

Three Versions of Modernity: Witkacy, Schulz, Gombrowicz

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Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, known as Witkacy (1885–1939), Bruno Schulz (1892–1942), and Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969) were all born during the time of the Partition of Poland: Witkacy and Gombrowicz in the Russian Partition, and Schulz in the Austro-Hungarian one. The Polish literature with which they came in contact in childhood and youth still had as its chief function to provide Poles with uplift and to waken hope that independence would be returned to the fatherland. In truth, no one knew how this was supposed to happen (Poland was divided among the three greatest military powers in Europe), but a belief in the recovery of self-determination was somehow maintained in Polish lands. But in 1918, when those dreams came true, Polish literature was not prepared. It was necessary to invent it anew, to find new subjects that would be suitable for a society entering into independence (a short-lived one, unfortunately, only lasting twenty years), but also to face up to problems that modernity had brought to the whole world. The three writers mentioned above, at first less appreciated than those who were engaged in social matters and who were nationalist writers, such as Andrzej Strug, Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, Zofia Nałkowska, and Maria Dąbrowska, won recognition after the Second World War and became Polish “classics of modernity”. This does not alter the fact that each of them saw modernity differently, and, as a result, solved the problems of literary form differently from his colleagues. At the start of the 1960s, Gombrowicz defined the difference among them – the “three musketeers” of modern Polish literature.

“But despite everything we were a trio and a fairly clear one. Witkiewicz: the deliberate affirmation of “pure form” through revenge, and also in order to fulfill tragic destinies, the despairing madman. Schulz: lost in form, the drowned madman. Me: the desire to break through via form to my “I” and to reality, the madman in revolt”¹.

So let us ask at the outset why Witkacy was despairing. He was the exceptionally gifted and multi-sided son of famous painter and art critic from the period of *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland), Stanisław Witkiewicz. Amongst his friends was Bronisław Malinowski,

¹ W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1961–1969*, Wyd. Literackie, Kraków 1997, p. 17.

later a famous ethnologist (who took him as a graphic artist and photographer on a scientific expedition to Asia and Australia). They also included: Karol Szymanowski, the most outstanding Polish composer of his day; Leon Chwistek, a fine painter, writer, and logician; and Tadeusz Miciński, an original writer, poet, and dramaturge. Witkacy was the lover of the actress and artists' muse Irena Solska; he was surrounded from his early youth by outstanding people, creative and attractive.

Witkacy himself, from his earliest years, wrote dramas, painted, dabbled in photography. Later he took up artistic criticism, novel writing, and finally philosophy. But by historical-philosophical conviction he was a catastrophist, which was a result of his lack of belief in the ability of human beings, in the long run, to develop in themselves the ability to achieve "metaphysical survival" – especially, a philosophical intuition that would allow them to perceive the world's strangeness, but above all that humans constitute a hierarchy of objects and living beings, composed of separable parts that fit together into a whole by force of a somewhat mysterious "unity in diversity". That "unity in diversity", the mind distinguishes, not thinking in functional categories or in ones that are in any way utilitarian, but in *stricte* philosophical ones, as objects constituted in the consciousness of individual units, recalling somewhat Leibniz's monads.

In Witkiewicz's view, the ability to see reality in this way – along with all its exceptionality – once belonged only to outstanding persons: priests, saints, political leaders. With the rise of democracy after the Renaissance and the spread of education, more and more people were supposed to aspire to the ability to attain "metaphysical experience", but at the same time that experience became increasingly shallow. In this situation, people reached for support to other fields of the human spirit, which might help them toward an initiation in the metaphysical reception of the world: to religion, to philosophy, and to art. Religion, however, in the contemporary world, turned into a "discussion group", closer to sociology than to metaphysics. Philosophy turned away from creating great syntheses and systems, sticking to dealing with casual problems (hence the popularity of pragmatism and utilitarianism). Art, too, became lost in an uncontrolled multiplication of artistic movements and forms. So Witkacy recognized that a human culture that was based on solid metaphysical foundations was coming to an end, and in its place one should expect a new quasi-culture, democratic in spirit, but philosophically valueless, designed for a society of "satiated cattle". It is interesting that Witkacy did not protest against such change, acknowledging that this change was owed to the lower social strata, who for centuries had been oppressed and exploited. It was just that he did not want to take part in this spiritual degeneration. When he took a close look at the October Revolution in Russia, he recognized in it symptoms of the changes he expected. Two decades later,

on 18 September 1939, on hearing the news that the Red Army, following the example of Hitler's forces, had crossed into Polish territory, he recognized that what he had expected had, indeed, come to pass. Nothing remained for him but to commit suicide. In this dramatic act, there was something deeper than the suicides that frequently occur in the face of defeat. There was in it a conscious decision of a historical-philosophical nature, a vigorous rejection of totalitarian order and of the culture connected with it, which, Witkacy conjectured, would conquer the entire globe.

But before it came to those tragic outcomes, Witkacy created an original esthetic theory based on the concept of "pure form", which in his understanding had nothing in common with form as understood by classicists. Its "purity" was defined rather by negation, and thus it did not, as a matter of principle, serve either *mimesis* or the expression of any views or emotions. It was not to express philosophical positions or scientific ones. Nor did it fulfill any persuasive functions. Its only task was to create a certain configuration of elements that were subject to a completely disinterested evaluation from the esthetic point of view. The ideal work of "pure form" would, thus, be a musical work (as long as no illustrative function was imposed on it). These criteria would also be fulfilled by a painting (best of all, an abstract one), and, to some degree, a theater performance. However, the novel would not fulfill them, being according to Witkacy a "Basket", in which the author could place any content he/she liked dressed out in any form of expression. So the author of the concept of "pure form" himself started out with painting and drama. In painting, he was closer to expressionism with a certain tincture of surrealism. In this admixture the influence could be seen of the new directions in art that Witkacy had seen during his visit to Paris, the kind of visit that was obligatory at that time for all young artists. In Poland, Witkacy allied himself to the group of *Formiści* (Formists), who drew on the works of Expressionists and Cubists. After some time, however, he began to treat his painting commercially, opening his so-called Portrait Firm (*Firma Portretowa*), in which for moderate fees he painted the portraits of acquaintances and clients from the city. Sometimes the portraits were realist, sometimes surrealistically deformed; that, however, is not very important in the context of "pure form". Witkacy had earlier transferred his main creative effort to the drama.

