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Chapter Seven

The Ecological Avant-garde

Arkady Fiedler's The River of Singing Fish

Ida Day

Even among his extraordinary generation of Polish avant-garde literary and artistic figures, Arkady Fiedler (1894–1985) stands out as one of the most original and creative authors. His travel reportage from the experimental inter-war period of the 1920s and 1930 is an example of an avant-garde production—ahead of its time, eclectic, and exploring new ideas. As avant-garde is a very broad term referring to a variety of experimental literary and artistic techniques, I focus on Fiedler's innovative and ethical approach to the natural world. This essay explores how the historical changes of the early twentieth century, affecting literature, theater, and art, also transformed the way in which the natural environment was perceived. Fiedler was a pioneer of this biocentric and holistic orientation toward nature, which gradually became more and more influential in literary and cultural studies. I revisit Fiedler's work as a source of the growing discipline of environmental ethics, and by doing so, I propose to revive the field and the canon of the ecological avant-garde.

It is important to note that an ethical approach to the natural world and awareness of the environmental impact of modernity were not common attitudes in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Joshua Schuster observed in *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (2015), all the global events of the era, such as the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the breakup of colonial empires, were “rarely, if ever, considered in relation to the major ecological changes that they themselves effect.”¹ Even though the environmental domination was one of the central issues of the period, there was no focus on preserving ecosystems from distress of development: the cultural production was “keenly attentive to environs but ambivalent about environmentalism.”² Fiedler did not follow this trend. His work undeniably offered a reflection on the impact of

environmental changes and global transformations of the era. Józef Ratajczak proposed Fiedler as “the patron saint” of ecology in Poland since the goal of his work was: “ukazać wielkie sacrum natury niszczone przez bezmyślnych morderców i wściekłe roboty cywilizacji” (“to show the sacredness of nature destroyed by thoughtless murderers and the mad projects of civilization”; my trans.).³ I propose to demonstrate Fiedler’s work as an ecological and cultural avant-garde—opposed to mainstream values of the 1920s and 1930s and promoting radical change.

I focus on Fiedler’s iconic, poetically entitled book, *The River of Singing Fish* (1935), a product of the author’s travel to the Amazon (the Ucayali river region in Peru), which was translated into fifteen languages and initiated his career as an international writer. I examine it as an example of a pluralistic text, which transcends a demarcation between science and literature. Also, I demonstrate how the book not only responded to certain tendencies of the epoch in which it was written, but also pioneered new ideas, and influenced new generations of authors. Fiedler’s vision of natural world as a living organism resonated in later environmental discourses, such as Gaia hypothesis in 1970s, and contemporary environmental ethics, especially a biocentric outlook, according to which “we share with other species a common relationship to the Earth.”⁴ Anna Szumna

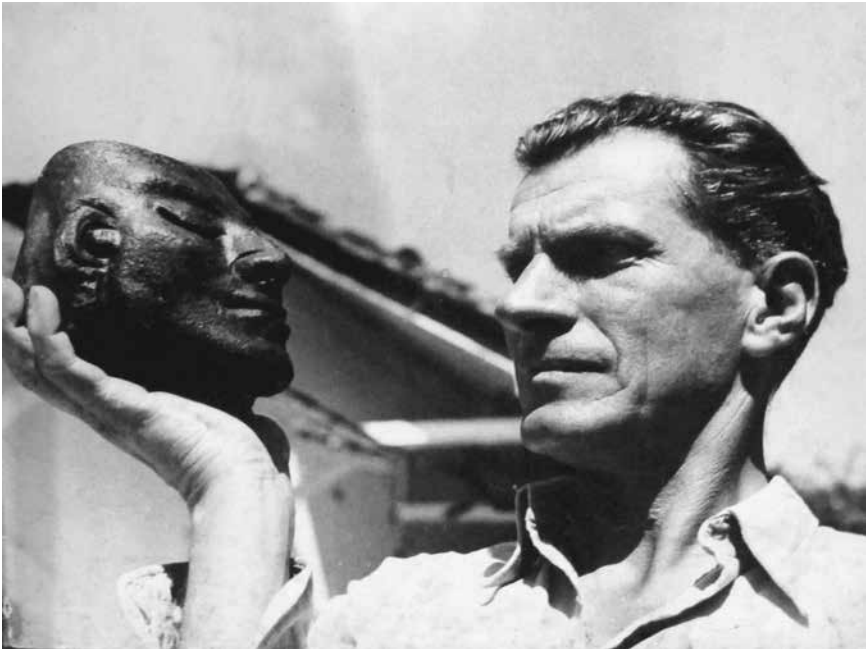


Figure 7.1. Arkady Fiedler. With permission from Marek Fiedler.

