianism, or simply stupidity), and symbolic and spiritual leadership of the nation in times of threat. In the eyes of some debaters, the role of the intelligentsia ended irrevocably with the appearance of the Third Republic. Its functions should now be taken over by groups of experts, professional politicians, enlightened entrepreneurs, educators and journalists, in order to normalize intelligentsia's status and adapt it to the rest of Europe.

In a discussion at the beginning of the 2000s about the life or death of the Polish intelligentsia in a free Poland, the lineage and ethos of that social group were recalled. Regardless of the different predictions and diagnoses, which were often controversial and mutually exclusive, everyone agreed on its genesis and dominating values. The origins of the intelligentsia in the nobility; the circumstances of that group's emergence at the end of the 19th century as a result of a lack of possibilities to realize its leading role in politics and society; its elite character; its attachment to spiritual and literary values, and infection by Romanticism — all this was more or less indisputable. At the same time, catalogs of the values of the intelligentsia ethos were formulated:

> The intelligentsia exists mainly through its ideas, through the values that meet with its collective approval and, as it were, concentrate it around them [...] various values that were taken from different systems and that were rarely unambiguously and precisely defined [...]. Among these, we find a universal, humanistic morality, the great freedom myth of the Enlightenment, convictions relating to this or

that societal utopia of this or that patriotic, territorial, social tradition or tradition of ideas, signs of a cult of science, education and progress, sublimely abstract philosophical principles and the simplest rules of interpersonal relationships, which remind us in everyday language not to be mean, selfish or primitively crude.[131]

Note the manifold character of this package of values — Enlightenment and Romanticism, religiosity and science, tradition and progress coexist in this paradigm: ideas stemming from contradictory sources behave here like the lion and the lamb of the Apocalypse... total consensus, no conflict, pure conciliation.

Differing positions existed on another level. Can the paradigm of the Polish intelligentsia (the ethics of service and dedication), which proved itself in times of slavery and threat, function and be useful to the nation in times of freedom and democracy? Does its inherent dislike of (even contempt for) bourgeois and pragmatic values, of the homo economicus and the rule of law, not sentence it to the museum shelf?

The answers were diverse. However, the dominating standpoint was introduced in the very first, somewhat provocative article by Bohdan Cywiński under the significant title: 'Premature obituaries of the intelligentsia'. It is too early yet, said Cywiński and others (Najder, Bratkowski), to declare the death of the intelligentsia. Perhaps its function should be somewhat modified, adapted to the new situation, but its central identity should not and need not be undermined. For the threats are still there. This time it is not totalitarian ideolog)' or political slavery, but the disintegration from within of the *Gemeinschaft,* the replacement of civic society by consumers and businessmen, and the dissolution of the value of high culture and its hierarchy in the chatter of the media, which are the new battlefields and take the role of the enemy.

[131] Cywiński, B., Premature obituaries of the intelligentsia, *Rzeczpospolita, 22.* April 2000. (The debate took place in *Rzeczpospolita,* with its start in April, 2000.)

The suggestions for reforming the role of the intelligentsia were not very far removed from the paradigmatic traditional pattern. First and foremost, the intelligentsia is, in its new situation, to become the guardian of collective values, and suggest collective, 'communitarian' solutions rather than individual ones. The atomization of interpersonal relations, the privatization of ideas and values and the focus on individual freedom and entrepreneurship will not automatically produce new goals or create new horizons of meaning. To humanize market reform, to regain power over national and cultural symbols, to preserve the role of an authority in the processes of social education — these are the new, collective challenges for the intellectual elites that are appearing in the new situation in the new Poland. The middle class is not equipped for these tasks; in the process of building its own and the nation's economic potential, infected with the myth of the market, it is focused on itself, the egoism of its values and goals understandable, though not acceptable.

If the discussion of the intelligentsia in the year 2000 more or less underscored that group's unity and homogeneity, then the debate provoked a year later by J. Gross' book[132] on the Polish responsibility for the murder of the Jewish community in the town of Jedwabne clearly showed its divisions and polarizations. Gross' uncovering of the inconvenient, forgotten and repressed truth about how the Poles collaborated in exterminating the Jewish population during the Second World War provoked a discussion about the entire Polish national mythology, especially the variant based on martyrdom and sacrifice.

