

“I Do Not Describe:” Description in Stanisław Przybyszewski’s Works and Aesthetic Views

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In an 1897 letter to his friend, the Viennese critic Alfred Neumann, Przybyszewski claimed that he did not describe. This statement was part of a more elaborate argument in which Przybyszewski distinguished between his writing and literary tradition, referring to the latter only by means of depreciating periphrases, such as “disgusting philistine artist” or “descriptors of reality” (*Wirklichkeitsschilderer*). He did not even try to hide strong negative emotions (“I spit,” “I hate”).¹

I hate, Przybyszewski wrote, the endless **descriptions** of [*Beschreibung*] furniture, of heroines’ and heroes’ beauty, in short, I hate all **descriptions** of [*Beschreibung*] reality. [...] Until now, every novelist has made the same foolish mistake, namely that [...] every person that appeared in front of the audience was **described** in the beginning [*beschrieben*]. (It was referred to as “characterization” [*charakterisiert*]). Then, his or her life story was recounted, his or her room was **described vividly** [*geschildert*], etc.²

¹ See Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Listy*, vol. 1, ed. Stanisław Helsztyński (Gdańsk-Warszawa: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauki i Sztuki; Spółka Wydawnicza „Parnas Polski”, 1937), 173-174. Helsztyński translated the fragments of the German original, which the addressee of the letter included in Przybyszewski’s literary profile published on July 15, 1897 in the journal *Wiener Rundschau*. I translate the phrase “Ich schildere nicht” as “I do not describe” (in place of “I do not represent”) because of its connection with the nouns ‘Schilderung’ and ‘-schilderer’, translated by the publisher of *Listy* as ‘description’ and ‘descriptors;’ in terms of synonymy; the style of the original is more economical - it basically uses derivatives of two verbs: ‘schildern’ and ‘beschreiben,’ which in translation correspond to: ‘describe,’ ‘specify,’ ‘represent,’ ‘describe vividly.’

² Przybyszewski [emphasis – M.W.]; Alfred Neumann, “Zur Charakteristik Stanislaw Przybyszewski s”, *Wiener Rundschau* 2, no. 17 (1897): 667-668, reprinted in *Über Stanislaw Przybyszewski. Rezensionen – Erinnerungen – Porträts – Studien (1892-1995). Rezeptionsdokumente aus 100 Jahren*, ed. Gabriela Matuszek (Paderborn: Igel Verlag Wissenschaft, 1995), 67-68.

Such a strong aversion to descriptiveness by default made Przybyszewski the "opposite" of a literary naturalist, whose trademark was accurate description. According to researchers, it was in naturalistic novels that description was favored or even became the compositional dominant.³ However, as David Baguley notes, in theoretical discourse, the terms 'nature,' 'naturalism' and 'description' may be used interchangeably.⁴ This affinity was noticed and explored by nineteenth-century authors who parodied naturalism, using "thick description" as the basic parodic trick.⁵ In one of the parodies from the era, the naturalist novelist solemnly declares under the portrait of Zola: "description is the formula of Art, the last word of our School" (*la description est la formule de l'Art, le dernier mot de notre Ecole*).⁶

From the beginning, Przybyszewski formulated his aesthetic views in opposition to Zola's school, with particular emphasis on its German sub-school.⁷ Already in 1892, in his debut essay *Zur Psychologie des Individuums. Chopin and Nietzsche*, he contrasted his "new art" with "empty naturalism with its mean and meaningless *coins de nature*,"⁸ thus openly challenging Zola's famous definition of a work of art as a "corner of nature seen through a temperament" ("Une oeuvre ne sera jamais qu'un coin de la nature vu à travers d'un temperament").⁹ As Gabriela Matuszek observes, it was "a clear attempt to overcome naturalism in art," which flourished in Germany from 1889 to 1893.¹⁰ In his autobiography, which he wrote twenty years later, Przybyszewski analyzed his first essay, together with its sequel, an essay devoted to Ola Hanson, in the context of his more mature writings. Przybyszewski drew attention to the fundamental continuity of his beliefs.

