

“Worse and worse boredom”: Gombrowicz, Schulz, and Witkacy on the Intensity of Modern Life

Translated by David Malcolm

“I was already bored in my mother’s womb.”

E. Cioran¹

The Monstrous Uncle

In the fifty-seventh number of *Przekrój* in 1946, Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński published, in the “Miscellany” section, the first part of a new cycle with the title *Teatrzyk Zielona Gęś* (The Little Green Goose Theater). The writer had only recently returned from his war-time wanderings through Europe. He had settled in Kraków and begun to work with local journals – *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Przekrój*. He made his debut in the latter in May 1946 with four pieces, which the publisher announced as “the poet’s first post-war poems”². A week later Gałczyński changes the tone from lyrical to comic.

“The Little Green Goose Theater

has the honor to present

The Monstrous Uncle.

The Cast:

A Monstrous Uncle, An Unhappy Aunt, General Mściśław

Monstrous Uncle (dripping blood)

Unhappy Aunt: What kind of new joke is that, Alojzy?

Monstrous Uncle: I’ve murdered the Baroness.

Unhappy Aunt (quietly): That’s the sixth crime this week. Alojzy, what’s up with you?

Monstrous Uncle: Boredom. I’m bored”³.

¹ E. Cioran, *Zeszyty 1957–1972*, trans. I. Kania, Warszawa 2004, p. 461.

² K.I. Gałczyński, *Wiersze*, „Przekrój” nr 56 (5–11 maja), s. 7.

³ I quote according to the first publication: K.I. Gałczyński, “Teatrzyk Zielona Gęś”, *Przekrój* 1946, nr 57 (12–18 May), p. 18. In *Przekrój*, Gałczyński published “Gęś” until his death. The last instalment of “Teatrzyk”, “vaudeville with songs and dances”, entitled “Kaloryfery” (Radiators), was published in *Przekrój* in number 454–455 (December 1953), p. 19, with the following annotation: “Gałczyński sent us this work shortly before his death, asking that it be placed in the holiday number”. The vaudeville finishes with the following “piece of didacticism” – “The vaudeville took this meaning,/and the moral came from those/who do nothing/and are usually very busy.” “It’s striking that the first and last ‘Gęś’ deal with doing nothing.”

In this there is nothing odd. The Monstrous Uncle murders because he is bored, but there is no end in sight for the crimes, because murder turns out to be no remedy for boredom. What to do, then, with the Monstrous Uncle, how to rein him in? The Unhappy Aunt proposes to dance for him “the dance of the Southern seas”, but the Uncle has no interest in this. At one point the conversation moves to current affairs and the “General” is mentioned, whose return offers hope for an exit from the paralysis of boredom, and, for sure, an end to the series of murders. To the Aunt’s doubtful question as to whether the General really will come back, the Uncle answers:

“He will return with his weapon in his hand. On a white horse. And all the bells will ring. And there will be no boredom, only construction and a great, inspired cry of rebirth. Eggs will go down in price. I’ll become voivode of Smolensk. Vivat General”. (18)

Unfortunately, as we read in the next line, the General does not return, as a result of which the Uncle, for want of a better victim to hand, strangles the kitten. The curtain falls.

A word of comment. Gałczyński published the first instalment of his absurd little theater a year after the war’s end, two years before the Communists took power in Poland, barely eighteen months after the Yalta Conference at which the Allies agreed to the Soviet occupation of Poland, and in the same year in which Churchill, on March 5, made his famous Cold War speech, declaring that an “iron curtain” had fallen across Europe. The General mentioned by Gałczyński is General Anders, Commander-in-Chief of Polish Armed Forces in the West in the years 1944 to 1945, whose return was awaited eagerly in Poland. In Poland the situation in May 1946 was very tense. A year earlier Stanisław Mikołajczyk had returned from London. He hoped to establish co-operation between the Communists and the Polish Government in Exile. His return raised hopes in Poland for the country’s liberation from the Stalinist regime.

He would like to. He would desire to. He would be able to. If only.

Gałczyński was fond of writing popular verses mocking the dreams of emigré Poles for a return to the pre-Yalta order⁴. Introducing the General on stage, who says nothing and does not return, the writer performs an ultimate act of destruction on the political myth of liberation from without. But this text’s message is not wholly clear. If the General (whose name is meaningful – Mścistał, the avenger – and shows the real aim of his return) does not return, then all that is left for the uncle, who draws from his return hopes for an escape from oppressive boredom, is to renew his murderous practices.

⁴ For example, in *Śmierć inteligenta* (Death of an Intellectual), a long poem published (in three parts) in *Odrodzenie* in 1947 (nr 11–13): “Chilled. Apolitical./Sore. Nostalgic./Turns in a circle. Looks./He would like to. He would desire to. He would be able to. If only./Rubs his eyes. Looks through the glass./White horse? No, it’s snow” (K.I. Gałczyński, *Dzieła w pięciu tomach*, vol. 2: *Poezje*, Warszawa 1979, p. 124).

This would suggest that boredom is an illness caused by Communism and that the only medicine would be an overthrow of the Stalinist regime by an emigré leader. But that is not it, mainly because the boredom from which the uncle suffers is an aristocratic boredom, for which there is no place in the new society. Gałczyński confirms the suspicions of contemporary researchers that modern boredom is an effect of the democratization of scepticism⁵. It simply reverses vectors. The uncle, we learn, strangled the Baroness, and for want of further members of the baronetcy, he has to choke a kitten, a symbol of bourgeois refinement. The Uncle is right that one can only combat boredom through social engagement (“construction and a great, inspired cry of rebirth”), but he locates this rebirth on the wrong side, and that is why when he sees the General will not return, he falls once more into the grip of boredom. He is defeated politically.

In “Potworny wujaszek”, Gałczyński performs a meaningful maneuver. What seems an existential experience, ultimately turns out to be a political choice. At the start, the Uncle is bored in a classical manner, like a nineteenth-century aristocrat or a twentieth-century bourgeois. Afterwards the hope arises in him that a political upheaval will put an end to his boredom, to fall at the last, not knowing how beaten he is, once more into the grip of boredom, which is ridiculed as an outworn symbol of a decrepit social dispositif.

In this way, Gałczyński, in what is seemingly a trivial sketch, demonstrates the political background of boredom, the first to do so in Poland, and perhaps the first in Europe. To be bored is not to believe in the new social order; it is to be condemned to passivity, to being shut in a circle that has no way out, as is evidenced by the absurd set of murders. In other words, Gałczyński makes an important correction to the modern understanding of boredom.

The metaphysics of the two-headed calf

The French invented *ennui* long before the revolution of modernity, but they connected it almost exclusively with an eternal human condition and the language of the heart⁶. For Pascal, boredom was dialectically connected with the need for distraction: the human being is bored and thus seeks entertainment beyond him/herself, in order to drown out the nothingness of his/her own existence. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, boredom (the symptoms of which were difficult to distinguish from other severe

⁵ E. S. Goodstein. *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*, Stanford 2004.

