

NECROLOGIES

WACŁAW BERENT
1873–1940

THE life and literary activity of Waclaw Berent belong to three different epochs in the history of his country: the age of positivism, during the second half of the nineteenth century; the period of "Young Poland," at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century; and the era of the restoration of an independent Poland after 1918. His works were influenced by literary movements of each of these periods but not to an equal degree. In his attempt to keep an independent and critical attitude toward his time he succeeded also only in part.

The problem posed in his first novel, *The Expert* (*Fachowiec*, 1898) makes a certain contribution to the positivist movement in Poland, one watchword of which was "organic work" or work "on the bases" (*praca u podstaw*) of economic development and wealth. The hero of this novel, a student, imbued with the idea that the country's first need is intellectually trained workers, abandons his studies and enters a factory as a simple worker. But his sacrifice results in disaster — he becomes not only a worker but also a drunkard. His education was not enough to save him from falling to a very low level and did not, of course, even enable him to work more efficiently. Have we here an indirect criticism of one of the positivist tenets? Perhaps; but it may also be a simple misunderstanding, a caricature or only an individual case treated in the novel without intending any social implication. To be exact, the Polish positivists did not require such sacrifices, still less if they were to lead to such results. What they did demand was educated foremen and engineers. Nevertheless, the problem presented in the novel seems to have its source in the positivist atmosphere. The style, too, is an attempt at realism in the traditional sense of the word; but it has some characteristics which belong rather to the succeeding epoch of symbolism and "modernism."

A more complicated case is presented in Berent's next novel, *Dry Rot* (*Próchno*, 1901). Here we find one of the most impressive and strong pictures, not only in the Polish but also in the European novel, of the *décadence* in literature and life toward the end of the nineteenth century. *La fin du siècle*, an epoch of great talents and great snobs and charlatans, of great economic development and of great social contrasts, an epoch also when the spiritual and moral situation of the European artistic intelligentsia seemed hopeless, is here presented *con amore*, with passion, and by means of the most refined artistic devices. The scene of the novel is a cosmopolitan one. The place of action is Berlin. The main characters are artists, writers, poets, musicians, "philosophers," and journalists, representing many nations: Germans, Poles, Russians, Jews and others. There is no central plot to bind together all or, at least, the main parts of the novel in an organic whole. The author's aim is rather to give a

broad picture of the soul of the "decadents" in its various manifestations. Their most important trait is simply decadence, decay, weariness of life and the impossibility of taking a positive attitude toward it, disappointment, weakness of will, lack of any faith, absolute scepticism, at best desperate attempts to create a "philosophy" either of life apologizing for their unproductivity, or of the high mission of Art, — Art as a redeemer, as an escape from the detestable necessity of living, as an Ivory Tower. Their life is a permanent negation of the surrounding world, a dream within mechanically-executed everyday functions. Their main occupations are endless discussions or ruminations about their own souls or those of others, self-analyses, almost public exhibitions of their inner selves, and — as the last redemption from despair — alcohol or suicide.

Nevertheless, in this desperate negation there was a strong positive point. It was a merciless criticism of contemporary middle-class culture, the younger generation's cry of despair against all the evil and humiliation of this culture which manifested itself in material and more especially in intellectual and moral life. As for the literary and artistic activity, it was a strong protest against any limits imposed on it by lower middleclass morality, against any demands that Art serve this morality and its hypocritical ideals.

Here again arises the same question as with the first novel of Berent. Does *Dry Rot* contain a criticism, an accusation of decadence? The Polish critics generally held this opinion, and the author himself suggested a similar attitude in one of his occasional pronouncements. But it is a known fact that authors' pronouncements about their own works are not always to be treated as the last word. Sometimes their primary intentions are not in accordance with the *final effect* of the work. For us, the important point is not what was intended but what was really done. In the case of Berent, an analysis of the style of *Dry Rot* shows that his critical intention, if any, was not carried out in the execution of the novel. Its style is typically and integrally "Young-Polish," difficult, pathetic, *recherché*, "artificial," full of symbols, periphrases, metaphors, poetical inversions, inarticulated moods (Stimmungen), mysterious, and enigmatical. This style is employed by Berent not only in dialogues and monologues of personages where it may be justified by the need of characterization but also in all descriptive and narrative passages — therefore whenever the author speaks himself and on his own behalf. This very special style confers on the novel the unity which it does not get from its plot. But equally important is the fact that it is evidence of how completely the author was steeped in his time, that he was so integral a part of his own period that he could not help expressing himself through its literary *media*, its style and language, its general attitudes, moods and thoughts. He created a style which is the apogee as well as an outgrowth of the literary aspirations of the young generation. So "Young Poland" and *décadence* found in *Dry Rot* an artistic idealization rather than a moral

judgement, an eternalization, as it were, of their Art — that is of the very essence of their spiritual life.