This little booklet, he wrote, is nothing, but it also contains everything that was supposed to develop in my soul: I wrote the second part half a year later [...], and this booklet is nothing, but it contains an embryo of my later book *Na drogach duszy* [On the Paths of the Soul] which, apart from my manifestos in the weekly *Życie*, is my literary testament [...] made in cordial blood of sincerity.¹¹

³ See Henryk Michalski, *Przestrzeń przedstawiona. Szkice z poetyki mimesis w powieści XIX-wiecznej* (Warszawa: IBL, 1999), 67-68.

⁴ David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction. The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 184 (chapter 8: *Naturalist Description*). The works of Emil Zola and thus the entire "realistic and naturalistic canon of writing" invariably provide literary theorists with standard examples of description as one of the two (next to narrative) basic narrative elements – See Philippe Hamon, "Qu'est-ce qu'une description?", *Poétique*, 112 (1972): 465-485.

⁵ See Zdzisława Mokranowska, "Parodia", in *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku*, ed. Józef Bachórz i Alina Kowalczykowa (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991), 682.

⁶ Hippolyte Parigot, "Dialogue des morts. Naturalistes", in *Génie et métier* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1894), 296. Quote after Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*, 184.

⁷ Years later, he wrote about writers associated with the magazine *Die Gesellschaft* that "Zola was their God – Zola was the 'greatest' genius of the 19th century." He characterized *Jung-Deutschland* thus: "though it idolized French and Scandinavian naturalism, it did not leave a single great 'naturalistic' work behind" – Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Biblioteka Polska, 1926), 95, 126.

⁸ Stanisław Przybyszewski, "Z psychologii jednostki twórczej. Chopin i Nietzsche", transl. Stanisław Helsztyński, in *Wybór pism*, ed. Roman Taborski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1966), 35.

⁹ Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880), 111. Quote after Edward Przewoński, "Emil Zola jako krytyk naturalistyczny", in *Krytyka literacka we Francji*, vol. 1, ed. Antoni Lange (Lwów: Księgarnia H. Altenberga, 1899), 122.

¹⁰ Gabriela Matuszek, "Der geniale Pole"? *Niemcy o Stanisławie Przybyszewskim (1892-1992)*, 2nd extended edition. (Kraków: Universitas, 1996), 13.

¹¹ Stanisław Przybyszewski, "Moja autobiografia", *Wiadomości Literackie* no. 18 (1928): 2. According to Henryk Biegeleisen, the text was written "a year before the great war."

Time distance (“later”) and classification (“apart from” manifestos published in *Życie*) indicate that the writer had in mind his essay about the works of the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland, which he finished in November 1895. It was published in Berlin in 1897 as the book *Auf den Wegen der Seele*.¹² It was this article, in its original and complete edition, published from April to May 1896 in the Berlin magazine *Die Kritik* and entitled *Ein Unbekannter* (A Stranger), that Przybyszewski strongly recommended to the young Krakow poet Maciej Szukiewicz as the most accurate expression of his views on art: “I have expressed everything that has been a burden for me for the past three years.”¹³ Szukiewicz, who acted as an intermediary between the writer and his Polish audience, published Przybyszewski’s letter with said recommendation and the translation of the relevant fragments of the essay in Przybyszewski’s extensive biographical note. The note was originally published in February 1897 in Wilhelm Feldman’s *Dziennik Krakowski* and reprinted two months later with minor changes in Adam Wiślicki’s *Przegląd Tygodniowy*.¹⁴ Thus, the readers of both journals learned about, among others, Przybyszewski’s antithetical view of “contemporary” and “new” art. In *Ein Unbekannter*, and in an essay about Munch that had been published two years earlier,¹⁵ Przybyszewski confronted the paintings of the Norwegian painter, the author of *The Scream*, with the works of Max Liebermann, one of the greatest representatives of realism and impressionism in German painting.

