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## The Gombrowicz case

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Literary Studies in Poland 10, 107-113

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1983

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Janusz Sławiński

## The Gombrowicz Case

It has already attained extraordinary proportions, yet it is still growing with increasing speed. We can foresee how it will end. The Gombrowicz case, just like any much talked about affair, at some stage has to reach a critical point: it must be immobilized in the dead sea of words. The profusion of commentaries, explanations, divagations, deliberations, recollections, testimonies, effusions, personal attitudes and professions of faith must invariably lead to exhaustion, boredom and indifference (though the time may yet be distant), which as a rule accompany the final phases of canonization in culture. A spark of life will no doubt appear along with those who belittle the giants—their time will come when society agrees upon Gombrowicz's place in the exclusive club of the bards of our native literature. A new evaluation of his work will incite the Writer's partisans to put forward new arguments in his favour. The heat of the discussion may—at best—produce a few more clever interpretative remarks for the use of future textbooks on the history of literature. The essence of the matter will, however, remain the same. Gombrowicz's name will be inscribed on compulsory reading lists, and professor Jan Błoński, senior member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, will reveal to young people the secrets of Gombrowicz's thought and style in his commentaries to the editions by the series „Biblioteka Narodowa”. Naturally, in the first place will come *Ferdydurke*; its venom will be watered down (it has already been...). But we can rest assured: some day even *Cosmos*, Gombrowicz's most dangerous book, will appear on the reading list for schoolchildren, not to mention *Pornografia* (*Pornography*) which will supersede *Barwy walki* (*The Colours of Fight*).

As for Gombrowicz's journals, *Dzienniki*, they will be listed among the books for additional reading, since they are suitable for young people whose minds are more refined than the average. And that will be the end of the Gombrowicz case. From then onwards his work will be subjected to the rules which govern the life of literary tradition, to the same extent as the works of Konopnicka, Prus or Żeromski.

However, the Case is still under way, and it is a most interesting case, perhaps more than any other such affair in postwar literary culture. It is certainly more involved than the Witkacy Case, which we have been able to observe in its final stages only. Among its many aspect, the one that appears to be of the greatest significance concerns literature directly.

Gombrowicz's writing has become a highly potent model of literary success, on a scale than no Polish writer before him has ever experienced. Gombrowicz is a telling example of an author who was able to make use of the sources here to produce values which would be highly esteemed there (in Europe, in the whole world...). What is more, he did not have to pay the price of abandoning his language, the local questions he was interested in, our mentality, our regional illusions and even our foolish ideas. On the contrary—they helped Gombrowicz to achieve world fame: the "Polish form" not only did not hinder him, but it proved to be the indispensable condition for his acceptance as a writer who has something important to say, something personal which can contribute to the augmentation of ideas and values in the world. It would be hard to overestimate the pedagogic (and therapeutic) significance of such an example. It invalidates the ancient complex of our literature: the conviction that it is inaccessible to the outsider, that the "Polish character" of its experiences (historical, sociopsychological, moral, etc.) expressed in literature cannot be understood elsewhere. The conflicts, problems and axiologies which serve as a natural reference for Polish writers are *a priori* considered impossible to grasp by foreign readers. Being hermetic, Polish literature is confined to a limited area of influence. When it tries to move out beyond these limits, what usually happens is that it assumes some kind of pose to suit the supposed tastes of foreign readers and it imitates foreign styles, including fashionable issues or conventions. Yet these are

illusory calculations: nobody is going to import goods which he has enough of, when his own are of a better quality. Polish literature abroad is either misunderstood or is simply superfluous. Gombrowicz who is actually an expert in our "exportation" complexes, makes a breakthrough in all this hopelessness. He shows that it is possible for a Polish writer's works to circulate naturally and freely in Europe. This fact overwhelms all those who hanker after success.

