

## **Characters in the Prose Works of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, and Witold Gombrowicz**

**Translated by Monika Szuba**

Contemporary studies of literary character attempt to fuse all existing methodological approaches, taking the most important elements from each of them. In line with the traditional, nineteenth-century approach to character in realist novels, readers still refer to their own reality, trying to find “a real person” in characters. The most important aspect of such an approach is a coherent character construction and its completeness, which make the literary being exist beyond the text. Structuralism, which opposes the anthropomorphic approach to a literary character, argues that characters are verbal beings and textual creations, which fulfil mainly the role of plot carriers. In this approach, functions that characters play in the text constitute the basis for classification. Today scholars attempt to reconcile these two propositions but, as Edward Kasperski notices, models based on a common methodological denominator do not work because a character poetics functioning in studies of the realist novel fails when applied to parody, grotesque, avant-garde, or postmodern novels.

Pragmatic theories attempt to overcome this methodological cul-de-sac, focusing on reception theory. Thus character analysis is balanced somewhere between the aim to achieve a completeness of the image (*complétude* – understood as completing the elements absent from the text based on the existing elements) and suspense – where the literary character remains unclear and blurry. When looking at novelistic structures in Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), Bruno Schulz, and Witold Gombrowicz the latter proposition appears very useful.

In this essay, I would like to focus only on prose works by Witkiewicz, Gombrowicz, and Schulz from the interwar period (even if Gombrowicz’s literary legacy goes beyond this time framework). I will not analyse dramatic characters, which are governed by different principles.

## Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz

During his life, Witkacy published two out of his four novels: *Farewell to Autumn* (*Pożegnanie jesieni* 1927) and *Insatiability* (*Nienasycenie* 1930). His early work, *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo or The Demonic Woman* (*622 upadki Bunga*) was not published until 1972, and the unfinished novel, *Jedyne wyjście* (*The Only Solution*) – in 1968. Prose works were treated as marginal by Witkacy, mainly because of his approach to novel form which he named “a bag” for every kind of content. It is, however, difficult to imagine the development of Polish prose without Witkacy’s input<sup>1</sup>.

### Candidate for a hero, a puppet, and surgical debauchery

The first readers of Witkacy’s prose noticed character in his work is peculiar, which was usually criticised, most frequently because of its instability and sketchiness. Thus, these are beings which, aiming at *complétude* in the traditional reception (such was the approach of the majority of the first readers of Witkacy’s novels), require considerable effort in completing the form. According to reviewers, Witkiewicz only offers “candidates for an unwritten novel”, “does not create the so-called character”, and the characters do not have “solid boundaries of individual finiteness”. Some think that Witkacy belongs to the Western European satirical tradition, but even for them this comparison makes him appear a bad writer. In most reviews Witkacy’s characters are puppets, marionnettes, and the author manipulates them so that the reader feels a mixture of fascination and repulsion. Especially the reader of the first published novel by Witkacy was not yet prepared for the reception of this kind of texts, which is demonstrated in the language used by reviewers, who employ sophisticated metaphors for want of a meta-language to describe the new phenomenon, as with Hanna Romer, who expresses her own fascination with the supposed “clumsiness” of the author’s character creation:

“[...] The section which Witkiewicz performs on his protagonists is an investigation of physiological springs of the soul. The audacity of these operations borders almost on surgical debauchery. The author tears the clothes off his living puppets together with their skin, underneath which he sees the right psychological *déshabillé*”.

These descriptions usually connect perception with the narrator-character relation (or author-character relation), in which the former almost tortures the other, frequently with sadistic relish. Irzykowski, who notices the nature of change in the treatment of the category of character, which belongs to the modernist movement, will later make the above accusation.

---

<sup>1</sup> All the references in English from: S.I. Witkiewicz, *The Witkacy Reader*, ed., trans. and with an introduction by D. Gerould, London 1993.

Amplifying the narratorial intrusion into the existence of characters in a way that is provocative and blatant, Witkacy highlights this textual aspect without aiming at an anthropomimetic illusion, wanted by the first readers of his novels. This effect becomes even more salient because of the lack of narratorial motivation for the utterances, thoughts, and even actions of characters. In Witkacy's novels there is no indirect figuring, which – in a case when all the main characters, talking in one voice, lacking in stylistic individuality, are potential porte paroles of the author – lays a strong emphasis on direct figuring, as Witkacy's aim is not to disintegrate characters, something practiced by the *nouveau roman*. Karol Irzykowski noticed this lack of character individualisation: "Not only are all the [characters] equally intelligent, all read the same books, their conversation is like an orchestra composed of the same instruments. [...] Thus when the author wants to distinguish these individuals, he must highlight and enunciate: this is a thickhead, this a crazy genius, this a decadent and that one, 'a metaphysical whore' [...] (The author torments his characters through the names alone)".

