

Literature Philosophied. Witkacy – Gombrowicz – Schulz

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I. Only philosophical contexts?

Readers of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz are bound to notice philosophical inspirations present in numerous intertextual references and contextual indicators. Their texts contain almost all possible literary signs suggesting the possibility of analysing works by Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz on at least two hermeneutic levels: literary and philosophical.

For instance, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's novels contain explicit references to philosophical concepts (characters or narrators quote or mention particular names of philosophers). Among cited thinkers are: Bertrand Russell, English logician, mathematician and social philosopher¹; Henri Poincaré, philosopher, mathematician and physicist concerned with the theory of relativity²; Edmund Husserl, creator of the new phenomenology³; Friedrich Nietzsche⁴; Hans Cornelius, German neo-Kantian⁵; Leon Chwistek, author of the theory of the multiplicity of realities⁶; Alfred North Whitehead, one of the founding fathers of process philosophy⁷; Ludwig Wittgenstein, logician and philosopher of language; and many others⁸. Fictional characters created by Witkacy discuss philosophy, quote and paraphrase famous thinkers, polemicize and argue about different theories; sometimes it is the narrator who picks up the subject, and at times it is mentioned as a digression. In the play *The Shoemakers*, the characters parody theoretical works by Witkacy himself, thus introducing a self-parodic element and allowing Witkacy to create a fictional portrait of himself⁹.

¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, trans. Louis Iribarne, Northwestern University Press, 1996, and idem, *622 upadki Bunga, czyli demoniczna kobieta*, Kraków 2005, s. 11.

² Idem, *Insatiability*, op. cit.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *The Shoemakers*, trans. Daniel Gerould and C.S. Durer, foreword by Jan Kott, Applause Books, 2000.

In Gombrowicz's works, too, we can find numerous proofs of literary dialog with philosophical tradition. Most notably, the Fryderyk character in *Pornografia* is based on Nietzsche's Super-human, with further paraphrases and cryptoquotes from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Moreover, the style of the novel is marked by comparisons bearing a striking resemblance to the animal metaphors present in many of Nietzsche's works¹⁰. In the last novel by Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*, we encounter, in turn, clear references to Nietzsche's idea of *vita femina*.

Schulz's works offer a different type of references to philosophy. In *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies*, or *The Second Book of Genesis*, *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies: Continuation* and *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies: Conclusion* we are dealing with a "reclassified domain"¹¹ of the genre. In the three short stories included in the collection *The Street of Crocodiles*, Schulz decided to use the genre of a treatise, i.e. a form of utterance originating from philosophical discourse. Notably, in Schulz's stories we can often find terms characteristic of philosophical texts, such as: transcendental¹², anamnesis¹³, peripatetic philosopher¹⁴, matter¹⁵, *principium individuationis*¹⁶, eschatological¹⁷. Schulz's style (both in his fiction, correspondence, and critical essays) is exceptionally absorbent in terms of lexical references to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*.

Similarly to Gombrowicz, the author of *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* was prone to hybrid genres such as the essay or the critical sketch, with philosophy as their essential generic element. Schulz's predisposition manifested itself mostly in his reviews, while in the case of Gombrowicz, it was most vocal in the essay-like prose of his *Diary*. Neither of them tried to clean their literary style of philosophical jargon. In the *Diary*, on numerous occasions we can find such terms as: absolute, being, dialectics, existentialism, *episteme*, phenomenology, individualism, ego, Cartesian, morality, pragmatism, nature, culture, structuralism, and value. Moreover, Gombrowicz was a well-known polemist, discussing Cioran, Sartre, Camus, Descartes, and others.

This observation leads to other questions: does the philosophical quality of Witkacy's, Schulz's, and Gombrowicz's writing end with references to philosophical tradition

¹⁰ See: F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes, Oxford University Press, 2005 and W. Gombrowicz, *Pornografia: A Novel*, trans. Danuta Borhardt, Grove Press, 2010.

¹¹ The term was coined by Janusz Stawiński in *Wypowiedź literacka a wypowiedź filozoficzna: trzy kwestie i jedna ponadto* [in:] *Idem, Prace wybrane*, vol. IV, *Próby teoretycznoliterackie*, Kraków 2000, pp. 80–87.

¹² "The Book" [in:] B. Schulz *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. Celina Wieniewska, Houghton Mifflin, New York 1997, p. 10.

