

Three modernists: Witkacy – Schulz – Gombrowicz (similarities and differences)¹

Translated by David Malcolm

Just as winged words exist in the common discourse, so too do winged names in literary history. In the history of twentieth century Polish literature these names are without a doubt Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), Witold Gombrowicz, and Bruno Schulz. Interestingly, these three names are surely linked even more so than the names of birth brothers. Nobody writing about Thomas Mann has ever felt compelled to mention Heinrich or Golo Mann; however, the names Gombrowicz, Witkacy, and Schulz are associated almost automatically – almost as if they are not individual writers, but as if they are a literary Marx Brothers.

Why then are Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz mentioned together? What do *Nienasycenie* (Insatiability), *Ferdydurke*, *Szewcy* and *Sklepy cynamonowe* (The Street of Crocodiles) have in common? What do *Albertynka* (*Operetka* ((Operetta)) and *Adela* (*Sklepy cynamonowe*), and *Atanazy Bazakbal* (*Pożegnanie jesieni* ((Farewell to Autumn)) and *Józef Kowalski* (*Ferdydurke*) have in common?

Witkacy (1885–1939), Schulz (1892–1942), and Gombrowicz (1904–1969) were, without doubt, the greatest individualists of Polish literature in the interwar period. Today, their names are uttered in terms of literary legends, of which there are two dimensions.

This first stems from the fact that the first two authors wrote about and to one another—these texts are immeasurably valuable to literary history today. Witkacy wrote about Schulz, while Schulz did not write so much about Witkacy as he did to Witkacy².

Schulz, in turn, wrote about Gombrowicz, and Gombrowicz wrote about Schulz. These texts are three quasi-open letters published in the Warsaw periodical *Studio*

¹ The first version of this text was published [in:] W. Bolecki, *Polowanie na postmodernistów (w Polsce)*, Kraków 1999.

² S. I. Witkiewicz, *Wywiad z Brunonem Schulzem*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1935, no. 17, repr. in B. Schulz, *Opowiadania, wybór esejów i listów*, ed. J. Jarzębski, BN, series I no. 264; Wrocław 1989 and then; *Twórczość literacka Brunona Schulza*, Pion 1935, no. 34, repr. in: S. I. Witkiewicz, *Bez kompromisu. Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*, ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 1976. B. Schulz, *Do St. I. Witkiewicza, Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1935, no. 17, repr. [in:] idem, *Opowiadania*, op. cit.

and Gombrowicz's review of *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą* (Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass), and, above all, Schulz's review of Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdynand*³.

The literary ties between Witkacy and Gombrowicz are altogether different. No known published writing by Witkacy on Gombrowicz exists; and the only written mention Witkacy has left is a postcard addressed to Jerzy Pomianowski dated August 3, 1939 in which he writes that some parts of *Ferdynand* "are genius" ("I roared with laughter"), but that "Chapter IV is obscene". As Pomianowski writes, before the war Witkacy and Gombrowicz differed in their attitudes to success with readers – Witkacy paid no attention to it, while Gombrowicz strove to achieve it, and in their assessment of the role of the intelligentsia – Gombrowicz mocked it, while Witkacy remembered clearly what happened to the intelligentsia in Bolshevik Russia⁴.

Before the war, Gombrowicz dedicated but a few words to the work of Witkacy. He read the typescripts of his plays, which he referred to rather conventionally in a questionnaire in 1936⁵. But this is all: one could say this is at once little and almost nothing. Not until *Wspomnienia polskie* (Polish Remembrances) does Gombrowicz address several comments to Witkacy and his *Nienasycenie*.

A fairly strange construction emerges from the perspective of the mutual relationships of the three writers and the texts they devoted themselves to before the war. Witkacy, marveling at Schulz's graphics and *Sklepy cynamonowe*, imposed upon criticism an interpretation of Schulzian masochism and eroticism. Witkacy found in Schulz's stories that which he was seeking ineffectively in both art and life, namely ecstatic experiences, the fundamental deformation of reality, and the intensity of sensations that flow from, as he himself wrote, "the indescribable Mystery of Existence". We do not know, however, what Schulz thought of Witkacy's work, or even if he commented on it at length.

Schulz, in turn, is the author of one of the deepest interpretations of Gombrowicz's *Ferdynand*, but Gombrowicz himself authored some insightful commentary regarding the reality presented in Schulz's prose. Gombrowicz was not as taken with Schulz's prose as Schulz was with his *Ferdynand*. He even distanced himself discreetly from Schulz, while giving him to understand that, while he could write anything, he did so in a monotonous tone, and that his style was artificial, misrepresentational, and openly untruthful; and finally that Schulz took himself all together too seriously, which refers to his own writing style⁶.

