

Michał Głowiński

Constructive Parody: Gombrowicz's "Pornografia"

Literary Studies in Poland 7, 27-46

1981

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Michał Głowiński

Constructive Parody: Gombrowicz's *Pornografia**

1. The World as Parody

“I shall tell you...”

Gombrowicz's last novels begin as if the storyteller and his listeners were separated by a space no broader than the reach of an outstretched arm. This spatial proximity nevertheless denotes distance: a distance in time. For who today expresses himself like this in a novel—a book, not a spoken narration? “I shall tell you a story...”: thus the narration must be taking place by the fireside or on the occasion of a festive dinner, while the narrator can be presumed to be a storyteller who relates his life's adventures as he has lived through them and experienced them. While in the good old days storytelling among friends in circumstances of this sort had become almost a ritual, at a certain moment it became a literary device. “I shall tell you”: this signals the *gawęda* narrative,¹ once rooted in custom but already by Henryk Rzewuski's day an evocation of past times and of an archaic past culture—an evocation behind which (as befitting that conservative) lay the conviction that only in this now irretrievable epoch had there existed genuine values. When

* The essay is one of the studies included in Michał Głowiński's, *Gry powieściowe. Szkice z teorii i historii form narracyjnych* (*The Novel Games. Studies in the Theory and History of Narrative Forms*), Warszawa 1973.

¹ In Polish literary tradition, a gentleman's talkative and informal recounting, presumably to his social equals, of episodes out of his own experience [translator's note].

Gombrowicz recalls the past, however, his purposes are neither programmatic nor sentimental. The devices of the *gawęda* become, for him, only the mark of a particular culture: he summons them up merely in order to incorporate them into a parodistic game, they can no longer be taken seriously.

My writing is based on traditional models. [...] *Pornografia* is a continuation of the *débonnaire* Polish 'country novel' [...] If I rely on traditional forms it is because they are the most perfect and the reader is already used to them. But please don't forget—it is important—that with me Form is always a parody of Form. I use it, but I escape from it. Yes, I look for the connection between these old literary forms which are readable and the newest, the very latest perception of the world. To smuggle the most modern goods in an old-fashioned wagon like *Trans-Atlantyk* or *Pornografia* is what I like doing!²

Thus in spite of the phrase "I will tell you..." the beginning of the novel does not establish direct contact with the reader but instead plunges him into the world of parody—and does so immediately and irrevocably. This is perhaps the first warning to the reader, an indication of how he is to read this work which begins in such an old-fashioned manner.

Gombrowicz's world is a world of parody; in it, no element can appear which would be free of parody. Georges Bataille's words from a work dating back to his surrealist period are remarkably apt:

Il est clair que le monde est purement parodique, c'est-à-dire que chaque chose qu'on regarde est la parodie d'une autre, ou encore la même chose sous une forme décevante. [...]

Tout le monde a conscience que la vie est parodique et qu'il manque une interprétation.

Ainsi le plomb est la parodie de l'or.

L'air est la parodie de l'eau.

Le cerveau est la parodie de l'équateur.

Le coït est la parodie du crime.³

This is precisely what happens in Gombrowicz's works: the thing (in the broadest sense of the word) cannot merely be itself, but instead becomes, as a rule, a reference to something else; there

² D. de Roux (ed.), W. Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, transl. by A. Hamilton, London 1973, p. 137–138.

³ G. Bataille, *L'Anus solaire*, [in:] *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, Paris 1971, p. 81. K. K. Jeleński has pointed to certain relations between Gombrowicz and Bataille (particularly evident in their conceptions of the erotic) in his essay *Gombrowicz le drame et l'antidrame*, [in:] *Gombrowicz*, Paris 1971, p. 383.

exists an unceasing tension between its own reality and that of something else. The phrase "I shall tell you....," to continue with this example, is thus not only the first note of the narrative, but also the parody of a certain style of narrating—and, moreover, of that culture which created it. All-encompassing parody—and that is precisely what we are dealing with in the works of Gombrowicz—does not take form only in relation to other texts; its scope is broader than that. It turns to the culture in which those texts functioned, and to that culture's structures, myths, and persuasions. Of course, parody is capable of encompassing only that which has been verbalized, so its partner and fundament can only be the text or, more indirectly, the elaborational rules sanctioned and required in a given period. Such a text may be treated in various ways—it may be an isolated and unique work—but it is nevertheless primarily the creation and model of a particular culture. As a rule, Gombrowicz is interested in that parody which maintains the broadest possible perspective, the widest scope, parody of a kind which goes so far as to be less interested in placing the work in its broad context than in that cultural context itself as recorded in the work. Zdzisław Łapiński writes:

For Gombrowicz there are no independent art objects, symphonies, poems, and paintings. He takes the language of created works and renders it into a language of interaction. He unwinds the skein and follows it back to the point of departure: the artist shaping his material.⁴

This lack of independence also emerges in what might be called the relation of text to text: the text cannot exist without the support represented by other texts.

