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## The Happy Hour: Polish Painting Around 1900

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In recent years the two largest national museums in Poland, the Warsaw and the Cracow divisions, have made new galleries of Polish painting accessible to the public.<sup>1</sup> In both cases the exhibitions which have been arranged – apart from meeting all the usual requirements of a museum's historical form of presentation – clearly suggest a specific interpretation of the history of Polish painting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their different approaches and concepts; their different hierarchies, accentuations and distribution of emphasis; a different choice of main characters, local and environmental features; and finally a totally different museum space accorded the two exhibitions – all this makes the two new exhibitions which have lately been unfolded before us two different panoramas of modern Polish painting calling for comparison and confrontation. Alongside all the differences, which it would no doubt be extremely interesting to compare and contrast, both galleries share a common feature: a decided culmination marking the painting around the turn of the century as the definitive high-point.<sup>2</sup>

This is the overwhelming impression the visitor to the museum rooms of both exhibitions gets in spite of the diverse selections and configurations achieved. In the Warsaw exposition what has been made paramount is a division into the public and the private space. Thus Malczewski is presented in an open, spacious room typical of gallery display, while Wyspiański has been locked away and isolated off in his sapphire workshop. Nothing disturbs the intimacy of Boznańska's silver-and-grey atelier; and Wojtkiewicz, too, is left in a little room of his own, like a prematurely aged child. The otherwise rather unfortunate spatial arrangement of the Warsaw museum

<sup>1</sup> Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie [National Museum, Cracow], Galeria Sztuki Polskiej XX wieku [Polish 20th-Century Art Gallery]; inaugurated 1991. Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie [National Museum, Warsaw], Galeria Malarstwa Polskiego [Polish Painting Gallery]; inaugurated 1992.

<sup>2</sup> The purely chronologically definition appears to be the safest in view of the problems over terminology used to refer to this period. Cf. W. Juszczak, "Modernism – Expressionism – Symbolism", in: *Symbolism in Poland. Collected Essays*, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit 1984, pp. 7–10.

has one advantage: it prevents the marshalling of the pictures into a unilinear continuous path of development. The 'visitors' route' imposed by museum conditions, which marks out the simplest and also the most categorical way of delineating the historical course in the development of art, is twisted and topsy-turvy here: you have to keep going back to things you have already seen, you have to keep making diversions and detours. But this apparently circuitous approach helps to tell this history of art in a fuller way, with all of its turbulence, its backlashes and its repetitiveness. Notwithstanding this multiformity and structural variegation, however, the art of the turn of the centuries still emerges as the pre-dominant feature, casting a shadow both over what precedes it as well as what comes after it.

The Cracovian gallery evokes exactly the same impression, albeit in an entirely different manner, resulting partly also from the different time limits chosen for this exposition. Here Polish painting around 1900 initiates a chronological continuum brought up to the present day. But there is nothing that may be compared with the dazzling room in which the cartoons for Wyspiański's stained-glass for Wawel Hill have been placed opposite the glass expanse of the windows, flanked by Wojtkiewicz and Mehoffer. This room, reached through a succession of arrays displaying the pictures of Malczewski, through a labyrinth of screens affording sanctuary to the landscapes of Stanisławski, is as it were the full and profound peal of harmony, after which all else seems attenuated, flat, and pallid. This dampening effect may also be observed in the Warsaw exposition, which has very recently been extended to include the Polish painting of the interwar period (1918–39), and of the 1940's.

Thus, though they accomplish it in different ways, both galleries show the art of the turn of the centuries as the richest and fullest period in Polish art. We see it pulsating with life and full of emotion; we feel its multivocal temper thanks to the many powerful artistic individualities flourishing in it; yet at the same time we see its distinct though intuitively sensed unity. This revelation is not the reflection of an established, canonical hierarchy. The paintings themselves impose the hierarchy. They are like 'fulgurations' in the continuous illumination that is the development of Polish art.

The history of art has for long been accused of being apologetic, of being a history of the masterpieces, of failing to register the extensive areas of art which are not contained within its criteria and current standards.<sup>3</sup> For it is paradoxical that the history of art appears to entail far more reflection on the "reasons for a decline in taste" than for the phenomenon of growth and flourishing. "It is impossible to establish the causes of the favourable and sudden 'fulgurations', the rapid phenomena marking the emergence of a new style and expression. The nature, rhythm, and causes both of the general and of the individual 'fulgurations' in art remain one of the mysteries of the creative process,"<sup>4</sup> said Jan Białostocki at the Castel Gandolfo meeting on the

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Poprzęcka, "Kryzys 'wielkiego artysty'." [The Crisis of the 'Great Artist'], *Przegląd Powszechny* (1986), p. 71; idem, "Jak mówić źle o sztuce?" [How to Speak Ill of Art], in: *Sztuka i wartość. Materiały XI Seminarium Metodologicznego Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki* [Art and Value. Materials of the 11th Methodological Seminar of the Polish Association of Art Historians], Warszawa 1988, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> J. Białostocki, "Kryzysy w sztuce" [Crises in Art], in: *Kryzysy w sztuce. Materiały Sesji*

subject of crises. The well-nigh decade that has elapsed has in no way altered this situation. The question why at a particular moment art suddenly begins to grow and flourish is still an interpretative challenge. The present essay is not an endeavour to show the causes (especially the inner causes) which made Polish art experience its 'happy hour' around 1900. Rather it will be an attempt to rationalise the experiences and feelings sensed through direct contact with this art.

