

Playing with Form: *Possessed* by Witold Gombrowicz

Translated by Bartosz Lutostański

Possessed by Witold Gombrowicz was published in two instalments in the summer of 1939 in two popular Polish dailies. Gombrowicz wrote the novel under the pseudonym of Zdzisław Niewieski and did not acknowledge its authorship until thirty years later¹. The novel in full book format was first published posthumously in 1973, although the final three instalments were added much later and the complete edition was published in 1990. According to Gombrowicz, the novel was consciously written as “a bad novel” for “a common consumer of printed pages”².

“I started writing a new novel in the second year of law school. ... With Tadeusz Kępiński, my former high school friend, we decided to write a detective novel to earn loads of money. Extraordinarily intelligent as we were, we didn’t expect to have any problems to carry out such an easy but riveting shenanigan. Soon enough however we discarded all we’d written, shocked by the awkwardness of our writerly endeavors.

“To write a bad novel is as difficult to write as a good one”, I then told Kępiński.

I was perfectly intrigued by this conundrum. To create a good novel for ten or even a hundred thousand intelligent people, well, that can be done by anyone, it’s banal and boring; but to write a good novel for that inferior, lowbrow reader who isn’t so much into what we call ‘good literature’³.

After many trials and errors *Possessed* was conceived. Maria Janion dubbed the novel as “the first Polish gothic novel”⁴, although it makes use of other conventions of popular fiction as well; in fact specific features of 1930s popular culture appear throughout Gombrowicz’s oeuvre. The writer’s interest in the popular culture of that period might be compared to romantics’ interest in folklore⁵. Zdzisław Łapiński claims that in both respects we deal with “an expression of profound feelings”, with “a resurrection

¹ See: K.A. Jeleński, *Pożytek z niepowodzenia*, trans. J. Lisowski [in:] W. Gombrowicz, *Opętani*, Warszawa 1990, p. 5.

² Quoted in Jeleński, *ibidem*, p. 5.

³ W. Gombrowicz, *Wspomnienia polskie*, [in:] *Wspomnienia polskie. Wędrówki po Argentynie*, Kraków 1999, pp. 47–48.

⁴ M. Janion, “Forma gotycka Gombrowicza”, [in:] *Gorączka romantyczna*, Warszawa 1975, p. 167.

⁵ See Z. Łapiński, *Ja Ferdynand. Gombrowicz świat interakcji*, Lublin 1985, p. 48.

of elite culture through primitive and spontaneous powers and with the engaging of new readers, who might put the elite's work to the test of their sensitivity"⁶.

However, while in *Cosmos* or *Pornografia* the popular stereotypes and plot patterns serve, amongst other ends, to diagnose ironically the creation process, in *Possessed* they are put to a completely different use. A convoluted plot is treated seriously as an integral part of the work, and its main constructive ingredient is designed in such a way as to attract readers' attention and to offer an ending that meets the expectations of the 1930s audience. In *The Mass Superman* Umberto Eco uses the term "gratification machine"⁷ to denote a quality of a novel that creates verisimilitude and, in the end, offers a conclusion that readers have unconsciously wanted all along. *Possessed* strictly toes the line of diverse popular fiction patterns, ideological as well as phraseological, and Gombrowicz "seems to derive his writerly satisfaction from the scrupulousness with which he adheres to those conventions"⁸. However, instead of making us re-think our position in the world and society, popular culture aims to calm us down; its cognitive properties are limited. This could suggest a low artistic merit of *Possessed*, as some Gombrowicz scholars imply. Jerzy Jarzębski for example claims:

"Pulp fiction creates ... a contemporary myth about the world. The 'game' with the reader is simple and relies on a mutual understanding that the writer takes it upon him/herself to deliver a maximum of entertainment and, simultaneously, without admitting it, to satisfy readers' dreams and desires. A mass reader ... wants the perverse as much as the stable in the world and value systems. *Possessed* fulfils these criteria"⁹.

