Warsaw Modernism – Bohdan Lachert

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Abstract. Bohdan Lachert’s work contributed significantly to the development of modern architectural concepts of the 20th century and his creative identity is connected with the activities at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology. He was one of the first students, later a Dean and lecturer, but also a theorist of architecture. His creative work, which was disrupted by the period of World War II, is invariably associated with the trend of modern avant-garde and leads a dialogue with the architecture of modernism. The dialogue is the subject of this article, the dialogue of the new residential architecture of Warsaw, in which Lachert presented his own interpretation of five rules of Le Corbusier’s modern architecture. The two stages of his work, a pre-war period with Józef Szanajca, and the post-war with the reality of socialist realism, create a unity since he remained faithful to the ideas of modernism. More importantly, however, he never changed his mind about the role of architecture as useful and practical, speaking about its utilitarian and artistic role at the same time but he also saw its importance in the constant pursuit of modernity. According to Lachert the understanding of modernity is related to eliminating discrepancies between the requirements of art and technology. Such a view of the role of architecture is illustrated in the examples of buildings as ‘the prototypes of the works of future generations’ of individual houses, the Muranów residential estate- one of the flagship works of the post-war architecture and other residential buildings in Warsaw. Lachert was an extraordinary creator, a predictable creator but at the same time difficult to define. He searched for a distinct expression of modern architecture, he experimented with material and form, which cannot be overlooked. He armed his great works with modernist patterns and expressive style, which became distinct and comprehensible within time in confrontation with spatial reality of his times.

1. Introduction

Among many buildings belonging to modern thought of architecture of Warsaw, a significant contribution was made by Bohdan Lachert. He was following the trend of modernism, which was in the process of development during the interwar period, and together with his pioneer approach towards modernity and quality of architecture with its distinct style based on geometry, elegance and rigidity, he became an unconventional creator. He belonged to the avant-garde in the way of thinking about architecture and he searched for his own interpretations of phenomenon which took place in the world of architecture. Continuing his work in the interwar period, he remained faithful to accepted ideals of modernism when Warsaw was struggling with the reality of socialist realism. He undertook multilevel activities in the field of residential architecture, public buildings and the elements of
equipment. He always highlighted his understanding of modern architecture, its movement towards usefulness and creation which was coming from practical needs.

2. Life-work-ideas

Provide Bogdan Lachert was born in 1900 in Moscow in a wealthy family of Polish entrepreneur. In 1919 he moved together with his family to Warsaw, where he started his law studies and in 1920 he began studying architecture at Warsaw University of Technology. In 1926 as a graduate of architecture, together with Józef Szanajca, they opened a studio and started their cooperation, which lasted till 1939. They were one of the most creative and recognizable architectural teams of pre-war Warsaw. They designed over 150 innovative objects, 40 of them were built, and almost 40 were awarded prizes in architectural competitions [1]. They shared the same passion for work on the ideals of architecture- modern and functional one, the architecture which met the expectations of ordinary people. Mutual friendship and cooperation brought extraordinary creativity. Both men were very talented and privately they had completely different characters, temperaments and mentality. They completed each other creating fully homogenous works [2]. ’(...) They were like fire and water. A young master from a wealthy family and a son of a pharmacist. One sporty, energetic and the other one always sick. One sociable but weak at writing, the other one uncommunicative but journalistically talented (…)’ [3]. (...) ‘One full of energy, keen on doing everything, the other one rational and cool-headed, has to dampen the enthusiasm (…)’ [2]. Project activities involved international and national exhibitions and competitions, on which spectacular ideas were presented in the forms of pavilions, public buildings and elements of small architecture and realizations of public and residential buildings mainly in Warsaw. Their professional activities were also noticeable outside the country, e.g. in Lvov, Geneva and Paris.

Design activities of Bogdan Lachert and many other young creators of this period were influenced by the situation in Europe connected with destructions after World War I and the ideas of modernism. The architects turned to realizations fulfilling the needs of new social conditions and new ways of living. At the same time Lachert and Józef Szanajca began their cooperation with the most important creators of Polish avant-garde such as Lech Niemojewski, Stanisław and Barbara Brzukalscy, Helena and Szymon Syrkusowie, who were the co-founders of the Praesens group (1926-29). Architects and artists belonged to it and its members worked actively during the congresses of CIAM and were involved in sharing their thoughts and experiences of the concepts of modernism in Europe. In Poland this group worked collectively and cooperated with urbanists, constructors, sociologists, and even doctors, that is why skills and experience became a strong background for architects [4]. In the group the trends of searching for Polish avant-garde in art were strongly defined thanks to support of fine artists, sculptors and stage designers [2]. The context of art was visible in further activities of Lachert and his struggles with technical aspects of architecture.