Undeniably, *moderna* – *Modernity*, *Art Nouveau*, *Jugendstil* – as no other period before, ostentatiously manifested its youth. An age's awareness of its novelty and of the otherness of its own times is nothing new in the history of art, which has had numerous 'modernisms'.<sup>5</sup> The novelty at the time was the making of youth serve as its main idea, for the self-determination not so much of a generation as of an artistic formation. There are patently few other words which can match the intensity of approval contained in the word 'new', or – all the more so – in 'youth', with its compelling aura of biological vitality. So this art, which perceived itself as 'young', dictated not only a name for itself to its contemporaries and to future generations, but also a means of assessment: the whole gamut of values associated with the concept of 'youth'. To what extent did it succeed in making this imposition permanent? The generations immediately following this period were quite distinct from the *Młoda Polska* ('Young Poland', *Art Nouveau*) tradition, disassociating themselves in a variety of ways depending on their exact artistic orientation. They did not consider themselves either its inheritors or its continuers. The most brusque expression of this rejection may be found in the *Avant-Garde*.<sup>6</sup> But the history of art, in its analysis from an increasingly retrospective distance, appears to have shared the views of the *Art Nouveau* regarding its own 'youthfulness' and the 'importance of the epoch'.<sup>7</sup> A reversal of this perspective is presented in Wiesław Juszczak's *Modernizm*, which shows the remarkably autumnal qualities of this 'spring', pointing out that for all its exaltation over youth, "Polish Modernism was an integral part of the receding age, a close to the nineteenth century... as it were in one swoop the recapitulation of the chief trends in nineteenth-century culture, and a summing up of the layers of a relatively near but sufficiently long and

*Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki* [Crises in Art. Materials of the Conference of Polish Art Historians], Warszawa 1988, p. 24. The term 'fulguration' as applied to art has been discussed by M. Porębski, "Ubi leones", in: *Przed Wielkim Jutrem. Sztuka 1905–1918. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki* [On the Eve of the Great Tomorrow. Art 1905–1918. Materials of the Conference of the Polish Association of Art Historians], Warszawa 1993.

<sup>5</sup> For an introductory outline of the concept of 'novelty' as a permanent constituent in European culture, see R. Curtis, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, New York 1953, pp. 162–166; *Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, Warszawa 1969, pp. 40ff. For the fundamental literature on the 'old/new' antinomy, see K. Secomska, *Spór o starożytność. Problemy malarstwa w "Paralelach" Perrault* [The Debate over Antiquity. Art Problems in Perrault's "Parallels"], Warszawa 1991, p. 44, notes 1–6.

<sup>6</sup> W. Strzemiński, "Bilans modernizmu" [The Outcome of Modernism], in: idem, *Pisma* [The Writings], ed. Z. Baranowicz, Wrocław 1975, p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Evidences of the 'importance of the epoch' are contained, e.g., in: C. Jellenta, "Stulecie plastyki polskiej" [The Centenary of Fine Arts in Poland], *Prawda* 1901, no. 3.

diversified tradition, a verification of their essential unity".<sup>8</sup> This interpretation stands in contradiction to the evolutionary metaphors deeply rooted in the usual way of thinking about art, according to which youth is the beginning of new life, the inception of a new life-cycle. The violation of this order has its axiological consequences. Aware of this, the author of the words quoted above made the following reservation: "it would be untenable to maintain that such a classification of the period, its inclusion into a past which has been fully accomplished and closed, lowers its value and curtails its significance either generally or with respect to ourselves. A termination, let us repeat, need not be synonymous with the relaxation of creative imaginativeness. There are no axiological decisions which result directly from the observation that the 'New Arts' do not open up a 'New Age'."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in the stylistics of the period, we might say that "every twilight, every autumn, brings about a miraculous eruption of life in us".<sup>10</sup> What, then, are the sources of the vitality in the art of that period, that extraordinary spring which was at the same time an autumn and more a harvest than a seeding-time? In the history of art the emergence of a 'new' or 'young' art was generally antinomic, or even antagonistic in nature. It meant principally a contrast between the old past and the young modern times. If art describes itself as 'young', this is not only the introduction of an evaluative suggestion, but also an encouragement for us to build up its image by means of contrasts, often with an evaluative aspect to them.<sup>11</sup> In the discussion of Polish art around 1900 the tendency has been to look for features which stand in opposition to the past, history, and Historicism. This, at any rate, is what the period, under the spell of its own youth, tempts us to do. One of the consequences of the complex story of Polish nineteenth-century art is that the contrasts in it appear to be illogical, and that their categories belong to different realms of ideas. What stood in opposition to Historicism in Poland was – in the words of the leading art critic of the time, Stanisław Witkiewicz – "the acknowledgement of the artistic element as the most important constituent part [of art]".<sup>12</sup> While agreeing with the opinion that 'the new art' did not mark the beginning of a 'new period', and also that the Polish art of those days was still under the influence of history, even in the early twentieth century<sup>13</sup> – we must emphasise that it was precisely at this time that the past lost its deforming sway over