This is a deliberate device, which is proved by the metatextual utterance from his last novel: "Lechoń's accusations that all my people speak the same language is silly. I do not lower myself to describing fragments of life but I try (maybe in vain) to create a type of an intellectual, philosophical novel..."

### **Types and stereotypes**

The first readers of Witkacy's novels looked not only for "real people", but also so-called typical characters. While searching for what was then understood as "character" turned out to be futile, the "typicality" of characters assumes caricatural features in Witkacy's prose texts. If we look at his four novels, we always find a similar protagonist – an artist looking for the meaning of life, obsessed with an artist's block (Bungo, Athanasius, Genezyp, and Izydor), he suffers from artistic and sexual unfulfillment (in love with an inaccessible woman or emotionally torn between two women). A typical love triangle is enriched with a revolutionary despot. In *Farewell to Autumn* (1926) these roles are given to Athanasius Bazakbala, Zosia Osłabęcka (his fiancée, later wife), Hela Bertz (a demonic lover), and Sajetan Tempe ("a poet entertaining Bolshevism"). It is not a square, but rather opposing antinomic couples: an artist (weak and guilt-ridden) and a despot (strong and scrupulousless), and a young wife (weak and innocent) and a lover (perverse and strong-willed). These roles, as in Witkacy's plays, are given in a caricatural way. It turns out very quickly that the distinction is apparent as they are surprisingly similar, equally depraved (the virtuous wife matches the sensual lover in her lasciviousness). All of them have similar dilemmas. None of these characters can be considered "positive", which is also true for secondary characters.

## Sweet nymphet and femme fatale

At the beginning of the twentieth century Wacław Berent's *Próchno* (Rotten Wood) is the most famous example in Polish literature of the modernist novel formula of the *Künstlerroman*, employed also by Witkacy. In his texts the main protagonists are usually artists suffering from an artist's block. He plays with the convention, building his improbable plot on a fragmentary novelistic narrative.

Even if Witkacy's characters imitate the patterns of the early modernist model, when observed closely, these constructions are distant from the original. Let us now look at female characters in *Farewell to Autumn*. Their names lead us to well-grounded stereotypes in Polish literature – Zosia Ostańcicka is another incarnation of Zosia Borowska from *Próchno* (both come from Zosia in *Pan Tadeusz*). Hela Bertz resembles Hilda Hertenstein from Berent's novel (as well as Telimena from Mickiewicz). Employing these typical *Künstlerroman* female characters (in *Insatiability* these roles are played by duchess Irina Ticonderoga and Eliza), Witkacy plays with the well-grounded convention of "light" and "dark" type in Polish literature.

Witkiewicz drives the sheer "typicality" of female characters to the absurd, and then destroys the construction. Let us now look at women in *Farewell to Autumn*. Zosia Ostańcicka – her first name always appears in a diminutive form, her surname brings to mind the verb "to faint" ("ślabnąć" in Polish; indeed, Zosia faints all the time) and "a swan" ("łabędź" in Polish; fragility, limpness, and virgin white). The portrait does not fit the "light" pattern.

Witkacy clearly plays with the convention of "a sweet, domestic girlie" (the artificiality of the portrait is highlighted by the word "the end", employed humorously to end the description) and adds elements borrowed from other conventions (the *femme fatale* and the sage), almost like a collage composed of contrastive, contradictory fragments: Zosia is "unstable" and oxymoronic. She turns from an innocent girl to a "metaphysical whore".

Hela Bertz, who is seemingly Zosia's antithesis, represents a type described as a "harp" in Jerzy Ziomek's classification. A harpy is an impulsive, sensual, confident, and domineering woman, who listens to her basic instinct, ignoring all social conventions. This fiery red Jewess is an incarnation of Oriental sensuality, which represents a recurrent motif in the Polish modernist novel ignoring all social conventions. Initially, she represents the most beautiful and intelligent woman for Athanasius only to become disagreeable and over-intelligent that same evening. This contradiction may be treated as Athanasius's emotional instability, but her character is composed of disjunctive elements. Finally, this domineering *femme fatale* secretly dreams about a man she could submit to, "an absolut ruler" (it might also be some ideological "higher aim"). Her love of philosophy does not match the type of the "thoughtless harpy".

The difference between these female types gradually blurs: they begin to look alike. Both have oval eyes, Oriental, cat-like beauty, lively lips, ready to undergo strange transformations; both have a liking for decadence. Is this an expression of Athanasius's desires, who would like to fuse them into one angel and demon figure? The reader has the impression that the outlines are blurred and the rules of character creation are confused.