⁶ I have written on the pre-modern understanding of boredom (from Montaigne to Crébillon) in my essay “O nudzie” (On Boredom) [in:] *Anatomia ciekawości*, Kraków 1999. One of the basic treatments of this part of the history of boredom is P.M. Spacks’s *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (University of Chicago 1996). A book that begins where Spacks finishes his account is *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* by Elizabeth S. Goodstein (Stanford 2004). The latest (excellent, although it is not as incisive as Goodstein’s work) study of the history of boredom is Peter Toohey’s *Boredom: A Lively History*, Yale 2012.

illness of the soul – melancholy, depression, spleen) was almost universally treated as: 1) an ailment characteristic of the human condition; and 2) an illness from which only outstandingly sensitive individuals suffered⁷. Only from the middle of the nineteenth century, when boredom started to leave aristocratic salons and threaten everyone, irrespective of social status, was boredom radically detached from both these conditions. It began to be understood as a specifically modern ailment and one that went beyond the particular individual, although it was not universal. It is necessary to understand that boredom became the basic distinguishing feature of a specific socio-cultural formation (modernity), and that – in connection with this – it took on a specific character, hitherto unknown. This specific character of modern boredom consists in the fact that it does not result from a human condition that is beyond time, but from the transformation that social life has undergone, starting from the middle of the nineteenth century⁸. As a result of the vast social changes connected with industrialization, and the mechanization and automatization of work⁹, urbanization and the secularization of the individual's life, the individual ceases to perceive his/her existence as a whole that belongs to him/her, and he/she starts to have a fundamental difficulty with self-definition. "Today I really don't know who I am", says the protagonist of one of the plays of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Edgar Wałpor, who earlier "moans with indecision": "Some boredom and torment, circular, infinite, but finished and closed in itself for ages"¹⁰. In Witkiewicz's last play, Szewcy (Shoemakers), Scurvy says the same as Edgar, but with a minor change: "I suffer more because I don't at all know who I am, from the time I got political power"¹¹. Witkiewicz reasons thus (I will address this in more detail in the part of this essay devoted to him): the boredom that makes self-definition impossible is not only at the point of exit in an individual's life, but also at the point of accession. No symbolic social mechanism (here, political power) invalidates boredom, nor does it equally

⁷ Unfortunately, there is no space here for more detailed historical analyses. I refer interested readers to Goodstein's book mentioned above. Its thesis is as follows: modern boredom, which develops as an effect of the democratization of scepticism about the legitimization of reality echoes a specific modern crisis of meaning (p. 5).

⁸ See, above all, W. Benjamin, *Pasaże*, trans. I. Kania, Kraków 2005, especially section D [Boredom, the Eternal Return], pp. 131–150, and E. Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*.

⁹ Walter Benjamin in the Arcades project (in the section on boredom) cites a characteristic sentence from Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: "Continuous exhausting toil, day after day, year after year, is not calculated to develop the intellectual and moral capabilities of the human being. The wearisome routine of endless drudgery, in which the same mechanical process is ever repeated, is like the torture of Sisyphus; the burden of toil, like the rock, is ever falling back upon the worn-out drudge" (qtd. W. Benjamin, *Pasaże*, p. 136). This is also Witkiewicz's understanding, when he points to "the scientific organization of work" (*Nienasycenie*, *Dzieła*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1985, p. 29. All quotations from Witkiewicz come from this edition), in other words Taylorism as one of the main sources of the individual's alienation and – in consequence – of the decay of living social relations. On the subject of Taylor and the modern organization of work, see A. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, Berkeley 1990.

¹⁰ S. I. Witkiewicz, *Kurka wodna* [in:] *Dzieła*, vol. 5, op. cit., p. 26, 11.

¹¹ Idem, *Szewcy* [in:] *Dzieła*, vol. 5, op. cit., p. 513.

provide an answer to the question who one is. This happens because boredom – the result of the illness that individuals suffer from – becomes a metaphysical condition of reality itself in all its manifestations. The alienation, of which Marx wrote that it deprives the worker of control over the work he/she does¹², is a sign that is characteristic of modern boredom, although this alienation, social in its manifestations, has its beginning in metaphysical experience. This means that modernity is an epoch that, for the first time, established a social grounds for metaphysics (as it is customary to argue following Durkheim and Brzozowski), but also – also for the first time – attempted to explain the structure of social life by means of the language of metaphysics. Up to now, those two languages had belonged to completely different spheres of experience. Modernity brings them into collision.

Grief for the absent subject

This essay aims to attempt two things. First, I try to show that boredom is one of the most important existential experiences described by modern Polish literature¹³, especially by three of its most outstanding representatives: Bruno Schulz, Witold Gombrowicz, and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz¹⁴. Second, I try to suggest that boredom, as an existential experience, consists in radical desubjectification, more precisely in the impossibility of constructing a strong subject. Each of the writers I have mentioned attempts in a different way to show that the confrontation of the I with its own emptiness and with the emptiness of the world makes it impossible to create a distance between the I and the world, without which distance no cognition is possible. Martin Heidegger, in his lectures in academic year 1929–1930, tried to show that boredom, alongside fear¹⁵,

¹² In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* in 1844 Marx writes of “alienated labor” and that “labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification” (K. Marks, F. Engels, *Dzieła*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1976, pp. 550–551).

¹³ I understand modernity here in a narrower sense than is usual, and I limit myself to the first half of the twentieth century. I set out my methodological choices more extensively in: *Polska literatura nowoczesna: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy*, Kraków 2006.

¹⁴ In order to limit myself only to the period in which all three writers were operating simultaneously, I fix my *terminus ad quem* as 1939. Witkacy committed suicide in that year; Schulz was murdered in the Droho-bycz ghetto in 1942. The three writers have often been put together in various contexts. Gombrowicz, indeed, was the first to construct this triumvirate, when he wrote in the *Dziennik* (Diary) of “three musketeers”: “Witkiewicz ...the despairing madman. Schulz ...the drowned madman. I ...the madman in revolt” (W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik* 1961–1969, Kraków 1997, p. 17).

¹⁵ Above all, section 40 of *Sein und Zeit* (1927) is devoted to fear as a fundamental state of mind, or the *Befindlichkeit* of *Dasein* (existence). See: M. Heidegger, *Bycie i czas*, trans. B. Baran, Warszawa 1994, pp. 261–270.

is one of the most basic frames of mind whereby a human being not so much knows reality, but opens him/herself up to it and is in it. All the Polish writers whom I have mentioned show that although Heidegger's analyses touching the liquidation of meaning in the experience of boredom are basically accurate, they may not be evaluated positively¹⁶. This is because the modernity in which boredom reaches the epidemic levels is not salvation for the human being, but rather a curse. At the same time, however, this metaphysical language does not obscure the most important motif in the modern discourse of boredom. Thus the impossibility of constructing the subject does not only have an epistemological meaning (the world cannot be transformed into a meaning filled whole), but also a social one: the subject is one means of avoiding the confrontation of the I with its own emptiness, and at the same time of symbolically (and, thus, beyond the level of the individual) grounding one's own existence. As Émile Tardieu wrote in his treatise on boredom in 1903, the one way to deal with boredom is to "obéir à un devoir, de se dévouer à un idéal" (give oneself to a duty, devote oneself to an ideal)¹⁷. This language is close to Freud's considerations on melancholy and grief¹⁸. The subject, withdrawing his/her emotional investment from the place vacated by the absent object of love, has to change its object, which may be a concrete person or an idea, in order to work through mourning and not get bogged down in melancholy. In this sense, boredom appears as grief, which has not been worked through, for an unconstructed subject. (This is how both Gombrowicz and Schulz formulate it.) But since the subject's existence is dependant on a symbolic mechanism that works properly in a given society, modern boredom can also be understood as grief, which has not been worked through, for a social catastrophe (which Wikacy argues). Elizabeth Goodstein argues that in boredom the disappearance of experience appears in an alienation from action and being. This is the everyday crisis of subjectivity¹⁹. In this essay, I attempt to show this crisis via the example of three Polish writers.

