


MODERNIST TRENDS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLISH FICTION

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The cover picture is *Portrait of Nina Stachurska* by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1929, pastel, in the National Museum in Poznań

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INTRODUCTION

MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM AND POLISH FICTION

In the English-speaking world Polish fiction has never been granted the same recognition as the Russian novel. The Nobel Prize for Henryk Sienkiewicz in 1905 was followed by many translations and by films based on his most acclaimed work, *Quo vadis*, but still this, the best known Polish author, is unable, because of the nature of his popular narratives, to achieve the rank of a true classic. Władysław Reymont, another Nobel Prize winner, is usually known only to Slav scholars. The postwar period has brought some change because of the growing interest in non-realistic writing, well represented in Poland by Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz. The very fact that a volume of short stories by Schulz was introduced by John Updike (1979) seems remarkable, but not everyone is equally sympathetic to this writer (see for example Josipovici, 1983, 102-5). Somewhat underestimated in his native Poland, Stanisław Lem has gained an international reputation not only by virtue of his highly ambitious science fiction, but also his metafictional bias (e.g. Nash, 1987). Over the last fifty years the predominant trend in the reception of Polish fiction has, however, usually been marred by politics. Politics determined the choice of translations and above all those translated works' interpretations in reviews. As a result, many novels have their complex content reduced to Polish-German or Polish-Russian antagonisms, minority problems (particularly Jewish) or an anti-Communist stand. Apart from a few academic books, such as Daniel Gerould's on S.I. Witkiewicz (1981) or Russell E. Brown's on Schulz (1991), little attention has been paid to the position of Polish fiction within the history of the twentieth-century novel, or to its contribution to the modern plurality of vision. Habitually regarded as belonging to a somewhat provincial culture, it has often been considered important only insofar as certain political points can be made.

I

The purpose of this book is not to promote the Polish novel to a status equal to those literatures that govern the development of modern fiction. There is little doubt that, notwithstanding all their achievement, Polish writers hardly match Joyce, Proust, Faulkner or García Márquez in originality. Yet the history of the modern novel is incomplete when the

output of less well-known literatures is totally ignored. Besides, Modernism and Postmodernism are not monolithic, as they are understood in various ways in different national literatures. While many books on the subject are inclined to portray a unified picture of modern fiction (e.g. Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976; Lodge, 1979;¹ Fokkema and Ibsch, 1987) the author of this study emphasizes discords, which are often irreconcilable. In fact, the diversity of trends originating in various cultures undoubtedly helps one to understand the modern novel and the multiplicity of its inspirations and goals, which are unified only in their broadest appeal.

It is necessary to find an unprejudiced perspective to adequately describe dominant trends and attitudes. This can be better achieved by an observant study of pertinent materials, rather than by the arbitrary imposition of prevalent ideas of modernity or postmodernity, which are usually marred by fashionable trends in philosophy and literature. Thus the influence of Barthes on the understanding of twentieth-century trends and the consequent postmodern perception of Modernism has been reflected primarily in contemporary prejudice against *any form* of realism, regarded as an approach founded on 'bad faith' and an instrument of much hated bourgeois ideology, and also in an attempt to overestimate the role of metalingual function in narratives before 1950 (e.g. Fokkema and Ibsch, 1987). As a result, not only the behaviourist, newsreel style of Hemingway and Dos Passos, but also the sophisticated narratives of Henry James and Joseph Conrad find themselves beyond the doctrinal confine of modernity as it is thus understood. Therefore Michael H. Levenson's *Genealogy of Modernism*, concerned with English literary doctrines between 1908 and 1922, provides invaluable inspiration. As the author points out, Modernism is a term 'at once vague and unavoidable', mostly based on a sharp, dualistic, and indeed Manichaeian contrast with what is understood as nineteenth-century culture (1986, vii-ix). None the less, its own development is nothing but a 'history of oppositions, disproportions and asymmetries, a history of distinctions drawn then dramatized, a doctrinal struggle waged often between mutually excluding extremes' (ibid., 186). There is friction between Romantic notions of freedom and individualism on the one side, and Classical notions of order and restraint on the other, between subjectivism and objectivism, creativity and mimesis, realism and non-realism or the idea of pure form (ibid., passim). Thus we have to assume that any search for the meaning of modernity must remain within broad formulas which allow for pluralism. Since the nineteenth-century novel had not been uniform and had several, nationally-based, formal variations, twentieth-century writers were frequently opposing different local traditions, and sometimes looked for inspiration in what was

¹ In his more recent book (1990), Lodge's inclination to understand all twentieth-century fiction from one contemporary perspective never exceeds reasonable limits.

considered old-fashioned elsewhere. Thus the loose and digressive structure of the Victorian novel, denigrated at home, was found interesting by some French critics, disenchanted with the well-disciplined structure of their own fiction (see Raimond, 1966), while in England Percy Lubbock (1957 [1921]) preferred Flaubert, Tolstoy and Balzac to Thackeray or George Eliot. Making allowances for 'borrowed' ideas and forms appears to be helpful in understanding the contradictory forces that have shaped Modernism and Postmodernism.

We may start from the assumption that during the late nineteenth century the supremacy of the English and the French novel was eventually undermined in the West by the discovery of the great Russian writers, particularly after the publication of Eugène M. de Vogüé's *Le roman russe* (Paris, 1886). The contribution of Scandinavian novelists and playwrights at the turn of the century also created grounds for a reassessment of what had hitherto been regarded as good narrative. In the English-speaking world, however, the model was first found in France in the writings of Gustave Flaubert and in the Impressionist attention to visual immediacy, coupled in the works of James and Conrad with intellectual inwardness. Henry James's notion of the 'central intelligence' and his point-of-view technique were later elaborated and turned into mandatory principles by Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921). His more prescriptive than descriptive account of *Madame Bovary* and the novels of Henry James paved the way for the ascendancy of such differentiation as 'scenic and panoramic presentation' (later 'telling and showing') (Lubbock, 1957 [1921], 67, 110–13). Beach's *The Twentieth-Century Novel* was published in 1932 and as a result might be said to summarize the achievements of high Modernism. His approach had been undoubtedly affected by recent developments and therefore his notion of the modern novel differed from Lubbock's very formal ideal of 'dramatic story'. Beach's introductory chapter 'Exit Author' sustains the obtaining Anglo-American principle that 'this is a great outstanding feature of technique since the time of Henry James that the story shall tell itself, being conducted through the impressions of the characters' (1960 [1932], 16). In the broadest sense, modern tendencies, according to Beach, undermine uniformity, show 'an eccentric tendency to fly off in many different directions', to disrupt continuity and to render 'ordinary experience, with its freakish, accidental interruptions, its overleaping of time and circumstances'. Hence the reader is left with the task of 'filling up the gaps' and 'getting the impression of an entire life from a mere hinting indication of the high moments' (335). In this respect even the author of *The Ambassadors* appears too classical and well-rounded: 'The method of James is to lay regular siege to life, the method of Conrad is to lie in ambush for it' (364).² In a more recent study by George Levine, this approach to reality is linked with the crisis of language as a means of

² Beach compares Henry James with James Joyce in a similar way (1960, 410–11).

representation and Conrad's scepticism about labelling things: 'meaning can then emerge from the fact as the reader experiences it, free from the bullying of labels' (Levine, 1981, 276). The point-of-view technique thus becomes consistent with the empiricist view that 'since we know not external reality but only our own sensations of it we must shift our focus from the physical to the psychological' (ibid., 318).³ A symptomatic oscillation between the idea of pure 'dramatic presentation' and a new approach to reality long characterized Anglo-American understanding of the modern novel. It was eventually sorted out by Franz Stanzel in his distinction between the authorial novel (*Der auktoriale Roman*) and the figural or personal novel (*Der personale Roman*) (1964, 18–25, 39–52) which took into account the various aspects of the novel form.⁴

The French understanding of modern fiction paved the way for postmodern developments. Michel Raimond in his fundamental discussion of the French novel from the waning of Naturalism to the 1920s, *La Crise du roman* (1966), regards the crisis of Naturalist representation as the starting point for new trends. Dostoevsky, or even Robert Louis Stevenson, were admired in the late nineteenth century for their 'realisme irréal', that is, for blending fantasy and dreams with ordinary events. The replacement of social explorations by mental quest in Joris-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) was another symptom of the retreat from fiction preoccupied with milieu and manners (Raimond, 1966, 35–40). Symbolist writers disliked the Realist novel because of its alleged 'desperate determinism' and its concentration on external rather than internal life, which was regarded as a betrayal of 'higher truth' and as a concession to vulgar and tasteless commerciality (Uitti, 1961, 19–20). The representation of inner life eventually led to deformations of the external world, which, in Rémy de Gourmont's words, had lain at the foundation of the whole of art and science: 'tout art est déformateur et toute science est déformatrice' (after Uitti, 1962, 31, 44).⁵ Little actually changed when, fifty years later, after Surrealism and Cubism, Maurice Blanchot understood literature 'as an autonomous human production that is divorced from reality, and not as a commentary on that reality' (Brée, 1983, 157).

René-Marill Albérès's *Bilan littéraire du XX-ième siècle* (1956) and the much more comprehensive *Histoire du roman moderne* (1962) well

³ Sternberg's conviction, that 'it is not, then, the omniscience of James's or Joyce's narrators that is "selective", as Norman Friedman suggests in his essay, but their communicativeness' (1993 [1978], 282–3), if applied to Modernist fiction as a whole, obviously simplifies a much more complex question.

⁴ In his later discussion of the problem in *Theorie des Erzählens* (1979, 2nd, revised edition, 1982) Stanzel was much more cautious. His diagram is circular and embraces only narrative situations. (cf. Stanzel, 1986). An important attempt at treating literary techniques as discovery was undertaken by Mark Schorer: 'Technique alone objectifies the materials of art; hence technique alone evaluates those materials' (1967, 71; reprinted from the *Hudson Review*, 1948).

⁵ The quotation is from the *Esthétique de la langue française* (1899).

represent what shaped the French approach to Modernism in the first half of the twentieth century. For him, the anti-Realist rebellion of the Symbolists paved the way for developments undermining the inherited image of the novel, particularly the tradition of Balzac and Flaubert. New narratives gradually rejected logical motivation, boring descriptions of environment and social or psychological studies (Albérès, 1962, 37–56, 137–42). Albérès singled out two basic tendencies in twentieth-century fiction: artistic experiments with form (Proust, Joyce, V. Woolf) and a new vision of the individual predicament, still broadly within the framework of the Realist novel (Malraux, Saint-Exupéry, Musil) (1962, 281–2). A third penchant was, however, particularly strong in French literature, a penchant to discredit the novel as a genre, to announce its crisis and consequently to redefine its boundaries through the inclusion of essayistic or poetic discourse (see Raimond, 1966, parts 2 & 3). The ideal of the *roman-poème*, rooted in Symbolism, and its drive towards universal meanings, has spawned a trend aiming at mythological, symbolic and parabolic structures. Even the ostensibly Realist novel of the *condition humaine* was concerned with ideas rather than everyday details, typical of ‘formal realism’, always attached to the *hic et nunc*.⁶ The lyrical novels of Max Jacob and Jean Giraudoux were described by Germaine Brée as ‘games with language and the imagination’, while the experimental prose of the recently rediscovered Raymond Roussel exploited wordplay as a ‘self-generating system’ for producing texts that were meaningless outside this process (Brée, 1983, 182–3; Roudiez, 1991, 15–27). Ian Noble traces in Céline’s fiction ‘playful experimentation with the associations of sound and sense’ and comes to the conclusion that its dynamism results from ‘the narrator’s desire to tell stories and his struggle with the material of language’ (1987, 195, 203).

The modern approach to fiction in France unquestionably upholds the conviction that the novel’s form is ‘lawless’, because of its variety and disparate traditions (Brée, 1983, 181). This attitude amounts to a complete rejection of the French nineteenth-century ideal of dramatic structure and teleological movement, frequently imitated and admired abroad. Percy Lubbock emphasized admiringly the sense of order and authorial control in *Madame Bovary* (Lubbock, 1957 [1921], 60–92), but André Gide looked for opposite values in the works of Dostoevsky. The French, as he maintained, were ready ‘to sacrifice truth for continuity and purity of line’, while the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* had been fascinated by inconsistencies and contradictions and asked rather than answered questions (1923, 135–40, 42). Jean-Paul Sartre in his well-known essay, *M. François Mauriac et la liberté*, followed Gide’s admiration for the illogical structure of Dostoevsky’s characters and maintained that only such an approach offered a real sense of existential freedom. He condemned the narrator’s omniscience and any attempt at

⁶ The idea of formal realism was introduced and expanded by Ian Watt (1957).

arbitrary classification, being convinced that the novelist is not God and the story should be told from different points of view (Sartre, 1947). The proclamation of *L'Âge du roman américain*⁷ and the corresponding 'restriction of field of vision' led to impressive works, like Camus's *L'Étranger*, but the traditional French distrust of the novel had remained in force. The idea of 'authentic realism', based on the common experience of individual perception ('un observateur situé'), was counterbalanced by the rejection of any genuinely novel-like representation, in favour of combined generic forms, where the novel converged with poetry, drama and essay (see Picon, 1958, 1353–9). While for the leading Anglo-American critics Modernism in fiction was tantamount to 'exit author', the French actually questioned story-telling and thus the very nature of the novel. This hostility to the novel inspired many Postmodernists.

Thomas Mann, usually regarded as a leading proponent of Modernism, together with Proust, Joyce and Kafka, in reality had rather little in common with the other three. His lecture on *The Art of the Novel*, delivered at Princeton in 1939, neither upheld the French prejudice against the genre, nor emphasized a need for the fundamental reform of its traditional technique, as Anglo-American criticism was declaring. On the contrary, Mann, like many of his nineteenth-century predecessors, defended the novel as such against those who believed it inferior to poetry and drama. When it came to modern times, Marcel Proust was merely placed at the end of a line embracing 'the great social novels' of Dickens, Thackeray, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Balzac and Zola. Only a conviction that 'objectivity is irony and the spirit of epic art is the spirit of irony' (Mann, 1960 [1939], 88) indicates a genuine disparity between his 'ironic' narrative, well demonstrated in *Joseph and His Brothers*, and that of the majority of the old masters. This Nietzschean concept of the *Januskopf der Kunst* has prompted a critical assumption that Mann's 'novels and stories are not designed to appeal directly to our rational powers and to our instinctive need to pass moral judgement, but rather to our intelligence and our refined sense of the human paradox' (Kuna, 1976, 451).⁸

In Eastern Europe, Russian fiction, linked with the Symbolist movement, carried on its own national tradition of the grotesque (Gogol) and deep psychology, which sometimes made the line dividing the real from the imaginary indiscernible (e.g. Dostoevsky's *The Double*, some short stories by Leonid Andreyev). Andrei Bely's complex novel *St Petersburg* (1913) demonstrates the artifice of any literary creation, lays bare the act of narration and treats fiction as fact. The world of this novel includes literary pastiche, going back to Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, reified metaphors, dreams and forebodings (see Fanger, 1976,

⁷ The title of the book by Claude-Edmonde Magny (1948).

⁸ The chapter on Mann in Fokkema's and Ibsch's *Modernist Conjectures* (1987, 290–317) may serve as a typical example of postmodern perspective.

469–75). Non-Realist art of this sort was continued by Mikhail Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita*, written 1928–40) and later by Vassily Aksyonov (*The Burn*, written 1969–75). Many Polish experiments in fiction are closely related to this Russian avant-garde, and manifest a similar understanding of the ‘Modernist’ technique of narration.

The profile of Modernist trends in fiction, as disclosed in the works of various writers, critics and theorists, supports my initial assumption that there is no ubiquitous, immutable tendency, unless it is understood in very general terms. Consequently, any attempt at formulating uniform rules for modern fiction or all-embracing definitions of Modernism, inevitably ends up in a sectarian restrictiveness or vague generalities. It is hard to reconcile all the following statements:

The gradual decline in the use of direct comment, till at last heaved overboard with a splash by the twentieth century, is a fascinating study which should be attempted by a contemporary critic... (Phyllis Bently [1947], after Friedman, 1967, 116–17).⁹

When an author surrenders in fiction, he does so in order to conquer; he gives up certain privileges and imposes certain limits in order the more effectively to render his story-illusion, which constitutes artistic truth in fiction. (Friedman, 1967 [1955], 137).

The intellectual awareness of epistemological problems leads the Modernists towards imaginative experiments which blur the distinction between poetry and narrative prose[...], and between the novel and the essay, particularly when the process of writing is being discussed [...]. In its own way, the metalingual comment may contribute to the syntagmatic coherence. Apart from epistemological doubt, metalingual criticism may serve as a criterion to separate Modernist from non-Modernist texts... (Fokkema and Ibsch, 1987, 38–9).

The problem is that the diverse explications of Modernism differ much less in their choice of examples than in their interpretations of the same standard texts of the twentieth century. Thus for some *Ulysses* may stand for an impersonal report on reality, while for others, mythological archetypes or metanarrative concerns. From one perspective, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute are just neo-Realists (Becker, 1963, 10); from another, more common, they undermine the Realist novel and eventually aim at metafictional observations (for example Waugh, 1988, 83). In the optimistic outlook of Mark Schorer modern ‘techniques are sharper tools than others’, ‘will discover more’, and result in ‘works with maximum meaning’ (1967 [1948], 66). According to Barthes’s *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, (1953), however, ‘Modernism begins with the search for a literature which is no longer possible’ and ‘the Novel is a Death’ (Barthes, 1982 [1953], 51–2).

⁹ The quotation is from *Some Observations on the Art of Narrative* (New York, 1947).

Hiding and disclosing the act of narration have always belonged to the Janus-faced strategy of telling stories. While, in the nineteenth century, the former played a major role in the novels of Stendhal ('le restrictions de champ', see Blin, 1954, ch. II) or Jane Austen, the latter found its peak in Romantic irony and the Victorian fiction of Dickens and Thackeray. From *Madame Bovary* (1857) on, a tendency towards mimesis suppressed metanarrative comments, along with any other signals of the narrative act. This tendency, on the one hand, led towards the 'well-made' novel, whose neutral omniscience (Friedman's term, 1967 [1955], 123–4) was popular with various writers from the late nineteenth century onwards and might give a deceptive impression that the Realist novel was 'transparent' as a whole. On the other hand, though, it ended up, particularly in the English-speaking world, in many of the most innovative works of our age, such as *Ulysses*, *The Sound and the Fury* or *U.S.A.* Outside that zone, 'scenic' representation was strongly supported by Ortega y Gasset, who believed that the exposure of narrative framework, as by Balzac, destroyed the directness and authenticity of the represented world which guaranteed the integrity of the novel. This directness, he maintained, without comment or superimposed classifications, enhanced the role of the reader as the final architect (Ortega y Gasset, 1948; cf. Booth, 1961, 119–20). Even more recently, when 'Postmodernist fiction has brought the author back to the surface' (McHale, 1987, 199), metafictional comments in the novels of Fowles, Sukenick or Barth are counterbalanced by the reticent narratives of Doctorow or Vargas Llosa. The latter's tribute to the 'objectivity' of Flaubert (1975) is a fine example of the lasting admiration for his craft even in the last quarter of the twentieth century:

The technique of objectivity is aimed at reducing to an absolute minimum the 'imposition' of a particular view that every work of art inevitably entails. I do not maintain, naturally, that Flaubert's novels are free of all ideology [...]. I do maintain, however, that in his case these ideas are not the cause but the effect of the work of art, which for the creator is not merely the consequence of a prior truth which he possesses and transmutes into fiction but the precise opposite: the search through artistic creation for a possible, and previously unknown, truth. (Vargas Llosa, 1987, 231–2).

Whether or not the pursuits of 'objectivism' and 'exit author' truly achieved their objective has always been disputable. Still, using Bakhtin's terminology, we may state that the speech of characters, normally 'represented', that is 'portrayed' and typified by the narrator, in the nineteenth century novel, gained a new dimension, that of 'direct speech, referring to its subject', which used to be in the absolute domain of author-creator (1963, 266–7).¹⁰

¹⁰ We have to take into account, however, that in some novels with an omniscient narrator certain characters could have a relative freedom of independent judgement. David Lodge's discussion of such an occurrence in *Middlemarch* draws our attention to a much broader eventuality (1990, 50). Correspondingly,

The following conclusion seems rather obvious. Despite difference in narrative techniques, the scepticism and relativism of Modernist writers are obvious, and their spirit is still carried on by the Postmodernists and late Modernists. So is the disintegration of the classical Realist novel, but its route is complex and contradictory. There are no grounds for denying that many modern experiments are in reality extreme forms of mimesis, which, perhaps, has come to the point of turning into its own negation.

II

In his broad description of postmodern culture, Steven Connor concludes 'that the contours of the postmodern paradigm are much less clear in literary studies than elsewhere' (1989, 104). Because it is a current cultural trend, one does not have an adequate perspective on it and therefore Postmodernism still provokes a fervent response, among both its sympathizers and its adversaries. Worse, in order to promote a current artistic fashion, critics sometimes forget to demonstrate what is actually innovative in postmodern fiction in comparison with techniques already introduced by Modernists. There is not even any consensus on whether postmodern poetics represents a definite break with the past or a continuation of Modernist trends: whether it is an outright rejection of the earlier avant-gardism in favour of popular culture, or the beginning of a new avant-garde, concerned with metanarrative questions and antagonistic towards the public appeal of Realism. Correspondingly, the points of comparison are variable and sometimes likely to mislead by opposing current narrative techniques to the traditional Realism of the nineteenth century, as if nothing had taken place afterwards. As a result, postmodern zealots, such as Ermath (1992) or Hutcheon (1988) seem to be starting from scratch. This originates in the new notion of language, which in Derrida's words is just a play 'without fault, without truth, and without origin'. A traditional belief, still present in the Modernist writing, that the critic 'deciphers a truth', is now replaced by an interpretation that simply 'affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism' (Derrida, 1978 [1967], 292). Hilary Lawson's aphoristic assertion that 'if we are certain of anything, it is that we are certain of nothing' (Lawson and Appignanesi, 1989, xi) broadly represents the same intellectual framework. Norman Denzin, a sociologist of culture, states this approach as follows: 'No longer taking anything for granted, doubting always the fictions that pass for truth, each of us bears the burden of this moment,

Boris Uspensky has indicated that in *War and Peace* the omniscient narrator sometimes relinquishes his privileged position: 'This narrator [...] is not an all-seeing observer with a gift of absolute insight, but simply a penetrating and intelligent human being with his own likes and dislikes, with his own human experiences, and with the limited knowledge that is inherent to all human beings (although such limitations are not necessarily those of an author)' (Uspensky, 1973, 109–10).

and lives, in our universal singularity, a fraudulent or authentic version of a postmodern self that is true or untrue to itself' (1991, 156). The impetus lies in Lyotard's conviction that in postmodern culture 'the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses' (Lyotard, 1984, 37). One may find a similar approach in others: Benveniste's revisionist subversion of Saussure's notions of signifier and signified,¹¹ (which moves the latter over to the side of the former, cutting out the referent (Harland, 1987, 79), Foucaultian 'archaeology', Derrida's deconstruction and Baudrillard's simulacra. It also coincides with Lacanian psychoanalysis, based on an assumption that 'the Unconscious works like a language of signifiers without signifieds, marks on the page without meaning behind them' (Harland, 1987, 36).

'Dismantling truth' in modern science and the humanities has its sources in a certitude that 'experience and reality are necessarily linguistic' and 'there can never be a neutral observation language' (Lawson, in Lawson and Appignanesi, 1989, xix, xx). Wittgenstein's theory of 'language games' (*Philosophical Investigations*, 1953), reworked by Lyotard (*La Condition postmoderne*, 1979) has encouraged confidence in the fact that various categories of utterances can be defined by a set of rules, like the game of chess (see Lyotard, 1984, 10). Consequently, meaning and truth become an internal function of language, totally dependent on their context: 'From the point of view of the realist, this means that there is no truth. From the point of view of the postmodernist there are many different stories to be told. [...] The postmodernist does not accept that there is any general notion of "truth" implied by all assertion' (Tomlinson, 1989, 51). In the field of literary criticism, Stanley Fish rejects a clear-cut distinction between 'fact' and fiction, the literary and the non-literary, because such a distinction, he believes, is always dependent on the process of communication, ruled by a set of discourse agreements. As a result, language never matches reality and 'what we know is not the world but stories about the world' (1980, 231–45). According to the somewhat catastrophic vision of Jean Baudrillard all reality has been 'absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and of simulation' and thus '*it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real*' (Baudrillard, 1988, 120, 179).

Theories advancing Postmodernism as the vanguard of a new discourse that overturns the past and paves the way for a different literature have been counterbalanced by much more moderate claims that set the trend firmly within the existing framework of Modernism. Whether we are living in a post-industrial society or have entered a 'post-

11 'Between the signifier and the signified, the connection is not arbitrary; on the contrary, it is *necessary*. The concept ("the signified") *bœuf* is perforce identical in my consciousness with the sound sequence (the "signifier") *bœf*. [...] Together the two are imprinted on my mind, together they evoke each other under any circumstance. [...] The mind does not contain empty forms, concepts without names.' (Benveniste, 1987 [1939], 78; cf. Harland, 1987, 77–80).

European, if not a post-Western era' (see Smart, 1990) seems to be a controversial sociological speculation. Attempts to locate the postmodern within the modern are undertaken from both the right (Daniel Bell, 1976) and the left (Fredric Jameson). The latter wonders:

Do we really need the concept of a *postmodernism*? [...] I must limit myself to the suggestion that radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary. In this sense, everything we have described here can be found in earlier periods and most notably within modernism proper (1985, 123).

Ihab Hassan rejects any strong distinction between Modernism and Postmodernism, but in his opinion a synchronism of tendencies characterizes any literary trend:

Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or a Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once. And an author may, in his or her own lifetime, easily write both a modernist and postmodernist work. [...]

This means that a 'period', as I have already intimated, must be perceived in terms of *both* continuity *and* discontinuity, the two perspectives being complementary and partial. (1993 [1987], 149)

David Harvey, having reintroduced Ihab Hassan's systematic table of differences between Modernism and Postmodernism, examines in detail manifold contrasts between the two trends, but eventually comes to the conclusion that continuity prevails. Postmodernism, he claims, carries on the first part of Baudelaire's formula¹² that 'modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent', while it is 'deeply sceptical' about Baudelaire's further implication that art is 'eternal and immutable' as well (1989, 116).

Critical works concerned more with the evolution of techniques of the novel than with attitudes towards reality and their philosophical implications tend to see Postmodernism as a continuation of rather than a direct opposition to Modernism. Brian McHale scrutinized James Joyce's development from the Modernist *Ulysses* towards the Postmodernist *Finnegans Wake* (1987, 233–5),¹³ while David Lodge traced a similar evolution in Milan Kundera, from *The Joke* to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Lodge, 1990, 160–7). Evidence that the same writers could represent both trends does not necessarily undermine the distinctive

¹² See his essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863).

¹³ In agreement with more recent scholarship, however, McHale pointed out in his second book on Postmodernism that *Ulysses* itself is a complex work, dominated in the later parts by a postmodern 'parallax of discourses' (1992, 42–58).

character of those trends, but may indicate common roots, some unity in diversity. McHale's book on *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), modified and amended in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), appears to be the most successful undertaking to tackle the problem *sine ira et studio*. The subtitle of the first chapter, 'From Modernism to Postmodernism: Change of Dominant' indicates the main thrust of his arguments. Having identified the dominant, McHale makes the following comments on Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*:

Ch. 8 of *Absalom, Absalom!* dramatizes the shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being* — from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological one*. At this point Faulkner's novel touches and perhaps crosses the boundary between modernist and postmodernist writing (1987, 10).

With the proviso that every generalization is open to debate, McHale's differentiation offers an inspiring impulse for further explorations, while what he has managed to discuss himself amounts to a comprehensive account of postmodern fiction. His second book, by introducing the concept of 'Modernism cut in half' (1992, 55–8), based on a reinterpretation of *Ulysses* that singles out its postmodern content, makes the above distinction between epistemological and ontological dominants more complex but still binding. His perception of ontological uncertainty in postmodern fiction is focused on 'an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural' (1987, 37). This follows the Foucaultian concept of 'heterotopia', where 'things are "laid", "placed", "arranged" in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all' (ibid., 44).¹⁴ Accordingly, the Modernist plurality of personal 'worlds' or *Weltanschauungen* loses its metaphorical character and becomes 'fantastically literal' (ibid., 79–80). With a rather arbitrary reference to Bakhtin, McHale also employs here the notion of 'heteroglasia, plurality of discourse [...] which serves as the vehicle for the confrontation and dialogue among world-views and ideologies in the novel, its orchestrated *polyphony* of voices'. Hence instead of exerting a centripetal pressure and striving towards the integration of multiple worlds, like the Modernists did, the Postmodernists enhance centrifugal tendencies and break up the unity of represented life (ibid., 166–7). When McHale examines innovations introduced by the Postmodernist novel on various levels of narrative discourse, he pays special attention to the role of language, which, as it is pointed out, achieves in Postmodernism the Flaubertian ideal of *un livre sur rien*. It indulges in 'stylistic exhibitionism' and transparently determines the make-up of many experimental novels (ibid., 148–61). Its most certain effect is an anti-realistic bias, inasmuch as writers seem, indeed, to view reality as '*constructed* in and through our

¹⁴ This quotation is from Foucault's *The Order of Things*, New York, 1970, xviii.

languages, discourses, and semiotic systems' (ibid., 164). This view is shared by Patricia Waugh, who considers metafictional strategies essential to Postmodernist fiction. While the Modernist novel reconstructs the world through consciousness, the Postmodernist, she argues, 'draws attention to the process of the construction of the *fictive* "world" through *writing*' (1988, 102).

The diversity of forms taken by Modernism in various cultures has been followed by the variety of postmodern writing, as the latter opposed the former (see Jameson, 1985, 112). Consequently, defining Postmodernism in the novel appears to be a complicated task, a fact which becomes even more apparent in the context of contradictory opinions on what is and what is not modern or postmodern. The non-Realist novel, developed in Continental Europe and South America at the beginning of the twentieth century, has been rediscovered in Britain and America in the last few decades, changing the ideal of 'modern writing'. Barry Smart's argument that American Postmodernism, so crucial for contemporary fiction, has in reality been founded on the imported theories, modern or postmodern, of Derrida, Barthes and Foucault (Smart, 1990, 22–3), or Peter Dews's clarification that French and German thought brought an end to the traditional philosophy of English-speaking nations (1989, 27–31),¹⁵ are close to the truth, and concur with what we can say about the evolution of the late-twentieth-century novel in English-speaking lands. Structuralist theories undermined the principles of point-of-view techniques, and eventually resulted in the extinction of subjectivity proclaimed by Barthes (1990 [1968]), who maintained that 'writing becomes truly writing only when it prevents one from answering the question "who is speaking?"' (Culler, 1975, 200). In Foucault's 'archaeology of knowledge', the subject of a statement is measured by 'a position that has already been defined — quite apart from his mental activity — by the rules of the relevant discursive formation' (Gutting, 1989, 241). The discursive formation, consequently, supersedes the Modernist notion of personality, which, in the words of Virginia Woolf, is able to receive 'a myriad impression' and to convey life as a particular vision, as 'a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' (after Daiches, 1965, 192).¹⁶ Foucault's conviction that the act of speaking contains something other than the simple expression of one's thoughts and that it is governed by rules not all of which are given to our consciousness (1989 [1969], 208–11) makes an essential contribution to the notion of the death of the subject. Other intellectual concepts, developed in France over the last few decades, go in the same direction.

It seems that the main thrust of the Postmodernist novel bifurcates into metafiction and fabulation, in agreement with the title of Robert

¹⁵ The impact of French theory on the English-speaking world is discussed by many authors in the volume of studies edited by Lisa Appignanesi (1989a).

¹⁶ Originally published in *The Common Reader* (1923).

Scholes's perceptive critical account (1979). Metafiction is described by Patricia Waugh (1988, 1–19) as a tendency within the novel to increase tensions between the construction and deconstruction of artistic illusion and to foreground the process of writing itself. Fabulation, in turn, is defined as 'an extraordinary delight in design' and 'a celebration of the creative imagination', which 'of all narrative forms puts the highest premium on art and joy' (Scholes, 1979, 2–3; Waugh, 1988, 16–17). Despite the fact that not all Postmodernist novels indulge primarily in a narrative extravaganza, this tendency is responsible for the most exuberant eruptions of fantasy and stylistic inventiveness in postmodern fiction, not infrequently resembling the appeal of the Baroque. 'The Baroque ceased imitating, lost restraint, took pleasure in the terrible, and sought to cultivate the extreme, all to impress a public more forcefully and with greater freedom', writes José A. Maravall (1986, 212). Flashy, graphic images of anything that is extraordinary, shocking contrasts between the mediocre and the unusual and the blend of sex, masochism and scatology are common in postmodern fiction. They found their climax in Bret E. Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), but can also be detected in earlier novels, such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Fuentes's *Terra Nostra*, Barth's *Sabbatical* or Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. This does not imply at all that such works indulge in the sheer titillation of their readers, but certainly puts limits on their intellectual ambitions, which are usually overemphasized by sympathetic critics. In Barthes's terminology (1990a [1973]), the postmodern novel is an interesting blend of the 'readerly' with the 'writerly', of experimentation with the collective appeal of mass media. It embraces, on the one hand, modern semiology and, on the other, comic strips, commercials, popular science-fiction, detective stories and pornographic magazines. We may return to Maravall, whose remarks that the Baroque lays bare 'the taste for the new, the unusual, the marvellous, the awesome, for that which astonishes, in the sense that its magnificence or strangeness offers itself as a surprise' (1986, 216) can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to many postmodern novels. Their specific imagination and fantasy coincide with the invasion of Continental European and South American influences on the English and American novel in the second half of the twentieth century.

Deciding whether Postmodernism defies Modernism or simply goes beyond its limits involves other quests: which Modernism? in which literature? It appears that Postmodernism has been predominantly anti-Realist, but Fowles, Graham Swift, Doctorow and even Eco in *The Name of the Rose* are certainly much closer to realism than Pynchon, Barthelme or Angela Carter. Moreover, anti-Realist tendencies featured conspicuously in Modernist literatures as well. Metafiction, in turn, has its roots in the variety of Modernist experiments with form, exceeding by far Gide's self-conscious novel, *Les Faux-monnayeurs*. Making the novel predominantly a matter of language can be traced back to the works of

Céline (Brée, 1983, 263) or Gertrude Stein (Lodge, 1979, 144–5), to mention only two writers. Even fabulation was anticipated by the ironic novels of Thomas Mann, such as *Joseph and his Brothers*, and by the grotesque stories of Bely and Bulgakov. We can only speak, therefore, of a change of dominants and a new balance struck between various national traditions. If we accept that Stanzel's 'figural novel', emanating from point-of-view techniques, is the best manifestation of what Modernism stood for in fiction, 'the death of the subject' and its further consequences would mark postmodern bias and its new approach to relativity as the overall symptom of the present century.

III

The early inclination of some Polish writers to develop certain characteristics resembling what is nowadays considered postmodern in Britain or America is consistent with the main tenor of their culture since Romanticism. Polish fiction seems to question the whole idea of social background being directly reflected in literature, for the country whose modernity is questioned even now demonstrated fears of contemporary automatization and artificiality even when its society and economic life were in many respects strikingly feudal. As shown in chapter I, Realism in Poland had shallow roots in nineteenth-century literature and was greatly overshadowed by Romantic poetry. That poetry was concerned with problems which were pursued later by the most ambitious works of fiction. The function of preconceived ideas in the human approach to reality and the intimate meaning of the 'madness' of Don Quixote, the gap between poetry and truth in literary discourse, the importance of role-playing in communication and — as the art of story-telling is considered — the pleasures of pure fabulation (Romantic irony) affect the character of narrative poems and dramas, as does the openness of their structure and the polyphony of their various perspectives. In comparison with that profusion of problems and artistic techniques, contemporary fiction looks plain, indeed insipid. Even the more accomplished realistic novel of the late nineteenth century was too much preoccupied with social programmes to be genuinely appreciated by the subsequent generation, who had a strong ambition to catch up with the rest of Europe. The innovative technique of Prus' *Lalka* (chapter II), which could actually have played the role of a Polish *Madame Bovary*, was not fully recognized by Prus's contemporaries and successors, since the Polish concept of Modernism followed different inspirations.

The lyrical fiction of the Young Poland (*Młoda Polska*) period (chapters III–IV) was born out of a disregard for Realism and the Realists' commitment to 'trivial' everyday existence and didacticism. Despite its coexistence with the still dynamic Realist and Naturalist trends, the Young Poland rebellion introduced Modernist tendencies which eventually undermined the traditional form of the novel. In the

case of the most daring attempts, such as the works of Berent and Miciński, Polish fiction transgressed the focalized narration of the 'personal novel' (Stanzel, 1964), that is its own lyrical transposal of the point-of-view technique, to espouse mythopoeia and fabulation. Irzykowski's *Patuba*, the appreciation of whose value has symptomatically grown in the course of the twentieth century, actually rejected the novel in favour of a predominantly essayistic discourse, thus initiating the increasing dissatisfaction with the novel form as such. The interwar period (chapter V) introduced the revival of authorial control and traditional realism, and demonstrated pointedly that the Jamesian art of 'scenic' presentation was of little interest in Poland. Perhaps, under the influence of Proust, the psychological analytical novel was more concerned with the retrospective order of analepsis, and rather disregarded the narrative subtleties of figural perspectives (points of view). This approach had a long-lasting impact on the Polish understanding of modernity in fiction.

The avant-garde prose of the 1930s, represented by Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz (chapters VI–VII), writers well-known in the West, demonstrates a characteristic clash of old and new attitudes. In their works Young Poland's faith in the great role of art and the demiurgic power of its creators fades before the modern world of simulacra, despite the fact that the antiquated structure of Polish society barely motivated this change. In a country said to be obsessed with national problems, such a broad perspective cannot be explained solely by the Poles' proclivity to follow the West. The penetrating insights of Romantic poetry and the universal bias of early Modernism paved the way for innovations in Poland, which frequently preceded the more mature forms of those innovations elsewhere. The old resentment of Realism, characteristic of the core of the Polish cultural élite, gave impetus to non-mimetic trends at a time when in the English-speaking world Realism was modernized rather than rejected. When Beach announced the departure of the author (1932), Polish writers defiantly demonstrated their egos and blended autobiography with their fictitious worlds. When Modernist narrative techniques imposed discipline on the rambling narration of the Victorian novel and attempted to grasp evasive reality, writers in Poland paraded unrestrained, all-inclusive narratives of a Rabelaisian kind and indulged in the grotesque or fluid world of surrealistic dreams. In their diverse ways they encouraged freedom of fabulation, but also the inclusion of the essayistic and, ultimately, the disintegration of the novel.

The fortunes of postwar fiction are closely linked with politics, that is with Communist rule after 1944 (chapter VIII). When the yoke of Socialist Realism was marginalized in the wake of the Thaw of 1955–6, the novel returned to its roots in the earlier Polish tradition. Irzykowski's *Patuba* and the avant-garde fiction of the thirties played a focal role, in particular that of Gombrowicz, who was still active (d. 1969) and regarded as an internationally-recognized luminary. The belated

acquaintance with modern narrative techniques caused some confusion at first, but the subjectivity of figural perspectives and interior monologues was never exploited to its extremes, which left ample room for authorial control (chapter X). A postwar drift towards documentary or quasi-documentary records, which spawned several works of unique originality, only initially approached behaviourist impassivity. Under the influence of Gombrowicz's diary, the boundary lines between the real and the invented eventually became blurred and barely important, undermining the very substance of both fiction and documentary discourse (chapter IX). Bolder Polish prose writers soon embarked upon the disintegration of the novel, whose crisis has consistently been proclaimed for decades.

The *nouveau roman* was chiefly characterized by critics and writers by its 'anti-novel' stance, its 'methodological' character set against 'traditional' narratives. Only the better informed, however, knew in more detail the theories of Robbe-Grillet or Sarraute. Polish admiration for the self-conscious novel (chapter XI) has resulted in a number of modifications, from the most conventional form of self-begetting fiction, which followed the model of Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, to more sophisticated techniques of fabulation and metafiction. Some notable books have undoubtedly been published, but the uncontrolled invasion of essayistic content, whose 'philosophical' ambitions are frequently imposed on a mediocre structure, have forced the novel into a cul-de-sac. However mixed the results, the enthusiasm for 'anti-novels' appears to be unabated. Experiments with language and personal pronouns (often 'borrowed' from abroad, e.g. Butor) are approached with extreme seriousness and frequently bring fiction to the borderline of readability; still, in times of growing commerciality some critics claim that the artistic novel should remain élitist (e.g. Łukosz, 1994).

Fiction in Poland has faced the same problems as elsewhere and the best writers have managed to respond in a remarkable way, sometimes in advance of their more famous counterparts abroad. Even if the results are not always flawless, their contribution to the novel of our times still deserves attention. Yet one is still tempted to recommend the opinion of Malcolm Bradbury to those Polish critics who consistently proclaim the decline of the novel, holding it to be too unsophisticated for more demanding contemporary readers:

We are in an age of uncomfortable transition, watching a disappointing century end and facing a future that has lost its pleasure, its promise and its innocence. The most interesting fiction soon to come will seek to chart our uncertain, imaginative way through that passage. [...]

Even in the age of film and the massing of the media, we need it, and need it as something more than an entertainment or a glistening commodity. The fiction that really matters matters because of this, and not because it attracts the big advances, wins the prizes, or tops the best-seller lists. We need it because at best it continues to be what it always was: novel (Bradbury, 1994, 11).

At present, the innovative force of Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism has lost much of its initial appeal, but those who, in our confusing epoch, still welcome *anything* that claims to be avant-garde, might consider the words of Vargas Llosa:

If we think that literature's function is merely to contribute to the rhetorical inflation of a specialized domain of knowledge, and that poems, novels and dramas proliferate with the sole object of producing certain formal disorders in the linguistic body, then the critic well may, in the manner of certain postmodernists, freely indulge in the pleasures of conceptual shots in the dark, expressed in muddy, opaque language (Vargas Llosa, 1994, 9).

This book is neither a history of the twentieth-century novel in Poland nor an attempt to cover all innovative writers and works. The lack of an adequate time perspective on more recent publications accounts for the somewhat personal selection of works and their assessment. I have aimed at a characterization of the tendencies which have been generally regarded as particularly symptomatic of modern trends in Polish fiction. It has been my intention to strike a balance between a general survey of developments in fiction and its poetics, and a more detailed presentation of single authors or works. The consideration of the latter, however, is selective; I have restricted myself to novels that raise questions of poetics, while leaving aside a complete appraisal of the given novelists. This seems to be the only possible approach for a study whose aim is to portray the chief trends rather than individual authors.

London, January 1995

PART ONE

THE ORIGINS OF MODERNIST
FICTION

CHAPTER I

THE EVOLUTION OF POLISH FICTION IN THE XIX CENTURY AND MODERNITY

I

The opinion of Czesław Miłosz that 'Polish literature has been oriented more toward poetry and the theatre than fiction' (1983, xv) explains to a great extent the individual development of Polish fiction. Baroque romances in verse flourished in Poland long after the publication of *Don Quixote* and this state of affairs continued in the times of Defoe, Fielding, Sterne and Lesage. The emergence of the Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century reversed the trend, in accordance with the spirit of rationalism and the utilitarian approach to the arts, but prose fiction played a subordinate role in major literary trends. The first Polish novelist in the modern sense, Ignacy Krasicki (1735–1801), was actually a poet, who excelled in fables, satires and mock epic. Although well-acquainted with contemporary English and French novelists and an enthusiast of Cervantes's masterpiece, he hardly respected fiction, tolerating only those works which contained a moral message, such as *The Vicar of Wakefield* or *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, but rejecting narratives where love and adventure overshadowed, in his belief, any utilitarian benefits (Piszczkowski, 1975, 118–22). As a result, his *Mikołaja Doświadczynskiego przypadku* (The Adventures of Mikołaj Doświadczynski, 1776) is more a social satire than a 'real' novel concerned with characters and the unfolding of a story. Krasicki's disregard for strictly narrative goals becomes even more evident in his next work, *Pan Podstoli* (1778, 1784), where learned and sententious conversations replace plot; it resembles Castiglione's *The Courtier*¹ rather than contemporary novels. Moreover, there is another, non-novel heritage. In his incisive study of this period, Waław Borowy (1948, 134–5) points out similarities between *Mikołaja Doświadczynskiego przypadku* and Voltaire's philosophical tales. The philosophical tale tradition was carried on by Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1755–1821) into the early nineteenth century.

Polish prose fiction gained ground after 1800, but success and critical esteem came rather late and after prolonged and outspoken hostility to the

¹ Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* was adapted to Polish by Łukasz Górnicki (1527–1603) as *Dworzanin polski* (1566).

genre. The sentimental romance of the early years, despite undoubted achievements in the representation of the human mind, mostly followed popular literature, that is the commonly-read followers of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, such as Juliane Krüdener and Marie S. Cottin, or the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe. The tear-jerking stories of suffering lovers eventually brought about a dramatic poem presenting unrequited affection, Adam Mickiewicz's (1798–1855) *Dziady* part IV (Forefathers' Eve, 1823), whose literary values far surpassed contemporaneous novels. Likewise, Mickiewicz's epic, *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), with its variety of subtle narrative techniques, surpassed any contemporary work of prose fiction and therefore, from a modern perspective, was regarded by Kazimierz Wyka as 'the best and most innovative Polish novel' of the period (Wyka, 1963, I, 184). In the same way the digressive progress of Romantic narration, along with 'ironic' self-reflection and free, illusion-breaking creativity, reached its peak in some of Juliusz Słowacki's (1809–49) poems, particularly *Beniowski* (1841), which surpassed the digressive style of the followers of Sterne in Polish fiction.

The expansion and popularity of the novel in the period between the two national insurrections of 1831 and 1863 did not produce many fine works of literature, and even the better novels hardly bear comparison with the contemporary fiction of Balzac, Stendhal, Dickens or Thackeray. Bearing in mind the achievements of Polish Romantic poetry and drama, which were deeply to affect the national culture in the years to come, their superiority over fiction seems rather certain. Consequently, Kazimierz Wyka's opinion that Romanticism 'ennobled' the novel (Wyka, 1969) has rightly been challenged by some critics (Zimand, 1970, 322–8; Głowiński, 1973, 151–94). While Victor Hugo and Goethe, by writing fiction, recognized its particular appeal, great Polish poets did not really follow suit. While Friedrich Schlegel wrote of his appreciation of the novels of Jean Paul, the Polish Romantics hardly considered prose fiction at all in their literary programme (see Bachórz, 1992, 9–21). Mickiewicz did not include novels in his lectures on Slavonic literature, and, when pressed for money, preferred to write plays in French. Słowacki either mocked story-telling or attempted to elevate it to the level of myth and prophecy. Cyprian Norwid (1821–83) dismissed Romantic fantasy as well as realistic account and, living in the France of Flaubert, openly despised fiction for its alleged triviality (Głowiński, 1973, 164–194) and composed brief, allegorical narratives, named by himself legends or parables (see Sławińska, 1957). The then respected literary critic, Julian Klaczko (1825–1906), accused the novel of pandering to the unrefined taste of common readers, thus noticing the most essential element of its status in Poland, a tendency to teach and try to influence the broader public, which found great poetry too sophisticated (see Bachórz, 1992, 31–4, 43–6).

The sceptical approach to fiction, which was discernible in Poland from the very beginning, concerned its basic principle, the very act of inventing stories. While the broader public enjoyed tales of outlandish adventure or French sentimental stories, writers and critics close to the Enlightenment who were concerned about moral standards in society mistrusted novelists' imagination, the illusory character of which was regarded as a danger to the accurate perception of reality. They believed that only unequivocal commitment to moral guidance could save a literary genre which was liable by its very nature to be frivolous. The Romantics also had misgivings about the impact of literary illusion, but their approach was much more complex and sometimes remarkably modern.

From the start, that is from Mickiewicz's introduction to the first volume of his poems (1822), the Polish Romantics, like others abroad, postulated the freedom of the imagination and the creative character of poetry. Their works attempted to embrace the inner character of their nation, or even more, that of humanity. Respecting the mythical dimension of epics, they elevated and defamiliarized reality, and favoured tragic conflicts, avoiding everyday trivialities. Even mystery and suspense in narrative poems served empathy and catharsis rather than the stimulation of curiosity. Karl Kroeber, discussing the poetic tales of George Byron, who had influenced Polish narrative poems more than anybody else, pointed out that in his works 'bewilderment' expresses the actual effect of the narration better than 'suspense'. The reader's attention is attracted more by enigmatic characters than by the plot itself. Correspondingly, 'sustained sentiment aided by the systematic progression of compressed, rhythmic language' results in a 'coherence of effect' and serves as a substitute for a teleological progress towards dénouement, which unravels the complications and offers a rational explanation of them (1960, 139-46).

When it comes to more conventional story-telling, such as in Słowacki's digressive poem *Beniowski*, the poetic ego eclipses events, undermining their seriousness and autonomy. Fiction becomes nothing but fiction and its literary character is clearly stated. Słowacki's French novel, *Le Roi de Ladawa*,² likewise, has been described as a literary polemic on the novel form as such (Żmigrodzka, 1960). The author undermines the story by emphasizing its derived and illusory character, thus questioning the verisimilitude of fictional worlds and laying bare their framework. As a result the craft of narration remains the sole vestige of reality. Unlike his extraordinary Romantic epic *Król Duch* (King Spirit, 1847), where the creative individuality of the poet guarantees the truth of its historical and prophetic content, Słowacki's digressive narratives mock fictional worlds and turn the act of telling into a masterly

² This novel, begun in 1832, was never finished. Słowacki completed almost six chapters out of a planned twenty-four. They were published posthumously.

performance. Such a method gains a broader context in his dramatized philosophical fairy-tale, *Balladyna* (1839), which combines well-known literary motifs, mostly from Shakespeare, in a metatextual game (see Weintraub, 1977).

Pan Tadeusz was novel-like in a specific sense. Though we may accept E.M. Forster's popular description that 'the novel tells a story' (Forster, 1927), we must note that the plot in Mickiewicz's epic is predominantly conventional to the point of banality. A family feud and a comedy of errors make up the core of the events, which culminate in a marriage, the most standard of all happy endings. The patriotic story of the penitent Father Robak and his confession is in the mould of Byron's *Giaour*, with the necessary adaptations for local needs. The narrator eventually drinks wine and mead with the wedding guests and closes the poem with a phrase common in Polish fairy-tales. We can thus conclude that Mickiewicz paid little attention to the plot as such and, by accepting a popular pattern, foregrounded different literary ambitions. As a result, he was not particularly concerned with the more controversial aspects of the family feud (e.g. the way the Soplicas acquired Horeszko's property from the Russians), which are hardly discernible in the poetic context, but were later brought to light by a prose translation into French.³ The masterly descriptions of everyday reality are in line with a practice common in contemporary novels, but taken as such do not merit, perhaps, much more than Norwid's ironic opinion that the appreciation of *Pan Tadeusz* actually amounts to 'falling in love with country woods, borsch, chops, sauerkraut and gherkins'.⁴

Pan Tadeusz is, however, a poem not just about the past, but also about the power of literature's loving reconstruction of that past, which provides a language for personal nostalgia and wishful thinking. Julian Przyboś (1901–70), himself a poet, convincingly argued that this is more a vision or a fairy-tale than a realistic picture of people and Nature (1950, 45–97), but one must add that hardly any other Romantic poem contains so many factual and apparently unpoetic descriptions. Mickiewicz takes the utmost pleasure in these contrasts and suggests that they have far-reaching implications. Recently, Richard Harland has pointed out that the contemporary world has accepted the concept of false consciousness as the main principle at work in the human mind. Preconceived ideas override real things and determine their perception. Such a notion, which is best reflected in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, had been suggested in the nineteenth century: 'Stendhal shows Julien and Mathilde spurred on to passionate behaviour by an "idea" of love which imposes itself from

3 Tadeusz Żeleński noticed the problem while reading a French translation (Żeleński-Boy, 1949).

4 This opinion, articulated in Norwid's letter to Bronisław Zaleski (1819–80) of 10 January 1868 (Norwid, 1968, 545), was paralleled by similar conclusions in the letters to Karol Ruprecht (1821–75), J.I. Kraszewski and Wojciech Cybulski (1808–67) (ibid., 496, 504, 520).

outside upon their lack of feeling (*Le rouge et le noir*); and Flaubert shows Emma Bovary trying to make real-life affairs *stand for* a 'glamour' of exotic romance which she has already acquired from books (*Madame Bovary*) (1987, 60). Mickiewicz was always interested in the impact of preconceptions on people's response to reality. His Gustaw from the early dramatic poem, *Dziady* part IV, is a man inspired, like Don Quixote, by 'villainous books' that have shaped his views on women and love. Hence his ecstasy and illusion are subject to confrontation with the opinions of others, but their deconstruction is never absolute, and his perspective retains its force of appeal. In like manner, Mickiewicz's love sonnets portray the multiple and inconsistent aspects of affection, each of them dependent on a given means of expression, from Petrarchan exaltation to mundane frivolity. The Romantic perception of the creative power of poetry, reflected in the imagery of the Great Improvisation in *Dziady* part III, is eventually questioned as a matter of illusion and delusion, engendered by excessive pride and evil spirits, but never totally rejected by the author.

The coexistence of various perspectives and styles achieves its peak in *Pan Tadeusz*, whose generic complexity has been discussed in detail by Wyka (1963). The poem, with its epic, lyric, novel-like, comic, heroic and mock-heroic elements, represents personal involvement together with narrative detachment, realistic concern for mimesis together with a lyrical transformation of reality. The represented world is in a state of flux, where constructed and deconstructed images never achieve stability. Within *Pan Tadeusz*, literature shapes the imagination of the quixotic Count, who, like his Spanish predecessor, is treated with sympathetic irony, but literature also determines the total appeal of the poem itself, where the Romantic style often mocks itself. Mickiewicz's 'remembrance of things past' transforms his native land into a paradise, petrifies its image and revives the great expectations of independence once inspired by Napoleon's Army, but also makes clear that only poetry has such a power and that its illusions eventually bring disenchantment to the Count. The poetic and factual approaches have an equal place in the poem, just as two different perceptions of life, dream and fantasy, have the right to coexist with facts. This certainly involves the plurality of representation (see Witkowska, 1983, 173–4).

