

Dissidents of Modernism: Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz

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Can the fading world of fathers still enchant the sons? Can a father teach his son the art of story-telling and hand over to him a passionate interest in people and things? Or has modernity already replaced the father and has itself become an impersonal pedagogue? What stories does it tell to those sons who dream of seeing their fathers sink into oblivion? What happens in the peripheries of modernity – in Polish culture and in all others similar to it in their constant attempt to make up for lost time? Can we say more about the pedagogy of modernity? “Dissidence”, “dissolution,” and “sabotage” – are these not beautiful names for what has to be seen as illegal narration? Are these not feminine names that will let sons forget what fathers required and at the same time treat the new pedagogue with skepticism? Education about modern (variable, volatile, replicated) values and education through story-telling – these two challenges part forever in the twentieth century and begin to represent two different temporal dimensions. For a peripheral writer the temporalities of the late provincial father and of the central pedagogue are two separate tasks to be considered – two lessons, two theoretical questions. These temporalities are always at odds, in conflict with each other, and subversive towards the idea of education itself. A pedagogical polyphony has always been part of the center, from which modern values were announced and spread. Although the polyphony can still be heard, not only has the father become more modern than the son, but his answers have also become less appropriate.

I am interested in the story of three dissidents from Poland who wanted the center to read their struggle with time, to listen to their regressive, rebellious, prophetic narrations unanchored in time, distrustful towards the present, belated and yet ahead of the phantasmagorical temporalities of the center. It is a story about three artists who understood and described the regression of the language of fathers. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz and Witold Gombrowicz did not surrender to the fear that commands peripheries to seek refuge in the narrations of fathers against the dangers of modernity. In their respective works these authors had to address some problems of Polish modernism (1880–1918), that hasty attempt to make up for philosophical backwardness.

In parodies of the exalted manner of Polish modernity, they found a grotesque, humorous aspect of the modern, almost non-existent in Polish literature from before 1918. A modern avant-garde form allowed them to express the horrors of civilisational progress that always annihilates both poverty and art. All three writers predicted a surprising effect of accumulated wealth – the extinction of desire. Desire, which can be understood also as creative impulse, disperses in an unlimited number of objects, persons, abstractions (ideas). The objects of modern desire limit the sphere of creativity seen as an example of purposeless desire. For Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz, to be devoted to the modern form is to see the limits of desire. Each of them looks for restitution elsewhere: Witkacy in cosmic solitude, Schulz in a regression towards amorphousness, Gombrowicz in ridicule of cultural forms. All three look for forms resistant to the dictatorship of linear temporality. Dissidence means for them a complicated game with modernity. Ironic towards the world of fathers, which promises only illusions and ineffectuality, a dissident applauds modernity, which, most probably, will reject him together with all his art. A dissident must make an art that restores desire, though art itself is desire. In the work of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz, imitation of desire is a process that leads to an omnipresent imitation of art. In the light of the work of these three authors modernity could be seen as a passageway from creativity to imitation, from pure art to a state in which every object that the creator and the receiver do not desire is, paradoxically, called art. The process is the following: first mass audiences reject incomprehensible art, and then a university scholar, in the name of scholarly abstraction, opposes art. After that, a critic expresses his extinguished desire and, finally, an artist rejects the idea of artistic creation by creating works without a purpose.

Witkacy – Art without (Modern) Illusions

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, commonly known as “Witkacy”, felt “the unity given directly to the personality”. He spent his life mainly in the mountains, in Zakopane. His father, Stanisław, chose this place in order to protect its culture from disappearance, to protect – like Alfred Kubin’s Patera from *The Other Side* (1902) – the mountain town against the interventions of time, which resulted in the transformation of a handcraft-based culture into one that was based on mass production of objects and feelings. Witkiewicz-père, whose outlook and activity could be compared to that of John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites¹, or Henry David Thoreau², hoped to find in the figure of his son

¹ Despite numerous similarities of these artists’ respective works, which seek a metaphysical dimension in the imitation of pre-Renaissance painting, Witkiewicz would not have a great admiration for them, as they did not result from the study of the object.