The muddle gets worse

In the Sunday issue of *Czas*, February 27, 1938, the reader could read on page 5 a note entitled "Marzec w Zakopanem" (March in Zakopane).

¹⁶ In the *Contributions to Philosophy* (1936–1938), Heidegger inverts his understanding and asserts that boredom is the state in which modernity attains its negative fulfillment as an epoch completely without questions (*Fraglosigkeit*) and full of the most straightforward use (*leichteste Nutzung*). See: *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, Gesamtausgabe LXV, Frankfurt 1989, p. 157.

¹⁷ E. Tardieu, *L'Ennui: Etude psychologique*, Paris 1903, p. 290 (Chapitre XVII: *Les Remèdes de l'ennui*).

¹⁸ S. Freud, *Trauer und Melancholie*, first published in: *Internationale Zeitschrift für Ärztliche Psychoanalyse*, Bd. 4 (6), 1917, pp. 288–301. The Polish translation is: Z. Freud, *Załoba i melancholia*, trans. B. Kocowska [in:] K. Pospiszyl, *Zygmunt Freud, człowiek i dzieło*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1991.

¹⁹ E.S. Goodstein, op. cit., p. 10.

"In March in the Tatras there is always the most lovely weather, and perfect snow conditions make it possible for many groups of skiers fully to enjoy winter sports.

A stay in Zakopane in March is also very pleasant, because it involves really only minimal costs".

Three pages down, the same reader – just below an advertisement for "Maggi bullion cubes, everywhere thought the best" – can learn something quite different on the subject of a stay in Zakopane. For, "driven by an inconsolable existential momentum", Witold Gombrowicz, the author of two books that have divided readers into two camps, has come to Zakopane. Some readers thought that both *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (Diary from the Time of Puberty) (1933) and *Ferdydurke* (published in autumn 1937, but dated 1938) are the product of a still-born, maniacal talent; others saw in the newly published book a "revolutionary form and method of novel writing"²⁰.

Gombrowicz traveled to Zakopane frequently; neither his work as a trainee lawyer nor his work as a writer prevented him, and his health required repeated periods of recuperation²¹. His stays in Zakopane were scarcely filled with fascinating adventures, but the feuilleton from his visit to the Tatras has a specific character, because a philosophical one.

"If you leave out the apparatus, if you leave out the skiing, cards, bottles, and your more or less smooth moving joints on the dance floor – an enormous boredom arises, and a terrible awkwardness. People here pull and drag each other, like those candies they call twists. . . . And all that dragging becomes a drag . . . it's time to traipse around churches and everything somehow limps along. . . . hey, it wasn't that way once. People are losing their dash"²².

This feuilleton is a mini-treatise on boredom. Gombrowicz is amusing here, but at the same time very serious. In the article, boredom is not a phenomenon connected with the individual, nor is it a psychological phenomenon; it has instead a social character. It arises as a result of a reduction of "apparatus", or, in other words, of the attributes of social intercourse. Sociability masks a boredom manifested by an acute sense of time, which is not an "inner" experience²³, but a bodily one. Basically, all that dragging around becomes a drag, and time starts to pass more slowly.

²⁰ B. Schulz, "Ferdydurke", *Skamander*, July-September 1938, nr. XCVI-XCVIII, reprinted [in:] idem, *Opowiadania, wybór esejów i listów*, ed. J. Jarzębski, Wrocław 1989, p. 379.

²¹ See: W. Gombrowicz, *Wspomnienia polskie. Wędrówki po Argentynie*, Paris 1982, p. 155. On Zakopane, see pp. 155–161.

²² I quote the first printing: W. Gombrowicz, "Niedole zakopiańskie", *Czas*, nr. 57 (1938), Sunday 27 February, p. 8. Further quotations are from this edition; citations appear in the text. Reprinted in: W. Gombrowicz, *Varia 1: Czytelnicy i krytycy. Proza, reportaże, krytyka literacka, eseje, przedmowy*, Kraków 2004, pp. 109–113.

²³ As in Husserl's work (*On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time – Wykłady z fenomenologii wewnętrznej świadomości czasu* [1905–1910], trans. J. Sidorek, Warszawa 1989), and in that of Thomas Mann (*Der Zauberberg* [1924]).

But here it is not just a matter of time. “I settled in the mountains. I fell into dreaminess [rozmarzenie], slovenliness [rozmarłanie], and idleness [rozwałkonienie]” (8). Of course, Gombrowicz does not link these three words by chance, for he wishes to show – through the prefix (roz)²⁴ – the condition of a world given over to boredom. The world is “rozmarłany” (made slovenly), because it has lost clear outlines. “It is something muddly, unclear, and doubtful; I don’t myself know what or how. . .” (8)²⁵. “Generally it’s cloudy and difficult to discern anything” (9). This effacing of the outlines of things brings further complications.

“Drawing in the smell of soup immediately gets mixed up in the turbid and dissolute atmosphere here with the drawing of a sleigh by horses – and horses get mixed up with cows, of which there aren’t any – and cows again get mixed up with veal with beans and potatoes – after which that whole dish, which you stuff yourself on, gets mixed up with you, and in the end you don’t know yourself if the veal goes into you or if you stuff yourself into the veal. And finally, you can’t distinguish between your own meat and the meat you eat, or the meat eaten by others, and even in general – the meat of others”.(9)

For a humorous feuilleton, this has a lot of non-feuilletonish thoughts. The muddle that Gombrowicz speaks of does not come from excess (an excess of gestures, figures, movement, events), but from the opposite. We are not dealing with polysemy, the cause of which would be an excessive production of meanings, but with a leakage of meaning caused by the effacing of the outlines of reality, or also, as the above quotation indicates, an effacing of borders not only between I and what is not I, but also between particular sectors of the world. In boredom reality becomes blurred, loses clarity and obviousness, and the human being has nothing to hold on to in order to stand on firm ground, for firm ground, a foundation on which a strong subject might stand, is no more. Boredom liquidates the social adhesion of the subject, and also exposes his/her bodily – fleshly – foundation. The clash of de-subjectified meat with the heavy matter of time, which has also lost its subjective roots – this is the effect of the operations of boredom, according to Gombrowicz.

Denudation

In autumn 1937, Gombrowicz published *Ferdynand*. In the key first chapter, sensationally entitled “Porwanie” (Abduction), the main subject is immaturity, which the writer

²⁴ I have written extensively on the fundamental meaning of the prefix “roz” [in English roughly “dis-”] in Bruno Schulz’s work – *Powszechna rozwiązłość: Schulz, egzystencja, literatura*, Kraków 2012.

