One might ask how the title of this symposium actually relates to the subject and content of the exhibition with which it is connected. I sense a certain disparity between the two, which could become the topic of a separate discussion. In any case, the following remarks on the present state of interpretation of Polish painting from the turn of the century must in some way relate to both of the above-mentioned facts. Admittedly, this constitutes a certain hinderance, since it concerns both the date 1913 in the title of the symposium and the word “Symbolism” and the date 1914 in the title of the exhibition.

From the point of view of the history of Polish art neither date marks a breakthrough. They are of no consequence for art, as such, and in the present contest appear to be superficial and perhaps casual. They are clearly imposed by the course of political rather than artistic history. The year 1913 can only be understood here as the last year of peace and the year 1914 as the first year of war. Politics, assuming that it has any immediate impact on art at all, can produce only superficial changes. In painting these effects are restricted to subject matter.

Since 1913 was the last year of peace, we tend to search for signs of anxiety and a foreboding of catastrophe in various contemporary artistic occurrences. In point of fact, however, catastrophic images appeared in art only after the war, and they were born out of fear of returning to prior experiences rather than premonitions of what might possibly take place in the future. Such was the case above all in Western Europe where the First World War was a cataclysm the scope of which exceeded all expectations and forebodings. We must bear in mind, however, that as far as war and peace were concerned, Poland did not share the feelings of the rest of Europe during this period. What could bring only loss for other nations, offered the hope of some gain for Poland. The more than one hundred years of political depen-
dence, which had never been accepted by the Poles, constituted the principle issue of the period under discussion. Political enslavement was seen as such a grave and painful cataclysm that, by contrast, any upheaval could only be regarded as an agent of change for the better.

Nevertheless, judging by what present-day historians know of the period, neither the years immediately preceding the war nor those during its outbreak left any imprint on Polish artistic culture. The year 1913 seems to mark the very center of a long period of stagnation for which the reasons seem inexplicable or mysterious, and thus deserving of consideration.

When dealing with works of art from this period, or rather with a certain attenuation of the previously vital creative atmosphere, we come to the conclusion that these were not times of crisis or anxiety, of search or anticipation, but only of withering away and dormition. In every sphere we seem to note lack of initiative and clearly defined goals. Something is drawing to an end once and for all, something that had continued for a long time—long enough in fact to produce deeply ingrained habits in thinking and activity, which, while no longer satisfactory, are difficult to replace. In polish literature dealing with this period, this great current which was waning away has recently come to be known as Modernism. This name has an unique meaning in Poland and we shall apply it here exclusively to Polish phenomena. At the same time, the twilight of Modernism was the end of a certain chapter in the history of art, a chapter which dated back to the late eighteenth century.

What made this period of more than one hundred years uniform in terms of art, or rather, why do we perceive the majority of important artistic occurrences at that time as a unity today? What features are most striking to us and seem to be shared by them all? In order to avoid the term “Realism,” which seems too ambiguous today and in fact was not really accurate during the nineteenth century, we shall refer to “Naturalism” and “Historicism” as the trends that were of particular significance for this period in art.

The relationships between these two leading features and their changing intensities are sufficient to describe the transformations that were taking place in contemporary art in Europe as a whole.

Although it is difficult to establish direct parallelisms between political history and culture, especially between individual events in both these spheres, in certain situations the development of culture must be viewed sub specie of the changes taking place in the other field. One such situation is caused by threat to the existence or separate identity of a culture by factors external to this culture, especially when these factors have been operating for a prolonged period of time. This was the case with Poland in the period under discussion, when the sense of national and thus also cultural unity continued despite the absence of an external organism to represent and at the same time protect this cultural unity. Cultural borders were maintained in spite of political and territorial divisions. Culture was, or rather gradually became, the