During his life, Witkacy wrote around thirty dramas, of which around twenty have survived, wholly or in extracts. Only a few of them were performed on stage during the author's life. They were too far from what was performed in theaters in Poland in those years. Witkacy most frequently placed the action of his dramas in fictional states, governed by fantastic dictators, or in imaginary countries, which sometimes had features in common with Poland, where there were artists of genius afflicted by a creative crisis,

or visionaries, discoverers with prescriptions for illnesses that are laying waste mankind, but with which they arrive – as usual – too late.

With a rather limited repertoire of figures and situations, Witkacy created a series of original dramas, showing humanity in a state of general crisis – political, religious, ideological, esthetic. In the plays, ideas fall apart and are compromised, great persons go mad, and artists become unproductive. In the background, however, implacable socio-political processes take place, as a result of which in the drama's finale there often appears a team of uniformly dressed officials of some new order, who take power and condemn the members of the previous dispensation to non-existence (death, prison). At this moment, the play must stop; nothing more – among things that make sense – can occur.

The difficulty in reading Witkacy's plays comes from the fact that they are realistic on the surface – as far as they illustrate Witkacy's catastrophic views on the future history of mankind. However, if we read them realistically and go too far with this, we fall into a trap, for figures and conflicts are constructed according to principles of "pure form", and, thus, it is impossible to treat them according to mimetic principles, that is to see in them a projection of ordinary people – of flesh and blood – in their normal, psychological, or sociological entanglements. The best proof of this is the scene in which the eponymous heroine of *Kurka wodna* (The Water Hen) falls dead from a bullet from a revolver, after which she comes fully alive again and proceeds to take part in the action that follows. Leon, the protagonist of the play entitled *Matka* (Mother) economically exploits his mother who is losing her eyesight over her knitting (her one source of income); later he torments her morally when he becomes engaged to a lady of easy virtue; finally he becomes involved in passing military secrets to foreign intelligence. There is nothing easier in this situation than to become involved in a realist reading and sympathize with the unfortunate woman who has given birth to a "monster". But in a reading that accords with the principles of "pure form", this kind of interpretation makes no sense: one can see that Witkacy needs this and no other image of tensions among his characters, in order to attain the artistic effect of "world-dream" that he desires. Who knows, in any case, whether the deadly knitting does not only serve to obtain a "local color" phenomenon (brightly colored yarn against the background of a black and white stage setting). In the play's finale, in any case, all this will be questioned as unreal.

In Witkacy's theater the element of parody and make-believe is unusually strong. For example, the play *W matym dworku* (In the little manor house) is a parody of Tadeusz Ritter's drama of manners, but in Witkiewicz's play the central figure is the ghost of Anasztaza, the dead wife of the landowner, Dyżapanazy Nibek, proprietor of the house in the title. She interferes constantly in the business of the living, and emotionally manipulates

men, revealing their hidden erotic affairs. In the end, however, she returns to the other world, taking her two daughters with her.

Witkacy wrote his first novel early in his life, between 1910 and 1911, but it remained for many years in typescript, and was first published only in 1972. The delay was perhaps caused by the fact that *622 upadki Bunga* (The 622 Falls of Bung) was a novel with an unambiguous personal key; it depicts the intellectual outstanding and creative milieu that Witkacy knew from the years he spent in Zakopane, the group of his closest friends (which I mentioned above). It also described the author's affair, as a young boy, with the great actress Irena Solska, who was older than he. Thereafter Solska became the prototype of all the experienced women (frequently occurring in Witkacy's works) who seduce men younger than themselves. In his second novel, printed in 1927, *Pożegnanie jesieni* (Farewell to Autumn), Witkacy also refers to the atmosphere of Kraków and Zakopane at the beginning of the twentieth century. As in all Witkacy's novels, its hero is a young man, entering life, who goes through numerous initiations: through marriage, perverse homosexual and heterosexual erotic experience, drugs, murder, intellectual reflections on the future of the world, Hindu mysticism, and finally in a political system that vividly recalls communism in its Soviet version. At the same time, almost all Witkacy's novels (except the first) show a world consistently tending toward the victory of totalitarianism and toward the extinction of culture. Thus, there is a peculiar contradiction here: the protagonist's acquisitive entry into the world and life combined with the decline of that world produce a feeling of the deep absurdity of existence, for which there is no remedy, since the fate of civilization has, in fact, been determined already. In this – absurd – way, Anasztazy Bazakbal, the protagonist of *Pożegnanie jesieni*, dies, shot by border guards at the moment when he comes down from the mountains, bringing, so it seems to him, the valuable idea that will redeem humanity. Such redemptive ideas come to many of the protagonists of Witkacy's plays and novels; however, one cannot see how they could in any way improve the lot of humanity, and the writer often personally unmask them as arrant nonsense.

Witkiewicz's last completed novel, *Nienasycenie* (Insatiability), was published in 1930 and is a further description of a young protagonist's entry into life. In the political background, China has completed the process of subjugating Europe. The only opposition to this is offered by a tiny Poland under her national leader Kocmotuchowicz, who recalls the charismatic figure of the Polish leader Józef Piłsudski. Kocmotuchowicz promises his fellow countrymen that the real heroism of his people will stand against the Chinese army. At the last moment, however, Kocmotuchowicz surrenders, denying the patriotic legend. More than twenty years later, in the essay *Zniewolony umysł* (The Captive Mind),

Czesław Miłosz used the motif of the “Murti Bing pill” to analyze the phenomenon of the intellectual capitulation of people of culture in the face of the (primitive) slogans of communist ideology. Those who take the pill experience a strange state of blessedness, acquiescence in their situation and, most importantly, in the logical arguments of the followers of a Chinese sage. One can see that very early on Witkacy recognized the danger threatening Europe’s dying culture. The endless ideological discussions of the characters in *Pożegnanie jesieni* has led them, at last, into the arms of the creator of a quasi-communist system of bureaucratized dictatorship, those of Sajetan Tempe, the enemy of all individualism. In *Nienasycenie* the power destroying the traditional contents and living forces of culture comes from without, from Asia. However, equally the illness that consumes that culture and leads to a collective capitulation before the steamroller of the new order, which destroys all creative difference, is born within it.

In Witkacy’s final, uncompleted novel, *Jedynе wyjście* (The Only Way Out), the characters keep on discussing, as if they did not notice that, in the meantime, there has been a political upheaval, and along with it the final collapse of culture. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Witkacy did not finish this book, which – like *622 upadki Bunga* – appeared after his death. Instead he finished and published the pamphlet *Niemyte dusze* (Unwashed Souls), which, as it were in the face of the end of culture, offered its readers a few practical pieces of advice and recommendations relating to physical and psychological hygiene in one’s social dealings. It even contains a recipe for an anti-dandruff fluid. Well, since we are condemned to exist in an undifferentiated human mass, let us at least save ourselves from the most elementary inconveniences connected with this. This kind of struggle for air, conducted among his own kind of people, was still conceivable to Witkacy; he was unable to imagine the extinction of the remains of freedom at the hands of Soviet or Nazi power.