II

Mickiewicz's insight into the role of literary discourse in people's 'grip on reality' revived problems which the story of Don Quixote had raised, but it had little immediate impact on prose fiction. Only one serious contemporary novel pursues similar interests, *Poganka* (The Heathen Woman, 1846) by Narcyza Żmichowska (1819–76). Dealing with art and artists, Żmichowska's lyrical and parabolic novel portrays the power of a creative imagination that preconceives reality and consequently leads

astray and destroys a human life, but eventually questions whether this experience is not superior to mediocrity.

The majority of writers, however, were convinced that the novel's salvation lay only in the authenticity of its account of reality. Even Sternean digressive narration and authors' familiarity with, on the one hand, their characters and, on the other, their readers served a different purpose from the same techniques in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. While Sterne dramatized the very act of telling to make it into discovery, where 'every comment is an action, every digression is "progressive" in a sense more profound than Tristram intends' (Booth, 1961, 234),⁵ in the Polish novels of Fryderyk Skarbek the commentary mainly indicates the realism of the author's account of reality as compared with the conventional devices of popular romances. Consequently, when, in *Pan Antoni* (Mr Antoni, 1824), the author meets his main character (metalepsis), he attempts to prove that his story is much more than fiction (Jasińska, 1965, 169–70). As a result, despite the open character of narration, the novel's world tends to be authentic, not created, based on the opposite of Romantic irony. To the same purpose, heterodiagetic (third-person) narrators identify themselves with the real author who guarantees the truth of their account (Jasińska, 1965, 106–15), while homodiagetic (first-person) narrative initially claimed to be documentary (letters, diaries),⁶ and only later satisfied itself with invented raconteurs whose 'authenticity' had been based on their realistic representativeness.⁷

Alina Witkowska, in her general survey of narrative prose between 1831 and 1863 (1986, 268–87) pointed out its penchant for documentary accuracy, a similarity to the recently-invented daguerreotypes. The leading writer of the period, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (1812–1887), wrote that the novel, contrary to the broad, concentrated perspective of historiographical works, looks at reality through the 'microscopic eyes' of the Flemish masters (1836, 95). Therefore, 'scenes from the life of', containing detailed descriptions of everyday events and galleries of social types, dominated contemporaneous novels of manners, disintegrated plot

5 This observation was made first by V.B. Shklovsky ('Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: stylistic commentary', 1921; published in English by L.T. Lemon and M.J. Reis in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, Nebraska, 1965).

6 Such artifices were well known to many early novelists (Defoe, Diderot) and were used even much later in *The Pickwick Papers*, but Dickens probably did not attempt to convince his readers of the authenticity of the humorous adventures of Mr Pickwick and his friends.

7 It seems symptomatic that Maria Wirtemberska (1768–1854) in the introduction ('Do mojego brata') to her pioneering novel, *Malwina* (1816), already voices a conviction that the representation of feelings common to everybody gives some value to the fictitious world of a romance. One of the most influential critics of those days, Michał Grabowski (1804–63), however, believed that the real value of *Malwina* stems from recognizable similarities between the heterodiegetic narrator and the author herself (see Jasińska, 1965, 110).

structure, and pushed literary technique into a secondary position (see Witkowska, 1986, 270–1, Żmigrodzka, 1966). Kraszewski's novels often accommodate conventional plots of mystery and suspense, but, at the same time, they demonstrate a tendency towards a more 'natural' order, where accidents and unexpected turns of events are expected to give the represented world some verisimilitude (Danek, 1966, 185–8; Burkot, 1967, 36, 43). Another leading novelist of this period, Józef Korzeniowski (1797–1863), maintained that every literary form was good when inspired by real life (see Kawyn, 1958, 89–90).

The proponents of Realism, however, faced a problem inherent in their method: how to accommodate truth within invented reality. Even Stendhal's formulation that 'a novel is a mirror journeying down the high road' which 'sometimes reflects for you the azure of heaven, sometimes the mire in the puddles on the road below' (*Le Rouge et le noir*) was merely a bare declaration of mimetic principles. Kraszewski was aware that artistic 'mirrors' or 'daguerreotypes', when understood literally, can end up as a plethora of descriptivity, full of trivial details, and that literature must be selective (Burkot, 1962, 296). Moreover, he believed that 'fiction will always be nothing but fiction' and therefore cannot actually demonstrate anything, for 'fairy-tales' satisfy only our aesthetic sense (Kraszewski, 1838). In practical terms, Kraszewski's opinion was barely more than a literary polemic on propaganda novels, since as a didactic writer himself, he theoretically opposed over-simplified displays of a political or moral tendentiousness.

While the Realist's attachment to everyday details purported to give the novel an air of authenticity, historical fiction, particularly by Kraszewski, also contained 'authentic' characters and events, who unquestionably overshadowed invented stories, giving the works of fiction a quasi-documentary character. This was also reflected in an open separation of historical 'facts' from fictitious incidents (Jasińska, 1965, 125–6) and, more generally, in the particular status of the narrator. The narrator is utterly omniscient and serves as the ultimate moral and interpretative authority. The narrator's intrusive presence and frequent allusions to the author as a man, to his life and literary output, was meant to assure the reliability of observation, supported by the mutual understanding between the writer and his readers (cf. Żmigrodzka, 1966). At the same time, however, the former is also a teacher, preaching Christian and civic virtues; this didacticism gained strength in the course of the nineteenth century, culminating in the 1870s.

In their critical writings, Kraszewski and Korzeniowski stressed the unrestricted potential of fiction, thanks to its flexible form, and believed that this property would allow it to supersede poetry and drama (Kawyn, 1958, 87–8, Zgorzelski, 1978, 294). As a result, they opened the way for an over-inclusive hybrid that served a variety of purposes and was barely able to stand on its own (see Bachórz, 1992, 45–6). Kraszewski's idea of chronicling the history of Poland in a cycle of novels was the best

example, perhaps, of the role of servant to ideas taken on by fiction at the time. Balzac's effort to present a social history of France in *La comédie humaine* resulted in a work of imagination rather than in documentary accuracy. 'The bourgeois of the Balzacian novel', claims Raymond Giraud, 'is not a product of exhaustive, scientific study, but rather of the novelist's vision of society, and particularly of his vision of Paris' (Giraud, 1957, 130). 'What we find here', writes Gaetan Picon, 'is the world of Balzac, not the world' (Picon, 1958a, 1059).⁸ In the same period Dickens and Gogol transgressed mimesis and, with their commitment to social justice, introduced characters and scenes verging on the grotesque. Stendhal, in turn, with his interior monologues, created the psychological analytical novel that reflected the complexities of the individual's life. The Polish Realists, in their pursuit of authenticity and didacticism, often forsook broader ambitions. The critical rejection of the novel by Norwid, Słowacki, Mickiewicz and many influential critics of the period was not unfounded.

The novelists certainly broadened the scope of Polish literature by the inclusion of new subjects and characters taken 'from life' and, consequently, not 'beautiful' in any traditional sense. Kraszewski openly claimed that the 'grime' of everyday existence had equal rights in literature with the veneer of images of 'high' life (Witkowska, 1986, 274). Some successful attempts were made at the psychological analytical novel (Żmichowska, Ludwik Szyrmer [1809–86], sometimes Kraszewski). The Polish *gawęda*, like the Russian *skaz* (see Prince, 1988), succeeded in producing the illusion of spontaneous speech and personal narrators independent of the author. Żmichowska's *Poganka* constitutes a lyrical novel; her achievement was matched by Dominik Magnuszewski's (1810–45) attempt to create a high lyrical style for his novels. Taken as a whole, however, novelist's ambitions hardly equalled those of contemporary poets and dramatists. Fiction managed to form its own aesthetics later, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

III

Positivism in Poland (1864–c. 1890)⁹ was initially concerned much more with the promotion of utilitarian principles than with strictly literary problems. 'The artist', claimed the leading critic of this period in 1872, 'should initially have a social purpose in mind; his works should deliver a message. Without a message there is no art, but only more or less well-executed gewgaws' (Chmielowski, 1961, I, 74). As a result, many novels

⁸ Martin Turner was of a similar view (1958, 220–1); he refers to the observations of Charles Baudelaire (Balzac as a 'great visionary') and Maurice Blanchot.

⁹ Positivism in Polish culture was only loosely connected with the French philosophy of the same name. The ideas of English utilitarianism (particularly those of J.S. Mill and Herbert Spencer) formed its basic principles, along with the aesthetics of Realism, mostly modelled on the theories of Taine.

were entirely devoted to the advocacy of Positivist ideas, narrative was disrupted by journalistic commentary, plots were subordinated to imposed theses, and characters frequently described in black and white terms. This protracted the moralising trend of earlier times and coincided with the social commitment of older writers, like Kraszewski or Teodor T. Jeż (1824–1915).

In the 1880s, however, Polish Positivism developed or rather borrowed from abroad its theory of the novel, which for the first time, practically speaking, took the aesthetic principles of the genre into account. As a result, Realism reached its peak and the novel became the most respectable of genres, more suitable than any other for what was then regarded as the age of science.¹⁰ Realism in Poland, however, had a specific character, in line with the existing tradition. The theories of Flaubert and Zola were described in detail in 1881–2 by Antoni Sygietyński (1850–1923) in his series of articles on the contemporary French novel (see Sygietyński, 1971, 91–303); this series manifested admiration for Flaubert, but the moral and social commitment of Polish writers accounted for a strong resistance to Zola's Naturalism and Flaubertian impassivity. The aesthetics of fiction had been shaped by Hippolyte Taine's *La philosophie de l'art* (1882) and his introduction to *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, (1864), and to a lesser extent by Friedrich Spielhagen's *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans* (1882).

While T.T. Jeż simply believed that the chronological order of events was very convenient, for one did not have to worry about the plot structure,¹¹ writers and critics born in the 1840s and 1850s assigned a crucial role to the artistic composition of the novel. What Paul Ricoeur (1981) has written about the rules of logic and teleology in traditional narratives can be applied to the Positivist ideal. Through Taine they more or less accepted the dramatic form of Balzac's novels, despite the fact that, on moral grounds, Balzac was not admired by the majority of the Polish Positivists. In his articles on contemporary writers, Piotr Chmielowski (1848–1904), having abandoned the propaganda novel, advocated the aesthetic principles mentioned above (see Chmielowski, 1961). Hostile to the profuse commentaries and rambling digressions of the old style, he pioneered what came to be known as the 'well-made novel', in which Taine's notion of the convergence of effects found its best fulfilment in a dramatic structure, whereby direct statements were replaced by teleological plot and dialogue. As a result, following the story could be 'less important than apprehending the well-known end as

¹⁰ The Positivist novel has been discussed by a number of critics, particularly by Zygmunt Szweykowski (1927, 1972 [1947], 1973 [1961]), Henryk Markiewicz (1964, 1967, 1980 [1978]) and Anna Martuszevska (1977). See also Bachórz and Głowiński (1992), Ludorowski (1992) and Makowiecki (1992).

¹¹ The opinion of his narrator in the novel *Ofiary* (Victims, 1874), quoted by Ostrowska (1936, 256).

implied in the beginning and the well-known episodes as leading to this end' (Ricoeur, 1981, 175). Logic, consistency and coherence became the ultimate values, while loose structures, with the simultaneity of separate story-lines, were out of favour. The discipline of composition stimulated prescriptive, normative recipes for good writing. For Teodor Jeske-Choiński (1854–1920), himself a novelist, logic was paramount and more or less identical with truth and artistry. The novel, as he maintained, should form a pyramid with a clear beginning, middle and end, where causality determines the course of events and guarantees their probability (Jeske-Choiński, 1883). This teleological perfection was coupled by contemporary novelists with mimetic illusionism, since intrusive narrators were criticised not for their omniscience or arbitrary control of events, but for spoiling the directness of represented reality.¹²

A very consistent implementation of these postulates can be found in the criticism and novels of Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910), who represents the Positivist ideal of realistic fiction in its highly developed form. In these times of great respect for science, she expected the novel to be on the boundary-line between art and scholarly investigation. Therefore Stendhal's notion of 'a mirror journeying down the high road' was not satisfactory.

The novel is often figuratively called a mirror of society. This apparent correspondence is not accurate, is only remotely true. A mirror duplicates the surface image of things in their natural state of order or disorder. [...] The novel not only imitates, but creates as well. It imitates things known to everyone, but in the pursuit of beauty and truth, which the general public is unable to perceive, the novel creates balance and order, uplifting represented incidents to the aesthetic and philosophical harmony of tones and forms, similarities and contrasts, causes and effects (Orzeszkowa, 1879, 124–5).

Consequently, referentiality stems from the logic of organization rather than from the direct report of reality. Taine's notion of the 'essential character of things', discussed in *La philosophie de l'art*, has been adapted to the narrative discourse, in order to govern its principles of selection and the grouping of events. Orzeszkowa best implemented her own ideals in the novel *Nad Niemnem* (On the Banks of the Niemen, 1888), where the author's control over the represented world reached a mature formulation. The Realist ambition of portraying typical characters and situations, linked by causality or comparability, was coupled with a well-disciplined dramatic structure in the main story.

The Polish novel of this period only partially responded to that principle. Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) gained his immense popularity by publishing historical fiction following long-established and sometimes pre-novel traditions. His historical novels were all based on the same pattern, where the motif of 'a dragon kidnapping the king's

¹² Examples can be found in, for instance, Chmielowski's assessment of Sienkiewicz's *Szkice węglem* (Charcoal sketches) (Chmielowski, 1961, I, 463).

daughter' (see Propp, 1958) acquires a variety of implementations and where characters play functions well-established in popular epics, fairy-tales or cowboy-and-Indian stories (Krzyżanowski, 1968, Szweykowski, 1973, Wyka, 1968). As a result, the teleological structure serves more to provide suspense and surprise rather than deliver a message, as it used to do in Realist novels. Naturalism, on the other hand, despite its unpopularity in Poland, adversely affected the ideal of dramatic action, in both its purely realistic and its romance form. Apart from writers directly related to Naturalism, its influence can be found in the works of Bolesław Prus (1847–1912), the best Polish novelist of the nineteenth century. His tendency to describe simple social conflicts, to write a *Bildungsroman* and to employ episodic or 'open'¹³ structures give him a special place in the development of Polish fiction (see chapter II).

Over the course of the nineteenth century prose fiction in Poland established itself as a respectable literary genre. Its maturity, however, came along with the disintegration of traditional norms. Moreover, Realism became connected with didacticism and minimal aesthetic aspirations. The Romantic grandeur of poetry survived Positivism and re-emerged with force at the turn of the century. In the opinion of the literary and academic élite, the cult of the 'three great bards' (Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński), and later Norwid, overshadowed the best of the novelists. It is no wonder that the most popular novelist of Young Poland (c. 1890–1918), Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925), used to be ranked by critics as a national 'bard' or 'the last minstrel'. Romantic narrative poems and drama offered a more sophisticated approach to reality than prose fiction and their complex attitude towards literary illusion came to the surface once again. Despite the fact that twentieth-century fiction in Poland is well-represented by Realists, the writers most appreciated by the cultural élite have been firmly committed to anti-Realist principles. Polish Modernism is in effect closer to literary trends in Russia, central Europe and, to some extent, France, than to Beach's ideal of 'Exit Author'. Many Polish Modernists, therefore, approach a state that is now regarded in the English-speaking world as postmodern.

¹³ This notion is discussed by Eco (1989 [1962]). The 'open' novel restricts the role of teleological progress and offers ambiguous dénouements.

CHAPTER II

BOLESŁAW PRUS AND HIS *LALKA*

Bolesław Prus (1847–1912) is a writer whose contribution to the development of Polish fiction has certainly been underestimated. Stanisław Brzozowski, in his *Współczesna powieść polska* (The Modern Polish Novel, 1906), maintained that a society that admired Sienkiewicz was unable to understand the much more complex world of Prus where ‘perspectives constantly changed, intellectual and emotional acts were constantly at play’ (Brzozowski, 1971 [1906–7], 86). These peculiarities are not always recognised by more recent critics either, since the perception of Prus as a classic of Polish nineteenth-century fiction has eclipsed his innovative ideas and literary techniques, while, on the other hand, there is a tendency towards unconvincing, hyperbolic ‘modernizations’ (for example in Bachórz and Głowiński, 1992).¹ His light-hearted sketches and comic verse, written at the beginning of his literary career, initiated a serious interest in humour as a mode of portrayal from two sides, the tragic and the comic. His singular combination of gaiety and sadness, compassion and narrative distance, mystery and everyday details tended towards a plurality of expression and a polyphony of views. This polyphony is often overshadowed, however, by a Positivist commitment to ‘organic work’, that is to economic and scientific progress and mutual co-operation between all members of society. As a result, Prus was not free of the traps set by the *roman à thèse*, which not infrequently affected the content of his novels and short stories. His first major novel, *Placówka* (The Outpost, 1886), despite its simple, chronological structure, which resembles that of French Naturalist novels, contains an unequivocal social message which eventually subordinates the plot, undermining its probability to some extent.

Prus’ chief literary achievement is *Lalka* (The Doll, 1890),² which holds a unique place in the development of Polish fiction. The innovative structure of this work, discussed later in this chapter, confused Positivist

¹ These and other attempts at ‘modernization’ are convincingly refuted by Markiewicz (1994, 331–62).

² There is an edited English translation by David Welsh: *The Doll*, New York, 1972. Louis J. Budd (1992) regards *Lalka* as one of the best European novels of the nineteenth century.

critics,³ who treated it as yet another novel of manners, with a distinctive anti-aristocrat message. From the very beginning everybody admired Prus's descriptions of Warsaw and its social circles, as in the eyes of contemporaries they had documentary value, something which was confirmed later by detailed studies (Markiewicz, 1964, 9, 74–91; Godlewski, 1957). Academic criticism has been greatly concerned with Prus's panoramic portrayal of society (see Szweykowski, 1927; Markiewicz, 1964, 7–73; 1967; Bachórz, 1991), and has treated *Lalka* as a Polish equivalent of *Anna Karenina* or *Vanity Fair*. The social orientation in literary criticism reached its peak in the Marxists' reduction of content to class relations and money (see particularly Kott, 1948). Jean Fabre was the first to observe that Polish critics, both older and more recent, were using the wrong key to *Lalka*, a novel which combined the most traditional and the most innovative narrative methods (Fabre, 1962).

Prus made it clear that he believed reality too complex to be portrayed in only one dimension, and as a humourist he tended to see things simultaneously from a variety of perspectives (Prus, 1890). Fabre noted that the rather conventional surface of *Lalka* was misleading; the semblance of unity has been conferred on disparate, contradictory elements. As I shall try to prove below, Prus undermined authorial omniscience, the traditional notion of causality, the movement of events towards dénouement and the homogeneity of the represented world. As a result, the basic ingredients of the classical Realist novel come under question.

I

Lalka employs both first- and third-person narrators; the former in the diary of Rzecki, one of the chief characters, and the latter in an 'authorial' story-telling. The attitude of the third-person narrator hovers between a firm hold on represented events and the relativism of a reporter, whose impassive account often undermines the supremacy of the authorial voice. This tendency embraces, above all, the protagonist, Wokulski, but is discernible also in the characterization of Izabela Łęcka, another leading character. They both bear some resemblance to Flaubert's Emma, but the former seems somewhat closer to the Gustaw of Mickiewicz's *Dziady* part IV. Wokulski's tender devotion to an aristocratic lady is greatly affected by his reading of Romantic poetry, which has inspired a preconceived notion of an ideal lover. His lofty dreams about great love conceal the 'real' nature of their object, Izabela, simultaneously disclosing, depending on the chosen standpoint, the protagonist's greatness or madness. Open intertextual links with *Don*

³ A comprehensive selection of these opinions was published by Markiewicz (1967).

Quixote (see *Lalka*, vol. II, ch. 15)⁴ may well serve to suggest madness, providing that we accept Cervantes's original intention and assume that in the novel the protagonist's fixation 'not only has no chance of success, [but] actually has no point of contact with reality [and] expends itself in a vacuum', and thus becomes a 'merry play on many levels' (Auerbach, 1953, 344, 354). But in the course of the nineteenth century Don Quixote was rehabilitated by poets such as Heinrich Heine and C.K. Norwid. For the latter, the knight of La Mancha represented spiritual standards inaccessible to the 'laughing mob' ('Epos nasza', *Our Epic*, 1848). Mickiewicz's Gustaw, like his Spanish progenitor, eventually condemns the 'villainous books' which had distorted his vision of reality, but seems also disconsolate that the world is just the world, that it does not allow any celestial experience.⁵

Mario Vargas Llosa, commenting on a love scene between Emma and Léon, comes to the following conclusions:

The space that the narrator sets between reality and illusion is not meant to be taken as an absolute condemnation of the one by the other: the scene is not a farce. These delicate mistruths that the two lovers put forward are always moving, because they reveal their thirst for some absolute, for sensual fulfilment, for beauty — the necessity of illusion, and their effort to bridge, with words, the abyss between their ideals and their true condition (Vargas Llosa, 1987, 147–8).

This observation reminds one of the analysis of aesthetic distance in *Madame Bovary* by B.F. Bart (1954), who demonstrates that the narrator's irony towards the heroine's sentimental dreams and recollections alternates with understanding and identification, depending on the writer's assessment of the sincerity of Emma's feelings. Consequently, the apparent gap in the novel between illusion and reality eventually becomes questionable.

In *Lalka* Wokulski has been granted a tragic dimension greatly exceeding Emma's lowbrow expectations. The sincerity of his feelings is never in doubt, but their absolute value can be questioned. Variable narrative distance from the protagonist, and the semantic equality of contradictory statements articulated by different characters, suspend any

4 All references to editions in two volumes: 21 + 17 chapters. The intertextuality of *Lalka* is discussed by Martuszevska (1992).

5 Ty mnie zabiłeś! — ty mnie nauczyłeś czytać!
W pięknych księgach i pięknym przyrodzeniu czytać!
Ty dla mnie ziemię piekłem zrobiłeś
(z żalem i uśmiechem)
i rajem
(mocniej i ze wzgardą)
A to jest tylko ziemia! (*Dziady* IV, ll. 749–52).
You killed me, you taught me how to read./ To read beautiful books and the beauty of nature./ You turned my world into hell / (*with regret and a smile*) / and into paradise / (*with strength and scorn*) / But this is only the world!

definite conclusion, giving the novel a dialogic structure, as described by Bakhtin (see Przybyła, 1993). There are passages, however, where the author's voice is clearly heard. They concern Wokulski's drama of illusion and disillusion, whose cyclic progress makes the seductive power of love, inspired by Romantic poetry, unquestionable. Now the narrator, who normally avoids direct characterizations of the hero, unusually interferes to point out that his sentimental obsession lacks sound judgement and sometimes borders on insanity.⁶ The word 'obłąd' (lunacy) is repeated several times. Moreover, Wokulski's discerning mind supports the narrator in unmasking his own delusions, and rational reflections of this kind starkly contrast with his irrational dreams and quixotic exaltation. There are also episodes which intertextually link Wokulski with Don Quixote's idealization of Dulcinea, such as the scene where, like a medieval knight, he asks his lady for the privilege of wearing 'her colours' in a duel with the baron, fought in defence of her 'honour' (vol. I, ch. 16). As a result, the reader is free of illusions and never loses contact with the true state of affairs.

Lalka is not a novel which consecutively leads either the protagonist or the reader towards a discovery. Don Quixote, even facing a coarse peasant girl, believes in the Dulcinea of 'flowing hair of gold', but when before his death he eventually renounces books on knight-errantry, he gives up his delusions for good. In other words, he has learned the truth known to Sancho Panza and the readers from the very beginning. Wokulski's love at first sight, as we are told in an analeptic account, had been immediately followed by scepticism as to whether the lady of his dreams actually is not just a common girl waiting for a suitable husband (vol. I, ch. 8). His encounter with Izabela after a business expedition to Bulgaria, that is the scene portrayed in the narrative 'present' (*Gegenwartshandlung*), contains all the elements of disenchantment which much later determine his final decision to terminate this relationship. By that moment Wokulski has come to the conclusion that his ideal woman is in fact a vain coquette, pleased by anyone's admiration (vol. I, ch. 7). This argument plays a major role in the middle of the novel when, following Izabela's flirtation with Starski, Wokulski suddenly leaves for Paris with the earnest intention of bringing his quixotic obsession to an end. His initial attempt to commit suicide, however, is replaced by a 'positive' alternative, that is the attempt to assist the French scholar, Professor Geist, in his scientific research. This decision is complemented by a now sober and rational assessment of his love follies (vol. II, chapters 1–2), after which little more can be said about that obsession. Hence by this stage Prus offers two possible dénouements: suicide or scientific research.

Wokulski's sudden decision to come back to Warsaw and to conduct his drama of illusion and disillusion once again has nothing to do with the

⁶ Details in Eile (1973), which contains a closer discussion of *Lalka*.

progressive logic of events. Conversely, even after his final repudiation of Izabela near the end of the novel, Wokulski remains undecided about whether it was a just decision and is potentially ready to repeat the cycle. The inconclusive ending of his story-line (suicide or departure for Geist's laboratory in Paris), was certainly unusual at the time, but is in fact the most consistent with the recurrent motion of the main events. Their progress results in a rhythmic structure which, theoretically, could be pursued. Elizabeth Ermath's remark that 'rhythm is parataxis on the horizontal and in motion: a repetitive element that doesn't "forward" anything, one that is always exact but never "identical"' (1992, 53) refer to the postmodern novel, which is arbitrarily regarded as a watershed in the understanding of time in fiction. That *Lalka* already contains the basic characteristics of such a rhythmic structure leads one to question the accuracy of many sweeping critical statements on Postmodernism.

Following Propp's model of the Russian folk tale, structuralist examination of narrative reduced the chronological sequence of events to its logical order, which fits the traditional novel well. Paul Ricoeur found an alternative to this approach in repetition, which instead of a 'logical abolition of time' offers the 'existential deepening' of time (Ricoeur, 1981, 180). *Odyssey*, Augustine's *Confessions* and Proust's *Le temps retrouvé* serve him as examples of a quest for lost identity, where the hero eventually 'becomes who he is' (ibid., 182). Had Wokulski, at the end of the novel, actually blown up the rock, symbolizing his blind love to Izabela, and then gone to Paris to become a scientist, this would have constituted a return to the ideals of his youth and thus a rediscovery of identity. The alternative conclusions of *Lalka* (suicide and defeat or survival and victory), however, exclude epiphany and offer no final answer, in the spirit of Eco's concept of *opera aperta* (see Eco, 1989 [1962]).

The open resolution of Wokulski's story-line is consistent with Prus's portrayal of his inner life. The continuous play of contradictory forces links him with Dostoevsky's characters, whose 'openness' was later admired by Gide and Sartre. Prus's innovative technique of representing the human mind has been duly noted by those who have written studies on him (Szwejkowski, 1927; Markiewicz, 1967), as has his admiration for Dostoevsky (which was unusual in the Poland of his day) (Sielicki, 1971, 80–1). Wokulski's story never aims at a preconceived conclusion, but as a result of unexpected peripeteias changes its direction several times. The most typical is the episode in a Paris hotel where immediately after the critical analysis of his illusion and the consequent rejection of love, as inspired by Romantic poetry, Wokulski suddenly decides to return to Warsaw and to court Izabela once again. He is thus reacting to the rather vague promises of her sympathetic response, contained in Prezesowa Zasławska's letter (vol. II, ch. 2). Generally, Prus pays much more attention to single moments than to a comprehensive image of his protagonist. When Wokulski calls on the Łęcis for the first time, the

mercantile calculation of the costs of Izabela's attire represents only his initial confusion and does not claim to represent any permanent or typical attributes (vol. I, ch. 16). Prus believed that human nature could not be classified in simple terms:

Napoleon was full of amazing contradictions. He had forty pulse beats a minute and about forty mistresses a year; cold-blooded in the greatest dangers, he was hysterical in women's arms. He thought with the precision of the best adding machine, but moved so fast from one subject to another that he sometimes sounded like a madman (Prus, 1959 [1890], 384–5).

This certainly resembles Flaubert's admiration for living contrasts expressed in a letter to Louise Colet:

As I entered [Jaffa], I breathed in at one and the same time the fragrance of the lemon trees and the stink of corpses; the cemetery, fallen into ruin, revealed to the eye half-rotten skeletons, while the green trees dangled their golden fruits. Don't you appreciate how complete this poetry is, how it represents the great synthesis? (after Vargas Llosa, 1987, 148).⁷

II

The innovative representation of Wokulski's inner life contrasts with that of other characters, where traditional omniscience is openly at work. The heroine of the love story, Izabela, is introduced by the narrator, whose full knowledge of her mind and ironic distance barely justifies any doubts about the nature of her personality. Moreover, Prus's assessment of Izabela in his remarks about *Lalka* is unequivocal and moralistic (Prus, 1890). Her destructive role in Wokulski's misfortune gives her the appearance of a *femme fatale*, which has adversely affected many critical judgements (for example: Nałkowska, 1932, Szweykowski, 1927, 125–45). Consequently, critics, like Markiewicz (1967, 37–8), accused Prus of subordinating the character's design to his main thesis, which is critical of the Polish aristocracy.

A close reading of *Lalka* reveals contradictions which actually make Izabela's story aporetic, since the text eventually undermines its initial assumptions and prevents any unequivocal conclusions. Apparently, Prus's attempt to make Izabela's aristocratic — and thus conservative — upbringing responsible for her lack of understanding of dynamic and extraordinary individuals like Wokulski, collided with his ambition to give her the independent status of another victim of quixotic illusions. Her dreams represent the uninspired discourse of aristocratic drawing rooms, whose level is far below Wokulski's inspirations, taken from Romantic poetry, but still surpass the pragmatic pursuit of rich husbands, which characterizes such women as Ewelina Janocka, whose subsidiary story-line forms a parallel to the main drama. Izabela's craving for

⁷ Letter of 27 March, 1853.

unusual men, misguided as it is, resembles Emma Bovary's delusions, which are not totally condemned by Flaubert. Prus chooses reprehension rather than sympathy, but still she may be understood as another victim of preconceived ideals, hardly matched by reality. In the words of Mrs Wąsowska, Wokulski and Izabela simply misunderstand each other (vol. II, ch. 11). If we follow this interpretation, the main conflict becomes neither strictly social (an aristocratic woman despising a businessman) or psychological (an idealist deceived by a heartless husband hunter), but turns into a clash of two irreconcilably isolated discourses. One discourse represents the Romantic notion of an ideal and actually moving affection (Wokulski). Another combines a relaxed attitude towards commonplace flirtation with naive and somewhat sentimental dreams about wonderful lovers, fulfilling expectations cultivated by young ladies from what is regarded as the superficial culture of the upper class (Izabela). Prus openly sympathized with the first discourse and feared the decline of moral standards brought about by modern civilization. His declared aims, however, to portray Izabela as a 'frigid Messalina', who imaginatively makes love to any attractive man while actually hunting for a rich husband (Prus, 1959 [1890], 393), is not convincingly incorporated into the novel. Therefore the opinion of one of the most sympathetic characters, Ochocki, that Izabela is neither silly nor bad, but just resembles thousands within her social group (vol. II, ch. 17), seems fully justified.

The diary of Ignacy Rzecki forms a distinctive part of the novel. The first-person narrative and expository content only partly account for the role it plays. As a character, Rzecki is certainly dependent on the predominantly authorial perspective, which oscillates between affectionate irony and sympathetic solidarity. As a narrator, he is only partly reliable, since his personal naivety and often simplistic views give the content an intimate hue. In Bakhtin's terms (1963) his narration appears definitely tilted towards represented speech, which characterizes the speaker from an external perspective, rather than direct speech, which refers to its object and reflects the 'internal' point of view.⁸ It is impossible to treat Rzecki's politics seriously; he assumes that the English will help to restore the Bonaparte dynasty in France and that the new Napoleon will cooperate with Bismarck (married to a Polish lady) for the benefit of Poland. His opinions about fictitious characters, particularly Wokulski, are equally simple-minded, and his world, both in

⁸ Bakhtin's distinction between direct speech, referring to its subject (*pryamoe, predmetno napravlennoe slovo*) and represented speech (*izobrazhennoe, obyektное slovo* [1963, 266-7]) goes far beyond a simple distinction between words announced by the author and those announced by his characters. It actually implies that any discourse free of a dominant tendency to portray and typify the speaker (represented speech) can offer him/her a chance to refer directly to the subject, that is to be transformed into a semantically independent and predominantly 'authentic' point of view. Thus in Bakhtin's figurative language each of Dostoevsky's heroes is an author (*ibid.*, 33).

its micro- and macro-structure, represents a neat division between right and wrong, peopled with black and white puppets. In this respect, however, Rzecki stands for something broader than himself. His own upbringing in the stable, traditional atmosphere of Warsaw in the first half of the nineteenth century, makes him close to the discourse of novels before Flaubert and Dostoevsky. Analogies with Dickens have been made by Szweykowski (1927, 343), but there are also similarities with the more sarcastic reality of Thackeray's puppets.⁹ None the less, Rzecki finally represents an idealistic belief in the eventual victory of good over evil and hence in a moral order. This is not totally rejected by the novel and therefore becomes part of its final, dialogic context.

The variety of discourses give *Lalka* a distinctive character, attesting to the role of false consciousness in people's perception of reality, where ideas are prone to override real things. The consistent implementation of this principle leads postmodern writers towards plurality of representation and complete rejection of any 'totalizing'¹⁰ image of reality. Prus's rational mind does not allow him to go that far and there is still an independent reality in *Lalka*. This reality, however, cannot be explained in the simple terms of one discourse. Whether or not the world is well-ordered or in disorder, whether a practical, businesslike approach to life is superior to imaginative Romantic 'madness', and, finally, whether contemporary civilization is actually progressing or in decline form open questions, something which is helped by the novel's peculiar non-teleological structure of events. The uncertainty of Wokulski's lot and the final, contrasting assessments of his personality by two different characters, Ochocki and Szuman, make for an open ending where nobody, including the author, has the closing word (see Kubaszewski, 1992). This was unique at the time of publication, and has been misunderstood by generations of critics since (for more details see Eile, 1973; see Warzenica-Zalewska, 1992, 212–16; Fita, 1992). *Lalka* certainly influenced the works of Young Poland writers, like Żeromski (see Bachórz, 1991, 39), but Prus himself later embarked on more homogenous structures, which in his last novel, *Dzieci* (Children, 1909), took the shape of an almost journalistic message. Only his historical novel, *Faraon* (The Pharaoh, 1897), manifests a little openness in its assessment of the mutual relations between the individual and history.

⁹ 'Come, children, let us shut up the box, and the puppets, for our play is played out' (*Vanity Fair*, ch. 67). The role of puppets in *Lalka* was recently discussed by Czapplejewicz (1987) and Przybyła (1992), but their conclusions are far-fetched and unconvincing.

¹⁰ The word 'totalizing' is borrowed from postmodern criticism. According to Ermath (1992, 151) totalizing interpretations reduce the play of meanings and arrive at unequivocal conclusions.

CHAPTER III

THE LYRICAL MOOD OF EARLY MODERNISM

Part I

Between the essay and 'landscapes of the soul'

I

The critical proclamations of the literary period known as Young Poland (c. 1890–1918) were utterly hostile to the novel, particularly in its Realist form. The most influential writers, inspired by French Symbolism, ultimately aimed at synthesized, general visions rather than detailed descriptions of everyday reality. Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam) (1861–1944), in a celebrated introduction to his translation of the selected plays of Maurice Maeterlinck (1894),¹ maintained that the everlasting value of masterpieces depends on the presence of 'a permanent, universal and immortal ingredient, immune to the erratic evolution of the sensuous world' (Przesmycki, 1967, I, 305). The most influential Polish author at the turn of the century, Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927), wrote in his essay *Z gleby kujawskiej* (From Kujawy Soil, 1902) that in its search for eternity Symbolism was able to penetrate beyond contingency and transience, treating the outer world only as 'a symbol of another, higher reality' (Przybyszewski, 1966, 161).² The condemnation of Realism achieved its peak in his promotion of Expressionism sixteen years later, when he declared: 'Down with any "reality", which is nothing but an illusive phantom, the caricature and delusion of the sole reality, the reality of our mind' (Przybyszewski, 1918, 5). It is also symptomatic that in looking for a Polish cultural tradition he turned back beyond Positivism towards the great Romantics, Mickiewicz and Słowacki.

Universal ambitions in the form of intellectual synthesis favoured parables and certainly disparaged the analytical 'formal realism'³ of the novel, oriented towards the *hic et nunc*. Maria Komornicka (1876–1949), who was closely associated with the leading Modernist journal, *Chimera* (1901–7), regarded prose fiction as a 'dull and disgusting' manifestation

1 First published in *Świat*, 1891, nos. 3–24.

2 For more of this see Eile, 1988.

3 The notion of 'formal realism' is explained by Watt (1957).

of the middle-class perspective (1894).⁴ In this period the novel was often identified with unsophisticated taste and mass culture. Consequently, Modernist magazines advanced the sort of prose which either aimed at symbolic representation (Garshin, Schwob, Gide, Huysmans), or Romantic mystery (Poe, Barbey-d'Aurevilly). Poetic prose, with rhythmic cadence, figurative language and parabolic structure, came into vogue, forcing Realists to adjust their craft to the new demands, sometimes with rather questionable results (Reymont's [1867–1925] 'Komurosaki' in *Chimera*). Even the old Positivist, Prus, was now promoted as a writer whose imagination approached Indian poetry in its search for the supersensory, and who allegedly was a 'mystic of realism' (Matuszewski, 1965 [1897], 154; 1904, 141–9; Miciński, 1912).

The anti-novel penchant engendered the popularity of intermediate forms, which combined artistic style with discursive content, such as the essay. The French predilection for that genre, within a broader backlash against realism, was certainly noticed in Poland. The symptomatic prescription of Jules Renard that 'la formule nouvelle du roman c'est de ne pas faire de roman' (after Raimond, 1966, 59) was not only followed in France by growing interest in the *roman-poème* and the short story, but also turned fiction into an intellectual game. Paul Valéry intended to portray 'the life of a theory' itself and believed that his *La soirée avec monsieur Teste* (1896) was a 'chimera of intellectual mythology' (ibid., 77–8). André Gide's *Paludes* (1895) is described by Raimond as the 'history of ideas' and 'a novel about the novel' (ibid., 79). On the other hand an 'artistic style' entered the realm of the essay which, consequently, discarded any claim to objectivity. In Germany even philosophers, such as Heinrich Rickert (*Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, 1892), identified theoretical thinking with a subjective assessment. The elegant and digressive style of Georg Simmel, with its frequent use of the uncommitted 'perhaps' or 'one might say', openly undermined logical precision and tended to represent the process of thinking rather than its final results (Hamann and Herman, 1960, 94–6).

Anti-novel trends in Polish literature produced one of the most remarkable works of the period in Karol Irzykowski's (1873–1944) *Pałuba* (1903).⁵ A book review in *Chimera* properly saw in Irzykowski's experiment a symptom of the contemporary drift towards a 'quasi-novel' and identified its major fault as an excess of commentary, whose immoderation did not allow the reality represented to speak for itself (Włast, 1905). Leading literary critics like Stanisław Lack (1980 [1903], 335–92), Stanisław Brzozowski (1971 [1906], 134–9), Władysław

4 Komornicka's article in question was reprinted by Pigoń under the title *Nowe drogi powieści* (Pigoń, 1964b, 353–8).

5 *Pałuba* is the name of a female character. Its broader meaning has been defined by the author as 'the symbol of everything that interrupts the illusory course of events from outside or inside' (Irzykowski, 1957b, 349).

Jabłonowski (1903) and Andrzej Niemojewski (1903) were respectful, at the very least. Even the traditionalist, Teodor Jeske-Choiński, found in *Pałuba* a penetrating insight into the human mind (1903). Hence, later complaints that Irzykowski's work was actually slighted by contemporaries are ungrounded and reflect repeated attempts to overestimate its role in the development of modern fiction. Considered a precursor of Proust (Topass, 1930), Freud and Adler (Wyka, 1968b [1948], 363–91), Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (Zengel, 1970 [1958], 109–26; Werner, 1965) and other avant-garde trends, he was eventually elevated to the status of a pioneer of the evolution of the self-conscious novel (see also Głowiński, 1969, 253–63; Szary-Matywiecka, 1979). In a recent assessment of his work, the intellectualization of the content is regarded as the main reason for *Pałuba*'s supreme rank in the history of Polish Modernist fiction (Podraza-Kwiatkowska, 1992, 221–5).⁶

Irzykowski's achievement in advancing the notion of the unconscious, independently of Freud,⁷ who was then unknown in Poland, seems beyond doubt. In what sense, however, his unusual work represents Modernist trends in fiction is a complex problem, which tends to have been simplified in recent critical works. Self-conscious writing is represented by various trends in twentieth-century fiction, but all of them imply a fiction that 'reflects upon its own structure as language' (Waugh, 1988, 13–14). While Modernism, concerned with consciousness, focuses on the development of the narrator as a novel-producing force (the self-begetting novel), Postmodernism embraces the construction of fictionality *per se*, the general conditions of any writing (ibid. 24, 102). Following Dostoevsky, André Gide, with whom Irzykowski is often compared, aimed with varying success at the 'open novel'. His *Le journal des Faux-monnayeurs* discloses an inclination towards the disappearance of the author as the ultimate wisdom and the consequent autonomy of the characters and their different points of view. As a result, the reader is expected to reconstruct the meaning and to draw his own conclusions.

Irzykowski's had the opposite objectives. In one of his manifold commentaries on the novel ('Szaniec *Pałuby*', The entrenchment of *Pałuba*, 1903), he flaunted his disregard for the reader, who had been spoiled by the adulation of writers and unable to decipher the deeper meaning of any ambitious work. So, in 'respect for his own ideas', Irzykowski decided to speak as a 'professor who made loud and lucid one part of his lecture, while in the apprehension of being misunderstood anyway, he delivered the other by mumbling under his beard, with his

⁶ See Drozdowski's Ph.D. thesis: *Borderline Masterpiece: Karol Irzykowski's 'Pałuba' Against the Background of Positivism and Modernism* (text in Polish, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1987). *Pałuba*'s unconventional form brings to mind Barthes's notion of the 'writerly text' (see Barthes, 1990a).

⁷ Irzykowski was interested in Eduard von Hartmann's *Die Philosophie des Unbewussten* (869), which he discussed several times in his diary in the early 1890s (see Irzykowski, 1964, 28, 38, 58–61).

back to the audience' (Irzykowski, 1957b [1903], 416–17). While 'mumbling' may still be interpreted as suggesting uncertainty, which is occasionally indicated in *Pałuba*, the 'lecturing' tone holds the privileged position and determines its narrative and semantic structure. Irzykowski saw five basic planes in the novel: 1) facts, 2) characters' opinions about those facts, 3) conclusions suggested by the facts themselves, 4) the author's assessment of these three sources of information, 5) the philosophical background of his final verdict, which determines the understanding of *Pałuba* 'in conformity with *his* intentions' (ibid., 415). Since the author eventually prevails over the characters and his interpretative expansion leaves little work for the reader, apart from the effort of grasping the complexities of the author's perspicacious explanations, he defies the Modernist ideal of 'active readers', who reconstruct the meaning themselves. Irzykowski's assault can thus be interpreted as an attempt to repel absolute relativity and chaos, to impose some rational order upon things,⁸ and to enforce the author's commentary, as readers are treated with a patronising disrespect. In other words, the traditional novelist's omniscience and didacticism achieve in *Pałuba* a sort of perfection which eventually undermines it, despite the fact that Irzykowski failed to write critical appraisal for his own method (cf. Głowiński, 1969, 261–2).

Consequently, *Pałuba* is a self-conscious novel only in a restricted sense. Irzykowski exposes and censures literary devices that falsify the image of reality, particularly the atmospheric effects of Young Poland writers and the photographic realism of the traditional novel. Moreover, his disregard for literary techniques embraces narration, dialogues and interior monologues, that is both 'telling' and 'showing', although the former seems closer to his analytical method. While the Polish followers of Sterne in the early nineteenth century openly criticized existing literary devices to underline the innovatory force of their own narrative, Irzykowski goes much further and points out that literary techniques in principle are unable to render the complexity of life. Therefore he assigns the dominant role to essayistic discourse and as a result interprets his own work, preventing others from anything beyond the exegesis of *Pałuba*'s own explanatory mechanism. He suggests how one can surpass literature, but despite rather marginal hesitations hardly investigates his own language. In the end, Irzykowski remains himself, that is a prominent literary critic who discloses the mistakes of others and earnestly defends his own methodology.

Irzykowski's disregard for the story as such results from its subordination to the ideas which it is supposed to illustrate. The weight of these ideas accounts for the almost academic seriousness with which events are described and assessed. While Zola tried to test his own

⁸ 'Name the nameless' postulated Irzykowski in 1922, under the provocative title 'Uroki naturalizmu' (The Attraction of Naturalism) (Irzykowski, 1957 b, 417).

creations in an 'experimental' manner, Irzykowski, with the devotion of a scholar, aims to expose the main character's self-deception, but forgets about his own power as the creator. One of the first critics of *Pałuba*, Stanisław Lack, correctly argues that, like many other doctrinaires, he ignores the fact that logic is often missing from human affairs and that therefore science is insufficient to determine which human life is genuine and which is not. *Pałuba*, as he teasingly suggested, 'could have been written by Cervantes' (Lack, 1980 [1903], 347, 357). Rejecting the plurality of points of view and the diversity of existence, Irzykowski actually upholds the traditional representation of reality, however sophisticated a form it might be given. Blatantly disregarding the notion that literary discovery is a matter of selecting narrative techniques, he can hardly be regarded as a pioneer of Modernist fiction. None the less, modern Polish prose-writing was most certainly inspired by his innovative theories and his scornful dismissal of the novel as such. Even his greatest admirers had to recognise that *Pałuba* was simply a long, intellectually-demanding essay (for example Werner, 1965, 368). Irzykowski undermined the novel as a literary genre and came close to the opinion of Jules Renard that the best formula for a novel was not to be written at all.

II

The most typical trend at the time was to reject realistic objectivity as a deceptive deviation from the only possible way open to literature, the communication of strictly personal experience. Scepticism about the perceptibility of the *Ding an sich* was the starting point for Maria Komornicka's exaltation of pure subjectivity: 'The world exists for us solely in thoughts and feelings and is never independent of our sensibility. The nature of external things will always remain dark and inscrutable' (Komornicka, 1964 [1894], 355). The revelation of the 'mysteries of the individual mind' and the transformation of the outer world into the 'ideograms of the writer's inner experience' were then the most common demands of the critics. While similar demands frequently failed to go beyond fashionable verbiage, the young Brzozowski's (1878–1913) claim that genuine art discloses 'the music of the soul' (1905, 104) certainly meant more than the vague formula indicated. Writers, he believed, were above all creators and their inner insight transcended the conscious and achieved metaphysical profundity, giving them the status of saints and prophets. Hence both realistic imitation and purely aesthetic accomplishment were actually trivial in comparison with spiritual vocation, which served as the ultimate measure of artistic maturity (Brzozowski, 1905).

Brzozowski and Komornicka's ideals, when carried to their conclusion, were hostile to the novel and paved the way for lyrical structures, resembling the *roman poème*. It is not sufficient, therefore, to

locate the Young Poland novel within the broader, Modernistic drift towards internal focalization, as Głowiński points out in his stimulating monograph (1969), because Polish prose fiction only partially fitted in with the post-Flaubertian development of point-of-view techniques. Henry James and his followers tended to strike a balance between the perceiving self and perceived reality, treating the former as an independent character in the novel and the latter as the personal vision of a supra-individual entity. Polish novelists, however, eventually aimed at the unity of subject and object in a lyrical imagery which openly manifested its links with the implied author, who was thus the supreme self within the reality evoked. Nevertheless contemporaneous fiction in Poland was also under the strong influence of Naturalism, which sometimes came to the foreground (the early novels of Reymont or Waław Sieroszewski [1858–1945]), but often simply coexisted with the lyrical mood, and pervaded and somewhat undermined its Symbolist drift towards synthesis. Reymont's *Chłopi* (The Peasants, 1902–9) and the majority of Żeromski's literary works represent that trend. This was acceptable only to moderate representatives of the new trends, such as Ignacy Matuszewski (1858–1919) and Wilhelm Feldman (1868–1919). More partisan devotees of Modernism, particularly the *Chimera* critics, demanded the complete rejection of techniques derived from the Realist novel. Żeromski's *Popioły* (Ashes, 1904) was praised as much for its divergence from the traditional novel, as blamed for the fact that this retreat was not complete (Włast, 1905).⁹

The champions of 'poetic' fiction considered the present state of affairs, when poetic imagery still adhered to everyday reality, as transitory, a stage preceding the 'novel to be born', which would reject mimesis in favour of genuine creativity (Leśmian, 1959b [1913], 379). Plot and action were tolerated only insofar as they contributed to the dramatization of inner life (see Dąbrowski, 1908). The intellectual climate declaring the supremacy of the mind over external events had been prepared, directly or indirectly, by the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The former conveyed Kantian epistemology in a simpler form and placed the individual in the centre of creation. His conviction that we should understand 'nature in ourselves and not ourselves in nature' identified style with the mode of perceiving and lent support to a self-centred contemplation of reality, as it had done in France (Uitti, 1961, 22–37; Toczyński, 1969). The Polish reception of Nietzsche has been already discussed by scholars (for example Weiss, 1961). His belief in the creative power of men, his criticism of the rational understanding of the world, his epistemological relativism, and his sympathy for a 'Dionysian' attitude, certainly corresponded with the Young Poland concept of the self.

⁹ This review was probably written by Zenon Przesmycki, but there is a chance that Maria Komornicka may have written it.

The notion of a universal message and subjectivity exposed affected the reception of foreign authors. Flaubert was respected by Żeromski, but his *impassibilité* barely struck a chord with dominant expectations. Dostoevsky's psychology of the unexpected was influential; it spawned a predilection for contrived fortuity and illogicality in the presentation of the human mind. Yet, the ideal of the novel was found elsewhere, particularly in Gabriele D'Annunzio and Scandinavian authors. In 1897 Maria Komornicka wrote to another literary critic, Cezary Jellenta, that the reading of *Il trionfo della morte* had had a shattering effect on her (Pigoń, 1964b, 358). For Władysław Jabłonowski, D'Annunzio's *Il fuoco* represented heroic art that liberated humanity from material bonds and aimed at the 'integral ideal of life' (Jabłonowski, 1905, 188–96). Ignacy Matuszewski (1900) complimented the Italian author on his rejection of Realist trivialities in favour of 'poetic symbolism' and 'the synthesis of all arts', while Walery Gostomski (1904) esteemed him for liberating the novel from 'doctrinaire realism' through poetic imagination (more examples in Podraza-Kwiatkowska, 1985, 206–24). Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries* had its following in Poland (Przybyszewski), and his *Pan* was regarded as a masterpiece of poetic vision (Bytkowski, 1896). As in German, Czech or Bulgarian, a remarkable number of Scandinavian novelists were translated, for example Herman Bang, Arne Garbourg, Verner von Heidenstam, Jens Peter Jacobsen, Jonas Lie, Selma Lagerlöf and August Strindberg. Leonid Andreyev earned great esteem for his symbolism, creation of atmosphere and the internalization of events (see Jabłonowski, 1910, 220–6). The Romantic imagination of Edgar Allan Poe served as an example of liberated dreams that rise above the dreadful reality of quotidian existence (Leśmian, 1959a [1913]). Fantasy and lyricism apart, the writers were admired for direct expression of their inner world. Jan Lorentowicz pointed out that in *À rebours* Huysmans had disregarded novelistic form and instead of representing the variety of his characters actually portrayed a mind akin to the author himself (1911, 105). Even Conrad, whose narrative technique still remained barely acceptable to Polish critics, was interpreted and appreciated in a similar way (Rakowska, 1908).

The general trend in Polish fiction concurs in many ways with what Ralph Freedman attributes to the lyrical novel:

The lyrical novel, then, emerges as an 'anti-novel' in the true sense of the term because, by portraying the act of knowledge, it subverts the conventionally accepted qualities of the novel which are focused on the intercourse between men and worlds. But in this form it also expresses a peculiarly modern approach to experience that has ripened into our current obsession with the conditions of knowledge. In this strangely alienated, yet somehow essential genre, the direct portrayal of awareness becomes the outer frontier where novel and poem meet (1963, p. viii).

III

Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925) attempted to strike a balance between the internal and external visions of reality, combining lyrical mood with the more traditional techniques of the Realist novels. As a result, despite his great popularity during his lifetime and some later admiration (Drozdowicz-Jurgielewiczowa, 1929, Adamczewski, 1949) he has neither fully satisfied those who believe that the ultimate value of literary success depends on the ‘controlling operation of intellect, which weighs up, chooses and organizes according to the rigorous rules of logical thinking’ (Hutnikiewicz, 1987, 411;¹⁰ see also Miłosz, 1983, 369), nor the champions of modernity, who usually regard him as an old-fashioned propagator of social justice or a sentimental adherent of literary kitsch.¹¹ The new approach to the novel, initiated in the sixties, has, in academe, brought with it new assessments of Żeromski’s place in the development of Polish fiction (for example: Bartoszyński, 1965; Głowiński, 1969; Goliński, 1977; Handke, 1980).

As Drozdowicz-Jurgielewiczowa (1929, 60) and Adamczewski (1949, 351–80) have noted, Żeromski’s characters can be divided into three groups: (1) traditional novelistic characters, which are described from outside, (2) hybrid constructs, combining unity with the implied author, external presentation and ironic distance, (3) protagonists, who play the role of focalizers and therefore are predominantly seen from within. Only in the last two groups, the most typical of his fiction, does Żeromski achieve the direct appeal of inward presentation considered essential for the lyrical novel. In his fundamental conception of his characters one may trace the Impressionistic tendency to portray the human mind kaleidoscopically, in opposition to the traditional unity of human self (see Hauser, 1951, II, 848–9; Moser, 1952, 252–8). The multiplicity of desires, unexpected, illogical reactions to events or states, and impressionability make up a framework for the represented self. The focalizing function of the self, however, is not stable and consistent in Żeromski’s works. The Impressionistic perception of external events may simply take the shape of a detached ‘camera-eye’, as in the descriptions of battlefields in his historical novel *Popioły* (Ashes, 1904). When it comes, however, to portrayals of Nature, the inner links between the subject and object of presentation advance to the foreground to become ‘landscapes of the soul’, where external reality becomes one with the perceptive self. The floating clouds, still water, flowers, trees or the piercing cry of a peacock suggest states of mind and actually belong to the characters’ inner life. They tend to reveal symbolically the very nature of existence. Stylistically, in Żeromski’s novels this corresponds

¹⁰ In his earlier works, Hutnikiewicz articulated similar views in a simplistic form, particularly in his Marxist study of Żeromski’s relations with Naturalism (1956).