¹³ "Spring" [in:] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ "Dodo" [in:] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁵ *The Treatise on Tailor's Dummies: Continuation*, [in:] *The Street of Crocodiles*, transl. Celina Wieniewska, Penguin Classics, 2008.

¹⁶ "The Comet" [in:] *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

in their literary works, or is it also of more innovative and original nature? Their critical texts suggest that they placed philosophy in the center of a writer's self-consciousness, which, in turn, stemmed from the conviction that literature is an adequate means to voice a philosophical message. Did they succeed in doing so? Can we find any other (literary and non-literary) evidence, apart from that mentioned earlier, demonstrating that these writers could also be called philosophers?

II. Was Witkacy a philosopher?

Although Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939) did not want to be a professional philosopher, it does not seem inappropriate to call him one now. Not because of his thorough philosophical education, provided initially by his father and later by esteemed professors, nor because of his diverse and intellectually stimulating meetings with philosophers and historians of philosophy, such as: his good friend Leon Chwistek (the founder of the theory of aesthetic spheres and the multiplicity of realities); Roman Ingarden, the renowned phenomenologist, author of major works on esthetics, e.g. *O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego* (1937) [The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art] and *Szkice z filozofii literatury* (1947) [Sketches on the Philosophy of Literature]; Tadeusz Kotarbiński, logician and ethicist, founder of independent ethics, representing the Lviv-Warsaw school; and Władysław Tatarkiewicz, philosopher and historian of philosophy, aesthetician and ethicist, author of two monumental three-volume works, *History of Philosophy* and *History of Aesthetics*¹⁸.

Even as a child, Witkacy (talented in many fields, such as literature, painting, and photography) demonstrated an interest in philosophy by writing his first book titled *Marzenia improduktywa (dywagacja metafizyczna)* [Dreams of an Improductivist: A Metaphysical Digression] (1902–1903). Later, he produced more serious and original treatises on ontology, aesthetics, and the history of philosophy, such as: *Pojęcia i twierdzenia implikowane przez pojęcie Istnienia* [Terms and Theorems Implied by Being] (1935),

¹⁸ The listed thinkers did in fact call Witkacy a philosopher – See: R. Ingarden, *Wspomnienie o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu* [in:] *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Człowiek i twórca. Księga pamiątkowa*, eds. T. Kotarbiński, J.E. Plomieński, Warszawa 1957, pp. 169–176; T. Kotarbiński, *Filozofia St. I. Witkiewicza* [in:] *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Człowiek i twórca. Księga pamiątkowa*, op. cit., pp. 11–20; J. Leszczyński, *Filozof metafizycznego niepokoju* [in:] *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Człowiek i twórca. Księga pamiątkowa*, op. cit., pp. 93–118; J.E. Plomieński, *Rozważania nad twórczością St. Ign. Witkiewicza* [in:] *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Człowiek i twórca. Księga pamiątkowa*, op. cit., pp. 5–9; W. Tatarkiewicz, *Wspomnienie o St. I. Witkiewiczu* [in:] *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Człowiek i twórca. Księga pamiątkowa*, op. cit., pp. 285–288. Other authors writing about Witkacy's philosophical contributions include: B. Michalski, *Miejsce filozofii Witkacego we współczesnej mu filozofii polskiej. (Monadyzm biologiczny a reizm i fenomenologia)*, "Studia Filozoficzne" 1978, no. 3, pp. 79–94; idem, *Dzieje rękopisu „Zagadnienia psychofizycznego” Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, "Studia Filozoficzne" 1977, no. 7, pp. 113–121; J.W. Sarna, *O obiektywną interpretację filozofii Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, "Studia Filozoficzne" 1974, no. 8, pp. 79–90; J. Leszczyński, *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939). Sylwetka filozofa*, "Ruch Filozoficzny" 1959–1960, no. XIX (3–4), pp. 150–153. See also: J. Degler, *Bibliografia Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza* [in:] J. Błoński, *Witkacy*, Kraków 2000.

Zagadnienie psychofizyczne [Psychophysical Issues] (1938, unfinished, first edition in Polish: 1978), *New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom* (1919, English translation: 1993), *Szkiec estetyczne* [Aesthetic Sketches] (1922), *Teatr. Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze* [Theatre. Introduction to the Pure Form Theory in Theatre] (1923). He also spoke as a philosopher in *Listy do Hansa Corneliusa* [Letters to Hans Cornelius]¹⁹.