### **Silhouettes, hybrids, monsters**

Far from any psychological veracity, Witkacy's characters do not illustrate any individuals, nor represent typicality. We learn little about their appearance. Complex descriptions of characters are rare in Witkacy's prose. Usually the characters are outlined using a color spot. Sometimes we get information about the shape of their eyes or nose. Nothing more; we learn even less about the appearance of other characters. Shortened comments in the form of gerund clauses appear in the so-called "information", resembling stage directions in dramas. The descriptions of corporeality are usually based on the use of synecdoche, highlighting one part of the body. In erotic scenes these close-ups make the body monstrous and repulsive.

Such a peculiar form of character undoubtedly results from the grotesque nature of the novel, treated by Witkacy (as in the above passage) in an almost model way: character syncretism is based on combining human and animal elements. Zosia is catlike and girly; Hela can be a sea monster, a panther or a demon, simultaneously remaining a woman; Irina Ticonderoga from *Insatiability* at times resembles a vulture or an owl, a crocodile or a deer. The exaggeration of observed body parts, amorphism, fragmentariness and changeability, references to animals, which, by entirely rejecting traditional animal symbolism, reach beyond the sphere of metaphor: all this in Witkacy's character descriptions creates grotesque dramatic tension.

The behavior of characters is grotesque too. The scene in which Zosia catches her husband with Hela is a perfect example. The naked Athanasius is set against a hellish black and red setting. Zosia's desperate suicidal gesture seems equally grotesque as the scene which provoked it.

Thus, in Witkacy's novels there are schematic characters who play the roles assigned by the narrator, frequently stepping out of line: the artist Athanasius does not even know where he could realize his talent, the aristocrat Prepudrech turns out to be a shady individual of suspicious origins, and the ruthless dictator Tempe writes poems and engages in philosophical debates, like all the others.

## Surnames, nicknames, onomastic games

"Tormenting" his characters, the narrator frequently employs invective and mockery. His creatures are "swines", "bastards", "slackers", "buffoons", "whores", etc. Their personal details do not create the illusion of real surnames: a weird or mocking proper name often becomes another piece of invective. Playing with onomastics, Witkacy creates original personal names. Some of them are quite obvious, others are equipped with the author's commentary, as for instance Genezyp Kapen, the main protagonist of *Insatiability*, whose name and surname is derived from a French expression "*je ne zipe qu'à peine*" (the expression "*faire quelque chose à peine*" (barely do sth) is mixed with the Polish verb "*zipać*" (to be barely alive).

Among other names, we should mention Tempe, who is not bright ("*tępy*" means "thick/stupid" in Polish), Kocmołuchowicz, who comes from the lower classes, Prepu-drech, who tends to powder his nose too often (of course, this is about doing cocaine and not his coquetry), Young Bungo's lover (Bungo is an onomatopoeic word for a downfall, which is repeated 622 times) is called Akne, referring to young people's skin condition, Putrycydes Tengier from *Insatiability* composes music in decayed form (in French "*putrescible*" means something which decays easily), and Purcel in *Farewell to Autumn* (descendant of French emigrants de Pourcelle), brings to mind the expression "*pour selle*" (for the saddle), which is quite logical for the commandant of infantry, and finally father Wyrprzyk from the same novel fights determinedly to maintain the position of religion, which is long finished (in colloquial Polish, "*wyrprzykać*"). Such examples abound because all characters in Witkacy's novels have strange names and surnames, often used in a diminutive form, triggering additional associations, and causing translators a lot of grief: Zypek is Genezyp, Putrys is Putrycydes, Zezio is Żelistał, Tazio is Athanasius.

All these devices aim to demonstrate that, as Irzykowski claims in *Prolegomeny do charakterologii*, "the laws of appearing and acting of literary characters are the laws of a different category than reality", prefiguring much later theories of character understood as a textual creation.

## Bruno Schulz

The first volume of Schulz's short stories was published three years after the publication of Witkacy's second novel. Whether it was because of the few years' difference between these two publications or because of Schulz's special style, the first readers and reviewers of his work did not apply traditional anthropomimetic criteria to his characters. However, this does not mean that the pioneering nature of his artistic creation

were immediately appreciated. Ignacy Fik's text, "Literatura choromaniaków", is a good example of negative opinions of Schulz's work. The eponymous Choromański interests the author more than the "sick" (in Polish "chory") characters in Schulz's short stories. Schulz himself introduces the reader to the secrets of his own craft, publishing a series of short stories around a *Treatise on Mannequins*.

