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# Witold Gombrowicz

Bartosz Lutosta?ski

## Brief orientation

Marian Witold Gombrowicz was born in Ma?oszyce in central Poland (formerly part of the Russian Empire prior to World War I) in 1904 and died in Vence, France in 1969. He wrote five novels, three theatrical plays, one short story collection, three volumes of diaries and miscellaneous critical and autobiographical works. He is considered one of the most important writers in the history of Polish literature.

Gombrowicz spent his youth in Warsaw and, very briefly, in France. After his decision to abandon a law career and become a writer, he became a member of an emergent generation of exciting writers that drew from the historical avant-garde in search of new directions for literature, including Stanis?aw Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, Micha? Choroma?ski, and others. His career, though, was abruptly put on hold by the outbreak of World War II.

As a well-known writer and a freelance journalist Gombrowicz had been hired as a foreign correspondent for a daily *Kurier Warszawski* (*The Warsaw Courier*) shortly before the war and in August 1939 he was on board a Polish passenger ship bound for South America. When the war broke out the following month, he decided not to go back to Europe and what was intended as a temporary stay turned into a twenty-four-year exile in Argentina. Indeed, Gombrowicz would never return to Poland. This period of exile, despite an initial period of hardship and poverty, turned out to be an essentially liberating experience for a man who had always keenly felt powerful social pressures. In the early 1950s he struck up a relation with *Kultura* (*Culture*), an independent cultural magazine published by the Polish Literary Institute in Paris. Its editor-in-chief, Jerzy Giedroyc, not only ensured the release of a drama and a novel written in Buenos Aires, but also convinced Gombrowicz to form a more regular partnership. As a result, from 1953 until Gombrowicz's death *Kultura* published Gombrowicz's diary. Today, this three-volume work is considered a masterpiece of non-fiction and autobiographical writing.

Gombrowicz returned to Europe in the 1960s, thanks to a Ford Foundation scholarship he was awarded in 1963. A short stay in West Berlin was marked by his deteriorating health and an intense campaign of slander against him by the communist authorities in Poland. Unable to go back to Argentina due to health issues, Gombrowicz moved to France and settled in Vence (1964), where he eventually died five years later. In 1966 and 1968 he was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature and according to documents he was due to finally receive the Prize in 1969, only to die a few months before the final decision. In 1967 his novel *Cosmos* was awarded the International Prize for Literature and his increasingly strong international position was confirmed by the translation of his work into many languages, the numerous successful productions of his plays, and the positive remarks he received from many major literary figures of the century, including Susan Sontag, Czes?aw Mi?osz and Gilles Deleuze.

Despite the recognition he finally acquired in Europe and the underground circulation of his works, Gombrowicz was rather poorly known in Poland before the 1980s, due to the ban on his works and regular campaigns against him by the communist authorities. Gombrowicz's work was not re-released in Poland until 1986 (nine volumes). In 2002 a major publishing house published his oeuvre as the "Collected Writings" edited by leading experts. Today, he remains one of the most frequently discussed writers in Poland; in fact, there is an informal section in Polish literary and cultural studies exclusively devoted to his writings, called "Gombrowiczology", which includes analyses of his works from every imaginable academic perspective from structuralism to postcolonialism and queer studies.

## Developments

Ever since his debut short story collection in 1933, *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (*Memoirs From the Time of Immaturity* or *A Diary of Adolescence*), Witold Gombrowicz exhibited an intense fascination with the process of forming interpersonal relations, and especially with the way in which an individual is shaped by dominant social conventions, forms of behaviour, institutions, and discourses. The theme of a protagonist's resistance towards an oppressive social power is present both in his 1935 drama *Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda* (*Iwona, Princess of Burgundia*; largely ignored by critics) and his most famous novel by far, *Ferdynand* (1938). The only exception from the "rule" is *Opętani* (*The Possessed*), a mock-gothic and sensational novel from 1939, which was published for money under a pseudonym.