¹¹ In the most extreme form Artur Sandauer (1966, 86, footnote).

with the flamboyant form, relying upon the extensive use of figurative language and rhythmical prose, which sharply contrasts with the factual approach of 'camera-eye' episodes.

In Żeromski's novels, the representation of inner life oscillates between individualization and universalization. The former dominates in descriptions of spontaneous and confused reactions, where a single, unpredictable experience violates logical patterns and the variety of human types is replaced by the multiplicity of psychological human responses. As a result, the characters undermine causality and teleological progress, which exposed the author to attacks from traditionally-oriented critics. Universalization, aiming at a 'synthetic' imagery of general implication, unites all protagonists in one shared experience and eventually portrays the same transcendental self. Because of the empathetic involvement of the 'triple point of view' (Uitti, 38–41), the author, the character and the reader take part in an identical search for what was then regarded as the 'soul of the universe'. As part of a broader Modernist trend, Żeromski elevates love to a great metaphysical occurrence, but unlike D'Annunzio or Huysmans, avoids over-refinement and looks above all for communion with Nature (see Kwiatkowska-Siemenska, 1964, 170–85).

In comparison with his 'landscapes of the soul', Żeromski's ideological commitment, the main source of his popularity among the radical intelligentsia, is mostly reflected in plot and dialogue, and only occasionally reaches inner life, as in *Ludzie bezdomni* (Homeless People, 1900), a novel with a forceful social message. The Bergsonian distinction between *le moi superficiel* and *le moi profond* affects the temporal structure of his novels, where the chronological sequence of events coexist with 'duration' (*durée*), that is the 'time' of inner experience. The role of the 'unexpected', however, undermines the teleological movement of events towards their logical conclusion and tilts the story-line towards an open ending. The resulting relativism of representation also includes a polyphony of voices, embracing both narration and dialogues. The fluctuation of sympathy and irony in reference to Dr Judym, the protagonist of *Ludzie bezdomni*, forces an ambivalent response on the reader, since the ideological commitment of the hero contains both lofty and comically quixotic tones.

Żeromski's approach to the past in his historical novels *Popioły* and *Wierna rzeka* (The Faithful River, 1913) resorts to the complexity of controversial arguments, articulated directly in dialogues or suggested by antithetical relations between various story-lines. Extended disputes in those novels have often been regarded as one of the shortcomings of his fiction (e.g. Hutnikiewicz, 1956, 1987). Be that as it may, the exchange of opinions in Żeromski's works diverges from traditional novelistic discourse, where controversies have usually been subordinated to preconceived conclusions and are thus artificial in principle (see Bakhtin, 1963, 242 ff.). Żeromski's fiction represents a genuine polyphony, where

every discussant seems to have an equal right to pronounce opinions reflecting personal convictions, political affiliation, social standing or nationality. This was the main reason why Żeromski has often been accused of supporting various ideas, which were only 'cited' in his novels.¹² Similarly, the variety of characters and story-lines in *Popioły* contributes to a representation of the Polish desire for independence where lines dividing enemies from allies and Polish patriots from foreign invaders do not necessarily correspond with implied moral assessments, and provoke more questions than answers. Consequently, every political stand appears debatable and the utter confusion in the critical response demonstrates this.¹³

IV

Żeromski's artistic compromise could barely satisfy the enthusiasts of the lyrical mood. Brzozowski complained that Żeromski's Realist devotion to detail thwarted the direct representation of the 'music of the soul' (1905, 104). He valued rather the 'more consistent approach' of Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927), for, in Brzozowski's view, Przybyszewski implemented the results of the philosophy of Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*) and Avenarius¹⁴ by looking upon truth and goodness as relative values and upholding faith in the reality of the self (Brzozowski, 1928 [1902–3]).¹⁵ Przybyszewski was an adherent of the notion of the 'deep self', which he advocated in his influential theory of the 'naked soul'. As a writer who in the 1890s was active in Berlin's *bohème* and published his first and, perhaps, best works in German,¹⁶ Przybyszewski was also known outside Poland (see McFarlane, 1976, 116–17; Filipkowska, 1982, 141–212). Directly influenced by the Swedish critic, Ola Hansson, he certainly followed Romantic idealism, Schopenhauer's understanding of the Will to life, and the would-be anti-intellectual penchant of Friedrich Nietzsche. In its early stage the 'naked

¹² The best example is the turbulent reception of his last novel *Przedwiośnie* (Before the Spring, 1924).

¹³ More about 'illogicality' and polyphony in Żeromski's novels in Eile (1976, 1977).

¹⁴ Richard Avenarius (1843–1896) was, along with Ernst Mach, the leading representative of Positivist empiricism. Brzozowski referred to his book *Kritik der reinem Erfahrung* (1889–90).

¹⁵ Despite his great popularity among his contemporaries, Przybyszewski was later rather disregarded as an important writer (e.g. Krzyżanowski, 1963, 30–1; Hutnikiewicz, 1967; Kuncewiczowa, 1979). The reappraisal of his contribution was above all reflected in the conference commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his death (see Filipkowska, 1982). The critics, however, are more concerned with his biography, theories, prose poems and plays than the novels.

¹⁶ These works, which included plays, prose poems, novels and essays, were later translated rather haphazardly into Polish. They are discussed by Herman (1939) Schluchter (1969) and Marx (1990).

soul', in direct reference to Nietzsche, was described in biological terms as a 'collective name for the souls of all animals that man had been before he became himself' (Przybyszewski, 1892). The 'naked soul', close to primary instincts, mainly comprised energy generated by sexual desire and thus resembled Freud's image of the libido. Later, however, this idea evolved into the vaguer concept of 'absolute consciousness', generic memory, keeping in stock human cultural heritage. The actual implication of this theory for artistic creation was apparent in the essay on Nietzsche (ibid.), where the experimental psychology of English and French scholars was rejected in favour of pure 'atmosphere' (*Stimmung*), regarded as the sole reflection of reality, as shown in a masterly fashion in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.¹⁷

In the Polish *fin de siècle* Przybyszewski's notion of the 'naked soul' represents the most extreme understanding of Modernist solipsism. As a novelist, however, Przybyszewski was much more successful in theory than in practice. His long, wordy and clumsy works of fiction (the most famous: *Homo sapiens*, 1895–6 in German, 1901 in Polish)¹⁸ are interesting only as experiments. Regarding the novel as a *biblia pauperum*, he showed little respect for it as a genre, but pioneered, none the less, a then innovative approach to the craft of fiction. His condemnation of 'useless talk about the characters' paralleled Henry James's rejection of authorial omniscience, while his disregard for action and external events was typical of the main stream of Modernist fiction (see Przybyszewski, 1959, 229–30; 1937 [1897], 173–4). Przybyszewski's interest in the inner life had a peculiar bias. In a letter to Franz Servaes (July 1895), he postulated the replacement of 'logical and rational' characters by 'transcendental human beings', that is, as he put it, 'the unprincipled, dreamers, fatalists and madmen'. Perhaps for this reason, he applauded Johannes Schlaf's interest in the demented, since people of sound health retained 'idiotic, uniform brains' (Przybyszewski, 1937, 103–4). Przybyszewski's characters are subordinated to the author's understanding of the human condition. All of them, but particularly the males, live in a state of permanent turbulence, torn between sexual desire or the greed for power and irresistible awareness of guilt engendered by their Judeo-Christian cultural heritage. Instead of Nietzschean supermen living beyond good and evil, he created miserable victims of universal Fate (see Dziemidok, 1972; Boniecki, 1993).

What is distinctive in Przybyszewski's works, and what adversely affects their artistic value, is his characters' full understanding of their tragic condition, as reflected in rambling sermons about the human predicament, which make the chief parts of the novels prolonged

17 Similar views were pronounced by Brzozowski (1905), another very influential critic. More details about Przybyszewski's theories in Eile (1988), which also contains bibliographical information. The most recent study of the 'naked soul' is by Boniecki (1993).

18 The English translation was published in New York (1970).

monologues. While Hamsun and Maeterlinck, as he claimed, portray only the naive victims of forces beyond their control, his characters are fully aware of their destiny, and he considered such an approach essential to the modern novel (Przybyszewski, 1937 [1895], 103–4). Moreover, in order to be universal, Przybyszewski transformed his characters' inner experience into rhetorical patterns and symbols, by means of which he hoped to represent the ubiquitous and eternal self.

Despite all his shortcomings, Przybyszewski belongs among the pioneers of the internal monologue in Polish fiction. Subordinated to an overtly universal notion of the human mind, his monologues are usually closer to those of Hermann Broch's *The Death of Vergil* (1945) than to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Occasionally, though, he attempts to give the impression of free association, as Dujardin does in his *Les Lauriers sont coupés* (1888). In *Homo sapiens*, for example, the reader watches the heroine, tormented by memories of her unfaithful lover, Falk, and looking mechanically at the shop sign of a certain Isaak: 'What huge letters. Isaak son of Isaak, awfully amusing...Falk a genius...He told me that he wanted to improve the human race by begetting many children with as great as possible a number of women...Here I can buy material for my dress...183 Friedrich-Strasse...what is his name? Isaak son of Isaak 183...' (1923, III, 161). Such episodes are rare, but the frequent use of flashbacks interrupts any traditional story-line and subordinates plot to inner experience. Furthermore, Przybyszewski's interest in hallucination internalized the represented world and eventually undermined its autonomous existence. In his late, Expressionist novel *Krzyk* (The Scream, 1917), inspired by Munch's painting, reality is entirely within the protagonist's mind. Przybyszewski's writing is here abreast with Strindberg's later work and resembles the world of Franz Kafka. His works reached a stage where the self creates rather than mirrors.

CHAPTER IV

THE LYRICAL MOOD OF EARLY MODERNISM

Part II

Symbols, myth and the grotesque

I

The 'triple point of view' in Young Poland fiction vacillates between attempts to strike a balance between internal and external reality (Żeromski) and the ultimate subordination of the latter to the experiencing self (Przybyszewski). This self, despite its empathic identification with the author, still belongs to the represented world, as its personal 'reflector'. Wacław Berent (1873–1940)¹ aims at a vision whose primarily external character makes the implied author the final creator of his invented world. From the Realist *Fachowiec* (The Specialist, 1895) he evolves towards fiction that does not really indulge in pure fantasy, but gives the external world a universal, symbolic and finally mythological essence. Thus the major role in the construction of reality is played by the author's style, which has been admired by a number of critics (for example Hultberg, 1969;² Paszek, 1976).

As a translator and interpreter of Nietzsche, Berent shared Nietzsche's view that artistic language should reverberate in the reader's mind, should supersede the style of scholarship or colloquial speech. The inspirations of Berent's figurative language, rhythmic cadences and inversive syntax have been traced back to the Romantic prose of the young Krasiński and particularly to the historical novels of Dominik Magnuszewski (Podraza-Kwiatkowska and Kwiatkowski, 1961). Berent's lyrical style deeply affects his literary world. Peer Hultberg pointed out that the concretization of abstract qualities modifies the presentation of characters by undermining their subjectivity (1969, 114–15), whereas the lack of individualization in the dialogues built up inner links between all characters involved (*ibid.*, 117). Other depersonalizing mechanisms include impressions detached from their human incentives, verbal nouns transferring attention from actors to derivative actions (*ibid.*, 158, 164–5) and the emancipation of the human body from its subservience to characters' inner life, corresponding here with a distinctly anti-analytical bias (Podraza-Kwiatkowska and Kwiatkowski, 425–31). Therefore a contemporary critic could maintain that in one of Berent's

1 Berent's novels have not been translated into English (there are some old German and French translations), but his literary work is competently discussed by J.T. Baer (1974).

2 The original version was written in English as a Ph.D. thesis at the University of London (1967).

novels lyricism had been shaped into 'dramatic narration' (Włast, 1902). This was a typical misinterpretation of Berent's individual approach to the lyrical mode, which in its own way was more consistent than in Żeromski's works, except for his prose poems.

The epic undoubtedly strives to portray the 'intercourse between men and worlds' which Ralph Freedman found typical of the traditional novel (1963, viii). The lyrical novel, he claims, in contrast, 'seeks to combine man and world in a strangely inward, yet aesthetically objective, form' that follows lyrical poems in their effort to objectify the inner experience and ideas that stand behind the events represented instead of people and their temporal setting. As a result, 'narrative progression' in time is superseded by 'qualitative progression'; succession is merely 'simulated' by language that achieves greater intensity rather than movement towards new events, and 'actions are turned into scenes which embody recognition' (ibid., 2–8). Berent's fiction certainly approaches reality in this manner, but, instead of promoting single lyrical heroes, a centrifugal movement gradually shifts attention from the intradiegetic perspective within the represented world towards an extradiegetic standpoint, akin to the implied author's. Simultaneously, the language surrenders its impressionist sensibility, oriented towards the exterior, and assumes an expressionist tendency to reflect inner experience. The paramount importance of speech in the construction of the worlds of Berent's novels creates narrative arrangements of the type regarded by Christopher Nash as distinctive of anti-realism, because 'the *linguistic event* comes first, and not "the thing it represents" [and] the initiating activity takes place not in "the world" but in the words' (1987, 95). Berent, who wrote novels with complicated and equivocal messages, would obviously disagree with such a non-referential understanding of language, but his fiction certainly contains *his* world and not 'the world'.

Próchno (Rotten Wood, 1903), which focuses on the impossibility of genuine art in modern urban civilization, may be regarded as a polyphonic representation of a supra-individual artistic self (see Troczyński, 1938, 25). The author denied any personal bias here by openly stating that he felt responsible only for the design of characters, not for their personal views, and, accordingly, he tried to show 'rotten wood' in its own light (Berent, 1901). Głowiński (1969, 243) accurately observed that narrative comments are eliminated, opening the way for a dialogical discourse, as understood by Bakhtin (1963). Moreover, in Dostoevsky's manner, the characters sustain an imperative compulsion to formulate their judgements by confrontation with others, either in open discussion or in the intimacy of inner speech (see Bakhtin, 1963, particularly 313–18). The characters are vague, hidden behind assumed roles, uncertain of their motives and continuously searching for their own personalities, which, reflected in the variety of mirrors, escape final classification.

The motifs are, however, precisely arranged and firmly under the control of the author. Individual characters matter only with regard to their place in the overall design. They each face similar problems, but respond to them in different ways, which eventually leads to a polyphonic conclusion. Their inner experience is mostly reduced to recurrent motifs illustrating interrelations between artists and a hostile environment. The four major characters of *Próchno* each represent a different combination of similar components, where repetition with variations forms a rhythmic pattern. Apart from many leitmotifs with a universal message, Berent introduces parallel events that link independent story-lines. Thus the role of the fathers in the stories of Borowski and Hertenstein, Borowski's incestuous affection for his mother and Hertenstein's for his sister, Müller and Kunicki's devotion to Zofia, the function of two female characters, Zofia and Hilda, in the life of male characters, similarities between Borowski's life and Turkuł's play — all these by analogy or contrast pave the way for the novel's final message. The dialogues play the same, unifying role. *Próchno* is thus more concerned with the variety of attitudes than with single personalities. 'Borowski, Müller, Hertenstein, Jelsky, Turkuł, Pawluk', as Stanisław Brzozowski observed (1992 [1902], 138), 'represent the modern human mind in its various configurations and shapes'. Berent's drift towards synthesis affects the image presented of the external world as well; in defiance of Realism, it is fully subordinated to intimate experience. The dominant urban landscape does not exist as a background for actions, but is internalized within the authorial vision of the existential situation of his characters, forming its emotive, symbolic extension. Hence the human self, although in a collective rather than individual form, comes to the foreground and controls the rest.

Through the deliberate depersonalization of characters and the supremacy of abstract thoughts over concrete events, Berent's next novel, *Ozimina* (Winter Wheat, 1911), transforms reality into a vision, which reflects the implied author's attitude towards Polish society. His overwhelming presence is primarily reflected in expressive imagery; direct comments, however, are significantly expanded in comparison with *Próchno* (see Hultberg, 1969, 215). Regarded from the very beginning as a verdict on the inertia of Polish society (for example Grzymała-Siedlecki, 1967 [1911], 87), it is rather unequivocal in its criticism of the Warsaw establishment and more ambiguous in its positive message.³ Because of the extensive use of figurative language, its creative function comes to the foreground, transforming characters and their surroundings into symbols and archetypes, that is into the 'objective correlatives' of the ideas behind them. These ideas are focused on the Polish collective self and are expressed in cumulative imagery, typical of Symbolist fiction, but

³ This hardly makes it, though, a genuine polyphonic novel, as claimed by Głowiński (1974).

also distinguishable both in the conventions of Polish Romantic drama and the contemporary plays by Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907). His *Wesele* (The Wedding, 1901) has often been compared with *Ozimina* (for example Szczerbowski, 1926). In Wyspiański's impressive *theatrum mundi*, characters play their roles in what serves as a symbolic manifestation of the structure of the world; it hovers between monumental mythology and a somewhat grotesque puppet show (see Łempicka, 1967, 90–1). Berent also exploits myths, but the prevalent tone is that of nightmares. The leitmotifs of birds, bats, fish and, above all, the statue of an African man, emblemize depressing inertia and doom, and transform a common social event, Baron Nieman's party, into an expressionist Witches' Sabbath. Some events transcend the image of Polish society to become universal archetypes, and so the metaphor of a beetle feeding on a flower lifts common flirtation to the level of the eternal battle of the sexes. References to the Eleusinian mysteries incorporate the national predicament in human mythology. The author's anxiety is eventually objectified in universal images (cf. Baranowska, 1993).

Joachim T. Baer regards Berent's last novel,⁴ *Żywe kamienie* (Living Stones, 1918), as his 'greatest artistic achievement', and as exhibiting 'the highly complex world of Symbolist poetics' (1974, 196). It is indeed Berent's greatest departure from Realism, and a novel where 'literariness' takes precedence over represented reality. The pattern of the minstrel's tale of medieval knights, wandering scholars, craftsmen and monks, has its roots in Berent's modernized version of Arthurian legends, while the imagery imitates medieval art rather than historical documents. The medievalist, Edward Porębowicz, admired the perfect illusion of the Middle Ages, arising from a deep affinity with contemporary miniatures (1951 [1919], 263). A pedantic historical approach, as demonstrated by some critics (Rosnowska, 1937, Ficowska, 1952) is misplaced.

Berent's endeavour to create an independent literary world is evident on various levels. The narrator imitates minstrels and their view on the world, but this stylization is relative, since a modern perspective also comes to the foreground and is disclosed in the epilogue, where the author speaks the same language as his medieval counterpart (details in Eile, 1973, 62–4). The events revolve around the quest for the Grail and Dionysian mythology, while the story is distinguished by neatly designed analogies and contrasts. The characters do not even have names, but are labelled by occupation: queen, knight, prior, goliard, woman acrobat (*skoczka*) and so forth. Despite certain hints of individuality, they represent above all universal types and attitudes. This approach corresponds to the rather vague temporal and spatial setting of the story. Thus *Żywe kamienie* abandons adherence to the 'here and now', which was regarded as the most distinctive property of the novel (see Watt,

⁴ Later he published only the fictionalized biographies of outstanding Poles.

1957), and moves towards allegory, legend and myth (see Popiel, 1992; 1989). Its flamboyant language plays a major role in this transformation, accounting for a blurred distinction between dream and reality.

Berent's treatment of metaphors is symptomatic in this respect. In addition to the disintegration of the human body into animated components (synecdoche), that had been manifest in *Ozimina* (Podraza-Kwiatkowska and Kwiatkowski, 1961, 425–9), he exploits the double structure of metaphors by turning their secondary, figurative and normally opalescent frame of reference (the 'vehicle') into a quasi-real image, which makes up part of the represented world (see Popiel, 1992, XLIV–VI). This clear manifestation of 'literariness', well-known to the Polish follower of Marinism, Jan Andrzej Morsztyn (c. 1620–1693), is recognised by McHale as an 'ontological pluralizer', typical of the postmodern tendency 'to foreground the ontological *duality* of metaphor, its participation in two frames of reference with different ontological statuses' (1987, 134; cf. 1992, 126).⁵ Berent's exploitation of ancient myths and legends gives the novel its 'objectified', universal status. His literary world, however, also reflects what Brzozowski once called 'the self-recognition of modern mind' (1992 [1902], 138), an inquiring persona standing behind the represented world, which thus loses its 'objective', mimetic character in favour of lyrical expression, as understood by Freedman (1963).

II

The lyrical mood of Young Poland had unusual results in the works of Tadeusz Miciński (1873–1918), one of its most original, yet least accomplished writers. While his poetry and drama have been reprinted in more recent times, the novels (some of them left in manuscript and published posthumously) were not published again. Substantial critical interest in this writer during the last few decades has done little towards a re-evaluation of his novels as well (an exception is Bolecki, 1982, 12–85), indeed has created misunderstanding (for example Głowiński, 1969, 233–43; Illg, 1983). Miciński, an admirer of Romantic narrative poems and Vedic literature, had no respect for the Realist novel, with its concern for milieu and plot design. While Żeromski, Przybyszewski and, occasionally, even Berent attempted to strike a balance between the particular and the general, Miciński always aimed at universality. Rejecting mimesis and consequent attempts to portray an independent reality, Miciński actually universalized his own putative self, torn between overrefined Decadence and national preaching (Podraza-Kwiatkowska, 1979, 151–2).

⁵ Nash (1987, 131–3) regards metaphors as the source of innovation in anti-Realist fiction.

Miciński's quasi-novels, and especially *Nietota. Księga tajemna Tatr* (*Nietota*.⁶ *The Secret Book of the Tatras*, 1910), represent a distinctive blend of an individual perception with the supra-individual universe of literature and mythology that has its roots in Romantic irony. This type of literary self-consciousness combines authorial freedom of creation with a keen awareness of its fictional nature and of metatextual links. 'As a corollary, then', writes McHale, 'to the artist's paradoxical self-representation, the artwork itself comes to be presented *as* an artwork' (1987, 30). An analogy with the story of the idealist Don Quixote and the practical Sancho Panza plays a key role in such novels. It explains the novel's fundamental conflict between the inspiring world of fantasy and dull common-sense materialism, and this is eventually reflected in a Manichaeic battle between good and evil. On the metaphysical plane, *Nietota* was understood by its admirers as a revelation, which followed *Mahabharata*, the *Vedas* and Polish Romantic poems in their search for supra-rational truth, based on inner experience (Nalepiński, 1910). As a literary work, however, it is very close to the metafictional assumption 'that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's "reality"' (Waugh, 1988, 24).

The complex narrative of *Nietota* barely constitutes any distinct, consistent pattern. The key principle can be found in the following words, articulated by one of its two main narrators: 'As on old palimpsest contains several texts, one upon another, so various characters in *Nietota*, living in different epochs, have recorded their *Mementoes*, disregarding chronology and order' (Miciński, 1910, 235–6). Accordingly, the unusual world of the 'Tatras-Himalayas', inhabited by lions, is surrounded by a primeval ocean and simultaneously existent in modern times, with the village of Zakopane at the foot of the mountains. There is no respect for historical probability, since submarines in the ocean and aeroplanes over its surface blend the prehistoric past with the future, mythological fantasy with science-fiction. Moreover, Gothic horrors, demonic *femmes fatales* and old tales of the occult⁷ are juxtaposed with the artistic refinement of the interiors, black masses and sophisticated tortures in the mould of Huysmans, Octave Mirbeau and other French *fin-de-siècle* writers (see Uitti, 1961, 44; Raimond, 1966, 225, 231). Patriotic sermons and academic lectures fall next to simple folk tales, legends and unrestrained flights of imagination. This resembles Foucault's *heterotopia*,⁸ for the discordant nature of represented reality defies logic and disturbs our perception, preventing denotation. McHale suggested the term 'zone' for

6 The word 'Nietota' functions here as a name with symbolic meaning, but in its basic sense means the club moss (*Lycopodiales*), growing in the Tatra Mountains.

7 The influence of Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842), then recently translated into Polish (1906), has been discussed by Pigoń (1964).

8 The idea is discussed by McHale (1987, 44), following Foucault's *The Order of Things* (*Le Mot et les choses*).

this sort of novelistic world, which is common in postmodern writing (1987, 44–5; 1992, 250–1). Its multiplicity aims at the spatialization of time rather than the modernist annihilation of space by time (see Harvey, 1989, 272–3).

The language of *Nietota* and, later, *Xiądz Faust* (Father Faust, 1913) employs metaphors to transmute the world into a subjective vision. In the author's own description this operates as binoculars used both ways round, enlarging or diminishing the observed object and thus elevating or demeaning it (1910, 68). *Xiądz Faust*, which does not indulge in pure fantasy, exploits in particular figurative language as the main tool of its anti-Realist bias. Uitti wrote that Symbolist fiction's figures of speech deformed the world of quotidian experience to suggest a 'higher reality': 'Linguistic deformation, as practised by [Jean] Lorrain and other *fin de siècle* writers, attacks both the lexical components of language and the whole purpose of linguistic context by insisting on the rare, the exotic, the "superior"' (1961, 55). In descriptions of ordinary events, Miciński's metaphors, similes and hyperboles summon up a cosmic dimension. They convert individual states of mind into universal experience in accordance with the advice, given by Rémy de Gourmont, that: 'il doit chercher l'éternel dans la diversité momentanée des formes' (after Uitti, 1961, 40). This style makes characters and things either monumental or disfigured and grotesque, as in the following extract:

His dense, huge thatch looked so wild that each whirling hair stuck out its fang like a serpent on Medusa's head [...].

He giggled shrilly — so I know, he-he! — shaking his head and scrawny hands in the air, as if he were casting down scorpions from his mane.' (Miciński, 1913, 84–5).⁹

Miciński's prose takes full advantage of the twofold composition of figurative language. The emancipation of 'vehicles' in metaphors and illustrative, explanatory components in similes allows him an easy passage from one reality to another, and thus he disturbs coherence and stability. As a result, personal outlook and lyrical mood come to the foreground, in complete agreement with Rémy de Gourmont's principles, outlined in his *Esthétique de la langue française* (1899): 'A vrai dire, nous ne connaissons que des déformations; nous ne connaissons que la forme particulière de nos esprits particuliers' (after Uitti, 1961, 43).

Miciński shares the Romantics' faith in the creative power of literature; as author, he always remains in the foreground. The very structure of his 'novels', which include his own poems and others', dramatic dialogues¹⁰ and pure journalism, rhythmic prose and folk tales, emphasizes their textuality and compilatory, derivative form. The narrator of *Nietota* plays with literary conventions, meditates on how to

⁹ More examples in Eile (1979).

¹⁰ The theatrical aspect of Miciński's works has been discussed by Rzewuska (1971).

portray characters and reveals his search for *mots justes*. Despite recurrent endeavours to evoke 'inspired' images, Miciński's world also contains manifold references to existing literary styles; thus intertextual relations are one of its main principles. This idea is possibly modelled on the introduction to *Don Quixote*, where a 'friend' advises the author to compose his novel out of existing narratives. In *Nietota* and *Xiądz Faust* the titles of well-known literary works or the names of famous characters are expected to trigger off readers' responses, deriving benefit from the connotations.

For example, one of the stories in *Nietota* (ch. VIII) is described as a folk version of Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1910, 209). Narrative efforts in the same novel to find a new name for the Absolute focus on the symbolic titles of Leonid Andreyev's then popular works, *The Red Laugh* and *The Black Maskers*. (ibid., 222). 'Our times', we read elsewhere, 'are worse than scenes in [Berent's] *Próchno*, worse than [Przybyszewski's] *Satans Kinder*, and worse than the sadness of [Żeromski's] *Popioły...*' (ibid., 464). Similes with literary referents are not infrequent: 'It will remind us of straying in the Paris sewers, that are known from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*' (ibid., 397). 'She looked lymphatic, pale, beautiful in Maeterlinck's style' (ibid., 207). 'I was fleeing in the falling darkness like the ghost from the ballad, holding Lenore¹¹ on the front of my saddle' (1913, 58). 'Storm-furrowed trees in the forest, raving and whistling like mad Tom in *King Lear*' (ibid., 67). Occasionally Miciński refutes the views of other writers, reinterprets old motifs (for examples see Eile, 1979, 108–9) or simply quotes from various works. All this, together with the author's propensity for amalgamating topoi of disparate provenance, gives the novels a distinctly bookish character.

Miciński represents anti-Realist revolt in its most extreme form. His fondness for 'lower' literary genres (the adventure novel in *Wita* [1913, posthumous edition in 1926], the Gothic novel, science-fiction etc.) defies the 'seriousness' of Realist novels of manners or character, albeit he introduces his own high style of mythological order. He totally disregards the teleological progress and places episodes within symbolic space, whose nature is captured in the allegorical representation of Lucifer's Theatre, stratified into Earth, Heaven and Hell in *Wita*. All the characters are depersonalized to fit the general pattern and there is no psychology, inner development or real action, these being replaced by a rhythmic struggle between good and evil and metaphysical learning under supreme guidance, which resembles the form of *The Divine Comedy*.¹² In Miciński's cosmos everything appears to portray the same, complex, modern soul, to make reality both internal and universal, personal and impersonal, as the individual mind seems unable to abandon the well-established archetypes reflected in literature and mythology.

11 The eponymous heroine of Bürger's ballad.

12 Illg unconvincingly takes a different stance (1983).

III

The lyrical mood of early Modernism liberated the imagination. External reality became subordinated to the experiencing self, whether within or without the represented world. The dominant role of the implied author led to the universalization of experience, which eventually resulted in the poetics of parable, nightmare, grotesque and myth. This trend culminated near the end of Young Poland, when 'Polish fiction diverged more than before from the "transparent style"' of the Realist novel (Podraza-Kwiatkowska, 1992, 267). This is discernible in the development of the initially Realist and Naturalist works of Władysław Orkan (1875–1930), whose later novels, *Pomór* (The Plague, 1910) and *Drzewiej* (Erstwhile, 1912), render reality monumental and mythical through the extensive use of figurative language and the inclusion of archaic archetypes. *Pomór* is narrated by a stylized peasant raconteur, who transforms a plague-infested countryside into an inferno of God's punishment, where personal visions become real and where the horrors of events turn Naturalism into Expressionism. *Drzewiej* blends the Bible with fairy-tales in a tense drama of ancient settlers, set against the background of primeval nature. Its mythical content and poetic style combine the subjective outlook of the stylized story-teller with universal symbolism.¹³

One can find the same type of transformation in the works of Władysław Reymont (1867–1925). His best known novel, *Chłopi* (The Peasants, 1904–9), is intended as a kind of epic about country life; it blends realistic details and a Naturalist approach to human character with high style, which is used in lofty descriptions of religious festivals and of dignified ploughmen whose toils verge on ritual. The cycle of the seasons, beginning with Autumn, divides the novel into four parts within which changing Nature is paralleled by the different stages in the cultivation of land and the Church feasts. Interrelations between the sacred and the profane turns Reymont's world into a universal image of the human condition, where death is part of Nature and God is present throughout everyday existence (see Wyka, 1968a). Żeromski's prose poems, somewhat different from his novels, achieve their peak in *Duma o hetmanie* (The Ballad of the Hetman, 1908), a syncretic work, which elevated history to the level of national myth (see Lubaszewska, 1984).

The extensive use of daring metaphors and the blurred border between the external world and personal hallucinations distinguish the once greatly admired and now almost-forgotten short stories of Ludwik S. Liciński,¹⁴ *Halucynacje* (Hallucinations, written 1904–5, pub. posthumously, 1911) and *Z pamiętnika włóczęgi* (From the Memoirs of a Vagabond, 1908). These extraordinary works hover between the full

¹³ Orkan had a predecessor in Adolf Dygasiński's poetic representation of the Darwinian struggle for survival in *Gody życia* (The Banquet of Life, 1902).

¹⁴ The only comprehensive study of these short stories is by Krzysztof Dmitruk (1968).

subordination of external events to the experiencing self and more detached narratives, sometimes satirical, sometimes parabolic and sometimes relatively close to Realist 'objectivism'. In 'A Dream about the Fairy Tale', published at the end of *Halucynacje*, the speaker declares that a dream like this is the most beautiful thing in life and that 'fairy tales should be loved more than life' (1911, 188–9). This anti-Realist bias emancipates language from mimetic representation and transforms metaphors into independent images, where abstract terms become stunningly concrete and common features turn into grotesque distortions:

He enjoyed power and tasted it like a good meal. Sipping it from a bowl like borsch, he thought it was hashish (1908, 62–3).

[The wrinkles] coiled on his face like serpents and vipers; they formed clumps, resembling lurking lizards, and jumped on to his neck (1911, 143).

The grotesque was normally alien to the elevated style of Young Poland's fiction, but as has been recently pointed out (Bolecki, 1991, 115–42; Kłosiński, 1992), it established a distinct trend within the movement and gained momentum with the rise of Expressionism in the pre-war years (see Prokop, 1970, 53–76). Moreover, it appears to be also related to the growing awareness of the social nature of language and literary conventions. At the end of the nineteenth century, a writer of the older generation, Felicjan Faleński (1825–1910), indulged in word-play, which included pastiche and intertextual references in his short stories, and mocked their conclusions in a manner resembling the later practice of Witkacy and Gombrowicz (Bolecki, 1991, 126–32). Intertextual relations and the exploitation of 'language games' characterize Jan Lemański's philosophical fairy tale, *Ofiara królowny* (The Princess's Sacrifice, 1906). In principle, his efforts correspond to Lyotard's explication of 'games' as pleasure and as a social bond (Lyotard, 1984, 10, 15). In Lemański's work, the traditional motifs of the fairy tale merge with Swiftian satire, and the invented reality of 'hobnails' (Ćwieczki) and nails (Gwoździki) hovers between the human and the animated worlds, exploiting both the literal and the allegorical sense of this representation. This is a reality of puppets, going back, perhaps, to Prus' *Lalka* (see chapter II), and looking forward to the interwar Avant-garde. The satirical content of the novel certainly carries a message, but the language used transcends representation and draws attention to its own playfulness (cf. Puchalska, 1985).

The recurrent puns are there just for fun, but they also indicate that language by nature makes itself and that this can result in semantic absurdities. The story of a *kraska* (European roller, *Coracias garrulus*), takes advantage of the etymological links between the bird's name and the adjective *kras[n]a* (fem.), that is colourful and pretty; it also plays with the double meaning of the adjective *wdzięczna*, which signifies both grateful and graceful. As a result, the *kraska* having been ravaged by a hawk and then rescued by a man is still a *kraska*, but not *krasna*, that is

colourful and pretty; consequently, it is *wdzięczna* — grateful for the liberation, but not *wdzięczna* — graceful, as many of its feathers have been plucked out by the hawk. The story's linguistic contradictions confuse the invited arbiter, whose job to sort them out becomes a failure, as he finds here a puzzle not simply ambiguous but semantically insoluble (Lemański, 1985 [1906], 84). The author equally enjoys the amusement resulting from the agglomeration of strange-sounding and sometimes telling names (e.g. counts and barons: Kor-Ko-ciąg [*korkociąg* — cork screw], Koc-Koc-Jąg, As-à-Tout, Clou-Trou-Etti, Neh-Mehr, Byleuż-Yć [*byle użyć* — enjoy life] etc. [ibid., 132–3, 140]), or bizarre objects, such as the collection of curious musical instruments (ibid., 108) or dishes and wines (for example *Château ruiné*, *Porto vomitorio* [ibid., 141–2]). Similar entertainment comes from the use of diminutives, as in the case of *dama* (lady): '*dama, damka, dameczka, damuleńka, damuchna, damusia, damutka, damulka*' (ibid., 133). Words, however, being somewhat liberated from their referentiality, form discourses corresponding with common stereotypes and thus serve as a bond between members of the same society. The uniformity of each of the two countries portrayed in the novel, which are respectively ruled by King *Ćwieczek* and by King *Goździk*, is largely based on their different languages, which reflect contrasts between two separate cultures (see Puchalska, 1985, 16–18). The dominance of universal canons over individual existence agrees with the Platonic principle that 'pure ideas' surpass and supersede reality, a principle that is espoused in the novel by the wise *Vizier* (Lemański, 88).

Buffoonery and the grotesque achieve extraordinary results in the works of Roman Jaworski (1883–1944), whose approach to the novel mocked and undermined its conventions well before the much better-known works of Witkacy and Gombrowicz. Despite the fact that his first book, a collection of short stories entitled *Historie maniaków* (Stories about Maniacs, 1909), was praised by Karol Irzykowski (1980 [1910]), the author remained almost forgotten until recently, when monographs and articles have demonstrated beyond doubt his substantial contribution to the development of modern fiction in Poland (for example, Łepkowska, 1981; J.Z. Maciejewski, 1990; Kłosiński, 1992). Jaworski's belief in the 'monstrosity of life' and the consequent anti-aestheticism of his imagery defied Young Poland poetics and showed him to be a harbinger of Expressionism (see Prokop, 1970, 62–7). His absurd literary world is disharmonious, grotesque, carnivalistic and subject to supra-individual stereotypes which get in the way of any direct contact with reality. Hence he questions all existing literary styles, but particularly that of Young Poland. Łepkowska (1981) makes this clear in her discussion of *Historie maniaków*, where the impossibility of avoiding pre-existent conventions forms the core of narrative art (Barthes called this much later [1968] 'the death of the author' [see Barthes, 1990]), giving it a vivid metafictional bias. Assuming the role of clown, Jaworski uses the

grotesque as the main instrument of his sceptical approach to 'totalizing' representations of reality and ridicules literature that takes its task too 'seriously'. This becomes most manifest when the narrator parodies himself or when he contrasts imaginative fantasies with stark existence; in this he resembles *Don Quixote*, but also *Pan Tadeusz* (see chapter I). Jaworski's later novel *Wesele hrabiego Orgaza* (The Wedding of Count Orgaz, 1925) continues in the same parodic mood. Its carnivalesque world of simulacra was once called 'the novel's criticism of the novel' (Głowiński, 1968, 201; cf. Kopciński, 1991).

Andrzej Strug's *Zakopanopticon* (1913–14) may serve as an example of the growing importance of parody and the grotesque. The writer, usually treated as a disciple of Żeromski's lyrical art, published a novel with a then unusual structure. Almost entirely deprived of the traditional progression of events and disintegrated into loosely connected episodes, it resembles the Impressionist technique of the Viennese bohemian, Peter Altenberg. Strug, however, surpassed Altenberg's passive observation; indeed, he went beyond traditional satire and by turning people into ducks he eventually approached the modern art of bizarre distortions. The parody of various styles (journalistic, literary, scientific, oratorical, etc) and the mock-heroic degradation of certain acts complete this novel's appeal. The author obviously regarded this as either too avant-garde or, perhaps, too trivial for his times and never published *Zakopanopticon* in book-form.¹⁵

IV

The main stream of Young Poland fiction, whether lyrical or not, eventually led towards objectives which have been described by a modern critic, familiar with the Russian Formalism and Czech structuralism, as follows:

The function of poetry is, through language, to 'de-familiarize' the everyday world in a form where it might be 'seen' rather than merely recognized. Using these terms of reference, a distinction can be made between 'realist' fiction, on the one hand, and modern and postmodern on the other, by saying that whereas the former creates worlds that the reader recognizes, using language as a mediating agent, the latter defamiliarizes the world in language that draws attention to itself. (Alexander, 1990, 5–6)

One might disagree with the assumption that Realism is necessarily at odds with Modernism, which often modified rather than defied Realist form.¹⁶ What had happened in Polish fiction paved the way for the non-

¹⁵ The novel appeared in the newspaper *Wiek Nowy*. Its first edition in book form was posthumous, 1957.

¹⁶ In particular, the post-Flaubertian novel, developed in Britain and America (see Introduction). In a broader sense, the notion of Realism and non-Realism is not very precise. As a result, Wellek and Warren could come to the following conclusion: "Life-like" might almost be paraphrased as "art-like", since the

Realist Avant-garde of the late 1920s and the 1930s, setting the modern novel on a specific Central and Eastern European course, as represented by Kafka and Bely, which made it different from the experiments of James, Conrad, Joyce, Faulkner or American behaviourists (see Introduction). I am not suggesting, however, that some trends were not close to the evolution of Realism after Flaubert and the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century.

The role of Władysław S. Reymont in the development of Polish fiction demands more attention. His earlier novels, such as *Ziemia obiecana* (The Promised Land, 1899), represent traditional omniscient narrative, portraying social types whose well-defined identity is also reflected in dialogues. There are distinct teleological links between events, but the various story-lines and episodes form a loose structure, in conformity with Reymont's Naturalist heritage rather than with traditional nineteenth-century fiction. This tendency to privilege the plurality of actions and aggregated social life over the concurrence of individual stories characterizes *Chłopi* as well. Here too, teleological progress is ultimately surpassed by cyclical recurrence and traditional omniscience is to a great extent replaced by the stylized narration, attempting, however inconsistently, to reflect the views of a country poet. His historical trilogy, *Rok 1794* (1794 A.D., 1913–18), is quasi-documentary and makes a contribution to the development of the Polish historical novel. In a more innovative way, accumulation rather than concurrence commands the composition of Andrzej Strug's social novels. His *Pieniądz* (Money, 1921 [1914])¹⁷ disregards the progress of action, passes over its essential links, starts the course of events at random and terminates them without any definite conclusion. The multiple story-lines are linked by the motif of money and causal relations are ignored. Later, in the pacifist novel *Żółty krzyż* (The Yellow Cross, 1933), he portrays the events of World War I in a similar way.

The internal perspective (focalization) was certainly dominated by the lyrical triple point of view, discussed above, but infrequent attempts to introduce ironic distance (occasionally Żeromski, much less so Przybyszewski) achieved some success in Stanisław A. Mueller's *Henryk Flis* (1908). Despite reasonably good reviews, this novel had to wait until 1976 for a second edition, but, once rediscovered, regained its proper place in the development of Polish fiction (see Puchalska, 1973; Zagajewski, 1978). Mueller, by denouncing art as a deforming force, follows in the steps of Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Prus's *Lalka* and Irzykowski's *Patuba*. Unlike Irzykowski, Mueller exploits the point-of-view technique as a tool of that

analogies between life and literature become most palpable when the art is highly stylized: it is writers like Dickens, Kafka, and Proust who superimpose their signed world on areas of our own experience' (Wellek and Warren, 1963, 246).

¹⁷ It was first published in the magazine *Świat*, 1914, 1–46.

denunciation. In the novel, whose structure resembles the natural flow of *L'Education sentimentale*, dialogues and interior monologues play the major role; thus 'showing' (mimesis) overweighs 'telling' (diegesis), as the story is told predominantly from the protagonist's perspective. The author avoids direct comments and allows Flis to cultivate his illusions, but eventually undermines them by ironic distance, by the critical opinions of others, and by the protagonist's own self-reproach. As a result, the pleasure of final discovery belongs to the reader.

The Naturalist cult of observation resulted in impassive narration, which remotely resembled behaviourism, and which yielded its best result in short narratives. Żeromski's *Zapomnienie* (Oblivion, 1891), Reymont's *Śmierć* (Death, 1893) or Sieroszewski's *Dno nędzy* (The Depths of Misery, 1900) consist of detached records of events overwhelmed by terror. A poor, helpless peasant beaten up by a bailiff, a dying father dragged by his own children into a pigsty, and a leper-colony in the land of the Yakuts form the subjects of the respective stories; in them impassivity intensifies tension and reinforces the natural appeal of the events represented. After World War II a similar technique accounted for the international acclaim reaped by Tadeusz Borowski's Auschwitz stories.

PART TWO

BETWEEN TRADITIONALISM AND
THE AVANT-GARDE.
THE INTERWAR PERIOD

CHAPTER V

THE AUTHOR REINTRODUCED: REALISM, PSYCHOLOGISME, INVERTED NARRATIVE

I

The heritage of Young Poland in interwar fiction is complex and controversial. One is certainly tempted to treat the bulk of post-1918 novels as representing direct opposition to its predecessors. Krystyna Jakowska emphasized this opposition by the very title of her book: *Powrót autora. Renesans narracji auktorialnej w polskiej powieści międzywojennej* (The Return of Author. The Renaissance of the Authorial Narration in Polish fiction of the Interwar Period, 1983). Some time before that, Julian Krzyżanowski went even further by using the label ‘neo-Realism’ for the whole literary output of the period (1969, ch. VIII). Włodzimierz Bolecki believes, however, that a staunch resistance to Young Poland’s discourse dominated criticism, re-emerged after World War II and did not lose its fervour until after 1956, but that avant-garde trends actually continued Young Poland’s poetics and inclination towards the grotesque (1982; 1991, 102–58). The concluding chapter of Głowiński’s study of the pre-1918 novel assesses its influence in more moderate terms, but still underlines the predominance of its impact, particularly in the 1920s (1969, 279–87).

The hostility of the critics towards Young Poland’s form of narrative and lyrical style is beyond doubt. Over the years the term *młodopolszczyzna* (Young-Polandism) has become almost an insult and, even today, it retains some of its disparaging tone. ‘Young-Polandism’ usually implies ‘insipid poeticising’ (*mdłe poetyzowanie*), debased literary taste, an incoherent plot structure, excessive emotionalism and an uncontrolled indulgence in subjectivity. Many writers and critics were disciples of Karol Irzykowski whose rediscovered *Pałuba* challenged the lyrical mood and personal narration of early Modernism, while his critical works supported the intellectualization of fiction and the authorial control of its integrity. Stanisław Baczyński’s two influential books, *Sztuka walcząca* (Fighting Art, 1923) and *Losy romansu* (The Fates of the Romance, 1927), followed similar objectives. He regarded *Pałuba* as a rebuttal of literary tricks and consequently respected intellectual inspiration more than mimetic accuracy (1963 [1923, 1927], 89, 173–4). One of the leading admirers of *Pałuba* in the 1930s, Kazimierz Wyka,

made it evident that the chief importance of Irzykowski's novel lay in its potential as a deterrent against the current notion of the complex obscurity of the human mind, supported by psychoanalysis and other fashionable tendencies which evaded 'clarity and explanation'. Irzykowski, he maintains, invites the multiplicity of interpretations, but always remembers the human need to understand causal relations (1967 [1938], 80).

Such a climate hardly favoured the post-Flaubertian notion of 'exit author', advocated by James, Joyce, Lubbock and Beach. The evolution of fiction in English achieved in *Ulysses* a 'paradoxical relationship between the subjective and the objective, the subjective novel ending up by becoming objective to the point where re-creation replaced imitation' (Daiches, 1965, 95). The impassive quasi-record of inner life, aiming at 'openness' and thus undermining the traditional teleological structure of the novel, enjoyed little understanding in Poland. Literary critics expected moral commitment from the author and his explanatory comments were usually welcomed, unless they were excessive. One of the best-known among those critics, Ludwik Fryde, wrote the following about the leading representative of traditional Realism, Maria Dąbrowska (1889–1965):

Dąbrowska is not satisfied with pure artistry. Out of her memory, imagination and observations she creates a world of 'real people', but in her own way she also interprets this world, explains and judges it. Moral standards are always present in her narratives and make for an integral part of their style. [...] Her remarks cannot be classified as an artificial commentary, because they shape the tone of the story-telling and determine its social significance (1966 [1938], 370).

The tradition of Young Poland's personal focalization, combined with the prominence of figurative language, found its individual continuation in the works of Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski (1885–1944), the most influential novelist of the 1920s, whose narrative perspective tended to shift from one character to another and avoided the direct interference of the author (see Hopensztand, 1946; Jakowska, 1978). Another descendant of pre-war literary trends, Zofia Nałkowska (1884–1954), criticized Romain Rolland for the prevalence of 'telling' over 'showing' and the author's subsequent intrusion on the readers' contact with his characters (1957 [1926], 46–7), but in her own works, the authorial voice always eclipsed personal perspectives. The period's unique interest in the point-of-view technique distinguishes Aniela Gruszecka (1884–1976) whose articles about the novel published in the important journal *Przegląd Współczesny* (Modern Review, 1927, nos. 57–8) demonstrate a conviction that the 'objective novel', the descendent of Naturalism, depends on a stable 'observation point' and the disappearance of the author and authorial commentary. This was primarily, however, an aesthetic principle, which approached the notion of the well-made novel,

espoused by Lubbock, but not Joyce or Beach. Consequently, Gruszecka postulated distinct causal relations between events, which were expected to substitute for the lack of commentary. Still, she was aware of the existence of the Modernist novels of Conrad and Proust, which she called 'subjective', and which represented 'our uncertainty about the nature of things and the possibility of different interpretations'. She even concurred that this new tendency might eventually replace her 'objective' artistic ideal (see Markiewicz, 1978, 134–6). In her best novel, *Przygoda w nieznanym kraju* (An Adventure in an Unknown Land, 1932), Gruszecka has chosen a moderate solution: the personal perspective of the heroine is ultimately overshadowed by the authorial voice (see Brodzka, 1975, 563).

There were attempts to restrict the role of narrator to the mere observation of ongoing affairs. Tadeusz Breza's (1905–70) *Adam Grywałd* (1936) turned the first-person narrator into a witness of events, and this was then regarded by Bruno Schulz as a 'revolutionary act'. The author-narrator, he believed, had established 'a new kind of objectivism' by becoming a literary character who is simply painstakingly recording perceived events (Schulz, 1964 [1937], 478–80). The idea of pure observation by a homodiegetic narrator took its most extreme form in *Duże litery* (Capital Letters, 1933), the only work of fiction by Adam Ciompa (1901–35). This formally independent novel, once forgotten and then brought to light in more recent times, rejects everything that is outside the focalizer's field of perception. Disregarding storyline, it disintegrates the world into metonymic particles, and, by the extensive use of nominalization, transforms reality into the innocent object of visual registration, where characters are nothing more than recorded perceptions. Jerzy Kwiatkowski believed that this 'naive' apprehension, avoiding classification and interpretation, resembled the much later experiments of the *nouveau roman* (1990, 275–6). Bolecki described this style as a special combination of Impressionism and behaviourism (1982, 146–69; see also Brodzka, 1975, 561–2).

Opposition to authorial narration, whether inspired by Young Poland or by contemporary trends abroad, was a side-track in the interwar period. The works of James, Virginia Woolf, Joyce or Faulkner were little known. The translation of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1931, came soon after the original, but aroused little interest and had no literary impact at the time. The Polish version of Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, put out in the same year, was not a literary event either. Joseph Conrad certainly had a broad appeal, mainly because of his Polish background and moral commitment, but his narrative craft was not necessarily met with great enthusiasm. Ludwik Fryde regarded Conrad's art as a 'tragic mistake', resulting from his involvement in the Modernist movement (1966 [1935], 322). The popularity of G.K. Chesterton, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis manifests more regard for traditional story-telling and social panoramas than technical innovations. The success of Aldous Huxley's

quasi-Modernist *Point Counter Point* (trans. 1932) was symptomatic. This novel, which combines the multiplicity of views and the consequent relativity of truth with a strong authorial voice — which is ultimately responsible for the characters' make-up — better satisfied the genuine need of Polish writers than any strictly personal focalization.

The Poles' typical interest in French culture resulted in the wide availability of comprehensive information about current literary trends and in a wide range of translations, embracing all the important novelists of the time. Moreover, thanks to the efforts of Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy) (1874–1941), the Polish reader had access to the great Realist novels of the nineteenth century (Balzac, Stendhal), the poetics of which were glorified by the translator and held up as an example. Boy, however, treated Proust as a 'modern Balzac' (Żeleński-Boy, 1939) and accordingly simplified in his Polish version the meandering line of *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (trans. 1937–9). Admiration for Proust's 'delicate precision of observation' and 'the grandeur of authenticity' (Nałkowska, 1957 [1926], 46) was scarcely followed by any interest in the innovative structure of his work and its personal bias. Nałkowska's ideal of 'naturalness', as put forward in the same article, seems, indeed, closer to the idea of the *roman-fleuve* of Roger Martin du Gard or Georges Duhamel (ibid., 47), while her own novels represent a laboured and highly intellectualized structure. Waław Kubacki's opinion that Proust 'diminished the control of artistic awareness' (1937) was rather typical of this period (see Bolecki, 1982, 270–1; more about this in Domagalski, 1995). Similarly, André Gide could genuinely impress Nałkowska by his 'open aversion to unnatural plot structures' (1957 [1926], 48), an antipathy common in Polish contemporaneous fiction, but neither she nor the majority of novelists relinquished their authorial control over their characters, as had been advised in Gide's *Journal des Faux-monnayers*: 'The thing to do [...] is to give the reader an advantage over me — to manage things so that the reader may think himself more intelligent than the author, of a higher morality, and more discerning, and as it were in spite of the author, may discover many points in the characters and many truths in the story not perceived by the author himself' (after Beach, 1960, 468).

Żeleński's systematic translations of the French classics were selective and restricted to a particular literary tradition. Boy revived novelists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the Comtesse de La Fayette, Voltaire, Diderot, Lesage) and the Realists of the subsequent age, but took no interest in Flaubert or the Naturalists. Since Proust concerned him mainly as the alleged Balzac of the twentieth century, the whole post-Flaubertian tradition, which shaped fiction in Britain and North America, was left aside. Consequently, Boy's contribution boosted the revival of Realism in its various forms, going back to the intrusive and digressive narrator of the old days. Nevertheless, more recent developments, which Boy rather disregarded, did not go unnoticed. They

undermined the importance of intrigue and traditional plot structure. In some of his short stories, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, who translated *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, followed Gide's idea of the *acte gratuit*, and reinterpreted the Proustian concept of *le temps retrouvé*. Sometimes, novelties from France reflected a symptomatic lack of confidence in prose fiction as such, typical in Symbolism and its followers. On the one hand, such an approach encouraged metafictional reflection, which had somewhat modest results (for example: Jan Brzękowski [1903–83], Ferdynant Goetel [1890–1960]), on the other, it impaired confidence in the novel as a genre. Tadeusz Breza, while reflecting on the intellectual content of ambitious contemporary works, came to the conclusion that prose fiction should be totally abandoned in texts of the sort later labelled 'writerly' by Barthes (1990a), and replaced by the essay, leaving traditional story-telling to popular novels (Markiewicz, 1978, 140). French writers aside, the reputation of Thomas Mann boosted this conviction, which was to play a very important role in post-World War II developments.¹

II

The authorial perspective and more conventional narrative forms were gradually reintroduced in the 1920s when, thanks to the influence of Kaden-Bandrowski, the Young Poland lyrical style still held the upper hand, particularly at the beginning of the decade (see Kwiatkowski, 1990, 166–72, 208–13; Rozental, 1971). The 1930s witnessed the flowering of avant-garde fiction, but the dominant trend largely maintained traditional Realist principles. The most respected novelist of the time, Maria Dąbrowska, openly opposed the disintegration of characters in Modernist fiction. 'The excessive tendency towards Naturalist analysis or spiritual synthesis', she wrote in 1933, 'causes characters to lose their integrity' and thus adversely affects the public's aesthetic and emotional response (after Markiewicz, 1978, 138). Literary critics like Stefan Kołaczkowski, Ludwik Fryde and Karol W. Zawodziński advocated the revival of authorial narration, but favoured its most neutral form, where the commentary was reduced to impersonal opinions or aphorism. Fryde praised the 'invisible style' (*styl niezauważalny*) not for its power to intensify illusion, but for its assumed factuality, sincerity and truthfulness (1966 [1938], 373–4). The defence of Realism was particularly strong among representatives of the radical left (Ignacy Fik, Stanisław Baczyński, Paweł Hoffman), whose views were sometimes close to the those of György Lukács (Markiewicz, 1978, 139).