The circles of young architectural avant-garde of Warsaw had international ambitions and cooperated with Kazimierz Malewicz, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier [5]. It is worth citing here after Beata Chomątowska a story of a competition to design the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva in 1927, where the project by Lachert and Szanajcy attracted the attention of ‘Corbu’ himself and became his favourite one at the same time. ‘(…) A seven-storey building of the General Assembly is erected centrally on the plan of a circle’s segment, surrounded by lower buildings built on the plan of quarter- and half-rings, where the office, library, and lobby with a reception were situated. Le Corbusier stood by this drawing for longer time. This work was also praised by Sigfield Giedion. However, it wasn’t awarded by the jury (…)’ [2]. The first project presented on the international forum became a pass in the works of CIAM, which was being formed at that time. It was compared to ‘bestowing the knighthood’ [2]. The interest in Polish avant-garde on the international forum and Le Corbusier’s curiosity with the works of young and talented architects was becoming bigger and bigger. ‘Even the pope of modernism’ foretold them great future [2].

Professionally, Lachert worked on many levels, conducting also the courses at the Faculty of Architecture of Warsaw University of Technology. Professor Rudolf Świerczyński was his mentor,
whose works of modernised classicism strongly influenced generations of architects, including contemporary creators [4]. An extract from a description of Lachert’s diploma project, under the guidance of his professor, should be mentioned here. The project presented a house of a notary on the slope ‘(...)this terraced area is inspired by an unusual location of the professor’s house at the junction of Myśliwiecka and Górnośląska Street. The apprentice designed the indoor area of eight storeys, which is connected with a hall on three levels and is divided in order to perform three distinct functions: of the office, dwelling and utility (...)’ [2]. A strong influence of Rudolf Święczyński’s theories was dictated by Lachert’s two-year apprenticeship in his professor’s studio.

He mastered a skill of connecting a restrained block with monumental form and visible divisions of rhythm, such as patterns, which are suggestive for supporters of tradition or the avant-garde, and even in the later period of socialist realism [4].

Design activities of Lachert & Szanajca team were developing greatly but they were disrupted by World War II and a different direction was taken after the death of Szanajca in 1939. In the post-war period Lachert stayed in the shadow of interwar avant-garde, to which he also belonged, searching for his own and an undefined path during the reality of Polish People’s Republic. His work from this period is much less spectacular. The project of the South Muranów residential estate (1947) belongs to one of the most significant ones and was strongly modified during the realization at times of the doctrine of socialist realism. Although he did not change his views, he still included characteristic features of usefulness in architecture, promoted innovation as a road to modernity.

After the war, he continued his work as a lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture of Warsaw University of Technology and a Dean between 1950-1954. He was the head of the department of Industrial Architecture Design and Professor [1]. He based his teaching job on his huge experience in design, applying Bauhaus at the same time, which involved education in so called ‘master studio’. In the educational process of architectural design, he did not support the growth of teaching units, fragmentation or multiplying faculties due to inability to apply a unified teaching method [2]. As a theorist of architecture, he published in fragments his artistic manifesto in 1983 entitled ‘Reflections on some Features of Architectural Works’ in Architecture magazine. As a practitioner, he participated in building the most important modernist undertakings of the Second Polish Republic. He developed a method of teaching based on creative authorities in the field of architecture, contributing to the development of Warsaw school of architecture at the same time. He died in 1987.

