

AT WORK AND PLAY: PHILOSOPHY AND PARODY
IN THE NOVELS OF WITOLD GOMBROWICZ

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the function of philosophy and parody in the novels and pseudo-autobiographical writings, in translation, of the Polish author Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969). It is intended not as an introduction, but as an analysis and explication to readers already familiar with Gombrowicz's work.

Problems:

This thesis examines Gombrowicz's philosophical/theoretical system of *Interhumanity*, and elucidates such concepts within that system as the "individual," "inaccessibility," "inauthenticity," "Form," the "Formal Imperative," and "Chaos." It analyses the portrayal of Interhumanity within Gombrowicz's novels, and the various levels at which Interhumanity is illustrated as operating. It identifies, through Gombrowicz's system of Interhumanity, as well as through other aspects of his works, the function of paradox, parody and satire. Finally, it attempts to "situate" Gombrowicz within the paradigm of the 20th-century novel.

Methods:

The methodology employed consists of an examination of Gombrowicz's *Diary* and *A Kind of Testament*, for its arguments regarding Interhumanity; an examination of the novels *Ferdynand*, *Trans-Atlantyk*, *Pornografia*, and *Cosmos*, to illustrate Gombrowicz's use of these novels as vehicles to portray the consequences of

Interhumanity, at both the interpersonal and the communal level; an examination of the function of parody and satire in Gombrowicz's novels, and Gombrowicz's utilization of these devices to delineate his views on philosophy, art, and human behavior; and a discussion of Gombrowicz's context within the 20th-century novel through the analysis of his relationship to Modernism and postmodernism.

Conclusions:

Gombrowicz's system represents a serious intellectual attempt to describe the human condition, and in certain respects anticipates Existentialism, Structuralism, and post-structuralism. His novels function as vehicles for the delineation of Interhumanity, and thus of Gombrowicz's specific world-view, which posits an existence centered around the binary of pain and laughter. Gombrowicz further employs Interhumanity as a means of invoking his preferred literary techniques, parody and satire, as well as his predilection for paradoxes and antinomies. In terms of the 20th-century novel, Gombrowicz emerges as one of its major satirists and parodists, and as a precursor to the "postmodern" novel.

Abbreviations:

(C): *Cosmos* / (D): *Diary* (3 vols.) / (F): *Ferdydurke* / (GG): *Gombrowicz's Grimaces* / (HPL): *The History of Polish Literature* / (KT): *A Kind of Testament* / (LOD): *Lines of Desire* / (M): *The Marriage* / (P): *Pornografia* / (TA): *Trans-Atlantyk* / (WG): *Witold Gombrowicz*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
I Introduction	1
II Interhumanity	4
2.1 Individuality, Inaccessibility, and Inauthenticity	4
2.2 The “I” and the “Other”: Joining the Dance	7
2.3 Form and Deformation	8
2.4 Chaos	13
2.5 The Defense against Form	14
2.6 Interhumanity: A Summing-Up	16
III Consequences of Interhumanity: The Interpersonal Level	17
3.1 The Problematics of Verbal Communication	17
3.2 Posture, Gesture, and Grimace	25
IV Consequences of Interhumanity: The Communal Level	37
4.1 Conventionalized Behaviour	38
4.2 Voyeurism: Hiding and Spying	40
4.3 Aggression, Violence, and the “Wriggling Heap”	46
V Paradox, Parody, and Satire	48
VI Witold Gombrowicz and the 20 th -Century Novel	60
VII Conclusion	63
VIII Works cited	67

I Introduction

In *Diary*, Witold Gombrowicz refers to an assessment of his work by the French critic Michel Mohrt, a member of the panel of judges the year *Cosmos* was nominated for the International Prize. "There is," according to Mohrt, "some sort of secret in the work of this writer, I would like to get to know him, who knows, maybe he is a homosexual, maybe an impotent, maybe an onanist, at any rate he has something of the bastard about him and I would not be surprised that he gave himself up quietly to orgies like King Ubu" (D3 201). Anticipating in spirit Czeslaw Milosz's reference, featured on the cover of the *Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics* edition, regarding the "enigmatic" and "disturbing" qualities of Gombrowicz's work, Mohrt's assessment, despite the nature of its peculiar enthusiasm, displays subtlety and acuity as a commentary on Gombrowicz's writing. The phrase "some sort of secret" is particularly significant. In alluding to aspects of the enigmatic in Gombrowicz's work, Mohrt suggests a discovery of intellectual depth, of insight, perhaps even of wisdom. He hints at seriousness, at an inquiry into "fundamental" questions, at the articulation of further possibilities.

Similarly, the hypotheses Mohrt formulates regarding Gombrowicz's character in fact reveal insight into another side, if not of the author, then of the author's work, an insight into the opposition that both counterbalances and contradicts the seriousness previously inferred. Mohrt echoes here, through his cynical and somewhat derisive tone, the predisposition in Gombrowicz's work toward the startling, the provocative, perhaps even the offensive. As well, Mohrt's assessment is not devoid of humour, and that too of a type indicative, in its irascibility, of the humour in Gombrowicz's work. These elements

of Mohrt's appraisal relate directly to the vehicles – idiosyncrasy and humour – through which “play” informs so much of Gombrowicz's work.

Mohrt's evaluation recognizes the existence of something compelling, perhaps perverse, at any rate exceptional, in the work of Gombrowicz. It further recognizes an element of cunning in that work, cunning of a kind that compels the reader to take seriously, and yet to laugh at, the ideas and situations presented. In sum, Mohrt's analysis encapsulates the most distinctive (and paradoxical) characteristics of the novels of Gombrowicz: on the one hand philosophy and seriousness, on the other parody and play.

Mohrt's assessment displays considerable insight into Gombrowicz's work. In fact, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that Gombrowicz's account of Mohrt's assessment is an example of the author at play. Though Gombrowicz did not invent the French critic, a search has failed to ascertain the source of the alleged quote. Meanwhile, in *Cosmos* itself, a passage suspiciously similar to the quote attributed to Mohrt appears; in a description of Leo, Witold comments, “his behaviour hinted at the possibility of licentious sybaritism, secret orgies, haunting the confines of this respectable home” (80). Similarities of content and tone suggest the passage Gombrowicz attributes to Mohrt might in fact be attributed to Gombrowicz himself, at play with presumed perceptions regarding his work, or as a way of indicating a personal view of how this work might be perceived.

The philosophical/theoretical system Gombrowicz constructs exemplifies the antinomies and paradoxes that are distinguishing features of his novels. This system – “Interhumanity” – represents what Gombrowicz declares to be his most important intellectual “discovery,” his most compelling philosophical insight. It is a concept that

intrigues and perplexes him throughout his “career,” so that over the course of his works the philosophy evolves and develops. Yet at the same time, Gombrowicz seeks to effectively disparage, through the use of satire and parody, the construction of philosophical/theoretical systems – his own as well as others – by testing the validity, and ultimately the relevance, of such constructs. The result is a paradox: the creation of an arguably profound systematic analysis of the human condition, which at the same time serves as a parody of philosophy and a questioning of the utility of all philosophical systems. For Gombrowicz, Interhumanity was the most serious thing he knew. At the same time, no writer waged a more relentless campaign against seriousness.

All Gombrowicz’s novels are essentially concerned with one subject – human interaction. Gombrowicz uses philosophical reflection, as well as satire and parody, to explore as comprehensively as possible this phenomenon. Through these motifs, he constructs, and deconstructs, his peculiar vision of humanity, and states his claim for the two fundamental facts of existence: pain and laughter.

Though many of the arguments I put forward are equally applicable to Gombrowicz’s plays (and also, though to a lesser extent, to the pseudonymously published novel *Possessed*), the analysis of philosophy and parody in this study will focus exclusively on the novels *Ferdydurke*, *Trans-Atlantyk*, *Pornografia*, and *Cosmos*, and on the pseudo- autobiographical works *Diary* and *A Kind of Testament*. It is in these latter works in particular that the concepts that comprise Gombrowicz’s system of Interhumanity are most fully defined.

II INTERHUMANITY

2.1 Individuality, Inaccessibility, and Inauthenticity

In *Testaments Betrayed*, Milan Kundera asks, “What is an individual? Wherein does his identity reside? All novels seek to answer these questions” (11). Kundera’s generalization might be qualified – in fact, is qualified, by the claims of certain writers of the *nouveau roman* and the postmodern novel – yet it would be argumentative to deny the veracity of Kundera’s claim in general terms. It is certainly applicable in Gombrowicz’s case; individuality and identity are his first subjects of inquiry in the laying of ground rules for Interhumanity. Gombrowicz’s perspective on this basic component, therefore, marks a logical point of entry into an analysis of Interhumanity.

In fact, an inquiry into the meaning of the term “I” lies at the heart of Interhumanity. In *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz asks, “Who am I really, and to what extent *am* I?” From his analysis of this question he draws two conclusions: the first postulates that the individual is nothing more than the *desire* for individuality (“My ‘self’ is nothing but my will to be myself” [77]); the second, that this desire is unrealizable, because the basic characteristic of the “I” is inaccessibility. As it pertains to the individual, inaccessibility may be defined as the impossibility of self-knowledge; inaccessibility renders the imperative “know thyself” unrealizable. As Ewa Thompson indicates, the “I” in Interhumanity is a “contentless concept” (WG 94). Gombrowicz endows this quality as a primary characteristic of his protagonists, particularly the various

narrators of the novels who function as representations or doubles of the author: “my dominant feeling,” Witold¹ remarks in *Pornografia*, “was one of vacuity” (16).

Gombrowicz does not undertake to resolve the (admittedly overwhelming) question as to why our “true” natures are inaccessible to us. He draws this conclusion, apparently, from personal experience – refracted through the vicissitudes of his own personality – and accepts it as a given, a fundamental truth. There is, however, nothing fantastic, startling, or even original (“I signed no contract to serve up first-time ideas,” he writes [D1 94]) in this perspective. Gombrowicz is attuned here to twentieth-century thought, formed by Freudian theories of the unconscious, the Marxian concept of “false consciousness,” the question of authenticity posed by Sartrean Existentialism, and the deconstruction of the Cartesian *cogito*, all of which make true and complete self-knowledge a particularly suspect concept.

