



GOMBROWICZ AND SCIENCE

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Abstract

An analysis of Gombrowicz's attitude towards science shows that it is based on an oxymoron: science does not lead to real knowledge about the world, but "muddles" and "reduces". Gombrowicz was very much aware of the opposition between art and science, yet he was not prepared to accept the early modernist idea of "art for art's sake". He perceived in this concept the same striving for "economy, purity, quintessence" that had led science astray, alienating it from reality. Especially dangerous was the demand of "objectivity". Paradoxically this scientific postulate had been accepted by modernist art as its own "internal value". According to Gombrowicz art should not follow the lead of science, but shake off its fetters. The author should not attempt to hide his self, but expose it to its utmost. Here we are confronted with a fresh paradox. Gombrowicz's hostility to science seems, from the point of the development of social science, a misunderstanding. It could even be argued that several areas of contemporary scientific humanities were created by him. Of course, these areas are not (in Gombrowicz's case) the objects of ordinary scientific research. They are acts of "Witold Gombrowicz", apprehending himself.

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1. Probably no other Polish writer of the twentieth century treated science as bluntly as Gombrowicz. In the second volume of his *Diary* he noted:

Science muddles.
 Science reduces.
 Science disfigures.
 Science warps.

(Gombrowicz 1988, II: 214)

All of these sentences are hidden oxymora. Science, the symbol of the development of human thought, of surpassing consecutive thresholds of knowledge by man, is, according to Gombrowicz, a straight path in the opposite direction – towards ideas lacking any value. Science, considered as the essence of knowledge, turns out to be the contradiction of this knowledge, and so – a stupidity. The second sentence, “science reduces”, is aimed at science as a symbol elevating the achievements of human thought. The third sentence – at its esthetic dimension. Indeed, we tend to talk about the scientific “beauty of thought” (or about the “beautiful minds” of great scientists), and Gombrowicz says “disfigures”. The fourth sentence questions the principal learning purpose of science, which is the possibility of coming closer to the truth. These sentences altogether are a different version of one of Gombrowicz’s most famous dictums: “the smarter, the dumber”.

Not at all more gentle were his commentaries on science in other texts, where terms such as “scientific” or “scientifistic” always function as negative epithets, and the name “scientist” is used to point out the individuals who are in their mass a plague of the human kind. It is enough to read about “scientifistic bands of ethnologists, etymologists, sociologists, brought by airplanes from the five corners of the world... loaded down with notebooks, cameras, glasses, tweeds, discussions, broken French, broken English. Covered with cars and scientists, like lichen, France is suffering, is still trying to defend itself!” (Gombrowicz 1988, III: 152). To Gombrowicz, France is the symbol of Europe, and Europe – the symbol of the modern civilization. “Covered with scientists, like lichen” – is the diagnosis of its sickness. And, on top of that, “scientists” mentioned along with cars – that is, with a mass product of the modern civilization. It is not hard to notice that the blade of Gombrowicz’s philippic against science and scientists is turned at the ancient idea of “kalos-kagathos” – the belief that striving for truth is identical with striving for beauty and good.

2. Those who do not know Gombrowicz’s work might think that what made him say all this was a “typical humanist’s” phobia of exact knowledge, of laborious struggle for truth, of rationalism, and also – the ignorance of a writer reducing knowledge about the world to a free play of inspiration, imagination, moods and emotions. Nothing more untrue! All of Gombrowicz’s deliberations – already at their roots – were directed against such

formulas. The greatest fault was to him the lack of interest for the changes of modern civilization, “modern thought” was to him a set of the most important problems, which he could not find in the discussions held in Polish public life. Education, knowledge about the world, philosophy, technique, as well as science (sic!) – in other contexts Gombrowicz treated all of these domains of modern life as the highest values, which – he regretted – had little importance in Poland. What then did he mean when he wrote that science muddles, reduces, disfigures?