Having established that Maria Dąbrowska is certainly not a Modernist, one still doubts whether the 'neutral omniscience'² in her

¹ Another trend hostile to story-telling was represented by the quasi-documentary novel, defended by some writers and critics.

² This term and its understanding follow Friedman (1967 [1955], 123–4).

roman-fleuve, *Noce i dnie* (Nights and Days, 1931–4), strictly follows Eliza Orzeszkowa and other classics of traditional Realism. For Stefan Kołaczowski, she was a writer who ‘boldly broke away’ from the school of formal experimentation, came back to the novel of characters and reintroduced ‘impersonal reflections on life’, much as recommended by Goethe (1968 [1935] 543–9). Stanisław Baczyński, however, voiced a different opinion: ‘One may regard Dąbrowska’s *Noce i dnie* as a form of *reaction and hostility against the tradition of the novel* [my emphasis]; here both plot and dramatic structure have been replaced by chronology, by time-based composition’ (1963 [1939], 423). The teleology of dramatic plot and the mimesis of ‘natural’ order seem to work as opposing forces in the various forms of Realism. In an attempt to strike a balance between these contradictions, nineteenth-century fiction gave a privileged place either to dramatic plot (Balzac) or to chronology (many Victorian novelists). The Modernists reaction, which undermined the arbitrary logic of teleological links, introduced various forms of ‘natural order’, from the strict chronology of events (Dos Passos)³ or inward experience (the stream-of-consciousness novel) to the complex pattern of characters’ search for ‘truth’ (Conrad, Faulkner).

Today’s conception of Dąbrowska as a classical example of traditional Realism results from the simplifications of Structuralists, who have had the greatest influence on literary studies in Poland since 1956; this influence has relaxed only very recently. The attitude of Structuralism towards Realism is characterized by Lilian Furst as follows: ‘On the whole, the structuralists were more attracted to other kinds of writing, notably the chiaroscuro of the fantastic and the gamesmanship of the self-reflexive novel. They tended to regard realist writing as too transparent, too readily intelligible, too ‘readerly’, to use the term coined by Barthes’ (Furst, 1992, 9). Sympathetic to the disclosure of narration and the consequent tendency to lay bare the very process of telling, the Structuralists found an antithesis in what they called ‘transparency’, attributed sweepingly to the nineteenth-century novel and its followers.⁴ As a result, they pay little attention to the whole problem of the ‘intrusive narrator’ and its later evolution towards neutrality. Even more frequently, they seem uninterested in the teleological structure of pre-Modernist texts, in their arbitrarily logical and selective representation of reality. As a matter of fact, nineteenth-century novelists scarcely made a secret of their constructive intentions. Guy de Maupassant described this carefully-designed way of representing reality in his well-known preface to *Pierre et Jean* :

In life there is no difference of foreground and distance, and events are sometimes hurried on, sometimes left to linger indefinitely. Art, on the contrary, consists in the employment of foresight, and elaboration in arranging

³ This was greatly admired by Sartre (1947b).

⁴ Such a prejudice also characterizes contemporary advocates of Postmodernism.

skilful and ingenious transitions, in setting essential events in a strong light, simply *by the craft of composition* and giving all else the degree of relief, in proportion to their importance, requisite to produce a *convincing sense* of the special truth to be conveyed. 'Truth' in such work consists in producing a complete illusion by *following the common logic of facts* [all emphases mine] and not by transcribing them pell-mell, as they succeed each other. (Maupassant, 1967 [1888], 398)

The Structuralist approach to Maria Dąbrowska's narrative art, and in a broader sense, to the Realist narrative as a whole, was launched in Poland by Janusz Sławiński's article (1963) and its principal idea of 'transparency'. The main thrust of the arguments concludes that the author of *Noce i dnie* cleverly manipulates the reader by concealing all indications of interference, while in fact the world represented is rigorously subjected to her impersonal comments and its structure is organised by an external 'superintelligence'. Since this authorial control was actually praised by contemporary critics and easily noticed by Sławiński himself, such a 'transparency' can only look like an unsuccessful attempt to mislead the naive. Considering that the causal structure of 'transparent' novels differs only in the degree of interference from the author's forthright control in works of fiction, the so-called 'transparency' can barely be treated as an independent trend, parallel to teleological composition and authorial presence in the novel, as some critics imply (e.g. Jakowska, 1992).⁵ Its main purpose, however, was not to present a 'seductive', intensified illusion of reality, but to follow to a certain extent some postulates of the Modernists' relativism. Kazimierz Wyka maintained that Dąbrowska was not a straightforward successor to Polish nineteenth-century Realists, but had also been influenced by Young Poland fiction (1963a, 187). Henryk Markiewicz's perceptive analysis of *Noce i dnie* indicates that her explanatory portrayals of character are counterbalanced by an interest in their unpredictable reactions and complex minds. He also points out that Dąbrowska's narrative art weakens the traditional story-line and emancipates single episodes, and that the omniscient narrator frequently stands for 'vernacular' wisdom, which does not transcend the milieu represented (Markiewicz, 1963; also Korzeniewska, 1968).

The tendency towards 'naturalness' and a degree of neutrality, represented by Dąbrowska's fiction, a tendency which was then boosted by the revival of Naturalism (Zbigniew Uniłowski, 1909–37) and a flourishing school of quasi-documentary prose (the *Przedmieście*

⁵ Jakowska's conviction that by undermining chronology (pure mimesis), the teleological structure functions as an anti-Realist force, in keeping with the general progress of the twentieth-century art, is the most consistent attempt to draw a full conclusion from the notion of 'transparency'. She defends the unpopular poetics of the Positivist propaganda novel (*powieść tendencyjna*) on the same grounds (Jakowska, 1992, 249–80). This obviously ahistorical and in fact absurd approach indicates the misleading implications of the concept and makes it redundant to the history of modern fiction.

[Suburb] group), represented one possible variant of the neo-Realist novel. Another tendency gave priority to teleological structure, generally understood to be the main attribute of a well-made novel. For some critics, particularly of the left wing, Naturalism demonstrated a passive, unselective imitation of life that needed to be opposed by a more 'constructive' approach. Literary works, they claimed, should be dominated by a 'ruling principle', capable of subordinating details to the overall purpose and its teleological line. Ignacy Fik, a militant representative of the hard left, disclosed the underlying intention: 'The energy which can secure two basic structural postulates, to give a literary work its organizing principle and to turn it into an active instrument of life, derives from an ideological commitment' (1961 [1937], 49–50). In a broader context, widespread interest in the composition of the novel reflected an inclination to make its form persuasive and effective in delivering a message (see Jakowska, 1992), in agreement with the advice given by Maupassant in his preface to *Pierre et Jean* quoted above. A novel's persuasiveness, however, can be inconsistent with pure chronology, unless the latter is eventually subordinated to teleology, as in the nineteenth-century novel. While the extreme forms of the 'natural order', whether internal (characters' stream of consciousness) or external (the 'camera eye' presentation of outer circumstances), were avoided in practice and theoretically unacceptable, complete authorial freedom in arranging the actual sequence of events dominated the psychological novel. In this type of prose fiction, highly appreciated during the interwar period, chronology was made to fit in with the line of argument. Then and long after the transgression of chronology was normally considered a measure of innovative form.

The dominance of authorial narration occasionally revived forms which Positivist prose had made obsolete. Some novelists (for example Emil Zegadłowicz [1888–1941] or Zygmunt Nowakowski [1891–1963]) indulged in a rambling and digressive narration, which resembled Kraszewski and the oral tradition of 'skaz' (Polish *gawęda*). This style is sometimes described as a return to the intimacy of private feelings and a playful approach to story-telling, in defiance of the mimetic mode of 'transparent' fiction (e.g. Jakowska, 1992, 169–70, 224–6). Yet it normally served as a strict control over events and characters, which eventually resulted in unequivocal message, as in Zegadłowicz's once notorious satirical novel *Zmory* (Spectres, 1935).⁶ Nevertheless it is remarkable that many peculiarities of the *gawęda* style and informal eighteenth-century narratives found a home in the avant-garde fiction of S.I. Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz. Still, the predominant trend was that of impersonal commentary, which was frequently aphoristic in its abstract neutrality.

⁶ This novel actually blends oral informality with the poetic style of Expressionism.

III

The psychological analytical novel was treated by the Modernists and their sympathizers as a reflection of 'the deeper and more searching inwardness of our century' (Edel, 1955, 28). It relied, therefore, on the Bergsonian notion of the 'flux of life' and either tried to reproduce the direct flow of inner experience (the stream-of-consciousness novel) or the working of human memory (Proust). Its technical innovations were usually linked with a personal perspective, maintained by a character's point of view, and with a new approach to language, which was expected to express the identity of private feelings. In that respect, it disregarded a public sense of significance. David Daiches once argued that 'the older English novelist selected what were the significant things in the behaviour of his characters on a principle publicly shared', while 'the modern novelist was born when that publicly shared principle of selection and significance was no longer felt to exist' (1965, 4–5). The commonest perception of temporality was also undermined. In their approach to Time, the Modernists 'were catching and recording the present moment — and no other' (Edel, 1955, 29). By giving recollected events the status of present experience in the minds of characters, they turned upside down the notion of the past.

The flourishing of the psychological analytical novel in Poland enjoyed strong support from critics like Leon Pomirowski and Leon Piwiński. The latter recommended detailed and analytical studies of the human mind, but warned against experiments imitating James Joyce (Markiewicz, 1978, 136). This was certainly typical of the prevalent mood. Subtlety of characterization was executed by the third-person narrator, who was primarily responsible for temporal inversions. The choice of flashbacks was thus subordinated to the assumed strategy of explanatory 'arguments', that is episodes carefully selected from characters' past. The greatest achievements of the psychological novel came from women writers, such as Helena Boguszevska (1883–1978), Aniela Gruszecka, Zofia Nałkowska and Maria Kuncewiczowa (1899–1989).

The paramount importance of Zofia Nałkowska, whether deserved or undeserved, is beyond doubt. Her first novels, written before World War I, epitomize the Young Poland cult of the individual psyche, exemplified here by the singularity of women's nature. Since Nałkowska's later attempts to introduce social criteria in *Granica* (Boundary line, 1935) are not very convincing (see Wyka, 1967 [1935]), her place in literature was established by her highly-intellectualized studies of the human mind, which broadly followed the principles of *Patuba*. Like Irzykowski, she was convinced of the intricacy of the inner life and the relativity of any psychological judgement, and like him, she tried to penetrate the unconscious and explain as much of it as possible. Her novels and enunciations on literary matters contain the notion of the multiple self,

undoubtedly inspired by contemporary fiction in France. This self by nature remains enigmatic, as in the lyrical fiction of early Polish Modernism: 'After all, in our relations with other people we transform and become someone else' or 'Everyone lives in turn in various realities, subject to changing controls' (after Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa, 1975, 8).⁷ This relativism becomes the subject of explanations from the author, whose authority still governs the represented world (see *ibid.*, 22–49). Nałkowska's predilection for commenting rather than simply 'showing' goes back to 1911, when she wrote in her diary:

As far as my new novel is concerned, it has been conceived as a simpler and less elaborate type, so that the story tells itself without comments. I am not certain whether this will not change in practice, since my inborn inclination promotes commentary. This is, anyway, a more modern approach, transmitting much better the subtleties and contradictions of feelings (Nałkowska, 1976, 199).

In her programmatic article, *Pisana rzeczywistość* (Written Reality), published in the most popular literary magazine of the day, *Wiadomości Literackie*, in 1926, Nałkowska glorified the authenticity and naturalness that she found in the novels of Proust, Gide, Mauriac and other contemporary French authors. She revealed her dislike of the artificiality of complicated plots, and pointed out that any genuine commitment to reality entails complexity and contradictions which could not be generalized without simplification (Nałkowska, 1957 [1926], 46–9). Her ensuing novels disclose what these views, consistent with Modernism, mean in practical terms. *Niedobra miłość* (Bad Love, 1928) has the structure of a dissertation, where the first chapter lays down the conditions of an assumed 'inquiry' and the last offers its final conclusion. To describe the characters' present predicament, the author dwells on their past; the structure of events reflects gradual discovery and thus serves as a means of interpretation which eventually leads to a revelation (Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa, 1975, 27–8). This pattern was typical not only of Nałkowska's novels, but also of the best known works of psychological analytical fiction in the 1930s. The resemblance of this pattern to that of detective stories (the process of disclosure) parallels the principles of point-of-view techniques, but here the active role belongs to the investigating author, is subordinated to his or her reliable authority. Tadeusz Breza came to the conclusion that for Nałkowska's penetrating intelligence the novel form became obsolete and that the essay suited her intentions better (after Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa, 1975, 75).⁸

The novel *Niecierpliwi* (The Impatient, 1939) has acquired the reputation of being Nałkowska's most accomplished and most avant-

⁷ The first quotation is from the novel *Niedobra miłość* (Evil Love, 1928), the second from an interview (1936).

⁸ Breza's article ('Dwugłos o Bolesławie Micińskim') was originally published in *Ateneum*, 1938, no. 2.

garde piece of fiction. A contemporary reviewer, Bruno Schulz, in accordance with his own literary practice, interpreted it as a modern 'drama of human fate', where myth and metaphor gain supremacy over characters and their individual fortunes, and where the author abandons the notion of any 'objective' truth (1964 [1939], 492–509). Similar opinions have been voiced more recently by Głowiński (1968, 211–30) and, to a lesser extent, by Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa (1975, 79–109). The latter, in her study of Nałkowska's narrative technique, regards *Niecierpliwi* as a breach of conventions characteristic of the psychological analytical novel and as the first step towards genuine ambiguity. However, this view, inspired by Schulz, appears to be an overstatement. Nałkowska was hardly a mythopoeist, even in this novel, which ostensibly deals with Fate.⁹ Her analytical mind contradicted in principle the contemporary notion of myth as a superior intuitive mode of understanding general laws. In *Niecierpliwi*, Fate is portrayed as a suicidal mania that haunts the Szpotawy family, but this is barely more than a mental obsession, which can be explained in the process of inquiry.¹⁰

By pointing out in the first paragraph of *Niecierpliwi* that its major concern will be the mystery of the death that afflicts the Szpotawys, Nałkowska reveals an investigative structure¹¹ which fits into a pattern common in contemporary Polish psychological analytical fiction. Moreover, the very concept of life existent in the memory of others and of its superiority over chronological time, openly espoused by the narrator (Nałkowska, 1964 [1939], 25), remains within the same technique. Its role is fundamentally different from Proust's notion of 'the past recaptured', since in accordance with Nałkowska's exegetic mode the past is interesting only insofar as it provides causal explanations for the present state of affairs. In comparison with other novels of the time, including her own, *Niecierpliwi* merely introduces a more complex structure of narrative perspective. Still, critics are inclined to overestimate the importance of the characters' points of view (e.g. Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa, 88). In reality, Nałkowska is usually very particular about the reliability of given evidence. Unreliable versions are normally corrected by fuller and more convincing accounts, so that final knowledge can eventually be inferred (e.g. the circumstances surrounding Fabian's suicide as reported by Mr Mrowa). To this purpose, the author frequently confronts two perspectives (for example Jakub's and Teodora's) or allows the story-teller to have the final word. Such a narrator represents the then fairly common modification of traditional

⁹ Differences between Nałkowska's novel and the works of Schulz and Kafka have been pointed out even by Frąckowiak-Wiegandtowa (1975, 105–9).

¹⁰ The obsessive belief in fate formed the core of a number of plays by Stanisław Wyspiański, the leading dramatist of Young Poland.

¹¹ Jakowska indicates here a similarity with the essay; she takes William Hazlitt as an example (1992, 58).

omniscience which involves a kind of wisdom characteristic of a well-informed neighbour or a friend of the family rather than of an omniscient creator. The narrator, however, is completely reliable, and as a result few doubts remain by the last page. This strategy of discovering truth, supplemented by epiphany within the characters' own awareness, appears to be paramount. Furthermore, the variety of enigmas surrounding the characters and events serves narrative suspense rather than poses genuine questions, and thus comes to resemble detective stories. Emotional aberrations are infrequent and grey areas not important enough to have a major impact on the underlying logic of the retrospective story-line. Whether or not Nałkowska's 'intellectual style' leads to very specific conclusions is another matter. Gombrowicz, who wrote about her works three years before the publication of *Niecierpliwi*, considered that she posited problems rather than solved them (Gombrowicz, 1973 [1936], 98–101).

IV

Cudzoziemka (The Stranger, 1936) by the then young Maria Kuncewiczowa¹² belongs among the most acclaimed Polish psychological analytical novels. At the time it was a literary success, praised for the profundity of its psychology and for its intricate structure. The portrayal of the last day in the life of the main character, Róża Żabczyńska, reveals to the reader her miserable past, but also the nature of her adult children. The narrative present covers few events. Róża pays a visit to her daughter, Marta, where she also meets her own estranged husband, her son and his wife. They talk, have dinner together and then she returns home, where she suddenly falls ill and dies. The novel, however, contains recurrent analepses, which go back to the protagonist's childhood in Russia before the Revolution, describe her life in Poland, journeys abroad and family stories. *Cudzoziemka* has a rhythmical structure, where the main theme re-emerges again and again, and important details serve as leitmotifs, as in a musical composition (see Fryde, 1966 [1937], 340). The elaborate story-line is only occasionally motivated by the characters' internal process of recollection. Saying that Róża's 'random associations' determine the temporal organization of the novel (Wysłouch, 1977, 53) is an exaggeration, which results from the false impression that the story has been focalized by the protagonist (ibid., 52; Speina, 1979, 140–1).

The governing principle of *Cudzoziemka*'s temporal structure was accurately described in a contemporary review:

The author [...] maintains the illusion of 'naturalness', essential to the Realist novel. Flashbacks are justified as recollections, because Róża, close to death,

¹² The English translation (*The Stranger. A Novel*) appeared in New York (1945) and London (1947).

is reliving her life experience. This provision, however, is hardly relevant in the novel. Past events are represented in the same way as present, and progress from one level to another has been motivated by thematic rather than psychological associations. For example, when Róża sits down to play the piano, there is a natural excuse for discussing the role of music in her life. When, in the following chapters, she is joined by her husband, son, daughter-in-law and daughter, we learn about Róża's family relations (Fryde, 1966 [1937], 339).

In other words, the controlling function of the author is still upheld, not as in the leading trend of Modernism, but as in contemporary Polish novels. Róża's point of view only occasionally comes to the foreground. Her discourse, introduced in direct or, less frequently, free indirect style, is always supervised by the narrator, who is aiming principally at a precise portrait. In Bakhtin's terminology, it is a good example of the 'represented speech', where language 'portrays' characters by demonstrating their attributes in line with the author's preliminary formula.

Correspondingly, the narrative perspective is manipulated to suit the strategy of presentation undertaken. The disclosure of Róża as a wife and mother of two children sometimes activates the respective standpoints of Adam, Władysław and Marta, while the directness of 'scenic' presentation sometimes moves the heroine into the focal position. From time to time the narrator takes full advantage of his/her omniscience, but in an attempt to avoid an impression of excessive presence he/she often speaks as an old acquaintance or even a fellow-tourist (an episode in Italy). The narrator shares with readers only the results of observation, or acts as a neutral spectator who just records the characters' words and gestures. All in all, definite focalization appears alien to Kuncewiczowa's technique. This vagueness and lack of stability resembles the narrative technique of Dąbrowska's so-called 'transparent' fiction and, in a broader sense, demonstrates the dominance of authorial command in the interwar novel. In *Cudzoziemka* it is consistent with the thematic organisation of the story, which, in principle, gives the writer even more power than in mimetic, chronological order. The contradictions of traditional Realism (imitation versus construction) have eventually been overcome by the enhanced role of the creator (see Jakowska, 1992, 128).

The dominance of external control affects the intellectual content of the novel. On the surface, *Cudzoziemka* follows many fundamental precepts of contemporary psychological analytical fiction. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) describes the events of a single day in the life of Clarissa by treating the present as a starting point for recollections which cover much of the heroine's past life. The main stream of events thus becomes significant only as 'the skeleton which supports the living flesh and blood of the novel' (Daiches, 1965, 18). While similarities with *Cudzoziemka* are clear, the final result looks very different. For Woolf, whatever happens to the characters seems less significant than the different images of human personality, as reflected in the characters' own

recollections and in the perception of others. Moreover, the problems haunting Clarissa Dalloway are addressed by several characters, which leads towards a plurality of disclosures (*ibid.*, 188, 209). Unlike Woolf, Kuncewiczowa introduces occasional psychological puzzles and unexpected reactions (for example Róża's impulse to kill her husband), exploits customarily trivial details (Róża's 'beautiful nose'), but the variety of relations eventually adds up into a round, fairly definitive portrait of the heroine, accompanied by a conclusive message that the wholehearted smile is more important in human life than wealth or artistic ambition. The author certainly tries to make the main character 'mysterious', thus sharing the impression of her entourage, but in the narrative process Kuncewiczowa amplifies what has been initially revealed rather than indicates new aspects of the heroine's mind. Róża's final epiphany of the purpose of life, which is meant to be cathartic, is somewhat banal. Critics, like Kołaczkowski (1968 [1936], 551–2) and Fryde (1966 [1937], 343), who complain of intellectual emptiness in a sophisticated form, seem closer to the truth than those who look for eschatological profundity (Schulz, 1964 [1936], 451–68), moral rebellion in the mould of Jaspers's Existentialism (Zaworska, 1992, 104–18) or the existential alienation of the artist (Kirchner, 1993, 640–1).

Another success of the 1930s, *Zazdrość i medycyna* (Jealousy and Medicine, 1933),¹³ by Michał Choromański (1904–72) also manifests virtuosity of construction, which many authors then craved. Karol Irzykowski sardonically remarked that the mere inversion of temporal order guarantees admiration by 'trendy' reviewers, who on such an occasion would eagerly hint at the phenomenology of Ingarden or Husserl (1937). As it looks, Choromański's achievement was due to a daring disregard for chronology and to an utter arbitrariness of plot structure. The initial episode of the novel is thus repeated at the end, when all the puzzles which had been mystifying readers are eventually explained. Inserted between are six days of events and mounting tension, complemented by flashbacks narrated by several characters. They concern mainly one subject: the exciting secrets of marital infidelity. The variety of witnesses, however, forms only an authorial story-telling strategy, since manifold personal accounts have nothing to do with the plurality of points of view. The chief principle of mystery and suspense restricts narrative omniscience, but the investigative power belongs solely to the author, who treats intradiegetic tellers only as providers of the missing information. That information eventually leads the reader to the full disclosure of Rebeka's liaison with Dr Tamten, while her deceived husband is still left in confusion and uncertainty.

This obvious resemblance to the detective story is regarded by Wyśłouch as a game with readers and their expectations, allegedly culminating in a teasing denouement where, contrary to earlier

¹³ The English translation (*Jealousy and Medicine*) was published in London (1946).

suggestions, the lover is not killed by the deceived husband (1977, 137–45). Yet the reader is not necessarily waiting for revenge, but for the final answer as to whether or not and with how many lovers Rebeka was unfaithful to her husband. The mysterious death of the amateur detective, Abraham Gold, which is signalled in the first episode, forms another mystery to be revealed. Narrative suspense results solely from the confusing evidence that is sorted out at the end. Atmospheric effects like gales, rain and darkness intensify the strained atmosphere of liberated passions and somewhat subdue the message; the message consists of the author's ironic assessment of blind love for a conventional *femme fatale*. Regarded as a major defiance of Realism (Sławiński, 1957; Wysłouch, 1977, 76), *Zazdrość i medycyna* is actually nothing but an inconsequential experiment in form. Jerzy Kwiatkowski comes close to the truth when he states that no novel of the time demonstrates such a striking disproportion between message and craft (1990, 272).

CHAPTER VI

DEMIURGES PERPLEXED: STANISŁAW IGNACY WITKIEWICZ AND BRUNO SCHULZ

I

The return of the author, as discussed earlier, was linked with the dominant features of traditional Realism. With the rejection of Impressionist perspectivism and the consequent relativism this narrative strengthened, although unevenly, the established position of the author as the final authority in the semantic structure of the reality portrayed. The followers of Young Poland fiction represent a more complex approach. Kaden-Bandrowski apart, they were not interested in personal focalization or the Flaubert heritage, which had affected the narrative art of such as Żeromski, Przybyszewski or, at one stage, Berent. Authorial presence sometimes assumes extreme forms. They, however, carried on another element of the lyrical mood, its ultimate links with universal man ('landscapes of soul') and authorial vision, which had combined subjectivity with the symbolic or mythological transformation of reality, where the autonomous properties of language played a major role. This tendency, initiated by Berent and taken further by Miciński, opened the way for uncovered creativity and the metafictional bias. This corresponded with the language games of Lemański's fairy tales and the irreverent, parodic approach to the novelistic conventions by Roman Jaworski, a writer still active in the 1920s. Żeromski, Przybyszewski and Berent were also active at the time, while metaphysical fantasy, as a force against Realism, found its followers among younger writers, among whom Stefan Grabiński achieved the best results.

Among the multiplicity of isms that populated the Polish literary scene after World War I, Expressionism seems the most important for the type of fiction discussed in this chapter. Its early stage was well represented by some Young Poland writers, and one of them, Przybyszewski, advocated this trend on the threshold of the interwar period. Although the greatest enthusiasts for Expressionism were artistic failures, the movement offered a focal point for the *Lebensgefühl*, rather rare in the Poland of 1920s, which affected several otherwise diverse writers of major importance. Any solely stylistic definition of Expressionism must fail, since the movement stands for a certain aesthetic and philosophical awareness rather than for some form of

definite poetics. Augustinus P. Dierick, in his well-documented monograph on German Expressionist prose, singled out its basic principles (1987, 3–93), which appear also to apply to Polish developments. There was a fundamental notion of crisis in social structures as well as in philosophy, religion and the arts, a sense of the collapse of all existing convictions and the fear of an oncoming catastrophe. It constituted in Poland the continuation of the *fin-de-siècle* decadence of the 1890s, analyzed by Wyka as a reaction to scientific Positivism (1968b, 38–56). While in the first stage this reaction was dominated by an escape into personal experience, where hapless hedonism and longings for Nirvana (death) played a major role, later it emerged in the Expressionistic form of universal catastrophe, concerned either with the degeneration of human culture or with the eschatological apprehension of doomsday in the godforsaken globe.¹

For artistic creativity, the most important implication of the Expressionist *Weltanschauung* is the idea of human alienation in a hostile and automatized society, which can be evaded only by escaping into one's own world. Thus the individual experience of reality becomes reality itself. Writers, however, attempted to transcend the personal and to achieve the universal, that is to reveal essentiality (*das Wesen*). On such grounds, in full-blooded Expressionism they rejected psychology in favour of supra-individual and often nameless human types.² On the other hand, they fought against reification and the classification present in the rational language, the language of clichés that transformed people into objects. Liberated fantasy and deformation served the general tendency to shun the mediocrity and dull materialism of the middle class (Dierick, 1987, 40–65). Expressionism in its complex and contradictory structure contains both elitism, rooted in the nineteenth-century concept of the ivory tower, and a need for unity with the masses; the old creed of the special mission of literature and a tendency to undermine its medium, the language; a deep scorn for mass culture and an underlying fascination with the appeal of mass media (film, the press). All differences aside, Expressionism is closer than even the most Modernist form of Realism to an over-scrupulous use of language, 'conscious subversiveness' in style and content, apocalyptic thinking and a sort of decadence, which also characterize the postmodern mode (see Alexander, 1990, 14–20). A similar rebellion against the alleged mediocrity of the middle-class culture, Realism and the logical rationality of language can be found in Surrealism, recognized as the most important predecessor of Postmodernism (e.g. Ermarth, 1992, 91–106).

¹ Both types of alarm can be found in the poetry and prose of Jan Kasprówicz and Tadeusz Miciński. The novels of Berent and Przybyszewski are not free from catastrophic forebodings either.

² Alfred Döblin voiced his derision of psychological literature as follows: 'Ich höhne auch der Dichtkunst, die sich sättigt im Seelenentwickeln — alles nur verstehen heisst alles erniedrigen' (after Dierick, 1987, 43).

The invasion of modern trends following World War I brought to Poland an avant-garde reassessment of aesthetic principles. Since this was stronger in poetry and the arts than in fiction, some of the first proposals for new narrative techniques came from two poets, who were associated with Futurism, but were also under the influence of Expressionism. In the introduction to his short novel *Nogi Izoldy Morgan* (The Legs of I. M., 1923), Bruno Jasiński writes:

The novel of today must stop narrating facts that evoke in the reader's mind the states simply reflecting those facts. This approach is fundamentally misguided and appeals only to the intellectually inferior.

The contemporary novel introduces certain basic states of mind and stimulates readers to construct a series of related facts. Therefore each reader gives the story an individual form, which accounts for its endless inspiration. (Jasiński, 1972 [1923], 221–2)

The notion of the liberated imagination was augmented by Aleksander Wat's advocacy of 'liberated words', free of logical and rational arrangements and approaching gibberish. His experimental prose poem *JA z jednej i JA z drugiej strony mego mopsożelaznego piecyka* (I on the one side and I on the other side of my pig-iron stove, 1920) attempted to destroy the traditional understanding of meaning, while his later short stories, published under the title *Bezrobotny Lucyfer* (Lucifer Unemployed, 1927),³ shifted attention from language to the grotesque deformation of the represented world and anticipated Witkiewicz's catastrophism (see Bolecki, 1991, 153–8). This intellectual climate determined the writing of the two most innovative disciples of early Modernism, Witkiewicz and Schulz. They both had an intimate experience of the crisis of modern civilization and both attempted to act as demiurges in the world of simulacra.

II

The artistic standing of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, known as Witkacy (1885–1939), has always been controversial. Regarded as a 'graphomaniac of genius' (*genialny grafoman*) by Karol Irzykowski (1957 [1929], 340) or as a Bohemian eccentric without talent by Witold Gombrowicz (1984, III, 17), he has also been an object of admiration both in Poland and the West. Daniel Gerould called him 'the most remarkable and versatile artistic personality active in Poland during the first half of the twentieth century' and 'a major figure in the European Avant-garde between the wars' (1981, ix).⁴ He is certainly best known as a playwright and a forerunner of the Theatre of the Absurd, but his novels also attract attention as experiments in form. Two of them, *Pożegnanie*

³ English translation: Evanston, III., 1990.

⁴ Witkiewicz's reception outside Poland is discussed by Degler (1990).

jesieni (Farewell to Autumn, 1927) and *Nienasycenie* (Insatiability, 1930),⁵ published in his lifetime, will be considered in this chapter.⁶

To say that Witkacy's 'dramatic and fictional style is unique' and that he stood aloof from any contemporary movement (Gerould 1981, xi–xii) is an overstatement, based on an ignorance of what was going on elsewhere in Europe. For example, anti-Realist and grotesque Russian fiction manifested a similar tendency. The works of writers like Andrei Bely, Yevgeny Zamyatin and Mikhail Bulgakov introduced Protean narrative, exposing the act of telling and blending various styles, which undermined the unity of the represented world, laid bare its literary character, merged triviality with the sublime and demonstrated a penchant for the apocalyptic (see Fanger, 1976, 467–80). The corresponding denial by Gerould (1987, xi) of the importance of the Polish literary tradition in the shaping of Witkiewicz's works, with the exception of Tadeusz Miciński, can only be explained by his ignorance. From Karol Irzykowski (1957 [1929], 337–49) on, Polish critics have pointed out Witkacy's various links with Young Poland (for example Puzyna, 1962, 7–11; Danek-Wojnowska, 1976; Bocheński, 1994); some of them went as far as naming him an epigone of that movement (for example Stawar, 1957, 607). Actually, he was not merely a follower of existing trends, but on the other hand, he was not the sole innovator.

Like the German Expressionists and Young Poland, Witkiewicz still believed in the great mission of art, or at least tried to sustain that creed in a world hostile to the idea of metaphysical experience. His theory of 'pure form' and philosophical ideas represented contradictions symptomatic of artists who felt they were living on the boundary-line between two epochs. Witkiewicz preached that 'among all transitory values on the Earth art is the most lasting' (1959 [1919], 116) and felt constrained to restore the old but now abandoned human concern with the 'mystery of existence', but he was horrified by the 'appalling dullness of the mechanized, senseless life' of his times to the point where he actually lost any faith in a better future and claimed that in a society of ants and bees art and beauty would survive only in the form of madness (*ibid.*, 129). Witkacy attacked, on the one hand, Modernist relativism, believing that the multiplicity of points of view is useless, because one should strive for an absolute truth (1959 [1922], 247). Denigrating Bergson at every opportunity and defending an intellectual approach to the problems portrayed in literature, Witkacy, on the other hand, often blamed science for its endeavour to systemize and label human knowledge of the world, and demonstrated his preference for primeval humanity, with its instinctive comprehension of reality. His theory of the theatre seriously

⁵ English translation by Louis Iribarne: Urbana, Ill., 1977.

⁶ His early novel, *622 upadki Bunga, czyli demoniczna kobieta* (The 622 Downfalls of Bungo, or the Demonic Woman, written 1910–11) and the unfinished philosophical narrative, *Jedyne wyjście* (The Only Way Out, written 1933), were published posthumously. They are discussed by Bocheński (1994).

undermined the logical and referential structure of language, but he would reject premeditated senselessness or deformation. While theoretically close to abstraction, he never actually advocated abstract art.

Witkacy's approach to the novel is equally hesitant. His often quoted formulation that the novel is 'a bag into which, without paying any attention to pure form, one can stuff everything' (1959 [1925], 334)⁷ is usually understood as a disparagement of the novel *per se*. Be that as it may, he could as well be said to be stating that the nineteenth-century novel was too restrictive, and therefore came up with a positive proposal, reaching back to the older forms of fiction (cf. Bolecki, 1982, 12–85; Czapliński, 1988, 1989). Moreover, as his editor, Konstanty Puzyna, has pointed out, the notion of a bag freed Witkiewicz from his own contradictions in the theory of pure form, where the influence of the Cracow 'Formists' bridled his Expressionist spontaneity of inspiration. As a result, his novels became a 'ferocious Expressionist grotesque, political and social' (Puzyna, 1962, 24–5). This 'liberated' form encouraged critics to hark back to the early stages of the novel, that is to Rabelais (Głowiński, 1973, 243–78), French philosophical tales from the eighteenth century (Speina, 1965, 76), or to the digressive narratives of Lawrence Sterne and his Romantic followers (Bolecki, 1982, 70). These analogies are symptomatic *per se* and invite further consideration.

Gabriel Josipovici (1983, 54–65) traced an 'extemporal vein' in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, where both author and readers are 'at leisure', launched into the unexpected by the onward rush of discourse itself. Free from any bonds and generic discipline, the narrative 'goes wild', moving between sheer pleasure and the principles of reality, while maintaining that the act of telling is more important than plot and characters. Josipovici admires here early novels, which surpassed the idea of art as selection and exclusion, creating an impression that everything could be told (*ibid.*, 57). If the nineteenth century imposed upon fiction concealed but rigid rules, which culminated in the rather unambitious well-made novel, and if modernist focalization kept those rules tight in another way, the second half of the twentieth century bolstered desires to return to the roots (cf. *ibid.*, 57). Robert Scholes maintains that the 'current interest in Rabelais, Cervantes, Alemán, Grimmelshausen, Swift, Smollett and Voltaire is part of the general drift of fiction into more violent and more intellectual channels' and that 'it is surely better to think of Voltaire and Swift when reading Vonnegut and Barth than to think of Hemingway and Fitzgerald' (1979, 144). Early novelists rejoiced in the creative power of language and fantasy, thus resembling contemporary fabulation, which, according to Scholes, celebrates imagination and delights in pure design (*ibid.*, 2; Waugh, 1988, 17). Moreover, in the grotesque world of Rabelais negation was indivisible from affirmation and the consequent laughter played a renovating role (Bakhtin, 1984, ch.

⁷ In his book review: 'Wniebowstąpienie J.M. Rytarda', *Skamander*, Warsaw, 1925, no. 37.

I). One has to consider whether the world represented in Witkiewicz's novels actually resembles such attitudes.

Witkacy's theory of pure form struggled to uphold the role of the artist-demiurge in the hostile environment of the industrialized world.⁸ His fear of Americanization played an essential role here (see Bocheński, 1994, 133, 144–6). His project of a dream-resembling plot in drama, outlined in *Wstęp do teorii czystej formy w teatrze* (The Introduction to the Theory of Pure Form in Theatre, 1920), came close to Surrealism (Puzyna, 1962, 30–1; Janicka, 1972), but his novels actually undermined the concept of genuine creativity. Andrzej Kijowski described *Nienasylenie* as 'suicide by parody', and stated that its message could be summarized as follows: 'there will be no story, no philosophy, no unity of characters, as unity is not feasible, no literature, because it cannot stand the pace, no intellectual formula able to embrace the new world' (1964, 36).⁹ Others emphasized the autodestructive inclination in Witkacy's works, discernible in his highly ironic portrayal of Kwintofron's theatre and the literary works of Abnol in *Nienasylenie*, despite the fact that both of them seemed to implement his own theories of art (cf. Nowotny-Szybistowa, 1973, 14–15; Bocheński, 1994, 159–69). An analogy with Marcel Duchamp (Nowotny-Szybistowa, 1973, 33) is particularly illuminating, as both artists resemble the Dadaists in their disrespect for 'divine creators'. Witkiewicz, despite his proclaimed beliefs in great art, was capable of replacing the philosophy and religion of the old days through the stimulation of metaphysical feeling, and despite his open criticism of Dada and Surrealism (see Bocheński, 1994, 164–5) was paradoxically close, at least in his novels, to the same disrespectful attitude towards the magnitude of artistic creation. He took a step further the scepticism of Berent's *Próchno*, and demonstrated that the tragic fate of 'pure form' was to remain a superior, unimplementable value (see Danek-Wojnowska, 1976, 93–4). His novels employ threadbare conventions and apparently demonstrate that any attempt to invent something new is in principle useless.

The main difficulty in dealing with Witkacy's fiction stems from its shoddiness, semantic inflation, trite story-lines and stock characters. One is uncertain of what is the result of artistic intentions, and what is simply the outcome of careless writing, poor taste and meagre imagination, despite claims to the contrary (e.g. Geroult, 1981). Witkacy's wordiness exceeds even the immoderation of many Young Poland writers, among whom the most exuberant, Przybyszewski and Miciński, had a serious impact on shaping Witkacy's narratives. Consequently, his juvenile

⁸ The very fact that such feelings agonized artists living in an economically-backward country certainly invites reflection, but its full implications go far beyond the scope of this discussion. One may say, nevertheless, that Polish avant-garde culture seems concerned more with general problems than with those arising from a strictly national predicament.

⁹ Axiological problems provoked by Witkacy's fiction are discussed by Czapliński (1989).

novel, *622 upadki Bunga* (The 622 Downfalls of Bungo), is barely readable, and even his best achievements, *Pożegnanie jesieni* and *Nienasycenie*, suffer from immense verbosity. Some contemporary critics, familiar with the current point-of-view techniques in English fiction, accused Witkiewicz of turning the clock back to pre-nineteenth-century narration (Piwiński, 1927, 1930; Pomirowski, 1933, 180–3).¹⁰ For Czesław Miłosz, however, this was a desirable assault on the novel, results notwithstanding (1981, 9). Witkacy's poetics, in fact, worked predominantly by negation, with a hidden hope that some constructiveness might eventually surface (see Nowotny-Szybistowa, 1973, 162–3).

His narrative art represents digressive discourse where the 'intrusive author' frequently interferes in the course of events. This Sternean form of story-telling was not uncommon during the interwar period (see Jakowska, 1992), but he gave it a special character. In the classification of the novel Witkiewicz singled out three possible ways of delivering a message: 1) realistic record, based on a common-sense approach and transparent language; 2) mysterious events, either interpolated directly into everyday reality or evoked by style, implicitly suggesting the author's metaphysical views; 3) an explicit disclosure of such views, conveyed through imagery or direct statements (1959 [1925], 328–9). He postulated an intellectual content and recommended the following code: 'say it precisely or do not speak at all' (ib., 334).¹¹ The striking presence in Witkacy's fiction of philosophical discourse achieves its peak in *Jedyne wyjście*, which is hardly more than an abstract debate. Still, *Pożegnanie jesieni* and *Nienasycenie* have also been treated as straight disclosures of the writer's opinions, voiced either by the narrator or by a series of characters. In his novels, Witkacy includes ideas and polemics borrowed from his theoretical books, articles and reviews. His emotional involvement, impulsive impatience and abusive language are blatant in the narrative, and often plunge into uncontrolled verbiage. More often in *Nienasycenie* than in *Pożegnanie jesieni*, however, his convictions are relativized or even ridiculed by their context, deprived of the traditional authorial power of assertion. Some characters are totally bored when ideas resembling those of Witkacy are lectured upon or discussed; the notions of 'pure form' or 'metaphysical feelings' are trivialized; apparently serious commentaries may end in a disparaging 'never mind', and the real author is once introduced as 'Witkacy, that brat from Zakopane' (1992 [1930], 389). Again, there is no consistency in his approach and to say that Witkacy totally abandoned any authorial message would unquestionably be stretching a point. Critics who claim that the wilful omniscience of the author arbitrarily manipulates the readers by forcing his philosophical conclusions on them come equally

¹⁰ Large quotations in Bolecki, 1982, 25–6, footnote.

¹¹ Witkiewicz also defended authorial digressions in his preface to *Nienasycenie*.

close to the truth (Piechal, 1957; Pomian, 1972, 27–9; Bocheński, 1994, 5).

The world represented in *Nienasylenie* and *Pożegnanie jesieni* consists of recurring stereotypes and clichés, focused on the traditional conflict between body and soul (see Pomian, 1972). The explicit eroticism, which once shocked the public, over-exploits the image of the demonic *femme fatale*, whose roots remain in the *Fin de siècle* (Huysmans, Przybyszewski), and even go back to the post-romantic fiction of Barbey d'Aureville, Przybyszewski's favourite writer, or Żmichowska's *Poganka*. Scenes of sexual intercourse, usually tainted with sadomasochism, form a rhythmic chain of events, which is rhetorical, meretricious and banal. They remind one of second-rate love stories and therefore encouraged critics to regard them as parodies of Young Poland's stylistic extravaganzas, particularly those of Żeromski and, even more, Przybyszewski. Witkiewicz, however, was respectful towards those writers, while his 'Eros in extremis' was in line with the Expressionist prose, which 'was in fact so preoccupied with sexual relationships of all kinds that we may almost speak of an obsession' (Dierick, 1987, 209). Like the author of *Nienasylenie*, Expressionists rarely portrayed sex as good in itself, but rather as an obstacle to the achievement of transcendency, or as an extreme form of self-indulgence where the partner was almost regarded as a mere instrument. Genuine love and salvation through sexual relations thus appeared as fleeting, illusory ideals (*ibid.*, 209–38). Although in Witkacy's works these matters often verge on triviality and kitsch, this corresponds with his destructive impulse to turn everything into mockery (see Bocheński, 1994). In a more general sense, reality and fiction transgress their boundaries, approaching what McHale called an 'ontological scandal' (1987, 85). Invented philosophers are quoted by the narrator with the same gravity as authentic ones, while the quasi-futuristic status of the story allows him to mention his own grandson and to cite mockingly 'the late Jan Lechoń', then one of most popular young poets (1992 [1930], 194, 389).

A similar tension between construction and deconstruction distinguishes Witkiewicz's approach to the psychology of his characters. *Pożegnanie jesieni* is still related to the interior monologues of Young Poland writers and to free indirect discourse, and includes perspicacious close-ups of the protagonist's most essential emotions. This accounts for Irzykowski's claim that Witkiewicz's psychological descriptions were the best in Polish fiction (1957 [1929], 341). *Nienasylenie* gives more prominence to the authorial voice, but also dwells entirely on selected states of mind, in agreement with the tradition of lyrical 'landscapes of the soul'. Consequently, Witkiewicz portrays supra-individual consciousness rather than strictly personal experience. Jan Błoński's opinion that 'Witkacy duplicates *ad infinitum* only one human type, probably himself' (1972, 38) reflects this situation, providing that we take

his universalizing tendency into account.¹² Still, even in *Pożegnanie jesieni* he frequently turns literary portraits into games, where the characters are mocked through parody and exaggeration; his hero, Atanazy Bazakbal, is introduced in such a way at the very beginning of the novel (1927, 11–13). Witkacy's over-elaborated metaphors transform people into tawdry demons (particularly Hela Bertz and her father), but his ostensible exactitude of description (Father Hieronim's height is given in centimetres) challenges the very principle of Realist description. Atanazy's assault on Proust for forcing him 'to associate with a bunch of snobbish idiots and listen to the extravagantly precise descriptions of their uninspired states of mind' (ibid., 23), reflects Witkacy's general outlook. In *Nienasycenie*, one learns that the next generation will not 'wallow in soul-searching' any more, because of 'a general knowledge that nothing new can be dug up from there' (1992 [1930], 474). This scepticism about the capacity of literature to serve as an instrument of cognition, coincides with a growing fear that in the automatized world people were losing their individuality and turning into puppets. The oriental pills of Murti Bing, distributed by the Chinese during their conquest of Eastern Europe, corrode any form of resistance and represent the final stage of that development.

Witkiewicz's literary awareness was haunted by a painful belief that 'everything had been already said', that language had lost all its possible 'permutations and variations' and that, as a result, 'one can only repeat, with a few modifications, things established previously' (1992 [1930], 473). This resembles Barthes's elimination of the author as a creative ego, on the grounds that 'the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original'. Thus 'his only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them' (1990 [1968], 230–1). Hence, as we read in *S/Z*, the literary code of single works is nothing more than a 'mirage of structures', containing 'fragments of something that has always been *already* read, seen, done, experienced' (1990a [1973], 20).¹³ Witkacy's Rabelaisian robustness is, actually, somewhat misleading. A lexical analysis of his works leads to the conclusion that not only the parody and pastiche, but also the neologizing represent primarily a lack of confidence in language and a strong tendency towards self-destruction, which frustrates any constructive efforts (Nowotny-Szybistowa, 1973).

Given his disbelief in the power of speech and in the authenticity of individual feelings, Witkacy could hardly be interested in the search for personal points of view which was typical of the contemporary novel in England and America, and in the consequent epistemological perspectives. He was fascinated instead by the ontological predicament of the human race, whose metaphysical needs had to remain insatiable in the

12 Bocheński (1994, 162–3) compares his views with those of Przybyszewski.

13 The consistency of this claim in the works of Barthes and other representatives of contemporary thought is questioned by Sean Burke (1992).

world of simulacra that was threatened by annihilation. Daniel Geroult is certainly right when he writes that ‘the fragmentary glimpses which Witkacy offers of the ersatz quality of modern life and its pseudoculture are among the most brilliant in *Nienasylenie*’, and that ‘everything from genius to revolution, from food to mystical experience, from art to patriotic heroics, is hybrid, inauthentic, and sham’ (1981, 299). Those qualities, however, are already discernible in *Pożegnanie jesieni*, and haunt his characters’ exuberant eroticism more than anything else; that is why everything becomes a hopeless struggle for fulfilment in a reality where role-play is the main principle. ‘How horrifying it is to look behind the scenes of the theatre of so-called love’, we read in *Nienasylenie* (1992 [1930], 193), where Genezyp Kapen is constantly subject to games performed by two women, Irina and Percy. His predecessor, Atanazy Bazakbal from *Pożegnanie jesieni*, was similarly treated by the demonic Hela Bertz. Genezyp’s successive endeavours to liberate himself from the oppression of his father and domineering females bring about only madness and reckless killings, and eventually end in the tyranny of Chinese rule and Murti Bing’s incapacitating tablets. In Witkiewicz’s view, sexual desires will finally become extinct in the mechanized societies of the future (see 1927, 321). Superficial stimulation by alcohol and cocaine confers upon his heroes ephemeral rapture and ironically lies behind Atanazy’s only impulse to reform degenerating humanity (*ibid.*, 439 ff.). In a world controlled by simulation, art is a wholly desperate attempt to substitute for real-life experience; the lengthy philosophical discussions apparently play the same role (see 1992 [1930], 108). In the ‘grotesque dance of puppets’ (Bocheński, 1994, 125) the only thing that means anything appears to be death (Witkiewicz, 1927, 448).

The assertion that, had Witkacy been well known in Western Europe, he would have probably surpassed the influence of Joyce and Sartre (Płomiński, 1957, 6), is a gross exaggeration. Still, his sensibility and narrative art most certainly led to a tendency which was later developed by Postmodernism. He blended kitsch with metaphysics, disrupted the usual way of reading by demonstrating the discursive character of represented reality (allusions to existing texts and metafictional comments), and came close to Baudrillard’s notion that ‘it is now a principle of simulation, and not of reality, that regulates social life’ (1988 [1976], 120). Whether or not a great writer, he was ahead of his times (see Kotarbiński, 1957, 13; Puzyna, 1962, 43).

III

Bruno Schulz (1892–1942) was another would-be demiurge, that is, creator of an autonomous literary world, who tried to turn the clock back in defiance of the corrupt modern world. Some critics argue that his ‘escape into the past has ended in the future’ (Kuryluk, 1990, 43), and that his belated affiliations actually made him one of the great

experimental writers of the twentieth century (Stala, 1993, 1). Novelists, such as John Updike (1979) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1978), compare him with Kafka, Proust and Borges. Some, however, consider him merely as a disciple of Young Poland and a writer of modest universal appeal (Goślicki-Baur, 1975, 138 ff.).¹⁴ Gabriel Josipovici maintains that Schulz's old-fashioned retreat into art made him inferior to more sceptical twentieth-century writers:

Art for him was clearly an essential relief from the tedium of his life, and it is therefore natural that he should have placed great faith in it. But, ultimately, it was this very confidence in art and the child's vision which let him down, while Kafka's doubts (like Proust's) are what propelled him towards his major psychological and technical discoveries (1983, 104).

Is this, however, the case?

Schulz's rather small output as a critic, and the letters that have survived, contain statements of a firm belief in the power of imaginative youth to reinstate art to its 'primeval' position. His often-quoted notion of 'growing into childhood' ("dojrzeć" do dzieciństwa' [Schulz, 1964 (1936), 580]) encourages speculations about art returning to its ancient roots, but, as Lutz Steinhoff explains (1984), this idea of renewal eventually turns into a complex game, where the grotesque undermines the initial principle. The writer's utopian conviction that poetry (he does not use the term fiction) can still regain its past power is disclosed in an unadulterated form in his short essay *Mityzacja rzeczywistości* (The Mythologization of Reality, 1936). This essay assigns a special role to naming, in reference to the biblical 'in the beginning was the Word'. 'The unnamed', he claims, 'does not exist for us. To name a thing is to include it into some universal meaning' (1964, 443). Consequently, instead of regarding words as 'shadows' or 'mirrors of reality', it would have been wiser to consider reality as the 'shadow of words' (ibid., 445). The creative function of speech can, however, be rebuilt only by overcoming the disintegration of language in its everyday usage, and by returning to the mythological sources of poetry, where words belonged to an integrated system. Displaced myths are thus expected to shape the substance of literature, which will 're-establish lost meanings, restore words to their former position, and bind them according to their ancient significance' (ibid., 444). As a result, the cognitive value of literature could equal that of science.

Schulz's theories were not unique in Poland, where the special quality of poetic language was discussed by the theorists of the Constructivist group, known as the Cracow Avant-garde. The urgent need to liberate poetry from clichés was also advocated by Bolesław Leśmian, a poet who looked for a defence against the menacing domination of utilitarian

¹⁴ Similar views were voiced by such outstanding critics as Kazimierz Wyka and Stefan Napierski soon after the publication of his short stories (Wyka, 1967 [1939], 259–71).

civilization (for more of this see Bolecki, 1982, 171–91). This approach resembled the concerns of the Symbolists (for example Mallarmé), and corresponded broadly with the more recent theory of defamiliarization, developed by the Russian Formalists (see Stala, 1993, 113). Philosophically, Schulz's attempt to combat pragmatic intellect followed Nietzsche and Bergson, but also took up ideas once advocated by Przybyszewski, ideas which can actually be traced back to Mickiewicz and Romanticism.¹⁵ Regarding displaced myths as the core element of fictional worlds brings to mind Northrop Frye's later concept of archetypes, but Frye's theory had its predecessors in the anthropology of James G. Frazer at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the psychoanalysis of Carl G. Jung (the collective unconscious). Ernst Cassirer's conviction that mythical thinking is just another form of reasoning seems particularly close to the ideas of Schulz (see Speina, 1971, 197).

Cristopher Nash believes that the 'idea of pure narration', as developed by the anti-Realists of the late twentieth century, has its roots in folklore and mythology. His arguments are close to those used by Schulz:

It's a commonplace observation in discussions of myth and folklore as the 'primordial' forms of narrative that one of their most prevalent motifs is the dramatization of the power of 'the word' itself as a — if not *the* — source of creation. In the beginning was the Word. The evidence for the near-'universality' of the mythological *topos* of the Logos as formative principle, of the *act of naming* as an act of creating, is stunning (Nash, 1987, 229–30).

The proclamations of Barthes, Philippe Sollers or Raymond Federman uphold language as the object of exploration and the main instrument of the self-begetting narrative. Taken to its extreme, Schulz's conviction that reality is just the 'shadow of words' would actually end in Derrida's doctrine that the signified 'is merely an illusion' and 'signifying is nothing more or less than signifiers *in motion*' (Harland, 1987, 134–5). Since language is shared and thus supra-individual in principle, it would have meant, in Sollers' terms, 'the continuous unfolding of "impersonal" language alone' (Nash, 1987, 235). How does it befit a writer whose fiction is often treated as a personal, nearly Proustian account of *le temps perdu* (e.g. Sandauer, 1964; Brown, 1991)?

Schulz's literary work includes two collections of short stories, *Sklepy cynamonowe* (Cinnamon Shops, 1933) and *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass, 1936),¹⁶ supplemented by a

¹⁵ S. Chwin (1985) discussed Schulz's links with Romanticism, but his only partly convincing arguments concern another problem, the notion of 'man-creator'.