Gombrowicz's post-war works expanded on the subject of individual oppression and the search for authenticity to explore, amongst others, the subjects of non-heteronormative sexuality and the most oppressive power in his life - Polish national identity. Penned during his initial years of exile in Argentina, the play *Wesele* (*The Wedding*, 1948) and the novel *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953) (both works published in one volume in Paris in 1953), reflected Gombrowicz's reckoning with national identity, sexual identity, individual freedom, and the ontological problems of ego formation. Yet it was in his two final novels - *Pornografia* (1960) and *Kosmos* (*Cosmos*, 1965) - as well as in the play *Operetka* (*Operetta*, 1966) - that Gombrowicz delved into the more psychological and philosophical ramifications of his primary subject matter. In these later works the protagonists do not necessarily grapple with society's repressive mechanisms but rather strive (in vain) to overcome a series of psychological and epistemological hurdles in the process of finding some stability in the chaotic, "godless" universe. The evolution of Gombrowicz's subject matter goes hand in hand with the aesthetic evolution of his work. His post-war works, despite that fact that they draw from popular literature genres, are essentially experimental in their approach to literary styles, genres and language.

Finally, it is important to note that the key issues prevalent throughout Gombrowicz's career were also addressed in his non-fictional writings, especially in the three volumes of the famous *Diary* (1953-1956, 1957-1961 and 1961-1966). More direct and intimate than his other writing, the autobiographical work became an area for the continuous and incomplete exploration of his views on multiple subjects such as fiction, poetry, tradition, history, national identity, the arts, politics, philosophy, everyday life, and the like.

## Avant-garde strategies

There are three persistent avant-garde tendencies in Gombrowicz's writings: the use of popular genres; the use of parody; and homodiegetic narration. These tendencies in turn exemplify central position in his life and work: individual freedom, a desire for authenticity; and a resistance to any ideological, cultural or institutional discourse. Wary of any kind of group behavior or thinking, alerted to the oppressive discourses,

he remained a loner throughout his literary career (or went to great lengths to appear as such). His incessant critiques of poetry, painting, philosophy, or national identity served as attempts to liberate himself from any influence. For that matter Gombrowicz's most important artistic devices (self-referentiality, experimentality, paradoxicality, proclivity for antinomies and distrust for language) are geared towards self-expression and self-representation without recourse to any specific conventions of genre or style, but instead always sit "in between" and *à rebours*. His objective was to free literature from the "institutions of art" with their ideological responsibilities, and approximation of a living life.

On numerous occasions Gombrowicz acknowledged his fascination with popular literature, and all his works can be roughly attributed to one genre or another. The most obvious example of this fascination is *The Possessed*, written in imitation of the Gothic and sensational novels that were an extremely popular genre in Poland in the 1930s. Elsewhere, the dramas *Princess Ivona* and *The Wedding* reference Shakespeare's tragedies; *Ferdydurke* and *Trans-Atlantyck* are both picaresque novels (the former, in addition, copiously draws from the philosophical novella in the vein of Voltaire and Diderot, whilst the latter is based on the national epic, especially its Polish Romantic manifestations, and references the ideology of Sarmatism and the Polish nobility); *Pornografia* makes use of the provincial novel; and, finally, *Cosmos* displays characteristics of the detective novel.

Gombrowicz typically parodies the generic templates that he exploits, and, in the process, draws attention to the very template in an essentially self-referential gesture. As a result, it makes sense to use the prefix *mock-* before the genres in specific works, or the qualification *à rebours*. This specifically negative and autotelic approach to the literary tradition results in the inclusion of Gombrowicz in the nouveau roman or anti-novel genre in the vein of Simon, Robbe-Grillet or even Beckett. Some of its features, such as weak narrativity or flat characterization, can be applied to Gombrowicz's early fiction and drama, while other features, including the subordination of plot and character to an individual vision of reality, can be observed more clearly in his late works. In the realm of drama, too, Gombrowicz's theatrical pieces – especially the later ones – can fall under the "theatre of the absurd" umbrella.

As Gombrowicz acknowledged in an interview with Piero Sanavio, "I always write parodies of the form" (in *Gombrowicz filozof*, ed. Francesco M. Cataluccio and Jerzy Illg, Kraków, ZNAK 1991), and this concrete approach to literature permeates all levels of his works. Initially, he mocked and ridiculed thematic issues (the problem of interpersonal form) and referential issues (characterization and emplotment). Later on, though, his focus fell more on issues of self-reference (the genre and composition; literary communication).