3. To Gombrowicz, the opposite of science was art, the opposite of the scientist – the artist. But not only an opposite – also an enemy. Gombrowicz did not invent these oppositions, they were characteristic components of the world view of early modernism. However, contrary to the modernists of the break of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Gombrowicz did not place art and the artist on a pedestal, and he made fun of haughty celebrations and ideas of the “priesthood of art”, reducing them to their most human and social dimensions (so did Czesław Miłosz). And to be more precise, he made fun of the conceptions of “art for art’s sake”, “writing for writing’s sake”, “the word for the word’s sake”. Why? Because – as he wrote – “their aim will always be economy, purity, quintessence”. What he saw in them was reduction, “solipsism”, escape from reality. But the same thing that he disliked in the idea of “art for art’s sake”, made him unfriendly towards science. Are “economy”, “purity”, “quintessence” and capability to reduce not the principal rules of the methodology of scientific research? Gombrowicz associated science with an intellectual speculation, with creating abstract solutions, abstract – and therefore far from reality. However paradoxical it might sound, according to Gombrowicz, science does not have a grip on reality.

However, the source of Gombrowicz’s aversion towards science lay deeper. The value accepted in science was – according to him – not only looking for “purified” problems, but most of all the tendency to create a system, the dominance of concept over detail, of logic over chance, and above all – the demand for objectivity. According to the writer, nothing is more dangerous to art than “theory. Intellectual. Fabricated. Of scientific inspiration. Abstract”. The measure of artistic failure according to Gombrowicz is: “Art on its knees before science, which leads it wherever it likes” (Gombrowicz 1982: 138-139).

What is worse, says Gombrowicz, the values of science have not only already been accepted by artists, but they have also become internal values of literature (art) itself. At least from the end of nineteenth century on, writers began to inscribe them on their banners (e.g. in the so-called naturalistic experimental novel), and after the beginning of twentieth-century objectivity in literature (especially in prose) became the principal indicator of its

modernity. To Gombrowicz this was a proof of art's withdrawal from its own problematic, and the triumph of objectivity – e.g. in prose expressing itself in the so-called “disappearance of the author” – was a proof of the final decline of literature. He commented on that phenomenon many times and explicitly:

You have what you deserve: you have persecuted this wretched “self” so often that you have reached an impersonal literature and hence abstract, unreal, artificial, cerebral, cowardly, feeble literature, deprived of strength, vigor, freshness, originality, determined only to bore.
(140)

So, everywhere, where – according to Gombrowicz – the artist was “corrupted by the intellect [...] thirsting for logic, for intellectual, scientific and philosophical justification” (150), he was in danger of a spiritual and artistic failure.

As I said, according to Gombrowicz, the method used by art cannot be objectivity but subjectivity. Its object then has to be not a system of laws or mechanisms ruling the world, but a real human being. But the human being is also the subject of art! This, said Gombrowicz, is the main paradox of contemporary literature, and, in order to be modern, literature has to face it. The author cannot pretend that it is someone else than himself who writes his books, some anonymous instance or Artist, who gives the reader the outcome of his inspiration. It is not the Artist who creates literature, argued Gombrowicz, but a concrete man-author, entangled in all the contexts of his human worldliness. And if so – he asked provocatively – how could we be so sure that the author's personality does not prove more interesting to the reader than the stories he invents? Or, God forbid, the stories he writes according to some doctrine, idea, or with the use of an existing knowledge: scientific or philosophical?

The Artist who allows himself to be led astray into the terrain of these cerebral speculations is lost. Lately, we artists have allowed ourselves to be led around too sheepishly by philosophers and other scientists. We have proved incapable of being sufficiently different. An excessive respect for scientific truth has obscured our own truth. In our eagerness to understand reality, we forget that we are not here to understand reality, but only to express it. We, art, *are* reality. Art is a fact and not commentary attached to fact.

