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## On How Gombrowicz's Antinomies May Cause Problems in Literary Interpretations

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Kazimierz Bartoszyński

## On How Gombrowicz's Antinomies May Cause Problems in Literary Interpretations

### 1

Witold Gombrowicz's philosophy may be called the philosophy of social interaction: it centres on the way people shape one another, how they attribute „roles” to themselves or to others, and on the question of “maturity” or of Form—to use the word preferred by Gombrowicz, though it is highly ambiguous and enigmatic. If we refer to a not so distant historical context, we can say that the concept of interaction, of relating to another person, has assumed in this philosophy the key role of Freud's subconscious.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Gombrowicz uncovered the manifold functions of interacting seems to be more than just one of his usual “tactical endeavours” or a set of “defence mechanisms.” It is the very substance of what the writer had to say, or rather to demonstrate (since “saying” implies that one “has been formed” and undermines the logic of the “interaction” thesis).

Gombrowicz believes in the loss of freedom and authenticity through interaction, but also in gaining Form or identity by that very means. The question of whether one is active or passive is of no consequence in the process of determining one's place in interaction. Coming into contact with another person e.g. in a con-

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Kijowski. „Strategia Gombrowicza” (Gombrowicz's Strategies), [in:] *Problemy literatury polskiej lat 1880–1939*. Series no. 2. Wrocław 1974.

versation demands that one should assume a social role. This is even more obvious in literary interaction, where a literary work forms the core of an intricate communication process, which is in fact a game with a number of clashes between the author and the reader; each in turn assumes a major role and determines the other's position, either through an active (creative) or a passive (receptive) attitude.

If we study this more closely it can easily be seen that passive behaviour leads to self-determination, as it is a silent acceptance of the imposed Form: e.g. not questioning one's place in the existing system, within the set range of options. On the other hand, active behaviour also leads to self-determination when a person creates a myth and "encloses" himself. This second type of behaviour may be described in the following way:

A. Self-determination by gradual limitation of random behaviour: each successive action reduces the scope of further actions. Gombrowicz described this process as follows:

A person says something and adapts himself to what he has said. One word gives birth to another. One scene engenders the next. There is an unceasing compulsion to give reality a meaningful shape (E 88).<sup>2</sup>

B. Self-determination by imposing oneself upon another person, by generating a binding and dominant role "towards" him.

C. Self-determination in a paradoxical way: by criticizing Form, by evading Form. Gombrowicz approached this issue with great perspicacity, and was in fact obsessed with it. This is how he formulated some of his thoughts:

undoubtedly in the very nature of my artistic effort there was a kind of contradiction, for by questioning form, my works were creating form... and they were defining me personally more and more (E 61).

My attempts at effacing form, where have they led me? They have led me to form. I spent so much time crushing it that in the end I became an author who writes about form—this then is the shape I have assumed, and how I may be defined (E 143).

These matters are close to the existential dilemma: to be negated (though tolerated) by someone else, or to assume an attitude towards

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<sup>2</sup> "E" stands for: D. de Roux, *Entretiens avec Gombrowicz*, Paris 1969. The number indicates the page.

him—which means: to gain identity, but which also implies “to exist for him,” to obtain a “role,” to be reified.<sup>3</sup> In the case of existentialism, the situation is reversible: it is possible to keep one’s independence, to exist *pour soi*, to obtain freedom. Gombrowicz considers even this to be a form of self-determination and reification.

Being determined (be it actively or passively) may mean losing one’s independence from Form, it may mean no longer being able to decide freely for oneself and will imply the loss of the openness of one’s “project.” How then can one achieve freedom from Form? The solution (if ever it is sought) consists in Gombrowicz’s case in constant oscillation, in an unending dynamism, in not relating to anyone, but also—in not reflecting, being difficult to pin-point, avoiding identification.<sup>4</sup> These features are inherent in the concept of youth or “immaturity”. However the matter is rather complicated, and the ideas which outline the much-desired way of “fleeing” are ambivalent. In Gombrowicz’s *Dziennik (Journal)* we read that *Ferdynand* “depicts the struggle for maturity in someone who is in love with his own immaturity” (D II 12).<sup>5</sup> In de Roux’s *Entretiens* we find the sententious statement about man “vacillating between God and Youth” (E 111). Here again one may draw a comparison with existentialism: the idea of man being suspended between the openness of youth and the determination of deity resembles the existential antithesis of freedom and Existence. It also calls to mind the implications of not relating to anything, as described by existentialism (particularly by Camus in *L’Etranger*): an existence “without a plan,” isolated in time, absurd.<sup>6</sup> The price which must be paid for “immaturity” (freedom) is the desert of absurdity: the more freedom a man has, the less personality and structure. On this issue which mattered so much to him, Gombrowicz made the following forcible remark:

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<sup>3</sup> See W. Gromczyński, *Człowiek. Świat rzeczy. Bóg – w filozofii Sartre’a (Man. The Material World. God—in the Philosophy of Sartre)*, Warszawa 1969, pp. 241–242.