The third general tendency of Gombrowicz's works, in fiction and non-fiction alike, is homodiegetic narration. Interestingly, all his novels feature a narrator figure who directly participates in prior or ongoing events. Moreover, the three post-war novels employ the framing, or box convention, and even begin in a strikingly similar way: "I feel the need to convey to my Family, to my kin and friends, this the beginning of my adventures, now ten years long, in the Argentinean capital" (*Trans-Atlantyck*), "I shall tell you about another experience I had, undoubtedly the most fatal of all (*Pornografia*), "But let me tell you about another, even more curious adventure" (*Cosmos*). Finally, the novels feature Gombrowicz's alter ego: a character of the same name, age, occupation, and similar world experiences. In addition, Gombrowicz makes use of autodiegetic narration in his autobiographical writings, most famously in his *Diary*. This persistent tendency demonstrates his sustained preoccupation with the individual, the ego, and the psyche, and dramatizes, using Judith Butler's term, the performative nature of identity.

Despite the tendency to narrate his fiction and non-fiction by means of homo- or autodiegetic narration, Gombrowicz highly valued multiple perspectives (or, to borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin, polyphony) in prose and drama. This feature seemed essential for him in literature to such an extent as to criticize literary forms that traditionally rely on a single and individual perspective. In a famously provocative literary-critical essay, "Against the Poets", Gombrowicz argues that poetry primarily serves narcissistic functions: it is to express the "Power of Poetic Word" and glorify "the Poet's vocation". In this way he was trying to kill two birds with one stone – both elevating his own fictional technique and undermining the Polish literary history centered

around poetry at least until 1945.

In addition, in his attacks on visual arts (most famously in “no credo en la pintura!” from the second volume of the *Diary*), Gombrowicz’s objective is to emphasize the dynamic quality of fiction. Narrative being a vitally time-driven concept, it provides his novels and stories with a sense of movement and purpose, vigor and verve. In contrast, in numerous passages scattered throughout his *Diary* or in his exciting row with the French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet, he believes the visual arts to be overly conventionalized and institutionalized, demanding from the audience a considerable extent of expert and historical knowledge (without which the works are hardly comprehensible) and, in terms of their form, a one-dimensional representation of statically “paralysed” or even dead objects; the painting, in his view, has no absolute meaning due to its artificial quality and artificially manufactured ability to be “read” by the audience.

An obsessive exegete of his own works, Gombrowicz elaborated in depth on the arts throughout his career. His *Diary* is sometimes described as an artist’s narrative about the artist and art. Also, one of his final critical statements, *A Kind of Testament*, synthesizes Gombrowicz’s philosophy of art, especially his narrative art, and recapitulates key aesthetic ideas.

One more significant feature worth mentioning is Gombrowicz’s use of language. A nightmare for translators, Gombrowicz’s original Polish works are linguistic masterpieces. Let me provide two specific examples. *Ferdydurke*, as signalled above, is a tale of a character oppressed by society; this oppression manifests itself, amongst other factors, in language. Gombrowicz cleverly scours everyday and common vocabulary and exploits specific words in order to explore their oppressive and formative power. One example of such a word is “pupa” (Polish for buttocks, especially a baby’s or small child’s); unfortunately, this key-word of the novel goes untranslated in English. As a result, its meanings are not completely comprehensible.

Another feature of Gombrowicz’s language is its vitality and eccentricity. The Polish author enjoys using puns, neologisms, and vague borrowings from authors belonging to European literature (such as Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Mann) and philosophy (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Voltaire). This feature is indicative of his parodic approach to writing: Gombrowicz parodies language by treating it as an object he can play with, forge and in a way recreate infinitely to match his artistic vision. *Ferdydurke* exemplifies this tendency very well, but it is *Trans-Atlantyk* that is often deemed a linguistic and stylistic masterpiece. The novel is modelled after various Baroque and Romantic narrative genres (including a typically Polish one, “gaw?da”, bearing numerous similarities to the Russian “skaz”) and it incorporates a number of lexical, syntactic and artistic features, such as repetitions, anachronisms, inconsistencies, and idiosyncratic capitalizations, that have contributed to the status of *Trans-Atlantyk* as “untranslatable”. (Interestingly, a number of Gombrowicz’s words and phrases have become so popular that they have now entered everyday language in Poland. Few writers can boast about that.)

## Contents

The key theme of Gombrowicz’s oeuvre is form (or Form), a concept whose denotation considerably diverges from a common, aesthetically informed one. Also, it tops the list of the most discussed subjects in the voluminous amount of critical books, articles and essays devoted to his writings. The term “form” is very difficult to pin down; it generally stands for a complex, ambiguous and sometimes paradoxical group of meanings accrued over Gombrowicz’s career that permeate across all his works: fictional, dramatic and autobiographical alike. In his early writings, Gombrowicz’s interest and focus lay mostly in the social form (a way of being in a social group or a type of behavior adapted to specific social circumstances), which subsequently evolved into the personal and psychological form (the question of an individual’s being in the world and one’s approach to the world; the formation of the psyche) and, finally, into the philosophical form (the creation of form, its epistemological limits and ontological consequences). The first one seems to be

the most significant and prevalent in Gombrowicz's works.