³ W. Gombrowicz, *List otwarty do Brunona Schulza*; B. Schulz, *Do Witolda Gombrowicza*; W. Gombrowicz, *Do Brunona Schulza*, "Studio" 1936, no. 7; B. Schulz, *Ferdynand*, *Skamander*, 1938, no. 96–98; repr. [in:] *Opowiadania*, op. cit. W. Gombrowicz *Twórczość Brunona Schulza* [rev. *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą*], *Apel*, 1938, no. 31 (supplement to *Kuriera Porannego* no. 112).

⁴ J. Pomianowski, *Jaśnie panicz i panisko* [in:] idem, *Biegun magnetyczny*, Warszawa 1995. See: W. Gombrowicz, *Ferdynand*, ed. W. Bolecki, Kraków 207, pp. 502–504.

⁵ *Prosto z Mostu* 1936, no. 5, repr. in *Dzieła*, ed. J. Błoński, J. Jarzębski, Kraków 1995, vol. 12.

⁶ W. Gombrowicz, *Twórczość Brunona Schulza*, op. cit.

Two years earlier, Gombrowicz had tried to draw Schulz into a discussion of writers' attitudes, but Schulz dodged this attempt and never addressed the topic⁷.

Thus, it is impossible not to note that the protagonists of this literary legend had a clear sense of their own individuality. They wrote of each other with the utmost admiration and offered each other the deepest recognition, but they also remained distanced from one another. In a word, while ever delving deeper into their similarities and affinities, they really did continually look outward—each in his own direction.

The second dimension of the literary legend, which is always much more colorful than the texts themselves, is the personal legend. It is one of gatherings, conversations, social events (of which photographs survive), and the friendships of these writers. During a certain period they knew each other very well, especially Schulz and Gombrowicz, and undoubtedly are indebted to their public pronouncements about each other: especially Schulz to Witkacy, and Gombrowicz to Schulz⁸.

Although all three were always considered to be experimentalists, each of these three writers experimented differently. Schulz only conducted artistic and intellectual experiments with reality in his works, while Witkacy and Gombrowicz also experimented with life. Witkacy experimented on himself by ingesting alcohol and narcotics and then observing the impact they had on his creativity. Gombrowicz, on the other hand, adored experimenting on others through intellectual and social games. Although the source of the personal legend originates in the inter-war period, it was formulated and codified much later following the war. The canonical form was established by Gombrowicz himself in 1961 in two memoirs that are well-known today: the third volume of *Dziennik* (Diary) and *Wspomnienia polskie*. In fact, that Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz are linked directly together is thanks to the critics; interestingly, though, these were the post-war critics.

Pairing Schulz with Gombrowicz before 1939 was not at all a routine critical association, quite the opposite: apart from Artur Sandauer, the critics contrasted rather than linked these writers. The most eminent inter-war critics of the 1930s placed Schulz's prose closer to that of Choromański, Breza, Andrzejewski, and Nałkowska, or – in the wider perspective with Kaden and Berent⁹. And although Gombrowicz belonged to, as Fik writes, the same generation of "Choromaniacs", in comparison with the oeuvre of his fellow writers, for example Fryde, he was a sensational, wholly distinct surprise.

And Witkacy? He was not even considered. It was generally thought that he belonged to a thoroughly different, older generation of writers that had nothing in common with Schulz and Gombrowicz, who were considered to have made their debuts in the 1930s.

⁷ In: Gombrowicz, *Do Brunona Schulza*, op. cit.

⁸ See: Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, vol. III (1961–1966), 1961.

⁹ I write about this in *Poetycki model prozy: Witkacy – Schulz – Gombrowicz*, Kraków 1996.

The name Witkacy was not permanently included with those of Gombrowicz and Schulz until after the war. The first to do so in 1949 were Jan Błoński, Ludwik Flaszen, and Konstanty Puzyna, while several years later, from 1956 onward, after these works were revived and staged, the links between these authors became a sign of the times.

The wave of this triad/trinity surged in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially outside of Poland where the plays of Witkacy and Gombrowicz were being staged. The names of these writers, which had previously been given rather separate theatrical and literary receptions, were beginning to converge. Undoubtedly, the reception abroad of their works was one of the reasons behind this, something that was swiftly noted by Polish academics. In the 1980s, Janusz Degler and Lech Sokół staged productions of the plays of Witkacy and Gombrowicz in Polish theaters and abroad¹⁰. In the 1970s, uttering Gombrowicz, Schulz, and Witkacy in the same breath became common parlance in Polish and foreign literary and theatrical criticism. Wolfgang Haedecke, the Austrian critic, referred to these writers as the *Seltsame Dreieinigkei*t (the Strange Trinity), while Iribarne, Witkacy's American translator, wrote a comparative study of the theatrical revolution of Witkacy and Gombrowicz.

Today, Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz appear inseparably in every textbook and study of twentieth century Polish literature. And this is how three different individualists became triplets.