To Gombrowicz then, the scientific was a negative point of reference for his understanding of art. But contradicting the determinants of science, the writer was specifying the determinants of the autonomy and particularity of art. One of the main goals of his writing was to liberate literature from the traps and illusions of scientism, which – as he thought – was a conceptual-

ization of reality that disregarded man as a concrete person, individual, self. Man described by science is, according to Gombrowicz, an artificial construct deprived of the most important determinants of humanness – personality, individuality, and above all – unpredictability. “Will scientism replace art?” – asked Gombrowicz:

[...] When will we take the offensive? Will we, artists, finally be able to attack the man of science in the name of a more radiant humanity? To attack – from what position? With what means? Are we in a position to attack at all? In past decades art has acted badly – it allowed itself to be appealed to, it almost fell to its knees, it received everything greedily from the hand of its enemy, it lacked pride and even an ordinary instinct of self-preservation. (Gombrowicz 1988, II: 216)

And he added: “I expect that in years to come art will have to shake off science and turn against it – this clash will take place sooner or later. Then there will be an open battle, with each side completely aware of its cause.”

What did “shaking off science” mean to Gombrowicz? It meant rejecting all those tendencies, currents, attitudes and directions of contemporary thought, where the individual self was questioned, repudiated or deprecated.

And I found myself in sharp conflict with all the post-war tendencies which condemned the word “myself”. This “myself” was excommunicated by the Church as being immoral, it was frowned upon by Science as being in contradiction with objectivism, it was banned by Marxism and by every current of the time which wanted man to despise his selfish, egocentric, old-fashioned, antisocial “self”. Severe admonishments came from all sides: you are nothing, forget yourself, live through others! When I wrote “myself” for the fourth time I felt like Antaeus as he touched the earth! (Gombrowicz 1982: 112)

“Like Antaeus” – he meant the “week schedule”, which he presented in the first volume of his *Diary* (1953/1988, I):

Monday
Me.
Tuesday
Me.
Wednesday
Me.
Thursday
Me.

What then does the “Me”, which Gombrowicz so proudly opposes to science, mean?

It is not our job to explain, elucidate, systematize, prove. We are the word that claims: this hurts me, this intrigues me, I like this, I hate this, I desire this, I don't want this... Science will always remain an abstraction, but our voice is the voice of a man made of flesh and blood, this is the individual voice. Not an idea, but a personality is important to us. We do not become real in the realm of concepts, but in the realm of people. We are and we must remain persons, our role is to make sure that the living, human word does not stop sounding in a world that is becoming more and more abstract. I think, therefore, that literature has submitted itself far too much to professors in this century and that we, artists, will have to cause a scandal in order to destroy these relations. We will be forced to act arrogantly and brashly toward science to make our desire for an unhealthy flirting with formulas of scientific intelligence go away. We must oppose our own, individual intelligence, our personal life, and our feelings as emphatically as possible to the truths of laboratory. (Gombrowicz 1988, I: 86)

4. If someone really wanted to look for the literary tradition of this attitude, he could recall the school example of the romantic poem 'Romantyczność' (1822) by Mickiewicz, in which the "glass and eye" of the scholar are opposed with "living truths"? It is better though not to do this! Gombrowicz considered the whole literature as a source of false knowledge about the world and man. Rejecting science, he was rejecting – in his own belief – the whole former literature and art. Why? Because he found them boring, and boring he found them, because – just like science – they did not represent what was real, but what was invented, therefore, conventional, therefore formalized and artificial, and finally – full of lies. "Not even the best of us can escape from this. A permanent lie gnaws at us. The critic, the friend, the stranger, the editor, the connoisseur, the admirer, every reader... they all lie, lie... *To contradict*, even on little matters, is the supreme necessity of art today" (Gombrowicz 1982: 141). What was it though that Gombrowicz wanted to put straight, disclose, uncover, what did he consider as the only reality, which modern literature should put straight, fight for, rescue from the rule of artistic conventionality and scientific abstraction?

5. Already in the above quotations Gombrowicz's program shows itself rather clearly. Literature (art) should express what science cannot touch or describe, what is, according to the writer, the most real and the most dramatic problem of modernity. It is man considered as a personality and as a person, an individual human being, suffering and "realizing himself among other people".

Wait a moment... – somebody could say – does not that program remind us of something? Is that what, according to Gombrowicz, is totally foreign to the "laboratory truths" of contemporary science, not accidentally an important field of interest in social sciences such as psychology, philosophical anthropology, sociology? Of course it is! Today – a few decades after the writer's death – there is no doubt: in his work Gombrowicz touched some of the main problems of "contemporary thought", dealt with by the broadly defined scientific humanities – to the disciplines mentioned above we could also add: esthetics, knowledge about culture, linguistics, social communication. Naturally, Gombrowicz did not practice any of those. Also, he saw the problems he dealt with as a whole and would be far from dividing them into different research areas and institutes.