Let us remember that during his lifetime, Witkacy was not universally regarded as a philosopher, yet he occasionally received such acknowledgements. One of those occasions was an invitation to a Philosophical Congress in Kraków, in September 1936. At the congress, there was a heated debate between representatives of formal logic and those in favour of traditional logic. The first group regarded traditional logic as imprecise in mathematical and methodological terms and associated it with influences of psychology and the theory of knowledge. Advocates of traditional logic rejected those accusations, stating that their approach had sufficient grounds for speculative deliberations and pointed out, following Roman Ingarden, that complex methodological frameworks used in formal logic had limited application to philosophy, as the latter had rules of its own. At the congress, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz demonstrated the paradox which the supporters of mathematical logic would have to face when entering the field of philosophy. As the author of philosophical novels²⁰, he emphasized that an unconditional adherence to the requirements of formal logic in philosophy would inevitably eliminate all questions and problems, whereas eliminating metaphysics would reintroduce positivist claims of making philosophy more scientific, while simultaneously still favouring metaphysics in an obscure form. Witkacy also joined the supporters of individual philosophical discourse, sharing the views of e.g. Professor Helena Willman-Grabowska ("language is alive as long as it is used") and Professor Adam Źółtowski, who stressed that "flexibility and dynamics of language use is the key to the development of philosophy"²¹.

Above all, Witkacy was predestined to play the role of writer-philosopher by virtue of his own aesthetic and ontological ideas. One of the most recurrent terms he used was the *notion of existence*, defined as tension between nothingness and human consciousness. The writer-philosopher also often wrote about a *metaphysical anxiety*,

¹⁹ See "Listy do Hansa Corneliusa", *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 1979, no. 6, pp. 137–157 and *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 1980, no. 2, pp. 87–112.

²⁰ 622 *upadki Bunga, czyli Demoniczna kobieta* 1911, partial translation into English as *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo, or the Demonic Woman* [in:] *The Witkiewicz Reader*, first Polish edition: 1972; *Pożegnanie jesieni*, 1927, partial translation into English as *Farewell to Autumn* in *The Witkiewicz Reader; Insatiability*, written in 1930; *Jedynie wyjście*, 1932, [The Only Way Out] unfinished, first Polish edition, 1968.

²¹ The information comes from Bolesław Miciński's notes he made after the Philosophical Congress in Kraków in 1936. See B. Miciński, "Krakowski Zjazd Filozoficzny. Notatka informacyjna" [in:] idem, *Pisma. Eseje, artykuły, listy*, selected and edited by A. Micińska, Kraków 1970, p. 357.

i.e. a metaphysical approach to the world which distinguished human beings from other creatures and was the source of human creative potential. According to Witkacy, metaphysical anxiety was connected with experiencing the *Mystery of Existence*, and it drove people to search and define their place in the universe. It can find an outlet only in the creative process, which constitutes the stimuli to pursue the most valuable achievements of human thought, such as religion (pursuit of *sacrum* and a symbolic presentation of emotional states), philosophy (pursuit of truth and giving structure to notions instilled in emotions), and art (pursuit of beauty by giving form to emotions). To Witkacy, a creator is like a messenger of those ideas addressing a society insensitive to metaphysical experience. According to his grim visions, social indifference to metaphysics grows with time: for, at the beginning, there was no division between the individual and society; the notion of individuality was redundant (Witkacy believed it was the most influential in the period of Renaissance). Later on, the division into the subordinate and the superior was established, and the pursuit of power dominated human activity. Since the French revolution until Witkacy's own times, humanity existed in an apocalyptic period, the times of an eliminative revolution: with crowds and masses in the forefront and individuality in retreat; an *ant-like society* emerged, and people were reduced to their functions in society and, consequently, the ability to experience the metaphysical was almost annihilated. As a result, humanity concentrated on destroying its most eminent achievements and for one reason only: to please equally all people in terms of material property.

