

Translated by David Malcolm

The Body as an Epistemological Metaphor¹ of Modernism

Interpréter – c'est avoir
un corps, être perspective².

Éric Blondel

1. "The Eye of the Mind" and "The Eye of the Body". From Descartes to Nietzsche

Reflecting on the genesis of the crisis of the traditional power of vision, Martin Jay asserted that the epoch of modernism is distinguished by the phenomenon of "the return to the body" (Jay 295–330). His opinion corresponds with the perception that modernist literature and philosophy, by focusing on the problem of corporeality, simultaneously diagnose the discovery of chaos within human nature and beyond it, undertake reflection on human cognitive capabilities, and recognize humanity's complicated situation in the world. However, Jay's enigmatic observation inclines one to reflect on what this return consists of and how it came to take place.

Richard Sheppard, referring to Hugo Ball's theoretical work, the pillars of which are ideas of Nietzsche's, has distinguished three aspects in which the modernist "transvaluation of all values" can be seen. These are: 1) a changing sense of reality; 2) a transformation of the understanding up to now of human nature; and 3) a transformation of the relations between reality and the human being (92). In Sheppard's view, the first change was linked to the scientific revision of the convictions that applied to physical reality and remained in accordance with Newton's mechanistic picture of the world. As Sheppard notes, the discoveries of Einstein, de Broglie, Schrödinger, and Dirac proved that space, the model of which was Euclidean geometry, defies Newtonian concepts because of its discontinuities and irregularities. In its new modernist version, physical reality constituted the *exemplum* of the annulment of the principle of causality; however the categories of time and space, in accordance with Kant's intuitions (confirmed

¹ The concept of an "epistemological metaphor" comes from Umberto Eco. See: U. Eco. *Dzieło otwarte. Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych*. Trans. J. Gałuszka, L. Eustachiewicz, A. Kreisberg, M. Oleksiuk. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1994. 43.

² "To interpret, that means to have a body, to be a perspective". See: É. Blondel, *Nietzsche. Le corps et la culture. La philosophie comme généalogie philologique*, Paris, 1986. 325.

by Nietzsche) revealed their relativity and turned out to be only useful schematizations whereby the human intellect can grasp a reality that is basically chaotic. The picture of a material universe, composed of atoms, marked by a certain equilibrium, crumbled under the pressure of motion pressing in on all sides, so that researchers began to observe that, as W. Heisenberg notes, the views of contemporary physics are in a sense surprisingly close to the concepts of Heraclitus. If we substitute for the word fire the term energy, then his assertions will almost completely match today's views (47).

Reality, so understood, loses permanent features, and immersed in mutability, simultaneously drowns in a relativism in which everything can be transformed into its opposite. At the same time, Heraclitus's sense of the cosmic rationality of the world hidden in antinomies, dissonances, and contradictions was not something so obvious for modernists.

To highlight the contrast, it is worth recalling that in the view of Descartes (the father of modern philosophy) God, constrained by nothing, devised a world in accordance with the principles of logic, although He could have done it differently. Therefore the human being was able to describe this predictable nature and all that exists in the language of concepts, just as the body's activity could be grasped with help of the category of hydromechanics. The ascription of cognitive competencies to the intellect put a high value on reason, made reality transparent to human intellect, and led to an apologia for rational knowledge. A comparison of the modernist vision of the world with the convictions inscribed in Cartesian philosophy makes it even more clear how the "formlessness" of the new face of reality, its amorphous quality, which is not subject to measurement, contradicts the classic sense of harmony, any concept of rationality and order, challenges our ideas about the purposeful construction of the world, and fills one with a sense of alienation toward a reality hitherto seen as homely and friendly. The parallelism between the logical structure of the material world and the structure of human reason, a parallelism that was obvious not only to Descartes, but also to nineteenth-century realist writers, loses in modernist literature and philosophy its former certainty.

A further aspect of the transvaluation that is strongly echoed in modernist philosophy, science, literature, and art takes the form of changes in well-established beliefs about human nature, which even more powerfully affected the balance between the human being and the cosmos. Looking suspiciously at what had hitherto passed for human consciousness, modernism conducted a ruthless dismantling of the foundations of the Cartesian philosophy of the subject. It is worth recalling here that Descartes understood the subject substantially and identified it with the act of thought.

"I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material

thing; so that “I,” that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is” (Descartes 31).

Understood thus, the body was not an integral element necessary for subjectivity to constitute itself. For Descartes did not notice its role in creating identity, reducing the subject to a thinking self understood substantially. For the subject, its own mind was the most obvious manifestation in the order of cognition. Descartes also developed the psychological criterion of truth, the result of which was that if the thinking person sees a given phenomenon *clearly*, that means that it exists in a certain way. It is characteristic that Descartes dealt with reflections on the world that aspired, as he thought, to be called objective, reflections carried out in the spirit of the principles of geometry and mathematics, immediately after he had – with a “creative gesture” participating as it were in a divine perspective, on the scale of *fiat lux* – divided cosmos from chaos, and had separated *res cogitans* (capable of self-knowledge) from *res extensa*, thus establishing an ontological dualism of body and soul. Geometry, which Descartes recognized as the pattern of perfection, became not only the basis of metaphysical investigation. It also served as a model suitable for describing the properties of matter, influencing in a basic way the visibility in matter of specific categories and not others, among which were spatiality, shape, number, and size. Geometry, however, had its limits, ones that Descartes did not perceive for a long time. Geometry permitted Descartes only to make a description of corporeality done “from the outside”, but paradoxically allowed him to grasp only what is visible to the eye. Further, however, in this objectified understanding, matter, reified, measurable, like a machine, completely predictable, and having nothing in common with the knowing “mind’s eye”, could not but cause unease.