Two extremes emerged. Gross and others fiercely attacked the Polish myth of innocence and its accompanying victimization complex. The Poles' dedication and sacrifice in fights for freedom, their own and others', should not be used to disguise inconvenient, shameful or ominous facts. The truth of Polish anti-Semitism is

[132] Gross, J., 2000, *Sąsiedzi,* Sejny.

pushed into oblivion by the selectivity of a collective memory that will not allow behavior and attitudes that do not fit into the paradigm of sacrifice, suffering and moral purity. The uncovering of the truth of Polish collaboration in the crime in Jedwabne led to remembering other examples of Polish anti-Semitism (the *szmalcownicy* during the war[133]; the pogroms in Kielce and Kraków just after the war; the anti-Semitic sentiments in official, Catholic and university circles in the years 1936—39; the purges of Jews in the party following March 1968). Being a victim of history is no justification: the defensive mythologies fostered by Poles in times of occupation and enslavement cannot constantly serve as a justification or alibi, either for individual dispktys of amorality, or for collective madness, anachronisms and degeneration. The current situation — the existence of a free, independent Poland — should incline one to critical and de-mystifying thought. The Polish national mythology is still waiting for a profound and critical re-evaluation.

Gross' opponents believed that making an affair of the Jedwabne incident was harmful to the self-image of the Polish nation and could lead to the disintegration or at least weakening of the Polish national identity, which was built on the ideas of dedication, honor, sacrifice, fidelity. They saw in it yet another conspiracy by the Jewish mafia against the Polish nation (in the more extreme cases), or, at least, a needless reawakening of old conflicts. Polish culture is under permanent threat; the time has not come yet for dealing with a painful past.

The latest debates and discussions about the role and place of the intelligentsia, about the cultural heritage and relationship to it, allow us to draw somewhat paradoxical conclusions. Today's post-communist Polish self-image comprises two opposed tendencies and is expressed through two positions that are hard to reconcile. The first of these could perhaps be called cultural revisionism, which has its roots in a self-critical current in the history of the

[133] The Polish term used for people that earned their living by blackmailing the hiding Jews.

Polish intelligentsia. This position is expressed in the following way: We are still slaves of stereotypes of ourselves — others' as well as our own. We have not succeeded in breaking through the convenient historical falsifications and lies: about our innate innocence and virtue, about the continuity of our Polish history, about the eternal Polishness of Silesia, Lithuania and Belarus, about the superiority of our own culture. The myths and stereotypes keep coming back to life and lead us out onto the peripheries of European history and Modernity. There is still much to be done — the Polish intelligentsia should concentrate with criticism and care on its own tradition, to re-evaluate it and filter it through the demands of Modernity.

The second, conservative and traditional position is expressed using the rhetoric of threat and defense: We are threatened by the progressing disintegration of values, loss of faith in the great narratives — religious, societal, humanist, moral, political; we have lost faith in utopias and in any sort of higher and all-encompassing meaning. We are living in a shallow world of gadgets and media (*simulacra),* stripped of higher values. During the first decade of freedom and half a century of communism, Poland has lost her national, moral and religious identity and is becoming just another European country, faceless and characterless. If these processes of disintegration are not checked, our contribution to Europe will amount to little more than forty million consumers.

Let us recall the question posed in the beginning of that chapter. Is it possible to point out, in this new process of polarization, some centers of thought that can epitomize those two attitudes — the cultural-revisionist one and the traditional-conciliatory? It seems that the figures of Witold Gombrowicz and Czesław Miłosz can epitomize, in this scope of debate, two opposite poles of discourse, two complementary moral sources, in the terms of Charles Taylor.[134]

[134] Taylor, C, 1989, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge.