In his philosophical works, novels, and plays, Witkacy prophesied the downfall of religion, philosophy, and art. He believed that by becoming institutionalized, religion had betrayed its principles and lost sight of its main objective: to inspire metaphysical experience. In the Renaissance, this function was taken over by philosophy, yet that ended with the death of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who created the last philosophical system worthy of attention. Modern philosophers seem to have lost the ability to reveal the truth and focus solely on "writing monographs". In this case, the function of inspiring metaphysical feeling should be passed on to art, which in turn is also destined to perish, as its best times belong to the past, when it was closely connected to non-institutionalized religion²². By stressing the importance of irrational stimuli in the creative process, Witkacy stated that modern art, entering the stage of abstract experiments, had nothing to do with giving form to metaphysical feeling and thus had come to an end. Its only hope lay in protecting its autonomy and searching for the intrinsically perverse (pieced together from the ugly, the disharmonious, and the dissonant) Pure Form,

²² See: S.I. Witkiewicz, "Rozwój społeczny" [in: *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia*, Warszawa 2002.

which combined a complexity of phenomena, broke away from “worldly matter”, and caused a metaphysical shock in passive recipients, thus allowing them to experience the Mystery of Existence, its unity, and to feel a part of it. According to Witkacy, perversion should be treated as an aesthetic category for a reason: if art is to express the spiritual states of contemporary people, then it has to be complicated, disturbing, shocking, and capable of exposing the recipient to the Mystery of Existence. The sensation and knowledge arising from such experience become more and more uncomfortable (and consequently inaccessible) to mechanized society.

III. Was Schulz a philosopher?

Similarly to Witkacy, Bruno Schulz (1892–1942) was not a professional philosopher and his prose would hardly meet the criteria of philosophical discourse. During his lifetime, he also was not regarded as a writer-philosopher. His affiliation with philosophers using literary means for expressing their ideas was probably clear only to Witkacy, who voiced his opinion in a sketch “*Twórczość literacka Brunona Schulza*” [Literary works of Bruno Schulz].

Authors are required to make readers look at the world in a different way: it can be good or bad, [...] funny or sad, optimistic or pessimistic, realistic or idealistic – as long as it is new! This can be achieved only if apart from talent, one stands out in every respect: personality, temperament, sensitivity, but most of all (especially in literature) in terms of intellect, i.e. having your own worldview²³.

Witkacy immediately recognised the original quality of Schulz’s vision of the world. He could see that in Schulz’s writing the division into the material and the spiritual is blurred and there is no dead matter in his fictional reality. He stressed that the worldview instilled in Schulz’s works was not derivative, but rather stemmed from “the fundamental guts of the author,” his experience, and was of exceptional originality.

Schulz’s fantasy is not based on finding miniscule life secrets and third rate oddities in the grand rubbish heap of life, but rather capturing reflections of the Great Mystery of Existence in any given fragment of reality²⁴.

Let us remember that Bruno Schulz, an author who based his writing on an original worldview, was an attentive reader. Jerzy Ficowski, one of the most acclaimed specialists with regard to Schulz’s works, and Shalom Lindenbaum (as part of their studies they

²³ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Twórczość literacka Brunona Schulza*, “Pion” 1935, no. 34–35; online version of the text is available at: <http://brunoschulz.dybook.pl/czytelnia/69-tworczosc-literacka-brunona-schulza.html?showall=&limitstart> [accessed on 30.09.2013]

²⁴ Idem.

verified the library catalogue of a Zionist group, the “Jewish House”, which Schulz used when living in Drohobycz, and which was later found in Israel) learned that the writer was well-read in e.g. works by Friedrich Nietzsche. Schulz’s interest in Nietzsche’s philosophy can be observed in many lexical borrowings present in his letters and critical works. Letters to Romana Halpern also contain many references to philosophy. After reading some works by Roman Ingarden, Schulz asked Romana to lend him something by Husserl, and he was planning to ask the same favour of Witkacy. He also wanted some Lviv and Warsaw libraries to send him books²⁵. The writer was also interested in Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity, which had an enormous impact on philosophical thought of the first half of the twentieth century.

Yet, Schulz did not like to incorporate philosophical discourse in his literary works. He did it only once, persuaded by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, in their correspondence on *The Street of Crocodiles* and their philosophical credo²⁶. Let us consider a longer excerpt from this letter.

“I would rather not answer to whether I could interpret the world of *The Street of Crocodiles* in philosophical terms. I believe that rationalizing worldview in works of art could be compared to revealing real identities of actors in a theatre, which would mean that the game was over; the issues addressed are simplified. I would not say that art is like a crossword puzzle with a hidden message and philosophy is the same crossword, yet with a solution at hand. The difference is more complex. In a work of art, the umbilical cord between its content and the larger issue has not been cut, the blood of mystery still flows, endings of veins open into the surrounding night and come back full of the dark fluid. In the case of philosophical interpretation, we are dealing only with an anatomical preparation extracted from the whole body of issues. However, *I am also curious what would the philosophical credo of The Street of Crocodiles sound in a discursive mode*. I can try to describe its world, rather than explain it.

