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FROM MACHINE TO MAN & BACK AGAIN

It goes without saying that if we allow for Lamarck's transformist hypothesis, we need to recognise that we aim to create a new nonhuman type within which moral pain, kindness, attachment and love – the only corrosive poisons of inexhaustible human energy, the only 'off' switch of our overwhelming physiological electricity – will be eradicated.

We believe in the possibility of numerous human metamorphoses and we claim, without irony, that wings lie dormant within the human body.

The day a human being is able to externalise his will in such a way that it will become a huge invisible hand, the Dream and the Desire, now only empty words, will rule over the tamed Space and time.

The nonhuman and mechanical type, constructed for its ubiquitous speed, will be cruel, omnipotent and belligerent.¹

¹ F. T. Marinetti, *Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine*, New York 1973.

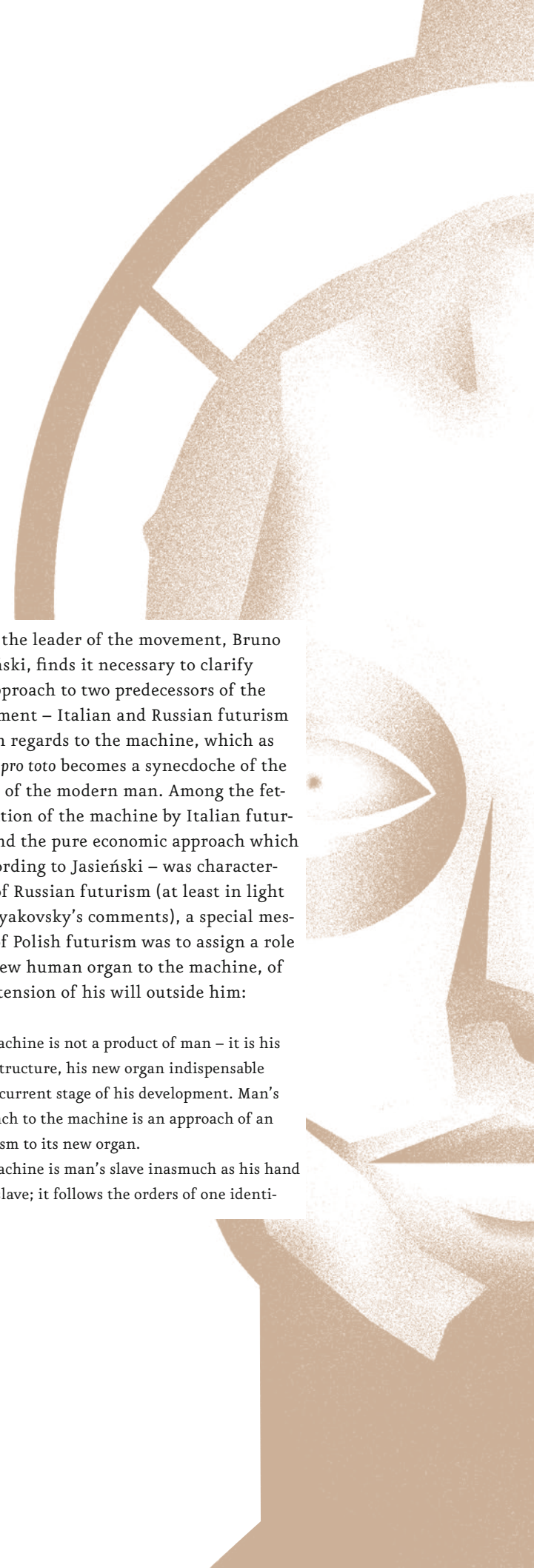
While discussing the historico-literary generalities of Polish futurism we need to emphasise Polish artists' ambivalent relationship with contemporary civilisation. Tytus Czyżewski's disturbing oxymoron has been quoted many times, these *electric visions, electric machines, the mechanical instinct, the mechanics of miracle, the mechanical garden, the electric lungs, the Dynamo-children, the Dynamo-heart, the magnetic diaphragm* (and the list could go on). The paradoxical, multi-level character of these metaphors has been correctly recognised; through a simple and surprising combination of two not previously combined designates, they can express both admiration and ironic distance, uneasiness, the inner dilemma of the oldest of Polish futurists who faces the challenges, charms and dangers of modernity.