What interests Gombrowicz in the shaping of fictional characters is the impersonal—therefore: interaction, people's mutual influence on each other—while in the formation of the work as a whole the most important aspect for him is the mutual influence of work upon work, a singular form of textual interaction or relationship. As Łapiński's essay indicates, these are only different sides of the same process.

⁴ Z. Łapiński, *Ślub w kościele ludzkim (O kategoriach interakcyjnych u Gombrowicza)*, "Twórczość," 1966, nr 9, p. 100. Łapiński's essay is one of the most significant of the critical treatments of Gombrowicz.

Parody that is all-encompassing, parody of a broad scope inclusive of the work's every layer and element, cannot be the end in and of itself. It derives from the issues treated, and it confirms those issues or, in its own manner, expresses them. For this reason these are, in a sense, "inexplicit" parodies.⁵ Their inexplicitness lies in the fact that reading Gombrowicz's works merely as parody flattens them severely, but reading them without recognizing the primacy of the parodic element results in a misreading of the text. Parody here serves a dual function. Like all discourse of this kind, it is a dialogue⁶ with other texts, but it also functions as the rule according to which its own world is constructed; it becomes one of the factors making possible the expression of its own themes, of those themes which in the parodied models not only did not appear but could not have appeared, since these are issues which can be structured only through negation. In Gombrowicz's case one can speak of constructive (or positive) parody. It is this constructive quality of his type of parody which prompts comparison of his works to those of Thomas Mann, who shaped his literary, ethical and philosophical ideas through parodies of traditional epic, hagiographic legend, the *Entwicklungsroman* and myth. In his own constructive parody Gombrowicz refers to forms occupying a time-honoured place in Polish literary tradition. The world-as-parody is also a world-as-construct, a structure thought through down to the last detail and with exquisite precision.

2. The Two Plots

Although *Pornografia* begins like a *gawęda* ("I shall tell you about another experience I had, undoubtedly the most fatal of all"⁷), the *gawęda* element plays here a minimal role; it is a peripheral phenomenon making itself apparent only on those rare occasions when Witold, relating his adventure, addresses the reader directly. Here Gombrowicz took his inspiration from other models of gentry.

⁵ Cf. J. Błoński, *O Gombrowiczu*, "Miesięcznik Literacki," 1970, nr 8.

⁶ "Dialogue" in the sense which M. Bakhtin imparts to this word in his *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*.

⁷ W. Gombrowicz, *Pornografia*, transl. from the French by A. Hamilton, New York, p. 13, All subsequent page references to this edition.

literature (“the *débonnaire* Polish ‘country novel’”)—not, to be sure, so traditionally Polish as the *gawęda*, but equally assimilated and familiar in spite of their having originated under the influence of Europe. The author also mentions “cheap romance on the model of *Rodziewiczówna* or *Zarzycka*,” but his models date back further in literary history to the days when the romance pattern was not associated with the novel alone (which was coming into literature through the back door)—not merely with writing on a level appropriate to it—but also appeared in the national masterpiece of poetry—Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*.

This pattern organized the world of the novel in a lucid manner and unified a variety of elements, creating links between the sphere of the private life and the sphere of history, between the endeavours of romance and the events of history. While romance lent colour and attraction to history, history provided romance not only with the dramatic quality but also with a variegated symbolic meaning. The intimate and the historic achieved equal rank, for in that same year when the Napoleonic army marched on Moscow Tadeusz led Zosia to the altar—and in the world created by poetry these are two events equally important. Mickiewicz’s masterpiece is of particular relevance here since in it novelistic models play a large role,⁸ models exploited in a considerable portion of the European fiction produced during the early decades of the 19th century. The elaboration of these models was the achievement of Walter Scott; it was he who introduced them to literary Europe and provided instruction in how to link romantic plots with historical plots. This novelistic pattern entered various ranks of the literary hierarchy, becoming the organizing component not only of masterpieces but also of the popular literature already in abundant production even at that time. Its association as much with lower- as with high-quality literature was to be of crucial importance for Gombrowicz, since it would permit him to bring a variegated literary reference to bear and thus to invest his work with two different perspectives. Of all the novels in the world, *Pornografia* is certainly the last structured according to the Walter Scott model.⁹

⁸ Cf. K. Wyka, *Pierwiastki powieściowe “Pana Tadeusza”*, [in:] *Pan Tadeusz. Studia o poemacie*, Warszawa 1963.

⁹ Cf. G. Lukacs’ analysis in his study *Der historische Roman*, 1955.

