Polish Modernist reflection on the place of man in history and relationships among people in the process of producing cultural goods, demonstrates that Modernist aesthetics were not only involved with anthropology, but also with ontology and epistemology; above all, however, it was characterised by an anti-positivist axiology.

The use of the term "Modernism" in its historical sense raises many reservations, if only because of the polymorphism of the trends which appeared at that time. Thus, I intend to use it only as a term denoting the dynamic structure of the Weltanschauung shared by a number of Polish artists, writers, and intellectuals, which appeared in opposition to the Positivist Weltanschauung and was constituted on the basis of aesthetic values (not necessarily artistic values) understood as "life through art."

Such a definition of the term suggests, first, that a correlation between certain aspects of art and philosophy exists. This I formulate deliberately, since one of the theses often raised and—it seems to me—rightly so, is that which claims that the Modernist reflection on art had an explicitly philosophical character. Second, the term will denote that, in order to accentuate the motivations which I am concerned with in this essay, I intend to consider the attitudes of the ideologists, Stanisław Przybyszewski and Zenon Przesmycki (Fig. 1), who were the representatives of the most extreme faction of Modernism identified generally with aestheticism, i.e., with an absolutist position in regard to art.

It is accepted that the Modernists, as opposed to the Positivists, who supported an art which was to be socially committed to the highest degree, saw art as an autotelic activity. One of the questions I would like to answer is whether the Polish Modernists really professed aestheticism, or, more precisely, what caused their theories to become identified with this movement. The answer will then lead to the presentation of the determining fea-
tures of Polish Modernism. In view of the fact that some of the ideas ex-
pounded in Modernist manifestos sound like programmatic premises ex-
plicitly expressed, my formulation of the question may at first glance seem
perverse. It is obvious that, disregarding the interpretative associations con-
ected with the notion of aestheticism, the location of aesthetic values as
paramount in the axiological hierarchy which served as a criterion differenti-
ating the Modernist outlook from all other ideological structures functioning
on Polish soil, was at the same time a connecting element between the
Polish variant and the Modernist trends developing in other European coun-
tries.

There is a common belief that the Modernists' premises which made the
irrational absolute, served as a justification for their escape from the complex
problems of the real world. In my view, this escape should not be interpreted
exclusively in a pejorative sense, as a dodge expressing helplessness in the face
of socio-historical problems. It seems equally valid to see it as the only
means—according to their premises—of preserving or revitalizing the human
values which had been lost in the existing reality.

A comparison of the different orientations functioning at that time
seems to show that the main element common to most of them was the criti-
cal evaluation of contemporary society. Representatives of both Polish and
foreign groups noticed the disintegration and alienation of individuals
involved in the material world subject to irreversible changes caused by rapid
technical development. Without using the word "alienation," they unani-
mously described the situation as such. The feeling of the tragic nature of
existence, which accompanied the spiritual formation of the period, was the
principal characteristic of the Modernists. Their protest against the existing
situation resulted in a resignation from intervention into external conditions
and an escape into art, since, according to their premises, art was to take
the place of the activities in other spheres of human creativity. With art's
help, a voice was given to the contesting spirit of an individual, undervalued
and entangled in the unacceptable external world. Hence, there was an em-
phasis on the tragic nature of experience, followed by a concentration on the
internal world and a definite break with Realism. The deep dissatisfaction
caused by the deficiencies of positive, rational knowledge led to the negation
of its meaning, to the turn toward transcendence, about which nothing is
known for sure, but in whose existence one can, or even should, believe, with
nihilism remaining the only alternative. It seems that the axiological intuition
of the Modernists, which appeared as a reaction against the surrounding
reality, was genetically an earlier part of their theory to which philosophical
justification was later added.

The Modernists' axiological preferences throw light on their ontological
theses, which were grounded on a key premise about the existence of an ab-
solute of a spiritual nature. They accepted, as self-evident, the unquestionable