Further, Descartes drew his conviction of the reality of the world from the existence of consciousness based on doubt. Optimistic assumptions permitted the philosopher to suppose that the subject undertakes mental activity and perceives the reality surrounding it independent of its own corporeality. Descartes did not take into account corporeality’s capricious influence to change the disposition of the human being; sticking to the thesis that if laid-down procedures are followed, it should not have any bearing on cognitive results. In this way, belief in the possibility of appropriately directing reason served to maintain the illusion of the universality, ahistoricity, and timelessness of the observer’s findings.

However, those processes that take place in modernism, connected with the transformation of the face of the world, the human being, and a change in the understanding

of the relation between them, demonstrated that Descartes' theses were difficult to maintain. By virtue of Freudian discoveries and the ideas of the representatives of *Lebensphilosophie*, the concept of the subject shaped in the modern period was fundamentally revised. Nietzsche's ideas played a role in this transformation that is difficult to exaggerate.

Reconstructing Nietzsche's position in the matter of the subject, we must answer the question: did he modify or perhaps completely destroy the concept of the subject? Additional reflection is also demanded by a question connected with the character of the criticism formulated by Nietzsche. It would be worthwhile establishing if it has only a negative sense, and, if not, which pieces of his writing were part of a positive project, aiming to establish a new vision of the subject.

Nietzsche's reflections are situated at the antipode of the paradigm of the subject established by Descartes. Subjectivity, understood in the Cartesian spirit – that thinking "I", self-conscious, autonomous, transparent to itself – was meant to be the guarantor of certain knowledge, its foundation, pillar, and sheet-anchor. Nietzsche's deliberations were conducted under the auspices of a conviction that it was necessary to subject to criticism the apparent transparency of concepts such as the subject, consciousness, reason, and will.

Nietzsche cast doubt on the ahistoricity of the concept of the subject. Recalling its corporeality brought history back to it. In Nietzsche's view, the subject could not be formulated as something obvious, a frozen identity not subject to change. As, in Nietzsche's view, identity was no longer beyond doubt, the philosopher saw identity as an effect of regulating, simplifying, and pragmatic work on the part of the human intellect. Valuing the unbridled element of the body, understood as a synonym of the paradoxality and incalculability of life, Nietzsche contradicted rational structuralizations, and resisted the schematizing claims of conceptual structures. Simultaneously, in contrast to the Cartesian certainty of perception directed at the confirmation of the self, Nietzschean reflection opened up to non-human and irrational aspects of existence, aspects that cannot be eradicated from existence. Reason is depreciated in confrontation with what is other than it, in the face of the body's irrationality. In reference to human beings, Nietzsche often uses animalistic metaphors, in this way shattering a tradition of thinking of the subject established by Descartes, one that, distancing itself from corporeality, cut itself off from the chaotic world of nature. The object of Nietzsche's suspicions was the possibility of achieving self-knowledge, the ability of the human being to know him/herself:

"What does man actually know about himself? Is he, indeed, ever able to perceive himself completely, as if laid out in a lighted display case? Does nature not conceal most things from him-even

concerning his own body—in order to confine and lock him within a proud, deceptive consciousness, aloof from the coils of the bowels, the rapid flow of the blood stream, and the intricate quivering of the fibers!” (185).

In Nietzsche’s view the human being is not fully transparent to him/herself. In order to give proof of this lack of transparency, Nietzsche recalls the construction of human anatomy. Nature forbids humans to look inside themselves; one can know the secret of the body only at the cost of self-wounding. Reducing the subject to structures of instinct and impulse, understood as manifestations of the will to power, Nietzsche simultaneously challenged the conviction that the subject is transparent to itself, and cast doubt on its autonomy, an autonomy that was still self-evident for Descartes.

In the process of crushing a monolithic understanding of the subject, Nietzsche also considered the problem of the will. “‘The doer’ is merely invented after the fact – the act is everything”, he wrote (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* 13). The philosopher’s assertions cast even more doubt on the once unwavering belief in the autonomy of the subject, since “belief in the will is, for Nietzsche, a typical transference of cause and effect, an unconscious metaphor” (Wasiewicz 378).

Nietzsche performed an analogical transvaluation of the question of consciousness. Pointing to its social lineage, he maintained that it does not individualize the human being, but makes possible interaction, mediates contact among people, and establishes a community of experience. In Nietzsche’s opinion a generalization of experience makes life simpler, and, thus, less painful. A conceptual system built in a secondary fashion over a chaotic world of sensory impressions makes it possible to frame reality in more human categories, and shows that reality as stable, lasting, safe, and governed by regular laws. Tirelessly criticizing the Cartesian concept that situates the observer outside the observed world, Nietzsche, however, proposed a positive project: he wished to return to the subject its dynamic quality, by understanding it together with reality, as a pulsing unit of uncertain boundaries, subject to fluctuations and changes, and difficult to grasp.

Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, Martin Jay asserted that the Cartesian conviction of the existence of a divine perspective in which the subject participates, and which is a guarantee of the reliability of the results of human cognition, and the spread of perspective in painting – these lie at the base of modern visual-centeredness, which was only questioned at the end of the nineteenth century. Modern visual-centeredness was connected with the domination of defined cognitive schemes mediating an understanding of reality.

To understand the meaning and character of this phenomenon, it is necessary at the start to look at its genesis.

A survey of selected concepts contained in writings by Plato, St Augustine, and Kant can constitute a representative corpus of material permitting one to reconstruct the problem. For it seems that reflection on the history of seeing understood as a metaphor of intellectual activity most fully reveals the specific features of the assumptions inscribed in a philosophical discourse permeated by visual metaphors. It is important that, on one hand, this metaphor refers one to the world of senses, but, on the other hand, paradoxically negates that world, for it is based on the premise that the intellect is not connected with the body, nor indeed with any concrete point in space.

Martin Jay and Hannah Arendt consider that from the very beginnings of philosophy, thought was understood in visual categories. Initially, the concept *noemai* was used to define visual perception, and only later was it used in the meaning of intellectual perception and processes of understanding, until, finally, it was promoted to mean the most perfect form of thinking.

Hanna Arendt emphasizes that no one, she suspects:

“ever thought that the eye, the organ of sight, and »nous«, the organ of thinking, were one and the same, but the very word points to the fact that relation between the eye and the seen object is very similar to the relation between the intellect and the object that is thought about, because it achieves the same kind of obviousness. No language, she goes on, has a ready lexicon for the requirements of intellectual activity; it must reach for words initially connected with sensual experience” (150, 153).

Already for Kant the only possibility of externalizing the speculative intellect, that is thinking, was to use analogies, to speak in the language of metaphors.

For Arendt, metaphor furnishes abstract thought, which is without tangible features, with intuitions derived from the world of phenomena, the function of which is to “ensure reality for our concepts”, and thus it, as it were, destroys that withdrawal from the world of phenomena that is the initial condition for mental activity. Arendt argues that our concepts derive from phenomena, and are only their abstractions. It is, however, completely different if the intellect must transcend the borders of a given world and lead us into uncertain regions of speculation, where there are no tangible features matching the intellect’s concepts. It is at this moment, she argues, metaphor appears. Metaphor performs the transfer, the transition from one existential state, which is thought, to another, which is being a phenomenon among phenomena, and this can only be accomplished via analogy (151).

Despite the fact that among all the senses, vision establishes the greatest distance between subject and object, the metaphor of seeing spread most widely in the pages of the works of the “lovers of wisdom”, and became the sign of the predestination of this sense to participate in the truth.

But, Arendt points out when she reflects of the problem of the permeation of philosophical discourse with visual metaphors, thinking is the most fundamental and the most radical action among all those of the intellect. This is also how seeing became the model for all perception and the measure of the other senses (160).

Intuition of understanding as an ideal of truthfulness is apparent, for example, in the Platonic description of the illumination that is opposed to the illusory and fleeting shadows on the wall of the cave. It becomes an important element of reflection on the subject of “divine light” by Saint Augustine, according to whom it is the spirit and not the body that knows God. It is impossible to see God with bodily eyes or with any such sense, because the sight of a transcendental being is only available to spiritual eyes (XXII).

It is a similar matter (I wish to limit the number of examples) with the previously discussed case of Cartesian thought, in which the most important criteria of cognition were “clarity” of perception, a clarity that was recognized as a gauge of the accuracy of thought, in other words of the sole attribute of consciousness.

In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes wrote that his aim was “to reject as if it were absolutely false everything regarding which I could imagine the least doubt, so as to see whether this left me with anything entirely indubitable to believe” (22).

The juxtaposition of Descartes’ argument, which constitutes the acme of modern vision-centeredness, with Plato’s thought and that of Saint Augustine and Kant, makes it completely apparent that those philosophers nourished the paradoxical conviction that thought is without spatial dimension and is not physical.

In the article I have already mentioned, Martin Jay drew attention to the fact that in the philosophy, literature and art of modernism, two changes had taken place that were fundamental for the shape of epistemology and aesthetics. An antivisual discourse led to a recorporealization of the subject and a detranscendentalization of perspective. To put the matter at its simplest, modernist thinking was connected with attempts to transvalue the “cultural hierarchy of the senses”, and was apparent in reflection on the phenomenon of vision-centeredness, a phenomenon well-established in classical times, and one adopted by Christian thought and the philosophy of the West.

In philosophy the generally accepted identification of the metaphor of seeing with accuracy of cognition almost completely disappears as a result of the critique carried out by Nietzsche and Bergson, both of whom rejected the concept of a divine perspective in favor of particular points of view. In addition, when asking about the possibility of the agreement of knowing with its object (*adequatio rei et intellectus*, which, according to Kant, is the ultimate criterion of truth), they perceived a lack of identity between the observing and the observed phenomenon.