Society abides by a set of rules, conventions and rituals regarding interpersonal relations, a common attitude to reality, or an acceptable means of communication. Gombrowicz dramatizes the tensions arising between characters and the society in which they exist as they strive to remain independent and authentic. Joey, the protagonist of *Ferdydurke*, is a very good case in point. The novel follows his continued, and ultimately futile, attempts to escape from the social forms represented by three social groups: school community, bourgeois family, and aristocracy. Their members strictly and fervently, albeit unconsciously, adhere to and believe in group-specific social, behavioral and linguistic rules, and continue to impose them on the protagonist. In the wake of his recalcitrance, however, not only does Joey lay bare the inherent artificiality and arbitrariness of these conventions, but he also effectively manages to expose the groups' very foundation, existence and *raison d'être* as artificial and arbitrary. Therefore, the teachers and students, the bourgeois family members, the landowners and peasants all come to realize, however subtly and subconsciously, the tenuous nature of the conventional social structures in which they live and operate. This realization invariably leads to the collapse of that structure, comically recounted as a "heap" (a chaotic altercation including physical violence). In *Trans-Atlantyk* and *Pornografia* the tension between the two main forms, adulthood and youth (represented in the former work as, depending on the translation, Fatherland vs. Sonland or Patria vs. Filistria), has rather lethal consequences: Thomas is killed by his son, and Karol and Henia stab a local resistance leader to death.

Both murdered characters exemplify another crucial social form in Gombrowicz's work, particularly from the post-WWII period: Polish national identity. Coupled with religious devotion, traditional (post-Romantic) values such as pride and honor, parochialism, and delusions of grandeur, this form is addressed most explicitly in non-fiction, particularly in the *Diary*. When it comes to fiction, *Trans-Atlantyk* is considered the most scathing critique of the Polish national identity. The novel sees a group of emigrants who are deprived of the possibility to act out their national form (that is, actively participate in World War II, fight for the motherland and die honorably), and go to absurd lengths to demonstrate their patriotic sentiments by organizing exquisite balls and suffering from self-inflicted acts of martyrdom.

In the context of the social form, Gombrowicz makes frequent use of face metaphors and symbols. They represent the inherent and fundamental inauthenticity of characters and the ongoing struggle to impose one's understanding of reality and mode of behavior on others. In *Ferdydurke* Joey resists others' attempts to put a "mug" on him: including parents, teachers, school colleagues, a girl who is in love with him. In *Operetta* Albertine becomes obsessed with nakedness in a highly conventional and etiquette-driven aristocratic milieu. Frequently, Gombrowicz's characters lose a face, acquire a face, put on a mask, make grimaces, or wear costumes.

The second type of form is the personal (or psychological) one. It pertains to an individual's attempt at creating an independent and authentic identity, often against the backdrop of larger (social) pressures. In *The Wedding*, which, as Gombrowicz acknowledged in the Preface, is "first and foremost a drama of Form", Henry's struggles immediately arise out of his endeavors to achieve autonomy and freedom from family, state, and friends. As a prince, he plots to dethrone the king, his father, in Act II. As a king himself, Henry becomes a dictator subjugating the entire nation, including his family. He seeks to marry his fiancée, Molly, in a ritual sanctified not by the power of the Father and Religion, but by his own absolute power. His catastrophe, however, is the realization that single-handedly constituted forms do not have the same constitutive powers as the universally acknowledged, social and religious ones. This is Henry's tragedy: the void left by the disposed form and the impossibility (or incapability) of creating a form for oneself *ab ovo*.

The third and final type of Gombrowicz's form is philosophical. It pertains to our perception and understanding of the world, and its expression. Faced with the chaos of reality and the lack of an available and reliable means to translate it into meaning, the protagonist of *Cosmos* sets out to "create" reality on his own. He becomes obsessed with discovering some kind of pattern, formula or, in his own words, "constellation" of random objects and people in his surroundings. In the course of reading this novel, we

track the failure of this endeavor to achieve that pattern: little makes sense, there is no resolution, no satisfactory closure, and the main character is left alone with this realization.