<sup>8</sup> W. Juszcak, *Malarstwo Polskie. Modernizm* [Polish Painting. Modernism], Warszawa 1977, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11. Also the comment by Porębski that "not every modernist intensification creates the necessary conditions for a true revival of art and civilisation" ("Modernizm i modernizmy" [Modernism and Modernisms], p. 41).

<sup>10</sup> J. P. Richard, *L'univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*. Paris 1961, p. 156. Quoted from the catalogue of the exhibition *W kręgu "Chimery"*. *Sztuka i literatura polskiego modernizmu* [The Social Environment of "Chimera" Magazine. The Art and Literature of Polish Modernism], Warszawa 1980, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Art of that time was analysed in this way by J. Kęblowski, *Dzieje sztuki polskiej* [The History of Polish Art], Warszawa 1987, pp. 195ff.

<sup>12</sup> S. Witkiewicz, "Aleksander Gierymski", in: *idem, Pisma zebrane* [Collected Works] Vol. 2. *Monografie artystyczne* [Artistic Monographs], ed. M. Olszaniecka, Kraków 1974, p. 364.

<sup>13</sup> W. Juszcak, *Malarstwo...*, p. 45.

painting, at the change of centuries in a wide sense of the term. Its power to deform had originated in the fact that in Polish painting Historicism was not merely a question of subject-matter, or costume, or stylistic convention which it would have been easy to abandon in favour of 'Modernity'.<sup>14</sup> It had reached down into the most profound foundations of creativity, defining the place art occupied in the axiological hierarchy. Its contrast therefore was not an inclination towards actuality, but an autonomous approach to art. Naturally, the most cogent example of this is to be found in Jan Matejko, not in his role as a historical painter or as a historiosophical painter, but in his status as the promulgator of opinions on art, of which he felt himself to be pontiff. In Polish ideas on art the matter did not apply merely to painting, but to all artistic work whatsoever, which was often envisaged as a token for military and patriotic action. The authenticity of Matejko's famous remark, "I am not composing and painting in the manner I would understand to be the conditions for a picture's artistic perfection. My concern is for something far more important..." is not really important. Matejko's entire life and works testify to this authenticity. For him art was but the means by which to accomplish the things which were "far more important"; art had an ancillary, not an autonomous value.

It has generally come to be accepted that the turning-point for the autonomous understanding of art occurred in the 1880's, and was associated with criticism and theory, the Naturalist programme, and the work of the painter Aleksander Gieryski. But this confrontation now seems to have been more a sign of a preparatory stage rather than of the breakthrough itself. More significantly, the actual crucial moment did not imply the substitution of one concept of art by another. The changes were not effected in line with Witkiewicz's distinction of 'how' as opposed to 'what' – a distinction that this critic had deliberately overdrawn and simplified.<sup>15</sup> The entire painting of that period manifests the superficiality of this distinction. It was not the removal of the preponderance of History, by the aesthetic programmes of first Realism and then of the *fin-de-siècle*, that brought about the autonomy of art; just as Matejko was not ousted from Polish art through the reform effected by Fałat in his school.<sup>16</sup> This happened not only because "another history came to be heard: history as the field of emotions and moods, the field of collective or individual experiences, history as an emotional category".<sup>17</sup> What is extraordinary about Polish art around 1900 is not the outcome of a crisis, or of a radical reshuffling of the principles of art; it is the result of precisely the breakdown of the internal contrast between the 'what' and the 'how', the crystallising out in an inextricable bond of "the liability clause which imposed on art an awareness of the common misery and of pure creativity".<sup>18</sup> This bond may

<sup>14</sup> S. Tarnowski, *Matejko*, Kraków 1897, p. 466; with a reference to an oral account by J. Unierzycki, student and son-in-law of Matejko.

<sup>15</sup> M. Olszaniecka, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: Witkiewicz, *Pisma zebrane* [Collected Works], 1, p. LXIII.