reflected in *Awangarda Środkowej i Wschodniej Europy—innovacja czy naśladownictwo?*: “Awangarda już dawno uległa pewnemu oswojeniu—teraz uczymy się ją czytać jako jeden z wielu poważnych pomysłów na uczestnictwo we współczesności” (“The avant-garde has become familiarized a long time ago—now we are learning to read it as one of the many essential concepts of contemporaneity”; my trans.).⁵ Following this line of thought, the goal of my essay is to examine the continuity between the avant-garde and the present. I study Fiedler’s cutting-edge ideas in new contexts and emphasize his contribution to contemporary cultural debates. Even though travel writing has been a marginalized genre in the academic literary studies, and has received very little critical attention, I consider it crucial in the context of an ecocritical study of Fiedler’s work.⁶ Travel and nature, which had been the author’s fascinations since the early childhood, shaped his artistic vision, contributed to his ideas and worldview, and formulated his ecological sensibility.

Arkady Fiedler was born in 1894, in Poznań, Poland. The most influential figure in the author’s life was his father, who inspired him with a passion for literature, adventure, and the natural world. During their walks in the old oak forest, young Arkady started dreaming about more distant forests and more exotic nature. He recalled in his book, *Mój ojciec i dęby* (1973) (*My Father and the Oaks*):

Las: jak dogłębnie, wszystkimi zmysłami go odczuwałem [. . .] W tym uroczym lesie tkwiła potężna magia, bo za każdym razem, gdy tędy przechodziliśmy, chłopięca wyobraźnia ponosiła mnie i zjawiały się te same indiańskie widziadła. A były to prorocze majaki i później niejedną raz przeżywałem podobne sceny, ale już na jawie z żywymi Indianami w Kanadzie, Meksyku czy w Brazylii.

The forest: how profoundly I felt it, with all my senses [. . .] In this charming forest there was intense magic, because, every time we walked through it, my boyish imagination carried me away and created Indian visions. They were prophetic dreams, and later I lived similar scenes, but with real Indians in Canada, Mexico or Brazil (my trans.).⁷

Fiedler’s first three books were not received with great applause. One of the reasons was the lack of prestige for the travel reportage in the literary taste of the time. However, Fiedler soon demonstrated that his work was not simply a novelistic travelogue or a conventional account of adventures, but an artistic, emotional, and insightful exploration of human and nonhuman life. When *The River of Singing Fish* was first published, in 1935, the praise of Fiedler’s talent and originality was spread in all literary circles: “W rodzinie poetów przyrody Fiedler jest indywidualnością do nikogo nie podobną, natomiast jego współzycie z przyrodą ma coś zmysłowego, że odnosi się wrażenie, iż pisarz przekracza tu granice, które dzieliły nawet Kiplinga od świata roślin i

zwierząt” (“Among the poets of nature, Fiedler is an individual that cannot be compared to anyone else, and there is something sensual in his relationship with nature, so that it gives an impression that the writer crosses the borders that were separating even Kipling from the realm of plants and animals”; my trans.).⁸ The book also crossed other borders, those between the literary genres, demonstrating an eclectic mix of styles: journalism, memoir, poetic prose, science, and textual collage. Using reportage, a non-fiction genre developed in Poland in the inter-war period, Fiedler experimented with new forms. In a non-chronological, mosaic style, he assembled events that he had witnessed, and then reflected on them. This genre manifested the inventiveness and dynamism of the era, and the spirit of the avant-garde, which was defined by Beret Strong as “a creative process rather than a product.”⁹