² There are parallels between Witkiewicz and Thoreau: a desire for a simple life, a distrust towards all institutions, including the church, seeking wisdom in the study of nature, a love of walking, a kind of civil disobedience. Witkiewicz differs in his relationship to culture which is always late and can thus, in his opinion, protect the sophistication of existence, rejecting the trash of modernity.

a confirmation of his intuition that the mountain environment was bound to create a genius. And indeed, the son came up to his expectations, especially in the visual arts – already at the age of twenty he produced subtle and masterly landscape paintings. But the father achieved a further success – he offered his son a childhood (and youth) in a mythical place of spiritual unity, in a place that could be called completely un-modern. Could not Witkacy, still in his *Wanderjahre*, suspect that all people of the Western world experience a “metaphysical feeling” (as he called the unity) in their existence and search for the feeling in art? He sought a confirmation of this hunch in conversation, philosophy, and artistic creation. He wanted to make sure that he lived and would continue to create within a metaphysical community; that even outside his place of abode he would find people similar to the friends of his youth: Leon Chwistek, who later became a great painter and logician but, perhaps, a never fully successful writer, and Bronisław Malinowski, a spiritual artist, one of the greatest ethnologists of the twentieth century.

Our fragile existence on earth, revolving in a cosmic abyss, seemed to the three friends infinitely bizarre; therefore all three sought an artistic, intellectual form that could accommodate the cosmic strangeness, which, with time, never stopped to surprise Witkacy, specifically because he was brought up in his father’s a-historical utopia, in which food, garments, architecture, intellectual disputes, artistic plans, and all accompanying experiences created a style of life free of cultural replication and imitation. A local architectonic style that was a part of the approach to life assumed that existence has a formal integrity that is a direct, harmonious result of the mountain environment. Wooden houses (themselves a synthesis of a mountain cottage and a manor house from the Polish borderlands), handmade objects of everyday use (seen as part of the wise nature of the area), even the food (as an expression of the riches of nature) – all these could create a culture, which had been available to free nations for centuries before the outset of modern change. Reconstruction of national taste was supposed to be an antidote for the tasteless constructions of modernism. The paradox of interrupted, stopped modernity allowed Witkacy to look at Polish culture from a distance and to notice its paradoxes: Poland, as a result of all its years of dependence, had and still has to catch up with Western civilisational development, achievement, and failure.

Witkacy’s father freed him from the school of mechanical existence, from the education that creates a useful citizen. The artist was created in contact with outstanding scholarly figures, through the development of his passions for art and life (seen as one). Allergic to all limitations that overwhelmed individual talent, Witkiewicz the father saw through the violence of educational institutions the same way as Champfleury, Baudelaire, and Flaubert did. Who else, like Witkacy, lived his youth in Poland

in a metaphysical culture, in this wonder of Mediterranean culture, where art was celebrated because of its naturalness, perfection, and usefulness?

When Witkacy fell into modern time – when he left the enclave of dreams so similar to Kubin's – he understood that in order to give people that lost unity and greatness he needed more radical means than his father's utopia. Time opened him up in the same way as it did with other modern artists; he had to create modern works in the name of lost values. That was a beautiful concept indeed: to provide a mad audience with mad works in order for the audience to live normally, that is, with an everyday feeling of extraordinariness. To humanize through artistic perversion – few artists of the time were so painfully aware of the paradox of modern art.

Influenced by Schopenhauer (and by his critique of academia as a fallen institution), Witkacy had to check for himself whether his father's educational ideas had any value in the modern world. A fascination with Gauguin, induced by Gauguin's follower Władysław Ślewiński, confirmed by his travels to an *élan*, a holy place where the great painter was nowhere to be found, had to make Witkacy realize that he himself – and his mastery of nature painting – had for certain arrived very late. Gauguin's work proved to him that only radical measures can re-establish a sense of unity. The writer assumes a dandy costume and quotes Whistler's attack on the wisdom of nature in order to underscore his own artificiality and strangeness. Immediately after that, Witkacy ridiculed the dandy style and ironized the wisdom of the mountains and of the noble art of the past; he was entranced by Picasso (Fagasso in *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo*).