<sup>4</sup> A penetrating analysis of these matters is to be found in J. Błoński, „O Gombrowiczu” (On G.), *Miesięcznik Literacki*, 1970, no. 8.

<sup>5</sup> “D II” stands for: W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1957–1961 (Journal)*, Paris 1962. “D I” will refer to: W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1953–1956*, Paris 1957.

<sup>6</sup> See J.-P. Sartre, „Explication de L’Etranger”, [in:] *Situations I*, Paris 1946.

I cannot be myself, yet I want to be myself and I have to be myself—that is the antinomy (D II 11).

Modern sociology which has a totally empirical approach has established the existence of the following problem: how can one not be condemned to a restrictive determination by conforming to a standard, yet at the same time avoid an excess of choices, i.e. “the stress of choosing.”<sup>7</sup> These are all “antinomies of freedom” formulated by Gombrowicz, sociologists, and also by Sartre, when he discussed the temporal structure of the novel and questioned both those structures which determined the hero and those which were open, for they did not develop the process of “temporization.”

Gombrowicz’s writing revolves round the issue of the antinomy of freedom.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, another antinomy, connected with the first, and which is a consequence of the thesis that a person’s identity is forged through interaction. The problem is that it is a generalization of the type: “all statements are doubtful.” Such statements of course contain the error *petitionis principii*, and may even be called “the paradox of the liar.” In questioning their own correctness as well as that of all other statements, they create an antinomy. Proclaiming the interaction thesis implies one’s subordination to it and throws doubt upon the objectiveness of the thesis, which has been formed according to one’s own “formation.” It may therefore be said that the thesis implies “the antinomy of interaction.”

Gombrowicz was surely aware of this antinomy, the proof of this being his views on “formation” through a struggle against Form. However in some of the instances when he discussed the problem of antinomy one may detect certain intellectual “tactical moves” which aimed at avoiding antinomy or “dodging” it. In order to see this, one must realize that possibly the only way of protecting the thesis which claims that our views are shaped through interaction from becoming an antinomy is to give it a logical status different

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<sup>7</sup> See A. Toffler, *Szok przyszłości (The Shock of the Future)*, transl. by E. Ryszka and W. Osiatyński, Warszawa 1974, pp. 281–282, 333–334. ..

<sup>8</sup> The problem of antinomy in Gombrowicz’s work has been studied by Błoński, and earlier on by Z. Łapiński, „Ślub w kościele ludzkim” (The Marriage in Human Church), *Twórczość*, 1966, fasc. 9.

from that of the statements on which it focusses its attention. It should be considered a primary postulate, a claim which is "special" and cannot be questioned. Like the Cartesian *cogito* or Ingarden's "intuition in experiencing."<sup>9</sup>

It appears that Gombrowicz's way of pronouncing the "interaction" thesis is characterized by detachment *vis-à-vis* statements which make use of clearly formulated concepts, which have a logical motivation, and are therefore in a sense "normal." In order to confirm these observations, it is necessary to consider Gombrowicz's attitude to existentialism.<sup>10</sup> It is obvious that he must have been evasive in his assessment of all philosophical doctrines, in order not to be involved in them through affirmation or negation, which in turn would mean determining his outlook. This kind of attitude was particularly significant in the case of existentialism, since that particular philosophy formulated the ideas which were behind Gombrowicz's belief that a person's identity became determined through interaction, and that the latter was a threat to man's individual freedom.

This is what Gombrowicz said about it:

*Ferdynand* is existential to the marrow [...] because a man is created by other people, because people form one another, that is existence, not essence (D I 265–266).

Sartre seemed to codify my own feelings (E 139).

However, Gombrowicz's attitude to existentialism is different at various stages of his career, and it is marked by much contradiction and hesitation. The following is his personal view on the matter:

My attitude to existentialism is of a tiring vagueness and is very tense. I follow it myself, yet I do not trust it [...] A philosophy which strives for authenticity in actual fact leads us to a monstrous falsehood (D I 268).