Despite many differences, the novel fits well in Gombrowicz's oeuvre, from *Bacacay* (1933/1957) and *Ferdynand* (1938) to *Cosmos* (1965); it explores topics characteristic for the Polish author, such as youth and age, the problem of social interaction and social roles etc.; and it uses popular motifs: alter ego, crime, misalliance, etc. Although Gombrowicz himself disparaged it¹⁰, we cannot discard *Possessed* when considering the work as a whole¹¹. The dilemma is ever more pronounced when we realize that the novel has recently been rediscovered in Poland as well as abroad. The Philadelphia-based Pig Iron group¹² recently received the readers' Obie Award from a music weekly

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ See U. Eco, *Superman w literaturze masowej. Powieść popularna: między retoryką a ideologią*, trans. J. Ugniewska, Kraków 2008, p. 22.

⁸ Łapiński, p. 49.

⁹ J. Jarzębski, *Gra w Gombrowicza*, Warszawa 1982, p. 86.

¹⁰ Gombrowicz in a letter to his brother, Jerzy, April 14 1957 [in:] Łapiński, p. 74.

¹¹ See Janion, p. 243.

¹² <http://www.pigiron.org/>

"The Village Voice"¹³ for its theatrical adaptation of *Possessed*, entitled *Hell Meets Henry Halfway* (2005). Another theatrical rendering worth mentioning was directed by Krzysztof Garbaczewski in Teatr Dramatyczny in Wałbrzych, Poland (2009). The reviewers of both performances unanimously appreciated the play's comic and grotesque elements¹⁴. Further, theatricality, unclarity, overloading, artificiality, humour and paradoxicality, Allen Kuharski's six aspects of Gombrowicz's works¹⁵, are also at work. We could add a seventh feature, more elusive in performance, which is an ironic approach to the work's form. According to Łapiński the approach presupposes a search for "haven against stereotypes in other stereotypes", the more artificial, the better¹⁶. Concurring with this view, Michał Głowiński focuses on the variety of uses of "traditional properties of novel"; in Gombrowicz's works they are often "stereotypical and banalised but never used as in a classical novel"¹⁷. That is to say, the properties are used in such a way as to foreground or even expose conventions of the genre. Głowiński asserts that Gombrowicz's main principle is, therefore, "a principle of empty epicality". Yet the novels are not only parodies of the novel, constructed by negation, insofar as the principle is a (positive) multifarious compositional factor¹⁸.

When conceptualizing Gombrowicz's narrative strategy, Jarzębski uses the term "game". With respect to the form of a work, this can be understood as a spontaneous treatment of literary tradition and its conventions, with respect to communication between writer and reader, as an interpretative process undergoing specific rules. When it comes to *Possessed*, however, it is more appropriate, I think, to use the concept of "playing with form". Such playing accentuates the rules of the text but also, more importantly, their comic and enjoyable employment. The interpretative process is here reduced to the tracking of the main plot lines and, possibly, to the recognition of the "languages" and clichés from other, usually well-known texts. As a result of this reduction, reception can include the intellectual elite of reading community as well as a "mass audience".

Playing with the form entails the intertwining of various genre markers, which leads to stylistic contrasts. *Possessed* is a good object for analysis insofar as it features

¹³ <http://www.villagevoice.com/>

¹⁴ See the passages from Polish reviews at <http://konfrontacje.pl/en/archiwum/witold-gombrowicz-the-possessed/> [date of access: 02.07.2013].

¹⁵ See A. Kuharski, "Witold, Witold i Witold. Odgrywanie Gombrowicza," [in:] *Grymasy Gombrowicza. W kręgu problemów modernizmu, społeczno-kulturowej roli ptcy i tożsamości narodowej*, Ed. E. Płonowskiej-Ziarek, trans. J. Margański, Kraków 2001, p. 305.

¹⁶ Łapiński, p. 48.

¹⁷ M. Głowiński, "Parodia konstruktywna (O Pornografii Gombrowicza)" [in:] *Gry powieściowe. Szkice z teorii i historii form narracyjnych*, Warszawa: PWN 1973, p. 292.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 292.

various distinct markers. The most straightforward one, indicative of a gothic romance, is the setting: an old, disturbing, frightening, half-deserted castle. As in classical gothic novels, such as *The Castle in Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) by Ann Radcliffe, *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis, or "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) by Edgar Allan Poe, the presentation of *Mystoecz* is stylised via a sophisticated and archaic language that emphasises "the tragic aura and mystic mysteriousness of the ancient nest" of the Holstein principality¹⁹. In accordance with the conventions of an eighteenth-century gothic novel, the setting exerts considerable influence upon the characters. The last descendant of the ancient dynasty, the dignified secretary of the prince, and the protagonists, the couple in love, turn out to be, as the title of the work suggests, possessed or, in other words, more or less infected with the dark ambience of *Mystoecz*. Another gothic novel marker worth pointing to is clearly the motif of the ghost haunting²⁰.