<sup>16</sup> For Matejko's influence on Polish Modernist art, see W. Juszczak, *Malarstwo...*, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45, note 80.

<sup>18</sup> S. Żeromski, "Literatura a życie polskie" [Literature and Polish Life], in: *Dzieła* [Works], ed. S. Pigoń, Vol. 4, Warszawa 1957, p. 86.

be observed most clearly in the work of two of Matejko's students, Stanisław Wyspiański and Jacek Malczewski. In Wyspiański it is in the cartoons for the Wawel stained-glass windows, which "equally embody the new elements and the enthralling power of history".<sup>19</sup> Malczewski, on the other hand, presents this matter in his paintings sometimes in too petulant a manner, mixing the history of the nation's suffering with the pains of creativity, lumping together the chimaeras plaguing the artists and the attributes of Siberian persecution.

The principal proof of the maturity Polish art had achieved by the end of the nineteenth century, of its ripeness for autonomy, is supplied by its exceptional intensification of artistic issues. This artistic congestion is also the cause of difficulties with the stylistic allocation of the contemporary Polish art, the Modernist, Symbolist, and Expressionist syndrome (or perhaps a Decadent confusion of styles) afflicting the researchers into that period.<sup>20</sup> What is particularly telling is the fact that the paintings themselves carry more evidence for the autonomisation of art than the theoretical programmes or the accompanying criticism. If programmes and manifestos are to be identified, they may be located not in the texts, but in the pictures, such as Malczewski's *Melancholia* [Melancholy] or *Błędne koło* [Vicious Circle].<sup>21</sup> These canvases, it may be observed, blatantly diverging from the conventional principles of presentation and arrangement, and flagrant in their spatial and stylistic incoherence, have at the same time remained faithful to an ancient iconographic formula, whereby the depiction of the artist's studio serves as the allegorical presentation of his views on art. This striking juxtaposition of novelty with an age-old convention (though well-nigh absent in Polish art) seems to be highly symptomatic of the position of Polish art at the time.

*Melancholy* and *Vicious Circle* are probably the first works in Polish art which are auto-thematic in nature; they are 'paintings about painting', just like auto-thematic prose, the subject of which is itself.<sup>22</sup> Here the question of parallels between verbal and pictorial presentations appears on an entirely new plane. Hitherto in Polish art the issue of relations between painting and literature never transcended the bounds of simple generic affinities, common origins, the illustrative aspect, or the problems associated with visual narration.<sup>23</sup> By the turn of the century the range of mutual relations linking the sister arts would not only expand radically, but would also assume new and multifarious forms. The most proliferated would, of course, still be

<sup>19</sup> W. Juszcak, *Malarstwo...*, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> See W. Juszcak, *Wojtkiewicz i nowa sztuka* [Wojtkiewicz and the New Art], Warszawa 1965, pp. 21ff.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A. Ławniczakowa, *Jacek Malczewski. Katalog wystawy monograficznej* [Jacek Malczewski. Monographic Exhibition Catalogue], Poznań 1968, pp. 39-45.

<sup>22</sup> W. Okoń, *Sztuka i narracja. O narracji obrazowej w malarstwie polskim II połowy XIX wieku* [Art and Narrative. Pictorial Narrative in Polish Painting in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century], Wrocław 1988, p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> M. Poprzęcka, *Czas wyobrażony. O sposobach opowiadania w polskim malarstwie XIX wieku* [Pictures of Time. Methods of Narration Used in Polish Nineteenth-Century Painting] Warszawa 1986. Okoń, op. cit.; idem, *Sztuki siostrzane. Malarstwo a literatura w Polsce w drugiej połowie XIX wieku. Wybrane zagadnienia* [The Sister Arts. Selected Issues in Polish Painting and Literature in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century], Wrocław 1992.

the direct inspirations drawn from literary texts and poetry. The association of several well-known pictures with particular texts by Polish Romantic or Symbolist poets is a documented fact. There are also numerous paintings the atmosphere of which – rather than their particular motif or subject-matter – recalls a given work of literature. One could also follow the various endeavours made to assimilate artistic means drawn from other disciplines: as, for instance, allusions hidden away in titles, endowing a new meaning to prosaic genres. Other titles may not even carry any sort of explanation or poetic name, they may simply act as a stimulus for the poetic or associative reception of a particular painting. The unity of subject-matter in painting and literature is so universal that it grows into a mythic unity, a topicality focused on symbolic words, such as ‘earth’, ‘sky’, ‘house’,<sup>24</sup> ‘spring’ and ‘autumn’ both with respect to nature and with respect to human life.