3. Experiments - creative dialogue with architecture of modernism

Bohdan Lachert set a new trend of creative avant-garde by building one of the first modernist residences in Warsaw, at 9 Katowicka Street in 1928. Józef Szanajca was a co-author of this project. While building it, the house was raising curiosity among students and colleagues as it was different from other residential buildings and was erected in an empty and undeveloped area. It was the example of five rules of modern architecture created by Le Corbusier and transferred to Saska Kępa district. The image of modern architecture was processed into its own (private) needs and was preserved as a three-family house of a terraced type of an innovative plastic form. The architects used an open-plan reinforced concrete skeleton, the idea was based on the assumptions of Dom-Ino by Le Corbusier, and experimental material, light and a bit rough foam concrete, i.e. cellolite, which had been patented only three years earlier in Denmark. The biggest advantages of the material was its ease of production and good insulation values [4]. Designers did not hide their inclinations to use modern materials, technological innovations and unusual forms. The flat had about 150 square metres and its layout was planned on three floors. They were equipped with lifts with a clear division into utility area, living and bedroom space. On the highest level there was a flat culmination - a terrace. The core of the interior was a two-storey living room. An illustrative description of the object was included in the book about Lachert and Szanajca written by Beata Chomątowska ‘(...)It isn’t standing on the ground as God intended, only on two pillars, as it was to sail away and generally it looks a bit like a ship. On front façade there are some windows running or rather very small windows (Mr Engineer wants to sit in the darkness). Yet the house should look properly from the front (...), and here not
only one will acknowledge that he is in a kind of factory. On the other hand, at the back there is almost nothing else except of windows, huge ones reaching the ground on both floors (...). And what’s more, a flat roof, which you can enter from the office on the second floor, climbing the stairs reminds a fan (...). And the ship is so long that from outside you can hardly see that it is divided into units for three families. [2]. Lachert applied the five points of modern architecture, taking into account a few realizations by Le Corbusier at the same time, but thanks to his imagination he arranged the use of some elements in his own avant-garde project. The façade with narrow strip windows and its composition referred to some solutions of Corbusier’s houses, which he presented on an open air exhibition in Stuttgart in 1927. Huge windows on the garden façade were copied from the Parisian Ozenfant House from 1923. Terraced roofs, which were available through openwork, spiral, and steel stairs together with a lengthened block, made the impression of a ‘machine for living’. Also the interior itself with spacy and open living room suggested some similarity with La Roche villa built between 1923-24 in Paris [6].

An important project in the trend of modernism was Anthony Szyller’s house, one of the financiers of the capital city at that time. The building created by Lachert and Szańcza in 1928 was located at 10 Międzyzdrojńska Street, and was described as an example of extreme functionalism. It was the creators’ response to their views on the utilitarian function of an object, its practical considerations and the necessity to acknowledge that function is precedent in shaping new architecture. Similarly to previous objects, it aroused an immense interest among students, architects, curious guests and even representatives of French architectural magazines [7]. A detached building was constructed of white cuboid blocks which seemed to be loosely bonded, still creating a well-shaped and proportional set. Above them there was a flat roof and predominant high chimneys. Each façade was composed differently, operating with the elements such as windows, terraces, railings and rhythmical pillars. The façade informed about the function of the hidden rooms and its composition resulted from function. Openwork and spiral stairs were placed on two façades, southwest and north one, with the addition of a winding railing, which broke the ruled surface of the blocks and dominance of the right angles. The main entrance was preceded by pillars, however, they were only used on one part of the façade and additionally one more was added from the entrance to the utility area. There was a visible row of horizontal, single window holes which were used somewhere else alternately. Finally, the irregular and geometric block ‘confirms the architects’ inspiration of abstract, neoplastic compositions’ [7]. The interior was divided into floors and each one was serving a particular function. There was a ground level with utility area, first floor with living area and the office, second floor with bedrooms and half-floor included laundry and drying room. Such a functional villa fulfilled the expectations of the Szyller’s family and Antoni’s wife Olimpia, called this house ‘a ship’ in Saska Kępa district. However, the image of the whole block with applied retractions, suspensions, extensions, the dominance of right angles and overlapping surfaces and the play of light were innovative enough to raise at least surprise and sometimes lack of approval and understanding for his creators’ ideas. This modern architectural object caused some controversy, which was visible in unflattering statements of contemporary critics in the press. The extract of the article written by Hanna Faryna-Paszkiewicz, which included Julian Podoski’s text ‘In Saska Kępa District’ (published in Warsaw Courier in 1930), might be cited here ‘(...)In spite of everything it seems to look like a henhouse built from crates of brick and concrete, laid on top of the other. This kind of architecture is supposed to be very comfortable because of the arrangement of the rooms, which is all over the map, one here, and the other one there(...). I don’t doubt that this ‘fashion’ for cubism in architecture, here, in Poland will become wiser within time ‘(...)’ [7].