²⁵ Substantially more radical, although it is based on the same principle of ontological “slovenliness”, is “Dariusz wiejski” (A Village Darius), found in the *Dziennik* from 1954, in which, for a change, the narrator “is dislimned and dissolved” and “does not understand what is up” because of the “cloudiness, mistiness, flow of everything”. W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1953–1956*, Kraków 1997, p. 165–169.

chooses in spite of the demands of a "mature" and, therefore "official" culture ("in the text [*pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania*] I put some frogs, some legs, all immature fermented contents" [8]). The subject is also dependency on the judgments of others – "we are not autonomous, we are just a function of other people" (11). At one point, the writer's double turns up, whose otherness the narrator cannot abide, because it makes him aware of the complete deformation of his own being, a deformation produced by "culture aunties". "Ah, to create one's own form! To turn outwards! To express oneself" (16). And, indeed, from Gombrowicz's desire to liberate himself from the transforming judgments of others there emerges a new form, *Ferdydurke* itself.

Gombrowicz had long been trying to produce a final draft of the novel. He wrote several preliminary stories, but the most important excerpt was published in the July number of the journal *Skamander* in 1935, under the title "Ferdydurke". The theme of immaturity is absent here (or at least not in such an extended form as in the final version); there are no "culture aunties"; nor is there the whole argument about a person's shaping through the judgments of other people. The matter is simpler, but at the same time somewhat more complicated.

The narrator is not an author who does not know what to do with his writerly future, but is rather a man who is conscious of the irrevocable loss of youth, and does not know what to do with himself, since no one "misses" him.

"For what indeed was I? A fright, as dull as a billiard table, full-time or contract employee, who had run out of the gas of youth – I bored myself and others; from time to time I went to chance parties and played bridge, but there was no life in all that". (278)

A situation similar to that in the final version, but not completely. Here there is no violence of alien judgment, but only an overwhelming emptiness, a lack of life, in other words an overwhelming boredom. Here we observe a situation that is the reverse of that described in the Zakopane feuilleton. There boredom appeared as an effect of "removing the apparatus". Here boredom is an original existential situation, the inconveniences of which can only be combated by "adding apparatus", that is more social props. For this reason all the repertoire of social adhesive institutions are mentioned: social service, the Fatherland, humanity. None of these, however, is sufficient, until here suddenly the double appears, but, in this case, in a reverse manner to that in the final version. The double is revealed as "life itself" (281), which the narrator sought everywhere in his inner world, but could not find within himself. Unfortunately, not knowing what to do with this suddenly and immediately revealed life, the narrator spits in the apparition's face.

"The apparition groaned and vanished. And I remained alone, but rather not alone, but with a feeling of overwhelming emptiness, as if life had escaped from me, and not seeing anything before me, only a vain and futile existence, inevitably ending in death, I dozed a little". (282–283)

After a brief snooze, the narrator wakes up, "horribly denuded spiritually, shaky and uncertain" (283). He asks himself "who he is", and discovers that maybe "simply – he is and nothing more",

"But that phrase "I am", with no additions, a fact bare and terrible, filled me with terror. It seemed that there was nothing more difficult than to be, nothing more and nothing else, only oneself. In that word there was contained a terrible nakedness". (283)

And here, as in the final version, there begins the "turning himself" outwards, toward various social relations, which permit the protagonist to forget about naked experience.

Ontological nakedness

It is time to formulate my thesis. It is as follows. The discovery of the naked facticity of existence intensifies the experience of original boredom, from which the narrator of the first version of the novel attempts to escape. "I bored myself and others", he says, identifying boredom with lack of life. However when life as such appears, unmediated by nothing else and by no one else, the narrator cannot bear it and escapes (into sleep), to discover finally after waking up that he is in no state to endure in existential nakedness. This radical nakedness is shown to be boredom itself, which is not the absence of something (absence of employment, absence of entertainment), but an autonomous experience, not a dialectical one, and in fact one that is ruinous of the dialectic. Boredom is a revelation of existence as such, unmediated by any social adhesive. The nakedness of which Gombrowicz writes is an ontological nakedness, from before the making of inter-personal relations, from before the assembling of "additions" and "apparatus", whereby the subject is established as an element of a wider relation. If we accept that subjectivity is always relational because it is always established in reference to the world, from which it wishes to separate itself, then boredom, however, as Gombrowicz says frequently, is a non-relational experience, without any props, and from this equation there comes a fairly obvious result. Boredom, thus, makes the constitution of subjectivity impossible. When the I is in itself and for itself, clothed in nothingness that does not belong to it, when the I is immediately given to itself and unmediated by anything that belongs to the world, or is a simple negation of its immediacy, then there is no place for the constitution of the subject. The subject is only an answer to the immediate experience (impossible to bear) of the world, a world that manifests itself in the I without any symbolic casing. It is because of this immediate ontological apocalypse that the world described

by Gombrowicz in his *Zakopane* feuilleton loses clarity, turns into an incomprehensible mess, and finally is transformed into meat, in which there is no way to distinguish anything from anything else. Boredom is not a psychological problem²⁶, nor is it a social or an ontological one: it exposes the impossibility of establishing the subject as a consequence of the lack of any mediation – social, ethical, cognitive, and esthetic.

Before the subject

In a lecture entitled “Was ist Metaphysik?”, given on April 24, 1929 at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, Martin Heidegger linked boredom with metaphysics in the following way:

“As surely as we never get a sure grasp of the generality of be-ing in itself, just as surely do we all the same find ourselves somehow placed in the midst of the generality of bare [enthüllt] be-ing. In the end, there continues to be [besteht] an essential difference between getting a grasp of the whole of be-ing in itself and finding oneself in the midst of be-ing as a whole [des Seienden im Ganzen]. The former is impossible in principle. The latter happens all the time in our existence. Of course, it looks just as though in our everyday comings and goings we were holding fast to only just this or that [kind of] be-ing, as though we were lost in this or that realm of be-ing. But no matter how fragmented the daily round may seem, it always maintains be-ing in the unity of a “whole [Ganzes]”, although only in the shadows. Even then and precisely just then, when we are not especially busy with things, this “as a whole” overcomes us; for example, in genuine boredom. This is a long way off far off when this or that book or play, job or leisure activity, is boring [langeweilt]. It breaks out when “it’s boring [es einem langweilig ist]”. Profound boredom, like a silent fog insinuating itself in the depths of existence, pulls things, others and oneself into it altogether with remarkable indifference. Such boredom reveals be-ing as a whole²⁷.”

Heidegger is the first twentieth-century philosopher who devotes very much attention to boredom, understood as a basic way in which humans relate to the world²⁸. Above all, as we have seen, he distinguishes the boredom evoked by something boring from boredom as a fundamental “state of existence”, in which “being as a whole”

²⁶ The first clinical research into boredom (today almost forgotten) was conducted J.E. Barmack, who published his findings in 1937. See: J.E. Barmack, “Boredom and other Factors in the Physiology of Mental Effort: An Exploratory Study,” *Archives of Psychology*, nr 218, New York 1937 (PhD dissertation submitted at Columbia University). Over the next several years, Barmack published further studies, which fundamentally indicated that boredom (*de facto* low blood pressure) may be combated using drugs such as benzedrine and ephedrine). See: idem, “Studies on the Psychophysiology of Boredom: Part 1. The Effect of 15 mg of Benzedrine Sulfate and 60 mg Ephedrine Hydrochloride on Blood Pressure, Report on Boredom and other Factors”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 1939, nr 25, pp. 494–505..