Inaccessibility in fact provides a key into the system of Interhumanity. The inability of the individual to attain a fundamental knowledge of its own individuality leads to the adoption of a series of masks, false fronts, generally centred on a set of convictions or ideals, in the attempt to mold something tangible out of an inaccessible centre. This compulsion holds further consequences for the individual; the adopting of masks implies the consciousness of artifice, of dishonesty. If inaccessibility entails an ignorance of who or what one “really” is, at the same time it imposes upon the individual the awareness that one is not what one appears, or attempts to appear, to be: in other words, an awareness of inauthenticity. As a consequence, humanity – or, in

¹ For the sake of clarity, I shall be referring throughout this thesis to *Gombrowicz* when referring to the author and to *Witold* when referring to the various narrators, with the obvious exception of Johnnie in *Ferdydurke*

Gombrowicz's terms, "man" – becomes an "eternal actor, but a natural one, because his artificiality is inborn, it makes up a feature of his humanity." To be an individual is to pretend, to "recite humanity" (D2 4).

Gombrowicz's proposition that "artificiality is inborn" is problematic. Rather than paradox, as he undoubtedly intends it, the concept breaks down into a contradiction in logic. In linking inauthenticity irrevocably to inaccessibility, Gombrowicz appears to elide these two factors, so that inauthenticity itself becomes innate ("there is artificiality," Gombrowicz writes, "in even the most intimate reflexes" [D1 192]), where it might be more accurate to suggest that inaccessibility is innate, but inauthenticity is imposed. Yet inauthenticity is imposed not only from without, but also from within: it is the individual, through the initial crisis of inaccessibility, who adopts the mask, who performs the first move in the imposition of inauthenticity. This, perhaps, is what Gombrowicz intends in posing the concept of innate inauthenticity – the argument that inauthenticity is to a certain extent self-imposed. Inaccessibility, furthermore, does not (apparently) imply the absolute impossibility of some form of self-knowledge; Gombrowicz postulates that while one cannot know what one is, nevertheless one can harbour a sort of intuition regarding what one is *not*: "I don't know who I really am," Gombrowicz writes in *A Kind of Testament*, "but I suffer when I'm deformed. So at least I know what I'm not" (77).

The following conclusions may be stated regarding the individual in the system of Interhumanity: its crucial aspect is inaccessibility of identity, in response to which it adopts a façade, and in doing so, is made increasingly conscious of its own artifice, or inauthenticity. At each step of the way, individuality results in torment. The individual, in itself, is caught in a circular struggle. And that is merely the beginning of its troubles.

2.2 The “I” and the “Other”: Joining the Dance

If, as Gombrowicz declares, the most blatant fact of reality is the other, then the most blatant fact of existence is co-existence. It is on this premise that Gombrowicz founds his system. Interhumanity, in its most restricted definition, is co-existence – the fact that the individual, at least as depicted in the novels of Gombrowicz, does not live in isolation. Ultimately, however, Interhumanity represents substantially more than the acknowledgment of interpersonal or intercommunal relationships. Interhumanity becomes an exploration of the enormity of the consequences of co-existence, of the repercussions of interhuman relations.

Throughout the three-volume *Diary* and *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz identifies particular attributes of Interhumanity. The first of these is the extraordinary precedence Interhumanity attains in the existence of the individual, to the point of becoming its dominant aspect. Gombrowicz variously refers to Interhumanity as the “interhuman sphere” or “interhuman church.” In *A Kind of Testament*, he explains: “I wanted to show humanity in its transition from the church of God to the church of man” (97). This is not to suggest that the individual indulges in a “cult of selfhood”; it suggests rather that the individual indulges in a “cult of the relationship.” Interhumanity, in its capacity to become a dominant force of existence, is deified by Gombrowiczian “man,” elevated to the status of a religion. The individual’s relationship with God, with nature, even with itself, becomes secondary to the relationship it carries on with the other, or others. “Man,” writes Gombrowicz, “has no other divinity but that which springs from other people” (M 15); Interhumanity is our “only accessible divinity” (D2 6). In the

process, however, the participants are diminished; the individual becomes increasingly susceptible to the dictates of Interhumanity. As Gombrowicz describes it, “Man submitted to the interhuman is like a twig on a rough sea: he bobs up and down, plunges into the raging waters, slides gently along the surface of the luminous waves, he is engulfed by rhymes and vertiginous rhythms, he loses himself in unforeseen perspectives” (KT 75).

A further attribute of Interhumanity is its oppositional and hierarchical nature. Interhumanity contains the potential for the individual to hone self-definition, through the reflection of the image mirrored in the eyes of the other, but also the potential for deformation, of having an identity imposed from without (or, alternatively, of imposing identities on others). “Being united,” writes Gombrowicz, “people impose upon one another this or that manner of being, speaking, behaving” (M 15). The result is commonly the reduction of relationships to a duel of impositions, and thus to struggles for power, inevitably resulting in the institution of divisions and hierarchies of domination, which become in their extreme form relations of mastery and slavery.

2.3 Form and Deformation

Interhumanity, in summary, represents not only the unity between the “I” and the “Other”, but also the prioritizing of this form of relationship over all others, and the inevitability of opposition and hierarchies. Most importantly, however, Interhumanity brings about the unleashing of “Form.” The mask adopted by the “I” becomes distorted through contact with the mask adopted by the “other.” Each mask goes through a series of contortions in its effort to adjust, to attune itself to the other. An “element of Form,” writes Gombrowicz, “is produced between people that delineates each man individually. I

am like a voice in an orchestra that must tune itself to its sound, find its place in the melody or, like a dancer for whom it is not so important exactly what is danced, the important thing is to join in the dance with others. And that is why neither my thought nor my feeling is truly free or my own. I think and feel 'for' people in order to rhyme with them" (D1 192). Form, then, is a factor that complicates the quest for identity, by forcing the individual to "adapt" to others. Arising through Interhumanity, Form further negates possibilities for agency and autonomy in the same way inaccessibility necessarily does for the individual.

In her study, *Witold Gombrowicz*, Ewa Thompson writes that "Form arises between men, whom it disfigures because it does not express what they are in the depths of their unconscious. It solidifies into a separate reality which threatens the identity of its creators" (151). In fact, Gombrowicz asserts that the individual lacks the capacity to know what lies in the "depths of [its] subconscious," but that it resists the Form or Forms imposed on it by others, because such impositions compound the awareness of inauthenticity.

In *Diary*, Gombrowicz describes the magnitude of Form: "It is not merely a matter of one person or group of people affecting another, but a matter of effecting a complete transformation: man creates himself with another man in the sense of the wildest debauchery" (D2 4). He elaborates: "even in a small group of freely conversing people, you will notice their need to attune themselves to this or that form, which creates itself accidentally and independently of their will by dint only of their mutual adjustment to one another [. . .] 'People' are something that must organize itself every minute – nevertheless, this organization, this collective shape, creates itself as the by-product of a

thousand impulses and is, in addition, unforeseen and does not allow itself to be ruled by those who make it up" (D2 73). A notable point here is that unless one is willing to live in total isolation, the effects of Form for the individual are inescapable – the presence of even one "other" is enough to set the process in motion.

Inaccessibility, then, is the starting point, Interhumanity the medium, and Form, the result. The consequence of Form is deformation: "Each person deforms other persons, while being at the same time deformed by them" (M 15). An examination of the various aspects of Form will assist in illustrating the means by which this deformation occurs.

The first characteristic that may be noted of Form is that it is reciprocal in nature. The individual seeks Form, attempts to impose Form, and has Form imposed in turn. "Gombrowicz," Dorota Glowacka writes, "repeats that man is both determined by a plurality of forms and an inveterate creator of forms in the interhuman realm" (GG 75). The reciprocal nature of Form states that the individual creates Form in others even while being created by Form. The "man who imposes his form is active," writes Gombrowicz. "He is the subject of form, it is he who creates it. But when his Form, in contact with the form of others, undergoes a deformation, he is, to a certain extent, created by others – he becomes an object. And that is by no means a superficial transformation, because Form penetrates us to the marrow" (KT 73-4).

It is because Form is reciprocal that deformation is inescapable. In *Diary*, Gombrowicz writes, "I experience a warping as a consequence of this highest of necessities: tuning myself to others in Form" (D1 192). The clash of Form produced by the individual and the Form produced by another results in a mutual deformation, through the mutual struggle, conscious or otherwise, to match one Form to the other, while

simultaneously attempting to keep oneself free of the deforming capabilities of the other. Thus relationships come to be characterized as an arena for struggle and conflict. "The process of deformation," writes Gombrowicz, "is a reciprocal one, a constant struggle between two forces – one internal, the other external – each imposing limitations upon the other" (M 16). This reciprocal nature of Form further accounts for Gombrowicz's concern with profusion and numbers, particularly in evidence in the second volume of *Diary*, because the greater the opportunities for reciprocity, the greater the extent to which Form is produced.

Another element of Form is the Formal Imperative. In *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz discusses this phenomenon: "man, in his deepest essence, possesses something which I would call 'the Formal Imperative'. Something which is, it seems to me, indispensable to any organic creation. For instance, take our innate need to complete incomplete Form: every Form that has been started requires a complement. When I say A, something compels me to say B, and so on. This need to develop, to complete, because of a certain logic inherent in Form, plays an important part of my work" (69). Ewa Thompson further elucidates this concept, describing the Formal imperative as "the impulse in man compelling him to finish what is unfinished and add to what has already been built [. . .] Compelling man to give names, classify and otherwise structure the reality around him" (WG 150). The Formal Imperative leads us to seek Form everywhere, and to everywhere impose it; it is this dynamic that compels the individual to impose Form on others. At its most ubiquitous we find a situation such as that in *Cosmos*, where links and connections seem to emerge out of a potentially endless trail of incoherent signs. "Born as we are out of chaos," Witold laments, "why can we never establish

contact with it? No sooner do we look at it than order, pattern, shape is born under our eyes” (31). Yet while order appears to emerge at random, the individual is ultimately frustrated in its inability to complete the pattern, to establish an overall design. This insatiable compulsion, which in *Cosmos* leads to Witold’s throttling and hanging of the cat, is, according to Gombrowicz, futile.