By nature this model was universal in the sense that with little difficulty it was assimilated by diverse cultures and was quickly accepted as integrated and fully domesticated; it enabled the creation of visions of events from the native past as well as pictures of local customs. In *Pornografia* there appear the paraphernalia and situations obligatory for the Polish variety of the novel of this type, with its gentry manor as a centre. Two gentlemen from the city arrive at the manor and are quickly drawn into the routine of gentry life as commonly conceived and, up to a point, undisturbed by the historical events taking place around it (after all, all this does take place during the Nazi occupation). Thus, neighbours are visited, the wedding of a girl to a neighbour gentleman is prepared, shopping expeditions to a nearby town are undertaken, household matters are attended to. We are dealing with landed normalcy at its height. Nevertheless, the ideology "Let the whole world be at war; if only the Polish manor can remain peaceful" does not apply here. It does not apply even though it is true that the powerful threat of war and war's disruptive force fail to obtrude on this stable, almost pastoral world. Gombrowicz is not writing a realistic novel; the Walter Scott pattern of linking the two plots serves instead as an object of parody. Yet it is in fact a constructive parody, one which can become the vehicle for the issues seen by the writer as central.

Both traditional plots are formed in a manner far from traditional. Here, the romance between the young is not a matter of natural attraction but is instead organized, directed and even coerced by the new arrivals from the outside. Frederick and Witold must exercise their expert skills¹⁰ in order to force Karol and Henia together. In Gombrowicz's world nothing is natural; all interpersonal situations belong to the realm of artificiality.

Equally singular as the eroticism in this novel is the manner in which history makes its appearance at the estate. True mention is made of incursions by the military police, of the AK and its

¹⁰ Gombrowicz's "myth of the Stage-Director" is insightfully discussed by A. Sandauer. *Witold Gombrowicz – człowiek i pisarz*. [in:] *Liryka i logika*. Warszawa 1971. (In Polish the verb "reżyserować" – to direct actors on the stage, in its extended use can refer to arranging one's or the other people's life, situations etc. It is in this meaning that the author (and Sandauer) uses the word, which cannot be precisely rendered in English [editor's note].)

struggle against the occupying forces. Nevertheless historical action consists of the organizing of the murder of Siemian, a member of the Resistance in whom his organization has lost confidence. What follows is thus a reversal of the traditional configuration: the action is aimed not against the enemy but him who (as it would have appeared at an earlier stage of the reading) serves to personify the struggle against that enemy. This action too is arranged and directed, though in a somewhat different way: the gentlemen allow themselves to be convinced that Siemian must take leave of this world and that they must help him to that end. Readily accepting the reasons offered to them, they proceed to take action. At the conclusion both plots link up as demanded by tradition, but in a way different from that in the gentry novels. The two plots end not with a heroic deed and the wedding-altar but with a crime in which the young have been joined together. The director has triumphed.

In reading *Pornografia* it is not difficult to perceive that both plots have been merged with apparent carelessness – that their connection is not in accordance with the rules of the *roman bien fait*. These rules hardly matter here, but the fact itself remains significant. All the more so when *Pornografia* is compared with *Trans-Atlantyk*, which is structured – in spite of its *gawęda* narration, by its very nature free – with exceptional precision and with a mastery commonly found in poetry. Comparison with *Kosmos* is also revealing: the latter is constructed according to a principle of the accumulation of several selected and suggestively emphasized elements – on the principle of a *crescendo* which leads to a powerful *fortissimo* at the end. Although in *Pornografia* there is also the element of accretion, it involves only one repeated motif, the killing of the worm: this motif reaches its culmination at the conclusion (“To kill... someone like that? It’s like crushing a worm!”). The device is to become an organizing element in *Kosmos*, in *Pornografia* it is still in the background, and not by this means are both plots joined into a single entity.

The Siemian affair makes its appearance late, at a time by which the pseudoromance intrigue has advanced and the reader might expect that the second plot will be connected with the murder of Amelia. It makes its appearance at an almost random place. This is not, however, an artistic fault. Parody, including constructive parody, has its rights and privileges. The dissonances between the two plots

are significant in *Pornografia*. In the era in which the compulsory poetics of the novel was that elaborated by Walter Scott those links between the historical and the individual could appear natural, could be treated not only as an operative and adequate formulation of the affairs of that world, but also as a factor promoting the communication of truth. When conventions outlive their day, it is precisely their conventionality which emerges, and thus the connections between elements also display their arbitrary nature. There is no reason why parody should reproduce them, especially parody as conceived by Gombrowicz. Structural unity in his works does not generally result from compliance with the rules observed in the original, parodied model; for example, in *Trans-Atlantyk* this unity results not from retention of the *gawęda* form (a form, as a matter of fact, structurally very loose), but from imposing upon that form the poetic quality of higher order. In *Pornografia* this no doubt plays a lesser role, since the dissonances of the parodied form are, in this work, more crucial than the heterogeneous order imposed on that form. One reason for this is that these dissonances serve to mark distance to both the story and the devices of its narration. Distance—“distance to form”—is one of the fundamental categories in Gombrowicz’s aesthetics, as shown both by his reflections in the *Journal* (where distance is discussed again and again) and by his actual practice. Distance functions as a necessary constituent of parody: all the more necessary in the works of Gombrowicz, who has frequent recourse to forms currently occupying humble literary ranks in spite of their former prominence. This is particularly true of *Pornografia*, whose links to the “penny romance” Gombrowicz took no pains to conceal. The distance created in the novel causes it to develop on a number of planes. Gombrowicz wrote about this himself in his comments regarding Andrzej Falkiewicz’s study of *Ślub* (*The Marriage*):