Liebermann paints the sheep as they are. [...] He paints women who are mending fishing nets just like thousands of other women who live by the sea. [...]. In short: Liebermann paints nature *sans phrase*, **descriptively** [*deskriptiv*], pedantically, ignoring the “idea.” He is a typical **naturalist** who grew up in the era of Americanism, thoughtlessness, lack of time, and above all in the era of photography.¹⁶

When Przybyszewski criticized descriptiveness in painting, identified with “naturalism in the broadest sense as a representation of «reality»,”¹⁷ he was also talking about contemporary literature. “For art,” he wrote, “which we love in our times, we need a notebook in literature and a good eye and a firm hand in art.”¹⁸ In the Polish version of *Na drogach duszy*, he did not juxtapose “two opposite poles in art”¹⁹ but referred to Liebermann specifically as the “pope

¹²In the Polish book entitled *Na drogach duszy* (Kraków 1900), the essays about Vigeland and Edvard Munch, previously published under the same title in *Życie* (1898, no. 42-44, 49), were combined with the manifestos *Confiteor* and *O „nową” sztukę* published in *Życie* in 1899 (no. 1 and 6).

¹³Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 117 (letter dated in Berlin 7 May 1896).

¹⁴Maciej Szukiewicz, “Stanisław Przybyszewski (Próbka sylwetki literackiej)”, *Dziennik Krakowski* no. 330-347 (1897); *Przegląd Tygodniowy* no. 14-16 (1897). According to Helsingforski, it was “the first serious Polish work” devoted to the author of *Totenmesse* (Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 143, footnote. 2).

¹⁵See Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Psychiczny naturalizm (O twórczości Edvarda Muncha)”, in *Synagoga szatana i inne eseje*, selected, edited and translated by Gabriela Matuszek (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1995), 99. The article was published in February 1894 in the Berlin magazine *Neue Deutsche Rundschau*.

¹⁶Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Ein Unbekannter”, *Die Kritik* no. 83 (1896). Quote after Maciej Szukiewicz, “Stanisław Przybyszewski”, *Przegląd Tygodniowy* no. 15 (10 April 1897): 176 [emphasis – M.W.]. See Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Auf den Wegen der Seele. Gustav Vigeland”, in *Kritische und essayistische Schriften Werke*, ed. Jörg Marx (Paderborn: Igel Verlag Literatur, 1992), 18. Polish translation of the entire article in: Przybyszewski, *Synagoga szatana i inne eseje*.

¹⁷Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Na drogach duszy* (Kraków: L. Zwoliński i S-ka, 1900), 28.

¹⁸Przybyszewski. The writer was more precise in German: “Zum Naturalismus braucht man in der Literatur das Notizbuch, in der bildenden Kunst ein gutes Auge und eine sichere Hand” (Przybyszewski, “Auf den Wegen der Seele. Gustav Vigeland”, 21 [emphasis – M.W.]); *die bildende Kunst* = Fine Arts.

¹⁹See Szukiewicz, “Stanisław Przybyszewski”, 176.

of naturalists."²⁰ This remark cannot be found in the German version of the text. The point was not to dethrone or criticize Zola but to criticize his followers: "Liebermann, the pope of naturalists, says «Die Phantasie ist Notbehelf.» So, according to Zola, what is left is a temperament. But temperament is just a phrase."²¹ This distinction was more prominent in the German original. Kazimierz Wyka pointed out that it was absent from the Polish version because Zola was "maliciously juxtaposed" with his "weak and sick heirs," including, according to Przybyszewski, decadents and impressionists:

[...] where Zola piles monstrous masses of stones, they pile with great difficulty delicate particles of their feelings and impressions; where Zola, opposing his doctrines, creates powerful images and transforms the affairs surrounding him into truly amazing symbols, his epigones want to evoke a mood with such recurring images that it would be easy to compose a dictionary of these images: white swans on quiet channels, black birds hovering over purple seas, white lilies swaying around glistening altars.²²

However, what is the most important from the point of view of our considerations is the beginning of this paragraph (which Wyka omitted): "*Ihre Kunst ist eine beschreibende Kunst par excellence*" (Their art is *par excellence* descriptive art).²³ It proves that when Przybyszewski criticized naturalism, he in fact criticized descriptiveness. Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska aptly summarized this by paraphrasing the above fragment of *Auf den Wegen der Seele*: "Przybyszewski was a writer endowed with exceptional theoretical awareness. He condemned the naturalistic "descriptors of reality" but valued Zola for his ability to intensify expression and transform certain objects and phenomena into symbols, demonstrating how the author views the world."²⁴ Kralkowska-Gątkowska also quoted the letter to Neumann, which brings us back to Przybyszewski's views on his works.