The Street of Crocodiles gives a certain prescription for reality, establishes a special kind of substance. The substance of that reality constantly ferments, sprouts, and is latently alive. There are no dead, hard, and limited objects. Everything floats beyond its limits, lasts for a moment in its shape, and changes it as soon as possible. Habits and routines in this reality reveal a certain rule: *pan-masquerade*. Reality takes shape only seemingly, for a laugh, for fun. Somebody is a person, somebody is a cockroach, but the shape does not extend to the essence: it is but a temporary role, a cuticle to be shed a moment later. What is established here is a kind of *extreme monism*

²⁵ B. Schulz, “Do Romany Halpernowej” [in:] idem, *Księga listów*, selected and edited by J. Ficowski, Gdańsk 2002, p. 147. For more on the subject see: S. Lindenbaum, *Lektury Schulza, Midrasz. Pismo Żydowskie* 2003, no. 3 (71), pp. 26–27.

²⁶ B. Schulz, “Bruno Schulz do St. I. Witkiewicza” [w:] idem, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, ed. J. Jarzębski, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1998, pp. 476–477. First printed in: *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1935, no. 17.

of substance, with different objects serving as masks. This journey of forms constitutes the meaning of life. Therefore, the substance has the aura of *pan-irony*. There is a constant sensation of backstage, where actors undress from costumes and laugh at the pathos of their roles. The very fact of *particular existence* is ironic and mocking, like sticking one's tongue out [...].

There was a lot of discussion about the destructive drive of the book. From the point of view of some established values, it might be true. But art exists in pre-moral depth; in a point where value is yet *in statu nascendi*.

As a spontaneous expression of life, art sets objectives for ethics – not the other way round. *Should art only assert what had already been established, it would have been redundant. Its role is being a survey into the anonymous.* The artist is like a device recording the in-depth processes, where values come to existence”²⁷.

Schulz's analysis of his own writing contains numerous terms long-associated with philosophy, such as: substance, monism, irony, and value. Taking into consideration *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, we should add the crucial term *matter*. It is worth noting, that the way this term is defined and assessed is often a focal point of formulating philosophical stands and distinguishing the characteristics of philosophical schools. Such is the case e.g. in differentiating between empiricism (sensualism, in particular) and rationalism, or between materialism and ontological idealism, which regarded the material world as secondary to the world of ideals.

The most significant supplement to Schulz's *credo* relating to *The Street of Crocodiles* defined in his letter to Witkacy, are the theses voiced by one of the most important characters (the Father) in *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies* or *The Second Book of Genesis*, *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies: Continuation*, and *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies: Conclusion* – all texts are deeply rooted in philosophical tradition, which is hinted at in the titles. In these stories, Jacob no longer speaks in poetic prose (in Schulz's works this style is usually reserved for the narrator) but in a discursive mode: he provides his key theses on matter, also called “substance”, and explains the rules of a new cosmology.

In this context, matter is subject to constant change (it gives rise to countless forms of life; their existence is ephemeral and transient). There is no way of defining the aim of this metaphor. Matter is fertile, mindful, has memory, and does not distinguish between the animate and the inanimate. In the most general sense, we might say that by undergoing constant transformations it returns to previous shapes “out of habit”²⁸. The father also explains how accepting such a worldview affects the history of philosophy.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 476–477. Emphasis added by Ż.N.

²⁸ “The Treatise on Tailor's Dummies: Conclusion” [in:] *The Street of Crocodiles*, trans. Celina Wieniewska, Penguin Classics, 2008.

The conviction that not only the history of civilisation but also of all life on Earth is subject to the rules of change and repetition leads to the conclusion that an individual cannot be free within history. We find evidence of this in the short story "Spring" from the collection *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, where metaphors of nature and theater are used to describe the mechanisms of historical reality. The consequent vision of time (as well as of nature) seems morally indifferent and has nothing to do with the idea of progress, which stipulates an ongoing development of human civilisation by means of creative input into the history of the world. Subsequent ideas resulting from this process are initially regarded as new and fresh, but soon become outdated, faint, devaluated, and finally follow the footsteps of matter and disintegrate. Once this happens, they seem arrogant and unable to provide meaning to intangible reality. Various forms of this reality materialise, perish, and return in the course of an ongoing repetition, which has only one aim, that of coming to existence. Historical reality and changeable ideas are presented as one great pan-ironic pan-masquerade.