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<sup>9</sup> See R. Ingarden, „O niebezpieczeństwie *petitionis principii* w teorii poznania” (On the Danger of *petitionis principii* in the Theory of Cognition), [in:] *U podstaw teorii poznania*, part I, Warszawa 1971, pp. 368–378.

<sup>10</sup> See R. Barilli, „Sartre et Camus jugés dans le *Journal*,” [in:] Gombrowicz, ed. by C. Jelenski and D. de Roux, Paris 1971; M. Głowiński, „Parodia konstruktywna. O *Pornografii* Gombrowicza” (The Constructive Parody. On G's *Pornography*), [in:] *Gry powieściowe*, Warszawa 1973.

The above reveals to us that Gombrowicz perceived in existentialism certain contradictions which could be a threat to himself, and he came near to concluding that if we should express the thesis on man's determination by fixed notions (i. e. predetermined sets of ideas)—we must inevitably arrive at an antinomy. To quote Gombrowicz's unequivocal opinion:

[Existentialism] cannot be sustained in any kind of philosophical thought where a model of thinking is unavoidable. As a result, existentialism becomes a trap: that antirationalistic titbit entices the gullible into one more notional cage [...] One could swear, seeing these thinkers, that they want to dance and remain seated (D II 250).

It appears that having discovered these contradictions, Gombrowicz had good grounds for not identifying himself with existentialism and for stressing the fact that in his approach the interaction thesis had a different status; it did not have to conform to any "models of thinking" or any philosophy with predetermined notions. It had the status of an artistic enunciation, or that of a special life *praxis*. In this sense the interaction thesis can only be demonstrated in a literary presentation of the relation between sender and recipient, or in one's own biography.<sup>11</sup> It cannot be formulated as a statement, it can only be presented in a series of unspoken acts.<sup>12</sup> In these ways one may evade the abstract and scientific character of the thesis and free it from the rigours of logic which give rise to antinomy. At the same time it can acquire the features of a fundamental starting point. The intention of attributing to the thesis such high qualifications can be combined with a nonchalant attitude towards those who try to formulate it in (dubious) scientific terms. This unprofessional and "common sense" approach can only be justified where elementary statements are concerned, for they are not affected by the antinomies which undermine the statements put forward by "professionals". Here are some excerpts from *Journal* and *Entretiens*, which appear to follow this line of thought:

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<sup>11</sup> The problem of "biographical demonstration" is discussed by Z. Łapiński, „Życie i twórczość czy dwie twórczości?” (Life and Work or Two Types of Creative Work), [in:] *Biografia – geografia – kultura literacka*, Wrocław 1975.

<sup>12</sup> See M. Hempoliński, *Brytyjska filozofia analityczna (British Analytical Philosophy)*, Warszawa 1974, pp. 115–124.

When you read my journal, what is your impression? Is it not the impression that a peasant has come into a vibrating, seething factory, and he strolls along as if he were in his own garden? In one place there is a red-hot oven which produces existentialisms, in another Sartre prepares his freedom-responsibility out of fiery lead [...] But I walk in the midst of these machines and products lost in thought and without taking much interest, just as if I was walking in my orchard back in the village. Now and then I try this or that (a pear or a plum) and I say to myself: Hmmm... Hm... this is too hard for my liking [...] or: Ah, this would not be bad, if it were not so blazing-red (D I 138).

I do not question the paths of thought and intuition which led them to this doctrine [...] I bring back to life a plain, concrete world, in which they can breathe (D I 275).

My writing is a game, it is without intention, plan or purpose (E 145).

There should be by now little doubt as to the fact that Gombrowicz aims at transferring all (essential) elements which are close to existentialism onto a different intellectual plane. Attempts have been made at describing the specific character of the plane as well as the reasons for the "transfer," though many a time it has been forgotten that Gombrowicz's "polemic" with existentialism was a discussion between someone who was content to criticize "formation" and those who proclaimed a definite, positive moral doctrine.

We may recapitulate by stating that Gombrowicz's writing is permeated by two main issues involving antinomy:

(a) how to achieve an undetermined identity, how not to be subjugated either by one's passiveness or by one's activeness, and yet avoid an empty and vague kind of freedom;

(b) how to pronounce the thesis on man's determination through interaction without undermining the thesis through its determination.

The second of these problems (as has been shown) is solved by diagnosing the "interaction" thesis as being fundamental, which means it cannot be submitted to any discursive notional formulation or to verification. Thanks to this measure the thesis cannot be proved false by a metastatement. Perhaps a sufficient way of escaping antinomy is to present the interaction thesis not in the form of a proclamation but as a model constructed by the world presented in a work of literature.