### **Mannequins – treatise**

The cycle containing four short stories constitutes the central point of Schulz's first volume. The treatise, understood as a scientific publication, is the long monolog of Jacob, the narrator's father, who with "his witty and elegant conversation"<sup>2</sup> tries to entertain Pold and Paulina, the seamstresses, in the company of a mute mannequin, "a silent immobile lady [...] of oakum and canvas"<sup>3</sup>. Jacob's heretic doctrine is meant to be a repeated act of creation, described in the biblical Book of Genesis, a failed repetition, an imperfect act being only a shadow of the original Genesis. Demiurgos's place, who holds divine power, is taken by "Gentlemen Demiurges"<sup>4</sup>, on behalf of whom Jacob declares: "We are not concerned [...] with long-winded creations, with long-term beings. Our creatures will not be heroes of romances in many volumes. Their roles will be short, concise; their characters – without background. Sometimes, for one gesture, for one word alone, we shall make the effort to bring them to life"<sup>5</sup>. Man, created "a second time – in the shape and semblance of a tailors' dummy"<sup>6</sup>, this clumsy dummy will reveal "behind each gesture, behind each move, its inertia, its heavy effort, its bear-like awkwardness"<sup>7</sup>.

In the last two stories of the cycle Schulz's protagonist looks at the masterpiece of the new creation from the perspective of "the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into matter of that dummy which does not know why it must be what it is, why it must remain in that forcibly imposed form"<sup>8</sup>, i.e. the character.

Characters projected in *The Treatise* are forms of vestigial anthropomimetism, splinters of human shapes (if we consider their appearance), hollow forms (if we look at what in a traditional, realist approach is considered a rounded literary character), their emotions also appear in an atrophic form, limited to suffering, melancholy and sadness.

---

<sup>2</sup> B. Schulz, *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*, ed. J. Jarzębski, trans. Celina Wieniewska, London 1998, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 33.

This suffering creates a relation between mannequins and things which are not human representations.

Jakob's argument reaches the reader by a double prism of irony (Jakob's and the narrator-Joseph's), seemingly undermining the sense of the discourse. As is often the case in Schulz's writing, double irony is abolished and the character's utterances can be taken seriously again. In the following section we will see what results from *The Treatise on Mannequins* for the characters.

## Mannequins – realization

Schulz's short stories contain a limited number of people. Some events take place in the family: Joseph, his father, his mother, a few distant members of the family, the servant Adela, the shop assistants. In other texts, there are just a few characters, who are usually very lonely: Dodo, Pan, Eddie, the Old-Age Pensioner. There is one exception, the short story entitled "Spring", in which the plurality of secondary characters of vague ontological status enhances the impression of chaos.

Two texts fulfill Father's program from *The Treatise on Tailors' Dummies* in a special way: "The Street of Crocodiles" (from *Cinammon Shops*) and *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*.

The district of Crocodiles is a modern part of the mythical Drohobycz. Modernity was not to be interpreted as progress; everything seems temporary, shabby, and dirty. The inhabitants blend in the surrounding background; they are grey and flat, like paper-figures. Everyone is tainted with a flaw. This concerns both their appearance and character: "The old established inhabitants of the city kept away from that area where the scum, the lowest orders had settled – creatures without character, without background, moral dregs, that inferior species of human being which is born in such ephemeral communities"<sup>9</sup>.

They look like beings created for one gesture and one word, as described by Joseph's father. These marionette figures evolve in a theatrical setting. Here everything is scenery, limited to the surface, the epidermis, appearances. Monochromes, ranging from various shades of grey to black, come to the foreground in the two stories. It is intriguing as Schulz, writer and painter, multiplies the palette of colours, which is one of the richest in Polish literature. Black and grey characters inhabit the eponymous sanatorium: Doctor Gotard has "a dark beard"<sup>10</sup>, the chambermaids wear black, there is a black dog, and even the shop girls in the pastry shop nearby have faces "misted over by dusk"<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 213.



In this they are similar to the ones in "The Street of Crocodiles": "their faces, like grey parchment, marked with the dark greasy pigment spots of brunetness"<sup>12</sup>.

The appearance of the characters is marked with ephemerality and lack (of color, depth, value); their actions also have the same provisional and useless nature: "Gestures hang in the air, movements are prematurely exhausted and cannot overcome a certain point of inertia [...] Having exceeded a certain point of tension, the tide stops and begins to ebb, the atmosphere becomes unclear and troubled, possibilities fade and decline into a void, the crazy grey poppies of excitement scatter into ashes"<sup>13</sup>.

The symbolism of grey and black, which dominates in both short stories, does not refer to ordinariness, sadness and dullness, but to the symbolic meaning of ash (decay of matter). Characters created for one moment of existence disappear almost immediately.

### **Polyheaded crowd**

In many short stories by Schulz there is a crowd. It is difficult to distinguish individual people from it. In "August" we read about passers-by who wear on their faces "that grimace of heat – as if the sun had forced his worshippers to wear identical masks of gold"<sup>14</sup>. On the Street of Crocodiles, we learn of the crowd, "one can see [...] only indistinctly; the figures pass in gentle disarray, never reaching complete sharpness of outline. Only at times do we catch among the turmoil of many heads a dark vivacious look, a black bowler hat worn at an angle, half a face split by a smile formed by lips which had just finished speaking, a foot thrust forward to take a step and fixed for ever in that position."<sup>15</sup> Other stories are also peopled by this polyheaded creature, in which characters lose any individual features, for instance in "The Night of the Great Season", where "The dense crowd sailed in darkness, in loud confusion, with the shuffle of a thousand feet, in the chatter of a thousand mouths"<sup>16</sup>.