Let us then look at Gombrowicz's work from that other side. Gombrowicz in the world of science? Absolutely.

6. Not to make the problem more complicated, but also not to dilute it, I will now point out several areas of interest of contemporary scientific humanities, which Gombrowicz touched in his works, but also, in a sense, which he created.

The first area comprises that sphere of psychosocial issues, which focus on questions about the factors that shape man's personality and the rules that regulate his social behavior. Many years ago they were recognized and thoroughly described by Zdzisław Łapiński. Gombrowicz's world – says the researcher – is the world of human interactions. Gombrowicz traced them not only at every level of human relations (from a two-person micro-group, through family, social institutions, to the society as a whole), but also in cultural phenomena and historical "mechanisms". He sought interactive character in religion, morality, ideology, reception of art, social mentality, and even values. In Gombrowicz's work, as a consequence of the thesis about the interactive character of all social relations, came the thesis about the dynamic character of man's personality – not given to us by nature, but created through contacts with other people, creating itself in the acts of interaction, changing and developing – and therefore never finished, never closed and never final.

In Gombrowicz's work, we can also find the other side of this thesis – social orders, institutions, human relations tend all to "coagulate" and formalize, tend to a "sclerosis", in which they fix themselves through constant repetitions, imitations; in one word, they are ruled by the principles of symmetry, analogy and above all – mimesis. To Gombrowicz, the world of mutual interactions, influences and repetitions is not a world of freedom, but of deformation, a world in which the individual is subject to constant oppression – both by other people and by culture as a whole. Man, according to Gombrowicz, constantly faces situations in which something is imposed on

him – by other people or by culture. He is, then, never authentic – although he might not know it at all. He is a victim of the pressure of the external world, or he is trying to match that external world – its norms, values and forms. In fact, he is always other people's victim. His consciousness is torn between the self that he has for his own use and the "mirrored self" – created in the optics of others. Those two cannot be reconciled, and this creates a permanent conflict of identity. A man's public image is, according to Gombrowicz, a "mug" attached to him by others, and not an objective view. Gombrowicz – the interactionist – rejected the thesis that "a man is what the others see". Although, in his view, man is constantly "created" by people, this does not allow him to gain a personality, but is to him a permanent torture, deformation, reduction.

In the sixties, Gombrowicz liked to "tack" his work to popular currents of thought and ideas. In his conception of form, which he had formulated in the thirties, he liked to see a forerunner of structuralism, in interactivity – a prediction of the philosophy of dialogue and the so-called philosophy of the Other. These comparisons were as significant – because they showed Gombrowicz's expert orientation in the panorama of thought in those times – as they were doubtful (because their goal was self-promotion). In any case, they should not be treated literally, Gombrowicz did not develop ideas of that time but he created his own different realizations of these ideas. He viewed the consequences of human interactions pessimistically, utterly different than contemporary philosophy. In his work, dialogue is impossible and the other man is always a source of deformation and danger. What is more – and here Gombrowicz was probably the furthest from the "sentimental" vision of the Other in contemporary philosophy – in interactions people create a universe of forms that are absurd, terrifying, where, instead of the intellect and wisdom, stupidity and mediocrity triumph.

The second area of thought that interested Gombrowicz corresponds with those interests of contemporary linguistics (and psycholinguistics), which focus on questions about the participation of language in the categorization of world views and about the mechanism of the verbalization of psychological contents. In Gombrowicz's work, language expression is on one hand an individual creative act, and that brings it closer to the way it is understood in cognitive science, and on the other hand, it is an act, through which the language determines the place of the subject in the universe of meanings. On one hand, language is the causative force of psychological and social processes, and on the other – a chain of stereotypes forcing an individual to repeat them constantly. On one hand, language forces man to repeat its already stabilized formulas, on the other hand it turns out to be an area of constant innovation. At the same time, Gombrowicz regarded the use of language not so much as an act of transferring information, but as an axiological fact, having pragmatic and ethical consequences.