In a text which both summarises and closes the parable of movement (*Polish Futurism*,

1923), the leader of the movement, Bruno Jasioński, finds it necessary to clarify his approach to two predecessors of the movement – Italian and Russian futurism – with regards to the machine, which as a *pars pro toto* becomes a synecdoche of the issues of the modern man. Among the fetishisation of the machine by Italian futurists and the pure economic approach which – according to Jasioński – was characteristic of Russian futurism (at least in light of Mayakovsky's comments), a special message of Polish futurism was to assign a role of a new human organ to the machine, of an extension of his will outside him:

The machine is not a product of man – it is his superstructure, his new organ indispensable at the current stage of his development. Man's approach to the machine is an approach of an organism to its new organ.

The machine is man's slave inasmuch as his hand is his slave; it follows the orders of one identi-





cal centre of the brain. If deprived of one or the other, a modern man would become disabled.²

In other words, a great achievement of Polish futurism, according to Jasioński, would be realising that the future of man is a cyborg³. We do not really know to what extent Jasioński was aware of the fact that the idea of the multiplied man, as described by Marinetti, had already appeared in the works of his Italian predecessor he was desperately trying to dissociate himself from. For Marinetti, the mechanisation of the life of an individual and the idea of the cyborg were separate, although not mutually exclusive aspects of the same vision. From Jasioński's viewpoint they constitute two opposing propositions of a vision of modernity. In fact, the aestheticisation of the subject forms of modern civilisation (as professionally described by Jasioński), contrary to what he believed, doesn't yet determine the specific nature of Polish futurism:

Polish futurism taught modern man to see the beauty of one's own enriched body in the subject forms of civilisation. It healed man from the fetishism which permeates the whole futurising of modern thought.

² B. Jasioński, *Futuryzm polski (bilans)* ["Polish Futurism (Summary)"], in: *Antologia polskiego futurizmu i Nowej Sztuki* ["The Anthology of Polish Futurism and New Art"], eds. Z. Jarosiński, H. Jaworska, Wrocław 1978, p. 60.

³ For the purposes of this essay, the fact that the word 'cyborg' appeared much later is of secondary importance.

This is what its universal significance consists in.⁴

The ethical implications of this opposition are more popular. Although Marinetti's multiplied man was set in opposition to Nietzsche's Übermensch by Marinetti, he bore certain resemblance to his predecessor, for example, in terms of understanding what the ethics of a new man should be driven by. Jasioński's cyborg, on the other hand, was to be an antidote to the bacillus of modernity:

The gigantic and fast development of forms of technology and industry is undoubtedly the most crucial basis and spine of contemporary times. It has created new ethics, new aesthetics and a new reality. The introduction of the machine into man's life as an indispensable, complementary element must have contributed to the general reconstruction of man's psyche, to the creation of his own equivalents, similarly to the intrusion of an alien body into a live organism which initiates the secretion of special anti-bodies that transform anti-genes into bodies capable of absorbing and with the possibility to be excreted. If a human or social organism doesn't produce enough energy, intoxication takes place.⁵

To sum up, the idea of the cyborg was supposed to be a Polish recipe for a balanced development of modern civilisation (and at the time of writing it, Jasioński considered the recipe as out-of-date) which was supposed to

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 61, emphasis in the original – E. R.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 50–51.

be equally distanced from the Italian fetishisation of the machine and Russian utilitarianism. To oppose Marinetti's mechanical, unemotional, cruel and superhuman cyborg, Jasiński invented his humanist cyborg which was the next stage of man's aesthetic education after a renaissance. The need to define his approach, to define the right position of Polish futurism compared to its predecessors is connected with Jasiński's ambivalent attitude to the affirmative vision of modernity, which was characteristic mainly of Italian futurism. Importantly, in the introduction to the summary of his contribution to the achievements of Polish futurism, Jasiński claims that "in fact I have already written the history of futurism. The audience and the critics failed to notice it as it is known as a "novel" and has an incredible title: *Nogi Izoldy Morgan* [The Legs of Izolda Morgan]"⁶.

If Jasiński's story is to be interpreted as an actual history of Polish futurism, then there is a striking lack of any utopian vision of the future within it, but instead there is a very gloomy and obsessive vision of a dystopian world ruled by hostile machines which ooze hatred towards man, unless a worker starts fighting them (which is performed by the main protagonist Berg who smashes the machine with a hammer in a high-tension scene). *Nogi Izoldy Morgan* displays a definitive turn towards political ideology, which would ultimately take Jasiński to the Soviet Union. We are not going

to go there, however, as we will say goodbye to the leader of Polish futurists and recall the third voice which in the same period tackled the problem of modernity in an incredibly intense literary way. The voice in question belongs to Jerzy Sosnkowski, a younger brother of General Kazimierz Sosnkowski.