The detranscendentalization of perspective, indicated in the assertion that “God is dead”, had its genesis in Nietzschean perspectivism, widely recognized as a conception that deconstructs modern vision-centrism. Initially in his reflections, Nietzsche followed the Kantian assertion concerning the intellect’s shaping and organizing of the world’s phenomenal chaos. Nietzsche shared Kant’s conviction concerning the sense-creating character of the subject’s mental activity, one that given shape to what is formless. Nietzsche wrote: “We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live – by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 164).

From a similar thesis about the ordering work of the mind, Nietzsche, however, drew radically different conclusions. He rejected Kant’s conviction of the universality of *a priori* cognition. Nietzsche’s perspectivism situates itself, in fact, in opposition to apriority, and constitutes a transition from the “unembodied intellect”, framing in structures the chaotic world of phenomena, to the body as an interpretative metaphor; from the unshaken, unchanging picture of the world to an entity that is constantly transforming and becoming³. Nietzschean perspectivism subjected objectivist and essentialist thinking to revision, and placed a question mark against the static picture of reality that that thinking promoted.

Nietzsche questioned the identity of thought and entity, so obvious for Kant, so that the category of interpretation had to replace categories of knowledge and its claim to unique truthfulness. In place of the one Intellect, which was the object of Kantian analysis, there appeared a multiplicity of frequently disproportionate, incompatible points of view. Through the assertion that everything is a matter of interpretation, Nietzsche went beyond the formal *a priori* foundation of the truthfulness of knowledge and experience.

Perspectivism anchors all thought in the horizon of experience, and frames presence in reference to the empirical world. “To interpret,” in Eric Blondel’s comment on a Nietzschean understanding of the senses, “means to have a body, to be a perspective. ... Chaos becomes a world only through the body” (325)⁴. He goes on, “The body, however, is a place mediating between the absolute multiplicity of the world of chaos and the absolute simplification of the intellect” (284).

The body determines the shape of cognitive processes and has the character of a liminal space via which the disorder of reality (related to the multiplicity of corporeal drives) is transformed into an order imposed by the simplifying apparatus located in the body.

³ See: Markowski 63.

⁴ “Interpréter, c’est avoir un corps, être perspective. (...) Chaos ne doit monde que par le corps”.

Situated as he/she is in relation to the world's excess, the human being, in order to achieve orientation, must exert him/herself and turn anonymous regions into meaningful places. The body is, in its way, a point of contact between the chaos of reality and the schematizing work of the intellect. If human cognition is complete, partial, fragmentary, and faulty, that is, in fact, because of the corporeal anchoring of the subject. Objects appearing in the subject's field of vision are inscribed in an unfinished line of possible perspectives, since it is possible to look at every thing from a limitless number of points of view. At the same time, the human being is condemned to cognitive incompleteness, because a given object manifests itself to vision only from one side, and the possibility of seeing a thing from all the perspectives that can be thought of has no chance of being realized in practice.

The Nietzschean critique of vision-centeredness had to lead to a redefinition of the status of the knowing subject and the known object. In this formulation, the knowing subject is an interpreter of an entity that is coming into existence, and not an objective examiner of a static world. The interpretation, that is the seeing, of the world is wholly determined by the corporeality of the subject. It is always a matter of seeing from a specific perspective. One of its inseparable features is intentionality. Invoking the body as a metaphor of interpretation must bring with it in consequence a questioning of the conception of the meaning of reality as a ready, ahistorical "text" that is subject to unambiguous exegesis. It appears that it is appropriate to interpret Nietzschean perspectivism in this spirit. Nietzsche is convinced that the world can not be known, nor experienced, beyond the concrete points of view from which it is perceived. Even the description of reality as chaos, although it is not without traces of an ambition to get near to the dynamism and fluidity of the world, also bears marks of a perspectival vision, and is not an objective assertion.

"It is, thus, necessary to say that the entity is not so much chaos, but something somehow unknown, so fluid and undefined that it is subject to a multiplicity of interpretations, and it is possible to grasp it by means of various perspectives. One could then say that it is that possibility of adopting various perspectives, various interpretations that would be that *logos*."

The entity so understood, subject to possibly many interpretations, can be perfectly grasped by means of the metaphor of the text. However, on the other hand, one of the basic meanings of the concept of *logos* is the word. A text, however, is nothing other than a multiplicity of words. One could follow this idea further and accept that Nietzsche accepts many *logoi*. Each new interpretation of the entity, each new perspective is governed by a *logos* that is appropriate to it" (Wasiewicz 391-392).

Thus meaning can no longer be understood as something objective, a frozen, immovable, substantialized state of affairs, which it is necessary to discover, understand,

and elucidate. Perspectivism equals a recognition of the fortuitousness, the fragmentariness of a picture of the world, the unavoidable segmentation and aspectual nature of its interpretation. A perspectival interpretation is a consequence of the way in which a changing, ungraspable world appears in the field of vision. Point of view has a decisive influence on the categorization of a given phenomenon. Thus one can say that the observer, instead of seeing the entity, selectively extracts from it features that are important for him/her, at the same time ascribing to them notations of value. However, the very principle of selection of properties that governs the process of perception is implemented in such a way that the subject, at a given moment, only perceives what has practical meaning for him/her. In this sense, the ontological status of reality is not independent to the degree that it is not final and is subject to transformation. Nietzsche argues that, for the human being, the being of things becomes a function of its accessibility, its presence in ocular over-view. Things exist insofar as they are seen. Perspectivism lays bare the interweaving of reality with the contingency of overview. Michał Paweł Markowski appropriately puts it thus:

“The eye that was hitherto always a metaphor of cognition, now becomes a metaphor of interpretation: for its is no longer the eye of the soul, but the body’s eye. The eye itself turns out to be body and occupies a defined place in space. A place fixed only for it and a time that is appropriate to it” (298).