[...] every literary work takes place on various planes, nearer by and further away; at first the story must “move, entertain, amuse,” then it takes on various deeper meanings and only in its final sense does it become (if it succeeds) precipitous, vertiginous, and sometimes mad. It is necessary to establish this principle and maintain it: that the deeper aspects of modern art can be discussed only after grasping the more casual, the easier aspects—those which connect it with earlier art.¹¹

¹¹ *Dziennik (Journal) 1957–1961*. Paris 1962. p. 161.

This self-commentary is also an excellent explanation of *Pornografia*.

3. The Picaresque Novel

Further literary background for *Pornografia* can be found in yet another archaic form: the picaresque novel. Just as the gentry novel is associated with the native tradition that is so important for Gombrowicz, to the same degree the picaresque novel is connected with another question of fundamental significance for him: the question of youth and immaturity. The writer asserted:

In *Pornografia* (according to my long-standing custom, since as early a work as *Ferdydurke* was densely saturated in it) there is revealed another, perhaps more suppressed and less legal goal of man, his need for the Incomplete... the Imperfect... the Second-Rate... the Young.¹²

This is precisely the point at which picaresque elements enter in.

Appearances notwithstanding, these elements had not had to wait until Gombrowicz found himself within the Spanish cultural sphere before they could emerge. Such elements are evident as early as in *Ferdydurke*,¹³ though they reach their highest realization in *Trans-Atlantyk*. In the latter work the narrator-protagonist is a shiftless man of unfixed social status, a man harnessed to a world full of contradictions. Adventure is his basic experience and every type of event is taken simply as an extraordinary adventure; it may take place in a questionable metropolitan district as well as in a millionaire's palace. The protagonist's story is comprised of a sequence of adventures of various types; they need not follow in a cause-result sequence—it is enough for them to be placed in chronological order.

In *Pornografia*, while the picaresque element is less distinct and subject to various kinds of complications, it nevertheless represents the book's essential ingredient. It comes to the fore in this at the very least: that the entire story is treated as one of many adventures experienced by the narrator (as indicated in the novel's opening

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 237.

¹³ Picaresque traits in Gombrowicz's first novel have been analyzed by D. Danek in an article unpublished to date.

sentence already cited more than once); thus, it is not isolated but constitutes one item of a sequence whose entirety is not known to the reader. Relating his adventure Witold (and also Frederick, his other incarnation) is a person of undetermined status; true, it is clear that he keeps to an artistic social circle, but that does not say much. This character's lack of any lasting bond makes him (like the *picaro*) especially open to adventure, since he sees his biography not as the realization of any particular conception or as, say, the outcome of the workings of a destiny, but rather as a string of loosely connected episodes not integrated, so to speak, into a system. The only sense in which he accords any value to his adventures is that he regards them as worth relating. One of the scholars of this form traditional to Spanish literature writes:

The picaresque novel is a pseudo-autobiography. This use of the first-person tense is more than a formal frame. It means that not only the hero and his actions are picaresque, but that everything else in the story is shaped by the perspective of the *picaro*-narrator. Hence the particular consistency and self-saturation of the style. Life is at the same time revived and judged, presented and remembered.¹⁴

It is not, however, a subject of analysis, of intellectual reflection. The *picaro* is a naïve narrator and therefore a perfect example of one who is "immature" (to state the matter in Gombrowicz's terms). He is fascinated by adventure for itself alone and is not capable of defining its problems, of any distance to it. At least from all appearances the narrator of *Pornografia* is just such a narrator. But only from appearances, since (as usually happens in Gombrowicz's works) the borrowing of a traditional form which does not pose a distance between the narrating subject and the related events—
—and neither the picaresque novel nor the *gawęda* nor the gentry story poses such a distance—is just a method of generating distance.