What make futile the attempt to impose order are proliferation, profusion, and multiplicity: “How many sentences,” Witold asks, “can be composed out of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet? How many meanings could be deduced from these hundreds of weeds, clumps of earth, and other details” (36). This compulsion toward a futile goal marks an additional source of humanity’s collective misery and torment. In the same way that it is impossible to refuse to make a choice, it is equally impossible to deny the Formal Imperative, the inborn necessity to create Form. The Formal Imperative drives Form. Form choreographs the dance, but it is the Formal Imperative that makes us join in.

The Formal Imperative is the need for Form. This is indicative of Gombrowicz’s vision of the paradoxical nature of existence. Form is both a creative and a destructive force; humanity desires Form at the same time that it desires to free itself from Form. The need for Form arises out of humanity’s instinct for self-affirmation. It adopts a mask, “recites” humanity, as much for the “other” as for itself. It desires Form because Form furnishes the individual with a pseudo-identity with which to confront the other, and through that other’s reaction form and reform its idea of itself: “At heart,” writes Gombrowicz, “man depends on the picture of himself formed in the mind of others” (F 16).

2.4 Chaos

The antithesis of Form is Chaos. These are the choices Gombrowicz poses for humanity. Stanislaw Baranczak elucidates this binary in his Introduction to *Trans-Atlantyk*:

The individual is, in other words, suspended between the internal ideas of Form and Chaos, between total subordination of the ego to the generally accepted patterns of behavior, logic, language, and so forth, and total liberation from all that is inherited or imitated [. . .] neither the extreme of Form nor that of Chaos is accepted unequivocally as a positive solution for the dilemma of human existence.

To reverse this equation, attaining the extreme of Chaos would allow us to be completely spontaneous, free, and sincere in whatever we try to communicate, but then the very process of communication would not occur, since a complete absence of Form would entail the lack of any 'language' common to us and the others. Striving for Form, we gain acceptance of others but lose our individual uniqueness; letting ourselves sink into Chaos, we remain individually unique all right, but others cannot comprehend and accept us. In fact, complete identification of the individual with the extreme of Form would mean dissolution in the conventional, that is, spiritual death; complete identification with the extreme of Chaos would mean absolute isolation, that is, spiritual death again (xi-xii).

I have quoted this passage at length because of its accurate representation of the means by which Form establishes itself in our everyday reality, through language, and other forms of communication and interaction. In *Cosmos*, we see the desire to impose Form, the Formal Imperative, taken by Witold to its limits, with the result that he nearly comes face to face with Chaos. But the “wish to catapult oneself into the pure infinite is impossible; moreover, says Gombrowicz, it is quite amusing how this desire itself fosters the growth of new constellations of Form” (Glowacka GG 80). Chaos, the opposite of Form, results in dissolution. Humanity desires order, and thus cannot bear formlessness. It does not actively resist Form because it fears even more the alternative.

2.5 The Defense against Form

Form, Gombrowicz insists, is inevitable and inescapable. And while he offers no resolution to this problem (“do not,” he declares in *Diary*, “expect me to provide you with medicine for incurable diseases” [D2 4]), yet he consistently challenges the individual to resist it. “*Try to set yourself against form*,” he writes in *Ferdydurke*, “*try to shake free of it*” (85). The first step, Gombrowicz declares, is to acknowledge the power of Form, and not attempt to hide from or deny it. “If Form deforms us,” he writes, “then the moral postulate requires us to face the consequences. To be myself. To defend myself from deformity, to keep my distance from my feelings, my most private thoughts, whenever they do not really express me. This is the first moral obligation” (KT 77).

Gombrowicz incorporates, within his writings, various strategies of defense in the struggle against Form. The most common of these is egocentricity. Gombrowicz justifies this privileging of egotism by declaring that “[t]he word ‘I’ is so basic and inborn, so full

of the most palpable and therefore most honest reality . . . that instead of sneering at it, it would be better to fall on your knees before it" (D1 113). *Diary* opens with a burst of egotism, four days of "me." Egotism is posited as a necessary response to the torment of inauthenticity, and a natural consequence of the fascination with the problematics of self-identity. "I," writes Gombrowicz, "am the most important and probably the only problem I have" (D1 113).

Another means of offsetting Form is through immaturity, or more precisely, in the engaging of a struggle against maturity. Thompson points out that "[f]or human beings to adopt a pretense of maturity means they become prisoners of Form" (WG 60), and that Gombrowicz "considers the acceptance of immaturity to be a means of circumventing Form" (WG 155). While *Ferdydurke* makes obvious the fact that adolescence is also subject to Form, Gombrowicz maintains that adolescence offers at least the possibility of escape, while "adults" are subject to its total ramifications. A "catastrophe," writes Gombrowicz, "occurs when one turns thirty – the utter transformation of youth into uninteresting maturity" (D1 71). Maturity proves an effective creator or instigator of Form; maturity calls Form into being. The older one grows, the more maturity is expected of or imposed on one, the greater the force of Form. "The process of getting older makes these spiritual states more and more terrifying," writes Gombrowicz. "Man's life becomes, with time, a steel trap" (D1 172). The novels portray the development of Gombrowicz's thought in this area. In *Ferdydurke*, initially, maturity is desirable, while immaturity is something imposed. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, in the choice posed between *patria* and *filistria* (binaries of such concepts as fatherhood/sonhood; patriotism/individualism;

maturity/immaturity), the paradigm shifts; the question becomes which choice is in fact preferable. In *Pornografia*, immaturity becomes the ideal.

In *Diary*, Gombrowicz declares “one cannot undermine form by opposing it with another form, but only by laxity in one’s attitude toward it” (D1 36). As Marzena Grzegorzczak suggests, “the key for Gombrowicz is to maintain the dynamism of the process, that is, to produce form for social use but to avoid identifying with it” (GG 137).

2.6 Interhumanity: A Summing Up

In his introduction to *Trans-Atlantyk*, Baranczak writes, “[p]robably no other fiction writer in modern world literature can match the almost intimidating consistency and precision of Gombrowicz’s ideas” (xi). This claim is countered by Milosz’s contention, in *A History of Polish Literature*, that Gombrowicz’s system contains unresolved contradictions, suggesting a lack of rigour (435). The concept of “innate inauthenticity,” the positing of the impossibility of self-knowledge while maintaining a conviction in the ability to know what one is “not,” attest to the problematics of Gombrowicz’s system. In this debate, the question may be stated as follows: is Gombrowicz (as is generally suggested of Sartre) a philosopher utilizing the novel as a showcase for his ideas, or is he a novelist incorporating philosophy for his own novelistic ends? The distinction is not a negligible one. In the Gombrowiczian scheme of things, the novelist clearly takes precedence. Milosz opts for this perspective, and even Baranczak is careful to designate Gombrowicz a “writer of fiction.”

If one were to posit a category of the “philosophical novel,” in which the employment of exaggeration to emphasize ideas would prove a common feature, it would

be possible to suggest that Gombrowicz works within that tradition. Does Voltaire's *Candide*, or Kafka's *The Trial* (to cite two works frequently alluded to as "philosophical novels") accurately represent our experience of the world? In fact they are perspectives exaggerated for effect. Yet at the same time, these portrayals provide insight into the experience of existence. Gombrowicz's privileging of the novel does not render his system void of philosophical validity.

III CONSEQUENCES OF INTERHUMANITY: THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL

Gombrowicz depicts a forbidding vision of humanity, and of existence. The individual, initially constrained by inaccessibility, is then subjected to Interhumanity – and made a subject of Interhumanity – wherein it encounters on one hand the distorting forces of Form, and on the other the unbearable void of Chaos. Existence comes to be characterized by unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) desire, futility, torment, anguish, suffering, and pain. Such are the subjects of Gombrowicz's comic novels.

Interpersonal relationships, established through communication and maintained through interaction, receive their most profound treatment by Gombrowicz not in the "autobiographical" writings but in his novels, where Form wreaks havoc. It does this, specifically, by rendering verbal communication meaningless, and by compelling the individual toward alternative – at times extreme – methods of communication, through posture, gesture, and grimace.

3.1 The Problematics of Verbal Communication

"Oh, what do we Say? Oh, why can we not say our Say?"

(*Trans-Atlantyk* 31)

In *Diary*, Gombrowicz relates a conversation that takes place on a voyage to Rio Parana: "The industrialist from San Nicolas spoke: – Lousy weather . . . yet again this didn't sound right, as if he had wanted to say something else, yes, something else . . . I had the same impression when, at breakfast, a doctor from Asuncion, a political exile, told me about the local women. He talked. But he talked precisely so as not to say anything (this thought hounds me), in such a way as not to say what he really had to say" (D1 200). The extent to which this thought "hounds" Gombrowicz is made explicit by the ubiquity of depictions regarding the ineffectiveness of verbal communication in his novels, a phenomenon which becomes increasingly pronounced, culminating in the dumb silences of *Cosmos*.

Interhumanity, Tomas Longinovic writes, "opens up a multitude of possibilities for misperception, misrecognition, and miscommunication" (GG 44). Gombrowicz posits three specific areas of deficiency that combine to undermine verbal communication: banality, duplicity, and inadequacy.

a) Banality: or, "talking for the sake of talking"

In *Ferdydurke*, Johnnie remarks of his Aunt Isabel, "nobody listened [to her], because everybody knew she was only talking for talking's sake" (212). We are obliged to speak, we speak because we "have to say something" (C 116). Consequently, conversation in the novels of Gombrowicz tends to be anything but a fine art. His characters have little to say to one another, rarely reveal themselves through speech, and in fact are often as likely to use verbal communication to conceal themselves, or aspects

of themselves. The espousal of ideology in *Ferdydurke* would seem to make this novel an exception, yet while many interminable discourses are delivered, they meet with little or no reception – here too communication fails, and characters merely continue to follow the paths their ideologies mark out for them. There is no dialogue, only demagoguery.