Witkacy had to wait almost two decades for his posthumous triumph. In the Stalinist system, the publication of his books was impossible; it was only after 1956 that Witkacy’s dramas at first, and then later his novels and critical writings began their unusual career. Productions of his plays coincided with the world-wide success of the “theater of the absurd”, among the precursors of which Martin Esslin placed him. Witkacy belonged to those Modernists who reacted to the vagaries of the contemporary with fear and pessimism about the future. As a prophet of coming times, Witkacy was, thus, a doomsayer, although, indeed, his previsions were partly fulfilled in the shape of an invasion of low-class mercenaries – imitative mass culture. Post-war Polish culture did not follow Witkacy’s catastrophic themes: after the empires of Stalin and Hitler, Witkacy’s “catastrophe” seemed wholly tolerable. Attention was, however, paid to the innovative

artistic form of his work. They depart far from the models of the bourgeois theater of the nineteenth century, but fitted in well with the ideas behind the great theatrical reform of the early twentieth century, the Russian avant-garde theater of the same period, Brechtian theater, and later – with some reservations – with the dramaturgy of the absurd. From the second half of the 1950s, his plays became a never-weakening source of inspiration for several generations of directors, who interpreted them on stages in Poland and the world. Surprisingly there also developed “Witkaciology” as a field of knowledge. Interestingly, the first monograph on Witkacy’s works was written by an American, Daniel Gerould.

As a prophet in social-political matters, Witkacy thus did not see any perspectives worth attention before humanity. He repeated infinitely the same scene in which a team of functionaries of the new order step into the arena of history, after which nothing is worth presenting in the theater. This is the real “end of history”, as Fukuyama put it, but one seen in dark colors. As an artist, Wikacy – paradoxically – was ahead of his time, and thus showed himself to be an “optimist”, at least in the sense that he wrote for future audiences and readers, ones that unexpectedly emerged after the cataclysms of war and the collapse of Stalinism. That reflexive, as it were, optimism of the author, who cannot imagine that he/she is writing for no one, turned out to be more accurate than historio-philosophical prophesies.

If Witkacy was a tall, handsome *bon vivant*, living at the center of Polish intellectual and artistic life, Bruno Schulz is the very opposite. Shy and inconspicuous in posture, he lived his whole life in the small Galician town of Drohobycz, some hundred kilometers to the south of Lwów. He was the son of a Jewish dealer in textiles, who towards the end of his life fell into financial difficulties. Bruno obtained help from a fairly wealthy brother, but after the brother’s death he had to maintain his mother and sister himself out of the miserable salary of a teacher of drawing and handicrafts in local high schools. “A drowned madman”, and that brought about by his “losing himself in form” – what was Gombrowicz thinking about when he described him thus? At the same time, it is worth remembering that in that same text from the *Diary*, Gombrowicz recognizes Schulz as a great artist of the word, equal to the greatest of his contemporaries, although on the subject of Schulz’s literary inheritance, Gombrowicz expresses himself in a fairly enigmatic fashion. Schulz is a difficult writer, and it has taken critics many years to get to the deepest strata of his work. Professionally, he was involved in painting and drawing, not in writing, and he made his debut as an author when he was forty-one, under the influence of his close friend, the writer Debora Vogel, who persuaded him to develop as literature the poetic letters he had written. These stories made up the volume entitled

Sklepy cynamonowe (Cinnamon Shops – published in English as *The Street of Crocodiles*), published in 1933. Four years later a second volume of stories was published entitled *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hour-Glass). Nine years later, on 19 November 1942, Schulz was shot dead on the streets of Drohobycz by a Gestapo officer.

As a painter and drawer, Schulz remained within a Jewish circle of artists from Lwów and its surrounding area. His visual works are principally a hymn to a femininity that is seen idolatrously and masochistically. As a writer, he immediately made a mark in the Warsaw literary world, and from the start was widely seen as a master of poetic language. The themes of his stories are considerably more complex: on the surface they seem to aim to describe his family home and its oddities, but at the same time, too, the exceptional creative passion of the protagonist's father, the old Jakub. In reality, Schulz is not so much describing his native Drohobycz, but rather constructing a universal, cosmic myth.

In Schulz's work, the location of action in time and space plays a key role. Here we have a small town, which basically the narrator does not leave, sometimes only recalling his journeys, usually not very far from the town. But the structure of this little town, surrounded by hills and covered with the sheet of the heavens, is not adventitious: it has its center and its peripheries, the center being staid, prosperous, and clearly defined, while the peripheries are tawdry, inclined to seduce and deceive their clients, to lead them into sin, without offering any fulfillment. This is clearly described in "Ulica Krokodyli" (The Street of Crocodiles), but one must add something here. Schulz's small town is not just a closed space with a defined structure, imitating the structure of the world, but also a model of human psychology with its sphere of *ratio* and the official at the center, and its sphere of impulse, of the non-official, and of what is hidden from others, haunted by loose women, and where one can buy the prints of secret societies, the contents of which are full of corruption and moral provocation. All this fits in with the ideas of Freudian psychoanalysis, which does not only emphasize the role of the sphere of impulse in the human psyche, but also places its symbolic reflection in the world of things, filling either the real world or the world of dreams. In Schulz's work, this world of dreams is very extensive – both when the protagonist sleeps and when he is awake – and further, it permeates the real world, attaining its own structure and symbolic meanings. That is why it is possible to "visit" city and house, simultaneously getting to know human psychology and all its nooks and crannies – as can be clearly seen in the description of Adela's dream in the story "Edzio". "The passages of Drohobycz" – just like Benjamin's Paris "passages" – are, on one hand, a work of culture, and, on the other, a creation of human imagination. The work of culture (with an admixture

of nature) is formed, in Schulz, by the stable space of the city, the domain of order, and also the place in which there can be seen particularly clearly the opposition of open and closed space. This latter is depicted as a safe refuge protected by walls, something that the little town, too, can become – surrounded, as it is, by gentle hills, separated from a world that threatens it.