The appreciation of Fiedler’s work must be seen in a context of Polish and European history. His style was inspired by the tendencies of the avant-garde movements on the artistic scene in Warsaw during the 1920s and 1930s, specifically the “Skamandrites.” This was a group of experimental poets founded in a literary café, “Under the Picador,” in Warsaw, in 1918. They were the first generation of a liberated Poland, which had been erased from the map of Europe by neighboring powers for over a century, and then regained independence following the First World War. In contrast to previous generations of Polish writers, the “Skamandrites” were free from national ideology and conventional patriotism. Literature, which before had to play a role of a guardian of the language and memory, could finally be spontaneous and innovative. One of those poets, Jan Lechoń, expressed the essence of their spirit in the following verse: “And in the spring let me see spring, not Poland.”¹⁰ Unlike other avant-garde movements, such as the Cracow Avant-garde (inspired by Futurism), the “Skamandrites” valued emotions, common people, and nature—all forms of life, including the biological/organic aspect. Even though they promoted original and new ideas, their productions continued the Polish Romantic tradition (its focus on sentiment, folklore, and poetic form). At the same time, they were very cosmopolitan, and inspired by Russian and French tendencies.¹¹ Fiedler’s travel reportage reflects many aspects of the “Skamander” group—the lack of political ideology, emphasis on emotions, nature, and poetic expression, as well as cosmopolitanism and a fascination with the world.

During the Second World War, Fiedler’s interests shifted from travel writing to active engagement in the conflict, and he wrote his most popular book about a legendary Polish air force unit, *Squadron 303* (1942)—the highest-scoring Allied fighter squadron in the Battle of Britain. The book was published in England, and circulated clandestinely in the German-occupied Poland, boosting morale and inspiring the fight for freedom. After the war, Fiedler was encouraged by the communist government to return to Poland

to be an advocate and a literary publicist for the country newly liberated from the Nazi oppression. In 1948, he settled with his family in a villa in Puszczykówko, from where he continued to travel and write. However, soon the communist authorities started to enforce the obedience to the ideology of social realism, and to apply restrictions toward artists and writers. Fiedler was not allowed to travel, and his work was censured due to cosmopolitanism, exoticism, and the lack of ideology: “Minęły czasy świetności egzotyizmu. Przestaliśmy spoglądać na dalekie kraje oczami Fiedlera, tego Fiedlera, któremu ryby śpiewały w Ukajali” (“The glory of exoticism has passed. We no longer look at faraway lands with Fiedler’s eyes, that Fiedler for whom the fish sang in Ucayali”; my trans.).¹²

In the 1950s, *The River of Singing Fish* was censured by the communist authorities because it “koncentruje się na otaczającym świecie przyrody, a sprawa człowieka jest dlań rzadko kiedy zagadnieniem pierwszoplanowym” (“concentrated on the natural world, and human concerns were rarely a priority”; my trans.).¹³ The title of the book itself communicates this eco-centric perspective, in which non-human nature has a “voice.” Fiedler dedicated entire chapters of his book to the fauna and flora of the Ucayali region, such as ants, parrots, spiders, lizards, and orchids. In a chapter, “An animal’s souls



Figure 7.2. Entrance to Fiedler House/Museum, Puszczykówko. Photograph by Dan Day.

revealed,” he discovered “the unplumbed depths of feeling which lurks in wild animals.”¹⁴ He found human qualities in all creatures of the tropical forest, reflecting, for example, on the Mygale spider as “a very tactful sort of robber” that was distinguished by “modesty and moderation.”¹⁵ Further, he reflected on the “cleverness and the unusual sense of solidarity” of parrots and their pure, disinterested friendship—“a rare enough trait even among human beings.”¹⁶ Also, the author described his experience with capturing a lizard, and then releasing it because of the animal’s “penetrating,” “steely,” and “eloquent” gaze that expressed “reproach as though reluctant to relinquish the power of its accusation.”¹⁷ Fiedler revealed to the reader how his pleasure of conquest vanished, and how the lizard’s gaze impacted him: “It was a reproach of all Nature against oppression by man. Or was it that I saw only the reflection of my own soul?”¹⁸ The author’s metaphysical reflection calls for a new ecological model, which expands the scope of scientific ecology with an ethical dimension.

Fiedler has integrated animal ethics with environmental studies and nature writing. His exploration of rich emotional life of animals resonates in contemporary environmental, philosophical, and scientific studies, such as the most recent Frans de Waal’s *Mama’s Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves* (2019), which claims: “Emotions are like organs [. . .] and we share them all with other mammals.”¹⁹ The author, a primatologist, explores the emotional continuity between humans and other species, using the example of a dying chimpanzee that recognizes and embraces her old friend—a Dutch biologist. De Waal demonstrates how modern science has finally recognized that animals are intelligent and emotional beings: “Today we dare speak of animal mental life only after a century of experiments on symbolic communication, mirror self-recognition, tool use, planning for the future, and adoption of another’s viewpoint. These studies have blown big drafty holes in the wall that supposedly separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom.”²⁰ The author argues that underestimating the emotions of animals has its roots in the theory of behaviorism, developed by B.F. Skinner in 1930s. According to this theory, all behavior is caused by external stimuli; therefore, animals are driven by instincts rather than internal mental states or consciousness. De Waal further elaborates that recognizing animals’ emotional intelligence has moral and ethical implications as it affects the way we treat them (he refers to industrial farms, habitat loss, and the use of animals in research). These attitudes toward animal life have contributed significantly to current ecological debates to decenter the human position in the natural world, in the context of biodiversity loss and climate emergency.²¹