Possessed also includes elements of other genres such as the eighteenth-century sentimental novel, for example, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761), Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) or, a famous example from Polish literature, Maria Wirtemberska's *Malwina* (1816). This genre has a number of characteristic properties: unhappy or hampered love, sensitivity and simplicity, a specific construction of the narrated world, especially of nature and characters, a type of conflict as well as language and style²¹. All these romance properties resurface in one of the kinds of twentieth-century popular literature: in women's fiction. Gombrowicz had an thorough knowledge of the literature of that period²². He knew the bestsellers of the genre, the novels by Maria Rodziewiczówna, Helena Mniszkówna, Pola Gojawiczyńska, and Irena Zarzycka, and he explicitly mentions them in his introduction to *Pornografia* and in numerous passages in his *Diary*²³. All these writers exploited the motif of unhappy love, the lovers' social inequality, and the conflict between true feeling and a reasonable marriage as requested by family. Gombrowicz employs the very same motif in *Possessed*. The main plot line is based on a love triangle: a noblewoman, a poor tennis instructor, and a prince's heir. Further, he follows the genre conventions in the ways

¹⁹ W. Gombrowicz, *Opętani*, Warszawa 1990, pp. 24 and 35. [All subsequent quotations from *Possessed* come from this edition of the novel; English translations are mine – BL.]

²⁰ Gombrowicz, *Opętani*, p. 61.

²¹ See J. Zawadzka, *Kronika serc czułych. Stereotypy polskiej powieści sentymentalnej I połowy XIX w.*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN 1997, p. 23.

²² See J. Błoński, *Forma, śmiech i rzeczy ostateczne. Studia o Gombrowiczu*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak 1994, p. 259.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 260.

of presenting Maja and Leszczuk; they accentuate emotions²⁴ and the “affinity of nature”²⁵ and the “identity of feeling”²⁶.

One can also notice here some features of one more kind of fictional prose, the romantic existential novel, such as *The Confession of a Child of the Century* (1836) by Alfred de Musset or epic poems by Lord Byron, *The Giaour* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814) or *Lara: A Tale* (1814). This genre is suggested by the motif of boredom in the characterization of Walczak/Leszczuk²⁷, bad feelings²⁸, thoughts of a wasted life²⁹ and, finally, a spiritual transformation of a hero suggested by the change of his name, as in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) by Alexandre Dumas (père). Gombrowicz, however, makes light of the motif since his hero changes only his name with no spiritual transformation. We learn about the change only in a footnote at the bottom of a page: “As it appears there really lives a tennis instructor, a Mr Walczak, and we thusly change the hero’s name to Leszczuk, with the author’s agreement. What a coincidence indeed!”³⁰.

The sentimental and romantic elements of *Possessed* sit side by side with another kind of popular fiction, the novel focussing on the latent social problems of a contemporary city: poverty, illiteracy, social inequality, injustice, human tragedies, etc., as in Eugène Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842–1843)³¹. A Polish example of this kind of text is *Granica* (1935) by Zofia Nałkowska. The sub-genre of psychological realism, very popular in Poland before the World War II, supplies *Possessed* with the motifs of uncurbed urban sprawl³², fast cars³³, illegal business activities, and the morally ambivalent career of Maja’s friends. In the last respect, nothing is said outright, but luxurious accessories, the lavish décor of apartments, and ethically suspect trysts with affluent men in fashionable Warsaw cafés, suggest that the women live off prostitution³⁴. Warsaw, therefore, is disturbing, but also ambiguous since, for Polish audience, it is quite familiar.

A new setting produces new characters and another kind of character, a Warsaw slicker, speaking a specific Warsaw dialect and living off “his own means”³⁵. Despite

²⁴ Gombrowicz, *Possessed*, p. 31.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8–9.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 14–15.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

³¹ See Eco, p. 58.