The 622 Downfalls of Bungo appeared in 1911. Witkacy's first novel is about an unsuccessful education – a dialog of two essentially opposing perspectives. The narrative tells the story of an artist inferior to the task art puts before him – somebody who, at the same time, aims to create universally valuable art, and to obtain as quickly as possible all experience that is necessary for such an aim. Both the initiation into art, and into existence, turn out to be illusory and mischievous. Hence comes a desire for the experience of a downfall – not an erotic or moral one, but rather a downfall into time. Witkacy shrewdly understands that even 622 downfalls are not enough to falsify the appearances that force one to accept mediocre productions instead of art, to be a buffoon rather than an artist, a fool rather than a man. It is not enough to substitute the father's education with a demonic education, in which primeval and instinctive forces devastate the need for spiritual development; it is not enough to oppose unity with a body fragmented by desire. A demonic woman – a proof of the artist's downfall – in the novel becomes a symbol of a modern civilisation that is unable to live up to the standards that it declares valid, and therefore requires an institution which could mask

its abdication, pretend that intellectual honour is preserved. Witkacy was soon to understand that man abdicates also in the face of impersonal forces of civilisation, just as the time of modernity – impersonal and mechanical – increasingly often devastates the worlds of the fathers; it deprives individuals of their individuality. In this catastrophic view no fatherly warning is enough to wake a person from his/her stupor. It was not enough for Witkacy himself, who was (as the whole culture must have been) tempted by the vision of abdication (of rejecting art and its perceptual ambitions), the vision of lowly happiness.

Witkacy's experience was different from Gauguin's, Brel's, or Le Clézio's, because he travelled from the mystery of the tropics (which made a lasting impression on him) to a civilisation that annihilates strangeness. From the trip to Australia (on which he embarked with Malinowski) he came back to Europe in order to fight in the Great War. As an officer in the Tsarist army he survived the Bolshevik revolution. It is not surprising, then, that he saw Western art as buffoonish trickery. After his return to Poland, in *Litmus Paper* he ridiculed Dada experimentation and the concepts of Marcel Duchamp as pretentious entertainments of modernity. The sense of artificiality of art and of politics, and at the same an awareness of the intellectual powers of the inter-war period in Europe, forced Witkacy to work more. After 1918, he started painting more intensively; he wrote, engaged in discussions, struggled to promote ambitious discussion of art – and he was utterly disillusioned. In the Polish culture of the inter-war period, nobody seemed to understand his work, which resulted in serious difficulties with publishing texts and putting his plays on stage. Even his "popular" novels did not sell well. Why? Witkacy thought audiences to be not only uneducated but also to be unwilling to undertake the effort necessary to comprehend his art. I myself believe that the reasons must have been different. Audiences, both educated and uneducated, did not want to be informed about a crisis of spiritual values, which was a harbinger of catastrophe for all cultures. Audiences preferred to enjoy the illusions of European provincial life, to plunge into the goods of prosperity, rather than to listen to nonsensical, sarcastic comments on mechanisation and the trivialization of life.

The artist had to create himself (and his audiences) again. For audiences to engage in artistic and philosophical discussions, they had to be taken out of their time – not only out of their pragmatic, limited existences (cinema, newspapers, sport), but also out of the illusions of modernity. The *catharsis* of Witkacy's theater is to purify the audience of their post-enlightenment illusions, in the same way as Witkacy had purified himself. The illusions are the following: 1. secession – opposing mediocre culture with sophistication (an ideal to which Witkiewicz's father was very attached); 2. dandyism – an aristocratic gesture in a world that neutralizes hierarchies; 3. communism – the neutralization

of everything in the name of hatred of hierarchies; 4. tyranny – the power that gives a (metaphysical) sense to the existence of its subjects; 5. the avant-garde – the creation of a new man suitable for his time; 6. artistic prophecy – creativity that turns the history of the world.

In the face of the civilisational development that aims at prosperity and an easy banal existence, Witkacy saw these concepts as illusory. He confessed:

“I am forced by fate to fight at two fronts: an extremely right-wing one and extremely leftist, revolutionary, one. At the same time, I am not accepted by the center”³.

And indeed, like an amphisbaena, Borges’ fantastic creature, he deliberately moves in two directions at the same time: towards the future that materializes the failures of the past, and towards the past, in order to enliven the future.

Pure Form – this is how Witkacy called his concept of art. The phrase, as it is spelled with capital letters, contains a slight irony of rhetorical zeal (in its capitalization) and a desire to purify culture (and oneself) of dirty triviality. In the phrase there is also a reminiscence of the coup against time conducted by the absurd, of a coup against languages that made existence understandable and mechanical. Witkacy’s work differs from what Alfred Jarry or the surrealists did – it differs in the awareness that unity is possible, that is, an artist can dominate over nonsense. Witkacy does not reject the everyday, but he rejects triviality, that is, the everyday turned into a simplified, boring set of habits. Art, in his opinion, though as unreal as triviality itself, has a different effect on man: it brings surprise – with the everyday, with the human organisation of life – and encourages creative, heroic existence. The extraordinary dramatic texts that Witkacy wrote between 1918 and 1934 can, of course, be compared to the work of Pirandello or de Ghelderode, to the dramatic works of the Vienna modernists, as well as (which seems most natural) to the theater of the absurd, but they are, in fact, completely different because they can transform a banal story typical of a popular text, into a drama of a fantastic existence.