Fiedler was one of the pioneers of these ideas, as he questioned human emotional superiority and exceptionalism in the world of nature. His chal-

lence of behaviorism was an avant-garde approach to understanding the behavior of humans and other animals. He observed animals and wrote about their intentions, emotions, and intelligence—issues that have been ignored in the field of science until recently. In one of his reflections about animal instinct, he described a situation when the Papilionidae butterflies came to visit the passion flowers on a clearing, recently abandoned by humming-birds. In the previous days, the humming-birds had driven off all the enemies from the clearing and made the area safe for themselves. Driven by instinctive mimicry, the butterflies came flying in numbers, imitating the swift movements of the humming-birds, as they knew that their predators were gone for a while. Fiedler calls their instinct “mysterious,” and poses a question: “What powerful force, at work with this stupendous jungle, had enticed them to the clearing? Who was it who gave them the finest possible, the most appropriate instruction?”²² The author recognizes that it was instinct that had driven the butterflies, however he also invites the reader to contemplate other possibilities, such as a certain degree of mental activity, consciousness, or awareness.

It is important to mention that Fiedler’s perspective was not just that of a writer and journalist, but also a scientist. His university studies in the field of



Figure 7.3. Arkady Fiedler’s Museum and Literary Atelier in Puszczykowo. Photograph by Frank Day.

natural sciences were interrupted by the first world war, but later he continued his research, collecting and studying animal species for natural history museums. A significant ornithological collection from Fiedler's expedition to Brazil of 1928/29 has been preserved at the Museum of Natural History in Berlin.²³ Years later, in *The River of Singing Fish*, Fiedler reflected upon collecting zoological specimen for scientific research as an activity that "inflicted a terrible wrong, depriving [animals] of liberty, and often bringing them death."²⁴ He expanded the scientific approach to nature with an ethical dimension—a new attitude toward animal life, questioning strictly human-centered views on the environment.

One of the chapters of "The River of Singing Fish" is dedicated to hunting and collecting humming-birds for the Warsaw Museum. It contains a distressing description of the killing of a very brave hummingbird that had won "an absurdly unequal fight" with a hawk, and then was captured by the author and his companion, Dolores.²⁵ The girl skillfully suffocated the bird, and its "fearless heart ceased to beat."²⁶ Fiedler's reflection on this event is self-critical: "Despite its courage [the bird] had to be included in my collection."²⁷ Even though Fiedler led this expedition, he questioned the human pleasure of hunting. The chapter also includes passages expressing the author's admiration for humming-birds—"these courageous little fairies of the jungle [which] deserve their world renown."²⁸ He tells Dolores that the Indians refer to them as "living sunbeams," and when she challenges the idea of sunbeams being alive, he affirms: "Yes, these are alive! Dolores, are you sure that sunbeams, I mean real sunbeams, are not living things?"²⁹ Such an attitude toward nature was an avant-garde and transgressive perspective at the time when the book was written, as it pushed the boundaries of what was accepted as the norm. Fiedler refers to the Amerindian cosmology, which, in contrast to Western worldview, postulates animism—a belief system that attributes to nonhuman entities a spiritual essence, and therefore a perspective, or agency.

Animated phenomena and creatures, such as living sunbeams and singing fish, inhabit the spirited nature represented in Fiedler's book: "Everything multiplied and lived, lived with full, indomitable spirit."³⁰ As Ratajczak observed, "Czytając książki Fiedlera, jesteścieście zaiste w zczarowanym, a jednocześnie realnym świecie" ("While reading Fiedler's books, we are indeed in an enchanted and yet real world," my trans.).³¹ Fiedler describes the Amazon forest not only as a living organic body, but also an enchanted space: "its vastness began to obsess our nerves and minds, and assumed a blurred force of menacing mystery."³² When his young travel companion, Chicinho, compares the Amazon to God, Fiedler comments that "he could not have guessed how much truth lay in his naïve words" since the Amazon is "vast, unfathomable, and almighty; it gives these people life, and it brings them