In Schulz's work there is a very clear division into a waking and a sleeping world, which is presented through the opposition of day space and night space. The former is incomparably better ordered; frequently one can verify its structure by looking at the real space of Drohobycz. This is the case in the story "Sierpień" (August), in which the route that the protagonist and his mother take on an afternoon walk can – at least in its opening part – be easily traced on a map of the town. It is different with the space of sleep and dream, which takes the shape of a labyrinth of confused paths. The material of this labyrinth is varied: you can get lost among thoughts, labyrinths may be what is inside human beings, the tangle of rooms in a home, tenement houses near the marketplace, the streets of the little town, paths in the park, the tangle of the undergrowth, the space under the roots of trees, where narrations unfold, the air of a summer night, the tale's plot. . . . The motif of the labyrinth is necessary for Schulz as a metaphor speaking of the nature of the world, the world understood now as order, now as an enigmatic space for lost wanderings. At times the writer surrounds himself with the walls of some protective refuge; at others he looks for adventure in open space. In this way Schulz's little town becomes a harmonious arrangement of settings distinguished particularly with regard to the protagonist's emotions and frame of mind.

Often in Schulz's work the idea emerges of a discrete space, marked with special features. This is the case in the story "Republika marzeń" (Republic of Dreams), in which this role is played, first, by the small town – the ideal Drohobycz – and later by the refuge dreamed up by the boys, and finally by the building of Błękitnooki, the visionary. In all similar cases, Schulz tries to create ad hoc protected places, in which he would feel safe. Apparently he had the habit, he felt uncertain, of stealthily drawing for himself on a scrap of paper a small house, a sign symbolizing friendly space. His whole literary output is an attempt to sketch this kind of "home".

Let us now consider Schulz's vision of time. The "clock" constructed by this writer, which measures out different times, is perhaps the most consistent and considered part of his world. If one misses this, one inevitably falls into interpretative difficulties, because one does not understand what is absolutely basic to Schulz's work. All human stories, all general "happening", can be repeated; they are placed in some kind of temporal cycle, most frequently an annual one. The idea of this cycle comes from

mythology, and for certain from Nietzsche too. The cyclic process described, most importantly, is not only multi-figural (cycles are astronomical, natural, ritual, custom-centered, business-based, and so on), but also multi-dimensional (cycles have the dimension of a day, a year, a human life, a historical epoch).

The model for the internal organization of the cycle seems to be the configuration of the seasons of the year, connected closely with the astronomical year and the symbolism of the zodiac. Thus, the cycle is four-fold and contains phases of youthful growth, revolt and expansion, maturity and sedateness, decline and aging, and finally – which in Schulz's work is the most original – death. A person goes through all these stages once in his/her life, but also frequently – in specific years. In connection with this, we experience, as if it were frequently, the whole of our existence in *précis*, attempting to investigate its meaning, in the course of which several phases of annual cycles harmonize sometimes more strongly – through interference – with the phases of our life to which they correspond. In this way, little Józef in the story "Wiosna" (Spring) experiences spring, "which was more real, more dazzling and colorful than other springs" – because this season of the year overlaps with his own personal "spring of life", a great outburst of youth, love, and romantic revolt against the order of the world.

This same mechanism allows the writer "to pass through death", just as he repeatedly passes through the night-sleep or winter phase in his life. That is why in the stories Józef's father does not die once and for all: not even in Dr Gotard's sanatorium, in which he lives as it were thanks to his son's memory; not even in "Ostatnia ucieczka ojca" (Father's Last Escape), in which, changed into a strange shellfish and cooked, he untiringly escapes the ultimate end. To tame death is one of the main tasks of Schulz's writing, as is the taming of defeat: at the end of the volume *Sklepy cynamonowe*, the father returns broken after failed attempts to hold back the invasion of chaos and sin into his world, but at the same time in his home, at dawn, the daily bustle starts up again. The image of Adela grinding coffee and the cat washing itself in the sun is one of the most suggestive hymns in praise of continuing existence and order.

However, before death becomes a problem for us, we have to enter life, which Schulz describes as a three-fold process: first, in his writing, there is a confrontation with the Book, in other words, with the mythical "summation" containing all the wisdom of the world and, at the same time, a divine message for humanity. This Book is present for us only as a hazy idea of something that appeared, unassimilated, in the dawn of life, and later vanished. The first Book of all, which appears in childhood memories, is the great folio, containing colorful illustrations (or stickers) that lies on the father's desk and is then completely destroyed. In describing it, Józef makes allusions to the Zofar,

the main, mystic work of the Kabala. Thus he stresses not just its cognitive function, but also its performative one. In later stages of his life, the Book appears only in extracts, in fragments, in ephemeral texts that only suggest their connection with the idea of the Book, referring to what are now the most important contents of the imagination of the Schulzean protagonist. The "scraps of paper" found in the kitchen, containing newspaper announcements, become important, because they allude to the cloudy and veiled erotic drives of the growing boy. Further, the Rudolf's stamp collector shows him the world in all its breadth and exoticism, referring to the acquisitive romanticism of youth.

Thus the Book falls apart and turns into something that is very old indeed and rooted in humanity's prehistory, in particular into mythic stories, the models for which rest, in "Wiosna", under the roots of the trees in the park. Schulz exploits the material in them to construct his own tales that impose meaning on the world's events. In this way there arises the story of two brothers, one of whom sits on the imperial throne, while the other is an incurable dreamer, driven off by fickle fate to Mexico. And immediately after this comes the story of Bianca, the niece of the imperial brother, wronged by dynastic intrigues. The collection of various "people-tales" is also an assemblage of figures from the panopticum that Józef mobilizes for his anti-imperial revolution. It is interesting that Schulz's protagonist lives in a little town in which, as it were, nothing happens. That is why in Schulz's stories, description, as has been frequently pointed out, dominates over narrative. The latter, thus, enters Schulz's world from outside, from "culture's underground", in which the models of stories hide, or from history that describes for us characters' actions. The reality of the small town feeds on this, wishing to snatch for itself a little fame and a fragment of collective memory. However, for everyday use, there remain for it rather unheroic and decidedly local tales, which can do no more than strenuously aspire to match those high models.

The most interesting aspect of the history presented in "Wiosna" is, however, something else: in his revolt against the emire's ultraconservative spirit, the protagonist seeks an ally in God, in whom he uncovers the Great Heresiarch, the patron of spring and the whole mystery of nature's rebirth and the new generations of human beings. To his amazement, the protagonist notices that at the end of the history he has recounted he no longer has God on his side, and thus must capitulate. Why? The one explanation is that summer has come and the springtime cult of revolution has been replaced by respect for what exists and has reached maturity. This stable order of the world is better served by the emperor and his conservatism, and so he now enjoys divine protection. God is not biased, or rather He is biased, but in relation to time, for He has to look after

the entirety of His world. Indeed, He invented it as a cyclical one, so eternally changing, but eternally returning to its earlier states.