We can find similar descriptions in "Spring", *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* or in "My Father Joins the Fire Brigade". We may discern Schulz's reactions to social changes in the early twentieth century (economic development, civilisational changes, and revolutionary movements leave less and less space for the individual) in the uniformisation of the individual. The specificity of literary character creation is motivated by something else than "a transposition of statistics". Schulz scholars have pointed to the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy on the author,

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, pp. 63–4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

especially in reference to the concept of art. Juxtaposing two tendencies, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Nietzsche introduces the concept of *principium individuationis*, which creates a particular form. The blurring of this individual form is realized in Schulz's texts by the fusion of literary characters in a crowd, a multi-headed pre-individual being, the Dionysian One.

### **Transgressing boundaries, deficiency, deformation**

The consequence of giving up the *principium individuationis* is a blurring of the shape of individual characters. The descriptions of their appearance is characterized not only by the use of synecdoche (separate parts of the body) and a monochromatic colour palette, lack of depth or even a flat, "paper" character, the instability of "boundaries" and changeability.

Starting from the first story, we encounter character descriptions which barely remain in their own "corporeal boundaries". For instance, aunt Agata: "My aunt was complaining. It was the principal burden of her conversation, the voice of that white and fertile flesh, floating as it were outside the boundaries of her person, held only loosely in the fetters of individual form, and despite those fetters, ready to multiply, to scatter, branch out, and divide into a family"<sup>17</sup>.

Schulz clearly undermines the existence of character as an "individual form", and the body, considered as something edible, falls apart under the influence of the constant impulse to reproduce. The corporeal surface does not illustrate individual identity; it is a harbinger of a flock of progeny. Similarly, uncle Charles ("Mr Charles"), seized with lust and indulging in debauchery in the absence of his family, becomes an organism "swelling with fat [...] still flowing with seminal juices"<sup>18</sup>. More plant than human, he is "completely surrendered to circulation, respiration, and the deep pulsation of his natural juices"<sup>19</sup>.

The crazy character from "August" named Touya is, to a large extent, similar. Her repulsive face ("a mop of tangled black hair"<sup>20</sup>, "the chinks of small eyes and damp gums with yellow teeth under snoutlike fleshy lips"<sup>21</sup>, is mobile and capable of violent change, compared to harmony; it is this "disharmony" and volatility of this face, haunted by surprise and sadness that attracts the reader's attention. Touya, "like a pagan idol, on short childish legs"<sup>22</sup> with "that half-animal, half-divine breast"<sup>23</sup>, announces

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

a different, male character from "Pan": "It was the face of a tramp or a drunkard. A tuft of filthy hair bristled over his broad forehead, rounded like a stone washed by a stream. The forehead was now creased into deep furrows. I did not know whether it was the pain, the burning heat of the sun, or that superhuman effort that had eaten into his face and stretched those features near to cracking"<sup>24</sup>.

Both alienated, homeless, and crazy characters are captured in a physiologically intimate moment, and both transgress the boundaries of their corporeality. The violence of emotion leads to destruction, a fracture, getting rid of a given shape. Both characters, suspended between loftiness and mundaneness (participating in demystification of myth and mythicizing of reality), are related to hybrids straight from ancient mythology: the half-human and half-animal Pan, god of fertility and sexual drive. They belong to Schulz's Dionysian procession of disabled characters, described in terms of madness, illness and disability: Eddie – a man whose body is made of two incompatible parts (an athletic upper body and a dwarfish, disabled lower body), Dodo, whose face – like the face of the country vagrant and that of the crazy Touya – is unable to stay within its boundaries, the Old-Age Pensioner, who shrinks gradually only to become light and almost disembodied.

On the one hand the characters are fragmentary and sketchy, on the other – the characters' outer layer fails to reach a final form, it changes, shrinks, expands, ripples, and pulsates, and it does not match the character's "inner self".

Dodo's "disjointedness" of the corporeal layer and his inner life assumes another aspect: his body reflects non-existent experiences. In the case of most of the characters listed here, their initial fascination with the mysterious inner life of creatures characterized by their repellent appearance ends with a very prosaic demystification, but with Dodo the gaze of the narrator travels the other way – from stating emptiness to a surprising ending.

In the same procession of madmen and characters marked with physical or mental impairments, Schulz places Jacob, Joseph's father, a central creation among all his characters. Artist-madman, just like other characters he is hybrid and changeable. At times an aloof prophet, at others a helpless old man, ready to give up his kingdom at Adela's beckoning.