In the preface to the "quasi-short story" *De Profundis*²⁵ (published in 1895 as a separate booklet entitled *Pro domo mea*; Przybyszewski sent several copies to Szukiewicz²⁶), in addition to criticizing naturalism as "a soulless brutal art for the common people, bourgeois art *par excellence*,"²⁷ Przybyszewski also provides the following *désintéressement*, commenting on description as a narrative technique: "I am not interested in furniture or the arrangement of the room that I once described [*beschrieben*]. I look at people from one point of view: I am

²⁰Przybyszewski, *Na drogach duszy*, 28.

²¹Przybyszewski. Przybyszewski recalled the motto of the German painter years later, observing that Liebermann "triumphant, was holding a banner with the slogan, which read that only the most consistent naturalism would save art, while 'stupid fantasy' was a silly 'Notbehelf:' a substitute for art" (Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 191).

²²Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Auf den Wegen der Seele* (Berlin: Kritik-Verlag, 1897), 58-59. Quote after Kazimierz Wyka, "«Naga dusza» i naturalizm", *Przegląd Współczesny* no. 10 (1937): 115. Naturally, Wyka's article is a subchapter of *Modernizm polski*, published over twenty years later. See Kazimierz Wyka, *Modernizm polski* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1959), VII.

²³Przybyszewski, "Auf den Wegen der Seele. Gustav Vigeland", 44.

²⁴Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska, "Kompozycja powieści Przybyszewskiego", in *Studia o przemianach gatunkowych w powieści polskiej XX wieku*, ed. Tadeusz Bujnicki (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1987), 10.

²⁵See Gabriela Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny. Eseje i proza – próba monografii* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), 254.

²⁶See Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 117, 123 (letters dated 7 May 1896 and 17 June 1896).

²⁷Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Pro domo mea* (Berlin: Storm, 1895), 5.

interested in their souls.”²⁸ The writer defined his position in this matter much more precisely in the above-quoted autobiographical note, which he wrote at Neumann’s special request on June 1, 1897. Neumann wanted to write “a longer piece” on Przybyszewski in the *Wiener Rundschau*.²⁹

I do not describe [...], Przybyszewski declared, emphasizing these words, If there happens to be a description [*eine Schilderung*] in the text, it serves only to determine the mood in which a given individual is; then, however, it is a real experience, the character experienced it in his soul. [...] For me and my characters, the shape or color of trousers is not important. What matters are the state of their souls, the mutual reaction of impressions, and the resulting conflicts.³⁰

It was probably the first statement issued by the writer regarding his poems in prose and fiction that was meant to be published in the press.³¹ It can therefore be said that Przybyszewski’s conflict with naturalism thus moved to the domain of the latter. Przybyszewski had already written four novels in German at the time. Though he finished his latest novel in German, *Satans Kinder*, in December 1895, it arrived in bookstores much later.³² At the beginning of March 1897, thanking Szukiewicz for the essay devoted to him in *Dziennik Krakowski*, Przybyszewski attached to the letter a copy of a “new romance,” which, in his opinion, was “perhaps the best text of the past era.”³³ Neumann, who in April 1897 published two reviews of *Satans Kinder* in the Berliner journals *Neuland* and *Wiener Rundschau*, thus characterized Przybyszewski as a novelist in his biographical essay for *Wiener Rundschau*: “He liberated narrative prose, namely, he rescued the novel from the bonds that constrain it, since he created **the psychic novel** [*psychischer Roman*], a literary genre that did not exist before and for which there is no technical name.”³⁴ However, in order to further his argument, the critic referred to a quote in which the writer commented on his visual poetic prose.