²⁷ M. Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?*, Bonn 1931, p. 14. Translation by Martin Groth available at: <http://wagner.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com>.

²⁸ See, above all: M. Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt–Endlichkeit–Einsamkeit*, ed. by F.-W. Von Hermann, Frankfurt 1983, *Gesamtausgabe* XXIX. Part I is devoted to boredom. In these lectures, there also appears the image of boredom as a fog spreading itself through human existence (p. 115).

is revealed.²⁹ This deeper, metaphysical boredom is ambiguous. On one hand, it shows us being as a whole, which means that we cease to pay attention to individual areas of existence – to individual things, to individual people. . . . On the other, this revelation does not sharpen our cognition, but blurs it, because boredom is a “silent fog” that levels the differences in our world.

Since differences are leveled, since the world is deprived of meaning and is reduced to “being as a whole”, this means that boredom lifts the human being out of subjectified intercourse with things and other subjects, and forces the de-subjectified I to encounter its naked core. In this sense, the human being, as a result of fundamental boredom, which sweeps from his/her world previously established meanings, him/herself confronts him/herself. That is why Heidegger says that boredom is one of the fundamental states of mind/being. A just appreciation of boredom, of course, means that the human being who is seized by this fundamental eradication of discriminations, should treat boredom as a purification from life’s oppressions and as an opportunity to renew his/her own existence. The examples that I cite, however, indicate how difficult it is to achieve that renewal through boredom.

As a result of its eradication of discriminations, boredom empties out our experience on two dimensions – that of meaning and of time. Since it embraces all, nothing can have meaning (because meaning arises via the reference of things to the world and to the subject), but also since under the cloud of boredom all differences die, time, too, ceases to flow and starts to weigh. In *A Philosophy of Boredom* Lars Svendsen describes this, thereby commenting on Heidegger’s musings. He sees that *Dasein* (in other words, human existence) becomes rigid in everyday life, and in the world. Boredom reveals this rigidity. In boredom, the human being is caught in a vortex of immanence, in which *Dasein* is no longer truly ecstatic, that is transcendent. Boredom is a reminder of eternity, in which there is no transcendence. Time collapses into a great, empty present. Time is usually transparent – we do not usually notice it – and does not manifest itself as such. However in our confrontation with nothingness in boredom, where time is not filled with anything that could occupy our attention, we experience time as time³⁰.

²⁹ A good example of being bored, and of looking for a way out of that state of non-fundamental tedium, produced by a lack of occupation, is the description of the characters in one of Schulz’s short stories: “Consumed by boredom they rocked back and forth on the high shelves and drummed on them with their legs, looking out in vain at the empty space of the market square, swept clean by the scorching heat, for any kind of adventure” (B. Schulz, *Proza*, Kraków 1973, p. 227). (All quotations from Schulz’s prose are from this edition and are marked by the abbreviation P followed by the page number.) Ernst Bloch, in 1926, wrote in the same way about boredom as lack of occupation. “Boredom is the charge for a life without occupation. It is that lonely leadenness from which one escapes into work and society; it is nothingness or in fact continually the nothingness on the edge of which all people live, the bedroom and the yawn of our immediate state, something that very easily may become a chamber of horrors” (E. Bloch, *Ślady*, trans. A. Czajka, Kraków 2012, p. 89). Heidegger analyzes such fortuitous boredom, but he is interested in something considerably more fundamental.

³⁰ L. Svendsen, *Philosophy of Boredom*, transl. by J. Irons, London 2005, p. 127.

In his *Notebooks*, Emil Cioran describes exactly the same experience.

“That attack of boredom that I experienced as a five-year-old (1916), one afternoon, which I will never forget, was the first and the real awakening of my consciousness. From that afternoon dates my birth as a conscious being. What was I before? Only a being [*un être sans plus*]. My I begins from that shattering and revelation, marking indeed the double nature of boredom. Suddenly I felt the presence of nothingness in my blood, in my bones, in my breath, and in everything that surrounded me. I was as empty as the objects. There was no heaven and no earth, only an enormous extent of time, mummified time”³¹.

The source experience of boredom for all three writers, Gombrowicz, Heidegger, and Cioran, is the birth of “oneself”, of *Dasein* or *Moi*. “Without boredom”, writes Cioran, “I would not have an identity. . . . Boredom is an encounter with one’s own self – through a perception of one’s own nothingness”³². Of course, this encounter with one’s self is shown most clearly by Gombrowicz in the confrontation of his protagonist with his double, and it is fatal in its consequences.

On the high seas

In the spring of 1930, one Zantman, whose situation “on the European continent became with every day more sorry and less clear”, boards by mistake a ship sailing to Valparaiso, and immediately falls into the embrace of boredom. First, literally: “I gave away all to the sea that I had to give, and I groaned, being void as an empty bottle. . . .”³³. Later the passenger, physically devastated, begins to share his boring existence with the whole crew. “Boredom hurts quite a lot”, writes Zantman in his notebook, and this observation becomes the main thread of Gombrowicz’s entire story, first published in *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* in 1933.

“When I climbed up on to the bridge, Clark said:

– Boring, my man. Maritime boring.

– Hmmn, I replied.

– Not a nice thing, boredom, is it? Not nice. Boring. A je-ne-sais-qua. (125)

– It must be boring for you on deck, Thompson, I said politely.

– Oy, boring, boring, groaned Thompson – Hard to put up with it, sir”. (132)

Of course, circumstances compel the situation, but we would be solving the problem of boredom in this novel, if we reduced boredom simply to a lack of occupation

³¹ E. Cioran, op. cit., p. 708. The original text is in: idem, *Cahiers 1957–1972*, op. cit., p. 768.

³² Ibidem.

³³ W. Gombrowicz, *Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury* [in:] idem, *Pisma zebrane*, vol. 1, Kraków 2002, p. 114. All quotations are from this edition.

on board ship. It would be easy to concur that “on this sh. . . ship nothing happens from morning to night” (126), and that the captain has to think up tasks for the crew, “because otherwise they’d all do crazy from boredom” (124). However, the situation is shown to be considerably more serious. The boredom that rules the ship is not common boredom, the result of a lack of activities, but it is rather a fundamental boredom, which liquidates differences and ultimately sucks all meanings from the world. In this sense, it appears close to stupidity³⁴.

At one moment, in a situation of monstrous tension that results from the fact that the sailors, unaccustomed to confront their own nothingness, stop putting up with the void now surging all around them. Zantman, in reaction to the captain’s announcement that he will implacably suppress a mutiny on board, notes down in his log:

“What stupidity! At this moment! What is in this – so that stupidity will not take a single step away from me? A terrible weariness poured over me like olive oil”. (146)

I would like to draw attention to two matters. The first is that olive oil here replaces the Heideggerian fog, and instead of enveloping the horizon, it washes over our protagonist, whereby not only does “the border of dreams becomes blurred” (146), but also, above all, “the difference becomes blurred between things, and also between good and evil” (147). Now we can see why stupidity turns out to be so close to boredom. Stupidity is not ignorance, labored cognition, or defective thinking. Stupidity is a state prior to the constitution of the rational subject, who begins to exist at the moment of his/her introduction into the world of fundamental discriminations: I-the world, good-bad, true-false. This pre-subjective situation becomes clear at the end of the story, when the protagonist hides away in his cabin and refuses to come out on deck because he is afraid of mutinying – he imagines – sailors. After several days, looking out through the window, he begins to note a radical change in the landscape – “bright celadons”, “a plenitude of light”, “richness of decoration” (149) – which, however, produces no enthusiasm in him, because he appears to be an enthusiast for “gray dusk” and “foggy dawn”. The ending is key here.