¹⁴ C. Guillen, *Toward a Definition of the Picaresque*, [in:] *Actes du III^e Congrès de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée*, 21–26 VIII 1961, 'S-Gravenhage 1962, p. 258–259. R. Scholes writes about the place of the picaresque novel in contemporary literature in his widely known book *The Fabulators*, New York 1967, pp. 57–94. By way of digression it may be noted here that the narrative *persona* created by Gombrowicz can be called a fabulator. Moreover, even though the book is not devoted to Gombrowicz's works, a number of Scholes' analyses can be applied to them.

In keeping with Gombrowicz's distinctive dialectic, the ostentatious lack of distance—a lack taken over from traditional literary genres now archaic—becomes a device for creating that distance. Yet the distance no longer affects the narrated story alone, or the adventures and the characters involved in them. Instead, it is shaped on a different level; directed towards the narrative devices themselves, it becomes distance to form. In this way the picaresque narrative is also located, for Gombrowicz, within the sphere of parody; this form evoked out of the past must be seen as parodied. Viewed in this manner, *Trans-Atlantyk* and *Pornografia* must be set beside another contemporary work which is at the same time a great picaresque novel and a great parody: Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull*.

Picaresque aspects in Gombrowicz's works are an expression of immaturity and—at the same time—the form in which it is surmounted—both the expression of a fascination with youth and the means of incorporating it into the thought-system created by the author. Picaresque novels were principally tales of young men. But the narrator of *Pornografia*, in spite of his unstabilized position, is not a young man; he has reached that age which seeks young men. And here the matter becomes more complex, for there appears a second picaresque character, Karol—a boy whose past, despite his youth, is rather uncertain and who at the moment of his arrival on the scene already has a considerable host of adventures behind him. Karol does not, however, become the subject of the story; to him a different role has been assigned: that of the object of manipulations by both of the gentlemen contriving the intrigue. Gombrowicz thus introduces picaresque elements at the level of narrative structure, a level at which tradition has not anticipated their presence.

4. The Principle of Empty Epic

Pornografia is not limited to the exploitation (and thereby the questioning) of the gentry romance and the picaresque story only; the object of the parody, and its basis, is essentially the novel-as-genre—or even the epic in general. With considerable ostentation Gombrowicz introduces into his works traditional novelistic devices, sometimes in a deliberately stereotyped and banalized version, but they never serve those functions which were assigned to them in

the classic novel. The writer fills his works with a typically novelistic substance, but does so in such a manner as to reveal or even unmask generic conventions. Thus it might be said that Gombrowicz applies a principle of empty epic. But as befits the constructive parody, this rule is not limited to negation, but also comprises a compositional principle revealed in a multitude of ways. Such is the case even when the traditional novelistic devices serve in the first place as suggestive of the genre in its classic form, and only secondarily as formulation of the author's actual themes.

Nevertheless, these associations form the basis of the principle under discussion, since they are also related to such important matters in Gombrowicz's works as that of directing the world and people as if on a stage. In the majority of his works—and in *Pornografia* in particular—the narrator-protagonist (and the same is true of his *alter ego*) does not experience the novelistic world as reality; while his surroundings admittedly have their unquestioned existence, they do not interest him as a world of rigid contours, ready and given, but are instead for him a plastic mass which he intends to mold in such a way as to suit his designs, thus transforming them into the medium of his ideas and conceptions. Gombrowicz's protagonist, assigned the role of narrator of the adventure, is a kind of demiurge in his stage-directorlike activity (and this applies also to his doubles¹⁵—sometimes, in fact, to an even greater degree than to himself). Thus he differs from the protagonist of an ordinary novel who, to be sure, treats his world as the subject of changes which may arise as a consequence of his actions, but this world is never merely the point of departure for creative activity. The protagonist's working of changes is an important, sometimes perhaps the fundamental element of the action. It is not, however, an element necessary to every type of novel, since the protagonist may comprehend his world primarily in terms of perception (more or less passive); he can also treat it as a pretext for reflection or expression. Yet these instances, too, are irrelevant for Gombrowicz, and the more so because in his writings he is so programmatically anti-psychological. This everpresent managing or directing the world and people as if on a stage is not self-expression in the usual sense of

¹⁵ Sandauer, *op. cit.*, discusses doubles and their role in Gombrowicz's works.

the word, but is primarily constructional activity, conscious and calculated, and carried out according to the adopted principles. Gombrowicz's heroes do not want simply to change the world; they are builders constructing new systems out of available elements. The novel becomes a history of "stage-directional" proceedings.

This has far-reaching consequences. What is relevant and of central importance in the presented world is not that which is but that which is to be—and thus not what Witold and Frederick find on Hipolit's estate at the moment of their arrival but rather what they will make out of it—how they will reshape it. This is central not only for the characters, who arrange the world like a chess arrangement, but also for the writer himself, who in this sphere identifies himself with his characters. And it is central for the reader, also invited to participate in the game, since he comes to know that world only to the extent to which it has become the point of departure for characters' "arranging" activity.