Witold Gombrowicz — the master of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

When, in the sixties, the works of Witold Gombrowicz were about to reach a broader reading audience in Poland — mainly due to smuggling from the West and to re-editions of *Ferdydurke,* it was apparent that the Polish audience was dealing with a writer of great dignity. Gombrowicz spoke in a fresh, young and new voice that corresponded with the utter need of renewal, of rebirth, of the Polish mentality. It was in accordance with the will for rebellion that dwelled in the generation of young Poles born after the war. That will for revolt was not directed entirely against communism and its dictatorship. The world of the Party and its newspeak was a distant and abstract one. The targets of that rebellion were rather the traditional Polish family with its rigid obligations; the anachronistic education system; and the absurdities of the official hybrid culture that consisted of affected patriotism, elements of artificial folklore, and admiration for the socialist progress. Long before Foucault the PoHsh intellectuals discovered, together with Gombrowicz, the structures of coercion inherent in the family, in the institutions, in the ideologies and in culture. It was obviously Gombrowicz, not Karl Marx, who helped young Polish intellectuals run away from the 'house of serfdom' of forms. Among those coercive forms were the everyday absurdities of communism that permeated all spheres of life. They were killing all manifestations of freedom, individuality and self-independence. The Poles have, however, learned from Gombrowicz that this form of oppression is not the only one; that coercion can have many faces.

Gombrowicz demystifies the culture as such, morality, and the world of ideas. Every single admiration and dedication is forced by the pressure coming from outside, from the community: from your neighbors or your Nation, from teachers and literary critics — the Others are always there.

The radical suspicion of all forms of coercion is expressed in Gombrowicz on behalf of the strong independent self and its ultimate freedom. The moral sources are inherent in my-self, in my

need of free expression, in my desire for alterity, for being different. These values can be found neither in the external world, itself being an epistemic construction of my mind, nor in religion, nor in God or in ideologies. Tensions, pregnant with consequences, arise between my-self and the other human beings; the moral values emerge in conflicts, in struggle. Such is the meaning of the metaphor of the inter-human church, acting as an affirmative stance, that appears in Gombrowicz's drama *The Wedding,* or in his *Diary.* The Others do not appear here in the horizon of the Christian love, agape, nor in the horizon of Rousseau-inspired sympathy or compassion. In spite of some references to Buber Gombrowicz's anthropology, is by no means grounded in the idea of dialog, or in epiphany of encounter (as for instance in Lévinas). It is rather a constant psychomachia, a permanent struggle between fighting selves.

I have already referred to Gombrowicz's critical attitude toward all mythologies, especially those with a nationalist provenance. For all the iconoclasts, demystifiers and deconstructors who deal with Polish culture, Gombrowicz's attitude can act as the ultimate departure-point. His hermeneutics of suspicion, his criticism toward Polish national myths, especially those with Romantic roots, can act as the proper ground, or moral source, for those intellectuals who try to fight the traditional, the mentality of Pole — the Catholic *(Polak-katolik)* with his blind attachment to all things Polish, with his mythologies of victimization.

In his novel *Transatlantyk,* Gombrowicz introduces the neologism *synczyzna* (fillia, sonland). That term renders Gombrowicz's radical intellectual heritage: it glorifies the community of young sons-rebels rising against the Patria of the fathers, against the coercive tradition. The cultural patricide suggested by Gombrowicz can be understood in a 'cruel' way — as a radical break with the national heritage (to escape, run away, retreat: the favorite motifs of Gombrowicz's novels). One can, however, grasp the cultural patricide in a softer manner — as an unrestrained relation to all forms, even those connected to patriotism. Let us play with all forms, even with the

national sacredness, argues Gombrowicz in a somewhat postmodern way. Polishness should not be comprehended as a burden; rather, it should act as a creative opportunity, as a pivotal power for individual maturation.

The hermeneutics of confidence and trust — Czesław Miłosz

At first sight, Czesław Miłosz's approach appears quite antithetical to that of Gombrowicz. If, for Gombrowicz, too much meaning exists in the world, (less meaning — more my-self), Miłosz depicts a world that keeps losing its meaning and order (another name for a disenchanted world) and attempts to struggle with that loss. His weapon is the poetry of confidence in truth, the poetry of affirmation.