“No, I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know, and I certainly don’t want heat and splendor, nor luxury, And I prefer not to go out on deck for fear of beholding something... something that until now was turbid, shrouded, and not completely told, now controlled in all its shamefulness among peacock feathers and warm gleams. Because from the start all was mine, and I, I was indeed as everything – the outer is a mirror in which one sees what is within!” (149–150)

Varied are the ways to interpret this ending. It is convincing to see here the principal protagonist’s insanity, which reading is confirmed in the light of what I have hitherto said

³⁴ I write extensively on stupidity in Gombrowicz’s work. See: *Czarny nurt: Gombrowicz, świat, literatura*, Kraków 2004, Część III: *Popłoch i wymiot*.

of boredom. Zantman does not wish to know not only of what is happening on the ship, but he also denies himself any knowledge at all that would separate his I from reality. In this sense, he chooses stupidity over knowledge. He does not wish to see what hitherto was turbid and shrouded by the fog of indifferentiation, because he does not believe in the distance between the inside and the outside. If he declares that from the beginning “everything was mine”, this does not mean that it appeared as such from the moment of his erroneous embarkation on board the Banbury, that everything that then happened was the result of the delirious imagination of a character assailed by seasickness (for such a reading is also possible). In my interpretation, Zantman cannot do beyond a confrontation with his own emptiness, the symbolic equivalent of which is the boredom that dominates everywhere. Unable to escape from the paralyzing grasp of boredom, Zantman falls into insanity, because insanity (like stupidity and like boredom) is the result of an unmediated intercourse with his own self.

Loneliness

“I’ve been sitting here for years and I’m bored,” says the narrator of “Samotność” (Loneliness), one of Schulz’s most important, but also certainly shortest, stories. “The world has become boring” and “Today emptiness and inertia breathe on me from the landscape”, Schulz himself writes to a close acquaintance³⁵. He defines boredom in the modern manner: it is “undifferentiated monotony” or “occurrence-less monotony”³⁶. Time ceases to flow; nothing can occur. Boredom eliminates a differentiated and constantly differentiating existence, replacing it with being in itself, the unmediated reference of the I to its own self. In this sense, boredom is also the liquidation of the subject, which cannot liberate itself from its own self through negation of its own self³⁷.

This is most clearly shown in the story “Samotność”, which I have mentioned above. It is odd in Schulz’s entire output because it is the only monolog we find in his work in which no other character other than the narrator appears. From the juxtaposition of the two quotations with which I began this chapter, we can see that this monolog should be read autobiographically. This hypothesis should not be rejected out of hand ³⁸

³⁵ Letter to Zenon Waśniewski, Drohobycz, 4 August 1937, [in:] B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, ed. J. Ficowski, Gdańsk 2002, p. 86.

³⁶ Both definitions come from the story “Dodo” and refer to the life of the eponymous protagonist, which was like “a completely level and uniform highway without events and surprises” (ibidem, p. 261).

³⁷ The confrontation of the I with its own emptiness, which defines modern boredom, was perhaps best summed up by Fernando Pessoa in the 1930s in *The Book of Disquiet*. See: F. Pessoa, *Księga niepokoju Bernarda Soaresa, pomocnika księgowego w Lizbonie*, trans. M. Lipszyc, Warszawa 2007, p. 294.

³⁸ In the first printing, in the second number of *Studia* (May 1936, pp. 11–13), this text is entitled “O sobie” (Of Myself). Schulz adopted the final version of the title when sending *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą* to be printed. Below I quote from the first printing.

– Schulz, at least from 1934 suffered from “chronic depression”³⁹, which he frequently called boredom. In a letter he confesses:

“Now I feel the terrible emptiness and nothingness of life. I can do nothing; I cannot pick up any book because it sickens and bores me terribly. . . . I do not recognize myself. I who was always full of issues, problems, always excited by the most varied ideas, now I trudge along empty, without a thought, and lethargic, and I have the impression that this is the end of everything. For months I haven’t written; I’m in no state to write even the shortest of articles. . . . I feel that everything is not just a consequence of my affairs of the heart, but that I have entered some new phase of life, the dominant note of which is a great and principled disappointment – the nothingness of life”⁴⁰.

Two months later, Schulz writes in a letter to the same correspondent:

“For four weeks I was in the country round Turka, almost completely on my own. I took no consolation from this loneliness and I rid myself of the illusion, an old one and rooted in me, that I am created for loneliness. Perhaps once I was; today emptiness and inertia breathe on me from the landscape; I can no longer feed myself at the table of the Lord. It is inelegant always to complain and not manly, but I must say that something has gone wrong in me. Do you still find anything in the world that is really beautiful and captivating; are you still capable of enthusiasm? It seems to me that the world has become boring”⁴¹.

It is time to return to “Samotność”. The narrator, let me recall, declares: “I’ve been sitting here for years and I’m bored” (11). Here, or in other words in his childhood room. “And so I live – on nothing in a dead room” (12). I, or in other words “the lonely inheritor”, “the pensioner”. In Schulz’s work the figure of the pensioner should be taken literally, as someone who has been thrown out of service, worn out, beyond the ambit of an active life⁴². The Schulzean pensioner, when he looks in the mirror, does not see himself *en face*, but always at an angle, from the side; his gaze and the gaze of his double never intersect with each other.

“When I move, he moves too, but half turned away, as if he did not know about me, as if he had gone beyond many mirrors and could not now return. Regret squeezes the heart when I see him so alien and indifferent”. (12)

The room in which the narrator sits and cannot see himself in the mirror is walled up, but the protagonist knows that he could get out of this room, if he could only imagine

³⁹ This is Schulz’s own definition from a letter to A. Pleśniewicz dated 29 November 1936. See: B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, op. cit., p. 115.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

⁴¹ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, op. cit., p. 86.