Transformation, change, the metaphysical metamorphosis of the ordinary into the extraordinary, reveal themselves gradually in the dramatic form. It is present, from the very beginning, in the utterances of the characters, who seem superheroic, inventive, autoironic, and philosophically distanced from themselves. One can notice that Witkacy’s dramatic works function on two levels: the level of speaking – where they struggle against the immobile stereotype, against non-creative repetition – and action – where through some extraordinary means they can present a picture of how strange existence seems.

³ S. I. Witkiewicz, *O skutkach działalności naszych futurystów* (1920) [in:] idem, *Bez kompromisu. Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*. Collected and edited by J. Degler, Warszawa 1976, p. 123.

In *The Madman and the Nun*, the plot of which may seem realistic at first, characters speak as if they took part in a pastiche of love tragedy and of art in general. However, and this is the most important aspect of the text, Witkacy manages to show an ambiguity in miraculous normality. He uses his favourite technique – “the rising of the dead”. In a psychiatric hospital, a poet-madman meets a nun-nurse. They are connected by the tragedies of the failures in love they have experienced, and by the love that arises in contradiction of the social norms embodied in the poet’s straightjacket. In the ending section of the play the poet hangs himself in the window of the hospital; the poet and his corpse are onstage at the same time. Which of them is alive as a creative being? The one that, together with the nun (who, as it turns out, takes the suicide of her lover in her stride), goes shopping and enjoys normal life? Or perhaps the poet, who cannot revive art in himself even by an artistic suicide? Does not normality mean being dead-alive for long? The play ends with a miraculous act of grace, which turns out to be a possible final straw. The ambiguous character of normality defends the average man against cognition. Cognition, understanding, that is, the feeling of how strange existence is, means a failure of normality. For normal people, the most desired event is the death of the artist who leads the audience towards a feeling of strangeness. The world free of humanities would be finally a world of happiness. Witkacy expresses such a desire, the desire to fail, to show weakness and run away from a hypostasis of unity, to abdicate from a unity that is both impossible and necessary. He expresses a desire to abdicate from humanity.

What conditions does an artist need in the civilised world if his art is to be not only a story about an ordinary, banal, commonly accepted mode of existence? The question appears in Witkacy’s major dramatic works, not only in *The Madman and the Nun*, but also in *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*, *The Beelzebub Sonata*, *The New Deliverance*, as well as in all novels. The question could be formulated in a different way: will the indefinite concreteness of existence, the abyss that his father explored looking at the sea rock, ever appear again? Or is it only theory that remains – the theory of art’s fall, or the theory of being? This is an ugly abstraction – were it beautiful like mathematical logic, perhaps it could provide one with a “metaphysical unity”?

Witkacy abdicated a number of times as a philosopher and as an artist of unity. He abdicated with pleasure and with reluctance. In *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo*, he finds a justification (which he immediately renounces): Eros is stronger than creativity. During the interwar period he announced a move away from the ambitious Pure Art, he finds himself at fault (because he is unable to achieve unity), and he finds fault with the audience (who wants “numbers”). From now on, he will paint commissioned portraits, masterpieces of self-irony made according to a precisely formulated set

of rules that sound like a fantastic mockery of bureaucracy overriding inventiveness. Witkacy does not believe the novel to be a form of art. Because it is impossible to experience unity when reading it; therefore he writes stories without any organizing form – stories to be read on the train. Yet another abdication that results in an artistic analysis of the basic problems of the contemporary world: of democracy and collapse of refined thinking, of religious crisis, of approaching totalitarianisms, of the increasingly mechanical character of human life. In Witkacy's philosophical views, one can also detect a similar self-ironic abdication. The writer developed a concept of "internal feelings", that is, signals that come from within our body. These signals defeat any unity. The inside, the "bowels", is, thus, governed by variety and typicality, as we all share something with the trivial; talent or mind, on the other hand, we share only with some. There is a constant abdication from unity, there is the unity of hypostasis, there is a false promise of eternity, a vision of the body being purged of its contemptible history.

In *Shoemakers* – the last, culminating work of Witkacy's oeuvre – there is no hope that extraordinary experiences may rejuvenate an individual. No initiation leads to mystery any more.