The third of the areas mentioned comprises philosophical problems – of at least two types. These are: epistemology and philosophical anthropology (of the subject). In Gombrowicz's work, the first one refers to both the production of social views of the world, which are a derivative of cultural determinants of individuals and groups, and the old philosophical dilemma – does human consciousness mirror the external world, or does it create it in its own image? And what is man's consciousness, if it exists at all? What shapes it and is it intersubjective or solipsistic? What is the border between rationalization and paranoia, e.g. an ideological one?

On the border between the second and third area lies Gombrowicz's problem of the subjective construction of fact and meaning. In other words, in his work Gombrowicz asks whether fact and meaning exist independently of man, or does he construct them in the act of cognition. It was undoubtedly Gombrowicz's variant of the "uncertainty principle", which is, as we know, the main component (and problem) of the methodology of contemporary sciences and humanities.

The fourth area of thought that interested Gombrowicz comprises the phenomena common to, among others, sociology, social psychology and knowledge about culture. Before the war, Gombrowicz witnessed the transformation and democratization of old social structures (his parents were landowners, Gombrowicz and his brothers and sister chose the life of members of the intelligentsia) and the consequences of the collision of different customs, manners, norms, traditions, behavior patterns, etc., shortly, to use the writer's own terminology, the clash of different social forms. Similar questions fascinated him when, at the end of August 1939, he arrived in Argentina (he stayed in this country till 1963). He then observed the clash of the European and the South American culture, the encounter of the traditional national myths, the myths created by modernity and the progress of civilization, as well as the abrupt processes of democratization and secularization of societies. Gombrowicz was a shrewd analyst of the mass-culture processes. What he liked to observe the most were the relations between the so-called high and low culture, and the expansion of the latter in all areas of public life. Not only did the writer not cry over it – but also he found in it arguments for his own anthropological, sociological and esthetic theses. Contemporary man – believed Gombrowicz – is not *homo doctus* but *homo ludens*, culture is not an area of knowledge but one of life and play to him. The contemporary culture, then, is ruled not by the cultivation of tradition and its values but by human biology – e.g. youth and the eroticism that it involves, which influence the customs, fashion, language, the image of the world in the media, etc. Gombrowicz saw contemporary culture not as a transmission of values, models and symbols that constituted the heritage of mankind, but as a dynamic, we could even say revolutionary process of the appearance of a new paradigm of behavior and norms. The fact that

Gombrowicz had this Dionysian vision of modernity did not mean that he was its prophet or apologist. Noting with incredible perspicacity the sociological consequences of the so-called rebellion of youth (which lasted, in his perspective, from the thirties till the sixties), and connecting them to the processes of popularization and standardization, Gombrowicz described above all their negative sides. He regarded them as the effect of cultural infantilization and secondary "analphabetization", stimulated by the processes of modernity, and influencing individual and collective emotional behaviors and destroying the norms of these behaviors.

The fifth of the areas of contemporary science, whose interests Gombrowicz shared, is the knowledge about art and above all – about literature. While, as a young man, he practiced literary criticism, Gombrowicz formulated for his own use several theses which, after decades, can be found within the range of – theoretical and practical – problems of contemporary literary studies. His chief statement was the thesis about the communicative character of literature, whose main components are the author and the reader. This thesis, in Gombrowicz's interpretation, had both a pragmatic and a sociological meaning. According to him, literature is an area where authors "charm" their readers, and not only must they keep in mind the readers' tastes – which are usually low – but also know how to use them for their own artistic purposes. In one word, according to Gombrowicz, knowledge about literature (and art) is both knowledge about the rhetorical components of communication, as well as knowledge about society, its culture, tastes, norms, market mechanisms, etc.