The final effect of the novel is here emphasized with the purpose of showing its true character and not of blaming the author. We cannot censure Berent because, perhaps in spite of his intentions, he appears here not as a judge but exclusively as an artist. It is because of this very fact that his work is one of the most characteristic and most expressive pictures of the epoch, with all its artistic peculiarity and all its weakness.

Dry Rot is Berent's greatest achievement. His later novels add nothing essentially new from the literary point of view, although they treat different problems. In general, Berent's style, language, kind of structure and composition remain the same, sometimes with an increasing tendency to a poetical and artificial style.

This is the case of *Winter Wheat* (*Ozimina*, 1911), and to a much greater degree, of *Living Stones* (*Żywe Kamienie*, 1918). The first of these novels is concerned with Polish society and its "soul" at a somewhat later time, the beginning of the twentieth century. The scene is now Warsaw, and the whole action of the novel takes place in a single night during a ball in a rich Warsaw home. No plot in the strict sense of the word is unfolded in this short time. There are only particular scenes, pictures, characterizations of a crowd of people, conversations showing their inner lives. A mass of different human types belonging to the *haut monde* of Warsaw is here subjected to a mercilessly probing analysis which lays bare the lies, hypocrisy, and weakness of character hidden beneath all their external pomp and splendor. They also are decadents, but of a different kind. Representatives of aristocracy, gentry and upper middle class, they have nothing of the spiritual revolt against the world which characterizes the personages of *Dry Rot*. Neither have they, of course, any escape into the realm of Art. Even those who realize their weakness and uselessness have not force enough to overcome it. In the meantime, important events are taking place all around them: the revolution of 1905 is raging both in Russia and in Poland, a revolution which claims essential national, social, and political goals. Echoes of revolt penetrate to this society fiddling while Rome burns, arouse various reactions, but do not compel them to take a distinct attitude much less a determined action.

As before, we may ask whether there is a criticism of contemporary Polish society in *Winter Wheat*. Again, there may be; but at any rate we cannot find there any positive and clear "program" either national or social. Some attempts of the author to formulate something of this kind (of course in the broad sense of the word "program"), for instance the contrast between Russians and Poles, have a too symbolic and nebulous character to be caught and explained in a rationalistic way. Here, as in *Dry Rot*, what stands out and is really important is the painting of fragments of human lives and souls.

In *Living Stones* the real artistic aim is not deflected by any other in-

tellectual problem. This aim is to present a new, modern vision of the Middle Ages emphasizing the importance of its artistic, and especially its poetic life. Berent represents this life by the use of jongleurs, wandering minstrels. They are the protagonists of their author who shows by their actions, sometimes in a rather popular way, the force of Art and Poetry and of their influence on life. In addition, we have in *Living Stones* as in Berent's other novels scenes — in this case picturing the life of different classes of medieval society — not connected by any unifying plot and action — presented to the reader like panoramas or miniatures in a gallery. Berent's individual style, already elaborated in *Dry Rot* and *Winter Wheat* to a high degree of "anti-realism," becomes so strained that one Polish critic, Stanislaw Brzozowski, labeled this style "sweating" and another paraphrased the title of the novel as "*Gall-Stones.*"

Nevertheless, it must be stated that Berent was able to overcome his mannerism. His last work, *Undercurrent* (*Nurt*, 1934), was conceived in the spirit of the "new realism" (*neue Sachlichkeit*) which invaded all Western Europe during the last twenties and manifested itself in an increasing reference to "documents," a return to history, biography (biographies romancées), in a word to "reality." This movement also penetrated the domain of fiction. Novelists began to write biographies and "historical" works, or, if they remained in the proper field of fiction, they were fond of documentation and of "written reality" which contributed to the working out of a sober, clear, measured, almost "scientific" style.

Berent was not unaffected by this new movement. His *Undercurrent* contains biographies of prominent historical personages and pictures of Polish life at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Based on exhaustive historical studies, this latest work of Berent, although far from a real novel, was perhaps in the line of his permanent aspirations: to catch and express the modern Polish soul in its essential characteristics. In *Undercurrent* he turned back to an epoch which contained the sources of this modern soul.

Berent's works are — as we see — not very numerous. Each of his novels was worked over for a long time, and there was sometimes an interval of many years between publications. Neither was he a popular writer. His works were not destined for a wide public and his style was hard for even a part of the Polish intelligentsia to support. Nevertheless, his literary activity has a great importance both from the literary and the cultural points of view as expressing an epoch which was the foundation of the distinguished Polish literature of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

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