death.”³³ This vision of God’s immanence, or the divine manifested in nature, represents indigenous spirituality, which emphasizes an intimate interdependence between physical and spiritual aspects of life, as well as human and nonhuman worlds. According to this holistic and ecological perspective of the universe, all the phenomena—material and divine—complement each other, and there is no separation between human beings, their natural environment, and the spiritual world. The indigenous perspective is opposed to the Christian religion, which disregards the sacred nature of organic life, separates the human from the divine, and conceives the earthly life as a transitory step to heaven. According to this worldview, one that contradicts an ecological vision of the cosmos, human beings are masters of nature and can transform it as they wish. Fiedler recuperates indigenous worldviews, emphasizing the unity of spirit and matter, “świętość przyrody, równouprawienie wszystkich żyjących stworzeń” (“the sacredness of nature and equality of all beings,” my trans.).³⁴ By re-enchanting and revering nature, the author revitalizes the indigenous religious system and promotes ecological awareness.

Fiedler had been inspired by the Amerindian traditions since his childhood, when he was reading about them and then imagined adventures in the forest. This fascination continued throughout his life. When the communist authorities in Poland censored his literary work and prohibited his travels, the author lectured in schools on native American knowledge and practices. His historic family residence in Puszczykówko, operating as Museum and Literary Atelier since 1974, reflects Fiedler lifelong passion for indigenous histories and traditions. Apart from photographs and books, the museum contains an exhibition of exotic artefacts and ritual masks. Outside, in the Garden of Cultures and Tolerance, there is a collection of monuments of Aztec gods and Native American chiefs, a copy of a statue from the Eastern Island, and an actual size replica of Columbus’s ship, Santa Maria. It is interesting to note that the replica is not integrated with other exhibits, which all share certain spiritual, ceremonial, and artistic value. It stands rather isolated, in the back of the garden, as a technological oddity and a symbol of colonial power.

The River of Singing Fish also contains descriptions of indigenous customs and lifestyles, which reflects the avant-garde attraction to the primitive, the exotic, and the “other” as an alternative to Western world order. In one chapter, dedicated to the Chama Indian tribe, Fiedler questions the idea of European superiority over the indigenous people: “We of the white race are proud of the fact that we have conquered the whole world by our intelligence, strength of character, and perfect organization, and because we have invented profound philosophic systems and highly effective guns. True, we pay polite tribute to the philosophy of the Brahmins and to Chinese culture, but there it all ends. A completely different situation arises when a white man visits the



Figure 7.4. The Garden of Cultures and Tolerance, Puszczykowo. Photograph by Dan Day

River Ucayali, where the Chama Indian tribe lives.”³⁵ He further elaborates on the perception that the indigenous people have of Europeans—as “handicaps” and “nit wits” since they completely lack ecological and practical knowledge.³⁶ Fiedler suggests that the practical knowledge of Chama (using a canoe) is as valid as modern science (a steam-boat) because it works better in local environments. This perception was not a common attitude at the time, as the first decades of the twentieth century glorified the scientific and technological progress. Rather, it belonged to the literary initiatives of the avant-garde that questioned Western civilization—“its smug self-conceptions, its cultural pieties, its racial prejudices, and its sense of historic exceptionalism.”³⁷ Today, there is a growing number of authors who emphasize the importance of revitalizing local/indigenous beliefs and practices. For example, Raymond Pierotti, in *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (2011), proposes to reevaluate the indigenous knowledge and to stimulate its dialogue with modern science in order to solve ecological problems. The author claims that, in contrast with scientific knowledge, the indigenous approach to the environment is “personal rather than abstract,” embedded deeply in their everyday life.³⁸ In current ecological debate, this small-scale and intimate approach offers a valid alternative to the Western scientific/

technological paradigm, which is failing to provide sustainability for our planet. The indigenous knowledge and traditions, which Fiedler honored in his research and writings, have served as influential sources in the field of contemporary environmental ethics, spiritual ecology, and ecocritical studies.