It would seem that since what in the novel is usually treated as reality, however fantastic and incompatible with empirical reality, in *Pornografia* becomes non-reality—merely a device that enables the construction of the significant world—all information about it should disappear, or at least play only a minimal role. But this is not the case. Visions of that world which has lost its relevance occupy a great deal of space in *Pornografia*, an amount of such information is disproportionately large in comparison with the role of that reality; these visions provide the kind of information that would be appropriate if that world were something more than merely the material for rearrangement, a basis for the "stage-directorial" enterprise. Calling the novel (and its traditions) into question on such an important point, Gombrowicz not only maintains all pretenses of novelistic narration, but—to compare his procedure with the usual techniques of contemporary prose—goes so far as to render traditional epic procedures more potent and more numerous by assembling details, composing lengthy descriptions, and making use of highly-developed dialogues. In *Pornografia* Gombrowicz wants to "fill in," as it were, the model of the genre while divesting it of its former functions and justifications. It is precisely this phenomenon which I call the empty epic.

It affects most of the traditional elements of novelistic composi-

tion. In earlier novels generalizations would usually appear which were to serve as formulations of rules prevailing within a given sphere of reality; so they appear in *Pornografia* as well:

By nature he was neither profound nor particularly sensitive, but he belonged to a certain social class, a certain elite, and when we became profound he could no longer remain superficial, if only for social reasons. In certain situations it is not permissible to be "les profound" or "less subtle," this disqualifies you socially.

This excerpt begins with what grade-school Polish literature classes used to call a description of the character, characterization. The passage is already ambiguous: undoubtedly providing a body of essential information about the character, it nevertheless constitutes a parody of a fossilized manner of writing. The reader of *Pornografia* cannot but be aware that today nobody writes "like that" any more, that such a presentation of character is in fact a provocation directed at the reader: while the information is in some way relevant, the form in which it is offered must be treated primarily as the "filling in" of the traditional epic model, which as part of its equipment had sentences of this kind—constructive parody is essentially ambiguous. To an even greater degree this applies to the second sentence, which formulates an apparent general rule. In the modern novel this type of generalizing statement would not usually appear; in Gombrowicz's works it can exist only as parody. And yet in this case general statements (in themselves serving again to fill in the model) formulate an idea important to the author, an idea which concerns a matter of crucial significance for him: interpersonal games (another characteristic example: "After the age of thirty men lapse into monstrosity"—p. 179). Here one might also mention the dual status of this kind of statement: the borderline between negation and a positive formulation swerves capriciously and refuses to be definitively fixed. Parody leads to positive formulation and becomes the paradoxical justification for its presence; or, in other words, the general statement is possible only to the extent to which it is a parodic statement. In any case, it never performs those functions which traditional epic would assign to it.

The same holds true for a large part of the dialogue. Time and again we may observe a parodic statement parodied—a kind

of parody raised to the 2nd power. This is the case of one of Witold's conversations with Frederick, a conversation described as a "minuet of good manners" (p. 34). Parody becomes here unmasked, or "naked" parody. In the case of dialogue this is not, however, what is most important. Some of the conversations (at least at first glance) concern matters that appear to be trivial, irrelevant, or simply stupid. On a first reading of this novel it is unclear why there is such a long and trivial dialogue in the scene with the uncorking of the bottle, and the dialogue has to seem a lot of talk about nothing. Its dramatic and symbolic value is revealed only later in the narration, and then the reader must reinterpret the dialogue, but this new value ascribed to it does not obliterate its triviality: the triviality itself is a calculated component of the game. In the course of the reader's linear progress through the novel, this dialogue remains what it was: it assumes greater importance only when the reader has reached the end of the novel.

In shaping certain dialogues in this way Gombrowicz apparently remains faithful to the genre traditions. In the novel dialogue could be irrelevant as long as this was justified accordingly, and above all if it provided a body of information about the character (in the realistic novel conversations were interpreted as indicating certain characteristics of the speaker). In *Pornografia*, however, such motivations are not respected; a different principle obtains. As in many other cases here too the principle is directly formulated in the novel. At the very outset there appears the sentence: "Frederick was conversing politely with Maria—but was it not simply to avoid saying something else that he sustained this banal conversation?" (p. 24). A parallel question concerns also other activities: "but maybe he only did it to avoid doing something else?" (p. 24). The question returns: we learn that in a conversation with Amelia Frederick has again said something "so as not to say *something else!*" (p. 87). These passages concern, it is true, only one character, but it cannot be claimed that their single task is to reveal his particular mode of behaviour even though this is described as a "disastrous peculiarity." Instead, these passages formulate a principle according to which Gombrowicz constructs at least selected dialogues. An utterance in the dialogue is not treated as an expression of a character, as

a communication which would allow us to reconstruct his personality; most of all, it represents an element of the game, and is subject to the same limitations, pressures and necessities as any other type of non-verbal behaviour. The dialogues making up the novelistic text can thus have, in some measure, a vicarious nature, since their sense is not limited to their literal meaning (though of course they have little in common with symbolism as it is conventionally understood). What is most important is that here the dialogues are treated not as quotations of what was said, as in the traditional novel, but as the realization of one of many possibilities.