Frederick in *Pornografia* offers a fitting illustration of this habit of “talking for the sake of talking.” As he and Witold undertake their journey to the estate of Hippolytus, Witold notes that Frederick “[f]rom time to time [. . .] smiled at me, said something obviously intended to make his presence bearable” (10). Interhumanity abhors silence, which is linked to chaos; speech alleviates the tension brought about by the unbearable “thereness” of others. Having established the necessity of verbalization, Gombrowicz proceeds to underscore its banality. “Frederick was conversing politely with Maria,” Witold declares, and then adds, “but was it not to merely avoid saying something else that he sustained this banal conversation?” (17). And after having delivered a toast to the engaged couple, Albert and Henia, Frederick says, “Ladies and gentlemen, they deserve to be happy so they will be happy!” – which Witold interprets as signifying, “I’m talking for the sake of talking” (73).

Gombrowicz uses a variety of techniques to underscore the banality of speech. One of the most notable is repetition. Taken far enough, repetition has the power to render words meaningless. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, for example, a typical conversation occurs between Witold and the Minister Kosiubidzki Feliks, a man incapable of reiterating anything but platitudes regarding nationality and honour. Witold narrates their conversation thus: “‘The War,’ I say. He says; ‘The War.’ Says I: ‘The war. He to this:

‘The War.’ So I to him: ‘The War, the war’” (13). Such exchanges, replete with repetition, relegate all efforts at communication to the squawking of two parrots.

Gombrowicz further employs reduction and “expansion” – expansiveness – to emphasize the poverty of verbal communication. This predilection is particularly evident in *Cosmos*, where characters tend to speak, on the one hand, in single, short sentences, using unsophisticated, often monosyllabic diction, or on the other in extended cliché-ridden outbursts that amount to little more than a litany of complaint. Kulka is the obvious representative of this latter trend. Fuchs proves unique in belonging to both categories, being essentially dull and predictable in speech, yet capable of elaborate rants when the subject is his personal nemesis, Drozdowski. In either case, little of import is ever related through the speech of these characters, and little of the speaker’s psychological state is imparted. Characters speak to fill the void.

In Gombrowicz’s novels, it would appear the more crucial the situation, the more banal the speech. “To reach the depths of her [Zutka’s] being,” says Johnnie in *Ferdydurke*, “would be extremely difficult for me, I could only hope to touch the surface, I could hardly do more than knock at the door and ask at what time dinner was served” (118). Perhaps the most telling example of the banality of verbal communication involves a scene in *Cosmos* concerning Witold’s growing obsession with Lena, to the point that he considers himself in love with her. Thus, when the opportunity to be alone with her arises, the reader anticipates something momentous. Witold, however, immediately turns away from her, ignores her, forces her to initiate the conversation. She remarks on the view, to which Witold makes the following assumption: “she said this because, being only five yards away, she had to say something.” When he does reply, it is

in the same banal vein, also “for the sake of saying something.” The “couple” exchange a few inconsequential questions and then Lena remarks, “I had a snooze after lunch,” to which Witold replies, “So did I.” That is the extent of their communication. Gombrowicz concludes this scene with Witold posing the question, “how can somebody whose words serve only as an excuse for her voice put up any resistance?” (116).

b) Duplicity: or, “talking to hide something”

In the novels, verbal communication is often reduced to opportunities in the practice of deception. Ewa Thompson, discussing *Pornografia*, remarks that there “are few novels in world literature in which man’s capacity for lying is so profoundly taken into account [. . .] The lying that goes on in *Pornografia* is not Freudian displacement, or rationalizing, or trying to protect one’s endangered privacy. It is lying pure and simple – the telling of untruth about a state of affairs at hand, by words or by behavior [. . .] *Pornografia* is a tissue of many lies which the characters constantly offer one another” (WG 93). Thompson further argues that a “fundamental assumption of the narrator is that being a man means to lie, that lying is often necessary to personal development. No voice or event in the story challenges this assumption” (WG 95).

In his depiction of verbal communication as duplicity, Gombrowicz appoints Frederick his main representative. In *Pornografia*, Witold comments, regarding Frederick, that as “soon as he said something one felt he was saying it so as not to say something else [. . .] his words only served to hide something” (69-70). Lying is also common in *Cosmos*, whose characters consistently fabricate mistruths in the attempt to conceal a variety of motives. This deception resides not only in what the characters say to

each other, but in what they do not say, what they attempt to conceal. Witold and Fuchs, for example, conceal from the Wojtys' their attempts to unravel the mysteries they "discover." Having decided to investigate the room of the domestic servant, Katasia, they fabricate an alibi in case of detection. Kulka and Lena prevaricate regarding Kulka's "condition," which compels her to mad fits of wood chopping. Leo conceals the truth of his sexual desires by playing the role of contented husband. And we never discover the demons Louis conceals, that lead to his ultimate suicide. Each of these characters, in their desire to conceal secrets, engages in a tournament of lies.

c) Inadequacy: or, "the speech beyond words"

However much one attempts to use speech to fill the void, situations nevertheless arise where silence remains the only possibility left. This effect is a consequence of the ultimate inadequacy of words. "[C]an words," Gombrowicz asks in *Ferdydurke*, "express more than a part of reality? The rest is silence" (74). As various critics have pointed out, the title "*Ferdydurke*" is itself a meaningless term. Gombrowicz points to the failure of words in illustrating the flawed nature of verbal communication. Recalling, in *Diary*, his attendance at an intellectual gathering in Paris, he notes of its participants that "an awful difficulty crawled into their articulation, someone might even want to say something, but he cannot, it's too difficult, too deep, too high, too subtle . . . and each person pays homage to his difficulty with his silence" (D3 99). Frederick in *Pornografia* comes to a similar understanding when he realizes that "his speech was nothing but an effort to distract our attention from the real speech, the speech without words, beyond words and full of a meaning that words could not convey" (73).

d) Verbal Communication, Form, and Inauthenticity

In his introduction to *Trans-Atlantyk*, Baranczak describes the significance of the effects of Form on verbal communication. The “same Form,” he writes, “that enables the individual psyche to express itself is also the psyche’s chief *obstacle* to expressing itself. By imposing on us ready-made ‘languages’ of generally recognizable, therefore more or less repetitive or trite, symbols, Form in fact distorts as much as it grants, in extreme cases making it impossible for us to communicate anything spontaneously and freely” (xii). The “extreme cases” to which Baranczak refers constitute the norm in the novels of Gombrowicz, whose characters rarely speak “freely,” where verbal communication – when it is not mere equivocation, deceit, or idle chatter, but rather a sincere attempt at an opening up, the revelation of some facet of one individual to another – repeatedly proves to be nothing less than a torturous undertaking. “It is not we who say the words,” writes Gombrowicz, “it is the words which say us” (KT 152). In the struggle against language, the struggle of the individual to master it, control it, utilize it as an instrument of self-expression, language wins – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the individual loses. This precept is illustrated by Gombrowicz’s portrayal of both Hippolytus in *Pornografia* and Leo in *Cosmos*, each of whom are in the habit of making utterances followed immediately by the repetition, in a semi-private fashion, under the breath, of that utterance – as if the utterance had come involuntarily, manifesting itself independently of the will of the speaker, who is taken by surprise, and can only test and sample its flavor after the fact.

While Form – the spontaneous distorting force arising from the compulsory interaction of individuals – undeniably proves a factor in the distortion of verbal

communication, it would be more accurate to cite another agent, another component of Interhumanity, as primarily responsible for the distortion of both verbal communication and the speech act itself. Within the system of Interhumanity, what ultimately undermines language and communication is inauthenticity. Language, an artificial construct created by inauthentic beings, becomes in itself a component of the inauthenticity of the individual. Having arisen from a source of primal inauthenticity, language in turn compounds the problem as much by its redundancies, which trivialize speech, as its complexities, which render it inscrutable.

Humanity's struggle with inauthenticity is in part the struggle to express itself sincerely and freely. Thus, in the novels of Gombrowicz, all speech is made under an initial condition of duress. In *Ferdydurke*, Johnnie's frustrated desire to explain himself, first to Pimko, then to his fellow students, is a prime example of the anxiety attached to the complexities of verbal communication. Undoubtedly, having been reduced to a schoolboy, Johnnie is already in a state of anxiety, but the ultimately futile need to explain his situation considerably compounds the problem. Inauthenticity, furthermore, is the source of all the lying in the novels; consciousness of inauthenticity leads to artifice, the adoption of "face," and to carry out this deception it is necessary to lie.

It should be noted that Gombrowicz allows, in his novels, at least one exception to his depiction of the ineffectiveness of verbal communication. Witold and Frederick, in *Pornografia*, seem able at times to perform almost telepathic feats of communication, which raise a question: what is it in the nature of this relationship that allows them to overcome the inherent obstacles? The solution perhaps lies in the fact that Witold and Frederick, more than any other characters in Gombrowicz's *oeuvre*, have "spied each

other out,” have peeled away or let slip their masks to such an extent that understanding is achieved. Their instincts and desires, furthermore, are so “attuned” that prevarication no longer becomes necessary.

It must be acknowledged, finally, that Gombrowicz’s argument – that verbal communication, language, is flawed to the point of futility – contains an inherent contradiction: Gombrowicz, a writer, denies the potentialities of language, the very potentialities he controls and manipulates in order to convey its inadequacy. Even if one were to draw distinctions between the inarticulateness of verbal communication on the one hand, and the art, artifice, or craft of writing on the other, nevertheless the utility of language itself is still under challenge. This unresolvable contradiction provides further evidence that in Gombrowicz’s work the novelist takes precedence over the philosopher, and that once again exaggeration for emphasis is applied.