Today completely and erroneously forgotten, Jerzy Sosnkowski was an uncommon man: an architect, interior designer, stage designer, screenwriter, illustrator and finally a writer. Between 1917 and 1927 he wrote several collections of novellas and one novel *Auto, Ty i Ja (Miłość maszyn)* ["Automobile, You and Me (The Love of Machines)"]. His works are not always of the highest order, especially in light of the Polish prose published in the following decade, but among his literary oeuvres there are successful and pioneering works (to which his novel undoubtedly belongs). Most of all, the striking and singular aspect in the Polish literary landscape at the time is a big concentration of motifs connected with the issues of modern civilisation. Jerzy Sosnkowski is fascinated with the achievements and the progress of technology to a greater degree than the very creators of Polish futurism. His stories teem with automobiles, airplanes, ships, telephones, gramophones, radios, and neon lights.

Therefore, it may be expected that Sosnkowski's attitude to modern civilisation would be explicitly affirmative. Yet this is not entirely the case. With his admiration of technology the writer retains an attitude full of reservation and uneasiness, which at

times transforms into a state of horror. This happens especially when the action moves from the present into the future. Let us have a look, for example, at an episode of the protagonist's long dystopian dream which constitutes Chapter 8 of the novel. In this unusual coming-of-age and road trip novel, which is set in Poland, although the name of the country is not mentioned, the main protagonist Pol, a young engineer, travels in his car with a young actress Iza, whom he has invited to join him for the pure pleasure of company. Thus, the car becomes an opportunity and a pretext to start a relationship; it is also an icon, the most famous icon of modernity, and therefore a reference to the very foundation act of the futurist mythology marked by Marinetti's manifesto. The couple, who become lovers only towards the end of the novel, arrive at a seaside resort. One day Pol and Iza decide to visit a town in which there are electrification installations and equipment and in which they are welcomed by the head engineer. The final part of the programme is a tour around the old closed power station which is situated on a cliff and which is filled with machines taken out of circulation. Pol goes out onto a dilapidating balcony which then collapses, in effect rendering Pol unconscious. The head engineer asks the local fishermen to help him to carry Pol up. They lay him down on a blanket in a room with a dangerous anthropomorphic dynamo-machine. In the next chapter Pol opens his eyes. He sees Lebelt, a negative (German or Jewish) key character whom we meet in the fifth

⁶ Ibidem, p. 49.

chapter in the boarding house in the Tatra mountains. Lebelt is a Mephistopheles type, a tempter who personifies one of Pol's two souls – a cynical, bitter and calculating soul, which is indicated by the similarity between their glasses (the glasses are the symbol of the precision of the look of modern ideologists and at the same time of their distance to reality – ultimately the precision turns out to be a form of image distortion). He informs Pol about what happens:

Well. I have always claimed that this is the way things will be. This is what the futurists along with their art have led us to, this is how our mechanised world takes revenge on us. We have overcivilised the world and the unleashed civilisation is falling on our heads; we have unleashed it imprudently and it has become hostile, full of hatred towards its creators, blind, brutal, and unstoppable as any force.⁷

Responding to Pol's frenzied questions, Lebelt describes a cyclical philosophy of history based on the theory of balance between opposing forces, including the soul and the intellect. The triumph of the intellect over the soul caused the loss of balance and accelerated the end of civilisation:

Simply, we were putting our mind into the machine. The machine, the machine! It was everyone's slogan and faith! And even those who subconsciously kept their souls – the artists – even those were hypnotised by the machine! O, Marinetti, Picasso, Matisse – they have greatly contributed to our disaster. We then created machines, we put minds into them, we, the scholars

⁷ J. Sosnkowski, *Auto, Ty i Ja (Miłość maszyn)* ["Automobile, You and I (The Love of Machines)"], Warszawa 1925, p. 102.