## **Metamorphoses and hybrid states**

Metamorphoses of the Father are different and Schulz's metamorphoses suggest comparisons with Franz Kafka. Gregor Samsa turns into a cockroach under the pressure

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 44.

of his surroundings, and this transformation fills him with repulsion and shame. Father's metamorphoses happen because of his aspirations. A certain affinity with Kafka's writing can be discerned in aunt Perazja's metamorphosis ("The Gale"). In this short story the outraged protagonist becomes an embodiment of expressions "wychodzić z siebie" and "spalać się ze złości". Father's metamorphosis, however, happens for other reasons, which go beyond the realization of the metaphor. Jacob is interested in life in every form: out of his fascination with birds, he turns into an old condor; after his observation of cockroaches, he becomes one of them. These metamorphoses may be understood as a desire to be in the object's "skin", which awakes scientific passions. Regardless of the form that Jacob takes, his identity remains recognizable to the other members of the family, whereas the transformation (until "Father's Last Escape", which is not last) is always reversible: "I recognized him at once. The resemblance was striking, although now he was a crab or a large scorpion. Mother and I exchanged looks: in spite of the metamorphosis, the resemblance was incredible"<sup>25</sup>.

The subject's identity in Schulz, thus, remains separated from the appearance, or even devoid of its initial ontological status. Human form may be partly (or entirely) animal; it may also assume the form of objects/things, or turn into a handful of dust ("Visitation").

The metamorphoses of the Father are an illustration of alienation beside "normality" in a separate world that is difficult to grasp. Most of them depict a loss (of human features), the incapacity or sick fascination. These are thus embodiments of what is embarrassing or at least what is considered as such by Jacob's surrounding. The transformation into St. George is one exception. It is a fulfillment of aspirations of a romantic troubadour ("My Father Joins the Fire Brigade"). This metamorphosis happens differently: he turns into a medieval hero in the son's gaze, who is full of admiration. The transformation of a dog into a man in *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* may be treated in a similar way: it is a look, a "bias" of the beholder that changes the character's ontological status. This is a special case for Schulz's idiosyncratic characters: the literary character is neither a man changed into a dog, nor a half-man; he remains both this and that, and its ontological status may tip the balance from one side onto another under a minor pretext, such as a stumble. Both species, *Canis familiaris* and *Homo sapiens*, are treated in exactly the same way: it is only a form that a character assumes depending on his mood.

As we can see, characters appearing in Schulz's short stories mostly show a tendency to stray from *principium individuationis*, one determined individual form, which would confirm his/her identity. Moving from one form to another, changing shapes,

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 261.

transgressing boundaries, is typical of almost all the characters. It brings them pain and suffering mentioned by Jacob in *The Treatise*. They establish the indeterminateness of Schulz's characters.

### **Witold Gombrowicz**

Gombrowicz's literary debut, *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (Diary from the Time of Puberty), coincides with the publication of the first volume of Schulz's short stories, and, further, the publication of *Ferdydurke* coincides with that of *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*. Even if the first reviews of Gombrowicz's prose published before the war demonstrate that readers were not prepared to read this type of literature, they are not as negative as Gombrowicz presents them. Some phrases bear a striking resemblance to Witkacy's and Schulz's reviews. Schulz wrote a review of *Ferdydurke*, interesting not only because of his apt analysis of Gombrowicz's intention, but also because of his own views expressed there.

### **The homeless reality of man**

The author of *Cinnamon Shops* gives lavish praise to Gombrowicz's first novel. Schulz states that Gombrowicz is the first author to describe what happens "outside official content", i.e. outside the sphere of maturity and consciousness of man, in a discipline that had been omitted or had not been treated seriously. According to Schulz, "The shadow illegally usurped all prerogatives of existence while the homeless reality of man led the secret life of an unacknowledged tenant"<sup>26</sup>.

Certainly Schulz notices allusions to Freud in *Ferdydurke*, but he avoids psychoanalytical terminology, replacing it with a list of metaphors. Writing about man's struggles with culture in Gombrowicz's writing, Schulz states:

Man has always seen himself as an incomplete, unimportant appendage of his cultural substance. Gombrowicz wants to restore this relationship to its true proportions; he turns it upside down. He shows that as immature, ridiculous greenhorns fighting for our expression on the plain of concreteness and dealing with our meaninglessness, we are closer to the truth than if we are solemn, sublime, mature, and completed<sup>27</sup>.

Creating an image of man in his texts, Gombrowicz takes this way: we see a whole gallery of "greenhorns" and people struggling with their own insignificance. They focus the author's attention. We get to know his characters through their interactions with others more than in Schulz's or Witkacy's texts.

---

<sup>26</sup> B. Schulz, "Review of Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*", trans. V. Nelson and A. Fiut [in:] *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*, ed. J. Ficowski, London 1998, pp. 416–423, p. 417.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 421.