The main realm of the empty epic is, however, that of pictures of the external world. As a parody of the gentry novel, this work could not be free of these, so Gombrowicz introduces numerous and varied *realia* and describes landscapes, though they have little bearing upon the intrigue developed in *Pornografia*. Their task is not the creation of atmosphere; the principle "I see and limn, for I yearn for thee"¹⁶ does not hold here. Primarily they serve to create in the novel a certain type of parodic whole, investing the work with a concrete and hard substance so that the epic-narrative traditions might be prominent continuously in the course of reading.

This is evident even in details, such as the triumphant proclamation announcing that "a compote was served," even though the fact had little significance other than, at most, to indicate that the dinner is coming to an end. Above all, however, it is manifest in descriptions, of which *Pornografia* has many. Often they seem simply non-functional and superfluous, acting as something in the nature of cotton-wads serving to plug up holes in the narrative. But this non-functionality is illusory, for it applies only to certain episodes and disappears when the matter is viewed in the context of the novel as a whole. It disappears in two senses. First because owing to the descriptive interludes the interpersonal relationships—Gombrowicz's main interest—cease to be abstract schemes and become grounded in a concrete world, a fact which is important even when—as in *Pornografia*—that world does not determine these relationships, since

¹⁶ A famous and well known phrase from the opening of Book I of Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, transl. by W. Kirkconnell, University of Toronto Press, 1962 [editor's note].

there is no strict interdependence between the two spheres. Secondly, the descriptive episodes serve to evoke the traditional novelistic model and hence are, indirectly, one of the essential factors in the parody.

Descriptions are not spaced at equal distances throughout the novel; for example, they appear in a particularly dense accumulation in the chapter about Witold and Karol's expedition to Ostrowiec for oil. Landscapes viewed in the course of the ride are presented by the author not because he ascribes any particular significance to them but primarily because the tradition of gentry fiction demands it. Description in *Pornografia* can only be parody, though what one might call the degree and the distinctness of this parody can vary. [...]

One of the manifestations of the empty epic is accumulation of words (usually adjectives or adverbs) which are there to serve descriptive functions but are put together in such a way as to say essentially nothing about the object: for example, "the little square was white, green, blue, hot" (p. 30). Composed in this way these accumulations appear to call themselves into question; the mere assembling of these colours does not create a picture of the town's colourscape. As it happens, accumulations profusely practiced by Gombrowicz testify that underlying his parodic style is also that tradition of Polish prose which was fully represented by Berent and Żeromski.

Another example of the operation of the rule under discussion are those descriptions in which there unexpectedly appears a general formula which erases, as it were, the concreteness of the description up to that point:

I started to walk about the room and finally went out [...] onto the field—
—where I was greeted by the sleepiness of the bulging land, the line of the hills against the fleeing heavens, and the mounting prenocturnal onrush of all things.

The general phrase "all things" in some measure invalidates the details mentioned previously; it permits one to overlook them and instead directs attention to that which at this moment of the narration is most important and entirely independent of how the night landscape is perceived by Witold. In its essence the empty epic consists of excluding all meaning from the elements belonging to the tradi-

tional narrative model, and thus in dissociating those elements from matters truly central to the novel. This ostensible fidelity to the tradition is the most extreme negation of it. Parody reduces to their primary components those constructs which once constituted a compact whole, superbly deliberate and functional. But the principle of empty epic is not merely the plaything of a virtuoso who plays with the conventions of a past age in order to show his literary artistry; it leads to what was most essential to Gombrowicz. His writing can be compared to the works of Igor Stravinsky, who shaped his own inimitable style by paraphrasing works from former eras. What the works of Pergolesi, Rossini, and Tchaikovsky were for Stravinsky, the *gawęda*, old gentry stories, the picaresque novel and the sacrosanct narrative devices of the realistic novel are for Gombrowicz.

5. Language and Artificiality

This attitude to the past is at the very center of Gombrowicz's literary system: the artist is to imitate those forms which can no longer be imitated.¹⁷ This view is quite explicit in one of his last public statements, in a conversation with François Bondy in 1969:

La forme ne doit pas être adéquate au contenu, mais au contraire impropre: car c'est justement ainsi que se montrent toutes les autres incongruités et qu'on obtient cette distance nécessaire envers la forme, envers toute tradition et culture. Car l'homme doit être maître des formes qu'il adopte et non esclave de celles-ci¹⁸.