Gombrowicz's attitude to the first of the above antinomies can be compared with the attitude adopted long before by the



sociology of knowledge, when it tried to find a way of escaping from “false awareness” (i. e. socially determined awareness). The idea was to promote the ability to stand aside and look at the various aspects of social knowledge—with an awareness of the fact that each of them was only partial and deformed.<sup>13</sup> This “theory of perspectives” may be implemented through reflexion and through a relative outlook which gives new scope to one’s literary solutions (e. g. as in *Cosmos*). In this respect we should consider the notional delimitations pertaining to *Cosmos* and point out those tactical aspects which may be connected with the solutions of the antinomy of freedom. The following would have to be investigated:

A. Revealing the creative character of the act of choice—in a direct reflexion which unveils the epistemological premises of the literary work and makes clear the relativity of its solutions.

B. The important measure which aims at making the literary propositions appear relative and gives them extra potential: this is done by presenting different versions of “the same” elements in the work and by introducing the relation of equivalence or potential replacement between certain situations. The phenomenon may be seen as a transition from epistemological awareness to its experimental realization or as the exteriorization of epistemological theses. The technique disrupts the stability and clarity of events and characters in a novel.

C. It is important to note that quite apart from the “meta” statements and the fragments which appear as optional propositions—the entire world of the literary work is “ontologically unstable.” For instance the reality found in *Cosmos* is a set of objects, events, signs and symbols of which the sense, actual existence and function may be doubted, for they all depend on points of reference, frequency and the perspective in which they have been shown. The objects which go to make up this world are constantly put to the test to see if they make sense, and they almost reach the limits of absurdity.

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<sup>13</sup> See K. Mannheim’s characterization of the sociology of knowledge in: A. Schaff, *Historia i prawda (History and Truth)*, Warszawa 1970, pp. 144–160.

## 2

There is a definite link between the methodological problems involved in interpreting Gombrowicz's works and his antinomies or paradoxes. Actually the issue is a universal one: we come across antinomy in any interpretation of literature, only it is more evident in works like those of Gombrowicz. It should now be possible to attempt a recapitulation of the problems encountered when interpreting Gombrowicz's works, and the resulting conclusions will have a more general significance.

A. Firstly let us refer to that of Gombrowicz's antinomies which takes its roots from "the antinomy of freedom." Gombrowicz's works as well as his literary personality manifested their (only partly intended) isolation from all literary structures and contexts, their undefinable character and "evasiveness." However at the same time his works aspired to such a position in the literary hierarchy as to force the reader to make use of his knowledge of contexts and scales of comparison, and demanded quick orientation in literary codes. The works were to be seen as immanent, yet it was necessary to uncover the structures which underlay them. Being "immature," they were to be ambiguous (which they often were), but at the same time they were to make an impact, which meant their methods and meanings had to be discerned. Gombrowicz's "mystification" should be understood as: concealing the truth about himself and about his works, evading identification, suggesting ideas which only seemingly reveal something about the author, a liking for ambiguity and being "double-faced."

Here are the antithetic consequences for interpretation brought about by the above antinomy:

(a) Accepting the given work to be irreducible, important just in itself, "reliable," though open to hermeneutic intervention. This means "entering inside Gombrowicz": assenting to his "games," succumbing to his playful ways. At the same time however: looking for references outside his works, searching for a system or code which might explain them. This is a kind of "attack" on Gombrowicz (the interpreter might be imposing his own truth), and Gombrowicz is suspected of trying to mystify his readers by using

a type of code. As a result of all these steps, the text may be decoded, and (more important still) the mystifying code can be examined along with the ways in which the author hides and exposes himself. However, if the work is to be studied through its code, its place must first be established in the author—reader relation (to exclude the possibility of “isolation”). The method required is one that would treat the work as an element of a certain pragmatic situation in communication.