Gombrowicz – Art against Modern Boredom

The heroic story of a protagonist fighting to save unity was, in Gombrowicz's opinion, slightly ostentatious, though of course he was strongly indebted to Witkacy. He did not, however, know his later works, and perhaps might not have noticed the abdication. Gombrowicz was interested in how Western culture was based on the degradation of creative talent, on cerebral boredom; at the same time, he thought about saving himself rather than about the entire culture. He thought that questions like "Why are we unable to create?" were a reason behind artistic lack of productivity. Instead, everybody should ask: "Why am I not creative?"⁴ He felt that unity was a haunting illusion, an inherited obligation. Witkacy wanted to be better, wiser than his father; Gombrowicz aimed to save the son from the usurping, opinionated father. He claimed that the duties that culture enforced on us, were above the individual. To find means of creative work in "being below" – this was indeed his aim. Below something, humiliation, shame, embarrassing actions, "separation from the form", ridicule, moderation, leading to disgust – these are important entries in Gombrowicz's dictionary of skepticism.

The writer sees twentieth-century culture as a rhetorical theater in which individuals present act out feelings towards art or philosophy, though in fact they are bored beyond limits, and lie in the face of the commandments of the fathers that cannot be successfully

⁴ W. Gombrowicz, *Dzieła, t. VIII: Dziennik 1957–1961*, edited by J. Błoński, Kraków 1986, p. 163.

followed. Give them some freedom, give it to yourself too – this is the message of Gombrowicz's inverted pedagogy.

In his early works, he introduced a subversive suggestion – let the son teach the father, let the father learn from the son about the freedom that results from a voluntary exposing of oneself to fiasco. The consent to participate in the fiasco, and an understanding of the strategy – this is what Gombrowicz expected of the readers of *The Memoirs of Puberty* (1933).

In "Dinner at Countess Pavahoke's" Gombrowicz parodies a vegetarian, philanthropic banquet of aristocrats. The protagonist of this grotesque story, a man of ordinary origins, as full of enthusiasm as a careerist should be, adapts himself to the allegedly higher forms, while the aristocrats indulge in low, vulgar, kitsch, cruel vampiric behavior, almost completely like the Western culture of exhaustion, which needs boorish gut energy. The writer, brought up in a peasant environment, exposes the superiority of the lordly attitude – there is no creativity in it, but still has a great power in the patronizing treatment of art. Patronizing – an inherited gesture – frees a person from pedagogic convictions that force an individual to aspire to the level of the great past works of art and to some fantastically high moral standards. In the short narrative the story of the careerist who despises the peasant, as he wants to advance socially, and does not understand art, as he blindly kneels in front of her, is bedecked in Rabelais-like concepts. The story reads like a parable about the torments of social advancement, not about modern pedagogy – about illusions and false convictions described later in the *Diary*, which deals with inferiority (in Poland and Argentine) and superiority (in Germany and France).

According to Gombrowicz, civilisation exists above what is needed to an individual. Obviously, the pressure for excessively complicated forms to be preserved is evident when the provinces aim to meet the demands of the center. Much of Gombrowicz's *Diary* was written about Argentina and Poland, countries whose cultures colonize themselves on their own – organize their existence in a sphere of worn-out abstractions (the provincial ideology following the hypocrisies of the center and allowing itself to be colonized by idiocy). The center – a hypocritical father – forces the sons to believe in models that he does not himself believe in. Lukewarmth, a lordly gesture towards arts and intellect; being lower, abandoning the chase of the center that does not meet its own requirements – these are Gombrowicz's suggestions. To simplify, to look for pleasure in storytelling, to observe forms that contemporary civilisation creates – these are clues both for the provincial and for the worldly.

Witkacy noticed a masking of the metaphysical mystery everywhere. Gombrowicz, in turn, observed a common masking of humanity. Metaphysics for him is just an inability

to understand Eros, to affirm corporeality, an inability to reveal “dark”, basic, irremovable powers. His art was born out of a secret, masked, technologized world – out of desire, bare power, the ridicule of individual and collective usurpations. He was an ascetic of sin, an anchorite of wildness. Witkacy wanted to purge both himself and art of any illusory sureness of existence; Gombrowicz aimed to purge himself of a culture that imitated cognition. Witkacy prophesied a bureaucratic boredom; Gombrowicz experienced it on everyday basis.