3.2 Interhumanity and the Interpersonal: Posture, Gesture, and Grimace

Within the sphere of Interhumanity, the individual is at no time more aware of artificiality, or more susceptible to the exposure of artificiality, than during the act of verbalization. The point Gombrowicz repeatedly makes is that in the struggle to express oneself, a struggle intensified by the problematics of verbal communication, the individual resorts, consciously or otherwise, to forms of non-verbal communication. The novels emphasize this fact, and further outline the effects of Interhumanity at the levels of posture, gesture, and grimace.

a) Posture

In the earlier novels, *Ferdydurke* and *Trans-Atlantyk*, the significance of posture is foregrounded as one of the means by which the endeavor to communicate non-verbally is performed. In *Ferdydurke*, for example, the act of sitting takes on a significance far surpassing the mundane act of making oneself comfortable. It becomes rather a pronouncement of status, signaling perceived levels of power within a relationship. Johnnie displays a keen awareness of the symbolic relevance of posture, his own as well as that of his adversary, Pimko, in the opening chapter: “the fact that we were seated was fundamental,” he declares, “was the cardinal obstacle” (22). The balance of power in the relationship, which, given the pedagogical context, assumes the paradigm of “master” and “apprentice,” is effectively demonstrated to Johnnie by their relative postures throughout this initial interview. Though both are seated, Pimko manages to assert his transcendence over Johnnie to the extent that Pimko’s sitting has the effect of manipulating and controlling Johnnie: “All this while he [Pimko] remained seated, and his sitting had now become immutable, permanent and absolute [. . .] the master still sat there, and such an overwhelmingly, schoolmasterly spirit emanated from his posture that instead of crying out I raised my arm like a schoolboy in class” (24).

Johnnie frequently associates sitting with the power and prerogatives of authority. He speaks of Pimko “seated [. . .] as if on the acropolis” (25), of the superintendent Piorkowski “seated powerfully and transcendently on his backside” (40), and of “Pimko’s sovereign sitting” (106). In the hierarchical world of Interhumanity, however, Johnnie’s own posture relegates him to a status of inferiority: “I, seated on my childish little behind which paralyzed me and deprived me of my senses” (25).

Interhumanity compels the individual to tune itself to the Form of others; posture is often the response that signals the presence of that force. "Sitting there on the divan," says Johnnie during his term of residence at the Youthfuls', "I could not shout out aloud that Pimko was brazenly lying. So I sat up, tried to pull myself together, to look confident and self-possessed, to sit in a modern manner, in fact, and mutely I shouted with the whole of my body that it wasn't true, that I was not like that, but different" (112-13).

In *Ferdydurke*, sitting is emphasized as the principal paradigm of posture as non-verbal communication; in *Trans-Atlantyk*, kneeling predominates. (In the space of three pages in this novel, Witold makes reference to "falling on his knees" eight times). The communicative capacities of posture, kneeling or otherwise, are evidenced in such passages as, "By his [Minister Kosiubidzki's] behaviour and bearing he displayed extraordinary respect for his high dignity and by his every movement upon himself bestowed honour . . . so that one spoke to him almost on one's knees. Instantly, then, having burst into tears, I threw myself down at his feet" (12). In this instance, the gesture is a calculated one on Witold's part, yet throughout the remainder of the novel – much of which Witold spends on his knees – the act seems more instinctive than calculated.

Just as sitting is an indication, for the most part, of superiority, so in *Trans-Atlantyk*, kneeling, with its associations to genuflection, is, for the most part, an act of obeisance. Yet it also communicates relief – Witold falls on his knees when Kosiubidzki offers him a salary for the writing of articles (in which he may praise "Copernicus, Chopin or Mickiewicz"[14]); obsequiousness – in the reaction of the crowd at the reception attended by the *gran escritor* (Gombrowicz's parodic caricature of Borges); incredulity – Witold repeatedly fall to his knees as the Minister and his cronies make

plans “for the edification of the Foreigners” (63), by impressing them with the spectacle of a duel; as a ritualistic gesture in the attempt to “ward off emptiness” (72); and as an act of repentance (Witold falls to his knees before Tomasz when he admits that he has so manipulated events that the duel between Tomasz and Gonzalo has been conducted without bullets [87]).

Just as the act of sitting can signify both superiority and inferiority in a relationship, so kneeling can signify dominance or mastery as well as subservience. One of the most telling examples of the significance of posture occurs in *Pornografia*, when Witold declares that “by *kneeling down* [my italics],” Frederick “dispatched the Mass as one wrings the neck of a chicken” (19). In isolation, this statement perhaps oversimplifies the matter, yet it is undeniable that the adoption of the specific kneeling posture plays a crucial role in the outcome of the ideological duel between Frederick and the Mass.

b) Gesture

As with posture, Gombrowicz draws extensively on the implications of gesture to portray Interhumanity’s effect on interpersonal relationships, to foreground the obstacles inherent in communication, and to portray the responses to these obstacles. However, in Gombrowicz’s novels gesture is invested with an additional significance. Here the gesture becomes an extended metaphor, attaining symbolic proportions, of the strained relationships of Interhumanity.

An example is Johnnie’s mutilation of a housefly in *Ferdydurke*. Through the profound misery of his relationship with the Modern schoolgirl, Zutka, Johnnie kills a fly, a symbolic act enacted to counteract Zutka’s similarly symbolic gesture of dropping a

carnation in a tennis shoe. "I tore off its wings and legs," says Johnnie of the fly, "made of it a little ball of terrified, metaphysical suffering, not completely round but certainly pitiful enough, and silently put it in the shoe, next to the flower" (152). He performs this ritualistic sacrifice of a fly in order to strip Zutka of the power she holds over him, attacking her through everything she represents, the set of ideals she has adopted as her "face" against inauthenticity. "The fly," says Johnnie, "with its mute, voiceless suffering, soiled and degraded the shoe, the flower, the apples, the cigarettes; the whole of the girl's kingdom" (152). Later in the novel, the mutilation of the fly is linked to Johnnie's reciting of the word "mamma," a further effort to vanquish Zutka's influence (139).

The "duel of grimaces" between Siphon and Mientus in *Ferdydurke* could as well be termed a duel of gestures. It provides another, if somewhat less forceful, portrayal of the symbolic capacities of gesture. Pointing is the gesture of preference here, and whether employed by Siphon or Mientus, in each case the gesture carries symbolic relevance. Thus Siphon, like Plato in Raphael's *School of Athens*, points skyward in his attempt to personify human dignity, while Mientus, with the same gesture, manages to symbolize debasement and contempt.

Gesture also plays this symbolic role in *Pornografia*. Gestures involving the lifting or turning up of clothing lie at the heart of two key scenes within the novel. In the first, Henia, at the bidding of Frederick, acquiesces to the gesture of turning up Karol's trouser leg. The second scene involves Karol and an old woman who is washing clothes in a stream: "Karol broke away from us and walked up to her as though he had something to say to her. And then he suddenly pulled up her skirt" (42). Both these incidents, in Witold's eyes, are revelations, and not merely for the proof they afford of the superiority

of gesture over speech as a means of communication. Henia's gesture, her compliance in following Frederick's suggestion, has a profound effect on Witold: "The shamelessness of this demand [. . .] was the admission of the excitement he required [. . .] That was how he introduced them [Henia and Karol] to our lust, to the longing we nurtured for them . . . What followed was so simple and easy, yes, 'easy,' that I felt as dizzy as if an abyss had suddenly appeared before me" (36). Henia's simple gesture, indicating her willingness to indulge Frederick in his fantasies, has profound consequences: "so," says Witold, "she was prepared to let him extract pleasure from her" (38).

Witold is similarly shocked, at least initially, by Karol's gesture, calling it "an unexpected and blatant obscenity" (42). Ultimately, however, he recognizes in Karol's behavior something of vaster significance than the mere indiscretions of a juvenile delinquent. "It was not so much the prank that upset me," says Witold, "it was the fact it could be transformed on another level, in another mode, into a perfectly natural gesture." "How," he asks, "could this foul gesture crown him with such grace?" (42-3). Once again, gesture manages to communicate not only vital information that speech would have been incapable of accomplishing, but a profounder significance: namely, that Henia and Karol's immaturity frees them from the debilitating consequences of Form.

As with the mutilation of the fly in *Ferdydurke*, *Pornografia* features a similar gesture in Henia's and Karol's "crushing of the worm." When the two adolescents work in concert to crush the insect, both Witold and Frederick see it as a further symbolic gesture of their willingness to make their "youth accessible" (58). But as the novel progresses, this gesture takes on more far-reaching associations. In a letter to Witold,

Frederick writes: "The worm! You know about it! You understood it! You must have felt it then as I did

[. . .] The worm is Albert! They were united over the worm! They will unite over Albert! They will trample on him" (104). This linking of the worm with Albert is taken even further, with the decision to murder Siemian: "Ah yes," Witold reflects, "crushing the worm . . . but the worm was now Siemian, not Albert" (146). Albert completes the circle by threatening to kill Karol: "I'll kill him, and with no difficulty," he tells Witold. "It's of no importance! To kill . . . someone like that? It's like crushing a worm" (147). The crushing of worms is thus associated first with complicity, secondly with crime and sin ("They had caused suffering, created pain, with the soles of their shoes they had transformed the peaceful existence of this worm into something abominable, an inferno – it was impossible to imagine a greater crime, a greater sin" [58]), and more specifically, in the end, with murder.

The symbolic gesture occurs yet again in *Cosmos*, with Witold's discovery of Louis, in a tree in a clump of bushes, hanged by the neck with his own trouser-belt. Witold's response to this discovery is a gesture. "I stretched out my hand," says Witold, "and put my finger in its mouth" (159). This gesture, as is generally the case in *Cosmos*, is performed in response to the dictates of the Formal Imperative, the need to pursue connections: "after putting my finger in his mouth," Witold declares, "this hanged man was partly mine . . . at last a link had been established between 'mouth' and 'hanging'" (159-60).

Certain gestures recur within Gombrowicz's novels. One of these is the rolling of breadcrumbs, a gesture which Gombrowicz associates with Gonzalo in *Trans-Atlantyk*,

Frederick in *Pornografia*, and Leo in *Cosmos*. These gestures are metonymically related to one of the more complex aspects of humanity – sexuality; in which the rolling of breadcrumbs is substituted for sexual desire. Each of these characters is uniquely “sexualized”; their sexuality dominates all other aspects of their nature.