(b) Recognition that the work has the “right” to be ambiguous (“mysterious”) and “immature.” Its ambiguity manifests itself in the it does not represent any definite, meaningful model. The complicated structure of semantic units—descriptive elements, personal relationships and events—may suggest this, Yet one will also find some signs of a search for the principal structure of the world, a desire to discover its value as a model, its “proper and unique” meaning. Sometimes it is possible to establish this kind of meaning or model, but it is then of an epistemological character and in fact discloses the relativity of meanings and facts in the work *vis-à-vis* various reference systems. This is then the unambiguous (i. e. identifiable) model of ambiguity.<sup>14</sup>

(c) An internal approach to the literary work, whereby its ends are considered autonomous and irreducible. This means that the work which is being studied does not have to be situated in any context. But at the same time: introducing oppositional contexts, which represent literary tradition, as the instruments for interpretation. At times these contexts depend on a “comparativist provocation,” on the parodic character of works which express a definite attitude, and which are not e. g. novels in the popular sense (as Gombrowicz’s *Opętani—The Possessed* is not “just” a shallow romance).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The issue of understanding ambiguity in two different ways is discussed by S. Lem, *Filozofia przypadku (Philosophy of Chance)*, Kraków 1968, pp. 167–196, in relation to the *nouveau roman*.

<sup>15</sup> The observation concerning antinomial situations in literary interpretation were inspired by two important works, both by J. Sławiński. „O problemach sztuki interpretacji” (On Problems in the Art of Interpretation), [in:] *Dzielo — język — tradycja*, Warszawa 1974; „Analiza, interpretacja i wartościowanie dzieła literackiego” (Analysis, Interpretation and Evaluation of a Work of Literature), [in:] *Problemy metodologiczne współczesnego literaturoznawstwa*, Kraków 1976.

B. Now we can consider the implications for literary interpretation brought on by the second of Gombrowicz's antinomies, which states that when we pronounce the general thesis on interaction we are in fact negating the objective truthfulness of all statements, which means we also question that thesis.

This antinomy is sometimes avoided (or "solved") by accentuating the fact that the thesis on social formation is also socially formed. This would imply a weakening or overruling of the interaction thesis, and the introduction of a non-interaction thesis. The latter would maintain that all human behaviour is autonomous, which would also be true for works of literature. This kind of "solution" must lead to "immanent" interpretations, and in the case of Gombrowicz's works it is in fact useless, for although it lays emphasis on the work's independence, it rules out the essential issues which go to make up the work.

On the other hand—the antinomy can be avoided by weakening or removing any doubts aroused by the general thesis on social formation, leading to a systematic but also critical view of formation. This method is most often employed in interpreting Gombrowicz's texts, because there the thesis has a particular status: it is not a constatement, but an "unspoken act", a kind of foundation of knowledge. It can be moved apart from other statements on the grounds that it cannot give rise to reservations which it itself puts forward, and so it may be considered well justified.

In the field of literary interpretation the acceptance of the role of social Form leads to investigations of a biographical/sociological character. Gombrowicz drew an analogy between his literary work and his other activities, which included treating life as a special kind of "game" and talking at length about himself. These investigations assume different forms—here are some possible varieties:

(a) Using a legend (e. g. concerning his attitude to existentialism) created by the writer about his biography and his works—as a commentary. Such a legend, as recorded in *Journal* and *Entretiens* can be quite credible, and its credible elements may be used in interpreting. Even when the legend appears to be a mystification, it can be taken into account for interpretation purposes. However this kind of interpretation will no longer be dealing with real

facts only and will enter the closed circle of investigations within literary immanence.

(b) Referring to a general model of biographical structure as a source of interpretation for a given work. This method has been used for *Cosmos*.<sup>16</sup>

(c) Using authentic biographical facts as a source for interpretation, such as the writer's set of values, outlook on man and society, his aesthetic tastes. The legend created by the writer must then be looked upon as material for decoding.<sup>17</sup>

(d) An integral approach to the writer's activities, which would allow us to treat on a level his literary work, his legend-making and his life "game," as three fields requiring interpretation to the same extent.<sup>18</sup>

Further analysis of these ways of investigation would lead to the consideration of such issues as the reducibility or irreducibility of the interpreted works, and the question of whether they can be taken literally or have to be decoded. Our attempt at removing the problems in interpretation connected with Gombrowicz's second antinomy does not free us from having to face the dilemmas ensuing from the first antinomy. This rather sceptical thought simply reflects the laws which govern the processes of cognition on which we have focussed our attention here.

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*

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<sup>16</sup> See A. L. Libera, „Kosmos Gombrowicza. Wizja życia – wizja wszechświata” (G.'s *Cosmos*. Vision of life – Vision of Universe), *Twórczość*, 1974, fasc. 5

<sup>17</sup> This appears to be a view adopted by M. Janion, „Forma gotycka Gombrowicza” (G.'s Gothic Form), [in:] *Gorączka romantyczna*, Warszawa 1975.

<sup>18</sup> This has been suggested by Łapiński in his article „Życie i twórczość...”