“Oh, how sad it is! Our fate so unenviable! Deemed to disgust each other’s pleasures and to invent new ones that would put us off and make us tired beyond limits. More than that! We are forced to admire them as if they were our true love; we are artificial in this onanism, artificial and poisoned, with the art that torments, disgusts, sickens but is not allowed to vomit”⁵.

The boredom is reproduced by contemporary culture in its factories of abstractions, in its centers of illusion and false conviction. Gombrowicz was particularly irritated by contemporary universities and their scholarly humanities that transformed students into humble machines, changed them into young zombies. It was easier for him to accept the old-age boredom of Western Europe than the epidemic of death amongst youth. What should maturity feed on? Who is to attach abstraction? Where to dissent from form, if youth becomes sclerotic? Just like Witkacy (and Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Cioran, Musil, Márai), Gombrowicz knew how to write extraordinary diatribes against his own times. “Obedient, meek, full of good will toward theory, constructive, positive, methodical, cerebral... Oh, dear desert!”⁶. Witkacy prophesied the arrival of “new men”; Gombrowicz described how he was haunted by them.

Gombrowicz believed that the two spheres which had protected singularity – criticism and art – were under constant pressure from a scholarly, methodical approach. It was and is more difficult to undermine art because it always reveals a breaking of the form; it is easier to discredit criticism, as it is possible to learn criticism that confirms existing opinions. A paradox of modernity, according to Gombrowicz, consists in the formalization of thought, and in the fact that thought has not realised that it has become an institution. Cerebral criticism freely undermines old truths, but with an “internal honesty”, indeed admirable, it does not offer any critique of itself, and of its “edifice of the chimera”⁷. Omnipresent ritualization is evident in the repetition of names, titles, interpretations, and judgements – in the declarative, defining windlass. Gombrowicz confronted these fossilized forms with movement, freedom, dissonance, disobedience, singularity,

⁵ Ibidem, p. 235.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 170.

⁷ Idem, *Dzieła*, vol. VII: *Dziennik 1953–1956*, pp. 307–308.

truths that are ungraspable, hooligan pranks, Rimbaud's dissent, a connection to life. He was attracted to existentialism, but he treated it only as an invitation to change, not as a set of claims. He noted: "Strange. Philosophy, calling for authenticity, leads us into a gigantic falseness"⁸. I want to claim, then, that Gombrowicz attacked the stillness of progressive modernity, the horror of modern pedagogy.

Through such a negation of modernity, Gombrowicz, like Witkacy, became a critic of his own art. Both writers theorized, forestalling the critics. In a world of replicated narrations, they defended the inimitable character of their work.

Gombrowicz created theories, but after *Ferdydurke* he did not introduce them into his prose, but presented them in the *Diary*. Not to let his abstractions (both his own or anyone else's) penetrate into his work, he filtered original ideas by ridiculing, clouding, and contaminating them in an act of deliberate abdication from power and, at the same time, as a mockery of usurpation. The three novels – *Ferdydurke*, *Trans-Atlantic*, and *Pornografia* – make up an anti-educational trilogy. In *Ferdydurke* – a picaresque educational novel – Gombrowicz terrifies maturity with a nightmare about the forming of a person by infantile schooling and the modern, tolerant family. In *Trans-Atlantic* – a tale about phantasmagorical emigration – he forces a homosexual to defend a son against the honour of the father. In *Pornografia* – a gothic tale ridiculing high ideas – in a murder he sees a connection between senile envy and youthful love. His novels embody a modern pedagogy as a set of boring declarations that cover the game of human desires. The sclerotic teacher, the father paralysed by his honor, a demiurge creating with the power of his mind only – they all test their obsessions on the young. Gombrowicz filters abstractions through the phenomenon of youth to show their fiasco and powerlessness. This is his form of abdicating from a mature, fatherly control of the world – a form that is very different from Witkacy's, a voluntary rather than an involuntary one. A metaphysical body, a tempting body, the body of a boy guarantees Gombrowicz a sinful art that vibrates, interests and is uncertain of its own judgement; an art that contradicts the kind of maturity that promotes forms of ordering, subservience, and power.

Schulz: Art against the (Modern) Banal

Peripheral writers who wanted to see the charm of the West – this is how we may summarise the art of the three Polish dissidents of modernism. Each of them wanted but could not, because he was both critical and creative, also in the face of myth. For Witkacy, the West no longer resembled a brave man who handles the sadness of infinity. For Gombrowicz, in turn, the West was no longer a beautiful boy full of charm, poetry,

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 287.

and character. And for Schulz? Did he not see the West as a child who can tell miraculous, innocent stories?