Going deeper into language, having passed through the level of the Book and the story, we find ourselves at the Word. As every reader of *"Mityzacja rzeczywistości"* (The Mythicization of Reality), Schulz imagined the beginnings of the world, as is similar in the prolog to the Gospel of St John, as act in which the divine demiurge pronounces the original Word, which is simultaneously the universal Being, Sign, and Performative. This first, undifferentiated breaks up into meaningful fragments, is transformed into a multiplicity of words and languages, but in it remains the memory of earlier unity, a sort of super-connectivity, best realized in poetry in the figure of metaphor. Metaphor is something that the reader immediately sees in Schulz's texts: it is rich, piled up multi-laterally and multi-figured, but also repeatable and even predictable. What returns in Schulz's metaphors is, above all, the function of juxtaposing and comparing whole spheres of reality. Sometimes such juxtapositions extend in Schulz's work over many chapters. Metaphor is a special binding agent, which serves to connect afresh those elements or fields that have fallen apart in the world as a result of the breaking of the original Word. So in Schulz's conception we are dealing with a reality that could not exist without poetry. Indeed, poetry constitutes its constructional principle and combines individual elements into a whole – every time a different one, for the individual worlds of Schulz's stories are like poems; they have their individual features, but at the same time they are all marked with a certain common style.

It is not surprising that in a world permeated by the poetic principle, the most important, indeed absolutely essential, ability, which a person must possess, is the ability to create poetry. This does not mean "writing poems". The father-magus, the father-poet is not at all a rhymer, but rather is a dreamer into whose head the most varied experiments enter, experiments in the field of linking different primary bodies, putting together elements that no one has hitherto shaped into a whole. In this way – out of a crossing of species – there appear weird birds, the rearing of which occupies old Jakub; that is how the experiments with electricity go in *"Kometa"* (The Comet), along with the transformation of Uncle Edward into a door bell; *"Traktat o manekinach"* (A Tract on Mannequins) is similarly conceived – a lecture encrusted with peculiar *exempla* on the similarities and differences between divine and human demiurgy. Even the father's transformations into a condor, a cockroach, a fly, a strange shellfish – these are attempts to go beyond his own identity, to look for the similarities of things that are in principle dissimilar and separate. In *"Kometa"* this pursuit attains a quasi-philosophical explanation in the father's monologues.

"*Panta rei* – he called out and indicated with a movement of his hand the circulation of substance. From long ago he had desired to mobilize the occult forces circulating within substance, to make its stiffness fluid, to pave its way to omni-pervasiveness, to transfusion, to omni-circulation, the only circulation that was appropriate to its nature – *Principium individuationis* bah humbug! – he said and expressed thus his limitless contempt for that dominant human principle"².

As one can see, the father refers to philosophical terms, but it is hard to treat these references completely seriously – perhaps particularly because he is a poet both in philosophy and in scientific experiments. But because he is expressing himself in a literary text, his ideas can be fulfilled in the shape of peculiar metamorphoses of the material, for which the creative imagination of the author bears responsibility. In any case, the direction of these metaphors is defined: they invariably lead to the revelation of the unity of the material world, which is invariably governed by the same set of general principles.

But who is this universal scholar, who has discovered and revealed the unity of the material? He is a provincial original, a homely amateur researcher, and a poet of a suspect cut. Everything he says is, therefore, suspect to a similar degree: his "ontological poetry" could equally well be valueless doggerel, especially since we might suspect that at least several of the father's experiments originate in an erotic drive and were (unsuccessful) attempts to seduce the servant Adela and two seamstresses. In Schulz's work, the erotic functions in a specific way: it is everywhere, but masked and hidden, that is it pretends to be something other than it is in fact. So it may be that the erotic is the true essence of poetry as Schulz understands it. It is a force that unites all existence, leading by its very nature to a synthesis of primary units. Indeed, it is the same with religion and metaphysics: for Schulz, God is a force that unites everything and everybody with-in repeating cycles. As I have suggested above, being identified with different aspects of being in successive seasons of the year, God may seem to be a force of differentiation, but, in fact, is the opposite: He supports all forms of existence, revolutionary mutability and stable conservatism, anarchy and authority. God is in His being the guarantor of all that in the form of unfinished repetitions creates the unity of the world.

According to some scholars, Schulz was an atheist; others have claimed the opposite – that Schulz's atheism is inconceivable. I think we do not have to resolve this dispute. In the peripheral universe of the writer from Drohobycz, everything that determined his value appeared suspect or followed by a question mark. It was as if at the edges of the world reality had lost its definite character, all greatness had been stripped from authority, and holiness had lost its sanctity. But simultaneously, the world looked at from

² B. Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejsów i listów*. Ed. J. Jarzębski. Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław-Kraków 1998, p. 356.

there was seen as if in a truncated perspective. That is why it is always looked at from the position of some Whole; an attempt is made to understand it as a Whole and to provide it with a holistic meaning. The artists, the Jewish painters, Schulz's kin from the great out-of-the-way locality that was the former Polish eastern borderlands, often had great ambitions, and thence – from Luts'k, Kolomya, Nowogródek and Vitebsk – they went to Paris to conquer it and attain the heights of world success. Only a few pulled it off, but in the end they were not as few as one might think: the names of Chagall, Soutine, El Lissitzky, and Sonia Delaunay now belong in the pantheon of the most outstanding artists of the first half of the twentieth century. In his lifetime, Schulz did not succeed in conquering Paris; it was only many years after his death that his drawings were presented as part of the exhibition entitled *Présences Polonaises* in the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1983.

When he formulates his ideas in the language of literature, Schulz thinks of the world in more general terms and by means of more universal categories than in the field of painting. But his artistic and philosophical visions always contain a peculiar and self-contradictory mixture of a universal view, encompassing the Whole, and of fragmentation. Schulz's works are, on one hand, drawn in the direction of presenting the most general subjects, but, on the other hand, they are frequently incomplete, told as it were only in part, suspended in the middle in ironic implication. These implications are not a defect: the provincial demiurge-philosopher is condemned to them because of his uncertain condition as a creator far removed from the world centers of art and science, deprived of access to the sources of knowledge, and yet at the same time almost ridiculously ambitious and tied up – as all are – in his desire – for success, for social position, for women. The situation of such a parochial prophet and demiurge is an ironic one, because all he can afford is his own intellectual *bricolage*. In the character of the father, Schulz shows such a figure – with a mixture of admiration, sensitiveness, and ineluctable irony. In any case, he certainly does present himself in a more favorable light. In the presentation of the way in which the father thinks (and also his son Józef) one cannot see the outlines of any concrete philosophy, only signals of such (very varied) borrowings that Schulz scatters throughout his stories. It would certainly be possible to assemble a catalog of his philosophical tastes and likings (Nietzsche would certainly play an important role here), but from that to a definite system is a long road. The paradigm through which he constructs and interprets the signs that fill his private reality, is genuine and seriously constructed, because it does not constitute some stray, detached “conception”, but the model of a meaningful and accommodating world, in which the writer would like to live, which has been received and reconstructed via deep personal

experience. Schulz – “drowned in form”? Yes, but it is of this form that his sanctuary was woven, a sanctuary that protected him against a crisis of values and an erosion of basic concepts (both in the hard sciences and in the humanities).