Nietzschean perspectivism led to a situation in which, in order to define human cognition, the concepts of body and intellect can be evoked interchangeably; they enter into relations of equivalence that would be incomprehensible to Descartes. Perspectival cognition is the establishment of “the mental object”, and does not conceal its relativity, selectivity, its active, emotional relation to the world. Nietzsche put it thus: “we have to give birth to our thoughts out of our pain and, like mothers, endow them with all we have of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate, and catastrophe”⁵.

Perspectivism verifies the fiction of “incorporeal cognition”. In this way the body, pushed aside by Descartes, in the process of doubt, into the regions of unreality, now transferred into the registries of the unobvious, gained a connection with the philosophizing subject.

2. The detranscendentalization of perspective and the recorporealization of the subject. Changes in modernist literature and art

Literature and art followed modernist philosophy, revising modern vision-centeredness, a revision identical with an undermining of the dominant role of the intellect.

⁵ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Preface to the Second Edition.

Literature and art, interested in the “cognitive apparatus”, attempted to get to the roots of the mechanisms governing the operation of perceptual processes. If we consider the achievements of a broadly understood perspectivism, the crowning proof of this may be the spatial compositions of Marcel Duchamp, the so-called *readymades*, undermining the classical ideal of beauty, questioning the visual-esthetic values of objects, values that had hitherto served as criteria allowing the definition of a given object as a work of art, or making it impossible to distinguish it from what a work of art is not.

Jarosław Przemieński rightly notes in his comments on Duchamp’s gesture of breaking with modern vision-centeredness:

“Through his provocations, the father of conceptualism called up stormy disputes on the subject of the definition of the artifact, disputes in which its visual value became peripheral, leaving at the center the artist and his arbitrary gesture of designation, raising the urinal to the status of a work of art” (340).

The Cubists, in turn, desirous of capturing the sum of individual perceptions of reality, rejected painterly perspective, and abandoned the strategy of presenting objects, a strategy causing the viewer to have the impression of three-dimensionality. On an esthetic level, this can be seen as the equivalent of Nietzschean perspectivism, in which the Platonic world of ideas was pushed aside by a play of views, meanings, and values.

Apollinaire insisted, in connection with Cubism, that Greek art understood beauty in purely human categories. The human being was the measure of perfection. The ideal of modern painters was, however, an unending universe, and it was to this particular ideal that we owe our new measure of perfection. Nietzsche, Apollinaire argued, guessed the possibility of such an art; he arraigns Greek art through the mouth of Dionysus (21–22).

The Cubists rejected the traditional conviction that it was possible fully to reach reality by the path of perception and rejected the rules of unitary perspective. They joined the apologists of a non-Euclidean vision of reality. One can say that Cubism, taking into consideration the relativistic findings of science, spoke in favor of a creative technique that matched the new face of the world, one far from stability and unitary meaning, the world that Nietzsche wrote of in *The Gay Science*. “But I should think that today we are at least far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner. Rather has the world become ‘infinite’ for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations” (Book V).

Thus, Apollinaire’s words on Cubism, together with Duchamp’s experiments and Nietzschean perspectivism, produced a triple voice connected with a critique of the subject

understood as a consciousness capable of realizing in conceptual categories what is the object of perception.

The detranscendentalization of perspective, accomplished under the Nietzschean banner at the turn of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, necessarily influenced literature, and manifested itself, in general terms, in the replacement of authorial narration by personal narration, one connected with the particular point of view of one unit. A narrative given in the third person, in which the narrator, to use Głowiński's apt term, is placed on "Olympian heights" (82), participating in a god-like purview, recounting events from a position that requires no verification, passing on unchanging truths about the world – such narration was replaced by a personal narration, not telling of how the world is, but of what has been seen and interpreted by a speaking figure. This transformation not only required the reader to ask who the narrator is, and what contents he/she has projected onto the presented world, but also rendered tangible the ontological lack of independence of the novel's reality, existing, as it does, as viewed and presented from one and not another perspective.

The problematization of the position of the very narrator, who, it seemed, does not have to be autonomous, rational, capable of self-knowledge, and transparent to him/herself, led to the bankruptcy of any conviction concerning the independence of reality from the subject. It led to a reduction of the world of objects to their surfaces, their appearances, and their profiles, the analysis of which demanded a recognition of the points of view inscribed in them – an epistemological one, an axiological one, and finally an esthetic one. Seen through this lens, omniscient narrational technique, constructed on the Cartesian model, which defines the criterion of certain knowledge as the formula "to see clearly", fell victim to disillusion and began to be seen as a convention that is not aware of its own procedures, and does not take account of the consequences of its drive to evoke impressions of insight into the essences of reality and the nature of "self-referencing" events.