Gonzalo is linked with the rolling of bread pellets in a scene centered around his tortured desire, when he recognizes, and in full heat stalks, Ignacy. Frederick is depicted as rolling breadcrumbs immediately after Witold, disturbed by the connection he sees between Karol and Henia, wonders if Frederick has also noticed. Frederick has; later we discover that as he is rolling breadcrumbs Frederick is already plotting his future machinations. Leo rolls breadcrumbs habitually, and this habit is eventually tied to others, his “private pleasures,” centred on masturbation and the memory of an erotic encounter in his past.

Another recurring gesture is the slap in the face. This figures most prominently in *Ferdydurke*. As Ewa Thompson writes, “the world consists of masters and peasants; the masters are there to slap, and the peasants to be slapped” (WG 135). Thus, to cite only the most obvious examples, Youthful (the father) slaps Pimko; Johnnie, Uncle Edward and Alfred slap Bert; and Bert slaps Mientus. Similarly, Momsen (anti-Philifor) slaps Philifor’s wife, and Philifor attempts to slap Momsen: “Only a well-aimed slap in the face,” says Philifor, “can restore my wife’s honour” (91). In the relationship between Johnnie and Zutka, Zutka substitutes for the slap in the face a kick to Johnnie’s shin, just as her father substitutes the pulling of Kopeida’s chin: “This indignity infuriated Kopeida more than a slap in the face would have done” (183).

The gesture occurs again in *Pornografia*, when Albert slaps Henia – “He’s pretty tough,” is her mocking response (143). Karol and Henia in turn use related gestures to strike at Albert. After witnessing their performance on the island (a pantomime, a series of gestures choreographed by Frederick), Albert confesses that “[e]ven if he had had her in front of me . . . it wouldn’t have upset me . . . so much . . . as those odd movements” (119). Later, Karol and Henia renew the assault through a game played at the dinner table with the use of forks and glasses,: “the faintest movement of their hands,” narrates Witold, “struck Albert a violent blow” (134). In the other novels one finds corollaries, or analogous events – Gonzalo’s striking of Tomasz with a beer mug in *Trans-Atlantyk*; Witold’s desire to spit in Lena’s mouth in *Cosmos*. These latter incidents, however, bear specific implications – an attack on “patria” in the former, symbolic rape in the latter – that nevertheless resonate beyond the motives of the slap in the face.

The gesture of the slap in the face is Gombrowicz’s way of portraying the consequences of Interhumanity’s hierarchical nature, which pits relationships in opposition, in struggles for ascendancy. Violence serves equally as a means of establishing (or, in the case of Bert and Mientus, undermining) authority, and as an all-too predictable response to the frustrations wrought by Form, compounded by the individual’s inescapable awareness of inauthenticity. Things break down; violence erupts. This aspect of Gombrowicz’s philosophy, the inevitability of conflict, and thus the inevitability of violence, is succinctly portrayed in an anecdote from *Diary*:

Yesterday three men at Teodolina’s: one clean shaven, the second mustached, the third bearded, and they were amazed that they could not come to an agreement about the political situation in the Far East. I said: I

am amazed that you talk to one another at all. Each of you is a different solution to the human face and personifies a different understanding of man. If a bearded man is okay, then a clean-shaven or mustached one is a monster, a clown, a degenerate, and a general absurdity; and if a clean-shaven man is the right type, then a bearded one is a monstrosity, sloppiness, nonsense, and foulness. Well then! What are you waiting for? Start punching!” (D1 99)

c) Grimace

In his introduction to *The Marriage*, Jan Kott writes, “La Rochefoucauld said: ‘The world is composed entirely of grimaces.’ Gombrowicz reverses this sentence; the grimace is the first and material reality of the world” (9). Generally speaking, it would be more precise to use the term “facial expression” than “grimace” in a discussion of modes of non-verbal communication. Specifically, however – in Gombrowicz’s system – “grimace” is the more accurate term. In the novels, the grimace is the expression most commonly encountered on the masks the characters are wearing.

The grimace may emerge as a reaction to a variety of stimuli – there are grimaces of discomfort, pain, exertion, abjection, boredom, disgust, hatred, or horror. Alternatively, one could speak also of grimaces of pleasure, delight, euphoria. Little of this latter category, however, makes much of an appearance in the reality depicted by Gombrowicz; the grimaces of his characters invariably fall into the former. In fact the grimace is a consistently negative Gombrowiczian image, an expression of the distortions and the contortions to which the individual born into Interhumanity is subject. In Gombrowicz’s

philosophy, existence is inseparable from suffering; pain is an inevitable reality. It is the grimace that most completely, and least self-consciously, conveys this inner torment. The grimace is the most reliable marker of the individual's emotional and psychological makeup.

In discussing the grimace within the context of Gombrowicz's novels, it would be appropriate to begin once again with *Ferdydurke*. As a prelude to the aforementioned "duel of grimaces," we are given a similar ritualistic duel, enacted on a smaller scale. After having informed Kopeida of the plan to "violate" Siphon, Johnnie is confronted by Mientus, "twisting" his face in a "repulsive manner" (53): "he [Mientus] openly and unreservedly showed me his teeth." Johnnie wonders, "Ought I to show him my teeth?" but decides against it: "I ended by not showing him my teeth, but I rounded my lips and whistled; and thus we stood facing each other, one showing his teeth and the other whistling" (55). Mientus challenges Johnnie with a grimace – the feral warning of bared teeth. Johnnie's response is not a grimace, but an evasion – from which it may be ascertained that Mientus' psychological bearing is in an even more precarious state than Johnnie's, a conclusion the remainder of the novel bears out.

The "duel of grimaces" not only reinforces Gombrowicz's vision of anguish as the most immediate expression of humanity, but serves also as an extended metaphor for the consequences of inauthenticity and Form, the imposition of "face." Gombrowicz directs attention here toward a particular means by which this is brought about. The individual adopts a set of principles (one of Siphon's allies says to him, "Think of your principles. You can think up all the grimaces you like because of your principles" [64]), then allows itself to be so governed and regulated by those principles that it becomes nothing more

than their hollow embodiment, the black-and-white personification of a principle. As countless mothers have warned for countless eons, Gombrowicz reiterates that the grimace, once adopted, can stick. The mask-adopting individual runs the risk of completely relinquishing its individuality. This is precisely the case with Mientus in *Ferdydurke*: “For the effect on Mientus of his duel with Siphon was that he could no longer escape from his terrible grimaces and was unable to act in other than a disgusting manner” (125). In the attempt to define oneself according to a set of principles or an ideology, the individual becomes more artificial than ever: “The faces Mientus had made during the duel had stuck. It is not so easy to get rid of a grimace” (130). The other schoolboys, as well, fall victim to this phenomenon: “all of them were the slaves of the faces they were making” (49).

The grimace makes its appearance in *Trans-Atlantyk* in the somewhat altered form of the “blush.” At the *soirée*, attended by all the luminaries of Argentine high society, the Polish delegation, feeling slighted, goad Witold into a “duel of wits” with the *Gran escritor*, Argentina’s “most Famous Author.” Witold is sabotaged in this challenge by his own countrymen, whose outbreak of blushes expose their unspoken belief in their own inferiority. The blush is a Gombrowiczian metaphor, not for shame, but for what Elias Canetti refers to in *Crowds and Power* as “slings,” the unforgettable injury of being slighted, of having “inferiority” thrust upon oneself. The blush, in Gombrowicz’s scheme, is a consequence of the hierarchical nature of Interhumanity.

The grimace also figures, albeit in altered form, in *Pornografia*, where Gombrowicz introduces a startling metaphor to portray the expressional equivalent of the loss of hope: “once disappointment had set in Frederick lost all his charm, all hope and all

passion, and his wrinkles spread and crawled over his face like worms on a corpse . . . his abjection contaminated me to such an extent that my own worms arose, crawled out, climbed up, and polluted my face” (55). This is a re-emphasizing of grimace as an illustration of anguish and torment that is the common expression of humanity.

IV CONSEQUENCES OF INTERHUMANITY: THE COMMUNAL LEVEL

“overabundance has a side that is both funny and terrible”
(Philippe Sollers, *Watteau in Venice*)

While it needs only, according to Gombrowicz, the interaction of two individuals for Form to arise, nevertheless each component added to the equation increases its complexity, with Form multiplying accordingly. Within social settings, as opposed to purely interpersonal relationships, the degree to which Form intervenes is raised. “Form has gone mad, roused by numbers,” Gombrowicz writes in *Diary* (D3 39). Proliferation is a concern in both his “fictional” and “non-fictional” writings (in which the distinction has never been more blurred), with a particular emphasis on the proliferation of the human population, or, to use the author’s term, the “crowd.” Already riddled with inauthenticity, humanity is further defaced through sheer numbers. “[M]an,” writes Gombrowicz, “is dehumanized by the mass, he is only the thousandth repetition of a man, a duplicate, an example, almost a monkey” (D3 40).

Form, through Interhumanity, influences relationships at the communal or societal level as a consequence of the individual’s need to adjust to the Form to others, a task generally negotiated by the attempt to adhere to a spectrum of societal mandates, ranging

from polite behaviors, manners, and niceties, to the more deeply imbedded mores, and the dictates of the society's institutions.

The novels of Gombrowicz revolve around a limited cluster of characters, and do not attempt to function as a depiction of society *en masse*. Nevertheless, there are scenes in the novels that indicate, often metaphorically, the relationship between the individual and society. These metaphors may be grouped under the triple heading of conventionalization, voyeurism, and aggression.