¹⁶ Both volumes were post-dated 1934 and 1937, respectively. They have been translated into English by Celina Wieniewska: *The Street of Crocodiles* (New York, 1963; the English title for *Sklepy cynamonowe*), *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* (New York, 1978). The updated bibliography of Schulz has recently been published (R.E. Brown, 1994).

handful of tales published in newspapers. His work on the major novel, *Mesjasz* (The Messiah), was tragically interrupted by his death at the hands of the Gestapo. *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* mostly contained short stories written before the publication of *Sklepy cynamonowe*, 'Wiosna' (Spring) being one of few exceptions (see Ficowski, 1967, 107–8, 155). Unlike *Sanatorium...*, the first volume represents a compact structure, where the succession of short stories seems to indicate the author's structural intentions and to carry his final message. Despite many digressions and metafictional comments articulated by the first-person narrator and the main character, his father, the extensive use of figurative language renders this message rather confusing and consequently open to a variety of esoteric readings, which often demonstrate the inventiveness of critics rather than representing a convincing explication of the text.¹⁷ It appears certain, nevertheless, that the optimistic belief in the possible revival of poetry by a return to its primordial roots becomes problematic, questioned by the author in a fashion similar to Witkacy questioning his pure form.¹⁸

The anti-mimetic creativity of art is encapsulated in the mysterious *Księga*, the Book, which brightened the narrator's childhood, but was later lost for ever. Critics compare it with the Bible (e.g. Błoński, 1994a) or with 'a writing of nature' that actually marks the signified (Stala, 1993, 45–9).¹⁹ As pointed out in *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą*, the Book is linked with childhood because later one has to be satisfied with common books (Schulz, 1964, 164). The focal idea of a return to childhood is resolved in the same tale ('The Book') in an ambiguous manner. The narrator's discovery of an old mail-order catalogue, where an advertisement for Anna Csillag hair restorer, accompanied by a picture of a woman with unusually long hair, appears most remarkable and is hailed as the recovery of the Original (*Autentyk*), though in a debased form (ibid., 171). 'Our narrator learns that he must be content with a degraded reality', comments George Hyde, and adds: 'in the modern world, the domain of the miraculous has been colonized by commerce, and Ulysses merges with Bloom, the wandering advertising canvasser in the modern street of crocodiles' (1992, 56).²⁰ Yet finding an analogy with Joyce can be misleading. Irony, clearly discernible in the initial version of *Ulysses*, has been eventually effaced (Booth, 1961, 33–4) and Joyce scholars

17 This tendency seems to be growing with time; see the recent collection of studies, edited by Jarzębski (1994).

18 The following assumption of Bolecki's seems too restrictive: 'Witkacy thus discovered in Schulz's fiction the sort of narrative art that he was always looking for himself, but never approached in his own literary practice. This seems to be the only link between the two of them' (1994, 151).

19 Chwin's conviction (1994) that the Book is actually less 'real' than the collection of stamps, introduced in another story, *Wiosna* (Spring), is as overstated as many views of this critic's on Schulz.

20 Brown's claim that the stamp collection holds the same status does not seem justifiable (1991, 37).

disagree as to whether his novel demonstrates the modern degradation of the universal values present in the *Odyssey*, or whether 'he endeavours to express everything and to assume nothing' (Daiches, 1965, 95). Anna Csillag's miraculous restoration of hair, on the other hand, appears to be nothing more than a commercial hoax to entice and mislead the prospective buyers of the concoction. Its tempting attraction thus seems deceptive, and the author certainly assumes that the reader is aware of this. As a result, the Original looks like a cheap imitation of the Book, and the whole idea of the mythologization of contemporary reality remains ambivalent until we accept the notion of a 'broken mirror', whose dispersed particles will bring us back to the 'Age of Genius' (Schulz, 1964 [1936], 175; see Panas, 1992; Sandauer, 1964, 32). Even if Anna Csillag's story, along with the trash and trinkets of the mass culture,²¹ contains remnants of this 'mirror', claims that Schulz merely upholds an unheroic myth and ennobles common reality (Ficowski, 1967, 44, 141–2) over-simplify his equivocal approach. 'The silver threads' pulled from 'the coarse texture of daily life', observed by John Updike (1979), are counterbalanced by the striking images of the degradation of ancient mythology (for example the tale 'Pan').

In his manifesto, *Mityzacja rzeczywistości*, Schulz was most probably attempting to uphold the position of great art. The main function of poetry, he claims, depends on the reconstruction of original meaning, on a search for 'ultimate knowledge' and the restoration of ancient myths (1964 [1936], 444–5). This seems to suggest a faith in language, and hence in imaginative writing, poetic style and an elevation of reality. Nevertheless, in the critical review of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (1937) Schulz defends immature subculture, that 'huge debris of culture, polluting its peripheries', for this 'cultural dump was, anyway, the maternal substance, the life-promoting muck and pulp, nourishing all values and the rest of culture'. He asserted that this 'dirty, private zone' overshadowed the formal façade and actually deconstructed official myths and ideals by exposing the imitative, hackneyed character of our language (1964, 484–5; see Karkowski, 1979, 68–9). Under such circumstances, the demiurgic power of great mythopoeic poetry becomes relative and the writer's programme somewhat cryptic.²² This looks forward to postmodern times and the words of Carlos Fuentes:

I'm not afraid of popular culture, I'm not afraid of the mass media, of entertainment. I feel that this is all grist to the mill of literature, it always has been. There is a constant re-elaboration of these themes which takes them,

21 In 'The Night of the Great Season' colourful trinkets and confections are described as the helpless defiance of the powers of night (1964 [1933], 150).

22 Describing Schulz's drawings in *The Book of Idolatry*, Krystyna Kulig-Janarek goes much further: 'The posture of a debased, grotesque author, drawn in *The Book*, parodies the old notion of artist-demiurges. The author seems to capitulate before his work. The Modernist myth of the creator thus becomes compromised' (1992, 167).

nevertheless, to another level and gives them more of an archetypal value than they would otherwise have, and hopefully wrests them from the purely entertainment value in which things would perish (King, 1987a, 146–7).²³

For Fuentes then, the task of a writer goes far beyond the imaginative reconstruction of the main, primeval language, the language of mythology. While pursuing the pattern of *Don Quixote*, he is expected to include ‘the combat of all sorts of languages which is the world we are living in’ (ibid., 138).

The idea of degraded mythology (*Autentyk*), contained in the Anna Csillag advertisement, is elaborated by the Father in his seminal ‘Treatise on Mannequins’ (*Sklepy cynamonowe*). This highly figurative, and hence perplexing, lecture is among the most difficult in Schulz’s whole work. Andreas Schönle (1991) understands its somewhat equivocal ‘we’ (*my*) as a direct expression of the Father’s views on the character of art and the role played therein by *tandeta*, that is simulation, ersatz or kitsch.²⁴ For Schönle, however, *tandeta* is an aesthetic category that rejects ‘transparent’ demiurgic creativity in favour of open ‘literariness’, which exposes the medium of communication and the derivative character of the worlds thus created. This principle, he contends, controls all the short stories and turns even the most imaginative scenes into mere fabrication. The Father, however, delivers his teaching with a ‘bitter smile’ (1964 [1933], 83) and while dwelling on the inevitability of simulacra in the modern world, he keeps in mind the recent misfortune of his failed endeavour to procreate real life; the magnificent birds, hatched by him in a loft, are eventually expelled by the cheeky maid, Adela, appalled by the muck and fetor in the house. Jerzy Jarzębski points out that the Father’s lecture on mannequins reflects the tragedy of human creativity, where naming is arbitrarily imposed upon objects, while the genuine demiurge does not need signs (1984, 216–18). For Zbigniew Taranienko, the Father is a ‘tragicomic demiurge’, because human creativity can result only in imperfect existence, as its imitative craft originates purely verbal ‘half-lives’ in literature (1993, 47). Still, as it seems, this sceptical assessment has affected Schulz’s stories to an unequal extent.

Schulz’s declared faith in the capacity of language to secure lost childhood by retreating into primeval myths, as we know it from a letter to S.I. Witkiewicz (Schulz, 1964 [1935], 683–4) and the essay *Mityzacja rzeczywistości*, was not completely abandoned. Lutz Steinhoff’s conclusion that the grotesque eventually kills any attempt at achieving spontaneous, naive fantasy, driving instead the first-person narrator and his Father to ‘existential catastrophe’ (1984, 185–6), indicates an important, albeit not the prevalent trend in Schulz’s fiction. The

²³ Schulz’s similarities with what are now known as Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism have been noted in the most recent publications (see Jarzębski [1994], Stala [1993]).

²⁴ According to Gombrowicz’s testimony Schulz used to call *tandeta* ersatz (1984, 16).

tragicomic fate of the Father is discussed by almost every critic. Constantly humiliated by Adela, and ultimately ridiculed by human clowns at the very end of *Sklepy cynamonowe*, he is certainly a quixotic hero. Apart from being a descendant of Don Quixote, he abides by the Romantic idea of the alienated artist and pursues the notional ambivalence of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, which was treated by Mickiewicz, adapted to Realism in Prus' *Lalka*, and subjected to grotesque contortions in Miciński's *Nietota*. Schulz's narrator, however, is a different case. His rather vague status gives him a protean quality. Sometimes a child, sometimes a young adult, he usually integrates with the author and joins in his polyphonic game of varied discourses.

The fantasy world of *Sklepy cynamonowe* extends between 'Cinnamon Stores', the title story of the original Polish edition, and 'The Street of Crocodiles', which headed the English translation.²⁵ 'Cinnamon Stores' is told by a boy enchanted by the beauty of a winter night. His imagery contains the freshness of an unadulterated spontaneous mind and, as a result, he is capable of reversing his father's failures. While the latter has to witness the degradation of his beloved birds, hatched from eggs but eventually turned into stuffed counterfeits in a hostile environment, the former, invigorated by his inspiring teacher, Professor Arendt, is fit to experience wonders which even conferr temporary life upon the stuffed animals in the school's natural history collection. Only the little dog, Nemrod, whose story is usually disregarded by critics, represents a higher degree of spontaneity than any human being (Schulz, 1964 [1933], 96). The 'magic of night' is, however, only an epiphany that interrupts the bleakness of everyday existence. The Father is given just one opportunity to defeat simulacra, when, instead of birds turned into mannequins, he witnesses the procreation of fantastic plants bred upon 'the humus of memories', but to his analytical mind this is only a mirage, another form of simulation. In the tale symbolically titled 'Spring', written later, the endeavours to compete with demiurge undertaken by the narrator, Józef N., also suffer eventual defeat. Roused by a stamp collection, whose childishly poetic character became associated with the Book, he strives to treat seriously the 'text of Spring', to rebel against the 'realm of prose' governed by Emperor Francis Joseph, and to return to the roots of words and the imagination. His retreat into the archetypal story of an 'abducted and metamorphosed princess' is a desperate attempt to impose fiction upon history that finally ends in farce, like all the adventures of Don Quixote (cf. Markowski, 1994). The princess, liberated with the suggestive assistance of mannequins from a waxworks, does not need any help, because she is not really abducted. Ironically, she does not even seem to be a princess. Józef N. fails to penetrate God's intentions and remains 'ignorant'. His later imprisonment for 'unlawful

²⁵ Whether or not the translator, Celina Wieniewska, was aware of this, the change of the title tilts the balance in the opposite direction and largely affects the final message.

dreaming' reinstates the conflict between artists and society, but does not resolve the main conflict between artistic imagination and authenticity.

The disparity between the artistic urge to create and its inevitable recourse to stock patterns gives rise to constant friction between inventive naming and expanding enumerations versus a tautological multiplication of meanings, extended into stereotypic imagery (see Jarzębski, 1992; Bolecki, 1982, 192–231). Original archetypes, employed as portrayals of the drama of existence, are eventually squeezed into over-used patterns, like the story of Bianka, the abducted 'princess'. Baroque agglomeration coupled with repetitiveness provoke Josipovici into complaining that 'for the reader, page after page of such evocation can grow tedious, however much it means to Schulz himself', and that 'irony does not bite very deep' (1983, 103–4). Ironic distance, however, is certainly more penetrating in what the writer regards as the zone of pure simulacra. His 'Street of Crocodiles', therefore, is totally absent from the 'beautiful old map' of the city, as if it had been ignored by the cartographer and in a sense also by the mythopoeic author of the poetic 'Cinnamon Stores'. In the imaginative world of shining colours, its grey and black aspect is striking, as is the cheap, imitative character of its fabric, a pretentious papier-mâché extravagance. Human puppets on the streets and the general impression of spectacle rather than reality represent an extreme form of what is comparatively muted and more diversified in other stories. The narrator places this street within the discourse of black-and-white commercial brochures, thus making it distinct in imagery from that inspired by the proper descendants of the Book, such as the memorabilia of childhood. Admitting, however, that even that godforsaken place has its 'ersatz charm' (*tandetny czar*), he seems to accept the plurality of the literary world which reflects the multiplicity of existing discourses and gives room for that ontological diversity typical of Postmodernism.²⁶ In the short narrative, '*Republika marzeń*' (The Republic of Dreams, 1936), he wants to be a disciple of Don Quixote and to allow a plethora of the most fantastic stories that ever existed to merge with life (1964, 405–6).

Schulz is in many ways linked with Expressionism and Surrealism. His defiance of ordinary language, his metaphoricality, anti-psychologisme, the poetics of dreams, his ontological instability, his presentation of metamorphoses and longing for the golden age bring him close to both trends, but also to early Polish Modernism. Gabriel Josipovici may be right that treating him as a Polish Proust or Kafka stretches a point, because 'unfortunately the truth of the matter is that he is not in that class at all' (1983, 102). Still, his highly imaginative art, blending commonplace events with fantasy, introduced a world under constant threat of erasure and attributed a creative role to language itself. By building on and then transmuting what was most innovative in Young Poland fiction, he anticipated, along with Witkacy, future developments.

²⁶ Stala describes Schulz's fiction as 'the infinite manifoldness of worlds' (1993, 11–29).

CHAPTER VII

CLOWN TURNED BARD: WITOLD GOMBROWICZ

I

Great Polish writers have always been regarded as national bards and it seems rather unlikely that there is to be any escape from this predicament. ‘A clown in his lifetime, the King-Spirit¹ after death’, muses Czesław Miłosz on Witold Gombrowicz’s (1904–1969) standing in national culture (1980 [1970], 137). Janusz Sławiński voices his concern about the dangers of such canonization, which forces scholars into a self-propelled and thus schematic exegesis of admired works (1990 [1977], 160–5). Jan Tomkowski mocks the results of the 1975 conference in Warsaw as follows: ‘Gombrowicz is the greatest Polish writer. The greatest in the whole history of literature. This has been decided by the Institute of Literary Research’ (1994, 98). The reading of Gombrowicz on one’s knees or prostrate on the floor in an almost religious deference annoys the writer’s former schoolmate, Tadeusz Kępiński, whose disrespectful approach can occasionally be convincing despite his essentially simplistic arguments (1992, 127). This state of affairs has adversely affected the huge critical literature on Gombrowicz’s undeniable contribution to modern fiction, including the most comprehensive books on him by Jerzy Jarzębski (1982) and Jan Błoński (1994). He found enthusiasts outside Poland as well, particularly in France and Italy, but in the English-speaking world he is not much more than a name in monographs on the twentieth-century novel.² Thus an academic assessment of Gombrowicz’s actual role is not an easy task.

Gombrowicz’s own declarations are whimsical and inconsistent to the point of self-contradiction. Quoting him, therefore, always poses a problem. ‘Gombrowicz’s views are never consistent, at least logically’, observes Błoński. ‘Any systematization is a useless effort, frustrating critics, not to mention politicians’ (Błoński, 1994, 238). He evidently feared any complete, ‘official’ portrait of himself (see de Roux, 1969,

1 An allusion to the mythological hero of Juliusz Słowacki’s Romantic poem (1847).

2 Gombrowicz’s major literary and autobiographical works, however, have been translated into English, including most recently *Trans-Atlantyk* (New Haven and London, 1994); bibliography (up to 1970s) in Thompson (1979, 163–8).

145–6)³ and despite apparent arrogance actually wavered, continually constructing and deconstructing his artistic image. Hence, on the one hand, he paraded his own egotism and maintained that ‘he had never written a word about anything but himself’ (1957 [1953], 6) and, consequently, ‘never aspired to the title of Polish writer’, just wanting ‘to be Gombrowicz and nothing else’ (1984, II, 65). The four times repeated ‘I’ or myself (*ja*) at the beginning of his diary (1984, I, 4) makes this point defiantly clear. In a broader context, it corresponds with his conviction that the author, rather than fictitious stories, makes the real substance of literary works (see Gombrowicz, 1973 [1935–6], 41–2, 99). On the other hand, he never lost his faith in ‘the vocation of artist as clown and Proteus’ (Błoński, 1985 [1974], 74) and thus allowed the critics to treat him as an ardent ‘apostle’ and fighting ‘reformer’ (Schulz, 1964 [1938], 487), or as a Utopian of anti-form, aiming at ‘a new and better world’ (Van der Meer, 1992, 139). This has most certainly paved the way for his precarious position as a modern bard, the position that understandably concerns Miłosz.

It is fair to say, however, that the ‘clown in his lifetime’ enjoyed playing a ‘master’ (see Rita Gombrowicz, 1987, 182–3). He requested from his commentators respect and earnestness (Gombrowicz, 1984, I, 98), while himself indulging in bullying his interlocutors with gusto and style (see Herbert, 1993, 109–10). His recently-published correspondence with Jerzy Giedroyc, the editor of the Paris-based journal *Kultura*, reveals another Gombrowicz, different from the image cleverly constructed in ‘official’ disclosures. Even if we disregard the political opportunism and striking pettiness of a writer whose ‘precious ego’ seems to overshadow everything else, the author’s megalomania is laid bare here, without the smoke screen of clownish masks and self-deprecating humour. Despite occasional attempts at playing a ‘modest man’ who does not treat himself seriously (Giedroyc–Gombrowicz, 1993, 50, 269–70), he claims to be ‘the greatest Polish’ or even ‘international writer’ (*ibid.*, 317, 320), a man of genius (*ibid.*, 389) or, symptomatically, a ‘national bard’ (*ibid.*, 370). As in these claims there is hardly a trace of irony, one does not wonder that even the sympathetic Giedroyc could regard Gombrowicz as a prima donna (*ibid.*, 221) and mockingly suggest to him the establishment of a Bards’ Union (*ibid.*, 371).⁴

Discrepancies abound in many aspects of Gombrowicz’s creativity, including the very foundations of his espoused theories. In his conversations with Dominique de Roux, he maintained that any ideological system extracted from his writing was actually imposed *ex*

³ This publication appeared in French as: Dominique de Roux, *Entretiens avec Gombrowicz. Les passages rédigés en polonais par W. Gombrowicz*, trans. Koukou Chanska and François Marié, Paris, 1968. After Gombrowicz’s death, however, it was recognised as his own work and consequently published as his *Testament* (Paris, 1977). This edition was preceded by the English translation: *A Kind of Testament*, translated by Alastair Hamilton, London, 1973.

⁴ Gombrowicz did not respond to this joke.

post, since he performed nothing but a game, devoid of any plan or intention (de Roux, 1969, 145). 'Art is a fact, not a commentary attached to facts' one reads in his *Diary*, where he claims that explanations and arguments belong to science, not literature (1984, I, 113). The self-proclaimed image of the unencumbered fabulator in the introduction to *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953) is consistent with this endeavour to diminish any trace of ideological commitment. This concurs with Robert Scholes's understanding of fabulation as pure 'delight in design', and the inability to discern reality beyond fiction (1979, 1–8). 'This is only a story, nothing more than a recounted world', declares Gombrowicz in *Trans-Atlantyk* and maintains that the entire value of his novel depends on its ability to move, inspire and entertain the reader (1957, 7). Still, is he not once again merely playing one of his many-sided games?

A response to this question by Błoński, one of the most discerning of Gombrowicz scholars, appears inconsistent. He treats *Ferdydurke* (1937) and *Trans-Atlantyk* as evidence that the early Gombrowicz was hesitant, uncertain of the ideas he espoused, still searching for his identity. Yet he regards *Trans-Atlantyk* as a 'general and provocative attack against Polish tradition, customs and myths', and considers Gombrowicz's apparent narrative distance in both novels as an attempt to charm his readers (1994, 12). Since 'charming' surreptitiously serves persuasion and Błoński talks about a game which eventually ends in seduction (1994, 97), one may wonder whether Gombrowicz truly constructs his literary world by playing games with his audience (Jarzębski, 1982, 59–87), or whether he furtively imposes upon it his own understanding of reality. Kępiński's assertion that his attitude towards his readers was in fact arbitrary and that they were never treated as real partners in the game (1992, 145) can hardly be dismissed as nonsense, since he was a disgruntled former schoolmate.

Gombrowicz certainly worked hard to create his image, his mythology, one might be tempted to say. Few writers equal the sheer quantity of his comments on his own life and work, all their intended or accidental contradictions notwithstanding. Game-playing made for a recurrent motif in his proclamations, like his confidence that he purposely indulged in incoherence, and that he was subsequently amazed by people's endeavours to impose order upon this sort of material.⁵ Gombrowicz claimed that, like dreams, his writing unfolded by self-generation and thus all the ideas surfaced by themselves. His final intellectual control purported to be only a safety measure to avoid total confusion. The resulting outcome was expected to reflect a friction between the writer and the inner logic of his work and consequently neither represented pure form nor the author's direct statements (Gombrowicz, 1984, I, 107–8). Gombrowicz's works, however, are rather well-structured, with their cleverly arranged surprises, and he voiced

⁵ His description of a lecture given in Berlin is typical (1984, III, 139).

strong opposition to automatic, unintelligible creativity. Being censorious of what he called S.I. Witkiewicz's Surrealist tricks, he recalled Chesterton's view that nothing became interesting when everything was possible, and postulated the following:

The structure of art, like the structure of the human spirit, is, in my opinion, antinomic, dependent on uniting contradictions and their compensation. Nonsense and humbug in art have to be compensated by reason and seriousness. As a result, the 'effortlessness' of artistic creation must be somehow complemented and redeemed by effort and hardship (1973 [1968], 500).

A highly intellectual content has been associated with Gombrowicz's works from the very beginning. Well in advance of later respectful exegeses, *Ferdydurke* was treated as a philosophical tale even by some of its first reviewers. Ludwik Fryde admired the clarity of its passionless, intellectual style, which he traced back to Voltaire and Diderot (1966 [1938], 390). In more recent times, Italo Calvino located Gombrowicz within the family of writers who have the 'the habit of cultivating the most compromising speculative and erudite passions without taking them entirely seriously' (1989 [1967], 48). The burlesque tone which he uses as a means of undermining the gravity of his message, particularly in the first two novels, has been widely noted by Gombrowicz scholars, including in a recent book by Błoński (1994). The writer himself often went a long way to undermine his status as a recognized 'sage': 'I am a humorist, clown, acrobat, trouble-maker, and my works tend to stand upside down to be admired' (de Roux, 1969, 131). But he also impatiently lectured a certain dissatisfied Polish reader that his literary work was addressed to an intellectual elite (Gombrowicz, 1973, 504), and relished the pose of an avant-garde writer who disregarded the ordinary readership (Giedroyc-Gombrowicz, 1993, 317, 481–2). This uneasy marriage between seriousness and clownery determined his position as a follower of Rabelais, one of the authors he admired most. Moreover, Van der Meer maintained that Gombrowicz's rebellious anti-form deconstructed decorum in a similar way to that in which *Gargantua and Pantagruel* contradicted the ecclesiastical and social hierarchy of the Middle Ages by espousing the unofficial mood of carnival (1992, 139–40).⁶ Hence his utopian idea of immaturity followed carnivalesque unconstraint, but this anti-form actually had to turn into another form, since as we had learned in *Ferdydurke* there was no escape from this predicament. The writer cleverly defended himself by saying that art lived off contradictions (de Roux, 1969, 61), which allowed him to vacillate between destruction and construction, blasphemy and utopian ideals, that is between playing clown and master at the same time. Some believe that such hesitant, non-systematic thought blended with artistic imagination is the only possible way of practising philosophy in the

⁶ This passage makes references to Bakhtin's monograph (1984, 9–10, 34).

twentieth century (Cataluccio, 1991, 8–9). Postmodernists are not far away from this assumption.

II

Gombrowicz's close links with major intellectual trends in the twentieth century are well documented and have been widely discussed (see particularly Cataluccio and Illg, 1991). In his conversations with Piero Sanavio of 1968, the author of *Ferdydurke* confessed that the reading of Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* (1943) moved him deeply because he found in it a conviction that a human being was never what it was, but what it was not, which he identified with his own idea of personality as warped by form (Sanavio, 1991, 30–1).⁷ Being-for-others (*l'être pour autrui*), shaped by form, however, eventually gave way to the notion of being-for-itself (*l'être pour soi*), to the awareness of one's individual position versus others; this did not sanction disinterested, abstract thinking. 'Existentialism', he argues, is thus more than thinking about life rather than objects, since it is equally an active thinking, and the most personal as well, engaging our whole personality'. And again: 'For the existentialist, thinking is also an act that serves man to create himself'. Consequently, existentialism is understood as a 'rebellion against theories, patterns and abstractions' on behalf of 'inner truth, life and humanity' (Gombrowicz, 1991a, 135–6). In that sense he treats it as a restitution of subjectivism and individual freedom, close to the irrationality and anti-theoretical bias of the Polish Romantics (*ibid.*, 135, 143). None the less, he finally had to reject existentialism as well, since it was nothing less than another systematic theory espoused by philosophers and thus incongruous with his individual life (Gombrowicz, 1984, I, 244–5). But what is he left with instead? Gombrowicz argues in his diary that 'truth is not just a matter of arguments', but also a sort of attraction that emerges as a result of a struggle between individual minds rather than between abstract ideas (*ibid.*, 98). But who is expected to represent such individuals in his world ruled by form and peopled by puppets?

Now we are approaching another focal point of Gombrowicz's theories, his links with Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, what he shares intellectually with predominantly postmodern developments. If we wholly believed the following statement, that link would seem fairly simple: 'At the end of *Ferdydurke* Johnnie [Józio] comes to the realization that there is no escape from the process of being created by others. He may thus appropriately be called the first structuralist hero, one consciously consenting to being shaped by others and willingly shaping others in return' (Thompson, 1979, 79). Moreover, the writer himself once proudly declared: *J'étais structuraliste avant tout le*

⁷ The conversation was first published in Italian as *Gombrowicz: la forma e il rito*, Padova, 1974.

monde.⁸ By identifying his notion of form with structure, he apparently recognizes the supra-individual tyranny of language: ‘Don’t you say that the human being makes himself known by autonomous structures, such as language, and is constrained by something that concurrently pervades and defines him, so that his *vis movens* is external to him? Well, such a person has been inhabiting my books’ (Gombrowicz, 1991 b [1967], 146). Subsequently he describes the ‘form’ in the following words: ‘So, our form is mainly being created in the interpersonal zone. Thus we come to a certain relativization of personality. I am honest with somebody, dishonest with somebody else, wise with one and silly with another [...]. It can be said that every moment I am ‘created’ by others’ (ibid., 147).

In a contemporary English novel an ordinary self-referential pronouncement is interrupted by an observation: ‘If you have a self’ (Byatt, 1990, 267). The postmodern background of this remark can be identified easily:

For [Mallarmé], for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’. Mallarmé’s entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing (Barthes, 1990 [1968], 229).

Must I suppose that in my discourse I can have no survival? And that in speaking I am not banishing my death, but actually establishing it; or rather that I am abolishing all interiority in that exterior that is so indifferent to my life, and so *neutral*, that it makes no distinction between my life and my death? (Foucault, 1989 [1969], 210).

Gombrowicz, who in his later years became acquainted with the works of Barthes and Foucault (see 1984, III, 196), never questioned his right to own subjectivity and strongly opposed the notion of ‘the death of the author’: ‘Foucault intends to eradicate human self in his *épistème*. But what for? To promote his own personality, to win a battle with other philosophers, to become a celebrity. And thus we land back in common reality’ (1991 b, 148). He maintained that Structuralism originated in scholarship, while his literary world was artistic, playful and linked with everyday life. Hence the differences between him and that movement were apparently stronger than the similarities: ‘Being a private and concrete man, I detest structures, and my own disclosure of form actually serves self-defence’ (de Roux, 1969, 143). But observant critics might recall another statement, where he considered ‘whether the human being was not just a sort of Sentence, articulating itself in a vacuum, a variant of a Structure, an enclosed system of diachronic dependencies, belonging to the self-evolving Form’ (Gombrowicz, 1973 [1968], 506). Was this only an empty demonstration of familiarity with current theories, aimed

⁸ Gombrowicz’s declaration appeared originally in French (*La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 1 May 1967).

at simplistic readers?⁹ Was it an example of his dialectical and ever-searching mind, or rather another demonstration of the contradictions accompanying an abortive effort to square the circle of form and anti-form?

Van der Meer's endeavour to give an answer to the antinomy of form and anti-form, maturity and immaturity, was based on the notion of 'liminality', which he borrowed from Victor Turner:¹⁰

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial (after Van der Meer, 1992, 140–1).

In Gombrowicz's case, liminality is presumed to indicate a continual game between the reality of form and anti-form, founded on constant transformations and changing roles, which deprive existing stereotypes of any logical coherence, and leave behind undefinability and indeterminateness (*Undefinierbarkeit und Umbestimmtheit*) (ibid., 141). Andrzej Kijowski maintained that Gombrowicz's pattern of freedom is tantamount to perpetual escape (1991 [1971], I, 298). This assumption corresponds to the writer's own confession that his personality is nothing more than 'his will to be himself' (de Roux, 1969, 61). He understands form as a prerequisite of any interhuman relations, which automatically follows people's need to 'tune' their voices and to accept their roles in the same 'orchestra' (Gombrowicz, 1984, II, 81). At the same time, however, form demonstrates the defiance by escaping into immaturity, a perpetual game mastered by himself. Therefore, he could afford the luxury of being dismissive of problems discussed in his own novels, as when persuasively explaining the message of *Trans-Atlantyk* and then stating: 'I actually care little about those arguments [...]; in fact, I am primarily childish' (1984, I, 26–7). His readers, nevertheless, are hardly left in a position to patronize the author in the same way. They are no more than observers in a literary circus, and 'playing Gombrowicz' (the title of Jarzębski's monograph) is not part of that role. A tendency to be 'shaped' by the readers (Błoński, 1994, 35) is eventually overridden by a powerful pressure to master their imagination and to impose upon them the author's understanding of reality (see Kijowski, 1991 [1971], I, 266). Only the author as artist achieves the full pleasure of 'language games', as put forward by Lyotard:

⁹ The opinion quoted above appeared in Gombrowicz's patronizing response to a certain Barbara Szubska, originally published in the London weekly *Wiadomości* (15 September 1968).

¹⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca, 1977, p.95.

To speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics. This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win. A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention: what else is involved in that labour of language harassment undertaken by popular speech and by literature? Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language on the level of *parole*. But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary — at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation (Lyotard, 1984, 10).

Gombrowicz would certainly have shared Lyotard's conviction that 'the grand narrative has lost its credibility' (*ibid.*, 37) and that 'the artist and the writer are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*' (*ibid.*, 81). The notion of 'constructive parody', applied to his works (Głowiński, 1973, 279–303), reflects the mode that activates differences to capture the unrepresentable in continuous 'liminality'. The important role of non-verbal communication, such as mime and gestures (Łapiński, 1985, 28–9), does not affect the code of that game, but the author, far from 'dead', appears to be the only real player. When Witkiewicz and Schulz attempted to be creators in the degraded world of simulation, Gombrowicz followed this principle in his own way. Ingeniously united and disunited with his alter egos, that is his narrators and protagonists, he undermined existing discourses and turned their vehicles into puppets. Even the chameleon-like Gonzalo from *Trans-Atlantyk*, living in postmodern 'erasure', where everything has lost its distinct shape, is ultimately nothing more than a man enslaved by his own sexuality. The liberating laughter at the end of this novel actually enhances the position of the author, the only free man among the prisoners of form. Błoński was right when he stated that such a finale demands great 'tenacity and self-confidence' (1985, 74). Is not this utopian attempt to play the bard of immaturity in a world dominated by form the last tune of Romantic irony and unrestricted individualism? In the later novels, and particularly in *Kosmos* (1965), Gombrowicz's humour and spontaneous optimism become somewhat subdued. The joy of immaturity is replaced by an awareness of the futility of intellectual constructions and hence of creativity. His ironic distance embraces the narrator, who like any *homo sapiens*, but especially an artist, has attempted to impose an arbitrary pattern on the confused order of things.

III

The pre-novel background of Gombrowicz's fiction has been noted by scholars, who have pointed out, particularly in the earlier novels, the anachronistic character of represented reality and his narrative techniques, combined with a twentieth-century inclination to self-reflection (Głowiński, 1991; Malić, 1968, 108, 153; Zawadzki, 1994). A contemporary critic deplored the fact that Gombrowicz had failed to

choose something closer to the more recent tradition that stretched from Dostoevsky to Virginia Woolf (Piwiński, 1938, 65). Instead Gombrowicz published an enthusiastic article about the remote *Don Quixote*, praising Cervantes for the disclosure that ‘everyone has his own, distinct reality’ and that the world is eventually refracted in individual minds (1973 [1935], 32). On the other hand, however, he did not follow Miciński’s one-sided admiration for the myth-inventing *hidalgo*; he recognized the essential role of Sancho Panza as well, respected the well-balanced representation of ‘the beauty of madness’ and ‘the postulates of common sense’ (ibid., 33). The deliberate or, more probably, accidental continuity between Mickiewicz’s and Prus’s assessments of *Don Quixote* is thus evident. It explains the intrinsically rational structure of Gombrowicz’s novels that transcends their dreamlike form, which plays a less important role than some critics believe (e.g. Furnal, 1992).¹¹

Jerzy Jarzębski maintains that, in Gombrowicz’s fiction, a painful disbelief in the restoration of any form underlies the playful Rabelaisian blend of high and low style, combined with a blatant disregard for academic solemnity. As a result, he undermines the very possibility of writing novels and ravages the conventions of the genre (1982, 294–302). This symptomatic attempt to detect anti-novels in any trend that transcends the ideal of well-made works of fiction seems dubious in principle. Gombrowicz had little sympathy for experimentation *per se* and never questioned the traditional principle of story-telling in fiction. When asked whether his novel (*Kosmos*) would have a story-line, he answered in the affirmative and added that the most feasible way of providing readers with a contemporary image of the human self was the exploitation of traditional forms, which rendered an exploration of that image comparatively approachable (Gombrowicz, 1973 [1963], 490). His desire to be a compelling narrator, and his often repeated aversion to anything tedious, was reflected in his negative views on the *nouveau roman*, which he found excessively abstract, theoretically narrow, monotonous for the reader and utterly at odds with youthful Rabelaisian joy in the freedom of expression (de Roux, 1969, 129–30).

A distinctively postmodern sympathy for popular literature characterized Gombrowicz from the very beginning (see Łapiński, 1985, 47–8; Kijowski, 1991 [1971], I, 292) and resulted in a fairly successful attempt at writing an ordinary thriller.¹² His remark that in his novel *Dolina Issy* (The Issa Valley) Miłosz fails to realize how ‘every text must abound in “enticements”, must be sensational or otherwise compulsive’ is symptomatic (Giedroyc–Gombrowicz, 1993, 127). He also recognized that his fiction parodied long-established sub-genres: *Ferdydurke* — Volterean philosophical tales, *Trans-Atlantyk* — Polish oral tales

¹¹ The limits of oneiric interpretations are pointed out by Błoński (1994, 23–4).

¹² This novel, *Opętani*, was published only in newspapers (1939) and was never recognized by the author as a serious work. There is an English translation: *Possessed, or The Secret of Myslotch* (London, 1980).

(*gawęda*), *Pornografia* — romances about country life, and *Kosmos* — detective stories. Thus one can regard his satisfaction that the contemporary content of *Trans-Atlantyk* or *Pornografia* was delivered by means of very traditional narratives as another area of common ground with the postmodern heterogeneity of style (de Roux, 1969, 128). In parodying other texts, Gombrowicz plays language games. His style, free from Witkiewicz's drive towards self-destruction, creates events by itself, generating 'language actions', based on repetition and punning (Bolecki, 1982, 103–12). Gombrowicz's respect for *Ulysses* characteristically stemmed from his admiration for the 'perfection and power of its elaborate style' (1973 [1937], 113–15).¹³ The writer's claim that in fact his stories are barely more than pure stories (1957, 7) is certainly overstated, but that their underlying aim is fabulation is unquestionable. Gombrowicz actually portrays the world as fabricated by competing discourses, which never fully grasp reality, but, at least in *Trans-Atlantyk* and *Ferdydurke*, enjoys the act of imaginative creation. He thus avoids strictly metafictional techniques, which, unlike fabulation, simply 'lay bare the conventions of realism' (see Waugh, 1988, 13–19).

Gombrowicz's utopia of immaturity makes room for an apparently unrestrained indulgence in narrative extravaganza, whose inner order is concealed behind an illogical, dream-like course of events and a constant change of roles, which characterizes the first-person narrator, whose similarity and dissimilarity with the real author constitutes an essential part of the game (cf. Błoński, 1994, 21–2). This certainly demonstrates his freedom from the generic compulsion imposed by mature Realism and continued, although in a different form, even by the Modernist novel. In this sense Gombrowicz harks back to the earlier stage of fiction (Rabelais, Cervantes, Sterne, French philosophical tales), whose unexploited possibilities have been pointed out by Milan Kundera¹⁴ in the following words:

Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Denis Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* are for me the two greatest novelistic works of the eighteenth century, two novels conceived as grand games. They reach heights of playfulness, of lightness, never scaled before or since. Afterwards, the novel got itself tied to the imperative of verisimilitude, to realistic settings, to chronological order. It abandoned the possibilities opened up by these two masterpieces, which could have led to a different development of the novel (1988, 15).

The foregrounding of the author's whimsical ego and his playful attitude towards recognized conventions approaches Romantic irony as well, but this is already accompanied by a modern awareness that creativity has its limits. The process of composition, therefore, is no longer a simple result of authorial whim, as it was in the Romantics or in Rabelaisian

¹³ Gombrowicz read Joyce's work in a French translation.

¹⁴ The importance of early fiction for postmodern trends, as pointed out by Josipovici and Scholes, was discussed in chapter VI.

carnivalization. It is subjected to the compulsory rules of the chosen discourse, since there was no escape from the Form, whose tyranny could be only temporarily suspended by 'immaturity' games. Hence Gombrowicz's ostensibly reckless fabulation and spontaneous drive towards anti-form are eventually balanced by a concern for the proclivity of the human mind to organize, which distorts reality by subordinating its natural fortuity to preconceived patterns. The unrestrained laughter closing *Trans-Atlantyka* or the puerile punch line of *Ferdydurke* conceal the writer's metafictional anxiety behind the outburst of carnivalesque mood.

The inborn tendency to subordinate events to their discursive practices is already evident in one of Gombrowicz's first works of fiction, the short story *Zbrodnia z premedytacją* (Premeditated Murder, 1928). A judge visiting a country house whose master has died of a heart attack indulges, as a lawyer, in a professional inclination to trace homicide everywhere, despite the fact that in this case nothing substantiates such a claim. By the forced formulation of circumstantial evidence, whose 'internal logic' stands by itself, he not only embroils the son of the deceased in the crime of premeditated murder, but through psychological coercion crushes his resistance until the son actively plays the role of patricide. This corresponds to Gombrowicz's analysis of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, where he maintains that the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* gradually begins to perceive himself as a criminal in response to the perceptions of others, such as Sonya and Porfiry Petrovich (1984, II, 169–70). This example of the power of logic governing initial stereotypes ('forms'), however, also has a metafictional aspect, which involves the teleological course of events typical of detective stories, indeed of the traditional novel as a whole. By demonstrating that 'logic' will not shrink from 'adjusting' reality to fit its arbitrary pattern, Gombrowicz addresses a problem which greatly concerns many modern writers, and particularly the followers of Dostoevsky. While Gide's defiance of rational order brought about his *acte gratuit*, the author of *Kosmos* was interested in the process of enforcing senseless stereotypical structures onto contingent events rather than in the creation of fortuity.

The narrative of *Ferdydurke*, rambling from one adventure to another, exploits the prearrangement of events by the use of an investigating character for the unmasking of the Form and the consequent disclosure of the unprotected self (Józio's 'games' with the Młodziakowie family). A parable interpolated in the text, 'Filibert dzieckiem podszyty' (Filibert honeycombed with childishness), renders human endeavours to impose a formal organization upon the accidental causality of events absurd. Its broader metafictional appeal, undermining the teleology of artistic constructions, was duly noted by one of its first reviewers (Sandauer, 1963 [1939], 35–8). In his last two novels Gombrowicz's interest in the process of creativity overshadows his earlier desire for reckless immaturity. In *Pornografia* (1960), the portrayed world of peaceful

country life (despite the World War II setting), the conventional stories of a 'prudent' marriage and patriotic sentiments are eventually transformed beyond recognition. Stock characters of Polish fiction, such as dignified matrons, innocent maidens and heroic soldiers, suddenly reveal unexpected faces. While in Gombrowicz's preceding novels such revelations were carried on in the spontaneous atmosphere of the carnivalesque, *Pornografia* is dominated by an open manipulation of events, which is carried out by the narrator and his friend, Fryderyk. They manage to obstruct the country marriage between a teenage bride and a middle-aged groom, but their bizarre and rather perturbing obsession with the matchmaking of the same girl with a young man backfires at the end. Their plan fits in with the popular stereotype of a 'love story', but the girl and the boy are unresponsive; they obediently play the part of lovers, evidently to please their 'champions', but in the final scene their union comes to pass only in a shared consent to assassinate an underground commander, who has been sentenced to death by his organization. The fact that this 'execution', prearranged by Fryderyk, also goes astray and they eventually kill a wrong man, complicates the development of events, but does not undermine their teleological structure, as responsibility for the killing still unites both youngsters. Another murder, committed by Fryderyk, gives the plot symmetry, but the obvious pointlessness of these events lays bare the futility of any imposed construction.

The most mature exercise in metafiction is undoubtedly *Kosmos*, where an endeavour to structure reality dominates the development of events. The narrator, again acting with a friend, Fuks, exerts himself in a frustrating effort to impose rhythm and order on a confusing web of haphazard circumstances. The recurring incidents of hanging and the mysterious affinity between the mouths of two women, Katusia and Lena, arouse the narrator's temptation to find a common pattern which can account for everything. In his desperate search for the missing signs of this pattern, the narrator transforms incidental objects, such as cracks in the ceiling, into the required signs, which will lead towards discovery. When the detective's investigation does not back up his theory, the narrator 'adjusts' reality through his own actions, which are expected to reinforce his initial understanding of events. This rhythmic structure determines his steps and leads to his resolution to close everything neatly by hanging Lena and thus uniting two main leitmotifs of the novel: hanging and the 'mouth'. Leaving aside its ominous metaphysical conclusion, the novel portrays attempts to construct reality by forcing an artificial homogeneity on its ingredients. When a rainstorm disrupts this structure and the narrator, instead of killing Lena, eventually dines peacefully on chicken fricassee, all his efforts become subject to ironic deconstruction (cf. Bartoszyński, 1984).

Gombrowicz's important role in heralding the postmodern mode has been pointed out by Polish and non-Polish critics. They usually mention his active interest both in metafiction and popular literature (Łapiński,

1985, 61; 1993, 79), the introduction of 'false identities' (the Form), imposed upon characters (Nash, 1987, 181) and his inclination for 'grotesque imagery of the human body' (McHale, 1987, 173). The writer's links with the romance and the early novel include the conception of a purposely 'intrusive' narrator,¹⁵ and in this he deliberately opposes the Modernist notion of 'exit author'. As has been pointed out by many scholars, he thus plays a game involving first-person narrators, always bearing his name, and the real author, who skilfully 'brakes the frame' and blurs the line between fiction and reality. This uncovers Gombrowicz as an 'author of authors' (Łapiński's expression: 1985, 103), who exploits the confusion caused by an alternating semblance of reliability and unreliability. Critics most commonly emphasize the primary function of the latter, but Gombrowicz, despite his carnivalesque mood, is keen on keeping his message intact. Could he achieve the status of a 'national sage' or 'bard' otherwise? Accordingly, he combines modern scepticism with a traditional commitment to the intellectual message of literature, as he blends the notion of supra-personal form with extreme egotism. Standing on the borderline between 'writerly' and 'readerly', seriousness and clownishness, refined art and mass culture, his dilemmas were similar to those of Witkiewicz and Schulz.

¹⁵ His narrator approaches neutrality in the last novel, *Kosmos*.

PART THREE

FICTION AT THE CROSSROADS.
FROM WORLD WAR II TO RECENT
TIMES

CHAPTER VIII

MODERNITY VERSUS IDEOLOGY

I

The years of madness and hatred have effectively persuaded men of letters that their words, equally as actions by men of action, must aid [postwar] reconstruction, assisting it without renouncing creativity or diminishing artists' rights, but, on the contrary, by fulfilling the ideal of beauty, which retains moral and thus social values. (Andrzejewski, 1945).

These words of Jerzy Andrzejewski (1909–1983), then a leading novelist of the younger generation, reflected the general mood of the postwar years, which had embraced writers of various political orientations. The atrocities of the war and the Nazi occupation of Poland affected the way literature was perceived; this broadly corresponded with Theodor Adorno's often-quoted statement that after Auschwitz there was no place for poetry. The experimentation of the 1930s had to give way to a search for the truth about recent events, where any form of fiction seemed trivial in the face of reality. This moral vacuum, however, also encouraged a quest for certainties and values which were able to offer an escape from the present confusion of ideas and standards: 'We are living in times that encourage a quest for assurance and faith. The modern human being is familiar with the fragility of solitude and the shallow illusions of solitary discoveries and revelations. [...] The monstrosity of the last years has instilled in tormented minds the necessity for order and discipline' (Andrzejewski, 1945). The 'ideological offensive' of the Communist Party took full advantage of this state of affairs, fostered by writers' disillusion with the policies of the pre-war establishment, and by their more practical desires to be sponsored by the present government and therefore successful.¹

The peculiar character of fiction in the wake of the war has been investigated by Kazimierz Wyka in his seminal collection of essays *Pogranicze powieści* (On the Borderline of the Novel, 1948). This critic realised that the unique experience of the concentration camps, the plight of the Warsaw Uprising and recent guerrilla warfare had hardly been adaptable to conventional story-telling, at least for contemporary

¹ The complicated motives of Polish writers' allegiance to Communism are broadly documented in Jacek Trznadel's collection of interviews (Trznadel, 1986).

readers (Wyka, 1974, 137–8). The proliferation of semi-documentary works and genuine memoirs of recent events was understandable. He pointed out that Adolf Rudnicki's short narratives about the Holocaust actually 'expanded the formal possibilities of prose into regions unknown so far' thanks to their borderline character somewhere between the essay, the novel and the report (*ibid.*, 159–60). Wyka appeared, however, as an uncompromising supporter of the conventional Realist novel as the best form of fiction. Backed by references to György Lukács, he criticized Polish and West European Modernism and praised Prus as the most accomplished Realist, since his narrative craft had espoused transparency (*ibid.*, 7–36). Hence he eventually rejected intermediate forms as a viable perspective for fiction:

Only a definite form, resulting from the writer's awareness of its outcome, demands and contradictions, can guarantee the value of accumulated wisdom. Very occasionally indeed, and with uncommon writers, an intermediate form, impure and hybrid, turns into an initiation or, perhaps, a draft for new, pure and precise forms. Usually, it only bears witness to the writer's unresolved contradictions and disguised conclusions, which, given more creative effort, would seem soluble. (Wyka, 1974 [1948], 145)

Unabated hostility towards the 'subjective psychologisme' of Polish fiction in the 1930s and the antisocial attitudes of many Modernist authors was also expressed by critics affiliated to the Roman Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, where Juliusz Kleiner declared his disapproval of ivory-tower aestheticism, which avoided collective and moral responsibility (Kleiner, 1945). A strong allegiance to the rule of Providence or historical progress led to the dominant role of the omniscient narrator, who firmly controls characters and their personal points of view, which are transformed into conventional, spurious individual perspectives (see Sobolewska, 1979). Gombrowicz's ideas of 'form' were somewhat adjusted to fit the then popular self-criticism, which was conceived as a 'settling of accounts' with the pre-war intelligentsia (the novels of Stanisław Dygat [1914–78], Kazimierz Brandys [b.1916] and Wilhelm Mach [1917–65]). Even in the most innovative works, such as Mach's *Rdza* (Rust, 1950), a symbolic commentary was imposed on the interior monologue, in accordance with the author's conviction that, in modern literature, didacticism should be conveyed indirectly (Sobolewska, 1979, 34–6). All in all, with a few exceptions, like Tadeusz Borowski (1922–51) and Teodor Parnicki (1908–88), narrative techniques of the 1940s were a step backwards in comparison with the 1930s (see *ibid.*, 38).

The ideological pressure on literature steadily grew in the postwar years, and led to the final replacement of traditional mimesis by Socialist Realism. From the very beginning the literary weekly *Kuźnica* became the main defender of Realist representation; here critics such as Stefan Żółkiewski and Jan Kott forged official literary taste and publishing

policies. The latter found the least controversial example of Realist poetics in Balzac and maintained, following Marxist principles, that the individual fortunes of literary characters should illustrate above all the general laws of historical process. Hostility to subjectivism, psychologisme, free indirect discourse and the amorphousness of modern fiction found its most influential support in the *Kuźnica* circle (see Żabicki, 1965). Although Socialist Realism was officially proclaimed the only acceptable method of writing at the Second Congress of the Polish Writers Union in January 1949, Żółkiewski was lecturing writers on the ideological hazards of modern 'non-realistic' techniques as early as 1947:

The principal deficiency of our postwar prose comes from the still-undefeated heritage of obsolete literary habits, which are ideologically hostile to our times: the Expressionist deformation [of reality], the triviality of biological motivation, the psychological isolation of the human mind, and the personal perspective of characters rather than full omniscience, which is the privilege of the author. (after Natanson, 1987, 203).²

Within a few years, the doctrinaire notion of Realism was political correctness, while pragmatically understood non-Realism turned into a literary counterpart to political reaction (see Markiewicz, 1955, 13).

The Socialist Realist episode in Polish culture was ostensibly short-lived and as a mandatory dogma expired after the 'Thaw' of the mid-1950s. In one form or another, however, it somehow survived until the end of Communist rule in 1989. 'Socialist Realism has terminated in the gutter', concluded Jan Błoński, 'but, let us dare to admit, it was spluttering on for a long time and with some impetus' (1990, 12). In the 1960s, the still influential, but remarkably transformed, Stefan Żółkiewski attempted to enrich the compromised concept by blending Communist demands with carefully-selected modern philosophical inspirations and Modernist literary techniques. This was undoubtedly encouraged by Roger Garaudy's *D'un Réalisme sans rivages* (Paris, 1963), which was strongly recommended by Louis Aragon. Żółkiewski, however, mindful of Marxist historicism, never went as far as the French critic, whose Realism 'without borderlines' embraced Picasso and Kafka. He preached, instead, the following:

We have faced this problem much earlier than Garaudy and solved it differently. Not by glorifying Kafka and making him a member of the leading literary trend [Realism], but by a recognition that this leading trend is able to evolve and to adopt, usually with modifications, artistic devices born elsewhere. (Żółkiewski, 1965, 105)

In practical terms, Żółkiewski accepted a metafictional bias, parabolic patterns, essayistic content and even moderate forms of the stream-of-consciousness novel. He believed that the Structuralism of Claude Lévi-

² Żółkiewski's speech, delivered at the writers' conference in Wrocław, was published in *Kuźnica* (1947, 37).

Strauss could be reconciled with Marxist notions of cultural models or formations (ibid., 247–8). In literature this corresponded to a disposition for general patterns rather than individual occurrences. Still, Żółkiewski advocated literature politically committed to the Party programme and raised objections against fiction which entirely rejected the story-line (ibid., 159–60). Obviously attempting the improbable, Żółkiewski was unable to infuse life and dignity into a defunct concept stemming from the era of Stalin and Zhdanov.

The ‘Thaw’ of 1955–6 determined the position of Polish culture in the years to come, making it unique within the ‘Socialist Bloc’. Censorship still had a firm grasp on the ideological content of literature and the arts; politically incorrect works had to be printed abroad, most commonly by the *Instytut Literacki* in Paris. Since Polish émigré centres, particularly in London and Paris, remained independent of People’s Poland, their publications were banned in the homeland. Writers living in exile continued to be virtually unknown by the general public, as their books were accessible only in special sections of academic libraries. Consequently, Polish culture retained a dual character. The high standards of many literary works published outside Poland, as — in the field of fiction — those by Witold Gombrowicz and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (b. 1919) made this situation abnormal and paradoxical. Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke* and *Trans-Atlantyk*, like his pre-war short stories, were released in Poland in the late 1950s, but other works had to wait as long as the late 1980s, the last years of Communist rule, before they were published there. He became extremely popular with writers and critics and his influence upon Polish letters cannot be underestimated. Still, he was accessible only to the intellectual élite, who had access to his recent books, published in Paris, and were able to read professional journals where his works were discussed.

The most important shift in the post-1956 era concerns translations from Western literatures and a new attitude towards Polish avant-garde writing of the interwar period. While during the era of Socialist Realism West European and American fiction was represented only by old classics and contemporary left-wingers, the relative liberalism of the ‘Thaw’ introduced for good a trend to have all the important modern authors published, apart from those considered staunch anti-Communists, like George Orwell. Accordingly the book market was augmented by many hitherto virtually unknown novels. The younger generation was barely familiar even with the classics of early Modernism (Proust, Kafka, Conrad), whose pre-1939 editions had survived the war only in small numbers. Moreover, even before 1939, Modernist fiction had been translated and discussed very selectively, and therefore even experts’ knowledge of it was patchy. As a result, the long-delayed flood of information confused the readers and critics; this blurred the profile of modern trends in fiction.