It is impossible to overestimate the effects of Nietzschean perspectivism on literary changes characteristic for the "atmosphere of crisis" of modernist experiments. The smashing of basic epistemological categories, a changing sense of the meaning of reality and "human nature", and a redefinition of the relation of the human being and reality (resulting from the impression of the constant threat of entropy) necessarily influenced the choice of the path of literary experiment by many modernist prose-writers. Robert Sheppard notes that according to many different positions, the fluctuations of reality and the complexity of human nature, invisible to the eye of empirical sense, which is guided by conventional common sense, can be understood, visualized, and gra-

sped only by those powers of human nature that are situated under or beyond rational powers (113).

It is certainly for this reason that madmen are the narrators of such different works as *Tancerz mecenasa Kraykowskiego*, *Zbrodnia z premedytacją*, and *Kosmos* by Gombrowicz, *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner (in this novel we have to deal with an idiot's monologue, in which the author, breaking the rules of narrational omniscience, condemns the reader to wander among contradictory accounts, and to reconstruct painstakingly the disturbed chronology of events), and *The Neighbor* by Kafka (in this miniature, the narrator's perspective is so particular that it deprives the narration of credibility – the protagonist, frustrated by the news that someone has got ahead of him and rented the flat that is on the other side of the wall from his firm, wrongly accuses the new tenant of harming his (the narrator's) interests, demonstrating by such behavior his own persecution complex⁶). In the case of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, one can also speak of the psychological disintegration of the narrator-protagonist⁷. The narrators' utterances touch the borders of the intelligible universum of human rationality. They become a manifestation of the etioliation of faith in the language of privileged explanations and in the possibility of constructing a semantically neutral account. At the same time, they are proof that the "madman's gaze" can rescue reality from the automatization of perception, and can show it from a different perspective.

While Gombrowicz in narration deals with madness, Bruno Schulz investigates the semantic force of metaphor in attempts to demonstrate the metamorphic character of his presented reality. Schulz's corporeal metaphor suspends the importance of the common meaning of the word "is", which lays claim to a fixed, unchanging, and real equivalent, and he shifts the line of demarcation marking the borders of the logosphere. Somatic language captures similarity in difference, and at the same time opens the text to heteroglossia, is, in fact, heteroglossia itself. One can treat this language as a variant of "conceptional relativity", the domain of which is polyphony and unlikeness, and the purpose of which is rather to raise doubts than to resolve them.

The literature of modernism, evoking philosophical content with the help of its own specific artistic means, attempts to understand how the human being knows the world, and what the mechanisms are of understanding and creating internal models of reality. The works of Gombrowicz and Schulz offer models. Indeed, each of those works presents, in its own way, the problem of body and mind, and compels the reader to formulate questions. What is the relation of the material to the world of the spirit? Is there free will?

⁶ See on this subject: E. Szczęsna 5.

⁷ In short stories by Schulz, madness appears in the characters' creations.

How far are human choices determined? To what degree is thinking based on logic? To what degree is emotional engagement necessary? Such questions prompt multi-layered reflection, based on issues from ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and axiology.

It is necessary to treat these works as modernist, as literary witness to the growing sense of alienation, appearing in the unceasing return of questions of meaning, purpose, and causes, asked by characters, subject to the operation of inhuman, because irrational, forces that are difficult to describe in terms of cognitive categories. Sheppard fully confirms this when he points out that characters suddenly discover that the “real”, that is the conventional, world of objects and relations, in which they felt secure and at home, is actually given over to the mercy of the forces of the elements that permeate it, over which the human being has no final control. At the same time, he/she must deal with them or be destroyed (97).

The shattering of the stable picture of reality, which sinking into entropy underwent alteration to become its own opposite, inclines modernist literary characters to seek their identity.

Perceiving the problematic nature of corporeality, they realize that that Difference and Otherness must not necessarily be identified exclusively with the external. In confrontation with the unbridled potential of events, struggling with the labile I, the modernist subject discovers “omnipotential” in him/herself. He/she stands face to face with the dialectic of what one can see as one’s own, and what exceeds that, and appears general, not finally domesticated, but resident in him/herself, bearing with it the unceasing danger of breaking apart.

The recognition (via philosophy) of the body as an essential element of subjectivity, the basis of all thinking and acting, had as its consequence the reinterpretation of the category of the literary figure/character and compelled questions concerning its *mode d’être*. This *mode d’être* turned out to be ambiguous and full of ambivalence. The modernist, self-reflexive literary character discovers doubleness in him/herself. When he/she starts on the road to self-knowledge, he/she perceives a paradox: seeking his/her own being, his/her own roots, he/she discovers a pre-established otherness, which constitutes him/her, exceeds and determines simultaneously. It turns out that the body, one of the basic elements constituting identity, and what is more, constituting its necessary condition, is marked by an indelible ambiguity. On one hand, the human being could not exist without a body; on the other hand, however, the body, understood as the seat of mighty emotional energies, frequently becomes a source of internal conflicts and crises that are difficult to overcome. The body, immersed in time in the most acute way, subjects literary figures to the experience of change. What was supposed

to constitute its subjectivity is also revealed as Other, which exists in time, is governed by its own dynamic, and constantly elusive, slipping constantly, misses all hope of attaining certain knowledge.