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While juxtaposing Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz still makes sense for informational purposes, it is no longer, as it was in years before, a discovery. It has simply become a matter of course, and is even sometimes commonplace. Today, personal legend is now an insufficient basis upon which to make such a juxtaposition; however, this is what shapes the common understanding of the similarities and communion of three great artists.

The legend of this community, as is well known, was codified brilliantly by Gombrowicz himself, and as frequently happens in Gombrowicz studies, the critics take his formulations and evaluations and develop them further. More often, however, they underscore the closeness, while those who declare impassable distinctiveness are more rare.

Most juxtapositions of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz are dominated by a search for common esthetic, philosophical, and artistic principles and a common place for them on the map of twentieth century Polish literature. While the characterization of this community is enriched continually, invariably discussions of the avant-garde, grotesque, and parodic in the works of these authors are increasingly banal. Obviously, this thesis is real, but, instead of uniting these authors, it should differentiate them; grotesque

¹⁰ *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, Warszawa 1985 1–4.

and parody in the worlds of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz are entirely different phenomenon.

Jerzy Pomianowski wrote aptly in 1992:

“The names Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz are uttered in the same breath. This and that suggest that Witkiewicz is the precursor of Gombrowicz. This conclusion is a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* type of fallacy. It is, in any case, premature. Essentially, their world views were contrary, as were their temperaments. What joined them were common adversaries, a similar sense of humor, and an awareness of loneliness, not to mention alienation, troubles in Poland, and excellent intellects. They also shared a highly critical attitude to what was commonly referred to as the national tradition, but they drew different conclusions. What I have in mind here is treating a writer’s inventory of thought with beneficence and without pigeonholing them”¹¹.

While it is true that juxtaposing Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz has become a cliché, it has never harmed anyone. Moreover, regardless of the degree of simplification, the juxtaposition of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz at the secondary school level has shifted interpretations of the twentieth-century Polish literary canon.

The theater, however, was to fall victim to this juxtaposition. What I have in mind here is stagings of Schulz’s prose in keeping with the conventions of Witkacy’s theater, and of searching for keys to Gombrowicz’s dramas in the esthetics of Witkacy. Both the first and second ideas – and nearly everyone has seen them realized – are artistic misunderstandings and, if they prove anything, it is the utter lack of understanding of the differences in the esthetics and the art of the individual writers. So whenever I witness expressionist howls from the stage served up as the speech of Gombrowicz or Schulz, wild cries as the manner in which Witkacy’s characters speak, or sets and the interplay of actors in which the only discernible trait is the director’s nonsensical programming, I recall the lament – I do not remember whose, “I know that anything is possible in the theater, by why do you try me so, God?”

Tadeusz Kantor alone understood that faithfulness to the original in art is only achieved with new originality; in a word, in order to be faithful to the esthetic quest of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, or Schulz, one has to create a wholly new theater.

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Undoubtedly, in all juxtapositions of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz what prevailed for years was the search for artistic similarities and analogies over that for differences and uniquenesses among the three authors. The aim of this strategy was more pragmatic and informational than it was interpretational. Outside of Poland, what was required

¹¹ *Biegun magnetyczny*, op. cit.

for many years was simply information about the most outstanding artistic phenomenon. However, in Poland acquiring information about authors whose works had been banned for decades by the censors was rendered even more difficult by the lack of reissues of their books. Of course, forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest, and overcoming these difficulties forged feelings among readers of elitism and being in-the-know. For them the work of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz was not only an artistic phenomenon, but also an antidote to Communist newspeak, esthetic mediocrity, and intellectual sterility. From this perspective, the work of Witkacy and Gombrowicz, and of Schulz in a slightly different way, provided a penetrative, brilliant, and fascinating diagnosis of twentieth-century culture, while that of the first two authors also commented on the Polish national conscience and the madness of twentieth-century history.

The similarities of the intellectual issues addressed in the work of Witkacy and Gombrowicz were certainly overshadowed by fundamental artistic and esthetic differences in their artistic pursuits. In turn, differences in the poetics and personalities of Schulz and Gombrowicz redirect the focus from the significant similarities written into their understandings of contemporary culture.

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That which unites these three writers is generally obvious and has been fairly well described. The work of each of these two writers is, after all, original enough that until not long ago “automatic” juxtapositions seemed to be unnecessary prostheses. Does that mean, however, that all of these writers are so different from one another that they can only be discussed separately? Not at all.

It is, however, good to switch perspectives; it is worth knowing about the similarities that differentiate these writers rather than those that unite them, not in what is shared and obvious, but what is separate and hidden. In a word, it is worthwhile to search not for identical similarities, but for different ones among Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz. Paradoxically, only that which is fundamentally different among them ensures their unique literary and intellectual identity. In that which is different we can discover similarities, while in that which is similar we will find differences. Is this not what Gombrowicz did when he wrote “we were three”, and did he not let it be understood that each of the “three” was wholly different and separate from the others?