## Character disintegration

Gombrowicz's sequence of novels opens with a famous scene of awakening: "I lay in the dim light, while mortal fear lay heavy on my body; and the smallest particles of myself writhed in the appalling certainty that nothing would ever happen, nothing ever change, and that, whatever one did, nothing would ever come of it. The explanation of my terror was contained in the dream which had troubled me during the night and had ended by waking me"<sup>28</sup>.

The impression of disintegration is what characterises *Ferdydurke*. When he encounters professor Pimko, Józio notices that the disintegration of the body onto separate body parts is accompanied by a feeling of shrinking, infantilisation: "And then suddenly I dwindled, my ears grew small, my hands contracted, my body shrank"<sup>29</sup>.

Indeed descriptions of characters treated as a coherent whole, as an *imago* that the protagonist is searching for, are nowhere to be found in *Ferdydurke*. This happens not only because in Gombrowicz's texts description is always treated with an ironic distance and resembles parody and in its succinctness may bring to mind Witkacy's theatrical "information". It is also because characters tend to be introduced with synecdoches. However, these are not separate body parts emerging from a crowd as in Schulz. Separating them highlights a sense of chaos in which an individual is immersed, and exaggerating separate parts – typical of synecdoches – leads to endowing them with a symbolic meaning. It is not accidental that most concepts forming Gombrowicz's particular anthropology originate from body parts: bum, face, etc.

In *Ferdydurke* it is not just Johnnie Kowalski who suffers from a dilemma. The embedded short story, "Philifor Honeycombed with Childishness", introduces the disintegration of Mrs Filidorowa's body into separate body parts.

Character fragmentation in Gombrowicz is realised not only through the disintegration of a single subject whose subjectivity is thus called into question, but also through splitting one character into many other. Ewa Graczyk reads *Bacacay* by treating the title of the collection in a literal manner, thus seeing it as the story of an individual in times of growing up. Although the stories constitute an autonomous text concentrated around a different protagonist, and every story is different (also in terms of genre), such interpretation is possible. A detailed overview of characters in all the stories points to a continuity of the subject, a veiled biography *à rebours*. Graczyk notices that Gombrowicz constructs stories around a protagonist who is a "greenhorn", mentioned by Schulz. He cannot find his way round social space, and the world plots against him. This is most clearly visible

---

<sup>28</sup> W. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. E. Mosbacher, London 1961, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

in the last two stories, where the protean protagonist remains alone. Far from others, he may be “himself”, which is a realization of his aspirations, but at the same time this fills him with dread. We may notice a similar process in *Ferdydurke*, where the protagonist tries to detach himself from all social ties, trying to overcome the process of pulverisation.

### **Doubling a character**

The disintegration of the subject makes the boundaries between him and the surrounding disappear. Gombrowicz’s protagonist enters incoherent social interactions, which constantly undergo transformations (state/duty, student/teacher, friendships and erotic relationships). In Witkacy’s novel characters are dominated by the narrator-tormentor/torturer, in Schulz their image is created through an empathising narration, and in Gombrowicz the character is created in the relation to surroundings, mainly to another character. That is why the figure of the double is crucial. Already in the first volume of stories, the characters create opposing pairs, constructed as “positive” and “negative” (Kraykowski and his admirer, Paweł and Alicja, the investigating judge and the alleged murderer...) and functioning as doubles – the action of one of them determines the behaviour of the other. The hero who is “negative” (a frivolous outsider) mocks the behaviour of the “positive” one or realizes his expectations. Even when he is alone, he has a vision of a double.

It is not surprising that *Ferdydurke* opens with an appearance of a double. After he wakes, the protagonist notices that in his room there is “another man”. This sight fills him with fear (the double is equally terrified). Observing him, he sees separate body parts, severed from the whole. The double finds Johnnie in the closing scene. He makes the imperfection of his “self” evident to him, entangled, as it is, in the net of links with others, a self that is inauthentic, unable to exist without the gaze of the other that seals it in a conventional form and becomes the only possible way to live. Johnnie escapes in vain; in vain he tries to maintain a shapeless form, choosing immaturity – his last escape will remain merely an escape with “with my face in my hands”<sup>30</sup>.