Witold Gombrowicz – the youngest of these three writers – was born in 1904 in the rural manor in central Poland that belonged to his parents. His mother’s fairly prosperous family came from that part of the country; Gombrowicz’s father came from Lithuania after the failure of the 1864 Uprising against the Russian occupiers. His grandfather was also involved in the 1864 Uprising, which led to financially ruinous sanctions from the Tsarist government. As a result the rich Gombrowicz landowning family, of some consequence in Lithuania, lost the fortunes located there and settled in the region of Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski and Opatów. They moved to Warsaw in 1911. Throughout his life, Gombrowicz felt he was a person living “between”: between gentry and aristocracy, country and city, conservative circles and revolutionary avant garde. Besides that, as boy he was an outsider and oddity, mocked by his more outgoing elder brothers.

These problems with shaping his own identity, which deeply affected the young boy, and with his mode of existence in his own environment became – as is often the case – the beginnings of his career as a writer. Legal studies at the University of Warsaw did not lead to any settlement of existential matters, and a stay of several months in Paris, connected with a journey to the south of France finally determined the choice of a literary career. His first stories, published in 1933, were collectively entitled *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (Diary from the Time of Puberty). Their protagonists wrestled with the duress exerted on them by various institutions (such as, family, school, nation, professional environment) concerned to adapt a young person to social life, and also attempting to control his erotic life. Gombrowicz discovered that what troubled him most is the pressure of form (in other words, of group custom, but also of various socially confirmed means of self-expression, formulating and comprehending the world) on the individual’s particularity. Such form also functions, he thought, in every contact of two or more people, because it is always connected with a struggle for domination and imposing roles on one’s partners. For a human being is an “eternal actor”, and is always appearing in some mask, depending on the situation in which he/she finds him/herself.

In a struggle for authenticity, the individual attempts to tear off masks from faces and battle against the pressures of form, but he/she never wholly succeeds, because he/she is in some social situation, and in relation to him/herself continues to play various roles. In Gombrowicz’s work, the dynamics of the individual’s existence recall what the Existentialists said of it. The writer saw as his private contribution to existentialism his perception of the role that immaturity plays in the human being. Thus, every individual is shaped

by two opposing drives: on one hand, he/she wishes to attain maturity, and thus take on some perfected form, but, on the other hand, he/she does not like this maturity, because others are charmed only by immaturity, weakness, incomplete formation, which offer the individual delight resulting from the plasticity of form appropriate to that state. The human being is torn between God and the Youth – declares Gombrowicz.

The stories from the debut volume, although they are artistically thoroughly worked up, did not meet with the understanding of critics, who were pleased to qualify them, following the suggestion in the title, as “immature”. Gombrowicz’s answer was the novel *Ferdydurke*, which was one of the most original works of inter-war Polish literature. In the book’s first chapter, which formulates the torments connected with the process of “I” construction as the author had been inspired by the concepts of Lacan, Gombrowicz compares the educational operations, imposing the corset of form, conducted on a young man entering life by his aunts – to the activities of critics toward a new author. In *Ferdydurke*, the process of the deformation of individuals by the culture-school is universalized. In three parts of the novel the author conducts his protagonist (with whom he identifies himself) through three social environments (school, lodgings in the house of the a “modern” family of an engineer, the manor house of conservative landowners). In each of those environments, the protagonist fights to maintain his freedom against the form imposed on him, the views and the systems of values, leading finally to the collapse of an oppressive system, which takes the form of a grotesque “heap” of passionately heaving followers of its logic and values.

Ferdydurke is perfectly constructed, for the author drew on numerous inspirations from world literature (Rabelais, Voltaire) juxtaposed with stylizations of popular literature. Thus, the duel of forms does take place on the literary plane.

Between the three parts of the novel, Gombrowicz placed two separate stories, which parody the hackneyed procedures for justifying the sequence of events in a work (the principle of symmetry in the former, and the principle of “logical” implication in the second). The first of the stories is preceded by a preface setting out the author’s views on literature; the second is prefaced by a parody of that kind of preface in Rabelaisian style. In this way *Ferdydurke* becomes a radically rebellious piece of work. It questions the form-creating and educational role, both of the whole culture and of literature. The novel attained much popularity, at least among intellectuals, and the motifs taken from it, the characters, and particular sentences have entered the everyday speech of Poles.

As a young, promising author, Gombrowicz was invited just before the outbreak of the Second World War to join the maiden voyage of the new Polish transatlantic liner

the *Chrobry* en route to Buenos Aires. Certain that war was inevitable and that he would not be able to meet the demands of being a soldier, he decided to stay in Argentine, a decision that he himself presented as an act of desertion. It was one of the most important decisions of his life, and not just because he spent nearly the next twenty-four years of his life away from Europe, but also because he openly gave that decision the character of the opening salvo in a struggle to adopt a new type of relation of the individual toward his/her homeland. Traditionally, for Poles this relation was a matter of faith and was based on a feeling of obligation and of subordination of oneself to the requirements of the collective. Gombrowicz proposed instead a critical relation, accenting the sovereignty of individuals and the right to refuse to serve, and even the right to redraw patriotic sentiments. He set out these views in the first chapter of his *Dziennik* (Diary) and in the novel *Trans-Atlantyk*. Both texts appeared in the emigré press of the Instytut Literacki (Literary Institute) in Paris, and they provoked a storm within emigré circles, which had a very traditional position as regards patriotism, having been raised on literature from the period of the Partitions.

For years in Polish literature *Trans-Atlantyk* took the role of a work of blasphemy toward national conservatism, and also a challenge thrown down to the greatest of Polish poets, Adam Mickiewicz, inasmuch as several scenes are an ironic pastiche of *Pan Tadeusz*. In the course of years it has turned out that this novel, hellishly difficult to translate – with its apology for provincialism and freedom for sexual minorities (one of its main characters is the eccentric Argentinian millionaire and homosexual Gonzalo, who spreads the cult of “son-land” on place of that of the fatherland) – is a work ahead of its time, and it has achieved an unexpectedly wide response all over the world.