Corporeality, thematized and problematized by modernist literature, is what arouses unease, is linked with the sphere that opposes the human will, demonstrating to it that the human is limited at the very bases of his/her being. Via the body, the literary character perceives the blurring of the boundary between being and possessing, and knows the dialectic movement between "I am" and "I have".

Modernist literary texts, exploiting the discoveries of psychoanalysis, demonstrate that the assertion that the body is not the possession of the subject, but the subject belongs to the body, does not have to be an absurdity. In the dialectic between what the subject recognizes as its own, and what it identifies as Other, experiences of bodily or psychological disintegration may cause the impression that the body is something alien, something in itself, something that can only with difficulty be subjected to the control of the will.

The ambivalent status of the body, which the modernists emphasize, resides also in the fact that the borderland between what is internal and what is external is at the same time open, not only for the experience of desire, but also for the experience of pain that the subject would rather avoid. In pain, the body ceases to be obedient, and appears one's own and alien simultaneously. Indeed, the sensation of alienness increases when the body demands what the subject can not wholly accept. Thus it is apparent that, shaping the map of experience, the body makes the work of consciousness dependent on it, and leaves the will only an insignificant area of freedom of operation. The will can only sanction *post factum* what has already happened without its participation. As examples of this we may adduce: parts of *The Immoralist* (1902) by André Gide, for whom the human being was the embodiment of a play of antimonies, a field of the clashes of contrary forces; Thomas Mann's tale *Death in Venice* (1913), in which the ageing artist Gustav von Aschenbach pays for his obsessive, Dionysian enchantment with his life, not wishing to leave the city caught in an epidemic and to the very end stubbornly believing that high Apollonian principles are the source of his desire for the beautiful teen-aged Tadzio; also excerpts of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), such as that in which Bloom, on exiting a church, mixes promiscuously the language of the erotic and the *sacrum*, noticing that it is a "Nice discreet place to be next some girl... That woman at midnight mass. Seventh heaven" (78); sections of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*; Gombrowicz's short stories *Tancerz mecenasa Krayowskiego* and *Dziewiectwo* (1933), and his novel *Pornografia* (1960); the orgiastic provocations characteristic of many figures from the novels and dramas of Stanisław Witkacy, figures that are at once spiritual and corporeal, sublime and earthy;

the text by the Chilean writer Vicente Huidobro *Sátiro o el poder de las palabras* (1939), which anticipates Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), in its presentation of a psychological study of the passion of a mature man for a teen-age girl; the homosexual motifs in Genet's *Notre dame des fleurs* (1946) i *Journal du voleur* (1949); and finally, to close this list that cannot pretend to be complete, Jerzy Andrzejewski's *Bramy raj* (1960).

The behavior of the characters in the above mentioned works frequently verge on a "parody of rationality humanness"; they lay bare shamefully twisted, deeply secret predilections; they smuggle in a doubt as to whether the subject really is in charge of his/her body, and whether free will always determines everything; they emphasize the paradox of "tethered consciousness", more subject to the charms of esthetic qualities than to the voice of reason. Corporeality itself reaches in them the level of a disruptive particle with the power of testing values.

A more thorough reading of modernist prose shows that in corporeal existence the dialectic is most fully expressed between "I want" and "I must", a dialectic that does not permit a limitation of theoretical reflection on itself to one or the other of the members of the above mentioned opposition. The fixing of reflections on the subject of corporeality on the side of "I want" would imply the existence of a preceding decision, it would demand the assumption of the intentionality of actions, an assumption based on a conviction of the possibility of the absolute subjugation of corporeality to the powers of reason. On the other hand, to situate considerations on the subject of corporeality on the side of "I must" would be connected with the exclusive accenting of what is independent of human will, and if it were possible to speak in that case of volitional control, that would only be possible in reference to a secondary permission, whereby the subject saying "Yes" confirms what has already happened, and what at the point of departure was other than the subject. The exclusivity of either of these perspectives could only lead to a reduction of corporeality, which is in real terms situated between decision and lack of intention.

It is important that even in extreme situations, the "corporeal existence" of the modernist literary character explodes all definitions, eludes unambiguous qualifications, and cannot be forced into the framework of simple distinctions and judgments. On one hand, the body marks out the rhythm of needs to which characters must be subject; on the other hand, however, it possesses the character of the original source of delight, and is the impulse to incomparable esthetic pleasure. Seen through this lens, corporeality, thus, appears not only as the "source of sufferings", but also as the "source of joyous knowledge", *corpus delecti* and *corpus delicti*, the body of vice and the body of delight (Skarga 216).

In the body, what was recognized by the modernist subject as his/her own, leads to a constant game with Alterity. The result of that conflict is always changing, and its final result remains unforeseen. In Schulz's stories, corporeality, which is the sign of the individualization and unique personality of characters, in a physical and psychological constitution that is distinctive to that personality, cannot, however, be seen as an enduring basis of unitary individuality and uniqueness in the world, since as one among the phenomena of nature, those uncounted forms of rich and vital matter, it is inscribed in nature's rhythms, is determined by nature, and is subject to its general laws, *inter alia* to the law of change. As Barbara Skarga writes:

"It is not an absurd thought that ... the body, along with the psychology connected with it, is only a momentary spurt from the depths of being, that what is general precedes what is particular; something along the lines of that Dionysian cosmic particle that shatters the Apollonian principle of individuation (215).