Thus the writer reverses one of those aesthetic injunctions most deeply anchored in the European consciousness. Not only does distance to form become important, but also form becomes a derivative, or even merely a tool, of distance. Gombrowicz, like the Romantic ironists, maintains the belief that the writer has no right to identify himself with his expression; he must remain above it.

Gombrowicz's literary philosophy is strikingly homologous in

¹⁷ I had the privilege to talk with Gombrowicz in the spring of 1963 in Paris, soon after his arrival from Argentina. The composer Romuald Twardowski also took part in this conversation and it was he who was advised by Gombrowicz, "Imitate Schubert, because him it is no longer possible to imitate."

¹⁸ *Gombrowicz*, p. 283.

regard to the principles which govern the world created by him — with regard to the humanistic themes registered in it. To return to our point of departure: just as in the human condition relations of one person to another are most important, in literature the highest importance accrues to the work's relation to other texts, to socially accepted conventions of writing. These are two aspects of the same issue. "For the writer," notes Łapiński in the essay already cited, "social role is determined by a certain literary *usus*." This homology manifests itself in the relation of behavioural patterns to literary ones, their common basis being language. Language is not only an element of tension between characters and their interactions, but also the substance with which the writer is working—and thus, in turn, a factor of other tensions and interactions.

Here language is never an ordinary and indifferent medium.

[...] in Gombrowicz's strategy [Kijowski writes] it is the strategy of violence which one person inflicts on another, on others, in order to free himself from the coercion inflicted on him; it is the colourful plumage of the conquering soul. According to Gombrowicz man has the horrible duty of creating the world from its foundation, from the most primitive biology to God and his cosmic plans.¹⁹

In Gombrowicz's world language is never innocent; it is not a natural phenomenon, and it cannot be trusted. The literary work becomes in its own way a criticism of language²⁰ and thus also of culture of which it is a component. But that is not all; it is also a specific form of literary self-reflection; on such an assumption language is not simply to be used but to be thought about as well; it becomes a problem. "Le langage — writes Merleau-Ponty — ne reste énigmatique que pour qui continue de l'interroger, c'est-à-dire d'en parler."²¹ Literature, in Gombrowicz's conception of it, includes asking questions of language. This process is not by nature thematic; questions need not be formulated, they are inherent in the very manner of writing. Making use of stylistic models out of the past must pose problems. Deprived of their transparency, they are incapable

¹⁹ A. Kijowski, *Kategorie Gombrowicza*, "Twórczość," 1971, nr 11, p. 65. Interesting reflections on Gombrowicz's philosophy of language can be found in J. Kosiński, *Hypothèque sur soi-même*, [in:] *Gombrowicz*, p. 427–430.

²⁰ G. Weiler includes an interesting analysis of "language criticism" in his book *Mauthner's Critique of Language*, Cambridge 1970.

²¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du monde*, Paris 1969, p. 165.

of suggesting a contiguity with things and situation; founded in an anachronic cultural formation, they cannot appear natural. Gombrowicz's parody—the imitation of that which it is no longer possible to imitate—is in fact something more than parody: it reveals its principles and limitations itself, and it imposes on the world of its narrative (as well as on the narrative itself) a certain order which must be felt as artificial. And this is the point. For the writer who is a critic of language all discourse, every speech act, belongs to the realm of artificiality. This leads Gombrowicz to far-reaching conclusions: that the writer is left with nothing else than to intensify that artificiality and that in this way he can not only avoid becoming its victim but turn it to his own advantage—true, out of it he builds his work, but also thanks to it he creates a distance to his own discourse.

Sincerity? As a writer, it is what I fear most. In literature sincerity leads nowhere. There is another of the dynamic antinomies of art: the more artificial we are, the closer we come to frankness. Artificiality allows the artist to approach shameful truths.²²

This explains the linguistic procedures employed by Gombrowicz in all his narrative and dramatic writing (in the *Journal* these matters take on a somewhat different shape), including *Pornografia*, even though in the latter they do not achieve the same advanced degree of development as in *Tram-Atlantyck* and certain sections of *Ferdydurke*. The principle, however, is the same: without it this remarkable gentry story, set in the Nazi occupation, telling of a landed estate on which two middle-aged gentlemen organize an uncanny intrigue, would have been impossible. The intrigue is a display of artificiality just as a display of artificiality is the way it is told. Artificiality—arising from the nature of language and, indirectly, from the very human condition—becomes the major factor organizing the work.²³

²² De Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²³ When I have already finished writing this article I happened upon an analysis of *Pornografia* written by the American critic R. Boyers and entitled *Aspects of the Perverse in Gombrowicz's Pornografia*. This perhaps most comprehensive treatment of the novel to date is to be found in the quarterly "Salmagundi." Fall 1971, nr 17, pp. 19–46.