Other examples of theories in which the indigenous vision of the environment has been used to enrich Western environmental thought include Aldo Leopold's biocentric ethics. His foundational essay, "Land Ethic," published posthumously in 1949, calls for respect for the land and "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it."³⁹ Like the indigenous worldview, Leopold questions Western postulations about humanity's independent condition from nature. His concept of "biotic community" includes all members of an ecosystem, and consequently reflects the first law of ecology that "everything is connected to everything else."⁴⁰ Another parallel between indigenous ethics and modern ecology is Gaia hypothesis, formulated by James Lovelock, in 1971, which regards the Earth as superorganism, a living planet, and a complex interacting system. Also, in recent decades, many authors have revived native traditions and knowledge, expanding the scope of scientific ecology with a spiritual dimension.⁴¹ The concept of ecology has been redefined as a "fundamentally holistic" knowledge that "cannot truly be reduced."⁴² Fiedler's work opened ways toward reflection on these ideas and helped to translate indigenous worldviews to Western sensibilities, as nature-based worldview was not a widely accepted environmental representation in 1930s.

The literary representation of nature in the inter-war period was dominated by poetic tropes, such as industrial pollution, toxicity, and wasteland. As Beret Strong stated, in *The Poetic Avant-Garde*, the period between the wars was "rife with fear, especially the fear of extinction loomed in the future," and the artists were attracted to anarchy, abstraction, and irony.⁴³ It was also a period of immense environmental transformations resulting from modernization—the rise of new technologies, rapid urbanization and industrialization, and the spread of mass communication. The new avant-garde movements, like futurism, glorified innovation, technology, and progress. Joshua Schuster observed that "the avant-garde sought to escape from nature and hitch its fate to the attention-grabbing of machines and mass media."⁴⁴ The nineteenth century sublime and aesthetically appealing landscapes were replaced with the imagery of "urban grime, smokestacks, and industrial waste."⁴⁵ The first decades of the twentieth century was also a period of the rise of ecology as a scientific field, which had a profound impact on the representation of the natural world in art and literature. Schuster describes how the avant-garde styles broke from earlier sentimental narratives of romanticized landscapes and introduced the idea of "nature as a dynamic space"—"the world in motion,

ever-exposed to change and disturbance, the appearance and disappearance of life.”⁴⁶ As a result of the rise of natural sciences, biology and organic form became issues of interest for artists and writers.

Fiedler embraced this aspect of the avant-garde, describing the dynamics of the Amazon forest: the instinct of self-preservation, copulation and proliferation of insects, symbiotic relationships between organisms, and omnipresent death. *The River of Singing Fish* focused on representing ecological conditions in Ucayali; however, it also included an awareness of the environmental impact of modernity and a desire to preserve the Amazon forest—“the most perfect form of vegetable life.”⁴⁷ Fiedler admired the exuberant vitality of the jungle, still protected from the rapidly approaching modern progress: “although it sounds improbable in these days of wireless, radar, and aeroplanes, all this tremendous tract of country has so far largely resisted the march of civilization.”⁴⁸ The book also promotes a spiritual awareness of biodiversity and a moral responsibility to the natural world, which were absent from the work of the author’s contemporaries. In a radio program, in 1974, Fiedler summarized his attitude toward nature in the following words: “Do przyrody podchodzę przede wszystkim uczuciowo i z sercem. Kochając słońce nie zamykam oczu na cienie, chociaż wiem, że w życiu jest więcej słońca niż cieni. O tym właśnie piszę w moich książkach” (“I approach nature primarily with emotions and heart. While loving the sun I do not close my eyes for shadows, even though, I know, that there is more sun light than shadow in life. This is what I write about in my books”; my trans.).⁴⁹

This emotional and positive outlook of the author is intimately linked to the Polish avant-garde “Skamander” group, whose manifesto, published in 1920, read: “we do not wish to pretend that evil is nonexistent, but our love is stronger than all evil.”⁵⁰ This manifesto “consisted in a programmatic denial of any program”—“programowa bezprogramowość,” and focused on exploring life in all its forms.⁵¹ Avoiding lofty and patriotic themes, the Skamandrites were interested in common people and everyday existence. Fiedler also demonstrated these tendencies, as he was more engaged in exploring the natural world and the depths of human/animal nature than promoting political views: “Ani w głowie było mu mieszać się do polityki, żył sam na sam z puszcza” (“It did not occur to him to get involved in politics, he lived one-on-one with the forest”; my trans.).⁵² Even though Fiedler was not focused on promoting any ideology or program, his writings have offered new insights into ecological thinking, and explored a broad range of critical questions, such as the human position in the natural environment and our relationship with nature.