Witkacy tempted Schulz with theory, while Gombrowicz suggested a need to include the trivial. Schulz politely refused to follow “the false daddies”. He avoided theorizing and the banal – these guarantors of public life – which would like to take him by force out of the world of his prose, from out the “regions of the great heresy”, from out “side bowels of time”; he thought it was already enough that these two elements had penetrated his writing through language. For Schulz two disciplines – prose and drawing – promised an escape path outside a reality that had already been limited by other languages.

The narrator of Schulz’s overriding story – which contains two sub-stories: of the father and of regression – is an ironic, and, at the same time, empathic son. These two large stories “plant out” the son’s story – I choose this specific word because Schulz enjoyed biological lexis and planted out his own writing, that is, he moved away from known semantic structures solidified in writing or being solidified in a phraseme, metaphor, sentence, portrait, in a narrative line, etc. His linguistic improvisations oppose the written word as a formalized story about the world. Schulz’s prose is full of the contemporary banal resonating with a subtle irony; it is full of these accords a fan of certainty expects to find but finds them ridiculed and dead, waiting to be revived in art. Like Witkacy and Gombrowicz, Schulz knew that dead language was a symptom of the death of the mind.

He neither aimed to limit, as Witkacy did, standardize, or split up with invention, nor to begin it with a mocked form, as Gombrowicz would. Schulz used his own alchemy of creation, he trusted his own creative mysteries, but he at the same time carefully protected them from the mortuary of theory. There is an anxiety about definition, categorisation, and systematicity speaking through his works. In his readings of the theoretical assumptions put forward by the two other writers discussed here, Schulz found “an anatomical preparation” in Witkacy’s “system”, and “a passive heavy mass” in Gombrowicz’s “dance with the mundane”⁹. He insightfully observed that while Witkacy’s work had been penetrated by modernity dressed up as abstraction, in Gombrowicz’s oeuvre modernity wears the costumes of vitality and of the low. Theoreticians of art seemed to him increasingly unable to close the work in a schematic model. Contemporary audiences would do it for him – they would find a model and a scheme. The same would happen to the theories of the low – audiences would replace flirtation with “inertia,” the low with “barbarian modes of thinking”.

⁹ Here I refer to Schulz’s replies to Witkacy’s and Gombrowicz’s respective letters. See B. Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, selected, edited and with an introduction by J. Jarzębski, Wrocław 1989, especially pp. 444–455.

Schulz was unwilling to lose energy like the other two; he would not allow “the crowd” to speak through his work; he aimed to reach, through writing, his genealogy – genealogy understood as patient exploration of the sources of his art rather than a pompous tree of origin. For Schulz, to write meant to look for stories that, though covered under imposing narrations, remained primeval, mythological, unclear. To tell stories one needs to improvise phrases, shape standards, change favourite expressions, associations, concepts. Why give over so much space to dead solutions?

In this stream-of-Schulz-thought I replaced the figure of the son with Schulz himself. The narrator of the stories does not abandon the fathers’ stories easily, though he impatiently rejects those that seem anachronic and powerless in the face of cultural change. The father imagined by the son is a playful heresiarch, a demiurge who risks ridicule, a corpse resurrected by a conjuror, a grotesque old man, a Proteus able to undergo curious changes, a piece of matter pulsating with life. The son observes the falls of the high-flying father, the painful confrontations of mythical phantasmagorias with the trivial everyday. It is easy for him to use irony and he continues to use it. After all, he will also participate in the change of mythology into the banal. The son listens attentively to the stories of the father not so much to prove they are out of date, ridiculous, and a potential danger to himself, but rather to find a thread that connects the family stories. Where does the thread start? It starts precisely where all stories start – in a mist of myth, in a world of fore-mothers, in an incubator of matter, in the unarticulated. The figure(s) of the father (and of the son) undergo a vast fantastic improvisation conducted by the son who aims to find some mythical support. The son ironizes the father so as not to yield to the temptations of sentimental utopias.

Out of the subtle co-existence of empathy and irony – impossible in itself, I should add to complete the model – comes a portrait of the father that appears nowhere else in modern literature – a Jewish merchant engulfed in a world of his own cosmogonies descends to the level of banal speech, while improvised, invented, and extraordinary reality descends to the level of stereotype.