These somewhat enigmatic words will soon become clear (although I am not sure: I recall Gombrowicz’s lesson that the brighter it is, the darker it is).

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The fates and attitudes of these three writers were once so different, that it is impossible not to marvel at their mutual complications.

Witkacy, largely because he rebelled against the views of his father and family, manifested an aversion to the traditional understanding of patriotism, and the noble tradition was a topic he consciously rejected. He also rejected anti-Russian independence. He viewed Piłsudski's Legion as "beautiful suicide". He placed his money on Russia, and in 1914 he joined the Russian army. In 1916, he fought in a fierce battle against the II Brigade of the Polish Legion, and was wounded. In September 1939 he wanted to join the army, but was rejected because of his age and poor health.

Gombrowicz is another story. He did not report to the front in 1920, and in September 1939 he did not return to Europe to mobilize with the army. Like Witkacy, he was an extreme individualist, but he drew very different conclusions from his rebellion against the traditions of the nobility and the landed gentry. On the one hand, the source of sclerosis in the social stratum matured in them, from which emerged, on the other, the source of his originality and strength. Nobody like him respected the Sarmatian tradition in Poland¹². Poland is a permanent theme in his work¹⁵.

Bruno Schulz, a Polish Jew, was a citizen of the Republic of many nations. For him the symbol of Poland was Marshal Piłsudski, whom he considered to be a figure of legendary greatness¹⁴.

The familial and interpersonal relationships of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz present many astonishing parallels. Each of these writers died childless, and spent their whole lives underscoring their inability to live with others, but also their urgent need of being with another person. The father figure is key in describing the personalities of both Witkacy and Schulz, while for Gombrowicz, as his biographers contend, the key figure is his mother.

Schulz was the "loner from Drohobycz"; this is where his home (his "mała ojczyzna") was and the reality that he transformed into myth. Throughout his life he dreamed of moving to a "genuine" metropolis, to Lwów or Warsaw, but, in the end, he never left his place of birth¹⁵.

It was different for Gombrowicz. Instead of needing to be in close proximity to his father, he needed radical distance from him. While the central figure in the work and biography

¹² J. Błoński, *Gombrowicz a ethos szlachecki* (1974), repr. [in:] *Forma, śmiech i rzeczy ostateczne. Studia o Gombrowiczu*, Kraków 2003.

¹³ Błoński, *Forma*, op. cit., J. Jarzębski, *Podglądanie Gombrowicza*, Kraków 2000; J. Margański, *Geografia pragnień. Opowieść o Gombrowiczu*, Kraków 2005.

¹⁴ J. Jarzębski, *Schulz*, Wrocław 1999; W. Budzyński, *Pod kluczem*, Warszawa 2001. "Powstają legendy", *Tygodnik Literacki* 1935, no. 22, repr. [in:] *Powstają legendy. Trzy szkice wokół Piłsudskiego*, ed. S. Rosiek, Kraków 1994.

¹⁵ Jarzębski, op. cit; Budzyński, op. cit.

of Schulz is the word "return", in that of Gombrowicz it is "escape". While Schulz mythologized a "return to childhood" because only this could guarantee him artistic authenticity, Gombrowicz demonized the "escape from childhood" since he saw there only the hell of infantilization and the original source of all "upupiania". "Youth" rather than "childhood" is the primary key to the anthropology of Gombrowicz.

If Schulz most literally immersed himself in his home and returned to the roots of individual, familial, and national fate, then Gombrowicz set about determinedly to "liberate" himself from his homeland in a fierce, lifelong intellectual dispute, which is most trenchantly expressed in *Trans-Atlantyk* and the *Dziennik*.

Witkacy's approach was different still; he determinedly rejected all notions of nation as outdated, and found intellectual refuge from the issue of homeland in universal questions of existence.

Witkacy perceived threats to the individual in that which was social, and in his writing socialization is synonymous with totalitarian unification. Gombrowicz, however, saw the essence of everything human in the social. Witkacy invented monsters and creatures originating from the nature of the individual, while for Gombrowicz the birthplace of monsters was the social and interpersonal. Thus, for Witkacy, the source of monstrosity in the human world was, traditionally, the psyche and character of each individual, while for Gombrowicz the sphere of this *monstruosité* was located among people in the shaping of their mutual relations, in other words in the "form".

One famous Witkacy photograph depicts several reflections of the same man in a mirror; the viewer sees the man multiple times. Multiplicity is a constant motif in the work of all three writers, but each of them uses it differently. Multiplicity in Witkacy is the literal multiplication of the same, which, in a word, is multiplication, but there is unity in this multiplication. Multiplication in Witkacy is the same entity multiplied.