The work of Malczewski, whose closeness to literature has often been the subject of study and emphasis, provides an opportunity for the observation of yet another, more profound type of connection between the verbal and the pictorial arts. Analysis of the ‘correspondence’ between his canvases and the texts which were their sources leads to the conclusion that Malczewski’s “poetic spectacles bear the qualities of a work of poetry in a wide sense of the term, not only in the meaning of general connotations but also in the structural properties of the message itself”.<sup>25</sup> Another kind of picture which should be mentioned in this context is the painting which has no direct or superficial relation with a piece of poetry, such as Stanislawski’s “landscapes based on *Król-Duch* by Słowacki”,<sup>26</sup> or the “trenchant landscapes” by Weiss, with their “predominant narrative quality of various degrees and types, also of varying conspicuousness”.<sup>27</sup> These are only a handful of examples to show that Polish Modernist painting is still an insufficiently documented area as regards the numerous not very tangible borrowings which might have been prompted by the temptation to encroach onto territories not acknowledged as proper to the given art, by a thirst for workshop discoveries, by a need to transcend the barriers imposed on the medium of painting.<sup>28</sup> Such are attempts to visualise the non-material, the non-corporeal, the entities which

<sup>24</sup> Remarks on these ‘key’ pictures in A. Morawińska, “Polish Symbolism”, in: *Symbolism in Poland. Collected Essays Published in Conjunction with the Exhibition “Symbolism in Polish Painting 1890–1914” July 30 – September 23, 1984*. Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1984, pp. 28ff. Cf. also M. Jankowiak, “Młodopolskie niebo” [The Sky of Młoda Polska], in: *Młodopolski świat wyobraźni. Studia i eseje* [The World of the Imagination in the Młoda Polska Period. Studies and Essays], ed. Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, Kraków 1977, pp. 299–321.

<sup>25</sup> W. Okoń, *Sztuka i narracja...* [Art and Narrative...], p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. W. Juszcak’s observations on Słowacki’s imagery, “Lekcja pejzażu według ‘Króla-Ducha’” [Lesson in Landscape According to Słowacki’s Poem, ‘Król-Duch’], in: *Ikonomia romantyczna* [Romantic Iconography], Warszawa 1977, pp. 299–321.

<sup>27</sup> W. Juszcak, *Młody Weiss* [The Young Weiss], Warszawa 1979, p. 187.

<sup>28</sup> This has been given the clearest expression in the following exhibitions in the Muzeum Literatury [Museum of Literature], Warsaw: *Boy i Młoda Polska* [Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński and ‘Young Poland’], 1974; *Stanisław Wyspiański, poeta – malarz* [Stanisław Wyspiański: Poet and Painter], 1976; and *W kręgu “Chimery”*. *Sztuka i literatura polskiego modernizmu* [The Social Environment of “Chimera” Magazine. The Art and Literature of Polish Modernism], 1979/80.

may be perceived by senses other than the sense of sight. Such, too, is the quest for the musical equivalents of painting.

These last-mentioned attempts transcend thematic unity, going beyond even the inspiration from the works of Whistler (which were of paramount significance as regards the Warsaw painters, and may be traced in the nocturnes of Pankiewicz, Podkowiński, and Gwozdecki).<sup>29</sup> An exceptional embodiment of the postulate of making painting 'musical' may be observed in the cycles of paintings by Mikołaj Čiurlionis, who was both a painter and a composer, and they are due to his double training in these arts. It was Čiurlionis' intention to create works in which the representations would be subjected to the rules of the classical sonata structure: Allegro – Andante – Scherzo – Finale.<sup>30</sup> Some of Weiss' canvases also have a musical character, though they are not as programmatic as Čiurlionis' pictures. They include paintings structured according to the keys, rhythms, and tempos of music, which the painter has expressly labelled as such (for instance "minor key" and "largo" for *Słoneczniki* [The Sunflowers], "presto" for *Strachy* [The Scarecrows], or "violently rhythmic compositions with series of acts progressing according to some 'musical' principle"<sup>31</sup> – as in *Opętanie* (Possession) and *Taniec* (Dance) – rather than his portrait of Chopin painted for Przybyszewski.

In this going out towards each other by the various arts there is a good deal of the synaesthetic tendencies proper to the entire period, of a symbolistic proximity of poetry, painting, and music (as evident in Polish art primarily in the Warsaw Chimaera Group). Participation in the contemporary questions in art, and confrontation with the concept of the unity of the arts, so crucial to the Symbolist aesthetics, was possible not only thanks to a familiarity with the current artistic programmes, but chiefly thanks to the fact that "the media of painting had reached a level of maturity enabling them to respond to the dematerialised flexibility of language".<sup>32</sup> In its endeavours to achieve the 'musical' and 'poetic' qualities, contemporary painting proved capable of transcending the generic limitations and of creating new categories of expression ranging from ecstasy and pathos, through auto-ironic grotesque to the bold rejection of spatial conventions, the departure from realist colour schemes, the deformation of shapes, and finally to an unprecedented increment in the purely painting and ultimately workshop means of expression. If we look at these trends from a broad historical perspective it will turn out that the contemporary need to transcend the barriers of painting was not only a response to the current challenge in art, but it was also the first attempt in the history of Polish art to put into practice some very ancient theoretical principles which formed the basis for the various concepts of correspondence between the arts. This involved not only the old doctrines of *ut pictura poesis* and *ut pictura musica*, but also the first ever insistent manifestation in Polish art of one of the most ancient objectives of art, the Horatian concept of making the impossible real.