and engineers, and the artists of the soul. And do you finally understand it, Mr Pol? They put them in. They gave away their minds, will and soul to cold machines. On the contrary, they started resembling the machines! They, if I may say so, have swapped places. And this is how the machines became alive! The machines started to have a will, one day they started to rule. They became organisms endowed with the same qualities as human beings. Only their bones are so far made of iron and steel, and their blood – of water, oil, petrol. In the fever of creation we didn't notice that the machine we were creating started resembling animals. Please, try to recall the appearance of the most recent machines. Weren't they similar to huge insects, or didn't they resemble the skeletons of some dead monsters? Wasn't an airplane like a bird, wasn't a submarine like a fish, wasn't a paddle steamer just like a big duck? And the train was similar to a legendary dragon, a radio station – to a horrible beetle, a telegraphic network – to a spider's web etc. Yes, the machines became alive and declared a war on us – a war in which we cannot participate because we cannot fight them with our bare hands. We can count on their mercy – utopia – alas! They have no feelings! They don't know any emotion. They are "mechanical animals" – intelligent and cunning.⁸

Then Lebelt takes Pol to the window and shows him the dynamo-machine which eats grass and is coated in transparent flesh which resembles a plesiosaurus. It turns out that every day the machine goes outside into the yard, or sometimes further, to graze and

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 105–106.

in the evening it goes back to its place. Next, the reader finds out about the machine's attraction to Iza. Pol's car becomes alive as well and it is coated in a jelly-like substance. Pol attempts to get into the car, but the sticky mass makes him suspended over the seat. In spite of this, it is still possible to drive it:

To Pol's surprise the car guessed his intentions correctly, it simply understood him. Pol had an impression that some kind of a supernatural mind which controlled the machine had mysterious access to his thoughts; it had read his thoughts before Pol managed to define them through his movements; this mind was doing everything faster and more efficiently than the normal course of action.⁹

Pol's relationship with his car remains friendly and constitutes a positive side of the dystopia – a dream of an intelligent machine that reads people's thoughts and realises them before they are even transformed into commands – it is a fantastical image of a cyborg whose functioning isn't much different from the systems developed nowadays by Kevin Warwick. Despite its naivety, the image consisting of two planes is extremely successful: a plane of the present represented by the machine's mechanical mode and a plane of the past – oval, transparent and organic, like the boldest visions of contemporary designers.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

Lebelt and Pol go into town to find food. On their way there, they stumble upon a trunk route and the view surprises them:

The road was completely choked with wandering machines. There was formal congestion. The incessant stream of monsters crawled in two directions without stopping for a moment. The middle of the road was left empty to allow overtaking.

Here you could see precisely the excellent, machine-like organisation and an amazing precision of movement calculation. The colossi passed each other with a millimetre distance between them and they never collided with one another despite the high speed of some machines. On the sides you could see the industrial machines crawling slowly and smoothly, while cars, locomobiles, locomotives, motorcycles and tractors sped along in the middle of the road. You could hear the monotonous drone of traffic – huge as the roaring waves of many stormy seas, but it was regular and rhythmical – I would say – depicting phonetically the dynamics of this mechanical river.

The machines' bodies had different shapes and all of them resembled the antediluvian monsters of various races and families.

They all stuck to the road persistently, as if the route was prescribed through the intellect and the law of reason.

Even the airplanes, which whizzed through the air and acquired the shapes of massive bats, followed the air route precisely.

The moving roaring stream, which was horizontally entangled, resembled the paintings of the extreme fine art reformers of the previous era – the paintings which were misunderstood even at

the beginning of the century and which were, it seems, inexplicable. But now their truth reveals itself before our eyes! Their transparent bulk mingled into one transparent snake with flickering shades; the snake was a muddle of wheels, gears, straps, straight and curved lines which were interlocking and crossing over each other. (...)

This ominous cloud moved this way, heavy with levers, chains, steel arms whose polished surface reflected the curving lights, as if it was a nightmare, as if it was a ghost before which all the atrocities known to people faded away and lost their significance. The spirit of the invincible organisation and force was hovering over the cloud. It was an avalanche which was impossible to resist, an avalanche roaring like one thousand waterfalls, like millions of stones rolling down – and its voice weighed us down, it depressed us, it pressed on the brain like a painful weight resonating in the head with the echo of disturbing blows, hurting the eyes.

It is strange that this devilish movement gave an impression of emptiness. The moving mass gave off the feeling of cold and the lack of life. The methodicalness was rolling down the road. The life of nature possesses many kinds of movement and uncoordinated, unexpected vibrations, but that place was oozing with routine, regularity, and lifelessness. This combination of lifelessness and movement was truly disturbing. Involuntarily, our imagination made us think of a galvanised corpse.¹⁰

Facing the impossibility of communication with the machines' psyche, "which was never

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 121–123.


there in the first place", Pol realises with horror that this is indeed the end of humanity as there are more machines than people:

In the nick of time, a human being became his own remains, his own relic, an organism being doomed to extinction. He fulfilled his historic mission – he has created – now he had to go into the darkness of existence, he was supposed to be known, if not removed unceremoniously like a drone from a swarm of bees.¹¹

Finally, Pol and Lebelt reach the boarding house where they meet other people embodying intellectual impotence, the inability of the elite to control the situation and to take responsibility for it. Pol levels a number of charges against a writer and an architect, but they reject them blaming and accusing the practitioners, such as Pol, of realising artists' dreams. Then Lebelt eases the tension by saying that everyone is to blame.