Schulz's interest in the issue of matter was connected with the literary pursuit (which is similar to philosophical motivation) of exploring pre-individual spheres. Creating the literary characters and the fictional worlds of his stories, he wanted to demonstrate how matter transforms, takes shape, and disintegrates; solely for fun, it assumes momentary, ephemeral, imperfect, crippled shapes, which force beings to confront their desires with existing possibilities. Moreover, in the world of Schulz's stories, there is no hierarchy of beings: people exist similarly to plants, animals, and inanimate objects. In one of the *Treatises*, Father mentions one captain whose lover's body had been turned into a lamp, and the main protagonist himself undergoes a transformation into a condor and a cockroach ("Cockroaches" in *The Street of Crocodiles*), while Uncle Edward turns into an electric bell ("The Comet" in *The Street of Crocodiles*). Faced with the compulsion of transformation, Schulz's characters, with their demands for significance and endurance, recall playthings or dummies subject to biological forces of nature. They try to find meaning but are unaware of where their roles might take them. This world of flow and vitality turns out to be transgressive, blasts out solid structures, transgresses the boundaries of individual shapes, and reveals the utopia of desires in order to introduce some kind of timeless sanction.

Bruno Schulz's literary heritage, as well as his drawings and letters, prove that he was far from supporting such worldviews which excluded "under-cultural spheres". He was also against an approach to literature which glorified intellectual qualities and ignored nature. We can hardly call Schulz an apologist for a creative process which is "deaf to whispers of chaos". As a writer responsible for creating such characters as the mad Touya

(“August” in *The Street of Crocodiles*) or the mentally handicapped Dodo (“Dodo” in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*), he cannot be seen as one of those rejecting the “dealings of what is once and for all a mindless and wicked [force] with all that can never become a part of the conscious spirit”, nor one of those who turn to literature in search of a cheap “balm for the incurable wound of existence” and reject all pursuit of non-normative truths²⁹. Schulz’s interest in “mindless manifestations of the Dionysian”, in a literary explosion of “ecstatic sensuality”, as well as in the margins of individual worlds, and in a cognitive dread of extreme experiences, stemmed from his belief that they constitute the necessary background for defining culture; that only the transgressive can leave the mark of authenticity on both literature and philosophy, which constitute significant fields of culture.

IV. Was Gombrowicz a philosopher?

Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969) – the author of a short story collection *Bacacy* (2004; first published in Polish: 1933), a novel *Ferdynand* (2000; first published in Polish: 1937), *Possessed* (1988 first published in Polish: 1939), *Trans-Atlantyk* (1955; first published in Polish: 1953), *Pornografia* (2009; first published in Polish: 1960), *Cosmos* (2005; first published in Polish: 1965), plays: *Iwona Księżniczka Burgunda* [Ivona, Princess of Burgundia] (1938), *Ślub* [The Wedding] (1953), *Operetka* [Operetta] (1966), *Historia* [History] (unfinished, published posthumously) and a three-volume *Diary* – did not practice philosophy professionally³⁰. He even wrote: “I do not try to pass as a philosopher, because I am a poet and as such I have an innate *abschmack* to abstract thinking”. Yet, he gave much evidence of a thorough knowledge of European philosophy, both ancient and medieval, as well as (mostly) modern philosophy, especially in the *Diary*³¹. Apart from referring to such prominent thinkers as Democritus, Heraclitus of Ephesus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Hume, Berkeley, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Bergson, and Husserl, he also analysed works by Simone Weil, and Simone de Beauvoir, polemical with the existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and criticised Cartesianism and Marxism. Attentive readers can have no doubts about Gombrowicz’s knowledge of the source texts. He spoke about some of them at length in lectures he gave just before his death, which were addressed to Rita

²⁹ B. Schulz, *Zofia Nałkowska na tle swej nowej powieści* [in:] Idem, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, op. cit., pp. 409–410, 413.

³⁰ Read more on philosophy in Gombrowicz’s works in: *Gombrowicz filozof*, collected and edited by F.M. Cataluccio and J. Illg, Kraków 1991. See also Ż. Nalewajk, *W stronę perspektywizmu. Problematyka cielesności w prozie Brunona Schulza i Witolda Gombrowicza*, Gdańsk 2010.