Another important building in the modernist works of Warsaw is one of the two gallery-style apartments realized by Lachert and Szańcza situated at 12 Franciszka Street. It was built in 1934 as one of the first buildings of this kind in Warsaw [4]. It was a two-storey-high multi-family villa of simple construction and clear modernist expression. The access to the flats was from the staircase, next it led to a long suspended balcony and further to the gallery of flats. The access to two flats was from both galleries. The building was lengthened and had a flat roof creating the impression of a
ship. The ground floor of the building was cut clearly and connected with gardens surrounded by walls and partially by mesh fence. The balconies were long, arranged in a row, adjacent to the façade, slightly extended from its face, similarly as a suspended roof.

Another original realization of a gallery-style building is Ordowski’s brothers tenement house at 28 Berezyńska Street [6]. The block has an arc-shaped façade and similarly applied solutions such as contracted ground level, two rows of galleries and a flat terraced roof. The façade is an abstract composition created by the use of irregular blocks, big glazed surfaces and small windows in the shape of ‘L’ letter. This gallery-style building combines the characteristics of so called ’soft functionalism with purism’, as it was written by Marta Leśniakowska, an author of the architecture’s catalogue in Warsaw [6].

A multi-family house of BGK pension fund at 3 Frascati Street from 1936 is a luxurious version of prewar functionalism and has all of the most important characteristics of modernism with the dominant elements of elegance, reminding a downtown tenement house. However, a cuboid-shaped façade, contracted ground floor, the rhythm of the windows of irregular sizes covering the walls’ surfaces and a terraced roof remained the same.

Bogdan Lachert’s project method involved experimenting with material and form, defining utilitarian values in the buildings. Shaping the viewpoint on the characteristic features of architecture of that time specified an innovative approach towards newly built objects and various issues connected with space assumptions and forms of expressions of the residential estates.

An interesting modernist example is a housing complex of terraced houses built between 1934-35 for the employees of ZUS, Social Insurance Institution. Bogdan Lachert and Józef Szanajca worked together under the guidance of Professor Rudolf Świerczyński, Stanisław Brukalski, and Roman Piotrowski. The concept of the terraced houses in the district of Żoliborz involved building a residential estate, consisting of a few types of buildings arranged together in suitable configurations, which could have been used in any location. The architects could test any new solutions on condition that they would fulfill the assumed concept of cheap construction, which was supposed to provide its inhabitants the basic needs with small but comfortable flats inside [2]. The residential estate in Żoliborz district had a radiant layout of quiet streets, full of greenery, located on the outskirts of the city centre but not so far away from the downtown. The rows of the terraced houses at 12-26 Dziennikarska and 25-43 Promyka Street, (altogether 60 flats) were the example of an extreme functional form with ‘(...) appeals to purism stemming from constructivism (...)’ [6]. Characteristic long and smooth façades, small rhythmically set windows overlooking the street, behind which utility rooms were hidden. They had a suspended storey and a flat roof. From the backyard side, the architects designed living and resting space. The program consisted of three types of family houses, which was copied in either a terraced layout or semi-detached type of houses, with mirror reflections. The whole concept was based on a functional repetition of the buildings’ layout, geometrical blocks, flat façades and the same windows. It was ‘the most consistent realization of programs for cheap, hygienic, and individual flats in the city’ [6].

