

Piotr J. Przybysz

**ON THE ACTUALITY
OF AESTHETIC VALUES IN KNUT HAMSUN'S
*BLESSING OF THE EARTH*¹**

ABSTRACT

Isaac, a character in *Blessing of the Earth* represents a number of qualities common with Nietzsche's ideal of a superman. The crisis of culture and civilization, which then, at the beginning of the XXth century, was articulated, among others, through that ideal is also expressed on the turn of the XXth and XXIst centuries. Its distinctive features are, among others, an escape from large agglomerations, fascination for the beauty of the nature, a revival of ecological movements. The difference, which may be read out in these, I think, complementary current of thinking lies in the loss of faith in the omnipotence of the Reason. As a consequence of this, the hedonism, among others, enjoys revaluation (I use here this term in the meaning adopted by Frederic Jameson – periodizing concept) in the post-modernist culture in contradistinction to the strength of will revalued by the modernist culture. Both in the first and in the latter cultural formations we have to do with satisfying aesthetic needs, which are immanently embedded in the human nature. Satisfying these needs in the modernist formation was fulfilled through the artistic values (I use here the proposal put forward by B. Dziemidok, which lies in the separation of the artistic values from the aesthetic ones as opposed to, among others, the proposal put forward by S. Morawski, who reduces the artistic values to the aesthetic ones). This function, in the post-modernist formation, is taken over by aesthetic values inherent in the human entourage, among others, in the natural environment. With this respect the reduction of aesthetics to the philosophy of art seems to be disputable. On the other hand, however, the relationship between aesthetics and the philosophy of culture is exceptionally inspiring.

In the proposed text I intend to determine the differences in the revaluation of the natural environment by using Knut Hamsun's novel *Blessing of the Earth* as an example. Consequently, I will use this differentiation to determine the direction in the development of this transformation which could (or should) be followed by the way of exercising the aesthetics. The acceptance

¹ Tekst przedstawiłem na V Międzynarodowej Konferencji Estetyki Środowiskowej pt. „The Aesthetics of Agriculture”, Lepaa – Finlandia, sierpień 2003 r.

of non-expansibility of the object of the aesthetic studies leads, among others, to replace the aesthetics with the anti-aesthetics or to exercise poetics. Finally I wish to confront my standpoint pertaining the question of the relationship between aesthetics and the philosophy of culture with the proposal by Lars-Olof Ahlberg (contained, among others, in the article *Aesthetics, Philosophy of Culture?* in „Filozofski Vestnik”, XXII, 3, 2001).

Blessing of the Earth by Knut Hamsun represents the praise and enchantment over the possibility of a harmonious relationship between man and the surrounding nature. An idealistic myth about harmony, which on the pages of the novel becomes fully credible, is symbolized by the most enigmatic character of Isac. Hamsun depicts this character in the following way: „It is a stalwart peasant of a powerful build, ginger-bearded with numerous scars on his face and arms got possibly at work or in a fight”². As a matter of fact nobody knows from where the main character appears on this Norwegian mountainous desolation. He may be a runaway for whom the town wafts the worst memories; he may also be a former prisoner who wants, as quickly as possible, to find himself far from the human settlements although in the contact of man with nature these questions do not have greater importance. What counts and gives sense to the Isac’s life in this desolated countryside is his physical strength, his iron character and his ability to enjoy and to utilise the nature. Moreover, what seems to be the most crucial is an awareness and esteem for the mystery of the living and regenerating nature. This metaphysical dimension of the Isac’s existence is obtained by Hamsun, among others, in the description of the sowing of grain: „Isac, bare-headed and with the name of Christ on his lips, went out to the fields and was sowing (...). By throwing the seeds in a pious concentration and with serene spirits, he performed, as it were, a mystic, religious rite”³.

Isac represents a contradiction to a suggestive, winsome hero of a folk epos. He is rather a clumsy man of a square posture and of not complicated mind. Contrary to this superficial impression he is a true hero. This credibility emanates from a timeless and class-type nature of the function performed by him. Certainly, as one may think, the critical features of the main character represent values as Sellanrå, the settlement founded by Isac, needs exactly such men. Thanks to this place, which had been created by his own work, he harnessed to the most important task: to preserve and maintain life. The best pointed remark in this respect comes from Geissler, Isac’s mentor and friend: „You preserve life. There, there is the whole nature which

² K. Hamsun, *Błogosławieństwo ziemi*, Poznań 1986, s. 5.

