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A DARK WELLSPRING



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*For every highest
spiritual matter,
there is a corresponding
key on the keyboard
of the body.*

Zofia Nałkowska,
"Count Emil"



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The literature of modernism, understood broadly as a kaleidoscope of phenomena stretching from the late nineteenth / early twentieth centuries down to the 1960s, can be characterized in many ways. One of the distinguishing features of this period, rich in masterpieces, is the link between philosophical reflection, linguistic awareness, and the personal experience of the writer, his or her own psycho-physical circumstances, corporality, gender. Of course, these circumstances were recognized significantly earlier, long before the onset of modernism, and discounted literarily, but those situations had then been treated more as a kind of limitation, as evidence of the artist's human imperfections.

In modernism, that changes. The myth of the Olympian narrator is laid to rest, the image of the omnipotent poet fades away. They are replaced by the artist who admits to a narrowed or altered perspective (Nałkowska's *close vs. far seeing*), the artist full of visible idiosyncrasies, as a medium endowed with a gender, particular experiences, and a recognizable sense of linguistic taste, pursued in particular stylistic registers characteristic for him or her.

These characteristics are manifest in the work of Zofia Nałkowska, an excellently educated (albeit home-schooled) female writer, an intellectual erudite, a subtle discussant. She never concealed that she first of all considered herself a woman, and only then a human. This confession – to some perhaps shocking – did not entail her abdication from involvement in the social, political, human reality, which she always participated in (as a PEN Club activist, a member of the Polish Academy of Literature, a provider of assistance to political prisoners in *sanacja*-era Poland, a delegate to world congresses of writers and intellectuals, a witness and recorder of war crimes). This confession was but a radical approach to the mental powers of the thinker, which in Nałkowska's view always manifest themselves via a concrete field of view, accessible not to some universal person but to a strictly specified individual. Nałkowska's identification with womanhood was strong and primary with respect to other kinds of identification. And it was also in a way heroic: admitting to a subjective perspective, an individual point of view, especially when this meant a woman's point of view, was not favorable either in interwar Poland, or in postwar Poland (and perhaps, neither is it so today). In general, such a declaration triggered a certain depreciation in the eyes of critics, of the public. It seemed like admitting to a kind of disability, like taking pride at a certain defectiveness that should more appropriately be concealed than showcased, by instead speaking vocally about universal and lofty values, especially common values.



What did this risky perspective yield in exchange? What kind of knowledge? Can what it yielded be called knowledge at all, seeing as the principles of objectivism and distance, obligatory in the Cartesian and post Cartesian model of thinking, were not preserved? Let's take a closer look at one example.

The novel *Hrabia Emil* ("Count Emil"), written in Nałkowska's youth (1917-18), was first serially published in the journal *Świat* in 1918, then as a separate whole in 1920. A bloody war was then underway in Europe, upon which the Poles pinned hopes of regaining independence. Nałkowska was, like everyone, sensitive to the patriotic idiom, but patriotism did not occlude her field of view. She looked at the war through the eyes



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of a female citizen, but above all, in keeping with the declaration of privileging one's own nature, through the eyes of a woman. She looked at the war from the *side* of women, asking how such ruthless fighting, geared towards killing, fit in with the overall economy of emotions that are people are endowed with, that are felt by them, that are shown to the world by women and men.

The main character, Emil Worostański, is the child of an aristocratic family. Neither his father, bedridden with a terminal illness, nor his mother, preoccupied with her own life organized in keeping with the principle of minimizing unpleasantness, devoted themselves to his upbringing. Turned over to tutors, and partly given free rein, he grew up like a wild plant, de-

rience, or recollections. It invoked certain words or images, but did not move beyond them.

After his father's death, Emil goes to live with his mother abroad, and is sent to attend one of the Catholic *écoles libres* in Paris. He was not fond of delicate boys, like himself, but was instead drawn to the strong, cunning ones. "He was considered proud, but he was timid and jealous." He did not like himself, his own weakness. Upon becoming a young man, he desired women who were strong, primordial, decisive. He did not know how to love, because – as the novel's author states – "we love what is similar to us, what reaffirms and grounds us in life. Emil, on the other hand, was attracted by what contradicted him and soon became adverse to it." After dreaming of the beautiful Angelica, he cast her aside once he sensed he had won her over, and he treated other women similarly. He returned to Poland and, wanting to get involved in the military, he joined the legions. Despite his poor health (the threat of tuberculosis), he made it through all the training. He felt at home at long last, in the proper role for himself. His weakness no longer mattered, because the military regime did not allow for it. Everything was settled in advance, simple, and closely tied up with the fantasies of his youth, "that mutual intermingling, interweaving of valor, faith, and the senses." In the military, like in school, he was drawn to people different from himself: strong, commanding, ruthless.