The new editions or translations of Proust, Kafka (*Das Schloß*, trans. 1958) and Russian avant-garde novelists (Andrei Bely, Mikhail Bulgakov) came along with the postwar works of Camus (*La Peste*, trans. 1957), Sartre and the *nouveaux romanciers*. The early fiction of Hemingway (*The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and other stories, trans. 1956),³ Faulkner (*Sanctuary*, trans. 1957; *Absalom, Absalom!*, trans. 1959) and Virginia Woolf (*Mrs Dalloway*, trans. 1961) were then as much a revelation as Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages* (trans. 1959) or Sarraute's *Portrait d'un inconnu* (trans. 1959). The long-overdue recognition of Henry James in the 1960s (*The Ambassadors*, trans. 1960), the first Polish version of *Ulysses* (trans. 1969) and Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (trans. 1971) coincided with or even followed the publications of William Golding, John Updike (*The Centaur*, trans. 1966), William Styron, Salinger (*The Catcher in the Rye*, trans. 1961), Italo Calvino, Iris Murdoch (*The Bell*, trans. 1972) and Saul Bellow (*Herzog*, trans. 1971). As a result, critical books and essays on Proust, Kafka and Joyce (Naganowski, 1962) appeared at the same time as those on the *nouveau roman*. Furthermore, the 1960s also mark the beginning of a long fascination with Latin American fiction, initiated by translations of Alejo Carpentier and Julio Cortazar (*Rayuela*, trans. 1968), soon succeeded in the 1970s by the works of Borges, Fuentes, García Márquez (*Cien años de soledad*, trans. 1974) and Vargas Llosa. A great interest in formal experiments carried out by those authors and their 'magic realism' was reflected in over 300 Polish articles on the subject, published between 1968 and 1978.

The most acceptable legacy of Polish pre-1939 fiction contained literary works which transcended or even defied Realism. The new popularity of Irzykowski's *Patuba* (reprinted in 1957)⁴ was due to its self-reflective character, disintegrating the story-line and non-fictional discourse. The novels and short stories of Witkiewicz, Schulz and Gombrowicz were treated as outstanding examples of modernity mainly because their fabrics and techniques violated Realism and thus could be regarded as 'creative', in comparison with traditionally mimetic works. The trumpets of triumph over 'degraded reality', sounding in the very title of Artur Sandauer's often quoted essay on Bruno Schulz (*Rzeczywistość zdegradowana*, 1956), proclaimed this message louder than others (Sandauer, 1964 [1956]). Sandauer, after all, was certainly the most vociferous and self-assured among the champions of avant-gardism, openly preaching hostility towards any form of political commitment; his words were addressed predominantly to opposition writers:

³ The titles in brackets represent only selective examples. There were many more translations of the authors in question.

⁴ This third edition of the novel was the second since the war. The previous edition appeared in 1948 with an introduction by its faithful admirer, Kazimierz Wyka.

That was the point of the separation between the official literature of 'humanists' and 'moralists' and us, the Modernists. Thus far we have marched arm in arm, fighting the clichés [of Socialist Realism] together, jointly requesting the abolition of political prizes and the recognition of diversity in literature. [...] This state of national unity has changed radically since October [1956]: if we believe in hard work and that the time has come to forget about bonuses given to literature for any form of ideological propriety, our partners are attempting to uphold the atmosphere of politicization. This has been followed by other discords. They have finally announced that our artistry had been grist to the [Party] conservatives' mill, while in our opinion their political humanism has changed colours too often to retain any gravity. (Sandauer, 1966 [1958], 167–8)

Disrespect for any ideological commitment found its patron in Witold Gombrowicz, one of the few Polish writers admired by Sandauer. Even in the time of Stalinist oppression, Gombrowicz reproved Czesław Miłosz for political commitment and loftily declared in his diary that 'revolutions, wars and cataclysms' are nothing but froth on the 'fundamental horrors of existence', and that the death of millions has been at the core of the human condition from the very beginning, while 'hell follows in our first steps all the time' (1984 [1953], I, 28).⁵ By defending individual concerns against collective values, he unquestionably encouraged escape into the universal problems of the modern Western world, which somewhat paradoxically became central in a backward country plagued by everyday troubles, grave and trivial. As a result, Polish literature tended to achieve a kind of neutrality, which was acceptable to the ruling Party, even with its avant-gardism. In the course of time, however, this contingency increased tensions between the style of Western modernity and the circumstantial need for ideological commitment, where being in the forefront of current artistic trends played a secondary role. Although artistic innovation often coincided with political involvement, the Gombrowicz-style 'ivory tower' eventually became inadequate for many writers and critics (see Werner, 1987, 153–83, and 1994; Balcerzan, 1990, 20–4; Tomkowski, 1994).

Polish fiction after 1956 was initially shaped by the reaction against Socialist Realism and its mythicized, over-simplified representation of society (see Wielopolski, 1987). This accounts for the unusual popularity of Marek Hłasko (1934–69), whose collection of short stories, *Pierwszy krok w chmurach* (The First Step in the Clouds, 1956), was greeted with excessive enthusiasm. When Hłasko's 'fool's paradise', with its illusions and simulations, shows its true face, it expresses the gloom of ruthless brutality and moral decay. Inhabited by misfits, criminals, drunkards and promiscuous women, this despondent world, resembling in American fiction the works of Hemingway, Steinbeck and Erskine Caldwell, is little more than a reversal of the varnished reality of Socialist Realism. Hłasko

⁵ Gombrowicz's unwillingness to be involved in any political action, even in the defence of writers persecuted by the Communists, is broadly illustrated in his correspondence with Giedroyc (see Giedroyc–Gombrowicz, 1993).

and his followers, who included the very talented short story writer, Marek Nowakowski (b.1935), rejected socialist stereotypes, but introduced their own in their stead. In his remarkable essays, the observant critic of those years, Jan Błóński, denounced the generational mythology of being different and hapless as equally as their obsession with eroticism and the lumpenproletariat (1961). The most viable tendency of the 'Thaw' was represented by the plays and satirical short stories of Sławomir Mrożek; his grotesque world ridiculed social and linguistic clichés, paving the way for a more considered and a more honest approach to literary representation.

II

Polish understanding of modernity in fiction has been greatly influenced by Artur Sandauer's rather sketchy essay, *O ewolucji sztuki narracyjnej w dwudziestym wieku* (On the Evolution of Narrative Art in the Twentieth Century), first published in 1956 and then reprinted several times in various collections. Like Gombrowicz, Sandauer maintains that modern art tends to constitute an assertion of the author's individuality. Therefore, in contrast to previous periods, the thematic substance of literary works has lost its independent value in favour of 'lyrical expression'. In his opinion, this individual content is inconsistent with the traditional structure of the novel which, as a literary genre, is incoherent in principle. While Apuleius, Boccaccio or Cervantes naively 'borrowed' their plots from others, the nineteenth-century Realists embarked on a contradictory endeavour to blend invented fiction with realistic presentation. The general inclination of the Realist novel to combine personal observations with divine omniscience makes the author a logical contradiction. Sandauer believes that the problem reflected in 'Romantic irony' has been fully recognized by the writers of the twentieth century. At first, he claims, they responded with the self-reflective novel (Gide), which was still unable to sort out the inherent contradictions between fiction and reality, but did pave the way for further experiments. The point-of-view technique of Modernism is considered important, but Sandauer one-sidedly identifies its internal angle with non-realistic psychologisme, aiming at the lyrical experience of reality with its stream-of-consciousness pattern. This broad and vague framework allows him to regard Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* and *Ulysses* as the most advanced forms of the same tendency. The key notion of inwardness paves the way for Sandauer's most favourite trend, Surrealist fantasy and its world of private experience. He preaches the gospel of genuine creativity where signs are identical with their referents, while reality is degraded (Sandauer, 1964 [1956], 7–20).

Since the 'Thaw' the notion of the crisis of realistic representation has remained the most lasting of Sandauer's arguments. It swiftly expanded, however, into the more general idea of the crisis of the novel as a literary

genre allegedly unable to meet the demands of sophisticated twentieth-century readers. Even well-established Realists felt doom hanging over their traditional craft. Maria Dąbrowska wrote in her diary for 28 February 1961: 'I detest the novelistic form, unable to invent any alternative, for one cannot surpass oneself' (Dąbrowska, 1988, V, 216). Against that background, one is reminded of Błoński's pragmatic observation:

Like the monster now and then emerging from Loch Ness, 'the crisis of the novel' alerts the critics' conscience from time to time. And sometimes men of letters are equally unable to find a proper word. The crisis, no doubt, exists — it continues after all, but the patient has never been so well; never has the novel been more exuberant, expansive and powerful. There is a permanent crisis of the concept of the novel, its theory, understanding and postulates, of everything that concerns it, while the novel itself feels fine. [...] The novel cannot be grasped — it is everywhere, it is, as once predicted, everything. Still, it eludes our inquiry, whatever the method, does not allow itself to be named, defined, described. (Błoński, 1965, 151–2)

Yet Błoński's defence of the viability of the novel is undertaken only on behalf of Modernist writers (1965, 151–71). He believes that Proust, Kafka and Joyce established a watershed in the development of the novel and have caused its fundamental deviation from its nineteenth-century route. His interest, however, is not focused on Modernist inwardness and narrative perspectivism, but on a 'creative', anti-Realist bias, which is responsible for the autonomy of represented worlds. The role of language thus comes to the foreground and links fiction with contemporary verse. Consequently, he maintains, in Proust psychology serves just as a means of discovering reality through language, giving his novel a self-reflective, metafictional leaning. *Ulysses*, in turn, appears attractive not as a stream-of-consciousness record of everyday reality, but as a mythological pattern and pastiche, whose linguistic experiments are continued in *Finnegans Wake*. Following Egon Naganowski's remarks about the latter (1967 [1962], 184–5), Błoński conveys the following message: 'For us, the world has begun to exist through language, in language and thanks to language; in other words, it is emerging in the process of naming, and the artist, as Joyce assumed, constantly promotes its existence' (1965, 164). As a result, Modernist novels are explained in somewhat postmodern categories. Concerning *Ulysses*, reference is made to those parts of the novel that McHale singled out in his twofold classification as 'disparate discourse-worlds' (Postmodernist), but not to those which introduce 'different characters' perspectives on the same world' (Modernist) (McHale, 1992, 54–5). As indicated earlier, the latter were of no interest to the Polish critic. He managed to find common ground, therefore, between James Joyce and recent developments in French fiction. In his understanding, Beckett and the *nouveaux romanciers* carried on Joyce's curiosity for language, but undermined his confidence in its power by the prominence they gave to banality and clichés. So, as suggested in his

conclusive remarks, they were paving the way for a new approach to language and reality (1965, 166–71).

Another leading critic of the day, Zbigniew Bienkowski, strove to explain modern fiction in a broad philosophical context. At the root of the novel's major quest he found the impossibility of constructing a pattern of human existence by conventional means; thus there was an artistic dilemma to which literature initially responded in two ways (1966, 7–24).⁶ The novel either questioned all general ideas and dwelled on the singularity of individual experience (Céline, Sartre), or attempted to adopt as models inward complexity (Proust), metaphysical trauma (Kafka), mythical archetype (Joyce) or parody (Mann). Bienkowski describes in more recent times a doomsday scenario, whereby Western culture is deprived of any confidence in great ideas, has been haunted by the disintegration of values and a sense of alienation and desolation, which has brought about the 'minimalism' of the *nouveau roman*. 'The twentieth century', he concludes, 'having stepped down into a "microworld" has to renounce both clarity and simplicity. The strangeness of the world is unavoidable' (ibid., 33). On such grounds, in Bienkowski's belief, the latest novel develops against Proust and Joyce, avoiding all generalizations and metaphors (89). Bienkowski, however, avoids extremes and pays much attention to the new notions of temporality, as developed by Proust and Joyce, along with Mann, Dos Passos and Faulkner. The importance of Faulkner for the modern novel Bienkowski considers essential in many respects (126–65), while he elevates Albert Camus to the position of the moral conscience of his contemporaries.

Bienkowski's conclusions reflect to a great extent his carefully-chosen interpretations and also his personal preferences in the evolution of fiction. We have to accept that in *Ulysses* the worlds of Leopold Bloom and ancient Odysseus are one, to acknowledge Bienkowski's diagnosis that the monistic, mythological order of Joyce's Dublin has since been overcome by the erratic and inscrutable structure of reality in Michel Butor's *L'Émloi du temps* (1966, 383–4). One has to concede that *Les Gommés* has a parabolic form (the opposite opinion is to be found in Roudiez, 1991, 143) in order to conclude that, beyond the facade of antihumanism, Robbe-Grillet eventually delivers a universal message (Bienkowski, 1966, 295–6).⁷ Nonetheless it is hard to disagree with Bienkowski that the author of *La Jalousie* undermines the concept of the human self, which had long existed in the novel (300), and that by challenging the authenticity of language Nathalie Sarraute undermines even more deeply the very nature of the literary genre, including its most sophisticated, stream-of-consciousness form (309–18). In advance of

⁶ Bienkowski's first book on the subject, slightly different in the character of critical investigation, was *Piekła i Orfeusze* (1960).

⁷ This opinion follows Bruce Morrissette's *Les romans d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris, 1963).

Polish academic studies on the *nouveau roman*, such as Głowiński's (1966, 35–136), Zbigniew Bienkowski had introduced that trend in French fiction,⁸ as well as other aspects of the evolution of modern narrative in the twentieth century. The implications of his message, asserting that, after Sartre, new literary techniques were inextricably bound with a new metaphysics, were essential for further formal experiments in Polish fiction. Dominant interest in time, language and myth are consistent with the understanding of modernity in Poland, and have supported those literary trends that have been most fruitful there. Their universal and West European bias could certainly accommodate political commitment.

Andrzej Kijowski's rather off-hand opinions about the the novel have to be inferred from the witty essays he published in the 1960s and 1970s. A novelist himself, whose *Dziecko przez ptaka przyniesione* (The Child by a Bird Delivered, 1968) was praised by the critics, Kijowski was concerned with traditional writers like Maria Dąbrowska as well as avant-gardists like Witkacy and Gombrowicz. Like Błoński, he did not believe in any crisis of the novel, but had less sympathy for recent 'conceptual' efforts to rebuild its structure, which he dismissed by saying: 'I am bored to death by Butor as much as by Romain Rolland' (1964, 152).⁹ He was equally dismissive of Barthes' Structuralism, which he regarded as narrow-minded and thus impoverishing the full content of literary works by one-sided interpretations (1991 [1980], I, 206–12). Kijowski's approach to the theoretical bias of the *nouveau roman* was remarkably close to Gombrowicz's, who was equally irritated by its abstraction (de Roux, 1969, 129–30); he also shared with Gombrowicz a fondness for parody and pastiche, which is reflected also in his own novels. Kijowski's attack on Sandauer for making Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* a masterpiece of literature followed his common-sense appraisal of this novel, his sympathy for its youthful appeal, which stemmed from 'the grotesque parody of topics traditional in Polish literature' (1961, 206–8).

Kijowski's sometimes inconsistent remarks on fiction reveal the ideas that constitute his fundamental concern. On the one hand, he reasserts the purgative role of World War II in the regeneration of the Polish moral conscience. This superseded strictly artistic considerations, but eventually resulted in a new demystified form, manifested in the short stories of Tadeusz Borowski, which are thus regarded as fundamental for modernity (1964, 47–8, 73–80; 1961, 189–90).¹⁰ Kijowski's consideration of the function of truth in literature possibly prompted his musings on 'the novel of his generation', which could be read with great

⁸ Apart from the authors mentioned earlier, he also discusses Claude Simon and, more critically, Robert Pinget.

⁹ In one of his earlier books, he describes Butor and 'his school' as a very fruitful experimentation in fiction (1961, 80–1).

¹⁰ For differences between the notion of modernity and Modernism see Harvey (1989, 10–38).

interest (1964, 152–3). On the other hand, and more consistently, Kijowski expects much from the development of parody and pastiche, then represented by Stanisław Zieliński, Sławomir Mrożek and Witold Gombrowicz. Having little faith in the artistic values of the novel and thus sceptical of metafictional experimentation with language, Kijowski also rejected traditional Realism (though he respected Maria Dąbrowska)¹¹ as much as the élitist avant-garde bias, of whose esotericism and disrespect for popular culture he patently disapproved (1961, 238–31; 1988 [1970/71], 198–9). The final message is obviously close to the postmodern tones present in Gombrowicz's writing:

The heart of the new reader will belong to a writer who mocks everything that the reader fails or is unwilling to understand, that is all literary antics from the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century: Modernism and avant-gardism, together with the postures these entail. This will follow the way in which Rabelais ridiculed late medieval culture and Cervantes the literary and social conventions of the Baroque. Literature must echo with the grand laughter of Cervantes, Molière, Diderot, Beaumarchais [...] a laughter at obscure artists and esoteric writers, a laughter at philosophical twaddle and psychological profundity, at everything that seems to us, men of letters, pompous and pretentious, but holds us firmly together under the command of fashion and snobbery — the laughter of Gombrowicz, Günter Grass, Ionesco, the laughter of parody, persiflage and 'mystification', the laughter of Witkacy [...]. (1986 [1974], 49).

Unreserved commitment to Gombrowicz's model of modernity characterized the prematurely-deceased literary critic, Ryszard Zengel, active in the late 1950s, whose collection of essays, published posthumously with Tomasz Burek's enthusiastic introduction (1970), can be regarded as typical of a fair part of the 'Thaw' generation. Deeply convinced that anti-Realism was the most significant hallmark of twentieth-century fiction, Zengel was among those who rediscovered the importance of Young Poland writers.¹² He claimed that their ideal of the authenticity of experience was actually perpetuated by the author of *Trans-Atlantyk* (1970, 68–72, 183–4). Gombrowicz's egotism, proclaimed in the introduction to this novel, served Zengel as an example of the foregrounding of the artist's personality, which he treated as a modern response to the 'public persona' of nineteenth-century fiction (185–6). In this context, and despite enjoying some respect, the behaviourism of Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* had little appeal, and was considered to reflect 'faceless' American capitalism. He also found Nathalie Sarraute abstract and uninspiring: 'While dealing with similar problems, *Ferdydurke* and *Portrait d'un inconnu* exemplify different

11 Kijowski published a book about Dąbrowska (1964a), and her obituary (1991 [1965], I, 20–8).

12 Głowiński's important work on fiction at that period (1969) was addressed above all to an academic audience. Remarks about the importance of Young Poland for modern Polish literature can be found in Kijowski's essays (e.g. 1964, 22–7).

talents and artistic temperaments. This is the difference between the essayistic speculation of a serious, analytic mode and artistic exuberance, invention and vitality' (1970, 226–7). Apparently, for Zengel, the manifestation of the writer's ego was the purest form of authenticity, an idea later taken up by some critics of the 1970s and 1980s.

The Rabelaisian subjectivity of Gombrowicz's fiction, also relished by Kijowski, undoubtedly became the focal point of Zengel's perspective on the contemporary novel. Yet, within his broad approach to prose-writing Zengel also sympathized with the essay, an excellent example of which he found in Irzykowski's *Patuba*, described by him as a 'critical study', not a work of fiction (1970, 111). His shift of attention towards semi-fiction or non-fiction was consonant with writing and literary criticism after 1956. The underlying conviction that there was a crisis of the novel had never been adequately refuted by the sober counter-arguments of Błoński or Kijowski. Apparently the old reluctance of Paul Valéry to narrate the story of a marquise 'who left at five' still had a powerful appeal in Poland:

Why do people write about themselves and their experience, why are others keen to read about it? — asks an analyst of that autobiographical trend. — What has happened to fiction, to plot, to the invention of stories, to the fairy tale and the novel? There are various responses: a craving for authenticity, an interest in other people's lives, exasperation with the old, and boredom with the new form of the novel. Perhaps the need for contact with a person rather than with an anonymous voice. (Czermińska, 1987, 10–11).¹³

In contemporary American writing such a crisis of confidence in fiction was addressed in a different manner by Ronald Sukenick and John Barth. While for the former 'the death of the novel' meant the liberation of the author's self, a playful and spontaneous improvization on his own biography and the circumstances of writing, the latter, in the famous essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion', described his works as 'novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author' (after Bradbury, 1992, 241). A similar blending of autobiography with fiction, narrative games with an intellectual message, outspoken egotism with open pastiche was characteristic of Gombrowicz's model of the novel, and was subsequently supported by Kijowski and Zengel as the essence of novel-writing. Gombrowicz's diaries, however, where he constantly constructs and deconstructs himself

¹³ Czesław Miłosz, on the contrary, considered novels a concealed attempt to sell one's own most intimate experience, which he rejected mainly on ethical grounds: 'Yet even though I have written two novels in my life, I have never been able to rid myself of uneasiness about that literary genre. After all, a novelist exploits the most intimate details from his or her life in order to prepare a concoction in which truth and invention are indistinguishable. [...] To be able to sacrifice everything, even what one considers the most sacred, for the sake of an artistic composition seems to be a mark of the born novelist. But a poem does not aspire to a gossipy reconstruction of individual lives' (1992, 60–1).

and invents autobiographical facts — which were not facts — present a different form of writing, a document on the brink of fiction, introducing an author who also plays the role of character (see Łapiński, 1985, 65–103; Błoński, 1994, 141–78). Correspondingly, in the most mature works of Polish literature, autobiographical accounts combined documentary with reflections on its writing and the nature of personal cognition (Lem, Kuncewiczowa, J.J. Szczepański, Konwicki) (see Czermińska, 1987, 21–8; Kandziora, 1993). Still, subjectivity only occasionally concurred with playfulness, and even Gombrowicz, in his non-fictional writings, vacillated between self-mockery and self-adulation, and could not refrain from preaching in his usual arrogant, provocative tone. The intimate element in autobiography finally served a serious purpose. By and large, essayistic discourse either in its pure or combined form normally creates an outlet for the writers' views on literary, political or philosophical problems (for example: Mach, K. Brandys, A. Rudnicki, Herling-Grudziński).

The militant critic of the 1970s, Tomasz Burek, advocated the reintroduction of Zengel's critical proposals, but his conclusions followed a particular line: 'He [Zengel] admirably defended introspection against behaviourism, supported psychoanalysis, considered the role of autobiography, found the future of literature in writers' powerful confessions' (Burek, 1970, 27–8). In Burek's own important work on modern fiction (1972) and his subsequent articles, the future of prose writing has been identified with Wyka's notion of 'the borderline of the novel', that is with the presence of non-fictional, essayistic discourse. What the older critic, however, deplored as a deviation from Realism, Burek accepted as an unavoidable reflection of the contemporary Polish political situation:

The disgrace of literature, which in the foregoing years [of Socialist Realism] neglected common human experience [...], undoubtedly remained a driving force behind 'the Polish variety of prose writing'. Hence the popularity of non-fictional narratives after 1956, such as reportage, travel accounts, letters, diaries, biographies and essays, hence the merging of literary genres — metaphoric discourse with document, digressive essays with parables, the novel with poetry — as a means of opening literature to the multiplicity and complexity of the modern world. (1987 [1973], 148).

Burek's plea for the introduction of the author and his experience actually amounts to a plea for a personal directness of intellectual content, whose 'authenticity' is regarded as an assurance of integrity. His concepts, 'the novel of conscience' or 'the novel of ideas', elevate essayistic discourse to the highest form of contemplation, because, theoretically, they portray thinking in its *status nascendi*, in the stage of uncertainty. Therefore collections of contemporary essays and autobiographical books are regarded as nothing else but 'latent novels' (ibid., 149–52).

III

Despite the objections against its very existence, the Polish novel of the 1960s and early 1970s constituted a great effort to 'catch up' with modern fiction in the West. This ambitious pursuit was born of many inspirations and, consequently, had various objectives. The Modernist technique of interior monologue was tried by Jerzy Andrzejewski, Stanisław Czycz (b. 1931) and Włodzimierz Odojewski (b. 1930), while behaviourism found followers in Marek Hłasko and Marek Nowakowski. A retrospective, sometimes spiral, movement of narration achieved outstanding results in the earlier novels of Teodor Parnicki (1908–88) and Andrzej Kuśniewicz (1904–93). Though such tendencies can be placed within the Modernist version of Realism, the predominantly anti-Realist penchant of influential Polish criticism became a dominant factor in the most resourceful works of fiction. They either laid bare the fabric of the Realist novel or rejected mimesis in favour of open 'creativity'. The inspirations of the Polish avant-garde of the 1930s, particularly Gombrowicz, played a major role in this anti-mimetic bias, but the *nouveau roman* and new narrative forms in North and Latin American fiction exerted their influence as well.

Among non-Realists, apart from Gombrowicz himself (d. 1969), the most prominent position has been held since the late 1950s by Sławomir Mrozek (b. 1930), who is best known as a playwright and whose narratives evolved from rather conventional satire in the novel *Maleńkie lato* (A Tiny Summer, 1956) to grotesque absurdity, allegorical content and 'language games' in his later short stories (see Włodarczyk, 1992).¹⁴ A disciple of Gombrowicz, he pursues the latter's idea of form, but shuns the egotism proudly espoused by the author of *Trans-Atlantyck*. Mrozek's world, peopled with puppets and represented by stock reactions and linguistic clichés, approaches the postmodern reality of a world of simulacra. Playing with readers to undermine the seriousness of the novel and to parody its conventions is characteristic of the postwar fiction of Michał Choromański (Wysłouch, 1977, 157 ff.) and Piotr Wojciechowski (b. 1938). The latter, along with the late Parnicki and Konwicki (b. 1926), plays with historical facts in a fashion typical of the postmodern mode. Outside Poland, narrative games characterize the works of Zygmunt Haupt (1907–75) and Marian Pankowski (b. 1919). The lyrical fiction of Tadeusz Nowak (1930–91), in turn, has its roots in peasant mythology and Biblical symbolism (see Eile, 1984), while the rural world of Wiesław Myśliwski's (b. 1932) *Pałac* (The Palace, 1970)¹⁵ is elevated and universalized by a parabolic structure (see Phillips, 1992). Lyricism and autobiographical content coexist with the postmodern pastiche of various literary styles in the works of Tadeusz Konwicki.

14 There is an English collection of his short stories: *The Elephant* (London, 1962).

15 English translation by Ursula Phillips (London, 1991).

The self-conscious novel owed its high position as sophisticated fiction, addressed to an intellectual elite, to a lack of confidence in fictional worlds and a consequent disregard for the readerly appeal of any story-line. Any assault on the transparency of narration and the resulting contribution to illusion has long been regarded as the most striking demonstration of the 'modern' approach. In the case of Wilhelm Mach's *Góry nad Czarnym Morzem* (Mountains on the Black Sea, 1961), much praised as it was at the time, it was simply a matter of the author's digressive commentary. Such writers as Stanisław Lem (b. 1921) and Teodor Parnicki, however, incorporated a metafictional bias into the structure of their works and foregrounded the conventionality of traditional plots and the indistinct demarcation lines between facts and fabrication. A reasonably good knowledge of the *nouveau roman* provided an impulse to linguistic experiments, which simultaneously produced innovation in poetry. Its main representative, Miron Białoszewski, was also an outstanding prose writer. The prevailing trend to discover the reality behind linguistic cliché distinguishes Polish efforts from the strictly formal approach of French *nouveaux romanciers* or American writers such as Donald Barthelme, but resembles Walter Abish, whose 'style endeavours to achieve authority, attempts in an apparently contingent world to acquire a significant message or recover a sense of the authentic' (Bradbury, 1992, 244). Some critics classify this sort of writing as 'experimental Realism' (ibid., 247), and thus reintroduce the term most unfashionable among many sophisticated Poles — Realism.

Roudiez had the following to say on one of Claude Simon's novels:

La Route des Flandres thus exhibits tripartite confusion affecting narrator, narration, and listener, destroying the three indispensable elements of traditional storytelling. What remains is no longer a story, properly speaking, but something that one might conveniently call a text — an assemblage of words that functions according to linguistic laws. (1991, 102).

In a similar manner, a Polish critic describes 'literary collage' in the novels of Leopold Buczkowski (1905–1989):

The conventional signs that articulate subjectivity, and the various roles the speaker's statements propound, thus become entirely negative proofs of identification for the ironic speaker, who exists wholly as a 'non-I' in the realm of speech. In my opinion, this form of personality — which believes in an unavoidable gap between the illusionary and inauthentic subject of announcement and a postulated mythical meta-subject, free of restrictions imposed by mediation — is referred to not only by the 'deserted I' of Buczkowski's prose, but also by the diverse concepts of the self in contemporary avant-garde and post-avant-garde literature. (Nycz, 1993, 212).

Buczkowski's narrative evolved from a simultaneity of many witnesses (a 'mosaic of quotation') in *Czarny potok* (Black Torrent, 1954) to the total collapse of any integrating principles in *Kąpiele w Lucca* (Bathing

in Lucca, 1974). His 'textual world' disintegrated storyline and causality, eradicating the narrator and reducing the characters to impersonal speakers (Indyk, 1987; Nycz, 1993, 198–214). This made him a darling of some Structuralist critics and encouraged similar modes of writing among younger authors in the 1970s (see Łukosz, 1994, 57–68). In the early 1980s these novelists, backed by the critic Henryk Berezka and linked with the literary periodical *Twórczość*, attempted to create a Polish counterpart to the *nouveau roman*. Their unsuccessful efforts had little impact and were later dismissed as immature by Błoński: 'After ridding themselves of their linguistic extravagance the readers will swiftly recognize ordinary pubertal dreams and frustrations, well-seasoned with moral or verbal provocativeness' (1990, 13). More constructive endeavours were scarce.

The ambition to be as sophisticated in Warsaw as in Paris defined the narrative and linguistic experiments of the 'post-Thaw' generation and their successors. Universality prevailed over any national commitments. With its concentration on the absurdities of Polish everyday existence, the grotesque world of Sławomir Mrożek was almost an exception. The mundane reality of Poland under Communist rule found its rather frail reflection in the so-called 'Aesopian language' of allusions, allegory and parables. Andrzejewski's historical novel about the Spanish Inquisition, *Ciemności kryją ziemię* (Darkness Covers the Earth, 1957),¹⁶ which actually portrayed Stalinism, was followed by Tadeusz Breza's *Urząd* (The Office, 1960), superficially about the Vatican, and Jacek Bocheński's narrative essay *Boski Juliusz* (Divine Julius, 1961), ostensibly about Julius Caesar. Julian Strykowski's (b.1905) 'Jewish' novels, whether set in Habsburg Galicia or Ferdinand and Isabella's Spain, contain problems experienced in Communist Eastern Europe. Any fiction directly critical of the Polish socialist state still had to be printed abroad. Andrzejewski published his *Apelacja* (The Appeal, 1968)¹⁷ in the West, a step that was followed by a number of writers in the 1970s and 1980s.

The intellectual rebellion of 1968 undermined the existing balance for good. This balance was based on an uneasy coexistence of Party propagandists with detached idealists, concerned with universal problems. The critical manifesto of two poets, Julian Kornhauser (b. 1946) and Adam Zagajewski (b. 1945), *Świat nie przedstawiony* (The Unrepresented World, 1974), vented the frustration experienced by the young, which had been manifested even earlier by another poet of this generation, Stanisław Barańczak (b.1946). In their youthful revolt, Kornhauser and Zagajewski challenged the techniques regarded in Poland as essential for twentieth-century literature, such as self-conscious narration, allusive style, allegory, pastiche, mythic or grotesque

¹⁶ There is an English translation by Konrad Syrop (*The Inquisitors*, New York, 1960) and a German monograph by Jürgen Schreiber (1981).

¹⁷ English translation by Celina Wieniewska (London, 1971).

deformation. They believed that experimentation should grow from a 'solid, realistic foundation'; otherwise literature would remain other people's problem: 'Normal culture includes various types of artistic expression; therefore the tensions between the concrete and the abstract, the mimetic and the creative are productive and dynamic. This happens, however, only at the moment when the principle of faithful representation has been fulfilled, when the world is treated with equity' (1974, 45). Kornhauser and Zagajewski, *The New Wave poets*, advocated 'outright speech' (*mówić wprost*) and 'looking facts straight in the face' (*Spójrzmy prawdzie w oczy*, a poem by Barańczak, 1970). Predominantly concerned with verse, they influenced prose fiction as well, by promoting a drive towards liberation from clichés. The increasing awareness of the detrimental influence of Party jargon, named, after Orwell, 'newspeak', culminated in a conference, organized by the University of Cracow in January 1981, during the 'Solidarity' period. In the opening speech, Jolanta Rokoszowa said the following:

August 1980 has also become a linguistic shock for our society. There was a violent collision between two forms of speech. Newspeak, whose referential value [...] melts away inside vague, hazy contours, collided with a simple, lucid, articulate and reliable manner of speaking. This collision revealed the mechanisms controlling such a language even to inexperienced observers; the main purpose of that language is manipulation rather than communication. (Rokoszowa, 1985, 10).

The fight against linguistic stereotype had already been manifested in the works of Mrozek, Różewicz and Białoszewski. At the end of the 1960s, Andrzejewski's *Apelacja* pointed out the detrimental influence of petrified forms of speech on the human mind, taking as an example an intimidated Party man. A similar approach can be found in the fiction of Kazimierz Orłoś (b. 1935), one of the most outspoken opposition writers in the 1970s and 1980s. Young authors, like Janusz Anderman, having taken lessons from the *nouveau roman*, made the unauthenticity of language the main object of their exploration. If one is to believe Włodzimierz Bolecki, Ryszard Schubert's controversial novel, *Trenta Tre* (1975), regarded by some critics as gibberish, actually portrays the annihilation of individuality by newspeak, and parodies official language (Bolecki, 1993). Stanisław Czycz's novel, *Nie wierz nikomu* (Do Not Believe Anybody, 1987), is regarded as the most accomplished portrayal of the domineering power of newspeak over reality (see Burek, 1995, 38).

The unprecedented growth of independent, clandestine publishers began in the mid-1970s, and the dramatic increase of novels and critical studies released abroad at the same time, mostly in London and Paris, gave a boost to politicized fiction concerned with everyday reality. A corresponding interest in the émigré literature which was politically committed shifted attention from experiments to ideology. The appeal of Gombrowicz temporarily decreased in favour of Czesław Miłosz, Józef

Mackiewicz (1902–85) and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (Tomkowski, 1994, 99–101). The martial law period (1981–3) revived many familiar patriotic stereotypes, noticeable in Marek Nowakowski's *Raport o stanie wojennym* (Report on Martial Law, 2 vols., 1982–3) and Janusz Anderman's *Brak tchu* (Out of Breath, 1983).¹⁸ Nevertheless, opposition writing was also based on non-realistic images, the apocalyptic and the grotesque, where facts bordered on nightmares, and the past entered a present that might be indistinguishable from the future (particularly in Tadeusz Konwicki). Andrzej Werner's study *Polskie, arcypolskie* (Polish, Arch-Polish..., 1987), Jacek Trznadel's collection of materials discrediting Stalinism in Polish literature (1986) and Adam Michnik's well-intended 'hagiography' of postwar patriotic writers in Poland (1985) make for a political reassessment of postwar literature. The subtitle of Michnik's book, 'prison notes', held a special appeal under post-martial-law circumstances. Moreover, several critics, hitherto interested in avant-garde writing, switched their allegiance to civic duties. One of them, Włodzimierz Bolecki, wrote, under the pen name Jerzy Malewski, about opposition writers and Solidarity's predicament, and then concentrated his attention on the very traditional narrator, but staunch anti-Bolshevik, Józef Mackiewicz. One of the leading Structuralists in Poland, Janusz Sławiński, cooperated with the underground press.

Political involvement was counterbalanced by those who, under the patronage of Gombrowicz and Białoszewski, wished to uphold modernity against ideological pressures. Adam Zagajewski's reassessment of that period (1986) indicates a measurable split even among well-known 'activists'. He still appreciates the invigorating spirit of the 1970s and holds avant-gardism in little respect, but having distanced himself from his moralist stance in *Świat nie przedstawiony*, now promotes a multiple privacy of artistic worlds: 'What is reality? Is it social? Is it moral? Aesthetic? Political? Nocturnal? Diurnal? Mad? Temperate? Everyone at least slightly familiar with the literature of the last hundred years understands that it does not reflect a single, communal reality, but that each outstanding artist reflects on his slide different spectres of the world' (1986, 60).

An instructive product of Gombrowicz's ideas, characteristically biased in its understanding of the 'master's' manifold art, is Jerzy Jarzębski collection of critical studies, fittingly named: 'The novel as auto-creation' (1984). Recalling his school years in the early 1960s, Jarzębski singles out the mentors of his peers — Witkacy, Schulz, Białoszewski and Gombrowicz, regarding the last as the true teacher of younger generations. Those pupils, he confesses, 'dreamt about hierarchies unencumbered by national handicap' and believed 'that the whole epoch had been guided by electronic music, abstract art, the theatre

¹⁸ English translations: M. Nowakowski, *Canary and Other Tales of Martial Law* (London, 1983); J. Anderman, *Poland under Black Light* (London, 1986).

of the absurd and experiments with defective language' (135-6).¹⁹ Comparing the two most influential writers of the time, the 'committed' Miłosz and the 'uncommitted' Gombrowicz, Jarzębski arrives at the following conclusion:

If one can talk about any 'patronage' over literature in the homeland, Gombrowicz has more followers so far. He is treasured by that vast group of writers who espouse the disclosure of 'the author's truth', which is understood as an everlasting process and a continuous conflict between the self and the world. His disciples will include the authors of 'novel-diaries' and various types of 'open works', which are in opposition to conventional stories. (168).

As a result, the critic sympathetically traces any manifestation of disruptive narration that undermines 'the naiveté of plot structure' and upholds ontological scepticism instead of the 'banality of points of view'. In his unusual tribute to Gombrowicz, Jarzębski elevates experimentation with personal pronouns, typical of the *nouveau roman*, to the level of strenuous ontological effort. The unresolved problems of this 'drama of speech', he claims, contributed to the suicide of the talented novelist, Edward Stachura (1937-79), thus turning him, as one is tempted to add, into a sort of 'language martyr' (389-90). How this kind of 'academic' fiction could ever concur with Gombrowicz's novelistic pattern, whose panache was still closer to traditional story-telling than to the *nouveau roman*, which he disparaged, is doubtful. It becomes obvious, however, that Jarzębski is an ardent reader of Gombrowicz's diaries, where abstract reflection overrides narration (see Jarzębski, 1984, 367-73). He has been induced to find the future of literature as a whole in a private, self-conscious and autobiographical writing (412-30).

Apart from Party propagandists or devoted oppositionists, Polish critics usually supported the élitist pattern of fiction, which was avowedly anti-Realist. This line carried on interwar avant-gardism only to a limited extent. After all, Witkacy, Gombrowicz and, to a much lesser extent, Schulz attempted to combine artistic sophistication with popular appeal. Mrozek, whose grotesque plays and stories have no East European aversion to entertain, has never been a darling of the self-proclaimed apostles of 'high modernity'. These apostles had a predilection for the esoteric and for the *nouveau roman*, or for the intellectual pretensions of essayistic compositions, particularly in their auto-reflective form. Mass culture was normally held in low esteem, consistent with Modernist elitism. Żółkiewski noticed the potential of mass entertainment, but wanted to subordinate it to the educational goals of socialism (1965, 131-82). The Polish edition of Marshall McLuhan's selected works (1975), preceded by a rather sympathetic essay by Krzysztof T. Toeplitz, unquestionably promoted a better knowledge of contemporary 'electronic culture' and its 'mosaic' character. The programme of Zagajewski and

¹⁹ One should bear in mind, however, that Zagajewski, Kornhauser and Barańczak belonged to the same generation.

Kornhauser, however, contained a strong condemnation of mass entertainment, which was regarded as the promotion of intellectual indolence (Zagajewski and Kornhauser, 1974, 200–8). Against that background, Kijowski's response appears uncommonly penetrating:

'We do not know where we stand', write Kornhauser and Zagajewski. I do: on the threshold of universal, supranational, multilingual but translatable culture. 'Further, we do not know what the matter is with our mass culture'. I do: good or bad, it is the pattern of a future culture. The new forms of creativity will sprout as an ennoblement of what is appreciated the least. It has always been this way. European painting resulted from the Church's pictorial propaganda for the illiterate, the novel from newspapers, the cinema from technical gadgets for the populace. (1986, 123–4).²⁰

If it is right to assume that Postmodernism stretches between the sophistication of formal experiments and a metafictional bias on the one hand, and the popular appeal of mass media on the other, the Polish novel clearly prefers the sophisticated approach. Even the last novels of Gombrowicz have lost the Rabelaisian vigour of *Ferdydurke* and *Trans-Atlantyk*. The collage technique of Buczkowski and the laborious search for personal identity in language (examined by Jarzębski [1984, 365–411]) in the works of Kuśniewicz and the young novelists of the 1970s (e.g. Anderman), pursue the theoretical approach, which Głowiński labelled 'the novel as methodology of the novel' (1968, 90–136). The robust vitality of Miciński and Witkacy has been overtaken by somewhat academic experiments. The world of Tadeusz Konwicki, however, obsessive and muddled to the point of incoherence, has preserved the specific blend of high and low styles, reality and non-reality, literary pastiche and personal voice, which links the Polish Avant-garde more than anything else with what is now called Postmodernism.

The political situation in the 1970s and 1980s hampered a broader interest in Postmodernism, whose relativism hardly corresponded with the continuing battle for democracy and economic reforms. The well-developed Structuralism school at the Institute of Literary Research (IBL) in Warsaw had supported self-reflective fiction since the 1960s. Their periodical *Teksty*, along with the more traditional *Pamiętnik Literacki* and various anthologies of philosophical writings and literary criticism, offered the Polish public the first glimpse of the works of Barthes, Derrida and Foucault in Polish translation. Foucault's *L'archéologie de savoir* was published in Poland in 1977. While the magic realism of Latin American novelists had been well known, recent developments in North America became accessible mostly through Zbigniew Lewicki's anthologies of fiction (1980) and literary criticism (1983). Some Postmodernist novels were translated in the 1980s (e.g. Barth, Vonnegut), but the first work of Thomas Pynchon to appear in Polish, *The Crying of*

²⁰ Kijowski also mocked the avant-garde ambition to be unpopular and barely understandable (1988 [1970–1], 198–9).

Lot 49 (1966), came out as late as 1990.²¹ This delay was partly compensated for by the well-edited journal *Literatura na Świecie* (World Literature). Here translations and critical essays covered leading contemporary writers (e.g. Nabokov, Barthelme, Rushdie), while special issues were devoted to individual writers, for example Pynchon (1985, 7), Claude Simon (1986, 11–12), Foucault (1988, 6).

Critical studies devoted to Postmodernism, its culture, philosophy and aesthetics, appeared sporadically in the late 1980s (e.g. Morawski, 1986) and culminated in Giżycki's anthology of texts on postmodern culture (1988), Bogdan Baran's monograph (1992) and Ryszard Nycz's comprehensive account of Post-Structuralism (1993). Baran's book, whatever one might say about its rather awkward terminology, introduces the linguistic and philosophical background of Postmodernism, with a brief chapter on fiction, mostly American. Nycz attempts to portray the 'textual world' of contemporary criticism, and adds some interesting, though disputable, conclusions about literature. His comments on modern parody, pastiche and collage have a sound theoretical, comparative background. The postmodern issue of the critical journal *Teksty Drugie* (1993, 1) and several articles on the subject in another, *Odra* (1994, 2), reflect the mounting interest in the trend when there was a more relaxed attitude towards ideology.

Concerns caused by the extremes of postmodern intellectual relativism and its links with the post-industrial culture of Western society, are understandable in a country which faces grave economic problems and is still looking for a way to make up for its Communist past. Emotional outrage at what is regarded as the philosophical nihilism of Postmodernism can be seen in the words of a speaker, who during an academic discussion in Warsaw was eager to lock up Postmodernists in a 'madhouse' (see Łapiński, 1993a). Zdzisław Łapiński's prospective seems very timely:

The cultural climate is changing today; the postmodern impulse is growing stronger and stronger under two separate influences — the contemporary influence from the West and a retrospective influence from the Polish tradition. There is only one, albeit rather serious, obstacle to this trend. How can one subvert when all social institutions are almost destroyed? How can one be unorthodox when any kind of orthodoxy has been compromised? How can one exalt the pragmatic concept of truth among people who take this concept quite literally? How can one scoff at the idea of mimesis if no one uses mimesis? In short, how can one be postmodern in a country where no one is modern? (1993b).

The awareness of Polish postmodern tendencies, covering the avant-garde fiction of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz and more recent writers, such as Buczkowski, Białoszewski and Konwicki (Łapiński, 1993, 1993b; Nycz, 1993, 198–214), sometimes meets with frustration

21 The number of translations of Postmodernist fiction increased in the 1990s.

because the new term presents nothing new about what have been long regarded as symptoms of modernity (Bolecki, 1993a). One must remember again that the Anglo-American pattern of the Modernist novel, related to the notion of 'exit author', had very shallow roots in Polish fiction, and that attempts to discuss that idea (e.g. Eile, 1973) had little appeal even among academics. Polish literary critics and writers believed that the self-conscious novel, the semi-fictional autobiography or the essay were the forms which distinguished a genuinely modern approach. Consequently Bolecki reduced Postmodernism to its affinity with popular culture, making it alien to the alleged Polish tradition of intellectually demanding, élitist art (1993b).

Among the younger novelists of today, Jerzy Pilch (b. 1952) and Paweł Huelle (b. 1957) represent different versions of what may be regarded as the postmodern approach. The new market-economy climate creates conditions that are somewhat hostile to unmarketable goods, including works of literature. Some critics (e.g. Łukosz, 1994) still attempt to promote élitist fiction. The practical needs of economic growth in Poland, however, encourage other critics to ask literature for support in the process of social and economic reforms, in a manner resembling nineteenth-century Positivism (e.g. Wiesław Kot in the magazine *Wprost*). The real threat, however, comes from another direction. The unabated popularity of unsophisticated bestsellers, Polish or translated (Maria Nurowska, Jackie Collins and others), and decreasing state funding will affect the standards of both writers and the reading public. The results will soon be seen.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE BORDERLINES OF FICTION: BOROWSKI—BIAŁOSZEWSKI—KONWICKI

Kazimierz Wyka's observation that Polish postwar fiction aimed at 'the borderline of the novel' (1974 [1948]) proved accurate much longer than the critic might have expected. The powerful trend towards autobiography and the essay encompassed so many contemporary writers that its full variety can hardly be dealt with in one chapter. The trend's interference with works which still have to be regarded as predominantly fictional complicates the matter even further. The avowed lack of confidence in fiction, upheld by numerous writers and critics, has been linked with modern scepticism, which casts doubt not only on the traditional way of narrating events, but also on the integrity of literature itself. Such a sceptical approach usually increases the accuracy of representation by promoting a kind of documentariness. It often encourages self-reflection and a metafictional bias, which, by avoiding artistic 'subterfuge', eventually suggests the authenticity of recorded knowledge. Blurring the conventional line dividing fiction and non-fiction, provable facts and invented stories, can advance another tendency as well: it can produce narratives in which authentic life turns into personal mythology. The brief discussion of symptomatic works by the three outstanding postwar writers which follows will consider the potential of fiction which attempts to be non-fiction.

I

Tadeusz Borowski (1922–51) survived Auschwitz and his own experience could vouch for the veracity of evidence given in his short stories about the Nazi genocide.¹ This advantage was fully exploited in the preface to the collection *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (We Were in Auschwitz, Munich, 1946), which for the first time published his four

¹ Borowski's short narratives were for the most part published in his two chief collections: *Pożegnanie z Marią* (Farewell to Maria, 1948) and *Kamienny Świat* (The World of Stone, 1948). An English translation by Barbara Vedder appeared as: *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen and Other Stories*, New York, 1967.

short narratives, together with the works of two fellow-prisoners (J. Nel-Siedlecki, K. Olszewski):²

We were united by ordinary death without grandeur, not because of our country, nor honour, but simply because of exhaustion, ulcers, typhus and swollen legs. [...] We saw millions of apathetic people going unresisting into the gas chambers. We stepped upon mountains of treasure, brought by them from all over Europe. [...] We trampled upon people collapsing from starvation and were trampled upon when we ourselves collapsed out of exhaustion into the sticky, stinking mud. [...]

We saw all this and we believe we have the right to speak bluntly and straightforwardly as eyewitnesses. There is nothing heroic or even positive in the camp, its misery, tortures and death in a gas chamber; 'it is the stupidity of those who allowed themselves to be captured'. It was a struggle deprived almost from the start of any ideological components. There was only a primeval battle for survival, carried on by a lonely, degraded prisoner against an equally degraded SS-man and the formidable oppression of the camp. *We have to emphasize this strongly, before it gives rise to future legends and myths.* We did not fight in the camp for our fatherland or the reformation of the human soul, but for a bowl of soup, a place to sleep, women, gold and watches from the newly deported. (after Werner, 1971, 24–5).

These are provocative words, openly defying the Polish martyr tradition that goes back to Romanticism. In Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, Poland was portrayed as an innocent victim of the oppression conducted by the satanic forces of omnipotent Russian tsars. Ultimately, the Polish question turned into a universal conflict between God and Satan, with biblical references to Herod's Massacre of the Innocents and the martyrdom of Christ Himself. This moral conflict transformed patriotic rebels into Christian martyrs facing the functionaries of Hell. Borowski, in turn, wrote to a friend in 1946 that he just wanted 'to show what everyday life in the camp was like, to unmask the so-called martyrdom of men and, finally, to inform that evil was not on just one side' (after Drewnowski, 1992, 122). His short stories appeared at the same time as the first works on the subject, but he had envisaged future endeavours to adjust the events of World War II to the traditional model of suffering and heroism, the endeavours which actually did prevail at the time. Roman Catholic writers in particular cherished the purging idea of an affinity to Limbo, claiming that the tortures and tribulations in concentration camps gave rise to moral fortitude or even sainthood. The very title of Zofia Kossak-Szczucka's novel about Birkenau — 'Out of Limbo' — (*Z otchłani*, 1946) encapsulates the message, which combines Christian confidence in the power of prayer and penitence with a nationalist persuasion that Polish Roman Catholic women are the best-equipped to endure misery and torture. The stereotype of Christian martyrs found its purest expression in Wojciech Żukrowski's short story *Kantata* (Cantata, in *Z kraju milczenia* [From the Country of Silence],

² Actually, their stories were to a great extent co-authored or at least largely edited by Borowski (Drewnowski, 1992, 182–3).

1946). It contains all the typical components of a black-and-white picture where moral values are clear cut and the contrasts between killers and their victims are distinct. Even the landscape is not neutral: its endless gloom, cold and damp exacerbate the overwhelmingly depressive atmosphere of a godforsaken Hell on Earth. In Żukrowski's short story, there is a straightforward battle between God and Satan, with the horrifying simulacrum of the latter reflected in the face of the most sadistic SS-man. Conversely, the prisoners form a Christian community where 'a secret brotherhood, refreshed by the endless martyrdom' allows them to preserve their dignity. Moreover, the setting of the events, Sachsenhausen, is compared by one of its prisoners, an old priest, to the bloodstained sand of the Colosseum as a future shrine and place for pilgrimage. Even in the plain narration of Zofia Nałkowska's *Medaliony* (Medallions, 1946) there is an unclouded contrast between victims and oppressors, which is combined with a strong conviction that only moral resilience ensures survival.

Borowski's approach to the reality of genocide is encapsulated in the following sentence: 'Between one corner kick and another three thousand people had been gassed just behind me' (1991 [1946], 125). This simple observation, made by a narrator who plays football in the camp while a 'transport' of Jews is being exterminated, represents Borowski's compelling account of Auschwitz at its best. If one dares apply the Russian Formalist's idea of defamiliarization to the horrors of the Holocaust, the style may be described as the employment of everyday words and images in order to deprive them of their familiarity by the alien context (see Wirth, 1965, 48). The very title of the most searing account of genocide, *Proszę państwa do gazu* (This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen), begins with a polite form of address — *Proszę państwa* (ladies and gentlemen), which sounds like an invitation to some social event, dinner perhaps. 'A day at Harmense' (*Dzień na Harmenzach*), portraying life on a *kommando* run by Auschwitz inmates, opens with a conventional novelistic account of chestnut trees under the blue sky, whatever gruesome events are to follow. Here Borowski's style resembles a 'normal' report, where Tadek, the narrator, relates what is going on in a plain style. High-spirited when well-fed, Tadek is never particularly fussy whether victuals come from parcels sent by his mother or from groups of Jews who have been dispatched to gas chambers. This employment of the 'usual' style of Realist fiction defies the prevailing notion of a 'particular' *parole* suitable for martyrological discourse. The author chooses colloquial language in the conviction that human emotional responses have in fact narrow limits, whether under exceptional or ordinary tension (Borowski, 1991, 134). He also believed that against the reality of simulacra, sham gestures and empty rhetoric, simple naming might restore the meaning to events. This meaning is suggested rather than disclosed in single descriptions, because finding a

'philosophical formula' for a world apart seemed to him hardly possible (ibid., 90).

The 'otherness' of Borowski's Auschwitz has little to do with its outward appearance, which creates an impression of normality, which is also rendered by the language. Unlike the huts of Birkenau, as we learn, the main camp had a concert hall, library, a museum of sorts and a brothel for its élite. The infamous station ramp, from which the new arrivals were sent to the gas chambers, was surrounded by trees and its rural aspect intensified the horrors of the selection of victims. Even the people involved in these atrocities do not resemble beasts and their motives sometimes surreptitiously conform with reactions that could be considered standard under different circumstances. While fighting for food at a time of deprivation seems understandable, its alarming abnormality is unveiled when hopes for provisions hinge upon new arrivals of Jews destined to the gas chambers. As long as everything is upside down, any attempt to restore moral order and familiar human relations ends in a horrific absurdity. When a young Jewess tries to abandon her little child to avoid the gas and gain the chance of survival in the camp (women with children were not allowed to stay there), an honourably outraged Russian prisoner reviles her as a rotten mother, but is unable to save any of them and has to place them both on a lorry bound for a gas chamber (Borowski, 1991, 228). Another inmate, Abramek from the *Sonderkommando*, in response to the usual formula: 'How are things going?' answers: 'Nothing new. We have gassed a trainload of Czech Jews', and when pressed for more personal news, just describes in detail an improved method of burning children in the crematorium (ibid., 121–2). The extraordinary and unfamiliar are thus fused with the ordinary and familiar, and the placing of the extraordinary within recognizable reality does much to account for the powerful appeal of such scenes.

The illusion of an eyewitness report is maintained by the first-person narrator, who shares his first name with the author (Tadeusz, Tadek).³ This link, however, is unstable and varies from near-identification to a misleading resemblance. The presence or absence of moral judgement reflects this flexible strategy in Borowski's fiction. He believed that writing about Auschwitz should never become impersonal, since all the survivors had been morally responsible for being alive and therefore their readers had the right to know how this had happened (Borowski, 1991 [1947], 497). In fact, however, he eventually abandoned the strategy of authentic document, which shaped his first narrative, *U nas w Auschwitzu...* (Here, in our Auschwitz),⁴ which was based on his own letters from the camp (see Drewnowski, 1992, 86), and introduced Tadek, a *Vorarbeiter* in *Dzień na Harmenzach*. Concerned mainly with his own survival, he represents qualities which, in the author's opinion, shaped

³ Tadek is a diminutive of Tadeusz.