³ Ibidem, s. 26 – 27.

belongs to you and to your family. Man and nature do not wage a furious struggle: they respect each other's rules; they do not compete with each other; they are free from superstitions and advance in concert"⁴.

Life in the Hamsun's novel constitutes a feature which unites the two worlds: the world of man and the world of nature. One may risk the statement that this literary text is totally void of aesthetising elements: everything there is raw, coarse, unglazed and coarsely chopped out. Everything, except the nature and the phenomenon of life as such, which arises the feeling of worship as it constitutes the mystery. In this way we delineate the area of our interest in this novel. It seems to be important here to say that *Blessing of the Earth* in its ideas is deeply rooted in the Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, starting from his idea of eternal returns, through the critics of his contemporary culture and civilisation, and by ending with his concept of superman. Isac places the sense of his existence in the eternal circle of the dying and regenerating nature. Examples of the characters in the novel confirm that living in the town destroys what is good in people. The true value is life itself, life based on both physical strength and the strength of will, which are confronted with the hardships brought by nature. The time which has passed from the publication of the Hamsun's novel in 1917 has put under cruel verification all perennial philosophies. Presently, ideals of the Enlightenment are about to be completed and, at the same time, are put under inflexible critics in the Postmodern period (this term is applied by me as a periodising concept taken from Frederic Jameson). Art has questioned its aesthetic paradigm and the sense of existence recognized by art is in establishing the frontiers where nobody ventured to put his foot, yet. Despite such radical changes, man still experiences the feelings of an aesthetic character in his contact with nature. Today he experiences this not to confirm his strength in contact with nature, but to satisfy the needs of an aesthetic nature which are deeply inherent in him. However, art not longer wants to provide such experiences to its addressees.

How does this happen that we experience this type of feelings in contact with a landscape, a meadow, a tree or a flower? In the Hamsun's novel we have to do with metaphysical aesthetics where the heart of beauty is beyond the object of its cognizance. Such was a proposal put forward by Jacques Maritain or Emmanuel Mounier. It is difficult to defend this standpoint on the grounds of aesthetics, unless a decisive argument is faith.

How to actually explain this phenomenon that we experience qualities and values aesthetically valent? The key to determine the way in which the values

⁴ Ibidem, s. 325.

generate and exist may be recognition of specific bio psychical inclinations of homo sapiens. The inclinations typical of the human kind may, I think, include: eagerness for homeostasis, sense of rhythm and a drive for imitation. These unchangeable human bio psychical antecedents, shaped by the social nature of human existence, lead to the establishment of an ability to experience aesthetic values and, consequently, appearance of the aesthetic awareness. The aesthetic value is created thanks to the correspondence of qualities known to an individual representing a certain historical level of aesthetic awareness with the qualities contained in the work of art. Certainly, this process has a gradual and long lasting nature. Aesthetic experience has been formed in a continuous process of culture oriented experience of nature by man.

An interesting aspect seems to be the formulation of a question: had man been sensitive to these qualities even before he started to produce the objects containing aesthetically valent qualities? One can think that man could not have produced such objects if he had not represented such sensibility. Consequently one can assume that aesthetic experiences felt in contact with nature are shaped thanks to the experiences coming from contacts with art in case of a civilized man, yet not necessarily.

A different standpoint is perhaps more difficult to defend. For example, Stefan Morawski consequently tries to indicate the process, which shaped such a sensibility through the culturing process of the homo sapiens species. According to S. Morawski, this process has developed along five distinguishable stages of a spiral nature. The first stage is a period where aesthetic value was formed on the basis of the homo faber dispositions in the neolith era. Emotional experiences were then shaped during shared work on objects in which, at present, we see artistic values, objects of cult, paintings on the rock, sculptures and figures. At that stage, according to Morawski, man generates an awareness of being separate from nature which became a basis for partial contemplation and for an emerging self-reflection. Here we also have to do with those who create and those who perceive. The second phase in the evolution of an aesthetic experience was dominated by religious experience. The characteristic feature of this stage is a metaphysical and symbolic entourage of the aesthetic experiences. Religion brought here a critically new element: an experience of transcendence. Since that time nature has been perceived as a work of god's creation. The beginning of the third phase is placed by Morawski in the period of mature Renaissance and its end falls at the beginning of the XX Century. Its characteristic feature is the generation of an aesthetic experience as clearly isolated from a