In turn, multiplicity in Gombrowicz is the co-existence of various phases of life and roles of the individual, which is the multiplication of diversity. This means the multiplicity in Gombrowicz's work is, then, the splitting of the individual, which is an entity that is internally incoherent and differentiated.

Multiplicity in Schulz is the continual transformation of beings in a search for the essence of substance.

There is no doubt that Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz differ in all esthetic and artistic aspects. In poetics there is no common ground among Witkacy's novels, Schulz's stories, or Gombrowicz's prose. Years ago I wrote about the fundamental, indelible differences between Witkacy's concept of the novel not as a work of art, but as a "bag", and the concept espoused by Gombrowicz and Schulz, who both

considered prose to be artistic masterpiece. Whatever we examine in the poetics of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz, we always encounter total opposites: style and composition, metaphors and colloquial language, the construction of the story material, dialog, time, space, and other characters – all of this originated from various sources and was directed toward different ends¹⁶.

The traditions that the works of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz refer to differ, as do the attitudes of the writers to them.

Witkacy laboriously, but furiously, destroys the realistic, naturalistic standards of the novel. While dreaming of a metaphysical novel, or a philosophical one, he paradoxically trades one set of constraints for another: as a novelist he does remain within the principles of the traditional novel with a thesis.

Schulz, in turn, revitalizes prose by delving into the symbolist tradition, and the paradoxical reversal of its determinants. What the symbolists considered the universal, sacred determinants of poetry is what Schulz used in his prose. This is why Witkacy – as he wrote – reveled in the “cinnamon fumes” of Schulz’s stories.

Just like Aleksander Wat in *Mopsożelaznym piecyku*, Witkacy remained a prisoner of the tradition that he destroyed passionately. All of his finished and unfinished novels are the stuff of a heroic battle with and destruction of every element of the traditional narrative work that is treated as an example of the despised tradition of describing the world realistically¹⁷.

Schulz does not fight tradition, he breathes it, and draws from it all its strength and juice, building within in metaphors and the histories of his novels. Everyone who knows Schulz knows what I am referring to: the Jewish, Old Testament universe, the symbolism of the Kabbalah, artistic creation as a gesture of repetition of the divine creation, the sacred need to refer to the holy words of the canon, and the mythical Book – all of this places Schulz in a wholly different artistic, esthetic, and historic space than that of Witkacy’s Pure Form¹⁸.

Gombrowicz, in turn, finds a wholly different esthetic for his prose. Tradition gave him neither free rein “nor rhythm nor curb”. The collection of empty symbols the writer uses to express himself – neglecting to separate the sacred from the profane, but quite the opposite – with the greatest pleasure mixing them up, playing with them, and above all else “playing” – as Jerzy Jarzębski would say¹⁹.

¹⁶ W. Bolecki, *Poetycki model prozy*, op. cit.

¹⁷ I write about this in *Modalności modernizmu*, Warszawa 2013.

¹⁸ W. Panas, *Księga blasku. Traktat o kabale w prozie Brunona Schulza*, Lublin 1997; also *Bruno od Mesjasza*, Lublin 2001.

¹⁹ Jarzębski, *Gra w Gombrowicza*, Warszawa 1982.

Gombrowicz wants to seduce the reader by telling stories about a seemingly conventional world in a seemingly conventional way (he eagerly used stereotypical adventure, crime, or sensational stories), but he did this only to deprive the reader of the possibility of a conventional understanding of the world.

Witkacy, in turn, wanted to stupefy his reader, or rather to trample him with an unceasing bombardment of artistic effects: “deformation” and “artistic perversion”, as he said. What is at stake in this cannonade is, according to Witkacy, a “metaphysical experience”, a kind of epiphany and an esthetic-ontological ecstasy that the reader of Witkacy’s Pure Form should survive.

And Schulz – does he play with the reader? And how! Does he seduce? Oh, yes! Schulz’s novels, like those of all symbolists and myth-makers, do not destroy the world (that is Witkacy’s aim) or deprive it of overriding sense (that is Gombrowicz’s aim), but rather they recreate the road of God’s creation, offering the reader an expedition of the Golden Fleece, the mythic Sense.

Every element of Schulz’s prose is narrative. Schulz unfailingly spins stories, and his narrator is a storyteller, a creator of myths telling stories even when describing clouds, plants, or attics. Schulz pulls his reader into reality where the metaphoric mechanism gently brushes up against borders and contours, sizes, and points of view²⁰. Gombrowicz understood the rules of this world perfectly, which he expressed in his review of *Sklepy cynamonowe*.