The new wave originated by Gombrowicz must surely spill over into all our writing. Already we can see it mounting. In recent years a good many writers, both young and experienced authors, have taken up the challenge proposed by Gombrowicz. At times the game they play is imaginative and refined, in other instances it is wholly primitive and finds fulfilment in superficial imitation. In every case, however, there is the same first step: an admiring or envious observation of Gombrowicz's writing (how did he do that?), the need to measure up to what is attractive in it (in the way of ideas or language...), and the burning desire to do something similar. Many are tempted to repeat in their own way a part of one of Gombrowicz's works: is this not the case of Konwicki, who in his *Kalendarz i klepsydra* (*The Calendar and the Hour-Glass*) produced a new version of *Dzienniki*? It is in the least expected of contexts that today we can find Gombrowicz's ideas, his intonations, stylistic whims, his sayings and witticisms. To write something in his style is to find oneself in a better milieu. Gombrowicz will produce a multitude of gombrowiczs, that cannot be avoided.

It is not, however, this aspect of the Case—though it is the most important aspect—that I would like to expand. We will certainly come back to it. The issue to which we shall now turn is linked with the professional interests of the periodical *Teksty*. The need to imitate Gombrowicz is accompanied by the acute need to cover reams on the subject of Gombrowicz. Who has not written about him? Is there any periodical which has not had a commentary on his work? In my own circle of friends five books are currently being written about Gombrowicz—mostly theses for Doctor's diplomas. There is no way the Master's theses can be counted. A kind of epidemic disease has spread over students of Polish literature: every other candidate for a literary début offers *Teksty* a dissertation on *Cosmos* or *Dzienniki*. Most of these

dissertations are not outstanding. At one point in the editor's office we took the decision not to accept any articles on Gombrowicz except those written by well-known critics. A few years ago it was a pleasure to read what each of Gombrowicz's admirers had to say about him; every article seemed fresh, it seemed to reveal dangerous new values. All this had the charm of an exciting expedition to the regions of unorthodox moral, ideological or aesthetic views. Beginnings can be agreeable. It is sometimes pleasant to watch a few pebbles rolling down a slope; but oddly enough the pleasure disappears when an avalanche of stones starts falling on top of your head. This is the picture of today's writing about Gombrowicz: the overabundance of texts is no longer satisfying, on the contrary – it is tedious and discouraging. There exists now a certain canon in the interpretation of Gombrowicz's work, and it is monotonously reproduced by a succession of commentators. The development of new issues is very restricted. This striking disproportion shows that the study of Gombrowicz has reached a barrier which it cannot cross, and that at this early stage it is already in a critical position. We can point out two causes of this situation, one of them somewhat less important than the other.

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The first cause is connected with the existing circumstances and it will stop operating—we hope—in the foreseeable future. The growth of studies devoted to Gombrowicz is a cultural phenomenon without precedent: it takes place in a situation where there are almost no texts by Gombrowicz available to readers. The last editions of his early works appeared in Poland twenty years ago. His later works were never published in his native country. The only exception are Gombrowicz's plays, which have been published on various occasions as an accompaniment to theatrical performances. The activity of critics therefore faces a reading public which knows little or nothing about the object of interpretation. In a literary periodical, the reader comes across subtle considerations on the abysmal depths of Gombrowicz's works, which he has not had the opportunity to read. He is told that *Cosmos* is one of the greatest

Polish novels, and he treats this piece of information like the story about the iron wolf (he may for instance think to himself: If it is one of the greatest novels, then it is probably something like *Slawa i chwala—Fame and Glory*—by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz). The countless critical studies have become a substitute for Gombrowicz's works, and in today's literary life they have a double function: they represent critical thought and at the same time they have to take the place of their object. The circle of readers who are able to form their own opinion on what is said about Gombrowicz's work is very small, in fact it is more or less restricted to the experts on the matter.

Someone might say: all that is true, but in what way is it connected with the situation of studies on Gombrowicz? After all these studies will always be produced by experts, even when all of Gombrowicz's works have been made accessible to readers. I believe these facts are related. It is true that it is the experts who develop knowledge on a particular subject; however, this knowledge is rooted in the wider social reading practice — it is its sublimated continuation. There is no doubt about the fact that the greater the number of individual readers' points of view and the receptive strategies of their environment, the larger the repertoire of interpretative approaches that can be introduced by critics. Today's reception of Gombrowicz takes place in a literary community which is almost homogeneous. There is no variation in the way a text of his is received. The socioliterary uniformity of the readers leads to a one-track receptive strategy, and this in turn causes the instruments of critical interpretation to become inflexible, schematic, and to be quickly drained.