⁴ The title of the existing English translation is *Auschwitz, Our Home*.

the most common pattern of behaviour in the camps (see Werner, 1971, 143; Drewnowski, 1992 [1972], 187–8). Tadeusz from *U nas w Auschwitzu...* has not only biographical details in common with Tadeusz Borowski, but aims at ideological generalizations identical with those ascribed to the author. It is difficult to draw a definite line between the two. In some contemporary reviews, however, the writer was identified also with his opportunistic *alter ego*, Tadek, and accused of dishonest conduct, cynicism and even war crimes (e.g. by Poszumski, 1947). Considering that in the light of existing evidence those allegations are far from the truth,⁵ Borowski appears to be a victim of his own standards of responsibility, here symptomatically reflected in a literary technique that blends fiction with autobiography.⁶

Borowski's formal realism, that is his inclination to represent people acting in the 'here and now' rather than as universal symbols of good and evil, is reflected in his refusal to use the imagery of saints and devils. The victims' opportunistic determination to survive is paralleled by the scarcity of conventional brutes among the oppressors. SS functionaries are portrayed as dull, obedient bureaucrats, carrying on their assignment systematically and without scruples, like any other task. They are not necessarily even sadistic. Their disgust at the shabbiness of people, coming straight out of crammed, filthy cattle trucks, reflects the extreme feeling of superiority that resulted from a Nazi education and spiritual mediocrity, but there is nothing demonic in it (cf. Drewnowski, 1992 [1972], 201). This approach to evil not only defies Polish patriotic stereotypes, but also the most popular portrayal of SS criminals in European or American films and literature, predominantly dwelling on a pathological fanaticism, verging on insanity. This propensity is not absent in the shaping of Amon Goeth, the 'mad Amon', in the comparatively well-balanced representation of the Holocaust in Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982), recently made into a film by Steven Spielberg. Even Kafka's archetypal executioner from *In der Strafkolonie*, morbidly obsessed with his liquidation machine, seems closer to such an approach than to Borowski's depiction of the mediocrity of killers. Among more recent works of fiction, William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* constitutes an exception in its portrayal of evil as ordinary rather than demonic, which concurs with many eyewitness accounts.⁷

⁵ Evidence to the contrary was given by other inmates: 'In the memory of friends and fellow-prisoners Tadeusz Borowski, inmate no. 119198, appears as an extraordinary man, compassionate, friendly, able to support others and boost their morale'. (Bartelski, 1963, 120)

⁶ The greatness of Borowski's narratives depends on this literary technique and therefore claims about the superiority of strictly documentary passages (Ziątek, 1994) are unconvincing.

⁷ One of the most significant is Hannah Arendt's report on Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, which makes evident the mediocrity of the best known Nazis (Arendt, 1963).

The instability of the intellectual and moral distance between the author and his narrator is also reflected in an alternating approach to the reality represented. *Dzień na Harmenzach* records chronologically one day's events on an Auschwitz *Kommando* by mingling the trivial with the horrific and treating both in the same manner. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* seems closest to such an account, but Isaak Babel's *Red Cavalry* and Hemingway's descriptions of the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* also resemble this austere, factual style.⁸ A stunning use of pure report features prominently in Borowski's narratives, but this is complemented by a tendency to elevate recent events into universal symbols of the modern age. Some short stories include direct comments and generalizations, but even the reporting mode of *Proszę państwa do gazu* ends with the image of an immense cloud of smoke over the crematoria, which ominously corresponds with the marching SS and their song: '*Und morgen die ganze Welt*'. This apocalyptic prediction of a global holocaust, together with the idea of the entire world as one great concentration camp, as presented in another narrative, becomes a striking feature of Borowski's output as a whole. The collection *Pożegnanie z Marią* (Farewell to Maria, 1948) develops from the title story, which, despite its Warsaw setting, resembles the image of Auschwitz. It ends with a symptomatic portrayal of a liberated camp (*Bitwa pod Grunwaldem*, The Battle of Grunwald), that is startlingly disillusioned with liberation and the postwar world, since this world still continues the system of oppression, animosity and simulacra we know from Auschwitz narratives. The collection *Kamienny Świat* (The World of Stone, 1948) exacerbates horrors to such a degree that they acquire a gruesome appeal and, in some bizarre manner, become aesthetically pleasing (see Błoński, 1973). These narratives conflate token situations with a general message which contains apocalyptic tones of inflated proportions.

Whether Borowski's discourse is dominated by the representation of the shadow of doomsday hanging over modern civilization or by the desire simply to chronicle the struggle for survival is discussed by various critics. Kazimierz Wyka believed that in his best short stories the author withdrew his judgement and merely portrayed the rules determining life in concentration camps (1974 [1948], 127–8). Yet Czesław Miłosz dissected Borowski's impassive style to find a nihilistic distrust of any values and a painful disillusion with the civilization that only manages to keep dormant the most bestial instincts of the human race (1980 [1953], 113–34). Andrzej Kijowski maintained that Borowski was putting Western culture on trial and was therefore much more than a reporter of Nazi atrocities (1964, 75–80). Andrzej Werner, in conformity with the literary fashions of 1960s Poland, went even further in his monograph (1971). He rejected the notion of Realist and behaviourist

⁸ Borowski was a great admirer of contemporary American fiction, Hemingway in particular.

principles in Borowski's poetics; instead he saw Borowski as writing philosophical or parabolic fiction about the human condition, as had Dostoevsky, Conrad, Musil, Kafka and Céline. The most recent study by Ziątek (1994), however, goes too far in the opposite direction, when he questions whether the author's generalizations have any importance whatsoever.

The assumption that Borowski was deeply concerned with what he considered the global crisis of modern civilization seems indubitable, but whether he can be regarded primarily as a reporter on human degradation or as a judge of the contemporary world depends on one's choice and consequent interpretation of examples from his works. It seems that his work hovers between both possibilities, with a growing tendency to overstep plain reporting and to pass a final verdict on the represented world. This tendency corresponds with his poetry, which from the very beginning proclaimed an apocalyptic message in the spirit of pre-war catastrophism.⁹ Bearing this in mind, one can conclude that, in his determination to fight the Polish martyr complex, Borowski has eventually taken on another well-established pattern of imagery, one which harks back to the 1930s and further, to Young Poland writers like Kasprowicz and Miciński.

II

The importance of Miron Białoszewski's (1922–83) prose has been recognized by Polish critics. Known best as a poet, he belongs to that small group of authors whose verse was influenced by prose rather than the other way round. As Barańczak has pointed out, over the course of time Białoszewski's style became the same in every genre (1974, 24), acquiring a sort of simplicity unique in modern Polish literature. Regarded as an experimental proponent of avant-garde writing at the time when the term Realism was considered almost offensive by the most influential critics, he certainly demonstrated his allegiance to this method with the publication of *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* (A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising, 1970)¹⁰ and his short narratives *Donosy rzeczywistości* (Reporting Reality/Reality's Denunciations, 1973).¹¹ Barańczak believes that the whole misconception of his writing as strictly 'reistic' or 'linguistic' was of critics' own making, since 'the truth was that he had been, in his own inimitable way, a scrupulous literary realist from the very beginning of his career' (1991, 292).

Białoszewski went out of his way to stress that his works reflected reality and claimed that 'writing and life go together. Sometimes they are

⁹ Drewnowski (1992, 226–7) regards this tendency as a dystopian disenchantment with utopian dreams about a better future after the war.

¹⁰ English translation by Madeline Levine: *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* (Ann Arbor, 1977).

¹¹ There are various ways of understanding the meaning of this title.

one' (Berberyusz, 1967). He could hardly accept the fashionable view that his works denounced the unauthenticity of everyday life, since for him even everyday artificiality had a well-established existence and hence had become real, and deserving of affirmation (*ibid.*). What he rejected was the aesthetic deformation of life by literature, which he opposed by the postulate of 'demythologization, demetaphorization, the rejection of metaphors and picturesqueness as unnecessary and non-functional' (Taranienko, 1971). While Borowski abandoned patriotic and martyrological discourse to place the horrors of concentration camps within a familiar world, Białoszewski attempted to supersede *belles lettres* as such and return to its primal sources, to forms of natural, spoken language. As if in a covert polemic on Bruno Schulz's idea of the Book, he proclaimed:

Everything originated from speaking, not writing. Despite the fact that some people or peoples were made to believe that the scripture had been first — from Heaven, from God — or even more, that the original still existed, sole and true, over there, in Heaven. Today some people still trust the veracity of the written word. Even in newspapers. But faith in the Original resulted from the scarcity of writing. Anything written was sacred, as writing itself was sacred, rare as it was. (Berberyusz, 1967).

Białoszewski's rejection of established literature, underscored by his unconventional style of life and open disregard for platitudes (Sobolewska, 1994, 110), has been generally recognized by critics, who have attempted to find a fitting formula for his kind of writing. For Barańczak, Białoszewski's low style defies the sacred and elevates the profane (1974, 136), or in Gombrowicz's terminology espouses 'immaturity' by rejecting 'form' (1993, 18–19). Głowiński believes that Białoszewski 'does not ennoble the form of low culture, but — on the contrary — lowers the forms of high culture' by dragging literature back to its pre-literary stage, that is to the very formation of oral language and pure 'language stories' (*fabuły językowe*), based on relations between words themselves (1973, 321–6). His 'intimate diaries', claims Głowiński, approach a sociology of language as they record the variety of everyday speech in the author's environment (1993, 151). Helena Zaworska regards strictly linguistic approach to Białoszewski's works as too restrictive, and inconsistent with the writer's commitment to reality, but rejects the notion of his writing as unmitigated reporting as well. She emphasizes Białoszewski's personal approach to portrayed reality, the polyphony of the views he represents, his humorous and parodic distance towards literary conventions. In a direct reference to Bakhtin, she treats his world as a transformation of ordinary circumstances into a carnivalesque mythology with a private base (1992, 131–47). Krzysztof Rutkowski elevates Białoszewski to the status of the Romantic creator of 'active poetry', such as was advocated by Mickiewicz in his Paris

lectures, and consequently claims that there are no grounds for relating him to low style (1987, 117–89).

Borowski's behaviourism needed elevating to the level of philosophical parables to achieve official status as great literature. Białoszewski's documentary narratives made critics search for linguistic patterns, the carnivalesque and 'active poetry' in order for his work to be said to rise above unrefined reports on reality. This is justifiable only to a certain extent. Białoszewski's mocking rejection of Paul Valéry's disrespect for statements such as that about a marquise who 'left at five' (in *Donosy rzeczywistości*) makes manifest his adherence to stories, providing that they are not invented but derived from reality (see Zieniewicz, 1989, 87–8). Following this principle, he employed events from his own life during and after the war. These include a private account of the Warsaw Uprising, anecdotes and sketches portraying everyday life, particularly in tenement blocks, the diary of his stay in hospital after his first heart attack (*Zawał*, *The Heart Attack*, 1977) and reports from his infrequent journeys in Poland and abroad (for example *Obmapywanie Europy* [Mapping Europe], *AAAmeryka* [AAAmerica], both published posthumously in 1988).

The intimate character of Białoszewski's narratives stems primarily from their close range of observation, restricted to his 'private world', or to their specific spatial and temporal plane, as Uspensky calls it (1973, 57–80). Andrzej Zieniewicz convincingly argues that Białoszewski's portrayal of his native Warsaw revolves around houses where he had lived, and thus creates enclosed spaces which serve as starting points for further descriptions and analeptic associations (1989, 62–85). Correspondingly, 'scenes' or 'showing' become the major form of narration, while 'panoramas', or 'telling' from a distant perspective, are absent even in a historical discourse like *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego*. This unusual 'memoir' fosters the directness of observation to the point where it contradicts another principle of memoirs — the illusion of a somehow Proustian remembrance of things that happened twenty years previously. Białoszewski's repeated assurance — 'I remember' or 'I don't remember' — his overt effort to recollect past events and his hesitations when memory fails, conspicuously contrast with the 'scenic', detailed descriptions of the Warsaw Uprising, and with the immediacy that renders as present the author's past experience. As a result, instantaneous impressions of war incidents can precede factual accounts of them, while the naming of events sometimes follows their description.

In *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* Białoszewski's narrative perspective resembles the Modernist point of view, particularly in its camera-eye method. This was openly recognised by the author-narrator, who confessed that the viewpoint of an impassive observer constituted the best possibility for dealing with the events of war (1971 [1970], 47–8). The work contains personal recollections, harking back to before the

war, digressive excursions into history and allusions to the narrative situation and the author himself. Still, apart from the breadth of experience and observation, the story hardly contains any strictly personal bias. The narrator shares his sentiments with the population of Warsaw and talks on their behalf (see Zieniewicz, 1989, 135). Not even in the more intimate stories like *Zawał*, which describes the aftermath of Białoszewski's own heart attack, is close observation of the environment overshadowed by the author's individuality. Białoszewski avoids the intellectualization of content so common in postwar essays and autobiographical writing in Poland, shuns philosophizing and, unlike other writers, barely discusses modern art and literature. If books he had read are mentioned, they are usually something from the canon, such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë or François Rabelais. Moreover, having read *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*, Białoszewski remarked that, in the past, writers had been less verbose than today, since in times when few people could write those who could did not indulge 'in doing it for its own sake, but to deliver a message' (1977, 76). In defiance of the intellectual snobbery of his contemporaries, he seems more concerned with the quality of the soup in his sanatorium than with the existential and aesthetic problems of the twentieth century. His reports from abroad put across the approach of the 'ordinary man', where an unfamiliar world is domesticated by some familiar experience from home (see Czermińska, 1993, 86–9). Lyrical or dream-like transformations characterize only some of his narratives and do not undermine their special quasi-documentary character.

Białoszewski's adherence to details and his trust in their representational value is well-documented: 'I do not care about form any more [...]. Content is more important [...]. All details are essential, for otherwise the content will not be dense. Without this there is only literature, aphorism, nothing human' (Taranienko, 1971). The density of everyday details relevant to their location give his prose the 'here and now' aspect that Ian Watt (1957) considered essential for 'formal realism'. But Białoszewski, like the stream-of-consciousness novelists, goes to an extreme by rejecting what Modernist critics described as the 'publicly shared principle of selection and significance' (Daiches, 1965, 4–5). He also disregards the rule that 'the story's conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development' (Ricoeur, 1981, 170), which governed traditional plots. What Białoszewski calls 'hums, lumps and threads' (the title of his volume: *Szumy, zlepy, ciągi*, 1976) suggests a tendency to collect rather than select represented events, and to arrange them in a succession instead of a teleological order. His chronicle of the Warsaw Uprising does not make political points and portrays trivia and local gossip together with hunger and continuous bombing. The glory of raising a Polish flag and singing the national anthem in a liberated district follows straight after the description of a participant in this event quivering with fear in a lavatory during the bombardment (1971 [1970],

11). In *Zawał* the scrupulous observation of the inconsequential behaviour of animals in a neighbouring courtyard seems as important as the descriptions of fellow patients in the sanatorium (1977, 164–5). In the same work the size and shape of turds left on a lavatory seat becomes, provocatively, a subject of serious conversation. (ibid., 65–6).

The realism of Białoszewski's narratives certainly demonstrates more than a simple adherence to everyday details. His rejection of *belles lettres* and intellectual snobbery inevitably brought him closer to the simple life, where ordinary words serve to disrupt any circumvention or pretence. The choice of oral language transforms the nineteenth-century convention of the *skaz* into a modern elliptical, associative pattern of spoken monologues, whose 'natural' structure often appears illogical and incoherent. Reality can become obscure, barely definable, as the spoken words seem to be addressed to the initiated, those familiar with the situational background, and are apparently active within a semantic context of accompanying gestures. The fact that Białoszewski used first to record his works on tape to sustain the authenticity of oral expression (Stańczakowa, 1993, 264) is closely related to the writer's basic principles of communication. Białoszewski once commented: 'Why do people oppose everyday metaphysics? They exploit it themselves. Contractions as well. But they are unwilling to understand the surface of a poem, its literality. They always immediately look for something different' (Berberyusz, 1967). As a result, prose of this sort demonstrates once again that exact imitations of reality eventually end up as the opposite of what is popularly regarded as Realism in its dominating nineteenth-century model, identified with logic and lucidity.

Moreover, the Modernist penchant to disregard the communally-shared principle of significance serves only to emphasize personal selection and hierarchy, which in the end gives reality an outlandish or even absurd character. In the story *Patyk* (A Rod, from *Donosy rzeczywistości*) the vicissitudes of an ordinary rod, regarded as amazing only by the woman who offers it to the narrator, are given a detail of attention normally apportioned only to 'significant' events. The same collection contains narratives where the grotesque aspect derives from the unusual behaviour of the characters involved. Baaing and mooing as a way of greeting each other is an example of this tendency (*Od 'beee' do 'muuu'*, From 'Baa' to 'Moo'). Yet in the majority of the tales, absurdity is nothing more than an essential ingredient of life itself; the writer exposes only the strangeness of everyday existence. The story of an ostensibly considerate woman who vents her matrimonial frustration on her neighbours by setting their houses on fire, having given a decent warning, — 'Get up, your house is on fire' (*Podpalaczka*, The Arsonist) — provides the sort of absurd humour exploited in particular by Sławomir Mrożek. Some narratives expose the inanity of customary existence in People's Poland much as Mrożek did. The pandemonium caused by the light being switched off in a block of flats (*O świetle*, On

Light) or the story of stealing a seat from a public lavatory, because none were available in shops (*Sedes*, The Toilet Seat), are nevertheless barely typical of Białoszewski. With his exploitation of the realm of the ordinary, he contemplates life in its existential form rather than in political terms.

Białoszewski's image of common life is not infrequently superseded by his dreams and fantasies, particularly in the short narratives. He paradoxically downgrades the supernatural and elevates the customary. Hence an ordinary question addressed to people in a hearse: Excuse me please, is this a coffin?' (this is the title of the story: *Przepraszam, czy to trumna?*) breaks the taboo of death, and makes coffins as much part of social intercourse as banana sandwiches. The colloquial language and down-to-earth attitude to the Holy Bible, which are evident in a domestic discussion with Jehovah's Witnesses, has the following punch line: 'And Lucifer was fourteen when he rebelled. — How do they know this? — They do. Boys of that age like to rebel; they stop saying, "Hello"' (*Teodycea*, in Białoszewski, 1981 [1973], 53). Similarly, a seance turns into the farce of breaking a spell once cast on an antiquated lady's fan (*Chaim*), and the dreams described in various narratives are always somehow linked with everyday reality. Extraordinary aspects of life emerge unexpectedly from ordinary circumstances and this somewhat resembles the experience of the late Impressionists. Thus the author is often amazed at the unusual appearance of familiar objects observed under artificial conditions, and is particularly fascinated by things multiplied in mirrors:

This mirror reflects what can be seen in a glass cabinet in the antechamber. That one reflects what can be seen in a mirror in my room. And thus the hanging sleeves, coats, standing sculptures and the figures in the paintings overlap each other. Everything in a cloud of cigarette smoke. When one is tired, all becomes remarkably static. It is hard to tell what has been reflected, what is glass, what smoke, and what a true sculpture or a shirt. (*Sylwester w lustrze* [New Year's Eve in a Mirror], in Białoszewski, 1981, 283).

The indefinite, enigmatic character of reality appears to be at the core of Białoszewski's world. The polyphony of varied discourse, pastiche, parody, dialogue, give his reality an open character, typical of modern Realism (cf. Jarzębski, 1992). His writing also demonstrates the aporetic character of such notions as objective and subjective, real and imaginary, Realism and anti-Realism. In brief, his writing participates in its own original way in the major dilemmas of modernity.

III

Tadeusz Konwicki (b. 1926) tries hard to confuse his readers and critics. His direct statements are full of contradictions, and inconsistency appears to be at the foundation of anything he writes. He does not seem much

concerned with the structure of his works as well, haphazardly blending open or disguised fiction with assumed reality, conventional anecdotes with metaphysical grandiloquence. Konwicki maintains that he dislikes amorphousness, but selects contradictory patterns to 'mirror the chaos of the external world as well as his private impatience' (Nowicki, 1986, 190–1). The personality of authors rather than represented realities are the focal point of his attention: 'All over the world people penetrate their inner selves deeper and deeper, and as a reader I am more interested in the author's mind than in his general outlook' (Eberhardt, 1972). While referring to his craft, however, Konwicki makes a symptomatic statement: 'My apprehension is at its best when concentrated on my personal frame of reference, which is partly genuine and partly contrived' (Nowicki, 1986, 7). As a result, he does not make life easy for those who like to disentangle provable facts from fabrications.

Since he started publishing his quasi-autobiographical essays, Konwicki has frequently declared his disregard for conventional storytelling and cleverly transformed his own life into a sort of fiction. This approach, which comports well with the lyrical character of his writing (see Walc, 1975, 1986; Lubelski, 1984), comes to the fore in his *Kalendarz i klepsydra* (A Calendar and an Hourglass, 1976), and then another three books of a similar character.¹² As in the old Polish books of *silva rerum*, which muddled up information on almost everything, Konwicki blends memories and anecdotes, reflections and warnings with open and disguised pieces of fiction. The boundary line between fiction and non-fiction becomes even more vague than in Gombrowicz's diaries and the author's position even more indeterminate. 'Let's pretend', Konwicki explains, 'that I am a well-written hero in a novel and that in 1981 I'm experiencing an avalanche of extraordinary adventures, a cascade of amazing conflicts and a few, not too many, a few major catastrophes in my love life' (1982, 3).¹³

The initial impulse of Konwicki's rebellion against traditional narratives somewhat resembles Białoszewski's rejection of the written word. He complains that the 'flood of words', devalued by politicians, has recently caused 'the decay and degradation' of literature, which not long ago used to play a major role in human life (Nowicki, 223–4). Consequently, the novel that contains plot and characters is dull and dead for him (*ibid.*, 241). In a Valéry-style rebuff of story-telling, he claims that narrating fiction is beyond his capacity, though real people may still attract his attention, even if he is a recluse (Konwicki, 1991, 7). This does not, however, correspond to the unadulterated reporting on reality which Białoszewski approximated in his inimitable manner. Konwicki is above all a mythologizer with, amazingly, both Polish Romantic and

12 Only one of them, *Wschody i zachody księżyca* (1982), has been translated to English, by Richard Lourie: *Moonrise, Moonset* (London, 1988). There are, however, translations of several Konwicki's novels.

13 R. Lourie's translation.

postmodern roots. On the one hand he approaches the contemporary conviction that 'history itself may be a form of fiction' (McHale, 1987, 96), or that history and literature are nothing but 'human constructs' (Hutcheon, 1988, 124–5). Therefore he blends facts, or at least events which look like facts from real life, with episodes apparently invented. This gives him the freedom to introduce his portrait based on carefully-chosen and partly-constructed evidence, and to claim its relative independence from himself: 'My hero is in some way collective and parodic. He is simultaneously a hero and a parody of a hero. I am present in this character, but also everything that comes from outside supports my message' (Nowicki, 1986, 126). Yet, on the other hand, this is hardly a Gombrowicz-like ironic portrayal of oneself, one that actually challenges 'form' or 'totalization'. In fact, who has managed to mythologize his/her own life and image to the same extent as Konwicki since Romanticism and Young Poland?

Konwicki's autobiographical essays contain an array of metafictional comments on his art, but, above all, seductively construct a portrait of the author. Many of his novels serve the same purpose, particularly in the late period. He is conscious of the 'traps' of language and the virtual impossibility of pure self-expression. Paul de Man goes as far as to suggest that autobiography is actually a 'de-facement', since 'language, as trope, is always privative', and thus 'the sense of a world [is] accessible only in the privative way of understanding' (1984, 80–1). Konwicki flouts the idea of demiurges and, like Polish avant-garde writers of the 1930s, has a strong awareness of the self-imitating, pastiche character of literature (see Konwicki, 1989 [1976], 214–15). Irony and self-ridicule notwithstanding, he cleverly uses Romantic stereotypes to create an image of a modern bard, whom his Lithuanian background places close to Mickiewicz, and to Miłosz. Maria Janion has demonstrated that Konwicki's pose as a 'Lithuanian in salons', that is as a provincial who unexpectedly finds himself in cultural centres, follows Polish Romantic patterns (1991, 164–6). In the first-person narrative of *Mała apokalipsa* (A Minor Apocalypse, 1979),¹⁴ the self-immolation of the protagonist, whose fictitious status furtively plays on some kinship with the real author, constitutes the only manifestation of authenticity in a world of sham gestures. Apparently, despite his trivial hangover, he is still a follower of the Czech, Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in January 1969, and of the Promethean heroes, typical of Polish Romantic and post-Romantic literature. Prophetic tones and pompous sermons on the corruption of the world magnify the image of a national bard. Accordingly, the writer shuns the inconvenient segments of his life, like his Stalinist past, and thus creates a private mythology that is cleverly disguised behind often unconvincing humility, mockery and farce (see Malewski [Bolecki], 1989).

¹⁴ English translation by Richard Lourie: *A Minor Apocalypse*, London, 1983.

Among Konwicki's quasi-autobiographical novels, *Bohin*¹⁵ is the least grandiose and rhetorical. The pose of a native Jeremiah, predicting catastrophe, looms in the background, but still does not overshadow the witty games with history played by the author. Julian Barnes in his approach to Flaubert's biography (*Flaubert's Parrot*, 1984) singled out proven facts, conjectures based on probability, and events possible under a different set of circumstances, that is those which might have done, but actually never did happen. Konwicki, focusing attention on the story of his own grandmother and her romance with a stranger, has been left, in practical terms, with only the last two possibilities. Having known very little about the grandmother and nothing about her lover, he invents the whole story and openly admits that the truth is irrelevant and depends only on the writer's acts of creating fiction (Konwicki, 1987, 104–5). Memory and reconstruction eventually become one with construction and mythopoeia. This relativity of genuine and imagined existence gives his world a distinctly postmodern character. It seems that any attempt to revive past events is barely possible and, more important, insignificant. In this example of autobiographical writing, fiction eventually triumphs over documentation and the resultant approximation of authenticity. 'Reporting reality' becomes a mythopoeic operation.

15 English translation by Richard Lourie: *Bohin Manor*, New York, 1990.

CHAPTER X

FROM REALITY UNDER SCRUTINY TO REALITY UNDER QUESTION

Part I

Retrospective order

The interwar period elevated retrospective narrative to the position of the avant-garde mode of story-telling. This mode achieved remarkable proficiency in the analeptic progression and gradual disclosures of reality in the works of Kuncewiczowa, Nałkowska and Choromański. The flashback technique or circular motion towards truth was revived after 1956 with the fresh popularity of Conrad and Proust and the esteem awarded to Faulkner, whose *Absalom, Absalom!* was considered a major twentieth-century novel. On the other hand, authorial control of represented reality was still in force and the extremes of point-of-view narratives or stream-of-consciousness fiction found barely any followers. Concurrently 'literariness' took precedence over mimesis, leading towards the use of a lyricizing, mythical structure and symbolic meaning. The works I discuss here were widely admired at the time of publication and represent some typical tendencies.

I

Teodor Parnicki's (1908–88) historical novel *Srebrne orły* (Silver Eagles) was published in Jerusalem in 1944, but a second edition came out in Poland in 1949. The critics applauded this publication (e.g. Wyka, 1974 [1948], 280–93), despite the author's residence abroad (until 1967), which, under the political circumstances of the time, was unwelcome. The novel can most certainly be regarded as a revolutionary step forward in the field of historical fiction, coming from a writer who had managed to publish only one work of similar rank before (1937). The novels of such authors as Prus, Żeromski, Berent or Iwaszkiewicz notwithstanding, Polish historical narratives were associated chiefly with didacticism and/or rather unsophisticated entertainment (Kraszewski, Sienkiewicz, Wacław Gąsiorowski). In contrast, Parnicki attempted to recreate the process of historical research rather than to deliver either a forthright lesson or compelling stories (see Parnicki, 1974, 192 ff). The dominance

of lengthy disputes over action make this novel distinct from popular, 'readerly' fiction. Set at the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries, it is primarily concerned with the politics of the Polish king, Bolesław the Brave, but in its broad approach to the events represented, the novel actually portrays the most important cultural centres of medieval Europe.

The pattern of reading is suggested by the author himself. Having chosen Abbot Aron as the focal character, he describes his search for truth as process of gradual discovery. The world Aron lives in resembles a 'forbidden book' of many pages, whose full content becomes known only at the end. Therefore, at the time of Aron's final discoveries, he makes the following observation:

It appeared to Aron that he had obtained a new and complete copy of a forbidden book, familiar to him before only from single pages torn from its old volume: two, three, four leaves at most. He frequently turned them in his hands and examined them, but understood little, if anything. How different their substance was when rediscovered within the full text! (1966 [1944], II, 127).

This strategy of gradual 'understanding' prompted many critics to compare Parnicki's early novels with detective stories or historical research, as both progressively unfold the truth (for example Czermińska, 1972, 57–8; 1974, 37–41; Chojnacki, 1975, 115–25; Burek, 1962). The impact of the point-of-view technique on *Srebrne Orły* is also obvious, but the problem is to ascertain who is actually performing the investigation and to what purpose.

In the classical tradition of Henry James, the focalized narration is often carried on from the perspective of a rather naive character, whose 'innocent' approach is for a long time unsuited to capturing the perplexing and deceptive nature of life (Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, Laura Rowan in Rebecca West's *The Birds Fall Down*). At first glance, the narrative situation in *Srebrne orły* appears to belong in this category. The central consciousness, Abbot Aron, is an Irishman who spent his most important, formative years in Italy. He feels somewhat alienated in the freshly converted Poland, a country whose politics still look puzzling to an uninformed foreigner. As a result, he is dependent on the opinions of King Bolesław's daughter-in-law, the German princess Rycheza, whom he respects and privately admires as an attractive woman. The initial episodes of the novel relate to the king's apparently puzzling refusal to join Emperor Henry II in Rome, despite holding the title of patrician of the Holy Roman Empire. This focal problem revolves for a long time around the impressive idea of the restored splendour of Ancient Rome, her multinational composition and universal appeal, which had been cherished by Otto III and his followers. Only at the end is the pragmatist background of these utopian dreams disclosed, that is German imperialism and grand European diplomacy, which were inconsistent with Polish domestic interests. Aron's recollections of the

years of his youth in Italy, and of his later visits to Spain, France and Germany seem, at the first glance, to be narrated mainly in order to prove that German politics was nationalistic despite its universal façade.

Parnicki appears consistent in his endeavour to transform the narration into personal reports, but he simultaneously does his best to keep a firm authorial control over them. Aron serves him well as the main observer of events, who has to be present at many junctures, and to be in touch with important historical characters. He does not even shun eavesdropping (actually a very old literary device) when any filling of the gaps is required. When not on the spot at focal affairs, he transmits accounts given by eyewitnesses. His friend, Tymoteusz, who is active in Italian politics, provides most information by 'reporting' what he has seen personally or heard from others. In the latter case, we actually have a three-tier structure, where somebody (for example Pope Gregory V) tells Tymoteusz a story which in turn is related to Aron. Since the language of the implied author dominates these reports, while individual characters are merely parts of the master discourse (see Chojnacki, 1975, 181; Czerwińska, 1972, 62), there are often problems with identifying the holder of a narrative perspective. It never tends to belong to an omniscient narrator, but sometimes seems to represent the collective self of Rome rather than any strictly personal point of view.

The function of this outwardly figural narrative situation¹ combines the advantages of both personal perspectives and authorial control. Parnicki has no Proustian scruples concerning the process of recollection and of the consequent distinction between the two selves of the central intelligence, one which narrates and one which experiences (*das erzählendes Ich* and *das erlebendes Ich*).² In *Srebrne orły*, Aron's 'current' knowledge and awareness only occasionally moves backwards, while the past is portrayed with the directness and detailed accuracy that normally indicates authorial narration. The readerly appeal of this 'scenic'³ representation goes together with an inclination towards relativism and uncertainty, alien to any traditional discourse. The strategy of research results in a gradual, 'spiralling' discovery of the truth, characterized by the consecutive reinterpretation of puzzling events (for example the role and conduct of the enigmatic, crafty Teodora Stefania), which broadly correspond with the technique of narration by conjecture in the novels of Conrad and Faulkner (see Guerard, 1982, 205–6). The main historical riddle described in *Srebrne orły*, that is the reasons for King Bolesław's refusal to accompany Emperor Henry to Rome, is eventually solved, which gives Aron the impression of having completed the 'whole book'. Still, problems are posited in the novel that are discussed rather than conclusively resolved. Absolute justice versus

1 Terminology after Stanzel (1964, 1986).

2 Terminology used by Lämmert (1955).

3 Readers unfamiliar with this terminology will find its explanation in any good dictionary of literary terms.

reason of state, debated by Abbot Leon and Pope Sylvester II, individualism (Tymoteusz) versus collective values (Aron) and Christian, Latin culture and the story of Jesus in the eyes of an Arab, Ibn al Faradi, represent some of these unanswered questions. The mysterious conduct of the two *femmes fatales*, Teodora Stefania and Rycheza, is never wholly explained either.

Parnicki's effort to avoid arbitrary omniscience in favour of evidence given by individuals, perfunctory as it is, resembles the naive realism of early first-person narratives.⁴ Here it serves a different purpose: a data-collecting process, which shows history as unveiled rather than pre-packed. The pleasure of disclosure by overcoming obstacles and rejecting wrong tracks overrides other considerations, including the design of characters and the conventional probability of their actions. As instantly noticed by Wyka, such a dynamic strategy of narration, full of 'red herrings', plays the role of a traditional plot (1974 [1948], 291–2). Despite somewhat misleading appearances, leading the critics towards comparisons with the stream-of-consciousness novel (e.g. Czermińska, 1974, 74–5), *Srebrne orły* hardly reflects the pattern of interior monologue. Instead of reconstructing the meanderings of free association or at least the mental process of recollection, the author uses Aron, Tymoteusz and others simply as presenters of his comprehensive image of the Middle Ages, subordinating the protagonist's movements to this purpose. The convincing portrayal of Medieval Europe seems to Parnicki more important than a comprehensive answer to all the puzzles of King Bolesław's politics, which ostensibly initiated Aron's intellectual quest. The ensuing artificiality of the narrative situation does not concern the author at all. He has transformed Aron and Tymoteusz into sagacious 'poets', who know what is essential for a compelling narrative. Parnicki's Freudian approach to libido and to the role of women in rulers' bedrooms tends to present universal rules on the movement of history. Even Aron's dreams are dominated by parabolic messages. The author is evidently present and, despite certain doubts and hesitations, still believes in the explicable nature of reality. The later development of his art reversed that conviction, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

II

Włodzimierz Odojewski (b. 1930) belongs to the generation which made its mark after the Thaw of 1956. Since he had left Poland and settled in Germany, his name and works disappeared from the Polish literary scene in the 1970s and 1980s, to regain their well-deserved position after the fall of Communism. So his most celebrated novel, *Zasypie wszystko, zawieje* (Snow Will Cover It Up, Will Bury It [Paris, 1973]), was for a

⁴ Parnicki had a special affection for the novels of Richardson, Fielding and Sterne (Czermińska, 1974, 17–18).

long time known only to those who had access to émigré publications.⁵ His earlier novel, *Wyspa ocalenia* (Island of Salvation, 1964),⁶ which will be discussed below, is Odojewski's first outstanding work, as Tomasz Burek (1990) recently reminded contemporary readers.

One of the first admirers of Odojewski's art, Zbigniew Bienkowski, made the following comments on *Wyspa ocalenia*:

No word can be missed. Plunged into the dungeon of 'endless' periods, several pages long, one does want to get out, but instead roams around their winding and suffocating nooks and crannies, where the meanderings of style stress the futility of literature, its helplessness versus the world. A helplessness which is literature's greatest triumph. It does not force order upon disorder. It does not untie knots that defy untying. It does not brighten darkness, but instead unveils chaos, frustration and obscurity. (1966, 200).

Many of Odojewski's stylistic peculiarities resemble William Faulkner's, with whom he has often been compared (for example Bienkowski, 1966, 195; Bereza, 1971). The progress of 'narration by conjecture' (Guerard, 1982, 206) towards discovery, repetitive cadence coupled with evasive and oblique messages, all those literary devices which, briefly, undermined the principles of traditional Realism are nourished by both novelists, like the tendency towards lyricizing and literariness.⁷ There are those 'impressionist circlings', 'the free wandering flow of mind', which Guerard pointed out in *Lord Jim* and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1982, 326), and there is that concern with human fate which transcends pure psychologism in favour of the metaphysical penchant present in Romanticism (see Janion, 1984; Werner, 1995).

Wyspa ocalenia depicts the adolescent experience of Piotr Czerestwienski, whose return to his grandparents' country estate, located in what used to be Eastern Poland, sours the idyllic memories of his childhood and destroys the idea of a 'salvation island' that he had cultivated. This happens because of sad discoveries concerning both his father's guilt in the past and the current antagonism between Poles and Ukrainians, which results from an ominously-expanding nationalism and the consequent mutual hatred. The Faulknerian curse of the past and the imperative of redemption hanging over the protagonist determine the structure of the novel; its solemn pace is replete in mysteries and

5 Certain fragments were published in literary magazines (1967–8), prior to Odojewski's defection. The importance of this book and its author to modern Polish fiction has been pointed out by Maria Janion (1984).

6 The first draft of this novel was completed in 1950 and read on Polish Radio. This initial text was then reworked by the author and a heavily censored edition appeared in 1964. The uncensored version was published in New York by the Polish daily *Nowy Dziennik* (1972–3). This complete print was not released in Poland until 1990 by 'Versus' in Białystok. There is an English translation: *No Island of Salvation* (London, 1965).

7 This does not imply that Odojewski is only concerned with the metafictional aspect of literary representation, as suggested by Tomasiak (1991).

enigmas, which is also characteristic of Romantic narratives. From the very beginning, the mysterious shadows surrounding Piotr mark the peculiar atmosphere with anxiety, uncertainty and mounting foreboding. Overheard conversations, hints and allusions accompany the hero throughout. The reader is drawn to the impression that something is here to be detected or dealt with. The characters' words and the way their behaviour is described foreground a strategy of questions and answers, which regulates the suspense.

In comparison with Parnicki, Odojewski pays much more attention to the processes of recollection and perception. Piotr reflects on the manner in which his memory works and carefully observes how the past is mirrored in his mind. He makes a clear distinction between what is properly remembered and what is just guesswork; the latter is emphasized by the repeated adverb: 'perhaps..., perhaps...' (*może..., może...*). As a result, there is a vagueness where things eventually remain unnamed and unexplained, because the protagonist realizes that not everything can be accurately labelled (for example Odojewski, 1990 [1964], 94–5, 190–1). The reality depicted in the novel is often *in statu nascendi*; for example Piotr's love of Katarzyna is gradually disclosed, not just stated at once. Piotr's main efforts are devoted to investigation and discovery, activities which are of equal concern to the reader as the external events.

At the beginning of his novel, Odojewski makes a remark, crucial for his narrative, about 'an elusive border between dreams and reality' (*ibid.*, 25). The manner in which events emerge vaguely from the past in Piotr's recollections resembles waking from a dream, but even when presented dramatically, they often blend actual occurrences with imagined ones. The protagonist lives on the borderline of two worlds and is frequently unable to distinguish fact from illusion, the external world from inner experience. Piotr can be uncertain whether he has recently seen Katarzyna at the grandparents' manor house or had only been overcome by wishful thinking. He can doubt whether he really hears the grandmother's voice or just imagines it (*ibid.*, 46). The novel contains episodes whose ambivalent ontological status is either left unsolved or is only solved nearer the end. The authentic dreams included in the narrative seem to merge with what is claimed as reality. Purposely cherished daydreams, however, are not glorified. As a means of retreat from the harsh reality of war and ethnic hatred, they represent the idea of the 'salvation island' which is eventually abandoned. Uncle Teodor's imaginary archaeological journeys into the Middle East merely feign enthusiasm at a time of increasing dangers and his personal loss of the beloved woman. His eventual deportation to Siberia, merely mentioned in the novel, constitutes a typical finale for unrealised expectations. The protagonist's search for *le temps perdu* turns out to be useless. Memories recovered are nothing more than a regression into the past that needs to be overcome in the interests of life.

In Odojewski's narrative, Piotr Czerestwienski is the one who experiences and the one who learns. His recollections occasionally become an interior monologue, which, in this relatively advanced form, was still regarded in Poland as innovative, but which, even when punctuation is scarce, respects morphology and syntax. The most disorganized narration, undoubtedly presenting a 'stream' of free-flowing speech, concerns an overheard conversation (*ibid.*, 177). Without Piotr, the strategy of unresolved enigmas could hardly be pursued. Yet the authorial voice remains remarkably present (see Tomasik, 1991, 140; Werner, 1995, 66). The author's lengthy, Faulknerian periods and hesitant, reflective tone are used in the case of all the speakers and their reports. His figurative language and art of description gives the represented reality its lyrical tone. A mythological order has been finally imposed over the individual experience of the protagonist, an order which concerns human life as such. In his review, Zbigniew Bienkowski regarded the hesitant tone of Odojewski's narrative as representing a philosophical conviction about the ontological chaos of the world. This tone, however, reflects the strategy of enigma and suspense in narration rather than genuine philosophical uncertainty; the author's final message that illusions are harmful and that there is no 'island of salvation' seems firm.

III

Like Teodor Parnicki, his peer, Andrzej Kuśniewicz (1904–93) underwent an evolution towards the postmodern type of relativism and therefore will be dealt with again in the next chapter. None the less, his earlier works represent that symptomatic tendency towards retrospective narration and monologue structure which formed the most innovative trend in 1960s Polish fiction. His *Eroica* (1963) belongs to the best achievements of those years not only as a penetrating analysis of war criminals, but also as a work of fiction which skilfully uses flashbacks to explain their state of mind. This retrospective first-person account is related by an SS officer and war criminal, Otto von Valentin, who is detained in a French prison. Consequently, it is a sort of narrative which concerns problems which were liable to rather too unequivocal an assessment in Polish postwar literature, which rarely attempted to understand such people. Kuśniewicz avoids forthright condemnation, claiming in his correspondence with Hoelscher-Obermaier that 'relativism makes an essential part of my views on human life and its foundations'. He attempts to see Nazism through the eyes of its 'bankrupt' supporter, because, as we learn, 'one is unable positively to accuse someone without trying to be in his shoes' (Hoelscher-Obermaier, 1988, 218, 219).

The very nature of Kuśniewicz's approach has been duly identified by a German critic as the description of Otto's hopeless search for an alibi,

where 'objective' form is eventually transcended by an implied authorial assessment (Hoelscher-Obermaier, 1988, 70–97). The prevalence of an *erlebendes Ich* or the past experience of the protagonist over an *erzählendes Ich* or his narrative situation gives the evidence submitted a direct and quasi-independent character. Von Valentin's monologue, with its rather lucid presentation, resembles a soliloquy much more than an inner stream of free associations, but still seems to reflect the current feelings of someone who has deeply repressed the memory of his war crimes and the ugliest aspects of his Nazi past, and hence discloses them gradually, selectively and indirectly. Another element of his current situation, the presence of prisoners sharing his cell, is not absent from Otto's mind. Their dialogues, tales and actions add to his inner anxiety, bolstering related reflections. Besides, the protagonist's lot is made more complicated by his repeated attacks of malaria, which blur his awareness and undermine the reliability of his report. The primarily diegetic character of his recollections contrasts with the mimetic representation of the cell scenes, and thus contributes to the foregrounding of the two temporal levels of the story.

Here, the main vehicle for Kuśniewicz's authorial intervention is a parallel drawn between the life of Otto von Valentin and the Faust myth, which in the postwar years served Thomas Mann equally well (*Doktor Faustus*, 1947).⁸ The story of a man who lost his soul to Mephistopheles in order to be rejuvenated, functions in *Eroica* as a metaphor for the hero's predicament, but can also be interpreted more broadly as a general inquiry into human decision-making under precarious historical circumstances (see Jarzębski, 1984, 268). Otto is 'old' only in a figurative sense, as the heir to an aristocratic family from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose greatness belonged to the past. As the author points out in one of his letters, 'the "heroism" of early Hitlerism could have been attractive to the likes of von Valentin, a descendant of the "lost social class" and the "lost cause"' (in Hoelscher-Obermaier, 1988, 220). The Faustian problem of regeneration is linked here with degradation and decadence. The novel illustrates how the protagonist's search for greatness is actually a betrayal of moral values and in effect a spiritual decline. This point is never questioned, despite the fact that Kuśniewicz is somewhat reluctant to pronounce an unconditional verdict on his hero, since he is uncertain whether, under similar circumstances, he might have behaved much differently himself (see *ibid.*, 219). In this sense the imposed Faustus myth gives von Valentin's story a wider, parabolic appeal.

Despite the fact that *Eroica* can be still regarded as a 'personal', Modernist, novel, as defined by Stanzel (1964, 39–52),⁹ it transcends that

⁸ 'In his treatment of the Faust theme, Mann deliberately ignores Goethe's version in order to adhere more closely to the original conception of Faust in the chap-book of 1587' (Waidson, 1971, 18).

⁹ Original term: *der personale Roman*.

pattern and the modern form of Realism. The dominant structure of a monologue-confession certainly endeavours to portray the workings of an individual mind. When recollecting events, Otto is often hesitant and keen on setting the record straight, apart from those episodes which he would have rather forgotten. The phrase 'I remember' is frequently used as means of authentication. The conversations in the cell often provide subsidiary narrations whose role is essential to the composition of the novel; they can also function like Proust's 'madeleines', evoking by association the thread of the protagonist's own memories ('When listening to him, I remember...'). Yet the apparent 'naturalness' of the recollections is overcome by the implied author's attempts to model the narrative according to his general design of the novel. The Faustus myth is not the only venture of this kind. All the characters in Otto's cell and their respective stories form parallels or contrasts to his experience, like some of the people described in his recollections.

Otto is a proud, refined aristocrat, whose effort to find a moral alibi excludes the possibility of the 'naked truth', memories which might eradicate his sense of dignity. Hence his fellow-prisoners, who comprise a cowardly baron, the vulgar and cynical pimp, Zibou, and the cunning hypocrite, Mr K, help to highlight the depth of the protagonist's moral degradation by implying similarities between his and their crimes (see Hoelscher-Obermaier, 1988, 82–8). Otto helps the author greatly in this task by drawing attention to analogies between the baron and his ancestors, or between the baron's nephew, Roger, and himself. In the general plan of the novel, Zibou's opportunistic consent to join the French 'Charlemagne' corps fighting in Russia ends in a similar way to Otto's Faustian dreams of power, which paved the way for his participation in an *Einatzgruppe* also active in USSR: they are both forced by circumstances to take part in the extermination of Jewish civilians. Mr K's 'trivial' crimes as an informer for the Gestapo are morally indistinguishable from the protagonist's work for the German intelligence in pre-war France. Contrasts serve the same purpose as analogies, imposing some explication on the chaos of von Valentin's memories. Otto's fellow-aristocrat friend, Christian, represents disillusion with the Faustian myth of rejuvenation, and when the protagonist does his best to open up the possibility of regeneration before the old ruling class, 'even by paying Faust's price', he maintains that 'the primal laws of nature may not be suspended' (Kuśniewicz, 1974 [1963], 50–1). Hoelscher-Obermaier has pointed out that this 'decadent' fellow-nobleman indicates an alternative route for Otto's own potential development. Professor Maurer, conversely, as an anti-Nazi intellectual, introduces a Dostoevsky-style inner dialogue within Valentin's troubled mind, which makes the moral points the novel requires.

The author's interference in the intimate reality of Otto's monologue also covers symbolic means, from the recurrent title-motif of Beethoven's *Eroica* to an allusive connection between the protagonist's name,

Valentin, and a French prostitute, Valentine, who is mentioned by Zibou. Kuśniewicz frequently exploits his protagonist's inner turmoil and his corresponding hallucinations to show generalized images of his plight. The real world may blend with the imaginary, and Otto's private obsessions may turn into imagined verdicts on his excruciating situation. In one of the last episodes, he constructs a mental image of his hypothetical trial by blending school memories with the representation of a court in session and symbolic images, such as light reflected on water or a magnetic needle, which denote his life's dilemma of choosing between torpid tradition and the desire for change. The image of Otto awaiting his sentencing in SS uniform is another attempt to encapsulate his fate in a symbolic icon. The impact of such wholly mental scenes reverses the primarily realistic character of *Eroica* and deprives the represented world of its solid, objective ontological status. The author goes even further than portraying the hallucinations of a malaria afflicted mind. In a way typical of his later novels, Kuśniewicz moves to another time zone and depicts scenes from Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. These images are sparked off by illustrations published by *Wiener Illustrierte* which were once seen by Otto. Associated with his great grandfather's participation in Napoleon's campaign and the protagonist's recent memories from Russia, the events of 1812 gain some kind of independent existence parallel to scenes set in the twentieth century.

IV

The 1960s interest in monologic structures and the retrospective, sometimes spiral, movement of story-telling encouraged pure experimentation with language — innovations that transcend the limits of realistic motivation. Short narratives appeared particularly adaptable to this mode; they appropriated certain attributes of poetic compositions. Lyrical prose had, in any case, an old tradition in Poland, beginning with Romanticism, and, in the twentieth century, was associated with the avant-garde narratives of Miciński, Wat, S.I. Witkiewicz and Schulz. In a broader sense, this trend approaches the aims of *nouveaux romanciers*, who treated their works as an assemblage of words or textual representations. 'I feel more and more like organizing visual images, sounds, with words. In that respect, anyway, one can view a book as a small theatre', claimed Michel Butor (after Roudiez, 1991, 212). Still, Polish authors, although tempted to look for strictly formal innovations, did not usually reject the conventional task of writers to deliver an important message. This is particularly true of Jerzy Andrzejewski (1909–83), whose interest in lyrical means of representation led to several short works of fiction of remarkable value.

The publication of *Bramy raj* (The Gates of Paradise)¹⁰ in 1960 was then regarded as a significant literary event. On the one hand, Andrzejewski's historical parable was recognised by more perceptive readers as an allusion to the recent Stalinist past; on the other, it looked formally unusual to his contemporaries, and was certainly intended as such. The story of the thirteenth-century Children's Crusade, which was first portrayed by Marcel Schwob (*Croisade des enfants*, 1896), is turned into a universal tale about illusive, fallacious and ultimately misleading daydreams and ideals. The Polish readership was prone to identify these ideals with the utopia of Communism, which gave the work a topical political content. The fact that the book was not subject to any persecution from the government, which was always sensitive to even well-concealed criticism, is due to its complex structure; the text has about hundred pages and only two, long sentences, followed by a third of just a few words.

Czesław Miłosz has described *Bramy raj* as 'written in a stream-of-consciousness style' (1983, 492), which misses the point. There is no central intelligence with an internal flow of perceptions, thoughts and feelings, as in *Ulysses*. The main speaker is an impersonal narrator, whose discourse is restricted to the narrative frame (introduction and conclusion), occasional reports given from the characters' perspective and brief explanations ('he said', 'he thought' and so on). His tale comprises above all quoted direct speech, that is principally five confessions. Since there are only a few manifestations of inner life, such as dreams, this discourse gives priority to spoken language, contrary to the purpose of the interior monologues with which it shares retrospective order and personal tone. The structure of Andrzejewski's narrative, an almost uninterrupted torrent of words transmitted by an extradiegetic narrator, must be understood as entirely arbitrary, a formal experiment having no recourse to any mimetic representation of speech. This arbitrariness ostensibly resembles the craft of Philippe Sollers, whose much later work, *H* (1973), also disperses with punctuation and paragraphs, but while this French 'novel' is a challenge to the symbolic system of language, and consequently its semantics remains within the textual structure, the referentiality of *Bramy raj* is beyond doubt. One is tempted to conclude that Andrzejewski disintegrates his narrative in order to reintegrate it on his own terms and thus attest to the superior power of the creator.

The main structural principles of *Bramy raj* have already been described by critics. The actual presence of one, highly-literary style that, despite several speakers, belongs to the same individual, the author, is beyond doubt (Poradecki, 1971, 299; Wyślouch, 1979, 83). As observed by Wyślouch, the stylistic dominant does not belong to figurative language, but to repetition with variations (1979, 80–1). These repetitions

¹⁰ English translation by James Kirkup: *The Gates of Paradise* (London, 1963).

comprise speech units of different sizes: from whole passages, through complete sentences or phrases, to single words. Since all the confessions are articulated in the same way, there is virtually only one rhetoric and thus one mode of persuasion. This is paralleled by the structure of the storyline, which instead of a linear development mainly dwells on the repetition of events, which are gradually clarified and augmented by new details, as the sequence of confessions moves on from the least to the best informed witnesses (*ibid.*, 83–5). Like the style, this strategy is nothing more than a certain rhetoric of persuasion. The plurality of speakers alone does not affect the semantics of the narrative, for it has nothing to do with a multiplicity of points of view. As in a detective novel, the mysterious reasons leading Jacques de Cloyes to initiate the crusade are slowly uncovered by some of its participants, while the hidden control of the author integrates scattered information, builds up the story-line and unfolds its message. Parabolic vagueness eventually takes precedence over any genuine plurality of accounts.

Andrzejewski's narrative technique combines the disclosure of the message with an inclination towards ambiguity. Consequently, the unstoppable flow of words blends the speakers (the narrator and the characters) with those who listen, which occasionally makes identification difficult. Despite the narrator's effort to rectify lies or mistakes uttered by unreliable narrators, teenage boys and girls in their confessions, certain points are left unilluminated. These points concern details of the characters' conduct rather than the disclosure of the principal message. The dream of the father-confessor at the beginning of the story introduces the title-symbol of the gates of Paradise and establishes it as an emblem for a grand illusion. While the development of the narrative penetrates the sources of this fallacy, the conclusion lays the blame firmly on the dedicated, honest leader of the crusade, Jacques, actually a false prophet, who becomes the only character to be refused absolution. To deliver his lesson, Andrzejewski elevates the intellectual awareness of the mostly-uneducated teenagers and fills their confessions with information directed at the reader. The aphorisms of focal importance, such as 'truth destroys hope' for example, are skilfully included in the characters' discourse. The final scene, where the voice of warning is rejected and its messenger trampled by the ecstatic young crusaders, leaves no doubt about the the author's crucial purpose. This defiant challenge to the poetics of the Realist novel does not, in the end, question the traditional principle of the writer's ideological commitment.