More important for Gombrowicz was, however his tackling in his writing the phenomenon of war, something of which he had no personal experience. The events in his most important play *Ślub* take place in the dreams of the protagonist Henryk, during the 1940 campaign, in the trenches in northern France. However, in his dream Henryk sees his family home in Małoszyce. The action in the novel *Pornografia* takes place in 1943 in a country house that recalls once more Gombrowicz’s Małoszyce. The characters in the play *Operetka*, indeed, live in a mythical principality of Himalaj, but as a result of a “revolution in attire” they become involved in times of war and its aftermath. There is a great deal about the war in *Wspomnienia polskie* (Polish Recollections) and in the *Dziennik*, where we find an outstanding analysis of German guilt and at the same the “innocence” of particular individuals, involved in crime through the collective will.

But an analysis of the war-time situation appears in Gombrowicz’s work even before the outbreak of hostilities, in the description in *Wspomnienie polskie* of a discussion

the writer had in Venice in 1938 with some young Italian airmen. When asked what they would do if Mussolini ordered them to destroy the monuments of Venice, they answered that they would leave not a single stone standing. For Gombrowicz, this was the clearest proof that in Europe there was a new generation that was capable of committing every kind of madness and crime, pushed to do so by the collective will, which first grants totalitarian power to its leaders, then ascribes almost divine qualities to them, and subordinates itself to them without any discussion. Features of this uncompromising sharpness, liberating them from inhibitions (equally of manners) was shared, in Gombrowicz's opinion, by the youth of Poland, as it prepared for war. This could relate to the celebrated response to the scandal Gombrowicz caused by his reading in 1940 in the Teatro del Pueblo in Buenos Aires, a reading that certainly no one understood, and the content of which has only survived in the précis and announcement placed by Gombrowicz in the exile Polish community's press in Buenos Aires. There he describes the Polish "new youth" – free and easy in its way of life, liberated in manners, but also at times cruel, a generation that carries out what crazy older people only did in their heads. This youth fascinated the writer in an erotic fashion, but at the same time he observed with unease what it was capable of. In *Ślub* the line of changes is underscored that leads from traditional society, based on religion and authority that stems from God, to the totalitarian state, in which the only law is the ruler's will, the ruler whose subjects "are puffed with greatness". The seizure of authority from the father by the son is based by Gombrowicz in *Ślub* on the model of Shakespearean "history plays", and he takes the "dream-world" from Calderon. But he shapes his protagonist, his sin of pride and his excess of power on the pattern of the figures in Polish Romantic drama, and especially on *Balladyna* and on the eponymous female protagonist of Juliusz Słowacki's play – except that *Balladyna*, condemned to die by lightning bolt, confesses her guilt and accepts the judgment of the heavens, while Henryk, the representative of new youth, declares that he is guiltless, but himself, as if on the strength of formal consistency, imposes a punishment on himself, which (just like authority) comes upon him from below. "From below" means from his subordinates, who are to touch him, in this way getting rid of the power that earlier flowed from them, when they anointed him their ruler.

In *Pornografia*, we observe the same crisis of power and sanctity, except that it is shown more realistically: the "savagery of war" causes the utter decay of traditional authority (the aristocratic big house, the landlord), but also of sanctity. Perhaps the central and most striking scene in the novel is the image of the collapse of the village church as a result of the activities of a power, negative and utterly rejecting sanctity, which is generated by one of the protagonists, Fryderyk, who is an atheist, but who pretends

to pray in order to keep up appearances. Both the elderly protagonists of the novel, Witold and Fryderyk, feel the destruction of the sacred equally. In fact, the sacred functions from now on only as an empty form, and both see a remedy for defeat in working with the two young protagonists, Henia and Karol. This collaboration entails the older characters' beginning to direct the actions of the younger ones. They push them toward each other, but, not able to make them indulge in erotic excesses, which the younger ones have no interest in, they obtain from them at least a powerfully eroticized participation in the crimes the two commit. The young characters, somewhat by mistake, murder Henia's fiancé Waclaw, her older neighbor, who symbolizes marriage according to traditional principles.

Pornografia is a fairly drastic attempt to find a new source of enchantment and a new type of the sacred in a world in which the old sources have run dry. But in Gombrowicz's last novel *Kosmos* (*Cosmos*), the author set himself the unusually ambitious task of constructing, as it were from zero, a universe that would have any kind of meaning for the individual. He does this beginning from a chance but intriguing minor detail, a sparrow hanging in the bushes, which the young characters notice walking with their friend Fuks on the outskirts of Zakopane, in order to rent a room for a short stay in the mountains. From the moment they see the sparrow, the young people cannot stop assembling facts, things, and signs in series and in constellations that would create quasi-meaningful wholes. However, no whole can be created, which causes the characters' increasing unease, and at the same time complicates those constructed quasi-meanings. Furthermore, the novel's hero, Witold Gombrowicz (the heroes and the narrators of his post-war novels always have the author's name), cooperates, as it were, with several of the partners in these investigatory procedures, who are sometimes more, sometimes less conscious of this collaboration. In each of these accounts, the meaning of the configuration of details is presented somewhat differently: with Fuks, the protagonist puts together a "whole" of a "detective-like" nature, which assumes that a Someone exists who hanged the sparrow and placed other signs and that it is, thus, necessary to discover this Someone. This is closest to a conception of things based on religion – the ultimate sender of the series of signs that constitutes the cosmos is, therefore, the Lord God. On the opposite side in the novel there is the householder, Leon. He favors a version in which the world only has meaning insofar as it has been absorbed by the individual, upon whom it has been imposed, and it can only be understood via introspection: for that individual, his/her body, then becomes the cosmos (and a source of delight). Thus, Leon favors an "onanistic" universe. With Lena, Leon's daughter, Witold, who falls in love with her, creates an alphabet of erotic communication, and he himself, secretly, creates one

of the signs in his series – by hanging Lena’s kitten, which is a drastic way of “choosing” the girl. It is the same with the other figures in the novel, which, through complications and the intersections of series of signs, moves inevitably to a surprising denouement, which should be Witold’s hanging of Lena in the course of an evening expedition in the mountains undertaken by the whole group of characters in the novel. Then the world of signs would finally achieve closure. Fortunately, nature intervenes; there is a downpour that “wipes out” the entire riddle.