By examining *The River of Singing Fish* and other representations of nature of the period, it is readily apprehended that Fiedler’s biocentric perspective was a departure from the established norms; however, at the same



Figure 7.5. Collection of Fiedler's published works, Fiedler Museum. Photograph by Ida Day

time, it brought into dialogue the environmental ideas not only of the author's contemporaries but also the predecessors. Inspired by the art of Paul Gauguin (*Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal* first published in 1903), who rebelled against urban culture and focused on detailing life in exotic places characterized by sensual and simple living, Fiedler once confessed: "mnie interesuje prymityw [. . .]. Prości ludzie to mój żywioł" ("I am interested in the primitive. Simple people are my passion," my trans.).⁵³ In this respect, the author's fascination was a continuation of the romantic and modernist tradition in their anti-rationalist tendencies and impulses toward a more genuine expression of human nature. He admired Henry David Thoreau, whose *Walden* (1854), on spiritual discovery and contemplation of nature in a cabin in the woods, became for Fiedler one of the most influential works: "dzieło to stanowiło dla niego swoistą Biblię, do której ciągle wracał" ("this masterpiece was for him a special Bible, to which he would always return," my trans.).⁵⁴ Also,

Fiedler's perspective that grants consciousness to nonhuman life was influenced by Maurice Maeterlinck's nature essay, *The Intelligence of Flowers*, published in 1907, to which he paid tribute in the following words: "Jeśli w późniejszych latach wędrówek dostrzegałem w przyrodzie wiele piękna [. . .] w znacznej mierze zawdzięczałem to książce belgijskiego maga" ("In my later years of globetrotting, if I found beauty in nature [. . .] I owed it to the book by the Belgian marvel," my trans.).⁵⁵ One chapter of *The River of Singing Fish* is dedicated to the beauty and sensuality of orchids "as though they had a living, forceful personality," which reflects Fiedler's fascination with these flowers inspired by Maeterlinck.⁵⁶ Considering all these influences, it is important to note that Fiedler's innovative views were not developed in isolation, but in a simultaneous interaction with other environmental discourses.⁵⁷ As Strong observed, "no work is completely avant-garde because every work necessarily relies on existing values."⁵⁸ Fiedler's themes, perspective, and style are a manifestation of the dynamism of the avant-garde era and its celebration of change.

To conclude, Arkady Fiedler's *The River of Singing Fish* is an example of ecological and cultural avant-garde as it has prefigured the changes in human attitudes toward the natural world and expanded the environmental concerns



Figure 7.6. Arkady Fiedler's resting place, Puszczykowo, Wielkopolski National Park. Photograph by Eugene Zeb Kozlowski.

of the time. Firstly, Fiedler developed an ethical orientation toward nature and a more holistic/biocentric worldview in which human life is part of the ecosystem. He fostered a dialogue between the early twentieth-century scientific ecological thinking and the current, much broader, ecological concerns, such as animal ethics. Secondly, the author attracted attention to the environmental consequences of modernity. The impact of the global transformations is visible in his innovative and vibrant travel reportage from the experimental inter-war period, when environmental concerns and ecological awareness were not traditional themes of literature. Considering the cultural representation of nature and the environmental knowledge available at the time, Fiedler's views were progressive since they promoted a reverence for the natural world in the era of science and industrialization. Finally, Fiedler revived the indigenous attitudes toward the environment, and by doing so, he anticipated many themes in contemporary ecocritical studies, such as spiritual ecology and Gaia theory. This essay has demonstrated how Fiedler's work contributed to formulation of contemporary environmental ethics and helped to incorporate indigenous spiritualities into Western worldviews, which traditionally disregarded the sacred nature of organic life, and thus brought about current ecological crisis. Fiedler's re-enchantment of nature, spiritual awareness of the environment, and attribution of mental qualities to nonhuman beings are examples of his innovative outlook, which reevaluates the human position in ecological frameworks and has influenced the succeeding generations of authors.

NOTES

1. Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 4.
2. Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics*, 3.
3. Józef Ratajczak, *Gdy Warta wpadała do Ukajali* (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, 1994), 50.
4. Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect to Nature," in *Environmental Ethics*, eds. David Schmidt and Elizabeth Willott (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 87. See also James Lovelock's *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979).
5. Anna Szumna, *Awangardia Środkowej i Wschodniej Europy—innovacja czy naśladownictwo?* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2014), 11.
6. Travel literature as a genre credited with little critical attention has been discussed by Kimberly J. Healey in *The Modernist Traveler* (2003). The author points out that travel literature "may exist on the margins of the literary canon [. . .] yet the experience of travel was instrumental in shaping the way the world and self were understood and depicted in the twentieth century" (140).