³¹ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary, Volume 1*, trans. Lillian Vallee, Northwestern University Press, 1988; *Diary, Volume 2*, op. cit. 1989; *Diary, Volume 3*, op. cit. 1993.

Gombrowicz and Dominique de Roux, later published as *A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes*³². In the lectures, he presented those philosophers who, in his opinion, had the greatest impact on modern thought, such as Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, and Karl Marx. In the unfinished book there is one lecture missing, as Gombrowicz wanted to dedicate the last fifteen minutes to structuralism³³.

In his essay-memoirs (*Diary*), Gombrowicz was probably most vocal about the connection between his works and the philosophical heritage of structuralism and existentialism. He wrote:

“The problem of Form, man as a producer of form, man as prisoner of form, the concept of Interhuman Form as a superior creative force, inauthentic man: I have always written about these things, I was always concerned with them, it was this I drew out, and please replace the word *form* with *structuralism* and you will see me at the center of today’s French intellectual issues. Why, in *Ferdurdurke* and *Cosmos*, there is no subject except for the tyranny of form, the ballet of structure. And in *The Marriage*, it is clearly stated: “We do not say words, they say us”³⁴.

Should we consider the reasons for his distaste of academic philosophy and look for other explanation of why he so often expressed dislike despite being aware of how similar his views were to those of structuralism and existentialism³⁵, then we would have to point out first of all to the highly abstract level of analyses conducted within those fields. To Gombrowicz, this was unacceptable, as he was primarily concerned with the physical human being; he believed that “a real man is one who is in pain”³⁶.

“My metaphysics exist to become flesh... constantly... without respite.... It is like an avalanche with a natural tendency to head for the bottom... the Spirit? I will say that my greatest pride as an artist is not at all in inhabiting the kingdom of the Spirit, but the fact that I have not broken relations with the flesh. I take more pride in the fact that I am sensual than in the fact that I am knowledgeable about the Spirit. My passion, my sinfulness and darkness, are more valuable to me than my light”³⁷.

³² W. Gombrowicz, *A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes*, trans. Benjamin Ivry, Yale University Press, 2004.

³³ *A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes* was written during a serious illness. In order to keep Gombrowicz intellectually active, Dominique de Roux persuaded him to prepare lectures on the history of philosophy for him and Rita Gombrowicz. They were given between 27 April and 25 May 1969. Gombrowicz did not manage to finish, nor edit the typescript before his death. The work was initially issued in 1971 in *Cahier Gombrowicz* edited by Dominique de Roux and published by his publishing house L’Herne.

³⁴ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary, Volume 3*, op. cit., p. 182.

³⁵ Gombrowicz stated that structuralism was his enemy as far as it was scientific and he, an artist, rejected science, but at the same time they joined ranks for he was fascinated by form as much as any structuralist. He also claimed that he welcomed both philosophies as akin to his own views. *Ibid*, p. 183. It is worth noting that the writer’s worldview and structuralism were based on completely different ideas, yet the significant thing is that the conclusions drawn from those initial axioms were surprisingly convergent.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 184.

³⁷ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary, Volume 2*, op. cit., p. 99.

"I do not believe in a nonerotic philosophy. I do not trust thought that frees itself of sex.... Of course it is difficult to imagine Hegel's Logic without abandoning the body. But pure consciousness must once again be immersed in the body, in sex, in Eros, the artist must again thrust the philosopher into beauty"³⁸.

Pursuing the aim of "thrusting the philosopher into beauty", Gombrowicz persistently surveyed the frontiers of the irrational, and consequently diagnosed the fluidity of the boundaries between *ratio* and insanity, spirituality and physicality, randomness and manipulation, *sacrum* and *profanum*, all the while pointing out how relational and ambiguous definitions of these notions were. In his works, he often reversed established values and revealed unofficial or hidden meanings. For he was deeply convinced that culture and "under-culture" had a common source, despite the fact that people would prefer to see themselves not as they really are, but rather as who they should be, and forget altogether that the latter form of culture even exists.

He stated that all attempts to transcend human nature bordered on pure aesthetics, structuralism, religion, or Marxism; therefore they were equally naive and bound to fail. "I demand both a 'relaxed' and 'ordinary' man and also a man who is, at the same time, pierced through with pain"³⁹.