4.1 Conventionalized Behaviour: The "Tournament of Courtesies"

One might take as an example of the "tournament of courtesies" a seemingly innocuous scene from *Ferdydurke*, in which Johnnie and Mientus are dinner guests at the home of Johnnie's relatives. The dinner-table gathering (extended to the *soirée* in *Trans-Atlantyk*) is the standard metaphor Gombrowicz employs to portray the individual in society:

And now, just to keep the conversation going, they started encouraging us to eat; and I had to sample the stewed pears; and then they offered us some little home-made cakes, for which I had to thank them, and I had to eat some, I had to, and I had to eat some stewed prunes, which stuck in my throat, while my aunt, to keep the conversation going, apologized for the difficulty of the repast. (213)

This example contributes, in the first place, to the portrayal of verbal communication as mere noise and background clutter; but what is of particular relevance is the repetition of

the phrase “I had to.” It is the obligatory participation in such conventions, rather than the “stewed pears,” that really sticks in Johnnie’s throat.

A further example of conventionalized behaviour occurs in *Trans-Atlantyk*, at the previously mentioned *soirée*. Witold is introduced to the host of this reception as the “Master Great Polish Genius Glorious Gombrowicz”; the host, “knowing not how enough to Honour, in courtesies, flourishes, melts away” (30). In courtesies and flourishes, the guests at this grand social event “behave”: “although there was no want of discourse and even laughter, discourse, laughter, exclamations instead of being a bit louder were indeed a bit softer, quietened, and that Motionlessness of motion as Fishes in a pond” (29-30). In truth, the most vital concern of these socialites involves the consideration of each other’s articles of clothing:

But despite that tenderness, cordiality, now and then the Discourse subsides or falls off for one speaks and the other in distraction, in some Forgetfulness now has stopped listening, now is inspecting his sock . . . So one to the other Flits, one bestows Honour on the other, one to the other ‘Maestro, maestro’ and ‘Gran Escritor’ and ‘Que obra’ and ‘Que Gloria’ but what, since it falls off anon and again in distraction they are inspecting Socks. (30-31)

This ubiquity of acting and behaving in a communal setting is a representation of the increased sense of inauthenticity the individual experiences, and the greater sense of need to adopt masks.

Almost at the beginning of *Pornografia*, Witold alerts the reader to the most crucial fact about Frederick. Frederick, says Witold, is always *behaving*: “in fact all he

ever did was 'to behave,' he 'behaved' the whole time" (8). His "pointless" gestures and "ceremonious" behaviour on entering the company at "the small flat in Krucza Street" are an expression of the anxieties produced by communal relationships. The torment of the "scrupulously correct" Frederick is the torment of all Gombrowicz's characters (though Frederick ultimately goes farthest in his attempts to break down these barriers). In the novels of Gombrowicz, what the individual labours under most is the judgment of others. "I am formed and fashioned," he writes in *Ferdydurke*, "by the severity of the human judgements which I have called down on my head" (83). One must constantly be on one's guard, one must participate with correctness in the conventions and duties that the "crowd" – that many-tongued dictator, society – demands. "The fact of the matter," says Johnnie in *Ferdydurke*, "is that our primary duty is to be pleasing to others . . . your heart may be broken, but it must be broken in accordance with the canons of taste" (143-44).

In *Cosmos*, the dinner-table gathering is renewed, this time around Leo and Kulka's table, where, according to Witold, "everybody behaved with slightly exaggerated charm and courtesy and felt slightly ashamed of not being completely himself however hard he tried, and of having to make an effort to be what ought to be the easiest thing in the world" (90).

The dinner-table gatherings in *Ferdydurke* and *Cosmos*, the banquet in *Trans-Atlantyk*, and the portrayals of Frederick in society in *Pornografia*, collectively represent Gombrowicz's microcosms of communal relationships. Each of these examples yields similar conclusions regarding the state of the individual in society. The consequences for the individual are conventionalized behaviour and increased levels of anxiety. Both are due to the proliferation of Form.

4.2 Voyeurism: Hiding and Spying

One of the notable effects of Interhumanity at the communal level is illustrated in the novels through the emphasis – from the perspective of both subject and object – on voyeurism. “Only things can be properly seen,” says Witold in *Cosmos*, “there are far more obstacles in the way of seeing persons” (31). The primary obstacle is the mask. If the wearing of masks is ubiquitous, so too is the desire to see behind them, to unmask. Furthermore, in the hierarchical and conflict-ridden world of Interhumanity, one always seeks the advantage. Hiding and spying present possibilities for such an advantage; the individual takes up “strategic positions” against the other, hoping to catch them at their most vulnerable, physically or psychologically.

In *Ferdydurke*, examples of hiding and spying – of voyeurism – abound. At Piorkowski’s school, mothers gaze “insatiably” at “their little darlings through gaps in the fence,” prompting Pimko to declare, “there’s nothing so effective as a mother strategically placed behind a wall to bring out a pair of fresh young buttocks” (27-8). By their “constant observation,” the mothers and teaching staff combine to impose the *pupa* (the bottom or “bum,” a metonym for immaturity and inferiority) on the schoolboys, who, under such watchful eyes, are left “convulsively clutching their behinds” (29). In the school grounds, Pimko hides behind a tree to observe them at play; “He’s spying on us and writing everything down!” the boys clamour. The classroom, another communal representation, is also a location of constant surveillance, where the students’ responses and actions are dictated, effectively rendering them powerless.

When Johnnie moves from Piorkowski's school to the home of the Youthfuls, the motif alters from being watched to watching. Almost immediately, Johnnie begins spying on Zutka. In chapter nine, aptly titled "Through the Keyhole," Johnnie, apropos Zutka, asks, "How could I spoil her beauty, work on her mind from a distance, when I was not with her, when she was alone? Only, I decided, by keeping a watch on her, by spying on her . . . the mere fact of spying on her would serve to a certain extent to detract from her beauty, to diminish her" (144). As with the mutilation of the fly, and the epithet "mamma," spying is another weapon in the arsenal Johnnie launches at Zutka.

A further element of spying is introduced in *Ferdydurke* – the trope of the room search, conducted in the absence of its occupant. Johnnie, in being granted such an opportunity, naturally undertakes an investigation of both the parents' and Zutka's rooms (where in the latter he reads Zutka's love-letters, and performs the previously discussed dismemberment). Johnnie, Polonius-like, spends the following morning hiding "behind the curtain of the little hanging cupboard that separated the kitchen from the bathroom," in order to launch his "psychological offensive against the Youthfuls." Johnnie explains: "I could not permit myself the luxury of scorning to take this advantage. Try to surprise the enemy in the bath. See him as he really is" (162). In retaliation, Zutka's mother, the "she-graduate," begins to spy on Johnnie: "She found excuses to come several times into my room, and even naively offered to pay for me to go to the cinema" (167). On the night Johnnie sets his final trap for Zutka, having sent off the forged invitations to Pimko and Kopeida, he takes up his voyeuristic offensive again: "As I had previously made a slit in the door with a pair of scissors, I could now see the part of the room which had previously been outside my field of vision" (168). Unwittingly obliged to witness the

modern schoolgirl's seduction of Kopeida, this tactic nearly backfires for Johnnie in his struggle against Zutka: "she knew I was watching through the slit, and that was why she shrank from nothing in order to crush me [*that phrase again*] with her beauty" (174).

Ferdydurke further introduces the trope of hiding to avoid detection, hiding as a "defensive" measure. Once Pimko appears for his *rendezvous* in Zutka's bedroom, Johnnie is able to proceed with his plan, and summons the parents to discover the guilty parties. Pimko and Kopeida, hoping to escape detection, hide in various wardrobes, while Zutka attempts to hide under her blanket.

In *Pornografia* the same motifs of watching and being watched, of hiding and spying, occur. Defending his privilege as a churchgoer, Hippolytus reveals his sensitivity to the gaze of others by declaring, "I don't need to hide – Let people see me – Let them stare to their hearts' content, let them photograph me!" (15). The process of hiding and spying is set in motion by Witold, more specifically, by Witold's need to comprehend Frederick: "it was better to leave him to himself and watch him," says Witold, "he would soon end up by betraying his excitement." To accomplish this, Witold observes Frederick from a vantage point behind the drawing-room curtains, and then follows him when Frederick goes out – ostensibly for a walk, in fact, to spy on Henia and Karol (or so Witold supposes, and which subsequent events appear to corroborate). When circumstances force Witold and Frederick to meet, Witold comments, "I had caught him red-handed, and he had caught me. He had seen the voyeur" (33). Ultimately, Witold regards his mission as a success: "Having spied on him I had revealed his secret folly, he had been surprised, caught out in his mystery" (P 38).

In *Cosmos*, Witold often feels he is being watched, and not only by Fuchs, the character most capable of keeping his (fish-like) eyes on him; Witold also confesses to a suspicion that even inanimate objects – the windows of Leo’s house, in this case – monitor his every move. “Wasn’t there something human,” he asks, “about the way in which one of those windows was looking at me?” (34).

The trope of the room-search reappears in *Cosmos*, with Fuchs and Witold’s exploration of Katasia’s quarters. It is while embarking upon this impropriety that Witold appears most sensitive to premonitions of being spied upon. In his attempt to discover the secrets of others, he is most concerned about concealing those of his own. “We could not be sure,” he says, “that someone . . . was not watching us from some secret hiding-place . . . We spent a long time wandering about trying to find out if anyone was spying on us” (59). Fuchs on the other hand appears to relish the room-search: “With a smile that had become a brothel smile, the smile of a voyeur, he inspected Katasia’s clothes” (62).

A more blatant example of voyeurism (and its relationship to relational conflict) is Witold’s decision to spy on Lena. He “advances” on her by climbing the pine tree outside her bedroom window. He wants to “find out” about her. “At last,” he states over and over, “I was going to find out” (67). Witold wants to “understand” Lena; he wants to “know” her, to gain the advantage of her: “For a long time,” he confesses at the novel’s conclusion, “I had been faced with the possibility, the hypothesis, that one day I should have . . . to hang either myself or her” (158).

In addition to the function of hiding and spying as a representation of the power-struggle inherent in all relationships, it further represents a specific component of the anxieties occasioned by forced participation in communal relationships, namely fear.