<sup>29</sup> M. Gołąb, "Sonata słońca M. Čiurlionisa" [The Sonata of the Sun by M. Čiurlionis], *Artium Questiones*, 2, 1983, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> W. Juszcak, *Młody Weiss* [The Young Weiss], pp. 76ff.

<sup>32</sup> W. Juszcak, *Malarstwo...*, p. 54.



The second 'novelty' in Polish art around 1900, evidence of its involvement in the great European sphere of the problems in art, is the establishment of a creative dialogue with the tradition of Antiquity. This only took place at the close of the nineteenth century, for it would hardly be appropriate to recognise the classically-oriented conventions in force at the beginning of the century, or some of the academic canvases, as a 'creative dialogue'. The reception of Antiquity in Polish Modernism, marked by its own course and pattern of events, was initiated in the 1870's with the young Malczewski's hesitant question: "Should I be doing classical things or not?" The final act in this dialogue was Wyspiański's design for an 'Acropolis' on Wawel Hill. The question spans a period of thirty years, starting with the dilemma of "Should I be doing classical things?" and is crowned and closed with a scheme to Hellenise the tabernacle of Polish history. In painting the extent of inspirations drawn from Antiquity is delineated on the one hand by Malczewski's visions filtered through Parnassian poetry, and on the other by the Expressionist and anti-classical, Bacchanal retinues of Weiss. A hitherto unprecedented "vitality of the mythological motifs was in a way facilitated by the separation of the concept of Antiquity (chiefly Hellenic Antiquity) from the idea of the Classics and classical qualities. Thanks to this Antiquity and ancient mythology lost their historically determined dimension.... It became possible both to introduce new interpretations and to move the motifs about in time and space."<sup>33</sup> The abandoning of a view of Antiquity through the classical Winckelmannian model meant that the combination of Polish folk motifs with the Dionysian theme, so typical of Polish Modernism, could now emerge; the chimaera, faun, or Thanatos figures could now become Polish, not merely through a location in a Polish landscape, but also in the national and historical context; syncretic mythological and religious concepts could now be fashioned. Thanks to the abundant creations of Jacek Malczewski "saucy [Dionysian and Nietzschean] fauns taking intimate liberties with infinity"<sup>34</sup> and "chimaeras, the beasts of burden of Polish Modernism"<sup>35</sup> could now proliferate throughout Polish painting. Side by side with such pictures are individual and exceptional compositions which break all the stereotypes, Classical and Modernist alike: for instance Wyspiański's illustrations for the Iliad interpreted through an archaic version of folklore and through Heinrich Schliemann's excavations at the site of Troy, or the unique specimen in Polish art of dialogue between Renaissance Platonism with its combination of Christian symbols and the ancient vision of the universe, and the mystical and theosophical notions of the end of the century – represented in the stained-glass window showing Apollo and the Copernican System.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> K. Nowakowska-Sito, "Antyk i mit w sztuce polskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku." [Myth and Antiquity in Polish Art at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries], unpublished Ph.D. thesis, to whom I am indebted for the observations in this part of my article.

<sup>34</sup> Formulated by 'Tredecim' (Z. Przesmycki?), "Rozstrojowcy i zamętowcy" [Confounders and Discomfitters], *Chimera* 6, 1902, no. 17, p. 299.

<sup>35</sup> Term used by J. Stempowski.

<sup>36</sup> K. Nowakowska-Sito, "«Apollo – system Kopernika». Studium o witrażu Wyspiańskiego" ['Apollo and the Copernican System.' A Study of Wyspiański's Stained-Glass Window], *Folia Historiae Artium*, 29, 1993, pp. 151–167; K. Czerni, "'Apollo' Stanisława Wyspiańskiego dla Domu Lekarskiego w Krakowie" [Wyspiański's 'Apollo' in the Cracow Medical Society House], *Folia Historiae Artium*, 29, 1993, pp. 129–149.