⁴² “Loneliness” is one of the poles of Schulz’s pensioner dyptych. The second is the story “Emeryt” (The Pensioner), in which the protagonist, a retired official, experiences a regression and enrolls in primary school, where he recovers his vigor and finds himself at the center of attention, after which he lets himself be blown away by the wind. I favor reading this final scene as a metaphor of ecstasy’s transporting the pensioner from the boredom of everyday existence.

an exit; “there is no room so walled up that it would not open to such trusted doors, if only there were strength enough to insinuate them into it” (13). The point is that neither Schulz’s narrator nor Schulz himself had such strength of insinuation. Schulz’s double, differently from Gombrowicz’s double, who reveals to the narrator of *Ferdynand* his own unbearable nakedness is a reflection of indifference, or undifferentiation, which seizes the person who looks in the mirror. The double “does not know” anything about his original, which can only mean that it is coming unstuck from the narrator, eluding a dialectical union in which there resides a chance of constructing a subject that is conscious of itself. Instead of the subject, we have – almost as in Kafka⁴³ – an immobile, “immortal mouse”, from which the narrator distances himself (“I am returning slowly to reflection” [12]), but not to the extent to establish himself in the position of the subject. From the mouse, he jumps to his double, which cannot look at him and turns his gaze away. The Schulzean narrator is, thus, suspended between two inhuman orders – between the beast to which he compares himself, and the reflection in the mirror that turns away from him. There is no space for him in a purely human order, because all ties with the world have been torn. He does not lose his reflection (as does Peter Schlemihl who lost his shadow⁴⁴), but he loses contact with it, which is proof of complete de-subjectification, in other words, the loss of speculative abilities. When such competences are extinguished, the world ceases to mean anything, because it can only mean for the subject. This moment of flaccid de-subjectification, characteristic for Schulz’s work, can be clearly seen in “Wiosna”, in which the youthful narrator is cruelly bored with his peers (“they were days for growth, days full of waiting, pale with boredom and impatience” [P 150]) up to the moment when one of the boys shows his friends a stamp album and “the flaming beauty of the world” is revealed (P 152). This moment of ecstatic fascination with stamps from foreign lands creates a breach in the closed world of boredom. Up to this moment, the world has gone on “without the definition” that one expected “from time” (P 150). Now when the world is bursting with different colors, with meanings sent from another world, boredom must relax its grip. Boredom and time are mutually exclusive⁴⁵, just as essence excludes existence, nakedness clothes, and loneliness a social life. Boredom excludes time as a horizon, against which everything takes on sense, but becomes unbearable when time replaces the world⁴⁶.

⁴³ I am thinking here of Kafka’s story “Josephine, die Sangerin, oder das Volk der Mause”.

⁴⁴ See: A. von Chamisso, “Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte”.

⁴⁵ In Witkacy’s *Insatiability* we read at a certain point: “Time once more stood still, but differently – and so differently – not like a compressor of a future leap, but simply from boredom” (S. I. Witkiewicz, *Nienasycenie* [in:] idem, *Dzieła*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1985, p. 74). All quotations from Witkacy’s writings come from this collected edition.

⁴⁶ As Cioran suggests, the most painful experience of childhood, which elsewhere he describes as an attack of boredom, consists in the fact that “at my expense time separated itself from being. There was no world any longer; there was only time” (E. Cioran, *Zeszyty 1957–1972*, op. cit., p. 581).

Essence versus existence

If I oppose here essence and existence, I do not do it without reason. Here is one of the most “essentialist” descriptions of essence that Schulz gives in his writing – the description of the town that “descended into essentiality”:

“Here nothing happens for free; nothing happens without deep sense and without premeditation. Here events are not an ephemeral phantom on the surface; here they have roots that go deep and reach the core of things. Here something is decided at every moment, in exemplary fashion and for all times. Here all matters happen only once and irrevocably. That is why there is such profound stress on and great seriousness and sadness at what happens here”. (P 304)

Schulz does not mention boredom here. He speaks of sadness that results from the fact that nothing is repeated here because it happens only once and irrevocably. Sadness thus understood is dialectically linked to boredom, in which nothing happens. Basically, boredom and sadness meet in that they both eliminate differences in the world. The world in which there is a lack of events, which is dominated by a total lack of differentiation, that is only the opposite side of a world in which there are no repetitions. Repetition only makes sense when it is constituted both by the difference between two occurrences and by their identity. The total identification of everything makes repetition impossible.

Thus, it is not strange that the opposition which, at base, defines the world of Schulz’s existence is also the opposition that defines the existential tensions in two other worlds – the world of Heidegger and the world of Cioran. For both, boredom, just as the sadness of the “autonomous microcosmos” (P 303) described above, is a basic experience, the essence of which is a matter of complete desolation, depletion, the de-differentiation of existence. The human being, for whom boredom is a basic state of mind, is not bored for this or that reason, is not bored by this or that, but finds him/herself in a timeless void, in which nothing has any meaning, including him/herself⁴⁷. For Heidegger and Cioran, the experience of boredom is of a basic character, because the bored human being, suspending relations with the external world, confronts exclusively him/herself with him/herself (like the protagonist of “Samotność” and Gombrowicz’s principal characters), and in this confrontation he/she uncovers his/her own nothingness. For Schulz, a person whom loneliness killed and who had to seek a warranty for his world in the existence of another person, the experience of his own nothingness is a thoroughly negative experience, beyond domestication. If Cioran is right (who often cites Heidegger) that

⁴⁷ Sadness and boredom are here two basic matching *modi* of essential emotional configuration, since the complete lack of meaning in the case of boredom (nothing makes any sense) is matched by the complete presence of meaning in the case of sadness (everything has meaning). The fullness of meaning and the absence of meaning are two sides of the same lack – the lack of difference. “Nothing is happening”, says boredom. “Everything has already happened”, answers sadness. Of course, one can add here melancholy, which would say: “Unfortunately that has not happened that should have happened”.

“between Boredom and Ecstasy our whole experience of time takes place”⁴⁸, “then Samoćność” certainly describes that non-ecstatic experience of time, in which the I cannot recognize itself, and thus the self-reflexive subject is never transformed.

“The mystery has gone to the dogs”

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’s first published novel⁴⁹, *Pożegnanie jesieni* (Farewell to Autumn) begins with the reflections of the protagonist Anatazy Bazakbal on the subject of the “transcendental lack of an exit from the situation, and the insolubility of the problems connected with it”, also of the “incommensurability of internal states and material facts”, and, further, to put it simply, the incoherence of life and thought. One of his first reflections is as follows:

“However at the very bottom of existence, at its very basis, there is some kind of hellish non-sense, and it is a boring non-sense. But this boredom is a result of modern times. Once it was all grand and powerful. Now, the mystery has gone to the dogs, and there are fewer and fewer people who know this. Until at the end a homogenous greyness covers everything for many, many years before the extinguishing of the sun”⁵⁰.

Bazakbal says what Witkacy himself thinks, the biggest pessimist in modern Polish literature. His reasoning is as follows⁵¹. Humanity, as a consequence of modernization and democracy, has reached the moment in which the metaphysical feeling of the “Mystery of Existence” has been irrevocably lost. Religion has lost all meaning; into its place has come art, but that had to surrender to the aggressive mechanization of life, lack of real ideas, and superficiality⁵². “Everything happened ostensibly – that was the essence of the epoch”⁵³. As a consequence of the general disappearance of metaphysical feelings, culture, deprived of any transcendental sanction, degenerates into perversity⁵⁴, which becomes the only accessible artistic experience. But even perversity is not able to veil the emptiness of basic experience that floods over reality. “Till his skin hurt from a feeling of unconquerable boredom, spreading over the whole world”⁵⁵. Modern people

⁴⁸ “Entre l’Ennui et l’Extase se déroule toute notre expérience du temps” – E. Cioran, *Syllogismes de l’amertume* [in:] *Oeuvres*, Paris 1995, p. 767.

⁴⁹ I write “published” because Witkacy’s first finished novel *622 upadki Bunga, czyli demoniczna kobieta*, written between 1910 and 1911, was published after the author’s death, that is in 1972.

⁵⁰ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Pożegnanie jesieni*, [in:] idem, *Dzieła*, vol. 3, p. 14.

⁵¹ Witkiewicz most fully set out his catastrophic vision in “Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikających stąd nieporozumieniach” (New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising from Them), written right after his return from Russia in 1918.