In all of his fictional works (stories, novels and dramas), Gombrowicz pits a dominant form against a lesser form, such as adulthood vs. youth, maturity vs. immaturity, religious faith vs. atheism, Polish nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism. Each first component of the dichotomies is typically correlated with the old, the traditional, the conventional, the inauthentic, the oppressive, and the complete, while the second component evokes associations with the new, the young, the rejuvenating, the liberating, the unfinished, the in-the-process-of-becoming. This is Gombrowicz's main artistic strategy: the clash of forms, serving as forces within or outside of a protagonist that he must address and accommodate. This strategy bears similarities to the structuralist mode of understanding language and culture by means of binary oppositions. In fact, Gombrowicz penned an essay under the ironic title "I Was the First Structuralist".

Another apparent structuralist legacy in Gombrowicz's work is his attitude to language. Language is understood to affect the individual psyche (as in *Cosmos* and *Ivona*) as well as collective consciousness (e.g. in *Trans-Atlantyk*). It forms a reality of its own that actively molds and impacts the characters' behavior. A good case in point is the above-mentioned "pupa". The characters who use that word in reference to others seek to infantilize them in a negative way, not only as childish, immature and inexperienced, but also as inferior, subordinate and somehow lacking; Joey often admits that he is escaping from "pupa".

These three types of form – social, psychological and philosophical – have served as the foundation of numerous analyses of Gombrowicz's oeuvre. Scholars have employed methodologies from parallel disciplines and sciences alongside literary studies. Some of the most recurrent motifs of "Gombrowiczological" research have been the exploration of the tensions within the Freudian ego—superego—id triad and the uncanny; the concepts of the real and the imaginary drawn from Jacques Lacan (or Julia Kristeva's the semiotic and the symbolic); language understood as oppressive power (Michel Foucault); or the problem of being in a godlessly random world (using ideas from Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger).

## Conclusion

Witold Gombrowicz's works are typical of mid-century European literature in their artistic, philosophical and ideological significance. They have been analyzed from the context of structuralism, narratology, intertextuality, phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and the like. Even though Gombrowicz studies in Poland and abroad are less active and innovative today, it is important to note that Gombrowicz's fiction, drama and non-fiction are relevant in the twentieth-first century as well. The relevance is three-fold.

Firstly, as many contemporary studies demonstrate, Gombrowicz's works remain a rich field for new research material. Experts in, for example, postcolonialism, queer studies and animal studies, have been positioning *Ferdynand* or *Diaries* in frameworks that are significant today. Secondly, there is an artistic appeal to Gombrowicz; his works are great reads: intricate, hilarious, and ingenious. They teem with sparkling energy, rare depth, and uncanny timeliness. For instance, they undoubtedly resonate with the problems of a twenty-first-century individual on whom powerful -isms are again trying to impose their discourse, form of behavior and way of thinking. Gombrowicz's works illustrate the difficulty of (and the possible ways of succeeding in) resisting the oppression of collective standards of being (promulgated on the Internet, especially in social media), state-sanctioned modes of behavior in line with a dominant ideology (for example, the case of Poland right now), or commonly accepted, capitalistic forms of living (consumerism, conformism, and lack of consideration for the environment). Finally, Gombrowicz is a fascinating person who used his talent and perseverance to achieve artistic success. Even though his

oeuvre sheds light on him from so many angles, he remains impossible to pin down; a paradoxical, quizzical and eccentric figure, and definitely someone difficult to forget.

This is illustrated by the manner in which Gombrowicz remains an influential inspiration for theatre writers and creators. His role in the development of the post-World War II experimental theatre both in Poland and abroad (Jarocki, Kantor, Lecoq, or Bondy) cannot be overlooked. At the same time, and quite surprisingly, Gombrowicz's theatrical works have also appealed to less highbrow audiences. Recently, there have been several productions of his plays in Poland, while two of the most interesting and influential Polish theatre makers, Monika Strzypka and Paweł Demirski, made numerous implicit and explicit references to Gombrowicz's plays in their 2020 play, *MG*.

After many years of poor translations into English, the last decades have seen improvements in that area. In the 1970s and 1980s, most of Gombrowicz's works published in English were in fact "versions", that is, translations not from Polish, but from French and/or German. Today, most of Gombrowicz's works are available in satisfactory renderings and have been released by prestigious academic publishers in the recent past.

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