7. Arkady Fiedler, *Mój ojciec i dęby* (Warszawa, 1973), 29.
8. Ratajczak, *Gdy Warta wpadała do Ukajali*, 8. Even though the critics compared Fiedler to Rudyard Kipling, Józef Ratajczak observed that Fiedler's travels did not have a colonial or imperial component characteristic of the English writer. Fiedler felt connected to nature since the early childhood, and, for him, the tropical forests were objects of "exploration rather than exploitation" (43).
9. Beret Strong. *Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 1.
10. Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), 385.
11. Miłosz, in *The History of Polish Literature* compares the "Skamandrites" to the Russian Acmeists, since both favored the form and clarity over the vagueness of other avant-garde tendencies.
12. Tomasz Kempniński, "Egzotyczny świat Arkadego Fiedlera," *Argumenta Historica. Czasopismo Naukowo-Dydaktyczne* 3, (2016): 51.
13. Ratajczak, *Gdy Warta wpadała do Ukajali*, 102.
14. Arkady Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish* (London: Readers Union with Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 75.
15. Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish*, 54.
16. *Ibid.*, 189.
17. *Ibid.*, 110.
18. *Ibid.*, 110.
19. Frans de Waal, *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves* (Waterville, Maine: Thorndike Press, 2019), 165.
20. de Waal, *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves*, 9.
21. For contemporary animal ethics see Peter Wohlleben's *The Inner Life of Animals* (2017), and Aysha Akhtar's *Our Symphony with Animals* (2019). These works demonstrate that animals are highly developed, intelligent, and compassionate creatures, and changing attitudes toward them is the next step in our moral evolution.
22. Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish*, 135.
23. Fiedler's contribution to the field of ornithology is studied by Christoph Hinkelmann and Jürgen Fiebig in "An Early Contribution to the Avifauna of Paraná, Brazil. The Arkady Fiedler's Expedition of 1928/29" (2001).
24. Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish*, 77.
25. *Ibid.*, 132.
26. *Ibid.*, 133.
27. *Ibid.*, 133.
28. *Ibid.*, 131.
29. *Ibid.*, 143.
30. *Ibid.*, 47.
31. Ratajczak, *Gdy Warta wpadała do Ukajali*, 8.
32. Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish*, 17.
33. *Ibid.*, 17.
34. Ratajczak, *Gdy Warta wpadała do Ukajali*, 49.
35. Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish*, 118.
36. *Ibid.*, 118.

37. David LeHardy Sweet, *Avant-garde Orientalism: The Eastern 'Other' in Twentieth-Century Travel Narrative and Poetry* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 6.
38. Raymond Pierotti, *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (New York, London: Routledge, 2011), 23.
39. Aldo Leopold, "Land Ethic" in *Environmental Ethics Environmental Ethics*, eds. David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willott (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.
40. For Barry Commoner's Laws of Ecology see *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (1971).
41. See John A. Grim's *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology* (2001).
42. John E. Carrol, *Sustainability and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 11.
43. Strong, *The Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton*, 26.
44. Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics*, 7.
45. *Ibid.*, 2.
46. *Ibid.*, x.
47. Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish*, 18.
48. *Ibid.*, 18.
49. Karolina Chojnacka, "Sztafeta polskich reporterów: dwudziestolecie międzywojenne," *Nowy Folder* (December 2018): n.p.
50. Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 385.
51. *Ibid.*, 401.
52. Ratajczak, *Gdy Warta wpadała do Ukajali*, 43.
53. *Ibid.*, 45.
54. Kempniński, "Egzotyczny świat Arkadego Fiedlera," *Argumenta Historica. Czasopismo Naukowo-Dydaktyczne* 3 (2016): 43.
55. Ratajczak, *Gdy Warta wpadała do Ukajali*, 31.
56. Fiedler, *The River of Singing Fish*, 70.
57. For more information on plants as animate beings see Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patricia Vieira's *The Language of Plants* (2017) and Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (2018). The authors bring up the ideas of Erasmus Darwin, an 18th-century naturalist and grandfather of Charles Darwin, who attributed to plants "sensation, movement, and certain degree of mental activity, emphasizing the continuity between humankind and plant existence" (xi).
58. Strong, *The Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton*, 23.

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