Using literature to define original philosophical theses, Gombrowicz's thoughts revolved around radical issues, such as: the ontology of facts, creating facts out of superficial and axiological assessment ("A Premeditated Crime" from the collection *Bacacay*); the issue of inauthentic identity determined by form and imposed from outside; and individuality which cannot constitute itself permanently (*Ferdydurke*). The writer was also concerned with the issue of community versus nation and the symbolic sphere, as well as the distress of an individual in pursuit of autonomy within society (*Trans-Atlantyck*). He was interested in the question of value and the ontology and axiology of murder (*Pornografia*). He analysed the connection of human cognition and perception, and the consequent results of human epistemological activity (*Cosmos*). He presented the tragedy of power, which can no longer be called the attribute of an individual since it is so easy to lose control over it, and its kingdom no longer seems godly but rather recalls a violent "inter-human church" ("The Wedding") established by interaction. He also examined the relationship between a subject and language ("The Wedding").

Notably, by studying issues which could well be a part of philosophical discourse (in the language of ontology, axiology, and epistemology), Gombrowicz created his own language, particularly visible on the stylistic level, made use of the grotesque with a tinge

³⁸ Ibid, p. 201.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 184.

of somatic vocabulary, and often employed parody (e.g. of various genres of popular literature).

V. The tradition of literary philosophy. Writers and Philosophers: A Partnership?

Although thinkers have long used literature to express their philosophies, such practices (probably because of their marginal character) have never been thoroughly recorded nor analysed by historians of literature or of philosophy. There may be a number of reasons for this, e.g.:

- When literary texts written by philosophers are read and interpreted by other thinkers, in the best cases they focus on the thinking process and not on the literary form; in worse cases the formal analysis seems a guide to how *not* to write philosophical treatises;
- When works written by philosopher are read and interpreted by literary specialists, they rarely treat them as literature (i.e. with literary artistic value).

However, if we consider comparatively the question of the integrity of philosophical thought and a chosen literary form, we will discover a whole genre of such texts. We might count such modern writers as: Blaise Pascal, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Søren Kierkegaard, Novalis, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and many others. There were also numerous Polish writers, especially in the twentieth century (although we might find some examples in the nineteenth century, e.g. in works by Cyprian Norwid). Among writers-philosophers who conducted such formal experiments we find: Stanisław Brzozowski, Bolesław Miciński, Stefan Themerson, Barbara Skarga, Stanisław Lem, Józef Tischner, Adam Czerniawski, and Leszek Kołakowski.

However, it is worth noting how various the motivations behind choosing literature as a medium for philosophical thought were. The writers mentioned above often wanted to connect philosophy with existence and explain that by regarding life in a systematic framework people achieve not only a greater understanding of its diversity, but also its hypostasis. Other writers were looking for a way of expressing significant and innovative observations and were aware of their pioneering quality.

In the twentieth century, this group was most eminently represented by Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz, and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. They were innovators in terms of both literary and philosophical tradition because of the individualised literary forms they created. They intentionally rejected a discursive, scientific (and professional) way of practising philosophy and opted for the language of literature, which (if only because

of the required quality of originality) to them seemed perfect for this type of challenge. Notably, all three authors not only raised philosophical issues with the utmost precision, but also, paradoxically, observed an important principle of scientific analysis, i.e. prior to formulating their own notions, they read works by other philosophers and asked valid questions whenever they found them incomplete or mistaken. References to other philosophical texts introduced in stories, plays, essays, and/or diaries helped Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz place their own propositions within a wider context of philosophical thought. They constitute visible proof of a dialog and a kind of partnership: writers-philosophers made sure their literature was not only capable of conveying philosophical thoughts, but also of polemicizing with and successfully challenging the existing theories.

In the case of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz, the choice of literary form was essentially philosophical. In works by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, it seemed to advocate replacing philosophical monographs with individualised language as one of conditions of innovation in the field. Witold Gombrowicz, in turn, manifested his objection towards a speculative, “non-physical” philosophy deprived of experience. Bruno Schulz’s decision to mix philosophy and literature stemmed from a conviction that the arts (and literature as one of them) cannot mindlessly recreate existing philosophical theses. On the contrary, it should be the one to challenge philosophy with complex questions. If we were to look for examples of an illustrative character in the works of the three authors, we might only refer to their individual stands. In this sense, the presence of references to philosophical tradition was naturally significant, but should not overshadow their own points of view.