³² Gombrowicz, *Possessed*, p. 110.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

unemployment, Ewaryst Pitulski is a frequenter of bars, thanks to regular payments from the underworld in exchange for useful information from “cooks, shoppers, servants, milliners, and other working women”³⁶ This vivid, albeit episodic, character finely reflects Warsaw local color from between the wars.

In the same section of *Possessed* we can identify another genre marker: a mysterious crime indicative of detective and crime fiction in the vein of stories by Edgar Allan Poe (e.g. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841)) or works by Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. The murder of Maliniak is also a crime to be solved. Hińcz, a man of science, no less perceptive than Holmes or Poirot, based on Stefan Ossowiecki, an authentic person, famous at that time in Poland³⁷, is the one to solve it. He also finds a rational explanation for the ghosts haunting the Mysłocz castle³⁸.

By using various intertexts in *Possessed*, Gombrowicz makes the most of their semantic potential by putting together various motifs, languages, and conventions. They are bounded by the mechanism of the so-called “harmonized dissonance”, characteristic for the grotesque³⁹. This aesthetic category is evident, for instance, in the dialect/colloquial language used for the description of the mysterious ghosts in the Mysłocz castle⁴⁰. Gombrowicz also makes use of hyperbole and exaggeration, as in the argument between Maja and Leszczuk, full of cruelty and the macabre⁴¹, but in itself absurd, especially in the context of the sentimental aura that surrounds the couple. Characters, places, and objects are ascribed contradictory features and values. The Holstein prince has a “bird-like, aristocratic face”⁴², and the protagonists are seen both as “Romeo and Juliet”⁴³ and as “a stupid vulgar boy and a cast-out girl”⁴⁴. Finally, *Possessed*, like a piece of grotesque proper, mixes various styles: high and low, neutral and disturbing, sentimental/romantic and prosaic. The author consciously emphasizes particular genre markers in some passages, leading the reader down a specific path, just to clash them with passages of a contradictory genre type. A good case in point is the description of the prince’s residence that complies with gothic novel conventions: it is horrifying and accentuates the singularity of the historical place. Yet the description is contrasted,

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 117.

³⁷ See Janion, p. 198.

³⁸ Gombrowicz, *Possessed*, p.226.

³⁹ M. Głowiński, “Groteska” [in:] M. Głowiński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Stawińska, J. Stawiński, *Słownik terminów literackich*. Ed. J. Stawiński. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 2000, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Gombrowicz, *Possessed*, p. 50–51.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 84.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 47.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 55.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 163.

in the very next paragraph, with a report-like account providing topographical details as well as diminutives that reduce the gloomy atmosphere of the locale⁴⁵.

Similar examples are easy to find. Their quantity undoubtedly points to Gombrowicz's conscious strategy. On the one hand, he wanted to ridicule traditional patterns and conventions, commonly used by the authors of the genres alluded to in *Possessed*; on the other, there is a desire to blur the line between "high" and "low" art. The narrated world in the novel is not "directed"⁴⁶, not modeled by the protagonist and changed according to his will, but it functions according to traditional novelistic conventions of setting. The only innovation regards the language, changing with respect to a given genre convention, without the conscious ("creative")⁴⁷ participation of characters.

Possessed, apparently, was not only to be a product for a mass readership, but an experiment binding the features of high and low art, merging various audiences; it lives up to the expectations of the common reader of mass literature, as well as of the reader of a more sophisticated taste; on the one hand, the novel copies the mechanism of mass culture, as described by Eco⁴⁸, and on the other, it is a frivolous and pleasant entertainment for a highbrow reader⁴⁹. As an experiment, therefore, the novel is a success because of the abovementioned recent theatrical adaptations, as well as its explicit comic effects.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁴⁶ Głowiński, "Parodia konstruktywna", p. 292.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 293.

⁴⁸ See Eco, p. 100.

⁴⁹ The references to the Polish national epic *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz are particularly entertaining.

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ПРОСТРАНСТВО



СТАНИСЛАВ ИГНАЦИЙ ВИТКЕВИЧ

ДЮБАЛ
ВАХАЗАР

The cover of the Russian edition of Witkacy's plays (Moscow 1999)