In the meantime the machines throw themselves onto women. There are scenes of rape and the machines' violence towards women, of the shameless, obscene copulation of the machine with a woman – a scornful reversal of the machines' futuristic love. These events make Pol and Lebelt decide to go back as they are worried about Iza. At the old power station they see the old dynamo-machine attempt to attack

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 125.



Iza, but Pol's car rescues her. The ferocious fight between the two machines leads to their total destruction. After several days of the secluded idyll, the city refugees start to arrive. A commune at the end of the world is created. Yet, this situation doesn't last very long as one day they can hear roaring – the machines are moving towards them. The dream ends with the suicide of both protagonists.

In the following chapter we find out that, in case we didn't realise it, Pol's dream was caused by high fever. His dream experiences, however, very precisely translate into the ideological transformation of the main protagonist and ultimately into his relationship with Iza. Pol finds a way to his feelings and to Iza, of course.

The axiology of gender in this novel and other stories by Sosnkowski deserve a separate debate. Woman has not lost touch with the sphere of feelings and in a special way she makes civilisation retain a human face. Here you can find a parallel with the work of the critical futurist, Ruggero Vasari and with the famous film *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang. It is impossible not to mention Karel Čapek. His famous play *R.U.R.* from 1920 (for the purposes of this play the word robot was invented) has many elements which correlate with Pol's dream. Čapek's robots, similarly to the newts in his later novel (*War with the Newts*, 1936), are the creatures of biological nature, but they were created by putting together various body parts (based on Frankenstein's

model). Thus, they are closer to what we would call androids than to the robots to which Sosnkowski's machines are related. Another common theme is the issue of mind degeneration when it is separated from feelings. Here Sosnkowski rejects one of the first visions of death organisation, as if he sensed (a decade before Čapek's newts) that national socialism would be the extreme realisation of Marinetti's demands: an effect of the combination of the most perfect organisation due to the highly developed reason (the inventor who gave rise to the factory producing robots in Čapek's play is called Rossum¹²) with the lack of what used to be called feelings, which we now describe as empathy. Indeed, in *R.U.R.* the opposition between empathy and its lack is not yet polar because, as it turns out towards the end of the play, the new generation of robots developed some germs of feelings and like people they breed through reproduction. This is the reason for the utopian optimistic expression in the art works of the 1920s which we wouldn't be able to find in *War with the Newts* (anyway, this novel doesn't directly refer to the issues of technology). Also in this respect, the catastrophic vision of Pol's dream seems to be pioneering in comparison with other dystopian visions of the late twenties and later decades. Sosnkowski's representation of the opposition between man and machine is definitely more extreme and static in comparison with Čapek's robots.

¹² Reason in Polish and in Czech is "rozum" – translator's note.

One of the reasons for it is that his machines are theriomorphic and not anthropomorphic, and the ultimate interpretation of the dream doesn't leave space for hope. Nonetheless, if you look at it closely, you will notice some subtle nuances. Regardless of the catastrophic ending, not all the relationships between man and the machine in Pol's dream are the same. For example, Pol's car is represented – as I have already mentioned – as an intelligent machine. Therefore, Čapek's and Sosnkowski's ideas prove that the desired closeness of man and machine didn't necessarily have to be the way Marinetti had imagined.

If, on the one hand, the futuro-fascist superman – the inhuman type whose birth Marinetti predicted – predominated over man due to the lack of any moral scruples and feelings, and hence originally he was more like machines and simply constituted the most perfect machine, then it is not surprising that in the era of late capitalism, when many of the boldest visions of modernist creators become real, in the research field of robotics it is attempted to use the observations made on mirror neurons and to endow robots with some kind of an equivalent of human empathy. We have realised that the better the machine is, the more it should resemble a human being, also in terms of emotions. It turns out that Jasiński had good intuition and ultimately looked into a more distant future in comparison to Marinetti.

TRANSLATED FROM POLISH BY AGATA MASŁOWSKA