Miłosz's essays and poems consistently unmask the perils of Modernity, especially the loss of meaning as its most dangerous outcome. In the broadest perspective he is deeply merged in the Romantic stream of ideas with its revolt against the fragmentation of the human experience. In his intellectual summa, *The Land of Ulro (Ziemia Ulro)* from 1977, Miłosz depicts the atmosphere of waste land making the modern spiritual landscape of Modernity, and he traces the sources of this fatal condition, recalls those cassandric thinkers who have warned humanity about the traps it is about to approach. In an interview-book by Ewa Czarnecka bearing the significant title *The Traveler of the World,* Miłosz declares in few words his attitude expressed in *The Tand of Ulro:*

> Here one can find my opposition against the world of Western civilization, against the consequences of the scientific Weltanschauung. We live in the late period of the scientific revolution and its outcome. It can take a form of permissive society; find its expression through stressing rights to the individual happiness against the society. [...] *The Land of Ulro* tells the story about those few who tried to find a way out of that vicious circle. They dreamed about a completely new direction. Maybe we entered the wrong train of history? [...] Maybe some other options existed? People like Sweden-

borg, Mickiewicz, Oskar Miłosz, Goethe [...] had looked for another configuration, another possibility.[135]

The last 200 years of European history is made, according to Miłosz, of a continuous disintegration of values, of civilization. While the 19th century created the myth of the rational, the humanitarian and constant progress, the 20th century, with its atrocities, made clear that the monumental myth of progress appears to be empty. Disintegration of values has a number of reasons, and these reasons dwell inside the project of Enlightenment, in the very heart of the process of modernization. In the dense and digressive text of *U/ro,* one can find all the strands of a Western critical attitude towards Modernity, tracks of thought comparable to Max Weber, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman. These critical strands always appear in a very personal context and language; they are by no means abstract.

Milosz's whole literary production can be read as an attempt to restore that lost integration, to restore the hierarchy of values, the deep sources of meaning. His positive programme can be summed up as follows:

1. *The necessity for deeper meaning (for Great narratives, the broad bonbons of meaning) is an indispensable human need.* The hermeneutics of suspicions should hold back in the face of the notions of Truth, Confidence, Hope, and Love, and respect their holiness and inevitability. The mythologization of the world, performed in different rehgions, renewed in and by poetry, is also a fundamental human need. It helps us bear all the discomforts of human life — with hope and dignity.
2. *Confidence in the stability and objectivity of the World.* All modern theories that proclaim relativism concerning our world-image and undermine our confidence in the objective reality act against us. Milosz's poetry proclaims an affirmative attitude to-

[135] Czarnecka, E., 1983, *Podróżny Mata: miniony z Czesławem Miłoszem, komentarze,* New York,p. 198.

ward reality, an acceptance of the world as it is. To behold and depict the beauty of the world, to restore the hymnal approach to it — that is Miłosz's poetic credo.

3. *The necessity of order and hierarchy*. There do exist some universal value principles, which can discern good from evil, high from low, in culture and ethics. All attempts to deconstruct hierarchies have their own latent hierarchies, their own 'constitutive goods'. Total anarchy is not only dangerous — it is unattainable.
4. *Human nature is not a chimera-construction, it really exists.* For Miłosz, in spite of the cruel experiences of the 20th century that unmasked the weakness and mutability of human nature, there is an unchangeable core in human beings, a human substance, *esse.*
5. *The stable and objective reality must have its external and omniscent narrator* (in other words, there is some ordering instance in the world). The world is endowed with deep meaning, has another level, or in Miłosz's words, an undergrowth, a lining. Some men, especially poets, are endowed with the gift of being able to see that 'other side'. They are capable of attaining, of revealing the enigma of faith. Miłosz's metaphysics is challenging and difficult, and sometimes conflicted with traditional Polish religiosity. *The theological tractatu*[136], a short essay in verse, published by Miłosz in his late years, is a record of tensions and doubts that dwell in the metaphysical attitude on the eve of the 21st century, but Miłosz evidently takes sides here - in favor of reflexive religiosity and faith.