I mean, wrote Przybyszewski openly, this mixture of poetry and an outline of a situation, this fantastic form, removed from life and the world, which *Vigilien*, *Requiem aeternam* and *De profundis* exemplify. Dream and vision merge into one. Reality may only be known vaguely, it is somewhere there in the background, only to show the true life of the soul. What actually happened is completely irrelevant, only the reaction of the soul to this partially unknown experience remains.³⁵

²⁸Przybyszewski, 10. Translation after Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, “Wstęp”, in *Programy i dyskusje literackie Młodej Polski* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977), XLV. Translation of the entire text in Przybyszewski, *Synagoga szatana i inne eseje*.

²⁹See Matuszek, “Der geniale Pole”?, 60. Neumann and Przybyszewski exchanged many letters from March 1897 to April 1898 – Roman Taborski, “Przybyszewski w Wiedniu”, in *Wśród wiedeńskich poloników*, 2nd extended edition. (Kraków-Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1983), 128.

³⁰Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 174; *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 68-69 [emphasis - Przybyszewski].

³¹Neumann used extensive fragments not only in the biweekly publication of the Vienna Secession from mid-July 1897 (as he informed the writer in a letter), but also in an article entitled *Der deutsche Roman und Stanislaus Przybyszewski (Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Snobismus)*, which was published in April 1898 in the Berlin magazine *Monatsschrift für neue Literatur und Kunst*.

³²Others are part of the *Homo Sapiens* trilogy: *Über Bord*, *Unterwegs*, *Im Malstrom*.

³³Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 142-143 (letter dated in Berlin, 9 March 1897).

³⁴Quote after Matuszek, “Der geniale Pole”?, 60. See *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 66 [emphasis - Neumann].

³⁵Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 173. See *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 66-67. In correspondence with Neumann, the writer of course referred to German titles of his works (*Vigilien*, *Totenmesse*): their Polish “versions” were first mentioned in 1899.

As Stanisław Eile observes in his article about the form of the novel created by Przybyszewski, "the characters' monologues are full of visions, dreams and hallucinations but their domain was early prose poems."³⁶ According to Eile, the author of *Homo sapiens* was endowed with "an extraordinary theoretical consciousness, especially in comparison with other novelists of his era;" therefore, although "the most general ontological and aesthetic assumptions were the same in all his writings, in fiction he referred to issues that were characteristic of this form of writing."³⁷ Indeed, Szukiewicz was right when he distinguished between rhapsodies, "positive images of the soul" which "almost completely exclude the real world," and the novel, which is a "negative image because it does not present the soul. The soul in the right place, but only for a moment, for a second, in an elusive flash."³⁸ To sum up Neumann's argument, when we talk about Przybyszewski as an original novelist, we should refer to the writer's authorial comments (cited by the critic on the next page), in which the author of *Satans Kinder* contrasts the contemporary novel with the new novel.

The novelist **before me**, he observes, influenced the reader's imagination in advance [...]. There was no freedom; everything was said, the reader knew that the action took place in a given year and in a given city, people were described, they attended school and had specific features of character etc. [...] I do not mention the past, the reader only accidentally learns about it from a conversation, when something about past life or external things is mentioned. It is not known exactly who my characters are, where they are or where they come from.³⁹

Przybyszewski confirmed his stance, using similar phrases, in his late work *Moi współcześni* [My contemporaries]. He explained "what he meant when he turned to the novel after a few poems:"⁴⁰

All that was the only goal of the contemporary popular novel has become a minor thing for me, a silly accident. The simplest plot in the world, without any complications, that keeps the reader interested: what, where and when something happens is not known, I deleted all descriptions from my novels, all external manifestations that were not or could not be psychic projections of a given state in which a given individual finds himself [...] – I clung to the human soul with the same curiosity with which the anatomist or physiologist begins an interesting autopsy.⁴¹

The last sentence is particularly symptomatic, considering that since at least the 1860s, the dissecting room had been emblematic in naturalist writing.⁴² Przybyszewski's words confirm the thesis formulated by Stefan Kołaczowski, and then developed by Wyka, that "Przybyszewski inherited the ruthless pursuit of truth [...] from naturalists" but directed it "not to the

³⁶Stanisław Eile "Powieść «nagiej duszy»", *Teksty* no. 1 (1973): 80.