regular daily experiences which are opposed to intellectual, moral and religious approaches. Morawski indicates Kant's differentiation of these questions, which results in the approach to art as the main area of an aesthetic experience, while nature becomes a secondary reference. As an effect of the adopted distinction the artistic beauty becomes a measure of aesthetic values of nature. In the Hegel's concept we have to do with a consequence of such an assumption, which treats the beauty of nature as a mystification. The fourth phase of evolution of the aesthetic experience started in the 20-s of the XX Century. As Morawski states that „the demarcation line for this phase is an absolute cult of demiurge who uses technical facilities developed and improved on an avalanche basis, oriented to an absolute supremacy of the pragmatic and universal values subordinated to the control of the reason and steered by it”⁵. The essence of this phase could be represented by constructivism, and then productivism routed in it and the Bauhaus school. In our times the continuation of this phase can be seen in land art, earth art and anti-art (representatives of these trends were: Marcel Duchamp, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Oscar Dominguez, Jackson Pollock, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Heinz Mack, Piero Manzoni, Barry Flangan, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, Christo, Joseph Beuys). Here we commune not with an aesthetic experience, but with its deconstruction and negation. The aesthetic experience is pushed away to the margin “underlines a crisis condition of the human existence”⁶ The fifth phase the formation of which we currently observe is a return in a spiral way to the first phase. It does not come out from an aesthetic tradition, but from the ecologic movement. This leads to de-aesthetisation of our contacts with nature „it is a return to the biological pulsations existing in ourselves, this is, at the same time, a spontaneous expression”⁷ The sense of this process, according to Morawski, lies in the saving acts of the human kind from traumatic experiences provided by hyper rational culture which is blindly pragmatic, and devotionally cultivating technological progress.

This area of dispositions given to our species should be overlaid, I think, by the results of historical development. The starting point would be common for all cultural circles. This is primitive culture with commonly existing elements of magic and production. This is essentially the basis for each art in the evolution throughout the centuries. Varieties of the present times are an effect of the varieties of the conditions in the course of development. On the other hand the structure of the

⁵ Ibidem, s. 4.

⁶ Ibidem, s. 5.

⁷ Ibidem, s. 6.

core – of what is formed on the basis of the bio psychic features of man is invariant. Throughout the historical process these invariants are born and improve, as despite the process of definition of new aesthetic norms and canons the questions arising are the same and the answers are similar, which accumulate in the awareness of the species.

The essential question in the Morawski's theory mentioned here is the reduction of the aesthetic values to the artistic values of art. Within such a standpoint it is assumed that the evaluation of a work of art performed in relation to aesthetic experience is the priority. Apart from that artistic values constitute a narrower concept because they relate exclusively to the artistic objects. Aesthetic values are a broader concept as they exist thanks to the first ones. Separation of artistic values from aesthetic ones, I think, would cancel an internal coherence of the Morawski's proposal. A consequence of this decision – actually saving the theory – is Morawski's ambiguous approach to the contemporary currents of Neo-Avantguard and Postmodernism. Bohdan Dziemidok characterises this in the following way: „On the one hand, he declares in favour of the Neo-Avantguard, which questions aesthetic paradigm of the traditional art (...). On the other hand, however, »he is not able to finally move away from aesthetics, because the new categories and the corresponding new co-ordinated knowledge have not been generated«⁸.

I think that Morawski's metaaesthetic solutions are fully grounded with regard to art which advocates aesthetic sacrum. It seems that the demand for such a type of artistic creation was exhausted at the moment when Neo-Avantguard appeared. That is why the methodology proposed by Morawski is ideal for a historian of art which performs research into this type of creation, or for future aestheticians, for the times when art will again advocate aesthetic sacrum. Today, following the trails of the B. Dziemidok's proposal, aesthetics should follow art as a form of cultural expression at a given historical moment and within a given cultural and civilisation circle. It should follow various representations in respect of both its quality and form of expression, starting from mass art and ending with haute art and aesthetically valent qualities scattered throughout our daily realities.