V

Stanisław Czycz's (b. 1929) short narrative *And*¹¹ constitutes another attempt to subordinate interior monologue to chiefly lyrical ends; it also

11 'And' is the name of the main character.

appeared at the beginning of the 1960s. Its apparently disorganized structure looked so unconventional that its publication in the literary journal, *Twórczość* (1961, no. 3), was accompanied by explication and vindication in an essay written by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, the editor-in-chief. Some critics regarded the work as perplexing twaddle, a clumsy imitation of fashionable trends,¹² while others, much more sympathetic, were confused and misled by its unusual form. One notices with a certain astonishment that even nowadays *And* can be presented as 'one of the best realizations of the stream-of-consciousness technique in [Polish] postwar fiction' (Witkiewicz, 1989, 1). The belief of the leading essayist, Jerzy Stempowski, that Czycz's tale contains 'an outstanding local colour, that particular climate hardly imaginable outside Poland' also sounds unconvincing (1988 [1961], II, 251). What actually emerges in *And* is a contradictory text where conspicuous literariness overwhelmingly undermines mimesis, including the stream-of-consciousness form, but where some scenes and dialogues still resemble very conventional realism. Moreover, this experiment in the poetizing of reality is at the same time openly critical of the 'gilt frames' (*złoczone ramki*) of literary representation and consequently dismissive of literature as such (see Wielopolski, 1987, 170–1).¹³

There is no question that Czycz intended to produce something strikingly provocative, a work that would sound *épatant* on various levels. Portraying the atmosphere of literary circles, assembling young writers, with *And* and the narrator in the central roles, he selected scenes and images which would shock and surprise the reader. In agreement with the then prevailing conventions the tale concerns a great deal of oppressive boredom and intensive drinking; an attempted homosexual rape may be regarded as the author's own 'contribution' to the *épater le bourgeois* trend. The same purpose is served by his aversion to punctuation marks, which, as in *Bramy raję*, constitutes a 'defamiliarization trick', which makes otherwise ordinary events unusual. Czycz obviously enjoys phrases such as 'crucified prick', because of their potential to scandalize or offend 'philistine' readers. The creation of an enigmatic and bizarre world is as important to him as to many other contemporary Polish writers, who regarded defamiliarization as the chief goal of fiction. Therefore the narrative is full of amazing events, unexpected reactions and unsolved puzzles, including the mysterious death of *And* himself. The last, ostensibly intellectual, conversation with *And* approaches obscurity with its esoteric allusiveness.

The narrative discourse only outwardly resembles the structure of interior monologue. A sequence of free associations typical of the stream-of-consciousness mode actually appears only at the very end. The reality

12 The most vociferous was Kazimierz Koźniewski in the party weekly, *Polityka* (29 June 1961).

13 Burek blames Czycz's disillusion with contemporary culture on the compromised rhetoric of Communist propaganda (1995, 35).

of *And* is predominantly vague and short on the concrete details that normally shape characters' perceptions and the consequent flow of inner experience. Apart from a few realistic episodes, the narrative constitutes a loose sequence of images, linked together by the rules of poetic imagination rather than the psychological motivation typical of the novel. The occasional play of leitmotifs (for example the bomb and the revolver) upholds this mode of narration. Even recollections are subordinated to the principles of a distinctively literary approach, and thus hardly resemble a stream-of-consciousness attempt to reconstruct inner life. Many episodes assume a symbolic character (for example the train driven underground that epitomizes the spiritual bankruptcy of the two main characters), and this enhances the reflective, almost parabolic, aspects of the story. As the role of figurative language is primary, images become important in themselves. The episode with the invalid in a wheelchair is reshaped by metaphors and thus represents Czycz's tendency to exploit the semantic potential of words in order to construct new worlds out of them. His language games remind one of Baroque poems or postmodern conceits. Therefore the author follows the structure of the English expression 'pig-headed' simply to coin an analogous but in Polish unusual form — *pawiogłowy* ('peacock-headed'), or he accumulates words in an extraordinary manner in order to exploit their picturesqueness and phonetic similarities (for example Czycz, 1987 [1961], II, 224–5). The infrequent realistic scenes interpolated into this background tint the narrative, unwittingly perhaps, with postmodern heterotopia. The postmodern mood seems to be reflected in the conviction articulated near the end that literary works are nothing more than frames for duplicated contents. If any particular inspiration guides Czycz's narrative, it is the ultimate rejection of the Modernist confidence in words in favour of Barthesian scepticism about artistic originality.

CHAPTER XI

FROM REALITY UNDER SCRUTINY TO REALITY UNDER QUESTION

Part II

Heterotopia and metafiction

I

The disintegration of the traditional novel in the form discussed in the previous chapter has entailed its modification rather than inward destruction. Represented reality, despite the cautious scrutiny of its substance and resulting relativism, still preserves its entirety and therefore is not threatened with 'erasure'. Czycz's eventual mistrust of language and of the originality of story-telling, however, indicates problems which have become typical of more recent Polish fiction. The growing loss of confidence in the integrity of fictional worlds encourages metafictional reflection, pastiche, collage (the latter is prominent in Leopold Buczkowski's novels) and, in a broader sense, the ontological instability of representation. This distinctly postmodern penchant (see MacHale, 1987, 1992) had haunted writers long before the existence of a Polish Postmodernism was contemplated in critical debates. The Polish national tradition, though, has tended to give the novel that is actually an anti-novel a privileged position. Irzykowski's *Patuba*, rediscovered in the postwar years, paved the way for the invasion of essayistic content and self-centred commentaries. The loose and complex structure of Miciński's fiction, continued and expanded by Witkacy, effected generic confusion and quasi-novelistic forms. Schulz undermined the idea of mimetic objectivity and commonly shared experience, in favour of a multifaceted world where genuine fantasy borders on banality and simulacra. Gombrowicz returned to the tradition of Rabelais and philosophical parables, questioned the traditional concept of human character, and in his novels and diaries alike blurred the borderline between fiction and reality, autobiography and literary fabrication. News of the French new novel, initially known as *anti-novel*, supported rather than determined the Polish internal tendency to disintegrate fiction. The position of being 'anti', it seems, was of foremost importance, for rather few writers and critics were actually familiar with the principles of the *nouveau roman*.

Wilhelm Mach's (1917–65) novel *Góry nad Czarnym Morzem* (Mountains on the Black Sea, 1961) was considered a major achievement in modern fiction at the time of publication, but this judgement was scaled down later. By undermining conventional story-telling, Mach simply reflected popular opinion that constructing plots and characters should be transcended by direct access to the author's genuine experience; this concerned his life and environment, and the very process of inventing fiction, which was openly exposed as something 'fabricated' and thus distinct from authentic existence. Modern relativism and the concomitant rejection of any 'objective' truth, based on universal principles, makes an essential part of Mach's commentary, but hardly affects the story itself. The author complains about the antagonistic discrepancy between life and fiction, real events, which have inspired his narrative, and their selective, causal representation, but he comes to terms with the notion that 'invention is the only accessible form of truth' (1961, 244), and offers an intrinsically traditional narrative, where only the chronology is reversed. The strategy of searching for the truth about the main character actually reveals little, since the reader receives all the necessary clues at the very beginning. The suggested authenticity of the author's record of his creative effort, supported by the personal recollection of relevant facts and supplemented by reflection on the literary craft, together with a game played with his *alter ego*, the narrator Aleksander, undermine illusion and demonstratively lay bare novelistic tricks. The awareness that these rules actually refer to the obsolete forms of narrative never bothers the author, who remains for the most part ignorant of Modernist ways. Consequently, he ends up with a distrust in the novelistic form as such, like Irzykowski.

A similar disintegration of story-line by non-fictional discourse is visible in Jerzy Andrzejewski's last full-length novel, *Miazga* (Pulp, 1979).¹ Some critics regarded the work as 'a novel about the impossibility of writing the novel' (Zaworska, 1992 [1982], 122), or — in other words — as a denial of the novelistic form (Burek, 1994, 176–7), a tendency popularly regarded in Poland as the unavoidable fate of the genre in modern times; therefore *Miazga* was considered a sophisticated response to the *status quo*. In addition to this reading of *Miazga* there was an inclination to link its 'pulpiness' with the political turmoil and moral anxiety in the aftermath of the civil unrest in March 1968 and the oppression that followed (e.g. Burek, 1987 [1980], 210–11). Against that background, the sober assessment of *Miazga*'s 'self-awareness' by Teresa Walas (1984) makes for an exception. It seems fairly certain nowadays

¹ This novel had serious problems with censorship in Communist Poland. Some fragments had been published in *Twórczość* as early as 1966, but the complete text was eventually rejected on political grounds in 1972. It was released by an underground publisher in Poland (1979) and later in London (1981). A state publisher (PIW) printed the novel in 1982. All this affected the final version of *Miazga*, its form and message (see Burek, 1987, 201–5).

that Andrzejewski (like Mach before him) was adversely affected by a discrepancy between his instinctive narrative talent and an imposed metafictional bias, which at the time of publication had, anyway, lost its innovative thrust, and had become almost the mandatory form of 'writerly' fiction, dominating literary opinion and reaching down to better-educated sixth-formers. Walas writes as follows:

For a long time undermining fiction has not impressed anyone much, and killing the novel is no longer a breathtaking spectacle. The critics have realized all that, and now, with a cool professionalism, they are watching the agony of the novel and the suffering of the artist whose narrative form immediately disintegrates. If any scream is occasionally heard, it comes from a reader still attached to the traditional 'mimetic mode'. The self-reflective mechanism of the novel has obviously advanced from defamiliarization towards purely automatic activity. (1984, 233).

Andrzejewski's metafictional consciousness reaches deeper than Mach's somewhat cosmetic endeavours, as it certainly proceeds further than metafictional commentary and disrupted plot. Nevertheless, his direct statements, included in the author's authentic diary that alternates with the story-line, constitute the most advanced form of this sceptical mood. Moreover, they are given a distinctly personal colour, when he attempts to disclaim his former search for order, which he had once found in the socialist world-view (see Trznadel, 1986, 76):

For quite a few years I have not even been longing for order. Some old aspirations are certainly still with me [...], but neither within my own self nor in the world can I spot the slightest vestiges of a structure which would allow me to believe that it is permeated and shaped by an order accessible to comprehension. The older I get, the less I know and understand; instead I am surrounded more and more by questions to which I can find no answers. (Andrzejewski, 1992 [1979], 141).

And with a direct reference to the Polish political situation:

[...] Literature demonstrates a certain singular tendency to create and duplicate not only authentic existence, but also its pattern. In the literature developing in totalitarian states such a model of life must be restricted to unimportant facts, resembling, in a sense, a chronicle of accidents or a book of suggestions and complaints. Apart from this, when an all-embracing form has been eventually fashioned, why not exploit its beneficial shapelessness? This is supposedly a pulp. (ibid., 237).

Miazga is not an anti-novel, as some critics claim (e.g. Zaworska, 1992), and Walas is right that experiments with grammar, which undoubtedly follow modern French fiction, hardly subvert the fabric of traditional story-telling or the construction of vivid characters whose existence is still rooted in customary biographies (Walas, 1984, 241–2). The novel contains events which might have happened and those that 'really' take place, embraces fiction and documentation, which apart from the author's diary includes quotation (a letter, an essay, and so on). Future and

conditional clauses appear alongside present-tense clauses to emphasize distinctions between the 'actual' course of action and its 'possible' alternative. Andrzejewski tries hard to espouse the metafictional cause, but paradoxically achieves his best results as a traditional raconteur.

II

Teodor Parnicki's narrative art underwent substantial evolution some time after the publication of *Srebrne orły*. The publication of *Słowo i ciało* (The Word and the Flesh) in 1959 (written 1953–8) was a watershed in his artistic development. This epistolary novel, most appreciated by the author himself (Parnicki, 1974, 151), is regarded by critics as a work of fiction where the very process of creating characters and events in language becomes one of the main objectives of narration (Czermińska, 1972, 47). There is a much earlier precedent, however, which indicates that, from the beginning, Parnicki has been considering the inadequacy of mimetic representation in the historical novel. One of his first narratives, *Hrabia Julian i król Roderyk* (Count Julian and King Roderyk, written 1934, published 1976) demonstrates an awareness of the relativity of historical facts, unusual for the times. This awareness, in the author's own words, acts as 'the fifth column', disintegrating the novel from inside (Parnicki, 1974, 81–5). Whether this metafictional current in Parnicki's art produces interesting results, or whether it proves once again that portraying the crisis of the novel is often nothing more than a modern response to the genuine inability to create art that bedevils certain writers (see Walas, 1984, 233), needs closer examination. Two works, chosen from Parnicki's abundant literary output after 1960, seem to illustrate the role of constructive and destructive forces in his uneven writing.

Tylko Beatrycze (Only Beatrice, 1962) represents Parnicki at his best and it certainly belongs among the most accomplished Polish novels since World War II.² Like *Srebrne orły*, it expands its initial location, medieval Poland, into a much broader European setting, but the main purpose of this new work of fiction is characteristically different. One of its first commentators, Andrzej Kijowski, described its innovative mode as follows:

Tylko Beatrycze is not a novel. The reader will not find here a single phrase of the author's report. Nothing goes on, as everything has already happened. Besides, nobody knows what has really occurred. The course of events becomes the subject of investigation and grows in the course of this inquiry. Hence it has an affinity with the detective novel. (1964, 172).

² Unfortunately this novel has not been translated into English. Its content and the author, however, have been recently described by Drozdowski (1994).

And finally:

Parnicki's novel is a labyrinth. A labyrinth of plot, for in his design everything that occurs has to be complex and obscure, uncertain and impossible to grasp. [...]

Without doubt, I am much impressed by this work, which I cannot master [...]. Difficult and exhausting as it is, it intrigues and fascinates, not allowing one to rest, and such a physical impact on the reader reminds one of a labyrinth once more. (ibid., 178–9).

The story centres on the role played by the protagonist, Stanisław, in the massacre of Cistercian monks who were burnt alive by their rebelling serfs, and in the assassination of King Przemysław II in Rogoźno; this second event was circumstantially related to his first encounter with his 'Beatrycze' (an allusion to the Dante's Beatrice), who is allegedly a young Polish princess. Parnicki's fundamental tendency to prefer characters' speech to authorial narration reaches its climax here, as, apart from a few strictly 'editorial' explanations, the novel consists only of dialogues, interior dialogues, quoted 'documents', their amendments and the revisions of these amendments. Everything is challenged, counterbalanced, corrected or amplified, inviting analogies with Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in the novels of Dostoevsky (see Chojnacki, 1975, 183).³ It is not, however, a collision of attitudes or perspectives that eventually results in the complex but still homogenous representation of reality. Parnicki's spiral motion of endless construction, deconstruction, re-construction and re-deconstruction defies any conclusion, apart from a sceptical realization that history can be portrayed only in a vague and inconsistent form. Hence the postmodern plurality of worlds (MacHale, 1987) finds a rather early supporter here.

This strategy of gradual discovery typical of detective stories and, indeed, of focalized narratives of Henry James' parentage, including *Srebrne orły*, undergoes an essential transformation in *Tylko Beatrycze*, which finishes with the total deconstruction of its main goal, the establishment of truth. In this novel nothing seems certain, even the identity of the protagonist and his ancestry. We are only convinced of his illegitimate descent and mixed parentage (Polish/Jewish? Polish/Tatar? Polish/Scandinavian?); Parnicki chooses characters of mixed nationality or race in many works. The identity of the Beatrycze of the title is equally enigmatic: Princess Ryksa, eventually the Queen of Poland and Bohemia? Joanna, her friend and companion? A subconscious representation of the hero's mother? One also remains doubtful of whether Stanisław really was responsible for the massacre of the Cistercian monks, including perhaps (?) his presumed father. One is also

³ Dialogic narrative, Dostoevsky's style, embraces the protagonists' inner struggles, including an interesting concept of reversed roles, where the characters play each other (e.g., Stanisław acts his adversary, Erling, and vice versa) and thus intensify the dialectical thinking by acting as devil's advocates.

perplexed by the circumstances of his first encounter with 'Beatrice' in Rogoźno, where, instead of his princess and her entourage, he might have met a group of peasant children. Father Giraldu, one of Stanisław's interrogators at the papal court, observes that finding the truth is only possible within the narrow limits of comprehension granted to the heirs of 'Adam's sin' (Parnicki, 1973 [1962], 221). Instead of one, homogenous world, we approach Foucault's heterotopia, which he describes in *Les Mots et les choses* as follows:

There is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous* [...]. I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclitite* [...]. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance. (after McHale, 1987, 44).

Stanisław, whose report is continuously contested and modified by the pope and other investigators, defends himself in a somewhat 'postmodern' way, by quoting a Scottish master, who read a lecture at Cologne:

Poetry differs from history by its form, not because one narrative is closer to historical truth than the other [...]. Whoever makes such a definite distinction has to prove first beyond any doubt that contrary to the poet, the author of a work, which you, my present antagonists, tend to call unquestionably historical, demonstrates more concern for historical veracity than the poet. (ibid., 206).

In his direct statements Parnicki cast doubts on the reliability of historiography and points out that recent research had contradicted documentary sources which once served him for the portrayal of Abbot Aron in *Srebrne orły*, while common versions of famous events (for example the execution of Joan of Arc) had become controversial over the course of time (1974, 131, 185). Parnicki seems to believe that both historiography and poetry are ruled by selection, predetermined by ideas standing behind the writing which override real things. In the case of Stanisław's 'Beatrice' and her identification as a Polish princess, the poetic mind of the protagonist, it is suggested, may have adjusted reality to his expectations, that is to his preconceived notion of refined beauty, inspired by the 'patrician' shape of his mother's feet. Parnicki illustrates the role of necessity, represented by restrictive patterns chosen beforehand, in what is regarded as freedom of decision (see Parnicki, 1973 [1962], 237, 273–4). A certain idea of love imposes itself upon people's minds and, as is pointed out in a dispute between Stanisław and the Pope, both Dante in *The Divine Comedy* and the hero of Parnicki's novel actually fall in love with their own images of love (ibid., 266–7). It is well known that the concept of 'false consciousness' plays a major role in modern thought and literature (see Harland, 1987, 59–64). Parnicki

also indicates that language, whether conceptual or poetic, must always simplify reality, as it labels things which are 'ephemeral, incommensurable, indeterminate' (1973 [1962], 243). Indeed, he actually believes in a contemporary formula that 'no use of language matches reality but that all uses of language are interpretations of reality' (Fish, 1980, 243).

There is a passage in *Tylko Beatrycze* where Alexander the Great, looking for the grave of Achilles to verify the authenticity of his existence, is compared with Homer, who would not have any need for such an investigation, since the hard evidence had been delivered by his own poetry (1973 [1962], 261). Małgorzata Czermińska, one of Parnicki's most incisive analysts, pointed out the demiurgic ambitions that he revealed in the six-volume cycle *Nowa baśń* (A New Fairy Tale, 1962–70) and other later novels (Czermińska, 1972, 101–5). This may be so, but all his faith in the power of poetic creativity notwithstanding, Parnicki eventually became a great destroyer of story-telling and prose fiction as such. A tribute paid to the artistic potential of poetry in *Tylko Beatrycze* does not alter the fact that this novel is a masterpiece of deconstruction, where everything is cleverly contradicted, made relative and vague. One has good reason to consider whether it is a work of fiction about the power of imagination or rather about its futility, whereby its products are neither original nor sustainable. In that sense Parnicki would be following the path of scepticism in demiurgic forces, espoused in their convoluted manner by Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz. Stanisław, whose Beatrice might have been a peasant girl and remains enigmatic till the very end, resembles Don Quixote's faith in Dulcinea, but he is eventually made a tax collector by the Pope, thus becoming a Sancho Panza of the practical world, forbidden to enter the 'magic circle' of poetry again. The fact that this new role gives him real power makes for an ironic punch line.

An ever greater fluidity and shapelessness marks Parnicki's later works, up to the point where they turn into an unrestrained flood of words whose main function is to emphasize the impossibility of writing a novel, of composing any stable imaginative structure. Parnicki called such forms of fiction 'historico-fantastical novels' (*powieść historyczno-fantastyczna*) and justified their origin in a loss of faith in the 'reliability of the historical message' (1974, 11). He claimed that movement itself gave him more satisfaction than aiming at any definite goal, and that his novels demonstrated more the joy of writing than the joy of completion (*ibid.*, 13). They represent a progression of his penetrating dialectic, which has always been at the core of his achievement. He regarded himself, after all, as a serious and demanding writer whose narrative talent had never managed to catch up with his intellectual compulsion (*ibid.*, 201).

Muza dalekich podróży (The Muse of Faraway Journeys, 1970) demonstrates the disputable value of the final stage in Parnicki's

historical writing. At a time when a disbelief in the viability of storytelling was *de rigueur* in Polish academic circles and often declared by writers themselves, his direct statements oscillate between the fashionable total rejection of fiction and a sense of failing to modernize its form. In his lectures at the University of Warsaw (1972–3) Parnicki complained that having known the ways to save the historical novel, he had still failed to succeed for personal reasons (Parnicki, 1974, 187). Yet in *Muza dalekich podróży* he seems to have rejected any desire for salvage. The novel's abundant metafictional content includes remarks about the engineer's son (one of the author's several roles in this work),⁴ who 'is fed up with writing historical novels' and prefers instead autobiography and family chronicles (1970, 281). Czerwińska exploits this in her description of Parnicki's later works as autobiographical mythopoeia or a family bible (1972, 97–101); she takes the latter from his own words in the epilogue to *Zabij Kleopatrze* (Kill Cleopatra, 1968). *Muza dalekich podróży*, with its 'frame breaking' presence of the author within the novelistic world, follows the lead of the contemporaneous *Palec zagrożenia* (Ominous Finger, 1970), the last part of *Nowa baśń*, where invented characters formally judge their creator. Moreover, in conformity with the earlier tradition, this is not a game played by the implied author, since the novel suggests an authentic or, at least, quasi-authentic presence of the real man, his father and family story. It is also, as we read, a continuation of Parnicki's previous novels (see p. 649), which with its many intertextual allusions enters the world of literature in the most general sense. As indicated in one of the novel's self-reflective remarks, five per cent of its content consists of quotations and over twenty per cent of paraphrases (*ibid.*, 532). A predominantly abstract content, which infrequently demonstrates more than the mere display of the author's eloquence, certainly defies the postmodern trend towards fabulation. Yet the novel approaches Postmodernism in many other ways.

In comparison with *Tylko Beatrycze*, *Muza dalekich podróży* speeds up the process of disintegration of fictional worlds. Everything here appears to be 'under erasure' and everything is openly manipulated by the author, whose protean plurality of roles, which he shares with the fictional characters who are also engaged in the construction of the story, confers a sophisticated character on his metaleptic presence. In this novel all demarcation lines are subverted and relativized. H.G. Wells's 'time machine' allows the characters to move freely back and forth and change their roles. Moreover, they occasionally switch their positions and 'play' each other, a device which contributes to the assumed strategy of reproducing indeterminate factors. Heterogeneity is at the core of their existence, as authentic or quasi-authentic heroes blend with the invented human beings, like 'superhumans' (the author's own term), personified ideas or things (the four figurative metals) or semi-allegories (Ochrolub).

⁴ Parnicki's father was indeed an engineer and, as such, was introduced into the novel, which relates various facts of Parnicki family life.

As a result, concrete relations between the 'master' and his 'disciple' actually refer to abstract links between the established poetics of the novel and the rebellious author of *Muza dalekich podróży*. The novel within that novel, entitled 'It might have happened this way' (*Mogło być tak właśnie*) and written by a certain Samon, characteristically portrays an alternative version of nineteenth-century Polish history; here the great writers of those days, Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Krasiński, play new 'parts'. Parnicki treats historical and fictional characters and events in the same fashion, exhibiting a more unequivocal postmodern conviction than in *Tylko Beatrycze* that everything is actually invented and that the poetic fantasy world, therefore, excels documentary records.

Parnicki's links with the 'academic' and distinctly elitist trend within Postmodernism remain beyond doubt. Is he luckier, though, in his metafictional impetus than other Polish champions of 'anti-novels'? *Tylko Beatrycze* constitutes a masterpiece of competing discourses that ingeniously deconstruct each other. The pattern developed in *Muza dalekich podróży*, however, despite many exciting and then innovative devices, is swamped by sheer verbosity. Even the stimulating notion of alternative history is simply sketched, unlike in Fuentes's somewhat later *Terra nostra* (1975). Parnicki has failed to match the compelling metafictional narratives of Fowles or Barth, whose tendency to emphasise fictitiousness is well-balanced by their skills as fabulators. He does not even equal the author who comes closest to him, Italo Calvino, whose 'book about books' — *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979) — demonstrates greater narrative inventiveness and, above all, narrative economy. Only the heritage of Irzykowski's equally rambling (but more intellectually inspiring) *Pałuba* explains the unique significance in the development of modern fiction lent to experiments of this kind by many critics in Poland (for example Łepkowska, 1991, 153–78; Uniłowski, 1991).

III

The retrospective structure of *Eroica* indicates Andrzej Kuśniewicz's fascination with the working and personal bias of memory, but, apart from a few escapades in the world of private imagination or hallucinatory visions, this novel still represents the inquiring mode of the point-of-view technique, whose main purpose is the establishment of hard facts. At least from *Strefy* (Zones, 1971) onwards, a marked interest in the remembrance of things past concentrates on the demiurgic rather than investigative power of recollection. *Stan nieważkości* (Weightlessness, 1973) and *Nawrócenie* (The Conversion, 1987) attempt to capture 'the presence of the past' and 'the untrue truth' of remembrance⁵ (Kuśniewicz, 1973, 19, 28); here the creativity of the imagination and the contents of the

⁵ Originally named in German: *die unwirkliche Wirklichkeit*.

experiencing mind overshadow 'objective reality' (see Hoelscher-Obermaier, 1988, 187–91). The author appears sceptical about the possibility of giving detached descriptions:

Our salvaged experience of the past has survived in a form which is completely altered, modified and distorted; it simply bears our name, nothing more. Everything else: the background, the framework, the alleged purpose, the subject of our cult or desire [...] dissipates and disappears, as Time trickles like the sands of Baltic dunes. I raise my hands and they are empty. There is nothing left. There has never been anything else, perhaps, but a helpless desire to awaken things and people who are only half real and of dubious existence. (1973, 293–4).

The crisis of the point-of-view technique in the later works of Kuśniewicz has a distinctive character. While the evolution of Parnicki's focalized narration advances from an investigation, which 'fills up the missing pages', towards the deconstruction of this 'abortive' effort and finally the total destruction of story-telling, the author of *Stan nieważkości* has found undoubted pleasure in the act of unobstructed fabulation. Diligent study of *Pismo* (The Scripture) by the first-person narrator of *Nawrócenie* (1987, 90) resembles Schulz's respect for *Księga* (The Book), but certainly reveals more faith in demiurgic powers. While in Schulz's fiction the creative potential of the imagination eventually becomes problematic at the times of domineering kitsch and simulacra, Kuśniewicz seems to believe that individual perception is capable of producing fictions stronger than truth. The artistic potential of modalities such as 'I see this' or 'I know that' guarantees the existence of autobiographical fantasies in *Stan nieważkości*, as if those phrases had a magic power. Entering the Berlin underground symbolically marks a submergence into the world of fiction, an enticing escape from reality:

I was entering an invented world; I purposely approached a state close to narcosis and prepared myself for a voyage, being both the helmsman and captain of a pirate brigantine, but also an observer living in a different era, having different eyes and different feelings, and aware that my will could turn the improbable into something obvious, and mendacity into a sacred dogma that identifies right with wrong and beauty with disgust. (1973, 162–3).

Kuśniewicz's narrative self-awareness clarifies and defends the vagaries of fabulation; that is the unrestrained character of his 'time machine', moving freely far beyond the life span of personal experience. He seems to enjoy telling stories and turning his family saga into myth more than he enjoys in the artificiality of the fictional world and its disintegration. When the recounted present remains within the limits of probability (for example the narrator's stay in a hospital in *Stan nieważkości*), the imaginary excursions into the past offer almost unrestricted possibilities of adventure, such as the fantastic escapades into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in *Stan nieważkości* or movements both in time (childhood) and space (the illusory and deliberately conventional

expedition to India) in *Nawrócenie*. The earlier novel explains the continual metamorphoses of the first-person narrator, who acts on behalf of the author, as a Faustian striving for rebirth; that is by reference to Kuśniewicz's typical topos, which is present in other novels as well (see Jarzębski, 1984, 227–74). The motif of *commedia dell'arte* in *Nawrócenie* indicates his efforts to transgress the canons of Realism and move into the region of free play. Thus Hoelscher-Obermaier's remark about Kuśniewicz's affinity with Romantic irony sounds convincing (1988, 215).

At the beginning of *Stan nieważkości* Kuśniewicz explains the symbolic weightlessness in the title as his old desire to forsake dull reality in favour of the 'surging waves' of elation, close to euphoria, hence conceived as 'a kind of absurd joy and gaiety, occurring to children who have managed to make a prank' (1973, 5). He even attempts, not very seriously perhaps, to make that state realistically possible by the initial situation of the narrator, who rests in hospital after heart failure and takes morphine (*ibid.*, 172–3). This narrator is to some extent merged with the author by dint of having the same name and date of birth, although he pretends to be uncertain about the latter's accuracy. All in all, everything in the novel appears undetermined, mutable and on the borderline between the 'real' and 'imagined'. The narrator moves back and forth in the 'time machine', constantly changing his roles. He turns into such characters as a reactionary 'Sarmatian' of eighteenth-century Poland or a naive, old-fashioned enthusiast for legends and magic healing, but also into a modern, sophisticated intellectual who plays the author. The hospital setting interferes with the process of 'recollection', thus linking all temporal levels. Besides, they belong to the same lyrical self, which integrates the syncretic contents of represented reality. The speaker's family myth, his longing for reincarnation and his puzzling obsession with his own sister, who is associated with Frau Renata, the German heroine of the events recalled, form the framework of the novel.

Nawrócenie, despite its apparent links with the author's own life, through the first-person recollections of his youth in a small Galician town, appears less concerned with family matters. Its main goal is 'to save from oblivion' the lost world of the local Jews (1987, 170).⁶ However, it is just another personal journey in the 'time machine', where the creative function of memory comes to the fore more than the mimetic. This is not only a matter of liberated dreaming and unattached fantasies, but also of the basic principle of remembrance; the past is 'summoned up' (*czas przywołany*) rather than truly recovered. Remembered books, in particular Hans H. Ewers's *Alraune*, blend with 'real' events, while the free play of *commedia dell'arte* allows the author to introduce characters into situations which he 'never witnessed' (*ibid.*, 102). Thus memory creates fiction:

⁶ Hoelscher-Obermaier compared this undertaking to Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (1988, 187).

By coming back I ostensibly regain my old skin. [...] I bend down, kneel, and attempt to try it on. So, I am becoming my old self a little, outwardly at least. I realise this not without melancholy when watching and touching the snake's parched, rustling slough like an empty sleeve. I have recognised it. This brief moment of illusion, despite its obvious fictitiousness, offers some rueful joy. (1987, 80).

Kuśniewicz's representation of reality has been compared with a palimpsest (Łepkowska, 1991, 142) and described as syncretic in its very foundations (Hoelscher-Obermaier, 1988). The author's assumption that 'our knowledge of life is illusive' (1973, 236) accounts for the equal status of things which allegedly happened, might have happened or were dreamt about. This gives his world an unstable, transient and multiple character, close in principle to the postmodern heterotopia, a reality which is in constant 'erasure'. The Modernist mechanism of free association largely abandons its realistic motivation and often works as a purely arbitrary link between the various planes of narrative. Kuśniewicz spells out the fact that there are two realities, actual and illusory, but we are unable to tell one from the other (*ibid.*, 46). As a result, he eventually escapes into an undisguised creativity, where 'saying a word' is tantamount to artistic fulfilment (*ibid.*, 47). His novelistic world clearly belongs to literature, as is suggested by various allusions and direct statements. It is ruled by the continuous mutability of the narrator and by the fluidity of the remembered past. The notion of the labyrinth, mentioned at the very end of *Nawrócenie*, encapsulates this situation perfectly well.

IV

The novels of Stanisław Lem (b. 1921) are more appreciated abroad than in his native country. Regarded abroad as an outstanding representative of science-fiction, he is affected by its rather low status in Poland, despite his vehement protests against what he regards as a false label and his biting criticism of science-fiction's popular form, particularly in American literature.⁷ Lem's impressive literary standing in Germany, Russia and many other European countries was later matched by translations of the majority of his novels into English (the first was *Solaris*, 1970) and official recognition, reflected in the Lem issue of *Science Fiction Studies* (Montreal, 1986, XIII, 3) and voiced by such critics and writers as Csicsery-Ronay, Scholes, Le Guin or Ziegfeld. In Ziegfeld's monograph we find the following assessment:

⁷ McHale asserts that ambitious contemporary writers are reluctant to acknowledge their links with science-fiction, because of its 'low-art stigma' (1987, 65).

In works such as *Solaris* Lem has demonstrated his ability to handle conventional plotting, but a sign of his literary courage is his unwillingness to settle for comfortable acclaim as a superb conventional story-teller. Lem passes up traditional plotting in order to search for the genuinely new form. His adventurous work in genre may well contribute to an international acknowledgement that Lem is one of the few masters in twentieth-century literature. (1985, 141).

In Christopher's Nash book on the postmodern rebellion against Realism, Lem is the only Polish writer given serious attention, in the company of Borges, Golding, Vonnegut, Barthelme, Pynchon and Calvino (1987, 54). This, Golding apart, avant-garde company suits Lem only to a certain extent. One must obviously treat his confessed defiance of all fashionable trends in contemporary fiction *cum grano salis* (see Bereś, 1987, 107), but Lem's well-argued disapproval of Structuralism in *Filozofia przypadku* (Philosophy of Chance, 1968) caused quite a stir in Polish intellectual circles, where this tendency had long been regarded as sacrosanct. His theoretical polemic with Tzvetan Todorov even reached America (for example Scholes, 1975).⁸ While in Poland any subversion of the Realist novel is almost automatically regarded as a remarkable achievement, Lem claims that 'throwing the reader off his traditional balance of naive realism and common sense does not guarantee in itself the value of such experiments' (Bereś, 1987, 72). As a result, he consistently censures the *nouveau roman* by contending that 'this is an entirely formal game, deprived of any informative value' and that Robbe-Grillet compensates for his lack of literary talent by tedious eccentricities (ibid., 73, 154–5). He even traces 'bad faith' in Robbe-Grillet's choice of sensational stories, which, in Lem's view, try to win over originally antagonistic readers (1975 [1968], I, 218–19). Censorious remarks about Beckett, Lowry, Musil, Philip Roth and William Burroughs confirm this position (Bereś, 1987, 145–54).

Lem, being an admirer of Dostoevsky, Conrad, Nabokov and Borges (with whom he is sometimes compared), is hardly a conservative traditionalist. His firm confidence that faith in 'objective ultimate truth' is baseless puts him on a par with the main twentieth-century trends, while his criticism of authorial omniscience resembles the Anglo-American form of Modernism in fiction. He maintains that the unequivocal storyline, guaranteed by the authority of the author, has been abandoned since the time of Dostoevsky and replaced by a 'polyphony of psychological type', where each character has an equal say to others and hence the final verdict is never pronounced (Bereś, 1987, 72–3). Lem points out that this ideal is implemented in his *Wizja lokalna* (Official On the Spot Hearing, 1982), which, as he says, demonstrates 'the complete horror of uncertainty' that results in a textual 'palimpsest', with multiple levels of meaning (ibid., 72, 82). Yet for Lem this is not the last possibility for

⁸ Lem's theoretical statements, translated into English and published in periodicals, are listed by Ziegfeld (1985, 166–8).

fiction, since he postulates 'the expansion of creative imagination into a sociological dimension' by making up a 'fantastic history' which is presented in a way analogous to that of standard textbooks (*ibid.*, 73). Brian McHale, who has singled out the 'ontological poetics' of science-fiction and demonstrated its links with Postmodernism, attests that in recent decades science-fiction novels have turned interest away from mere technology to its social and institutional consequences, to problems of much concern to all Postmodernists (1987, 59–72). Lem's work, it appears, exemplifies that movement at its best and, therefore, his refusal to be regarded simply as a science-fiction writer is understandable. If he enjoys fantasy, it demonstrates a modern breed of the art of fabulation. In *Cyberiada* (*Cyberiad*, 1965) he exploits the pure creativity of language to the extent that the book has been endorsed as 'one of the singular imaginative works of fiction in the twentieth century' ((Ziegfeld, 1985, 92).

Lem's commentary on the controversial marquise who 'left at five' brings to light, however, his impatience with story-telling as such. 'Damn the marquise, her house and five o'clock. One should tell only necessary things' he declared on one occasion (Bereś, 1987, 105). In some of his best novels, like *Solaris* (1961) or *Głos pana* (*His Master's Voice*, 1968), the story serves only as a pretext for philosophical essays (see Stoff, 1983, 149–50). Another force disrupting the coherence of storyline is related to Lem's favourite notion of chance, which (particularly in *Filozofia przypadku*) is also his main weapon against the habit of providing models in Structuralism and the *nouveau roman*. Some critics believe that the notion of 'open work' (see Eco, 1989 [1962]) is his principal characteristic (for example Stoff, 1983). Since Dostoevsky, questioning the teleological progress of the storyline has been an important trend in fiction, and its outspoken supporters have included Gide, Sartre and Eco. Lem's pseudo-thrillers undermine the basic principle of detective stories. The logic of the investigative process in *Sledztwo* (*The Investigation*, 1959) leads nowhere, remains inconclusive and suggests the existence of forces that are in principle inexplicable.⁹ *Katar* (*Catarrh*, 1976)¹⁰ has an explanatory conclusion based entirely on chance.

Doskonała próżnia (*A Perfect Vacuum*, 1971) and *Wielkość urojona* (*Imaginary Magnitude*, 1973) exemplify Lem's ultimate disillusion with 'scrupulous, routine and slow-moving story-telling' in favour of the parody and pastiche of various literary schools and styles (Bereś, 1987, 80). As collections of pseudo-reviews of non-existent books (the former work) or pseudo-introductions to them (the latter) they extend fictionality

⁹ None the less this demonstrates the relevance of Gombrowicz's view that anti-form always turns into another form. Andrzej Stoff's remark that *Śledztwo* simply exemplifies a theory which stands behind its structure is, therefore, not without foundation (1983, 112).

¹⁰ The title of one English translation is *The Chain of Chance*.

into the world of literary texts themselves, in the fashion of Borges and Rabelais. Lem's apparent attempt is to 'speak without speaking', 'because the only really consistent way for a writer to rise up against the service of literature is silence' (1991 [1971], 7, 116). Thus he comes out with a new suggestion, which condemns as futile the current ostensible attempts to reject the traditional service of literature by 'waxing unintelligible and tedious' (ibid., 114). Moreover, he points out that this attitude is not necessarily sincere. As earlier, in *Filozofia przypadku*, Lem accuses the *nouveau roman* of failing in its lofty ambitions and actually trying to seduce the reader. This time he considers not only the enticement of foul language and sensationalism, but also believes that amusement comes from the *nouveau roman* by default, through 'the very refusal to serve', which eventually serves itself and therefore becomes entertaining (ibid., 115–16). Contrary to Parnicki's bulky volumes of endless arguments that writing a novel is hardly possible nowadays (for example *Muza dalekich podróży*), Lem's relaxed, witty narrative considers similar problems in a much more attractive, even if not always fully consistent, manner.

Apart from recognizable pastiches of fashionable trends, *Doskonała próżnia* includes summaries of unwritten novels or academic works, which reflect Lem's concerns about the future of civilization. He pokes fun at the *nouveau roman*, as well as at the American obsession with sexuality, ridicules Joyce scholars and the inanity of mass culture. The convoluted position of the reviewer, who, while close to the author, is still not identical with the real-life Lem, allows him to discuss in the first chapter *Doskonała próżnia* itself, to quote the non-existent introduction to this book and to state playfully at the end 'that it was not I, the critic, but he himself, the author, who wrote the present review and added it to — and made it part of — *A Perfect Vacuum*' (ibid., 8). Apparently self-mockery, Gombrowicz's style accounts also for a parodic approach to his own beloved theory of chance in the pseudo-family saga of a fictitious Cezar Kouska ('De Impossibilitate Vitae').

Lem's comments about *Rien du tout, ou la conséquence*, a novel 'that not only does not exist but also cannot' (ibid., 4) seem to constitute the focus of his interest. While discussing the *nouveau roman*, he reflects on the dangers of the cul-de-sac of various avant-garde trends in contemporary fiction. 'Nothing or the Consequence' marks the final destination of the self-destructive trends, present in the anti-novel and in the most exhibitionist forms of self-conscious narratives: 'The self-novel is a partial striptease; the anti-novel, ipso facto, is (alas) a form of autocastration. [...It] has mutilated the unfortunate body of traditional literature. What then was left? Nothing except a romance with nothingness. For he who lies (and, as we know, a writer must lie) about *nothing* surely ceases to be a liar' (ibid., 71). Lem, who most respects the earlier, Rabelaisian period of Gombrowicz's narrative, believes that only by accepting play as a literary strategy can we put up with the thus

indispensable lies, since 'when it speaks the honest truth, literature ceases to be itself...' (ibid., 73).¹¹ Thus saying simply that 'the marquise didn't leave at five' is nothing more than a platitude. Tampering with personal pronouns, which in the wake of the *nouveau romanciers* has been elevated to the position of great literary innovation in Poland, is here regarded as equally pointless, for 'all one need do is turn the second person back into the first. It does no violence whatever to the book; in no way does it change it'. Therefore 'the nature of an innovation must be ontological, and not simply grammatical' (ibid., 74).

Doskonała próżnia is an uneasy and not fully convincing undertaking to liberate literature from a discourse that describes in detail the trivial story of the *invented* 'marquise', and which simultaneously recognizes her *existence*, since fictionalization has always been at the core of narration. Defying Barthes and his disciples, Lem believes that 'playing games' in literature is more of a creative act than the mere compilation of already existing components. The mechanical jigsaw puzzle of a 'literary erector set', whose pieces are borrowed from old novels and can be shuffled and recombined in a 'u-write-it'¹² manner, is just the buffoonery of mass culture that attempts to make money out of the theory of functions, espoused by the fashionable French narratology. Lem is certainly not a disciple of Barthes, whom he describes as a 'shallow intellect' (ibid. 71). His intertextual bias is not related to 'the death of the author', since he believes that 'literature is first of all creation' (1992 [1968], 151). Nash's claim that Lem comes close to the rejection of referentiality (1987, 231, 244) represents postmodern thinking and is overstretched, since Lem plainly declares that telling nothing 'will never work in language' (1991 [1971], 70). He emphasizes, however, the importance of role-playing and the fact that borrowed notions overtake real things. The story of *Gruppenführer* Siegfried Taudlitz and his SS-men, playing the court of Louis XVI in an Argentinian wilderness, portrays the world of simulation in its purest form. Lem is a Postmodernist in his awareness of the artificiality of things and in his conviction that fabulation is the only way out at times of crisis in mimetic representation. In *Doskonała próżnia*, however, he apparently evades story-telling and presents summaries instead of any fully developed narratives, but while others turn fiction into the essay, Lem has paradoxically converted essayistic discourse into fiction.

V

Postmodern plurality of representation constitutes the form of Tadeusz Konwicki's novels and accounts for their complex world of multiple

¹¹ This opinion resembles Oscar Wilde's view in 'The Decay of Lying' (*Intentions*, 1891).

¹² This phrase is used in the English translation of *Doskonała próżnia* (*A Perfect Vacuum*, London, 1979).

components and blurred shapes. His particular predilection for obscuring the line dividing fiction from reality and thus making the invented barely distinguishable from the autobiographical has been discussed in the context of the variety of modern approaches to documentation (chapter IX). He also, however, blends various styles and poetics (realistic, fantastic, oneiric and so forth), destabilizing his novelistic world to the point where it approaches Foucault's heterotopia. In Konwicki's works, dreams and nightmares fuse with 'real' things, various temporal planes overlap, and diversified styles accumulate into a compound pastiche of many schools; this almost deprives the author of his own language. Such a tendency begins in *Rojsty* (Marshes; written 1948, published 1956) (see Janion, 1991, 154ff), but plays its most significant role in his later novels. Sometimes it results in nothing more than a cacophony, where the borderline between an ostensible parody or pastiche and the real voice of the author is hardly discernible. Sometimes, however, it brings about an accomplished polyphony of styles, one of the most remarkable in present Polish fiction. *Zwierzoczekoupiór* (The Anthropos-Spectre-Beast, 1969)¹³ and *Bohiń* (1987) represent Konwicki's heterotopia at its best.

Zwierzoczekoupiór exemplifies the author's manifest drive to rediscover the world, either by depicting the recovery from amnesia, as in *Wniebowstąpienie* (Ascension, 1967), or by presenting a child's eye view, as in this novel (see Barańczak, 1979, 249–50; Zaworska, 1973, 178). The novel also illustrates the composite structure of his works of fiction, where, as the writer claims, such 'readerly' genres as soap opera and adventure coexist with an ambiguous message, which invites many interpretations (see Taranienko, 1986, 258–9). Konwicki states at the very beginning of *Zwierzoczekoupiór* that this apparent fairy-tale is in fact addressed to 'naughty children', who will find there 'many useful ideas and worthy examples' (1992 [1969], 5). As has been noted long ago (for example Zaworska, 1973, 178), the book rises above naive stories, because, beyond the simple narrative about boys and girls, it penetrates the world of the subconscious and manifests a sophisticated approach to prose fiction. The novel's triple reality embraces realistic scenes of family life in a Warsaw tenant block, a dream-like story about an enchanted valley, where a pretty girl is enslaved by a bad boy, and a science-fiction film, in which the main character of the novel plays a leading role. These three worlds both overlap and oppose each other and, at the very end, the author suggests two possible resolutions of the main plot, one optimistic and the other pessimistic. The relativism of values is reflected in the very concept of Piotr, the protagonist. He is not always a plain Jekyll-versus-Hyde antithesis to his evil counterpart, Troip (Peter/Retep in the English translation), who has an important role in the novel as well. In the science-fiction film, Piotr, indeed, plays a Troip-like character, thus foregrounding the fluidity of any demarcation. Konwicki's

¹³ English translation by George and Andrzej Korwin-Rodziszewski: *The Anthropos-Spectre-Beast*, Oxford, 1977.

narrative strategy exploits the exchange of roles in a manner similar to Parnicki. Besides, we learn in the final episode that the three story-lines, realist or fantastic, are in fact invented by the narrator, who is trying to forget his forthcoming death from leukaemia. Like Witkacy in *Pozegnanie jesieni*, Konwicki suggests that in the world of simulation, role-playing and pastiche, nothing is truly authentic except personal demise.

The plurality of representation also hallmarks *Bohiń*, whose syncretic narrative imitates diverse forms of fiction. Ostensibly a traditional village love-story, it begins like any old-fashioned tale and deliberately employs antiquated descriptions of people and their environment. The narrator emphasizes their ordinary character and thus seems aware of the inevitability of clichés in fiction. But while complaining of his submergence into the 'mire of banality', he oversteps the limits of traditional teleological plots by declaring that the unfolding story of his grandmother's love-affair moves towards a dénouement which is still unknown (1987, 128). In reality, the final episodes are not out of step with the logic of the action, but their pattern runs counter to the common stereotype of similar developments. The 'seduced' girl, Helena ('the author's grandmother'), her rejected betrothed, who has obvious homosexual preferences, her confused father, and the extraordinary Jewish lover, fall short of their stock image, which had been well established in Polish literature, beginning with nineteenth-century novels of manners. The lovers are evidently actors ruled by Gombrowicz's form and by Roland Barthes's principle that the 'inner thing' is nothing more than 'a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words' (Barthes, 1990 [1968], 231). Accordingly Eliaz, Helena's admirer, speaks and behaves like a conventional romantic lover, and is subsequently reduced to his literary role, as is for somewhat different reasons Helena herself (examples in Eile, 1991, 540–1). The notion of the fatal power of libido, which accounts for the climax of their affair, is borrowed from the Young Poland period and, in particular, from Przybyszewski; thus the whole affair is turned into some literary theatre.

The variety of literary discourses which interweave in the text of *Bohiń* includes the fairy tale and symbolic fantasy, which border on Romantic ballads and their modern, philosophical versions, represented in Polish literature by Bolesław Leśmian. McHale claims that, in Postmodernism, the fantastic 'problematizes'¹⁴ representation either by encroaching upon our world, or by being penetrated by it (1987, 75). Konwicki takes advantage of both possibilities, but prefers the former, where the astonishing is indistinguishable from the real. An extraordinary sound coming from the universe belongs to everyday events, and nobody

14 The verb 'to problematize' is often used by postmodern critics. It is understood to mean raising questions about ('rendering problematic') 'the common-sensical and the "natural"'. 'It never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited)' (Hutcheon, 1988, xi).

wonders that Konstanty, a coachman, is 182 years old. Awesome Schickelgruber seems to belong, like folkish ghosts, to another reality, but by bearing the name of Hitler's mother he playfully blends fairy-tales with historical future. Dreams and visions and legendary and historical characters meet together and enjoy the same, opaque status of semi-existence, where a superintendent of the Russian police bears Stalin's original name, Dzhugashvili, and where a character named Pushkin has an ambiguous identity, that of the author of *Eugene Onegin* and that of his son, who was actually living at the time of the events represented. The symptomatic 'spatialization of time' (see Harvey, 1989, 237) ends as an image of petrified and immobilized history, which blends past, present and future in a closed world of defunct forms, solitude and impending catastrophe. And only the biblical fear of punishment seems authentic in this realm of literature. By demonstrating the futility of artistic creation, *Bohiń* adds one more voice to the postmodern chorus that 'all the books [we] read are leading to a single book' (Calvino, 1982 [1979], 202).

VI

Paweł Huelle (b. 1957) is much younger than the writers discussed earlier, but paradoxically does not belong to any recognized avant-garde. In a country where ostentatious avant-gardism has been 'the big thing' for many years, his works, which neither exploit language games nor manifest a metafictional bias, are usually frowned upon by smug 'experimental' authors (see Kot, 1992). It appears that critics still prefer 'writerly' novels which are addressed to tiny groups of admirers, and therefore the unrestricted admiration of Jerzy Łukosz (1994) for the often barely-readable Leopold Buczkowski comes as no surprise. Huelle's first novel, *Weiser Dawidek* (1987), was nonetheless a literary success, both in Poland (Błoński, 1987) and abroad. The mainly political bias of the Western reviews (the novel was translated to English, French, German and Italian) reflected the then standard attitude towards East European literatures, but analogies with 'magic realism' were drawn as well (see js/aw, 1991). Correspondingly, in Poland some critics discover in the misleadingly-traditional Realism of Huelle's fiction an initiation into mythology and into an 'invisible' zone of spiritual experience (for example Libera, 1991; Fiut, 1993). One is tempted to believe that, while *Weiser Dawidek* was still in the shadow of Günter Grass who also describes the city of Gdańsk, in *Opowiadania na czas przeprowadzki* (Tales for the Times of Removal, 1991),¹⁵ the author gains his own voice.

When the telling of stories has become almost disreputable in Poland, Huelle still exploits the possibility of the enrichment rather than the destruction of novelistic worlds. He overcomes the much-trumpeted idea of the demise of the novel in the refined era of scepticism. When the

¹⁵ Translated into English by A. Lloyd-Jones as *Moving House and other stories* (London, 1994).

evolution of the twentieth-century novel is regarded as equivalent to its transformation into contemplative and self-reflective essays or arcane experiments in language, Huelle recounts events and portrays characters, that is, he follows what is commonly considered most essential in the novel. He also, however, transforms the customary into the unusual and, like Schulz, discovers marvels in ordinary events. The narrator, a child who gradually grows into a young man, guarantees an 'educational' character for the experience portrayed and accounts for its tentative, undefined form of representation. The narrator initially looks for certainties, for simple yes or no answers, but is soon guided by his father's Shakespearean advice that 'there are things not even dreamt of, which transgress our imagination, and which most certainly exist, yet beyond our understanding' (1991, 34).

Dreams, myths or poetic marvels intrude on conventional surroundings, and link the familiar with the unfamiliar, thus rendering both problematic.¹⁶ The very titles of Huelle's short stories foreground the mundane nature of reality: 'The Table', 'Snails, Puddles, Rain', 'Uncle Henry' and so forth. As a result, a 'higher' reality may emerge naturally through conventional associations, sparked off by tangible objects as in the stream-of-consciousness novel. The table reminds one of its previous owner, and consequently retrieves the past, like old photographs in other stories. But Huelle goes much further and either defamiliarizes ordinary things by discovering their mysterious character, or enters the realms of dream and hallucination, whose representational 'tangibility' questions conventional notions of the real. In the first case, the simple adjusting of the legs of the family table turns into a bewildering struggle with resistant matter, apparently Kafkaesque in its absurd futility. Despite the fact that his world never enters the realm of metamorphosis and never contains, like that of Schulz, any significant deformation of reality, by opening vistas towards the unexpected, Huelle complicates and multiplies his image of reality. This tendency accounts for the narrator's fascination with the strangeness of surrounding things, which gives rise to such descriptions as that of the secret world of snails. It also gives rise to the symbolic transformations of common objects (an entrance to municipal sewers turned into the gate to Hades), located against the drab background of rain, puddles and children's games.

There is only one step from 'estranged'¹⁷ to alternative reality and thus to postmodern heterotopia. In comparison with Konwicki, Huelle is rather cautious in introducing things which are openly unearthly or fabulous. The enigmatic grandfather, who has built at home a submarine ('In Dublin's Fair City'), belongs to the world of technological ventures and does not defy the fundamental laws of probability. The mythopoeic fantasies of 'Mina' verge on the supernatural (an encounter with an

¹⁶ See footnote 14.

¹⁷ This term follows Victor Shklovsky's use of the Russian word *ostranenie*, that is, 'making strange'.

angel), but result from insanity and hence the 'alternative zone' does not possess firm foundations. In *Wuj Henryk* (Uncle Henry), however, a realistic frame contains a story which could be regarded as pure hallucination had not one of its particulars, a stopwatch, been transferred into the common reality of two skiers who have lost their way in a snowstorm. The resultant uncertainty of representation, whether convincing or not in this particular context, may pave the way for a Polish form of 'magic realism', where, in a distinctly postmodern manner, everything oscillates between the factual and the imaginary. Paweł Huelle, whose first novel was published in 1987, is still at an early stage of his literary career. His future success may save narrative art from the futility symptomatic of many contemporary works of fiction in Poland.

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