³⁷Eile, 69.

³⁸Szukiewicz, "Stanisław Przybyszewski", *Przegląd Tygodniowy* no. 16 (17 April 1897): 190-191.

³⁹Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 174; *Über Stanisław Przybyszewski*, 68 [emphasis - Przybyszewski].

⁴⁰Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 235.

⁴¹Przybyszewski, 237-238.

⁴²See Guy Robert, *Emil Zola. Ogólne zasady i cechy jego twórczości*, translated by Irena Wachlowska, afterword by Halina Suwała (Warszawa: PIW, 1968), 21.

outside world but to the psyche.”⁴³ That is why Wyka is right when he writes that when Przybyszewski describes Munch as “a naturalist of psychological phenomena,” he in fact “does not characterize someone else but describes himself.”⁴⁴ Przybyszewski treated Munch’s paintings for the rest of his life as the equivalent of his visionary prose, which is clearly demonstrated by a fragment of *Moi współcześni*. The writer sees the famous *Scream* as a transposition of *Totenmesse*: “I cannot imagine, he writes, that a literary work could be more powerfully transformed in color.”⁴⁵ In turn, according to Marta Wyka, as far as literature was concerned, Przybyszewski could find inspiration in the works of Joris-Karl Huysmans, who was, by the way, a dissident from Émile Zola’s Médan group. In his 1891 novel *Là-Bas*, Huysmans makes his alter ego, Durtal, explain the tenets of “spiritualistic naturalism.” The novel should “preserve the truthfulness of the document, the precision of detail, the rich and nervous language of realism, and at the same time touch the soul.”⁴⁶ However, how can these contradictory tendencies be combined in writing?

One of Przybyszewski’s answers was to limit the role of description in its current form and function, namely as presenting a character from the point of view of the world around him, i.e. from the outside. According to Zola, “the proper role of descriptive passages in the novel” was, as Edward Przewóski explains, “only to render a man who cannot be separated from his surroundings, because he is complemented by his clothes, the house he lives in, the city he lives in and the province in which he resides, ‘complete’ and ‘whole.’”⁴⁷ As we know, Przybyszewski rejects all this external ballast and uses description, if he cannot do without it, “only to determine the mood in which a given individual is.”⁴⁸ Thus, “crumbs of empirical reality are filtered through the characters’ feelings,” which, according to Matuszek, leads in extreme cases, as in *Satans Kinder*, to “the total destruction of the represented world.”⁴⁹ In turn, Kralkowska-Gątkowska who, “due to the fragmentation of descriptions” calls Przybyszewski’s naturalism “amputated,” argues that the goal of this narrative strategy is the creation of “conditions for the development of vision,” that is, preparing a place for a different type of space in which the laws of physics would be suspended and the laws of physiology would be in force.⁵⁰

I describe the reduced ‘background,’ she further observes, the depleted quasi-empirical space of

⁴³Stefan Kołaczkowski, “Twórcze fermenty”, *Wiadomości Literackie* no. 18 (1928): 1. See Wyka, “«Naga dusza» i naturalizm”, 114. Kołaczkowski was the supervisor of Wyka’s doctoral dissertation, which then gave rise to his book on Polish modernism (Wyka, *Modernizm polski*, VII).

⁴⁴Wyka, “«Naga dusza» i naturalizm”, 117. See Przybyszewski, “Psychiczny naturalizm (O twórczości Edvarda Muncha)”, 99. Matuszek also claims that this German essay from 1894 was the writer’s artistic credo – See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny*, 31. Leonhard Lier and Hans Pauli, the reviewers of Przybyszewski’s debut novel *Unterwegs* from 1895, had a similar opinion (Matuszek, “*Der geniale Pole*”?, 42-43).

⁴⁵Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 195.