On one hand, in such lines of thought involving modernist Dionysian corporeality, there appear preindividual contents, originary, preceding all reflection and all personality; on the other hand, the sigil of the uniqueness of human existence in the course of its coming into being begins to appear as a synonym of fragility, transience, and ephemerality. Literary exemplifications of the problems of corporeality irrefutably show that the body is connected to what seems mutually exclusive, and contains within itself antithetical qualities that, at first glance are extremely distant from each other. The equal validity of both members makes tangible the irreducibility of the tensions between them. The play of life and death in the body that is coming into being is a tension between identity and difference, and at the same time between the tension and co-existence of contraries. The consciousness of the body intensifies the ontological unease occasioned by existence, and strengthens in literary characters a fear of a constantly threatened diffusion of identity in the darkly irrational element of matter. Such phenomena as transience, illness, and death are connected with the temporal aspect of corporeality, and make manifest the provisionality, the immediacy, and the temporariness of situated existence. They point to the possibility of degradation that is contained in the very manner of the existence (of the body). What is for the corporeal subject most natural is revealed as being the greatest danger to him/her. Seen thus, growing appears as aging, and in maturing there appears the clear destructive dimension of extension of life. That is why all subject assertions of the naturalness of death, which always has the character of an "ontological disaster" and recalls the tragic, amoral organization of the world, must be laced with a dose of irony. However, even the ephemerality of the body, connected with its subjugation to vital and esthetic degradation – for example, in the perspective of Schulz's

imagining of cyclical time – is revealed as a stage preceding an unbridled explosion of existence as it comes into life, and is inscribed in the rhythms of the dialectic of all and nothing.

Monika Bakke notes that we cannot grasp, we cannot immobilize the body. The body, she declares, is the point of intersection of impulses coming from the world and of those coming from the body. It is always open, and constitutes perhaps the best visual proof of transience as a world principle. It is the place of the individual and collective inscription of transience (9).

However, taking into consideration the insights of Nietzschean perspectivism, it is necessary to treat the category “the open body” with caution. To the degree that opening can be seen as the domain of corporeality understood as metamorphosis, the to the same extent, in the process of perception, openness ceases at a defined point of view, beyond which the corporeal subject cannot go. Thus it is the case that the world can appear only as a correlate of the body’s experience; that is, it will never be perceived in the absolute multiplicity of all the appearances that can be conceived. In other words, the embodied literary character appears as an intermediary being, always on a border. What he/she encounters first is the world as the body’s equivalent, the body having a mediatory character, because by opening up the literary character to the experience of reality, it also simultaneously closes off and limits that opening. For the corporeal subject, the interpretation of each occurrence is nothing other than perception undertaken from a specific perspective. But, despite everything, the body, situated here and now, understood as the synonym of the limitedness of perception and human intentional consciousness, remains the guarantee of the identicalness of the faces of reality perceived by the subject.

Modernist literature exaggerates the ambiguity of the ontological membership of the body. It does not allow one to place it exclusively within the sphere of nature (to which the subject most frequently has access via cultural mediation) or of culture. It is certain that all the aspects of a human being’s corporeal existence in the world cannot be exhausted within any one perspective that is basically biological, since the subject has the capability of self-transcendence, of in some measure overcoming bodily limits, which it is necessary to understand as a symbol of passing over to the side of culture. Nonetheless, even the fact that the body is the primary model of the cultural identification of the I, does not convey the body’s doubleness and ambivalence. Despite the literary character’s being able to make contact with others only via the body, and that the body defines identity and becomes a recognizable sign (as in Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke*), that very same corporeality is a cause of psychological discomfort,

since individual inner experience cannot fully be grasped by an observer, and is reduced to what is outside. That body, with its fusion of contradictions, sets in motion a dialectic of identity and difference. It is difficult to resist the impression that an interest in the bodily must inevitably reach its culmination in the perception that, as Michel Foucault puts it, nothing in the human being, not even his/her own body is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-knowledge and for a knowledge of others (qtd. in Markowski 248).

In its *a priori* status and its psychological ambivalence, corporeality is the fundament of every existence (although it is not exhausted in it). It is archetypical in relation to every existential situation. Corporeality allows one to perceive what is Other. Through the body, the modernist subject experiences the world; it determines the quality of that experience; for the body, it is necessary to emphasize once more, is an essential condition of all subjectivity, although that subjectivity may have tendencies toward dissolution, and it has its existence only thanks to constant questioning.

It is worth underlining that the commencement of a reflexive movement of consciousness demands going beyond what is corporeal, but that going beyond is not fully possible, and the body frequently becomes the most convenient tool to critique consciousness, as it is in the case of Gombrowicz's *Kosmos*.

To sum up, it is important to underline as strongly as possible that the modernist "return to the body" is achieved in the form of a paradox. In its ambivalence, the body is the part of reality thrust furthest into the depths of disorder and multiplicity of meaning, a promontory surrounded by spaces that do not accord with each other: culture and nature, self and other, formlessness and form, chaos and order, and the human and the non-human. The paradox denatures, undermines the obvious, strikes at habits of thought, and returns to us the ability of wonder. Understood thus, the body can be seen as the epistemological figure of modernism. It becomes the synonym of the problematic nature of the world.

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