“The shop’s expanse widened into a panorama of an autumn landscape, full of lakes and distances, and against the backdrop of that scene, Father walked between the folds and valleys of a fantastic Canaan. He walked with great strides, his hands outspread prophetically in the clouds, and with inspired strokes he fashioned a country.

But down below, on the foothills of that Sinai grown out of Father’s anger, the multitude gestulated and transgressed; they were worshipping Baal, and trading. They grasped whole handfuls of those soft folds and draped themselves in that coloured cloth. They wound themselves up in improvised carnival masks and mantles, and chattered profusely, though unintelligibly”¹⁰.

¹⁰ B. Schulz, *The Cinnamon Shops*, translated by John Curran Davis, available online at <http://www.schulzian.net/translation/shops.htm>. Accessed 1 March 2014.

On the one hand, the powerless authority of the father claiming a godly status for itself, and, on the other, the banal, trivialising life of the common crowd. Elevated imprecations of a heresiarch bordering on ridiculousness and, by contrast, the talk of the street, the sound of “those hand-mills, incessantly grinding out a coloured pulp of words”¹¹. The son notes down the pompous oddities of the old Jew, he records the anachronic conception of the beginning of life, and the low, oft-repeated worn-out words of the everyday. When he is ironical about the father, he does not do it in order to join the crowd. Banality and abstraction that speak through mediocrity are a danger to his own words, too. In the name of this banality the father and his incomprehensible stories cannot be done away with, though triviality will swallow all refined stories.

In Schulz’s stories the banal is death’s next of kin. Invention is dead, uncertainty yields to platitude, and empathy shrinks and becomes a convention. The banal has a powerful, omnipresent ally – institutionalized, bureaucratic speech, so dangerous as it lies in wait for a movement of the thought, for improvisation, for inspiration, difference, heresy, and life. Schulz’s acute intuition tells him to reverse the conventional relationship of the father and the son. After all, the senile father should do his best to make the son turn back to the good task. In *The Cinnamon Shops* and *The Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass* we engage in a wonderful, alarming inversion – the father’s ideas flabbergast the son, the father’s vitality embarrasses him, and the son, together with his mother, tries to control rampaging existence with words. In senile vitality there is a wisdom – the father’s stories seek a continuation. The son has to reach maturity to become the narrator and find his place in the genealogical line before the story of the father is extinguished. Schulz tells us about the miraculous postponement of the father’s death, about escaping death, slowing down time, and travelling through the definiteness of dying; at the same time he strengthens the metaphor of creativity as something that saves sense and beings from complete blending. *The Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass*, the title of his collection of stories, means not only a place where the hourglass has not yet announced the death of the father, but also a sanatorium where one is protected against a modernity in which time is lost, together with the freedom of story-telling and the thread of the story, and with the freedom of inventive biography.

* * *

Witkacy erased the father from his first novel. Later, he invented some fantastic creators of beings, demiurges of creative action. In “A Premeditated Crime” Gombrowicz described a reserved indifference to the father’s death as a murder in cold blood.

¹¹ Ibidem.

He went on to mock fathers as promoters of empty phrases. Schulz understood that in the murder of the father there is something else apart from the criminal and the victim – something that should not be, but is blamed – the procedures of abstraction, impersonal powers, modern generators of indifference, mills of banal talk. In *The Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass*, the mother accidentally boils the father-crustacean. “I can scarcely believe to this day that we were the fully-conscious perpetrators of that deed”¹² – the son writes. But what in this sentence really comes from him? Only the “perpetrators of the deed”. Only the parodistic, incorrect juxtaposition of the favourite words of modernity.

Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz wonderfully described the mechanism of modern history. From their points of view, post-Enlightenment culture was stimulated by an impulse toward change – of the old into the new. For this reason the province can never catch up with the constantly modifying center, and the center will never manage to deal with the boredom of continuous change and imitation. Dissidents are interesting only when they defend their art against widespread imitation. Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz presented modernity as an epoch of universal profit and individual loss. The individual loss, let us simplify, is nothing special, just the loss of life – of course, only if we understand existence as creative life, a voluntary desire that cannot be satisfied by an object.

¹² B. Schulz, *The Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass*, translated by John Curran Davis, available online at <http://www.schulzian.net/translation/sanatorium.htm>. Accessed 01 March 2013.

STANISŁAW IGNACY WITKIEWICZ



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The cover of the Italian edition of the novel *Pożegnanie jesieni* (Milan 1969)