⁴⁶Marta Wyka, “Przybyszewski – powieściopisarz”, in *Stanisław Przybyszewski. W 50-lecie zgonu pisarza*, ed. Hanna Filipkowska (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1982), 89. Przybyszewski openly and eagerly admits that Huysmans influenced him: “And if there is a violent influence I am allegedly under, then I could only point to Huysmans as the one who had the strongest influence on me and who controlled my soul for some time” (Przybyszewski, *Moi współcześni. Wśród obcych*, 119).

⁴⁷Przewóski, “Emil Zola jako krytyk naturalistyczny”, 132-133.

⁴⁸Przybyszewski, *Listy*, 174.

⁴⁹Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny*, 273.

⁵⁰Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska, “Antymimesis i wizja. Typy konstrukcji przestrzeni w powieściach Stanisława Przybyszewskiego”, in *Przełom antypozytywistyczny w polskiej świadomości kulturowej końca XIX wieku*, ed. Tadeusz Bujnicki and Janusz Maciejewski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1986), 143-144.

Przybyszewski's novels as anti-mimesis. I want to emphasize the writer's reluctant attitude towards a category that was overestimated by naturalists. I also think that leaving the remains of realistic scenery here and there is significant and demonstrates that the writer openly breaks with the tradition of the genre.⁵¹

Indeed, we should not talk about breaking, but about reversing, the cognitive perspective. It stems from the conviction that the nature of external reality is projective and therefore superficial, and from the belief that the path to true nature leads through layers of individual and collective unconsciousness which only new art is able to explore.⁵² Therefore, it would be a kind of an epistemological turn, which entailed changes in the artistic medium. Przybyszewski often commented on it, even when he wrote favorably about expressionists from the *Zdrój* group in Poznań.

Expressionist art, he wrote, begins when 'impressionism' (no matter whether it manifests itself in realism, extreme brutal naturalism, proper impressionism, or in any other 'ism' which represents nature and reality in art) ends [...]. And I, maybe the last representative of this 'impressionism,' struggling to go through the abyss of the 'real,' the illusive and the misleading Being towards the essential reality that is only the Soul, the 'naked soul,' the monad 'without windows' which gives rise to the world by and in itself, I agree completely to this agenda.⁵³

Perhaps better than in authorial comments, Przybyszewski exemplifies the modernist paradigm in such a summary of his work, which Jerzy Franczak describes thus:

Modernism is a post-realistic paradigm. [...] Realism turns out to be a useless convention and is rejected ... in the name of achieving reality. Modernists believed that 'reality,' both material and mental, was elusive, complex, multiple and unstable, but they still believed that the purpose of their art was to express this elusiveness. Their dispute with realism was both aesthetic and epistemological. In other words, modernism is a secondary and negatively mimetic project animated by the search for more adequate ways of presenting reality. Its attitude to realism is dialectical: it creates both anti-mimetic and 'realistic' art.⁵⁴

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁵¹Kralkowska-Gątkowska, 153.

⁵²See Beata Szymańska, "Letejska strona sztuki (Koncepcja nieświadomości w polskiej literaturze modernistycznej)", *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* vol. 22 (1976): 183, 186; Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik, "«Mitologia mózgu» – casus Stanisława Przybyszewskiego", in *Poetyka intersubiektywności. Kognitywistyczna teoria narracji a proza XX wieku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2012), 50.

⁵³Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Ekspresjonizm, Słowacki i "Genezis z Ducha"* (Poznań: Zdrój, 1918), 6, 10.

⁵⁴Jerzy Franczak, *Poszukiwanie realności. Światopogląd polskiej prozy modernistycznej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 26-28.

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KEYWORDS

description

NOVEL

naturalism

ABSTRACT:

The article addresses the well-known problem of the complex relations between the works of Stanisław Przybyszewski and naturalism. However, this problem is not discussed in terms of ideology but poetics. The focus is on description and descriptiveness as components of a literary (or painterly) work of art and their role in representing the world, i.e. relations between aesthetics and epistemology.

r e a l i s m

MODERNISM

expressionism

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