⁵² In *Matka* Leon says: “The fact is that humanity is degenerating more and more. Art is fallen, and let its end be an easy one – you can get on quite well without it. Religion is finished, philosophy consumes its own innards, and it also will end with suicide”. (S. I. Witkiewicz, *Matka*, [in:] idem, *Dzieła*, vol. 5, op. cit., p. 386).

⁵³ Idem, *Nienasycenie*, op. cit., p. 29.

⁵⁴ “Greatness is only in perversion”, says one of the characters in *Nienasycenie* (p. 65).

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

are condemned to “the sterile driving of time”⁵⁶, in which there is no longer any space either for art or for deeper reflection. “There was no intellectual atmosphere – a few monstrous clowns toadying to imbecilic crowds in the name of a festering levity and in the name of joke that from overuse became rancid long ago”⁵⁷.

In all modern European literature, there is no pessimistic vision of the crisis in culture equal to Witkiewicz’s. He not only diagnoses the fall of Western culture (many other writers and philosophers have done that), but he also tries to show that the social catastrophe the political effects of which can be observed in the aggressive growth of totalitarian regimes and have their roots in the metaphysical situation of the individual. As opposed to many critics, for whom the individual’s spiritual life becomes impossible because of the intervention of mass culture, Witkiewicz says that the crisis of culture is the consequence of a radical loss of ground on the part of the individual. In *Nienasycenie*, the protagonist Genezyp Kapen experiences this loss of ground thus:

“And he realized that he knew nothing about who he actually was, and not only about whom he would be. Before him gaped a hole, a bottomless hole, but narrow and comfortless. The world disappeared under his feet as if washed away. He hung leaning over this abyss”⁵⁸.

It is not the technically-shaped culture that rapes the innocent individual, as many critics have suggested⁵⁹, in defense of the individual against the mass, the city, and the machine, but rather the individual discovers in him/herself an indelible lack, which he/she subsequently recognizes, to his/her horror, in social reality. In this sense, Witkiewicz establishes a continuity between two dimensions of existence – individual experience and the social network of relations. From boredom discovered in oneself there is no escape in any social constructions, because the essence of social relations is founded on even greater boredom. To put it differently, Witkiewicz knows that the history of Western culture is a history of gradual decline, a vanishing of metaphysical feelings, but he also knows that the individual is defined not by fullness, but only by emptiness. When he declares that “everything is hollowed, eaten out, dry, ringing with emptiness, like a dried gourd”⁶⁰, that empty “that” means both dimensions of human existence – the inner and the outer life, both of which lose their sharp antithetical status⁶¹.

⁵⁶ Idem, *Jedynie wyjście*, [in:] *Dzieła*, vol. 3, p. 481.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 467.

⁵⁸ Idem, *Nienasycenie*, op. cit. p. 75.

⁵⁹ A good example of various views on the influence of technology in the modern world (although limited to Germany) is found in the volume *Kultura techniki*, ed. E. Schütz, Poznań 2001.

⁶⁰ S.l. Witkiewicz, *Nienasycenie*, op. cit., p. 441.

⁶¹ The best image of this ontological boredom is the board with the inscription “Boredom” that appears one does not know from where or by whose agency on the stage in Witkacy’s last play *Szewcy*. After a while it disappears and is replaced by a second board with the inscription “Even worse boredom” (Idem, *Szewcy*, [in:] *Dzieła*, vol. 5, p. 553, 554).

Without any tricks

Gombrowicz tried to find an exit from the confrontation with pure existence, Schulz dramatically searched for the opportunity to escape from the double that turned away from him, and Witkiewicz knew perfectly well that no liberating transition between *esse* and *socius* is possible. "Non-existence in general was and is something monstrous in its essence – social ideas and the fictions that come from them do not help, wishing to make of it an illusory paradise"⁶². In his analyses of boredom, Heidegger wished to show a deeper, more authentic level of existence than that imposed by a contemporary culture that had led it to the level of superficial journalism. Witkiewicz did not believe that such a deep level of authentic confrontation with oneself is possible to attain. He rather believed in it as a metaphysical postulate, but all the examples given by him (in novels and plays) prove the impossibility of standing face to face with oneself. For this reason, every protagonist in his texts must suffer defeat, the cause of which turns out to be despair. There is no escape from internal boredom, since on the outside all is subordinated to it. "The monstrous job extorting an identity for oneself in all infinity, without art, science, religion, and philosophy, and without any tricks"⁶³, which Genzyp Kapen attempts toward the end of his life, comes to nothing. At a certain moment, he feels how a great wave of boredom sweeps over him, but he knows perfectly well that it does not come from the world deprived of its metaphysics in which it is his lot to live, but that it was sent "perhaps from some metaphysical telephone exchange of that being"⁶⁴. Witkiewicz without any doubt is the ontologist of boredom and he knows very well that its destructive operation touches equally both the I and the whole world⁶⁵. It is, nevertheless, necessary to say what boredom is as the foundation of existence (individual and social). In *Nienasycenie*, describing the thoughts of the protagonist as to who is fiancée is, Witkiewicz writes:

"At the bottom of all that [in other words, life – M.P.M] there was a certain boredom, as at the bottom of all perfection. Perfection is a very suspicious thing and sometimes conceals the total negativity of nothingness"⁶⁶.

Sometimes when one is reading Witkacy's novels and dramas, one cannot resist the impression that the ontological hollowness, described in all dimensions, from

⁶² Idem, *Jedyne wyjście*, op. cit., p. 436.

⁶³ S.l. Witkiewicz, *Nienasycenie*, op. cit., p. 447.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 445.

⁶⁵ In my book *Polska literatura nowoczesna: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy* (pp. 339–368), I present a more extensive (and different) analysis of Witkiewicz's struggles with boredom, on a private and an intellectual-literary level. See also my essay "Facemaker" in *Witkacy: Workoholism*, Kraków 2009, in which I demonstrate that one possible escape from boredom (although in the final analysis it is inadequate) is an ostentatious distortion of one's own face and the adoption in life of the role of the dissatisfied jester.

⁶⁶ S.l. Witkiewicz, *Nienasycenie*, op. cit., p. 423.

an individual feeling of emptiness to the perception of a lack of meaning in the world⁶⁷, is identical with the nothingness that does not constitute a lack, but rather an autonomous entity. In this sense, Witkacy is a radical (because ontological) nihilist. Boredom identified with emptiness defines the manner of the world's existence, and is not only a psychological feeling on the part of the protagonist or a lack of occupation, a liberation from which might be art, religion, or politics. Understood ontologically, boredom makes it impossible to get beyond oneself, beyond the immediately experienced I, in the direction of the subject, and, thus too, towards the social world. It appears that from boredom understood thusly there is no way to escape other than to fall into depression (Schulz) or to take one's life (Witkacy). Gombrowicz's post-war output, however, shows that there is a completely other, more dialectic solution that is possible, one which, however, does not belong to this tale.



The cover of the Italian edition of the novel *Nienasycenie* (Bari 1970)

⁶⁷ "The world is a desert without meaning", declares Edgar, the protagonist of one of Witkacy's plays. See: Idem, *Kurka wodna* [in:] idem, *Dzieła*, vol. 5, op. cit., p. 17.