However, it is difficult to confirm the twilight of aesthetics and its replacement with anti-aesthetics, whose object of cognizance would be a kind of „poietics”. We can observe quite opposite standpoints. The majority of theorists associated with

⁸ B. Dziemidok, *O potrzebie odróżnienia artystycznego i estetycznego wartościowania sztuki*, [w:], *Primum Philosopharum. Księga pamiątkowa Stefanowi Morawskiemu ofiarowana*, red. Brach-Czaina, Warszawa 1993, s. 73.

the aesthetics represented the right point of view that the crisis may be overcome by modifying analytical assumptions and categories concerning aesthetics. Representatives of such a standpoint in Poland are Grzegorz Dziamski and Tadeusz Szkołut, who confirmed the legitimacy of their statements in their research in Avantguard and Neo-Avantguard art⁹. Moreover the philosophers of a Postmodern orientation very often point out to an unusual renaissance of aesthetics. They perceive a relationship between the Postmodern awareness with the Avantguard art¹⁰. For example Wolfgang Welsch treats aesthetics as the primary philosophy. He is of an opinion that the Postmodern philosophy was born from the spirit of the modern art. The modern times are treated as a period of an unbelievable development of aesthetics and aesthetisation of the human entourage. This aesthetisation does not only cover our entourage, but also our cognition, our knowledge, epistemology and the whole philosophy. All-embracing aesthetisation of our daily lives, whose main goal is the winding up of the consumption, leads, according to Welsch, to *anaesthetisation*, or, in other words, to a specific callousness to aesthetic stimuli¹¹. Brigitte Scheer formulates similar diagnoses. She is of a firm opinion that aesthetic has been flourishing for the last 15 years. She associates the existing intellectual leaven in the philosophy with philosophical aesthetics. Thanks to aesthetics, she thinks, transformation of basic domains of philosophy occurs and that makes up aesthetics one of the main philosophical disciplines¹².

The phenomenon which is commonly described as „aesthetisation” is associated, as it were, with two aspects: one of them is aesthetisation of the philosophy, understood as overcoming the rationalist paradigm of the Western modern philosophy, the other is aesthetisation of a widely understood culture and daily life.

⁹ A key work which enables to make up such classification in case of G. Dziamski is his work mentioned here: *Postmodernizm wobec kryzysu estetyki współczesnej*, Poznań 1996, whereas in case of T. Szkołut is: T. Szkołut, *Antyszuka, antyestetyka a sytuacja kultury współczesnej*, „Studia Estetyczne”, 1986 – 1990, t. 23, s. 398 – 399; idem, *O perspektywach estetyki w dobie kultury postmodernistycznej*, „Przegląd Humanistyczny”, 1993, nr 2, s. 45 – 52.

¹⁰ Comp. G. Dziamski, *Postmodernizm wobec kryzysu estetyki współczesnej*, Poznań 1996, s. 107.

¹¹ Comp. W. Welsch, *Estetyka i anestetyka*, [w:], *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów*, red. R. Nycz, Kraków 1996, s. 524; W. Welsch, *Budynki, które pozwalają oddychać*. Z Wolfgangiem Welschem rozmawia Łukasz Stanek, „Opcje”, 2002, nr 3, s. 60 – 65; W. Welsch, *Art Transcending the Human Pale – Towards a Transhuman Stance*, „International Yearbook of Aesthetics”, 2001, v. 5, p. 3 – 23.

¹² Comp. B. Scheer, *Einführung in die philosophische Ästhetik*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, s. 1 – 7.

An unquestionable fact of a common presence of aesthetisation of the contemporary culture and daily life, as it may appear, may not be ignored by aesthetics as a research discipline. In the light of such an experience of reality traditionally cultivated aesthetics as a philosophy of art has become insufficient. Consequently a postulate to enlarge the object of cognition of aesthetics has appeared rather than to reject the object, which has been in force till today. The central point for aesthetics is still, in my opinion, art and artistic creation both traditional one and that which breaks off with the aesthetic paradigm. However, further neglect of aesthetic phenomena existing outside art becomes groundless. Here we have to do with the phenomena such as: aesthetic phenomena inherent in both natural and urban environments, what may be located at the frontiers of art and popular culture (fashion, advertisements, etc.) and also aesthetic phenomena associated with modern electronic media¹³. An obvious threat, which is faced within a context of a proposal to enlarge the object of cognition is to embrace all which is ascribed to an aesthetisation value. The way to continue requires, I think, such solutions as: leaving the question of aesthetisation of knowledge and cognition to epistemology and leaving the question of aesthetisation of ethics to ethics itself (styles of life, planning of lifetime, etc.). The other threat which may be associated with the standpoint concerning the enlargement of the object of cognition is the scattering of aesthetics within the philosophy of culture¹⁴. However, I think that we should not worry too much as, up till today, aesthetics as a philosophical and axiologic discipline has not been absorbed and deprived of its autonomy.