The restrictions imposed by conference conditions have made me concentrate, from the numerous possibilities available, on two problems only: the correspondence between the arts, and the reception of Antiquity. These two aspects seem to provide the clearest evidence supporting my thesis, that the full and deliberate participation by Polish art around 1900 in the contemporary problems of art was made possible thanks to its accession to the field of questions which, in a variety of forms, including the Modernist one, had been shaping the European tradition in painting for several centuries. Analysis of other aspects of painting, such as expression or spatial image arrangement could likewise show how much of what was termed 'new' in the young art was in fact a late accomplishment of what had hitherto never been, or never could have been, accomplished in Polish art. Viewed from the aspect of artistic tradition, Polish art in the Modernist period turns out to be not so much an art of the novel and of the turning-point, as an art of maturity and equilibrium. A maturity which – paradoxically – made novelty possible. And an equilibrium between the national requirements and 'pure art'; between native tradition and impulses coming in from external centres for art; between the 'qualities of painting' and 'literature'; between all 'novelty' whatsoever and the faculty for its reception and acceptance. It was this equilibrium that made the Polish painting of that period able to preserve its identity within a process of change – something that it has not always managed to do.

To conclude let us return once more to the pictures themselves, in the way we see them in the museum rooms. It is these pictures that arm the critics with arguments. Mieczysław Porębski has written of Matejko that "he created stereotypes of an emotive and imaginative force which cannot be compared with anything else in terms of power and resilience".<sup>37</sup> The Post-Matejko period also created a set of powerful and enduring conceptualisations, albeit these were not the work only of one man. These paintings are the most deeply rooted in the national awareness and emotional framework of the Polish gentry and intelligentsia middle classes. They are the comforting and sensitive nestling-sites of the collective national memory, summoned up with an ever-growing nostalgia, the Polish land of reminiscence and dreams: the traditional vine-covered abodes in the countryside, the furrows on the arable fields, the great expanses of sky hedged in by the clouds along the horizon, the orchards with the low, whitewashed tree-trunks, the quiet evenings at home by the light of the lamp, the May sunshine filtering through the veranda, the cottages full of song, and the Cracovian Planty Gardens of an autumn evening with a misty outline of Wawel Hill rising over the shadows. As if they were obediently carrying out the precepts of Miłosz' *Poetical Treatise*,<sup>38</sup> they allow us to glimpse

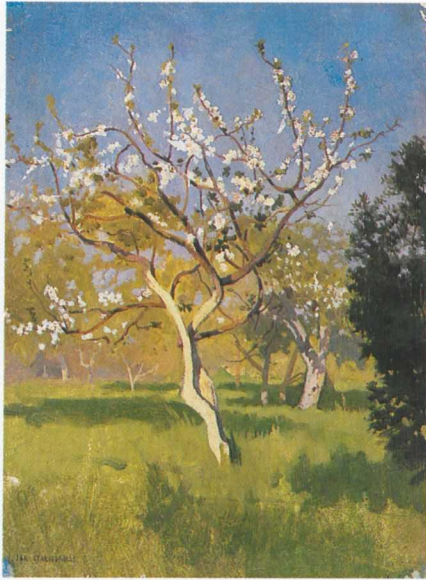
...the apple-trees, the river, the bend in the road,  
As can be seen by the gleam of a summer lightning-flash.

<sup>37</sup> Porębski, M., *Malowane dzieje* [History Depicted], Warszawa 1962, p.170.

<sup>38</sup> C. Miłosz, *Traktat poetycki* [Poetical Treatise], 1957.



7. Piotr Stachewicz, *The Manor in Tuchanowicze*



8. Jan Stanislawski, *An Apple Tree in Blossom*

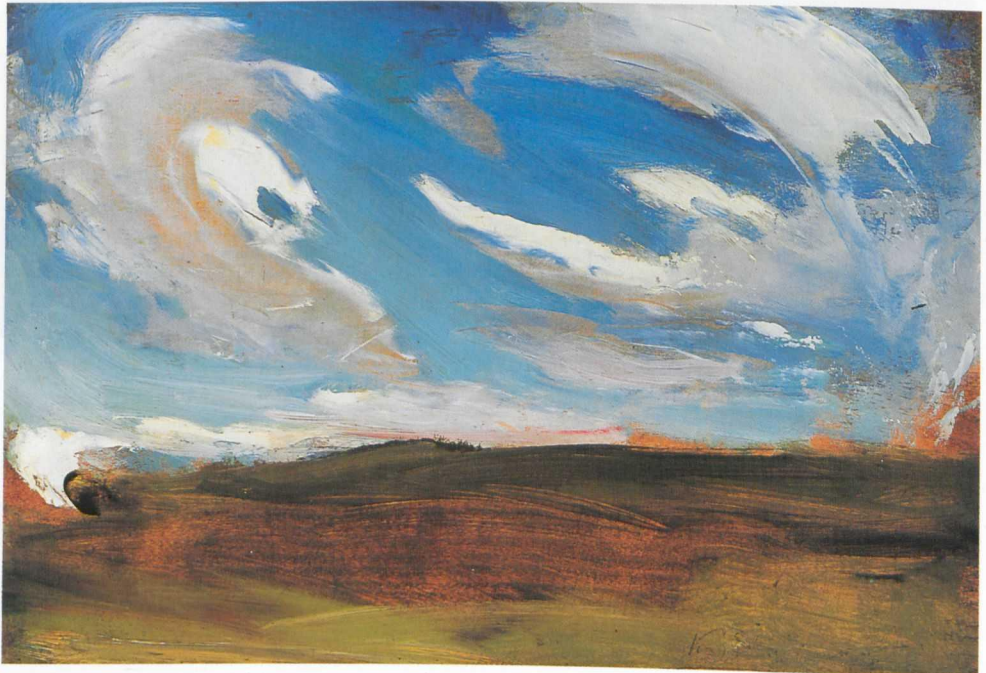
9. Jan Stanislawski, *An Orchard in Autumn*