Kosmos asks many philosophical questions concerning the nature of the universe and its order, concerning the links that are created between it and human beings, concerning the role of the knowing individual in the creation of its construction, and finally concerning the way in which the external plays a part in constructing our psyche. *Kosmos* is also dark, enigmatic, and unclear, full of undefined suffering that relates to all the characters, but which usually remains unacknowledged. Psychoanalytic commentators have recalled the Freudian *Unheimlich* here, as something that defines the Gombrowiczian individual’s relation to the world. Literary scholars have drawn attention to the artistic, multi-layered construction of this slim book, in which several novel genre models are realized. Many commentators’ attention, too, has been drawn to the word “berg” and its derivatives, which Leon and Witold use, without guessing its meaning. The meaning may be established to some degree in successive uses of the word, but it stays, however, mysterious to the last.

In the course of writing *Kosmos* (first published in 1965), Gombrowicz returned to Europe. At the invitation of the Ford Foundation, he spent a year in 1963 in West Berlin, which called forth the rage of the Polish communist authorities, who wished to compromise Gombrowicz at any cost in the eyes of Poles. This affair, with a carefully prepared “interview” that the writer was to give to a Polish female journalist and which was intended to compromise him, made it very difficult for many years (until as late as 1986) for Gombrowicz’s works to be republished in Poland. In 1964, the writer settled in France, finally choosing to live permanently in Vence, not far from Nice. He became increasingly well known in the West, was published in many different languages, and his plays were performed in the best theaters. In December 1968, he married Rita Labrosse, a Canadian much younger than he, and he died in July 1969. His works, in Instytut Literacki editions, were smuggled into Poland, or they were published by underground publishers. On the official market from 1986, Gombrowicz became a classic after the political transformations in Poland, an author on school reading lists, and one who was very widely discussed indeed. It was quite an unusual career twist for a provocateur and rebel.

Gombrowicz’s literary material was his life; first formulated in literary approximations and fictional creations, as in the stories, and later in the novels, now further from,

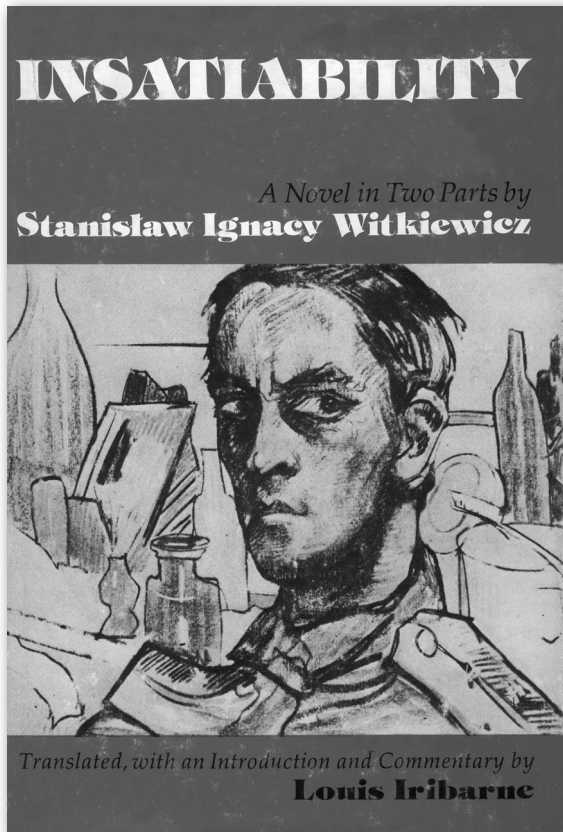
now closer to (as at the beginning of *Ferdydurke* and *Trans-Atlantyk*) the facts of the authentic biography. From 1953 to his death, Gombrowicz wrote his *Dziennik* (Diary) and published it in *Kultura* in Paris. This is really a collection of essays on various topics important for the author, based on the facts of his life, but re-worked, and not without elements of fiction and self-creation. *Dziennik* is certainly a literary text and some passages belong among the best things that Gombrowicz wrote – for example: the excerpt from the beginning of 1958 on the subject of the human position vis-à-vis nature, with which he is linked by a feeling of pain; or that constructed around the motif of the hand of a waiter in the café Querandi and the devilishness that lurks in the world's chaos; or that from the end of 1961 about Simon's burnt daughter. Further, the excerpt that deals with saving beetles on the beach is one of the best examples in Polish literature of a piece of writing that considers a fundamental philosophical problem embodied in a simple existential situation.

The *Dziennik* – with its discussions of philosophy and literature, with its polemics, with its anecdotes drawn from the author's life – is seen by many as the greatest work of Polish literature in the twentieth century. But Gombrowicz wanted to move closer to his own life, at least in a version that is possible close to the truth. That is why he wrote for Radio Free Europe a series of talks, which were never broadcast, but were published only after his death as *Wspomnienia polskie* (Polish Recollections) and *Wędrowki po Argentynie* (Argentinian Wanderings). These are texts that are certainly free of fiction, although not free of self-creation. They were, however, full of concrete information about the author's life, information that does not appear in the *Dziennik*. In 1953, in parallel to the *Dziennik*, Gombrowicz wrote yet another work that was published as his final book only in May 2013. This is *Kronos*, a collection of private notes reconstructing the factographical level of the author's life, at first glance quite without any literary features, but not without emotions connected with the author's reading. Here Gombrowicz the mystic looks into the sketch of his fate and looks in it for some meaning, some order, some logic. At the same time, he pitilessly describes his own unconventional erotic feelings, and also the many illnesses and defeats that accompanied his international triumphs.

So what – we ask in the end – does Gombrowicz's "madman in revolt" mean, he who "breaks through to reality"? The multi-layered structure of Gombrowicz's writing, from the literary fiction to *Kronos*, seems to give an answer to this question. But really it is absurd to treat a personal chronicle as a point of access to a writer's work. We have to formulate the question differently: a penetration of reality exists at all levels in Gombrowicz's writing, even there where fiction is clearly present, for reality is not just bare facts, but the writer's internal world in confrontation with the real world so that the "I" emerges unfalsified, eternally alive, and dynamic. *Kronos* does not

disavow the chapter about Simon's daughter, when it tells us that it is a *cuento*, a story, just as it does not invalidate the passage on nature from January 1958, although when we read *Kronos*, we learn that the events described actually took place in 1957.

The version of modernity that Gombrowicz praises compels the writer to exploit his own "I" and his own biography as a particular version of the world's fate in the twentieth century. Witkacy fled from it in death; Schulz tried in vain to hide from its menaces in the asylum of his native town, transformed into a cozy cosmos, cozy because organized round the idea of the eternal return. Gombrowicz tried to defy the world's changes, choosing the fate, so important in the twentieth century, of the eternal outsider and emigrant, without losing his personal identity, and turning his struggle for the sovereignty of his own "I" into the greatest performance of his created work.



The cover of the American edition of *Nienasylenie* (Urbana – Chicago – London 1977)