Gombrowicz’s narrative is always theatrical and dramaturgical. Theatricality, or maybe even better spectacularity, emerges as an intrinsic feature of Gombrowicz’s utterance. He presents every thought, idea, or concept as a role-play and as a replica of a scene playing out on an imaginary stage among characters or between the author and the reader. From this comes the hyperactivity of the narrator who must dramatize not only reality and actual events, but above all banal, accidental gestures, and even single words. It is also a world of specific metaphors, but how it differs from Schulz!

The metamorphoses of Schulz give their protagonists and readers a sense of security; they are rooted in the depths of tradition, meaning and mystery that are benign toward human beings. Gombrowicz’s metamorphoses rip the ground from under his protagonist’s feet. The tiniest element of reality (thing, gesture, word) becomes in Gombrowicz’s world a link in the mysterious and threatening element of being. In Schulz’s work to touch this link is, as it were, to find oneself on the other side of the looking-glass – like Alice in her land of wonders.

²⁰ W. Bolecki, *Poetycki model prozy*, op. cit.

In Gombrowicz's work, to touch the link (sparrow, cat, branch) is to feel the cold touch of a dark element that is inscrutable, drives forward, and sweeps away all that is in its path. But for both writers, metamorphosis is, as it were, a point of arrival for metaphysical searchings, an event in which the Mystery appears.

However, metamorphoses in Witkacy's work form a programmatic principle of his esthetics, an artistic means that is supposed to place the reader or viewer in relation to the "weirdness of existence". However, what on the level of esthetics and poetics seems in Witkacy's work simply a game or some playing around with artistic conventions, is in the sphere of the concerns of his works a startlingly penetrating analysis of the mutability of human attitudes and personality traits in history.

In turn, Witkacy's narration is always discursive, and even the dramatic is in Witkacy a form of discourse. On the surface, that brings him close to Gombrowicz, with whom he is linked by a fascination with philosophy and philosophicality. However, while Witkacy aims at philosophical categorization, at the inscription of his world into a system of concepts and ideas (he sometimes calls it "biological realism"), Gombrowicz makes quite different use of philosophicality. Witkacy is looking for a system for himself, scientific justifications, terms, and precise definitions, and objective determinants of Existence (Being). Gombrowicz rejects the systemic, the abstract, the scientific. He is entranced by movement, changeability, unpreparedness. To speak metaphorically – Witkacy is closer to essentialism, Gombrowicz to existentialism. Witkacy is a monadist, Gombrowicz an interactionist.

The finale of Schulz's stories is always an immersion or a continuation in this or another form of existence. Reality, for him, is full of metamorphoses, but all beings that transform themselves strive toward their one – so to speak – root and essential substance.

The finale of all the cognitive-fabular adventures in Gombrowicz's works is a crime, chance, unresolved, unwilled, but always provoked. Not death, but crime.

And what is the finale of the novels and most important plays by Witkacy? Neither a crime, nor death, one would say, although there is death by shooting in *Pożegnanie jesieni*, and decapitation in *Szewcy*. The finale of texts, and indeed the finale of the world in Witkacy is annihilation, decay, and degeneration, in which the death of the individual is an element of the destructive process of the extinction of individual and societal life.

There is no doubt that Schulz is a religious writer – all his writing circles around the mystery of the world's creation, the myth and symbolism of the return of the Messiah (Schulz's great work, the novel *The Messiah*, has not been found to this day)²¹.

²¹ W. Panas, *Bruno od Mesjasza*, op. cit.

Witkacy and Gombrowicz were, however, programmatic atheists – although they were christened in childhood, their writing is a record of a crisis in belief in religion and in a personal God.

This is a good moment to look at matters even more closely.

A constant motive of all Gombrowicz's works are crimes, understood in the most literal way, and violence, also understood in the most literal way – on the surface only psychological violence, but always, however, leading to physical consequences (*Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda, Ślub, Kosmos, and Pornografia*). For a constant topic of Gombrowicz's writing is the problem of power and the usurpation of power of one human being over another.

Gombrowicz's diagnosis, which one can read in his plays and novels, is perhaps finally this: in a world without a Higher Instance, the human being, drunk on the omnipotence of his/her humanity, creates for him/herself Instances that serve to achieve power over others: "he proclaims himself king, god, director" (*Ślub*). But that reality that the Gombrowiczian protagonist creates in his intoxication, always turns back against him, strangles him, crushes him with a weight of invented constructions – this is, indeed, the finale of *Ślub*. In this play, there is no Love, and forced bonds turn out to be a Prison; there is no wedding, but, instead, a Funeral.

All this interpersonal and transpersonal activity of Gombrowicz's protagonists ends in catastrophe, and the aspiration of that activity to create a "human church" (in other words, to worship the human) is demonstrated to be a nightmare delusion. Only the corpses of murdered characters turn out to be genuine.