Lachert together with other architects from the Praesens group was engaged in the first stage of the project of the Warsaw Housing Association in the district of Rakowiec. It was something more than just a creative experiment. It was an initiative based on the utopian values being shaped all over the years in the minds of young avant-garde creators, and which specified new aesthetic patterns, ready to be copied. It also became a prototype of creating a ‘new’ society on the grounds of mutual cooperation and shaping social bonds. This residential estate was built to fulfill the housing needs of workers and the intelligence. However, it was not only about functional and spatial needs, comfortable or hygienic flats, nor the creation of the nearest surroundings, but it was mostly about the possibility to engage the inhabitants in the process of building and further functioning, which would lead to developing social bonds and mutual responsibility for the space [8]. The construction of the first Colony began in 1927 (the construction process lasted after the war, too). First, four buildings were erected. In the next stage, after obtaining the plot by the housing association between Słowackiego and Krasińskiego streets, the realization of the concept of a housing unit started. The whole project for six
thousand inhabitants comprised, apart from the idea of neighbours’ ‘cells’, service, educational and sanitary facilities. Additionally there were green squares, kindergartens, vegetable gardens, library and social clubs [9]. Urban planners and architects formulated a functional arrangement of colonies, houses, and flats but also the equipment and furnishings. The original assumption started with inexpensive flats of 24-36 square meters available for workers. The size limits could be compensated by placing some functions in service facilities buildings. Apart from social facilities, the activities of community organizations were promoted and sustaining the balance between the inhabitants of various social groups was important.

The assumptions of the modernist ideology were realized through planning solutions and urban arrangements of housing units. Aesthetics was strongly applied in blocks, their geometrical sets and details of the buildings, in interiors’ design and furnishings. The development of the residential estate and the extension of Colony VII was slowed down by the outbreak of the big crisis in 1931. While designing further stages, their authors, Syrkusowie and Brukalscy with their teams, had to face the ‘extreme economisation’. Dramatically worsening living conditions in the period of the crisis significantly contributed to changes in design preferences among architects and there was a return to housing development of a ‘barrack’ type. Warsaw Housing Association in the district of Rakowiec became an experiment for its creators who introduced further modifications to the buildings and checked them in practise. Respectively, they created levels of understanding between workers’ needs and design possibilities facing the reality [10]. The most functional project predicted standardization as an economical form and introduced the concept of repetitive types of houses, typified and modern, made of production elements, possible to be used in the whole country.

4. Searching for distinctiveness
This As a member of the team of the Office of Reconstruction of the Capital City Bohdan Lachert participated actively in the most important project works and decision-making connected with restoring Warsaw. The post-war plans of restoring the capital city were based in a significant way on the formulations of ‘Functional Warsaw’, which appeared in 1934 and were made by the leaders of the modernist movement in Poland and members of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM). The plans for Warsaw became at that time an example of functional approach towards urban space and inspiration for other European countries. The development of Warsaw on the cross plan was supposed to be dominated by ‘two lanes towards the river, two perpendicular towards one another’ with an ideal residential estate on the west bank for several thousands of inhabitants, accumulated in some colonies. Le Corbusier was supposed to say that ‘his Polish friends set a new stage in spatial planning seeing that the city does not exist in a void’ and ‘that thinking about much
bigger scale extending even the region was worth approving'. After the war the attention was paid towards pre-war studio works based on the avant-garde theories of urban development [2].

A new project of Muranów district was created under the guidance of Bohdan Lachert in the ZOR architectural studio. It was one of the most important undertakings due to its spatial scale (the housing estate was located in the area of former Ghetto) and the scale of destruction of this downtown area (the estate was supposed to be built directly on the ruins). Thanks to it, it was possible to create a totally new avant-garde residential district. The construction started in 1947 in the area of Gen. Wł. Anders Street and WZ route and it was contoured on the basis of the project which was changed in 1949. According to a modernist concept of Lachert, this residential estate was divided into four colonies organized around public buildings. The buildings were isolated from traffic and had three, four and eight storeys. Foundations on different levels were planned in order to obtain spatial flexibility.

Additionally, the houses were located in green surroundings and combined communication paths, routes, landings and stairs [4]. In accordance with a modified concept, which assumed adjusting monumental patterns to urban socialist realism, compositional viewing axes were introduced and this housing development was standardized. However, a system of courtyards and patios was applied together with nearby service and educational facilities for inhabitants [9]. Advocating the idea of original aesthetics, of raw non-plastered concrete rubble ended up in failure. Finally, the buildings were plastered and rusticated, cornices and balusters were added in accordance with the inhabitants’ will and existing fashion.