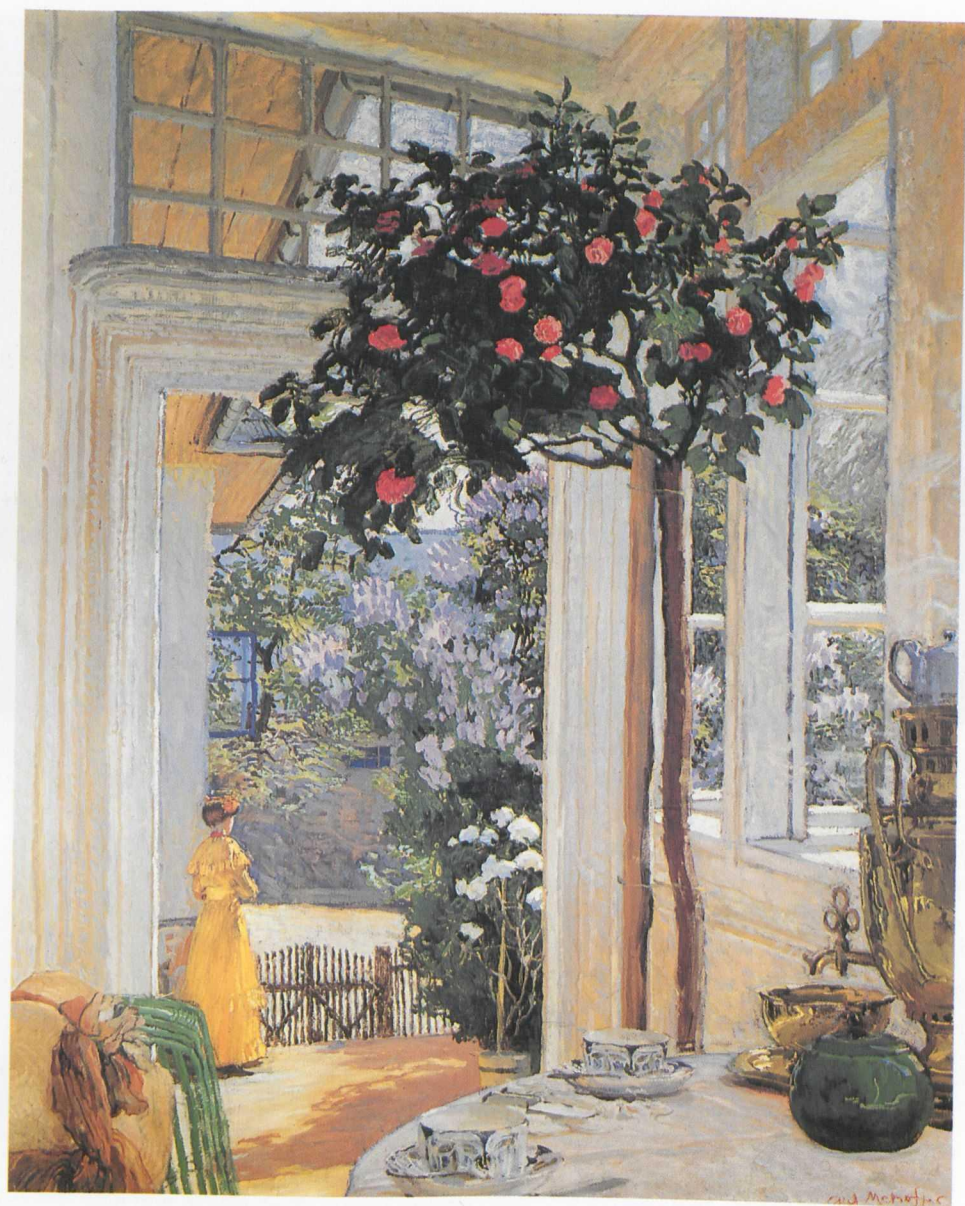
10. Jacek Malczewski, *Spring Thaw – the Vistula River near Zawichost*

11. Konrad Krzyżanowski, *Clouds*





12. Józef Pankiewicz, *By Lamplight*



13. Józef Mehoffer, *The Sun in May*



14. Stanisław Wyspiański, *Straw Coverings*