Gombrowicz discovered the mechanism which out of the human makes a sanction for the actions of other people. So he discovered – as he wrote himself – "Form's convulsions" as a permanent attribute of human existence. So he discovered in "form" the mechanism of human actions, a mechanism that always turns back against the "suprahuman" usurpations of man²².

Starting from clowning, Gombrowicz always brings his characters to tragedy. Gombrowicz – one could say – is a tragedian who hides his despair behind the mask of a clown.

With Witkacy it is different: a constantly heightened clownishness does not so much reveal despair, as simply drown it and put it aside for a moment. But Witkacy has no illusions; that moment will not last forever.

Gombrowicz began writing with Rabelesian laughter (*Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* 1933; *Ferdydurke*, 1937), but studying the genesis, shapes, and consequences of the interhuman form, he died not with laughter, but with a ghastly grimace on his lips.

²² See: Ł. Tischner, *Gombrowicz milczenie o Bogu*, Kraków 2013.

Witkacy, however, was terrified by the real history of the twentieth century. What he experienced and reflected on during the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, he copied out later in his catastrophic visions. That is why in Witkacy the final extinction always comes from without – and is unavoidable because it already lurked in the souls of individual people.

With Gombrowicz it is different. As we know, Gombrowicz despised and rejected all historicity. According to him, it was contaminated with particularism, burdened by the empiric weight of time and place. Thus, Gombrowicz made the field of his observation not the human being's connections with history, but the connections of person to person – in other words, what was interhuman. Paradoxically, however, in what was interhuman, Gombrowicz discovered exactly the same as had terrified Witkacy in history. In Witkacy's works, history brings extinction and annihilation. In Gombrowicz's writing, the interhuman church, with no higher sanction, always leads to crime. This is what *Iwona*, *Ślub*, and *Pornogafia* teach.

Witkacy – as one knows – was a fatalist, and he could see the outlines of the end of history. Gombrowicz saw history as an endless pageant of masks, costumes, and forms, cyclically renewed by the eruption of youth, non-officalness, and vitality.

Gombrowicz's anthropology is interactive. The human being shapes him/herslef "on the Procrustean bed of interhuman form" – as Schulz wrote, to Gombrowicz's satisfaction²⁵. Hence Gombrowicz's eroticism is always a form of communication. Meanwhile Witkacy is a monadist, and independently of the physical violence of the relations between his characters, his human being is condemned to a terrifying loneliness in relation to others and to the cosmos. Hence Witkacy's eroticism always leads to defeat and degradation.

Gombrowicz's philosophy is the philosophy of "the mask", because "form" is also a type of "mask". In other words, it is a philosophy of what shapes, hides, and deforms human nature. Gombrowicz, of course, dreams of revealing this nature, of getting to its nakedness, but he knows that it is impossible. Albertynka appears, it is true, as the whimsical ideal in *Operetka* (an operetta!), but there is no place for her in any other of Gombrowicz's works. That which "hides" human nature, also hides Gombrowicz himself. It is an illusion that "form" is the core of his philosophy. So-called "form" is only the language of the utterance, Gombrowicz's own idiolect, but not his content. For the core of Gombrowicz's philosophy is, in the social sphere, power, and in the individual sphere, it is pain.

²⁵ B. Schulz, "Ferdydurke", *Skamander*, op. cit.

And yet there exists at least one common point in these two radically different anthropologies. Both Witkacy and Gombrowicz reject the division into matter and spirit, into the insurmountable dichotomy of part and whole. Witkacy thought the philosophical discovery of his anthropology was to see corporeality as the indivisible unity of materiality and the psychical. Gombrowicz thought it was the feeling of pain which threw up a bridge between all living beings.

And Schulz? He is neither a monadist, not an interactionist. For in his anthropology is inscribed the myth of the eternal metamorphosis of matter, which out of every form of being, from the human being too, makes a contingent and changing shape. Hence his particular distance and irony toward each of these forms, which he sees as a temporary mask or as a role played on the stage and behind the scenes of existence. However, in Schulz's work, behind the pageant of masks and forms there exists substance, "the secret essence of the thing", the Holy Grail of his symbolic-metaphorical searchings. Therefore this is different from Gombrowicz's work, in which metamorphosis seems a never-ending procession of changes, a self-generating dance, behind which lies emptiness or death.

* * *

There is no doubt that each of these writers, individually and collectively, weighed down on the forms and themes of twentieth-century Polish literature. Their influence and meaning, however, go far beyond the domain of literature. Without Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz, Polish artistic culture and Polish intellectual life would be quite different.

Gombrowicz died a quarter of a century ago. Witkacy and Schulz have been dead for over fifty years. But the continuing popularity of their works over the whole world inspires us to inscribe their writings into more and more new currents and ideas of modernity. That's how it must be and that's how it should be – the works and their creators go beyond their time, living and staring into newer and newer mirrors, fashions, and fascinations.