### **Behaviour of characters: narrative deformation**

Not only is Gombrowicz’s protagonist described by cultural forms imposed by the gaze of the Other. His textual existence is also determined by the choice of a literary convention. Gombrowicz recalls a lot of conventions with parodic intent. The inter-textual dialog with tradition conducted by Gombrowicz, highlights the conventionality of the character’s existence, exposing its fictional nature. “Hooligan” (“Szczur”) refers

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 272.

to traditional stories about highland robbers, depriving the protagonist of individuality and limiting his behaviour to the realization of a literary model. Paweł and Alicja play out a parody of a sentimental novel (their absurd actions make sense only in reference to this convention). The protagonist of "Przygody i Wydarzenia" (Adventures and Events) functions in an adventure novel, and in *Ferdynand* we find elements of the educational novel, the philosophical tale, etc. Those literary conventions impose particular plots, and characters are given appropriate roles. The story, often quoted by critics, "Zbrodnia z premedytacją" is the most characteristic one. The setting in which the story begins (a deserted neighbourhood, night, rain, a mysterious country manor house), a diseased father, and, most importantly, the investigative judge, whose presence suggests a crime novel convention, leads to "a crime" performed by the main suspect, the victim's son. Gombrowicz, thus, stresses the unimportance of "what really happened", and contrasts that with the power of form, which is the basis of functioning in culture. At the same time, the character appears incoherent: he behaves in a way that is an affront to psychological logic, but follows set literary patterns.

Gombrowicz's characters also – though in a different way from Schulz's characters – are created to play a role, with another character as the director (a clever one, e.g. the judge from "Zbrodnia", or an inept, but a stubborn one, e.g. Johnnie from *Ferdynand*).

\* \* \*

Even a cursory overview of the issues related to characters in the works of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, and Witold Gombrowicz lets us discern several typical features of their writing.

Most importantly, we may observe a pioneering approach to character. It differs from the reading habits of the inter-war period. This is confirmed by the reviewers who invariably criticized the constructions of characters and interpreted them as a sign of writer's block or the writers' inclination towards sickness and weirdness. The first readers of these texts rarely considered such construction of characters to be a deliberate choice. The innovation of these three Polish authors in terms of character creation was only discovered and appreciated by scholars after World War II. In the light of texts belonging to various theoretical movements such as psychology and psychoanalysis, gender studies, theory of the grotesque, and contemporary anthropology, and considering the significance of corporeality in the works of these three authors, we can now accurately read their goals in the creation of characters.



The openly fictional status of characters, common to all the three writers but realized by them in an individual way, is quite striking. We will not find attempts to construct psychologically believable “real people” in any of them. Deformation, fragmentariness, lack of consistence and of individualisation serve to demonstrate the problems that the subject faced in Modernism, looking for his/her own elusive identity. If we assume that the characters created by all the three authors, characterized by a marked fictional existence (from Witkacy to Gombrowicz to Schulz), constitute a wider metaliterary reflection, we should add that these constructions are not limited to a game with conventions, and rather constitute an “indirect form of existential and anthropological reflection through poetics and style – they articulate [...] individual and collective realizations and experiences”.



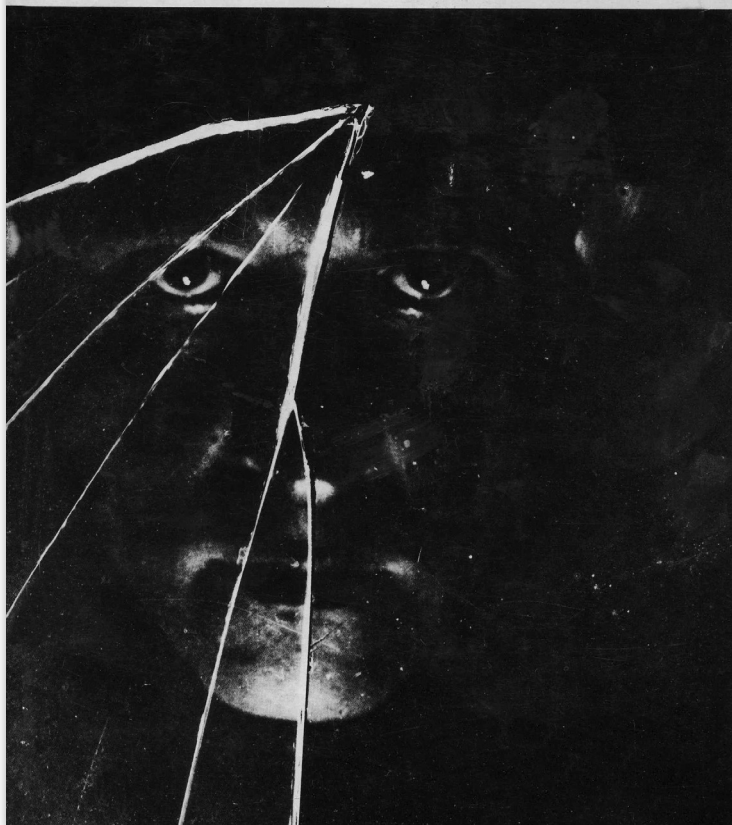
333. Szwajcaria. Okładki sześciu tomów pełnego wydania *Dramatów* Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza. Lausanne, 1969–1976.

The covers of six volumes of Witkacy's plays in French translation (Lausanne 1969–1976)

# WITKACY

*Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer*

Daniel Gerould



The cover of Daniel Gerould's study *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer* (Seattle and London 1981)