He adored his commander, Żelawa. "As was his custom, he dreamed about him," Nałkowska writes. "Indeed, Żelawa did not take cognizance of something, then next judge it. For him, taking cognizance of something took place in affective terms, *simultaneous* with judgement." Emil, too, followed this affective pathway to thought. He wanted to fight for a homeland he did not know, which had become solidified only in images, songs, stylizations, as one of his female cousins described it. He absolved himself with the notion that a person from a captive country cannot fail to relate to the horrors of war, which – finally heading to the front lines – he began to experience for himself. But, paradoxically, participation in the ritual of war also gave him the sense of strength he had always desired: "He had the impression that he had finally cast off responsibility, that he was living on someone else's moral account." The fact that he could be killed there gave him the right to react in any way. "Many things now became clear to him – through a particular connection to the world of his youth. Terrible and bloody things, murder, revenge, cruelty became understandable and normal once they became part of utility and duty. Emil understood that the whole world of perversion related to this is an artificial product of civilization, a secondary sense imposed upon simple matters through moral suggestion." He invoked comparisons arguing that when murdering, people are behaving just as naturally as animals that kill for food or to maintain



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Nałkowska's character Emil concluded that when murdering, people are behaving just as naturally as animals that kill for food or to maintain dominance. They only differ in terms of their capacity to ascribe lofty motivations to what they are doing. Pictured here: the trenches of WWI.

spite his refined manners and outward observance of conventions. His childish curiosity about the world led to a certain cruelty, natural at a certain age, towards animals, which he liked to torment in a seemingly innocent way. Acts of cruelty gave him pleasure and he abandoned himself to them, describing them as *dreams*. He imagined, for instance, an act of flogging with himself as the subject. He spied on acts of violence occurring in the families of workers on the manor. For pleasure, he would sometimes beat the servant girls working on embroidering in his mother's wardrobe. All of this strangely excited him. He inflicted pain and was curious about pain. More or less at the same time, he began to hear talk of the captive Polish nation as yearning to be liberated. He succumbed to these fantasies as well. "He dreamed of what a blissful struggle this must be, the bliss, as he felt it, of *overcoming fear*," Nałkowska commented, stressing that the patriotic tension was in this case distant, secondary, mediated rather than invoking any concrete knowledge, expe-

TOTALITARIAN PERSONALITY EXAMINED IN NAŁKOWSKA'S NOVELS

dominance. They only differ in terms of their capacity to ascribe lofty motivations to their own actions. When making this diagnosis, comprehending war as violence combined, not infrequently, with the bliss of killing, Emil did not feel disappointed. On the contrary: "This was more than he had expected."

It was only encountering Nina Bietowska, a girl from the neighboring manor, the daughter of a man who had had a romance with his own mother after the death of his father (thereby damaging his own family as well as Ms. Worostańska), that would provoke a change in his thinking. Looking upon Nina's life, modest, humble, steeped in work for the sake of others (helping wounded soldiers, irrespective of which army they were from, and working on the manor farm), devoted to taking care of him when he was overpowered by a relapse of tuberculosis, he understood that there exist a good and an evil, that there exists a different logic of life, one that does not involve putting others to death. That love does not involve inflicting pain, that it is not a way of taking out one's own weaknesses. That the army is not the emblem of strength. Dying after a long illness, he confessed: "I have had women, I have killed people. These are the sins of a human."



This equating of two things, taking the lives of others and causing suffering to women, is not a mixing up of domains of reality, but the outcome of a certain new anthropology, the modernist anthropology which Nałkowska builds and cultivates. These seemingly incomparable things have a common denominator in the conviction that the basic instinct guiding people is the pleasure of inflicting pain. This anthropological notion, supported no doubt by the authority of Freud, his theory of sadomasochism, the nearness of Eros and Thanatos, nevertheless flows primarily from self-experience, which allows romantic suffering, the suffering of rejection and betrayal, to be likened to physical pain, to the torment of death. That is why, despite what she herself said on the topic, the author's body of work does not exhibit any abrupt transition between the writings of her youth vs. her mature work, devoted to the social idiom. The cruelty of WWII, a burden beyond the strength of the aging writer, likewise did not come as a surprise to her in the ethical and intellectual dimension. In one of her journal entries during the occupation of WWII, Nałkowska writes that war is not something animal, on the contrary, it is very much *human*, because it emerges from the instinct of doing evil, of using violence, that the human species is endowed with.

But *Hrabia Emil* demonstrates that already around the times of WWI, several years prior to the birth of fascism, Nałkowska was familiar with the mechanisms that give rise to the totalitarian type of personality. In line with what Polish philosopher Tadeusz Kroński

and Israeli philosopher Saul Friedländer would write much later, she linked that mechanism to the kind of behavior that Kroński calls the "sentimental distortion of values," thoughtlessly succumbing to empty ideas (love for one's homeland, the greatness of one's nation) that do not have any concrete, verifiable, human content. They are merely, as Friedländer put it, a jumble of affects and images, most often kitschy ones as these have the greatest power of attraction, they are the most tempting, they provoke the most tears. Emil discovered this principle and took it as justification for his own patriotic emotions: "The secret is fully within the human heart. A shudder, baited breath, rapture – one word for all this: homeland. The secret is fully in a person's emotional state. The national flag is being carried, a song is being sung. And the shopkeeper stands on the steps of his shop, wipes away his tears, and thinks that this is the greatest moment of his life. We can

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presumably think about transferring those emotional states to a higher-order category. But after all, attempts made in history at glorifying Reason in lieu of God, of loving justice in lieu of one's homeland, have become caricatures. The bee would be more noble with its stinger removed, yet it will die. As a nation will die without an army. And as patriotism without hatred is dead. Certain instincts can only be excised together with life – or at least the capacity for it. And one such instinct is the love of one's homeland."

Nałkowska tries to derive the "secret of humanity" from the affective realm, wanting to lend it intellectual and moral sanction. She demanded it in every situation and from everyone, without exception. She applied the same measure of common sense and ethics to the Polish longing for independence. She wished to separate the natural need for liberty from "sentimentally distorted" patriotism, upon which the heart of the shopkeeper, the literary figure, the aristocrat, or the faithful legionnaire could feast. It is a shame that this was not appreciated, that the incisive and similar-minded critic Karol Irzykowski saw in Nałkowska's early, well-chiseled novels only the mannerism of a female writer.

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