In the 1980s, I pointed out the congruence of Witkacy's "saturation with form" and John Barth's concept of "the literature of exhaustion", and the surprising similarities in the esthetics of both writers²⁴. At that time, I did not know the term "postmodernism". In turn, Zdzisław Łapiński when describing Gombrowicz wrote that in the history of world literature Gombrowicz deserved a place as one of the great writers of postmodernism, because the marks that define his position and esthetics are simultaneously those of postmodernism²⁵. Some years later Łapiński extended this postmodernist

²⁴ W. Bolecki, "Witkacy et les Problèmes du Roman Moderne", *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis*, No 690, Romanica Wratislaviensis XXII, Wrocław 1984.

²⁵ The entry "Gombrowicz" [in:] *Literatura polska po 1939 r. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, ed. M. Witkiewicz [M. Drabikowski], Warszawa 1989.

formula to the work of Witkacy and Schulz. From the early 1990s, postmodernism became the most frequently referred to definition common to the creative work of these writers.

I am introducing here a subject that requires a separate lecture, because – even without beginning it – I can go straight to the point. The similarity of the works of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz to postmodern literature is doubtless tempting, and one can gather together many arguments, as Łapiński clearly demonstrates. But still, the analogy between postmodernism and the literature of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz seems to me to be quite wrong and recalls throwing the baby out with the bath water. It leads, it is true, to inspiring terminological reinterpretations and a broadening of the contexts in which we inscribe these writers, but it adds nothing new to existing analyses and interpretations of their works. The difference between the texts of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz, and the literature of postmodernism seems to me to be basic and inescapable.

The fundamental difference between postmodernism and these writers' works refers to the treatment of human subjectivity. For the postmodernists, "subject" and "subjectivity" are empty words; the subject does not exist – that is one of postmodernism's slogans, and at the same time a marker of its negative anthropology. At the same time, for Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz, the subject, the individual, individuality are the most important categories in their thought and art.

For postmodernists, art is only artificiality. Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz avail themselves, of course, of artificiality, but behind the masks of conventions, games, and deformations, there hides in their works a serious ontological and epistemological set of concerns, and also the Mystery – which means something different for each of these writers.

Postmodernism enjoys the technology of the twentieth century, and frequently is its adaptation. The work of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz grows out of a rejection of technology. The postmodern ludic is based on reproduction without a subject, without an individual, and without an original, but the ludic in these three writers is connected with the individual.

Irrespective of its many variants, postmodernism assumes that literature does not create any meaning, that it is only a game of the conventions of the signifier and the signified; in a word, it says nothing about the extra-verbal world, or extratextual reality. All such statements, or in other words, meaning, idea, concept is considered "utopian" or ideology, and "meaning", "ideology", and "utopia" are, according to postmodernists, a type of violence and the hierarchy of someone over someone else, and something over something else. Thus, they (meaning, ideology, utopia) are markers of thinking against which arose . . . postmodernism.

In this sense, the works of Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz are, indeed, full of meanings and ideas and open and concealed hierarchies. For example, a shared – sometimes open, sometimes concealed – marker of Witkacy’s and Gombrowicz’s work is the rejection of nothingness and nihilism, a sounding out of ways of existing, their consequences and dangers.

Each of these writers experimented with the latest “forms in art”, but the same forms were not their aim, ideal, or absolute. Someone who only sees in Witkacy’s work the meaninglessness of “Pure Form”, in Gombrowicz’s only “Form” and “parody”, and in Schulz’s only proliferating metaphors, is going no deeper than the surface of their texts, and sees no further than the “technical” definitions in the self-commentaries of these writers.

Not Pure Form, but metaphysical experience was the focus of Witkacy’s analyses. Not Form as such, but universal human drama intrigued and even terrified Gombrowicz. Not cascades of metamorphoses and metaphors, but the mysteries of creation and existence fascinated Schulz.

Each of these writers also had a feeling of the exceptionality of his work; each of them believed in the existence and meaning of art, and that – to speak in Gombrowicz’s facetious terms – his works were designed for the “bright and not for the dull”. This belief, that intellect and art, intelligence and talent are elite values, also places their work far from the programmatically egalitarian assumptions of postmodernism. Despite the various postmodern reinterpretations that are carried out on them today, the works of these three writers are far from the presuppositions of postmodernism, for their generative context is not postmodernism, but European modernism and its fundamental questions about the mutual relations of the individual and society, about *sacrum* and *profanum*, about power, the subject, and subjectivity, about myth, about consciousness and the subconscious, and about many other problems that shaped European – and more precisely – Central European modernism.

Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz do not belong to the same generation, but they create – each one differently – outstanding works of Polish modernism. Of the modernism that is the most important trans-generational current of the whole twentieth century, and which has lasted for a century already, because the problems and questions it raised more than 100 years ago have not yet either been solved or discredited.