But the most intriguing area that connects Gombrowicz's work with contemporary (scientific) humanities is developmental psychology and family life psychology. It is intriguing not because Gombrowicz would write about it explicitly, like about the problems mentioned above, on the contrary: because in his explicit declarations he carefully hid it, and at the same time he used it as the basic observation material in his work. In all Gombrowicz's works we deal with the variations on family relations – above all, between parents and children. In his works, these relations are always pathological and, to use the contemporary terminology – toxic. One could easily use them to reconstruct a rich vocabulary of the problems of family psychology: over-protectiveness, neurosis, collective violence, the ambivalence of an emotional relation, intellectualization of emotions, alienation, suppression of identity, family psychomachies, the asymmetry of intellectual and emotional development, family taboo and public life, children's puberty in family, patriarchal family, despotism, family as a source of infantilism, of sufferings, of complexes, traumas, phobias and many more. Amazing how many psychological problems Gombrowicz could see and diagnose, analyzing himself and the relations in his family.

But the most interesting area – after all we are not dealing with a "live man" in a psychologist's office but with the work of a writer expressing himself by means of a symbolic language – could be the eighth one, integrating all the others and one that has been drawing more and more attention of many fields of the science of man, e.g. psychology, esthetics, pedagogy. It is "Witold Gombrowicz" as the object of self-apprehension. And so – the problem of the creative act as autotherapy: of art – as a factor forming the human personality, of verbalization – as the process of constituting one's own identity.

Looking from this side at Gombrowicz's "scientific" achievements in the analysis of himself, we can find in his work the same thoughts that have constituted the most important anthropological findings of contemporary humanities.

7. Of course, Gombrowicz was not the only Polish writer of the twentieth century who included reflections on science and its individual disciplines in his artistic concepts. It is enough to mention the names as famous as Karol Irzykowski, Zofia Nałkowska, Teodor Parnicki, Stanisław Lem, Władysław Terlecki, Józef Mackiewicz, Czesław Miłosz or Wisława Szymborska. However, Gombrowicz's stance towards science was totally different – his criticism could be compared only to the negation of (positivistic) science practiced by the artists of the break of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

I am getting back to the beginning of my exposition. Gombrowicz's negative attitude towards science can also be looked at from a different angle. All that he wrote on the topic was criticism of science as much as it was criticism of modernity, criticism of contemporary European civilization, in which science has a central place. Only that second perspective allows us to understand the sources of Gombrowicz's dislike for science and its place in the contemporary world. Nothing will explain this better than the writer's own words:

I must (because I see that no one will do this for me) finally formulate the main problem of our times, one that completely dominates the entire Western *episteme*. This is not a problem of History, or a problem of Existence, or a problem of Praxis or Structure or Cogito or Psychology or any other of the problems that have spread across our field of vision. Our main problem is the problem of *the smarter, the dumber*. [...] This would be a matter of stupidity progressing hand in hand with reason, which grows along with it. Have a look at all the picnics of the intellect: These conceptions! These discoveries! Perspectives! Subtleties! Publications! Congresses! Discussions! Institutes! Universities! Yet: one senses nothing but stupidity. [...] In the Western *episteme* what is stupid is stupid in a gigantic way – and that is why it is elusive. [...] Let us cast

an eye at the garland of stupidity that winds itself around our erudition. It really is a scandal that up until now they did not have a language to express their ignorance; they must express their knowledge, their "mastery of the subject", constantly and exclusively. When they sit on the dais and participate in a discussion, the bolt falls: they must know, it is forbidden not to know, or to know more or less, even with a gesture, even with a wink, they cannot let anyone know that their knowledge is full of holes and hit-and-miss... In the expanse of all discussions consuming the Western *episteme*, there is not a single voice that will begin with "I really don't know... I am not familiar with... I have not read it through very well... who could remember all that... there is no time to read... I know something on the subject but not too much..." Yet people should begin with this! But who would dare! [...] The methods of the humanistic Western *episteme* are all the more rigorous the more indefinite its object; the more scientific they are, the less their object lends itself to a scientific approach. The humanistic faculties of the universities are bursting with heavy, professional nonsense. *Delenda est Carthago!* Liquidate them! (Gombrowicz 1988, III: 191-193)

Scholars do not formulate equally bitter self-accusations. But somebody who has read the book by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* could come to the conclusion that Gombrowicz, a writer born one hundred years ago, with exceptional perspicacity foresaw the problems of the scientific critique of the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty first century.

LITERATURE

Witold Gombrowicz

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