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Let us now turn to the second and more important cause of the crisis. The former cause was connected with outer circumstances of literary life; the cause we are about to discuss is so to speak inside the very object of study. Any piece of writing contains the implicit method in which it should be interpreted: a set of categories to be used, rules to determine its meaning, immanent verifications

of value. In its message to the readers, it suggests what they should think of it (and how). This message is not always hidden; it is sometimes formulated outright—and it can then play the role of a set of instructions. As we all know, instructions are treated in various ways: some are ignored altogether, others are followed initially, then quickly forgotten, others still are rejected on the grounds that they are useless or even harmful (they induce mistakes). Very few instructions have an actual influence on the ways a literary work is received by both readers and critics. This rare influence is exerted by Gombrowicz's autocommentaries. It would be very hard to point to an instance of greater control by a writer over the reception of his works. Gombrowicz managed to do this by publishing a whole series of acute and clever confessions, justifications, excuses, declarations and explanations (in *Dzienniki*; in *Entretiens* with Dominic de Roux). He set up a network of safety precautions, full of mysterious gates, roads for turning back, hidden traps, false signposts, subterranean corridors and labyrinths. In this way he planned the research that would be carried out on his works, he defined its main topics and methodology. The army of interpreters now concentrates on implementing that programme. Their work is an endless sequence of paraphrases of the sentences in Gombrowicz's autocommentaries. Their tools are the categories named by the writer himself: Form, Immaturity, Juniority, Inferiority, Interpersonal, Ugly Face... Gombrowicz has turned out to be the Chief Authority on Gombrowicz; not only has he initiated a sub-discipline in Polish literary studies, but he has also become an unsurpassable expert on himself. The works of his pupils and successors prove that Gombrowicz is entirely self-sufficient, because he actually interprets himself. This must put him in a good mood: there is nothing more satisfying than to know that people think of us just as we would like them to think. This situation, however, cannot be tolerated in the long run. Should literary criticism concern itself with the moods of the deceased? It is certainly not its duty to do so. Similarly, it should be indifferent to the tempers of living authors, when their works fall within its sphere of interest. As a matter of fact, if critics are to pay any attention to the feelings of a writer, it would be much better if they put him in a bad mood. His irritation or protest will often indicate that certain new facts have been

revealed, facts he did not or simply could not know about. The weakest point in the work of the critics is their almost exclusive use of Gombrowicz's language. By identifying themselves with one aspect of his work, they hope to gain power over it as a whole, but this has become a trap. Up to a certain time their method did not appear dangerous: that particular phase of becoming acquainted with the writer's point of view is indispensable. It must not, however, extend beyond measure. There comes a moment when that point of view demands to be explained. From then on, continued submissiveness on the part of the interpreter no longer makes sense. He should now cast aside what he gained in the first phase and look upon it as an object of interpretation. He must adopt other points of view which are separate from the object and beyond the self-awareness of the writer. This has not yet happened. Literary criticism is still at the stage of interpreting Gombrowicz by means of Gombrowicz, and it is therefore restricted to tautological explanations which do not lead to any new issues. I would not want to overlook the praiseworthy exceptions, particularly those linked with the names of some of my Friends: Łapiński's confrontation of Gombrowicz's categories with the objectives of modern social psychology, the analysis of the mechanisms of Gombrowicz's parody initiated by Głowiński, Błoński's reflections on Gombrowicz's attitude to the culture of the gentry. Though these are no more than individual efforts, they pave the way for future interpretation and point to new varieties of instruments in research. However, they are not sufficient to set the style for literary criticism pertaining to Gombrowicz. There is something truly puzzling in the fact that the answer to such defiant and aggressive work as that of Gombrowicz is the writing of docile exegetists and diffident glossators.

Experts on Gombrowicz, it is high time you snapped out of this impotence!

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*