In a review of 20th century philosophical attitudes towards moral 'constitutive goods', Charles Taylor discerns an affirmative current.[137] After all the disillusions about progress, Christianity, the innocence of nature, there are still some thinkers who try to find moral sources outside the punctual, subjective self, in the external,

[136] Miłosz, C, 2002, Traktat teologiczny, *Druga przestrzeń,* Kraków, p. 63.
[137] Taylor, C, op. cit., chapter on epiphany.

transcendent sphere. That modernist epiphany, represented and epitomized by such writers as Tomas Mann, Franz Kafka, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, may perfectly well act as a horizon for Milosz's affirmative approach. It expresses the attitude of a modernist who fights against the discourse of instrumental reason, in search of sources which can restore depth, richness and meaning to life.

As I have already demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, there is in contemporary Poland a need for two kinds of intelligentsia-discourse: for a hermeneutics of suspicions and for the discourse of affirmation. These two attitudes are in conflict, they unmask a deep polarization and deconstruct the intelligentsia's own myth of unity. One is able to observe some regularity in the Polish intellectual history. In times of peril, ideological differences disappeared, softened, and the intelligentsia paradigm remained a broad ideological construction. Without risk of conflict, it would embrace Christian values, the idea of progress and social justice, the soft forms of nationalism, critical thought. J. Jedlicki has observed that the first split of this unity could be traced to the end of the 19th century, when the modern ideologies — socialism, nationalism, Piłsudskiites' — emerged from the labyrinth of heterogeneous values, and came into conflict with each other.

In other times such as, for example, the gaining of independence (1920s), during the Second World War, in the Solidarity era, ideological tensions lost their significance, and the conciliatory approach was dominant. The differences were effaced in the name of the unity of the nation. After 1989 there began a new process of fraction, starting with the famous 'war on the top', promoted by Wałęsa in the early '90s. In recent years, especially during the Jedwabne debate, this trend has grown even stronger.

It is time now to recall the question I posed in the beginning of the chapter. Do the figures of Miłosz and Gombrowicz fit the roles of 'the new prophets' for the Polish intelligentsia? Are they able to act as 'moral sources', to deliver coherent visions of the constitutive goods that match the challenges of 21st century?

It seems that there is good reason to give positive answers to these questions. Both Miłosz and Gombrowicz are deeply rooted in the Polish tradition, but, on the other hand, the experience of emigration taught them to keep a distance to their own Polish identity, and made them receptive to the challenges of Modernity. Both are aware of the broken horizons of Modernity; both see the Polish problems in the context of the rapid changes taking place in the modern world. This wide perspective demands an impartial, non-political attitude.

Both may play the role of focal points for the reception of Western modern thought, of the windows to Europe and the World. With Gombrowicz as a guide it is easier to understand the whole stream of the hermeneutics of suspicions. It is easier to grasp the consequences of the 'constructivist' attitude in cultural studies, especially in the field of the modern approach to nationalism. The discourses of feminism, of deconstruction and of postmodernism suddenly become more familiar after reading Gombrowicz's *Diary*.

With Miłosz in hand, the modern hermeneutists (Ricoeur, Gadamer) and the ideas of communitarians (Taylor, Mclntyre) sound more familiar; the search for some new alternative sources of sacrum in modern culture (epitomized by Jung, Eliade and Franki) seems justified and right. And that is not the end of the list. With the help of, or through Gombrowicz one can read the whole tradition of Polish critical 'iconoclasts' — from Maurycy Mochnacki, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Stanisław Brzozowski, to Leszek Kołakowski and Sławomir Mrożek. Miłosz, on the other hand, may act as the spiritual leader for all those who intend to renew the Polish metaphysical tradition, in its non-dogmatic, open form. Miłosz opens the way to the heritage of Juliusz Słowacki and Adam Mickiewicz, to Zdziechowski and Józef Tischner...
I would like to end my book with a provocative statement. Bringing Gombrowicz's deconstructivist thinking to its radical conclusions may generate a question: what if the core of Polish culture is infected and corrupted to the bone? Is it possible to reorient a whole culture, or abandon its crucial symbolic universe, in the name

of Modernity and rationality, effectiveness and tolerance? What about the effects of such an operation on Polish national identity and cultural reproduction? Would it be capable of surviving?

With Miłosz we can pose another radical question: what if the whole modern world is infected and corrupted to the bottom? Is the return to the symbolic values of the past the only solution? What about the perils of backwardness and provincialism, of populist manipulations with ancient symbols, of fundamentalism?

Is there any middlecourse?