An important task of a new district of Muranów was the need to overcome housing shortages. That is why, houses had small flats which were dedicated to extended families and were adjusted to deal with subtenants, the issue was mentioned by Lachert in Architecture in 1949. He predicted that two-bedroom flats and studios might be combined into one flat in the future, which would increase a shared percentage of middle-sized flats. The norms related to the size, which were in force at that time, amounted to 10 square meters for one person. The accepted norms in the project assumed 13 square meters for a studio, 30 square meters for two-bedroom flat and respectively 40 for three-bedroom and 50 for four-bedroom flats [11]. A purely pragmatic approach to the requirements of architecture is visible, which should serve people and be prepared for different options of practical changes during its usage.

Realization of this modernist idea in its pure form failed. The Muranów residential housing estate presents ‘the style of socialist realism inspired by classicism combined with functionalism: from the front there is a socio-realistic decorum, from courtyard a functional gallery-style building.’ [12]. It is a combination of an unrealized avant-garde vision with existing realities of the doctrine of socialist realism and monumental patterns inspired by classicism era. ‘Struggles’ with historical remembrance of events full of macabre and heroism are visible and as the author mentioned (Beata Chomątowska writes about it) this ‘(...)realism of terror overshadowed every architectural vision which was arising and every technical thought, which could cover this area and bring it back to life’ [2]. For Lachert it was a very difficult decision to change the project and relate it to healthy tradition of national architecture with the use of socialistic content. As far as the aesthetics is concerned it was the first socialist residential estate with an urban arrangement- a neoromantic city-garden [12], it became a monument, a living history of building a contemporary architectural thought on the ruins of the past. It is also a story of shaping the idea of building a city in a specific political situation of socialist realism and ‘(...) interference in the process of urban planning and architectural design, (...) a tendency to destroy signs of individual concepts ’[2].
5. Artistic manifesto

What were the presumptions standing behind the manifesto published in *Architecture* magazine in 1983, presenting views on the philosophical and aesthetic spheres and being a summary of architectural work? The text might have appeared, and it may be confirmed in Lachert’s statements, due to lack of satisfaction related to one of his works or maybe his whole creative work had an influence on it, being so varied but at the same time so consistent.

Reflections about artistic characteristics comprise all elements of his creative work, works of architecture and their ingredients. Lachert delves into the aspect of perception of work, statics and dynamism of perceiving it. He tells about the intentions of the creator and his approach towards his work. In one part of the text he hides himself behind the words of other authorities in the field of architecture, citing their views. The most important reflections on architecture seem to be related to the worldwide contemporary works as developing multi-faceted heritage of the interwar period. Lachert considered this period as the most spectacular one and crucial in the development of contemporary architecture, seeing it as a basis for shaping a new viewpoint on the subject of architectural subjects ‘from these sources a contemporary trend of eliminating discrepancies between the requirements of art and technology arises. There are no architectural works more forward-looking from the contemporary ones’ [13]. Any innovative ideas are contemporary achievements and appear at present and even if they take a step into future, they are still the signs of present oddities. In relation to the avant-garde works of modernism he wrote that (...)we cannot include contemporary ideas and architectural creations to (...)prototypes of works of future generations(...), he was in agreement with the thought that an artist is never fully understood by contemporaries.

6. Conclusions

Bohdan Lachert, the leading representative of Warsaw modernism, is a creative personality, who combined two periods of development of architectural thought before and after World War II. His creative work is difficult to be defined, at the same time it is distinctly coherent due to constant artistic curiosity, experimenting with imagination and imposing reality on images and expressive forms. It is the art of suggestiveness of architecture.

The activities of the Praesens group took its toll on the whole project works, combining art and architecture, technique and emotions in what was called ‘a prototype of future generations’. Being deeply rooted in the allure of modernism and under the influence of Le Corbusier, he chose the best things from the elements of the code of modernist avant-garde to set a new trend for the future.

He perfectly and consciously combined utilitarian and artistic features of works, not ignoring a technical side. He designed fully and complementary, the details and materials but also spatial solutions and connections with the urban structure were equally important. His creativity was a
struggle with modernism, experimenting with functionalism and an incessant discussion about the modernity of architectural work.

In spite of his creative coherence, two stages are observed in his works. First, a very prolific and innovative one involving cooperation with Józef Szanajca. They became a separate phenomenon, an outstanding duet and the leading team of Polish architectural avant-garde. In the second period he stayed in the shadow and it was less consistent and defined, however, it had some strong characteristic features in the face of reality of his times. It was the time when he was searching for his own identity, clear and understandable manifesto of a creator being not understood.

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