Therefore a literary grasp of nature and human life, constituting the fundamental part of Knut Hamsun's novel has not devaluated and inspires and, I think, will inspire among the readers experiences of aesthetic nature, among others.

¹³ The environmental aesthetics was for the first time presented in a systematic way in the anthologies: *Environmental Aesthetics*, Editor: A. Carlson, B. Sadler, Victoria B.C. 1982; *Environmental Aesthetics: Theory Research and Application*, Cambridge 1988, and: Y. Sepanmaa, *The Beauty of Environmental*, Helsinki 1986, and M. Gołaszewska, *Estetyka rzeczywistości*, Warszawa 1984. In Poland ecoaesthetics is developed by the Cracow circle of aestheticians which may be documented by the following publications: M. Gołaszewska, *Święto wiosny. Ekoestetyka – nauka o pięknie natury*, Kraków 2000; *Poznanie i doznanie. Eseje z estetyki i ekologii*, red. M. Gołaszewska, Kraków 2000; *Estetyka a ekologia*, red. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 1992. Moreover, it is worth considering: *Piękno w sieci. Estetyka a nowe media*, red. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 1999; *Estetyczne przestrzenie współczesności*, red. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Warszawa 1996; D. Gelernter, *Mechaniczne piękno. Kryterium estetyczne w informatyce*, Warszawa 1999; J. D. Barrow, *Wszechświat a sztuka*, Warszawa 1998.

¹⁴ Comp. A. Erjavec, *Aesthetic: Philosophy of Art or Philosophy of Culture?*, „Filozofski Vestnik”, 2001, no 2, s. 7 – 20.

STRESZCZENIE

Izaak bohater *Błogosławieństwa ziemi* ma wiele cech wspólnych z nietzscheańskim ideałem nadczłowieka. Kryzys kultury i cywilizacji, który wówczas na początku XX wieku był artykułowany między innymi poprzez ten ideał, wyrażany jest również na przełomie XX i XXI wieku. Jego cechami dystyngtywnymi są między innymi ucieczka od wielkich aglomeracji, fascynacja pięknem natury, ożywienie ruchów proekologicznych. Różnica, którą można odczytać w tych – jak sądzę – komplementarnych ruchach myślenia, tkwi w utracie wiary w omnipotencję Rozumu. W konsekwencji tego w kulturze postmodernistycznej (posługuję się tym terminem w rozumieniu używanym przez Frederica Jamesona – *periodizing concept*) waloryzacji podlega m.in. hedonizm, w przeciwieństwie do waloryzowanej w kulturze modernistycznej siły woli. Zarówno w jednej, jak i w drugiej formacji kulturowej mamy do czynienia z zaspokajaniem potrzeb estetycznych, które immanentnie tkwią w naturze człowieka. Zaspokajanie owych potrzeb w formacji modernistycznej dokonywało się głównie poprzez wartości artystyczne (posługuję się propozycją B. Dziemidoka, która polega na oddzieleniu wartości artystycznych od wartości estetycznych w przeciwieństwie m.in. do propozycji S. Morawskiego, który wartości artystyczne sprowadza do wartości estetycznych). W formacji postmodernistycznej tę funkcję przejmują wartości estetyczne tkwiące w otoczeniu człowieka, m.in. w środowisku naturalnym (*environment*). Dyskusyjne w związku z tym wydaje się sprowadzanie estetyki do filozofii sztuki, a niezwykle inspirującym jest związek estetyki z filozofią kultury.

W tekście podejmuję próbę określenia cech dystyngtywnych wartościowania środowiska naturalnego, posługując się przykładem powieści Knuta Hamsuna *Błogosławieństwo ziemi*. Te cechy dystyngtywne służą mi do określenia kierunku dokonującej się transformacji, za którą może (powinien) podążyć sposób uprawiania estetyki. Uznawanie nierozszerzalności przedmiotu poznania estetyki prowadzi m.in. do zastępowania estetyki antyestetyką lub do uprawiania poetyki. Swoje zaś stanowisko formuję w obszarze relacjonizmu historyczno-kulturowego.

Recenzent dr hab. Tadeusz Szkołut, prof. nadzw. UMCS