Hiding takes on this significance in the abduction scene involving Johnnie and Bert in *Ferdydurke*, when, in the house at Bolimowo, Bert and Uncle Edward try to hide from each other in the dark, while Johnnie again hides behind a curtain. Each of these characters, out of fear of detection, is frozen in place. Of Uncle Edward, Johnnie relates, "He froze into immobility, and this immobility . . . rapidly accelerated and condensed into an expression of fear . . . I could divine on his face the grave, concentrated, highly serious expression proper to fear . . . and I in my turn started feeling afraid" (255). When Johnnie's cousin Alfred similarly becomes embroiled, the same fear grips him. He calls out in the dark to his father, who does not answer because he "was inhibited by ancient fears and terrors, oh he could not, because he was afraid. And the son was inhibited by his father's fear" (256). All characters involved in this situation, including Johnnie, fear exposure and the necessity of interaction. Johnnie's description of his emotions at that moment might be taken as a metaphor for the anxieties of intercommunal experience: "A sense of being throttled," describes Johnnie, "yet not throttled; obstacle; hold one's head high, disintegration, explosion, being slowly stripped, repetition, ejection and penetration, transformation and tension, tension, tension" (257).

A related issue arises in *Trans-Atlantyck*, where the motif of watching, as a consequence of fear within communal relationships, is represented through the "Order of the Spur." As Witold explains, "The reason the Accomptant to such a horrible snare had turned, from his own whitened lips I came to know . . . It did not come easily to him to speak about it for of himself he was the most terrified." The accomptant relates the chain of events that have brought him to this fate - each involving the ritualistic destruction of an insect or animal - in order to "overcome Fear and likewise become a hero" (103). As

Hanjo Berressem points out, the “Order, which is the accomptant’s attempt to exorcise and master his fear by countering it with excessive cruelty, is based on the mutual observation of the members” (LOD 103).

Futility is the cruel joke behind all this hiding and spying. There is something akin to Kafka in Gombrowicz’s insight here; despite the individual’s cognizance of its own inauthenticity, it retains a sort of blind faith in the authenticity of everyone else. It believes there is something, something to be *seen*, behind the mask of others. Still, voyeurism has its utilitarian purposes, and it is a primary form of offense or defense in the battle of Interhumanity.

4.3 Aggression, Violence, and the “Wriggling Heap”

The third metaphor employed by Gombrowicz to contextualize the individual within communal relationships is the *melee*, or “wriggling heap.” “Out of the duel of grimaces in *Ferdydurke*,” writes Jan Kott, “later developed the Gombrowiczian theory of social behavior and particularly of aggression and mutual debasement” (M 5). This precept has already been introduced in Gombrowicz’s system through the “slap in the face”; the *melee* is merely the logical extension in the face of proliferation.

As Gombrowicz notes in *A Kind of Testament*, “Each of the three parts of *Ferdydurke* [at school; at the Youthful; at Bolimowo] ends in an explosion brought about by the clash of irreconcilable Forms” (74). Furthermore, both the Philifor and Philimor sections end with a *melee*. The “school” section closes with Mientus *et al.* “overpowering” Siphon *et al.*, with an “inextricable heap of bodies writhing on the floor” (68), and with the “psycho-physical violation,” the symbolic rape, of Siphon. The

Youthful section concludes with a melee, an “ant-heap,” involving all three Youthfuls plus Kopeida and Pimko. The Bolimowo section concludes with a melee involving, initially, Uncle Edward and Alfred – with the assistance of Old Francis illuminating the scene with his lamp – “imposing” themselves on Bert, with the uprising of the peasants following: “The people, roused by the exceptional immaturity of the scene, had lost all sense of respect, and wanted to fraternize too” (264). After the melee (another parody of the duel) between Philifor and Momsen, all else is denouement; it is the vivisection of the duelists’ companions, wife and mistress, that properly ends the tale, while the Philimor chapter concludes with an all-out *brouhaha*, initiated by a gunshot, a brawl between two tennis players, and a slap in the face.

In *Trans-Atlantyk*, representations of the melee include both the duel between Tomasz and Gonzalo as well as the “intellectual” duel between Witold and the *Gran escriptore*, both scenes in which others as well as the duelists themselves are involved. Gonzalo having plotted to incite Ignacy and Horatio to murder Tomasz, the melee threatens to erupt at the conclusion of the novel, an outcome prevented by the intervention of laughter. In *Pornografia* the melee is represented by the struggle between Amelia and Skuziak, resulting in the death of Amelia, and the triple murders of Albert, Siemian, and Skuziak. *Cosmos* features the banding together of Lola, Lolo, and Fuchs (and to a lesser extent Louis and Lena), against Jadeczka, for her alleged flirtatiousness, and her air of self-satisfaction (“when she smelled herself she didn’t mind” [136]). There are insinuations, in the scenes dealing with this incident, of a barely-suppressed cruelty, of a lynch-mob mentality operating beneath the surface of events, which speak to the dangers of individual isolation within strife-torn Interhumanity. In fact, *Cosmos* as a

whole may be viewed as Gombrowicz's most exhaustive portrayal of the melee, in that it posits the conflict between humanity and the cosmos.

According to Gombrowicz, the misunderstandings and impediments that are a feature of Interhumanity generally result in, or can only be resolved by, a coming to blows. Herein is contained yet another consequence of Interhumanity – its ability to self-destruct in bouts of mindless brutality. The frequent appearance of the duel in Gombrowicz's novels represents the conflict and hierarchization characteristic of relationships at the interpersonal level; the melee is the representation of this conflict at the communal level. The melee, however, carries further ramifications: "When the rhythm of life is destroyed," writes Ewa Thompson, "and when instead of our place in the social grid we are forced by circumstances into 'the wriggling heap,' our Form falls off for awhile allowing our essential formlessness to show" (WG 79). The melee ultimately represents the disintegration of human interaction into formlessness, or in other words, Chaos.

V Paradox, Parody, and Satire

*"Nothing but Face," said Mientus, "to hell with philosophy."
(Ferdynand 199)*

In *Diary*, Gombrowicz writes, "[t]he problem of Form, man as a producer of form, man as a prisoner of form, the concept of Interhuman Form as a superior creative force, inauthentic man: I have always written about these things, I was always concerned with them, it was this I drew out" (D3 182). Gombrowicz's dilemma of inauthenticity is articulated from the beginning, from his first novel – as a comment from his last work, *A*

Kind of Testament, reveals: "If I am always an artefact," he writes, "always defined by others and by culture as well as by my own formal necessities, where should I look for my 'self'?" [...] This question, which is increasingly relevant to contemporary thought, troubled me at the time I was writing *Ferdydurke*. So it is as though the novel oscillated around an inaccessible center, although, from the first word to the last, it endeavours to be the assertion of identity" (77). Gombrowicz asserts with equal emphasis his conviction in the power of Form: "Through Form, penetrated to the marrow by other men, [man] emerges more powerful than himself, a stranger to himself . . . He becomes a function of the tensions which arise, unstable situations brought about by men, among men, and which are the result of various impulses. This interhuman creation, unknown and unseizable, determines his possibilities" (75). Gombrowicz maintains that only through the attempt to familiarize oneself with Form is it possible to come to terms with its torments: "See how different would be the attitude of a man who, instead of saturating himself with the phraseology of a million conceptualist metaphysician-aestheticians, looked at the world with new eyes and allowed himself to feel the enormous influence which form has on human life" (F 82). All the works examined in this study repeatedly attest to the debilitating effects of Interhumanity, through Form, on the individual at both the interpersonal and the communal level.

But then the question arises – could not Gombrowicz himself, in his construction of the philosophical/theoretical system of Interhumanity, be equally considered a "conceptualist metaphysician-aesthetician," the same purveyor of deceptions and illusions against whom he warns his readers? The claim, paradoxically, would in fact be equally true and false. Because in the final assessment, Gombrowicz creates a system,

Interhumanity, that is equally philosophical and parodic. Gombrowicz himself writes in *A Kind of Testament* that “with me Form is always a parody of Form” (138), and that “parody allowed me to liberate Form, to tear it from weightiness and launch it into pure space, where it became light, bold and revealing” (42). Interhumanity functions equally as philosophy and as a parody of philosophy, and Gombrowicz, by arguing sometimes for one side, sometimes for the other, leaves his readers entirely free to draw their own conclusions.

That Gombrowicz held contrary views on the ultimate utility of the attempt to construct philosophical/theoretical systems is made clear by his comments in *Diary* and *A Kind of Testament*. In the latter he writes of his “war against philosophy and, particularly, against Existentialism, Catholicism, Marxism and, more recently, against Structuralism” (115-16). In *Diary*, against the “seriousness” of philosophy, Gombrowicz counters with the tediousness of the banal: “It seems impossible,” he writes, “to meet the demands of *Dasein* and simultaneously have coffee and croissants for an evening snack. To fear nothingness, but to fear the dentist more. To be consciousness, which walks around in pants and talks on the telephone. To be responsibility, which runs little shopping errands downtown. To bear the weight of significant being, to instill the world with meaning and then return the change from ten pesos” (D1 184). Gombrowicz’s contradictory position regarding philosophy arises in part from his insistence on the superiority of literature over intellectual abstraction: “No concepts will replace the examples of the great masters and no philosophy will replace literature’s genealogical tree,” he writes in *Diary*. “One must be careful that the life beneath our pen not become transformed into politics, philosophy, or aesthetics” (D1 57-8). And finally, the “artist who allows himself to be led astray into

the terrain of these cerebral speculations is lost . . . I see,” he concludes, “how theory makes your face grimace” (D1 86).

Gombrowicz, furthermore, takes exception, not so much to the rarefied atmosphere in which the philosopher/theoretician appears to exist, but to the call of certain systems to “live” their philosophy: “As long as philosophy speculated in isolation from life, as long as it was pure reason reeling off abstractions, it was not violence, affront, and ridiculousness to such a degree” (D1 184). Gombrowicz cites Marxism and Existentialism as specific examples of this: “The Sartres and Mascolos,”² he declares, “seem to forget that man is a being created to live in an atmosphere of average pressures and median temperatures” (D1 89). In this, Gombrowicz distinguishes his own philosophy from that of others – existentialism, for example: “Define myself against the Sartrisms and against all of modern thought which is sharp and burning with a white heat? There is nothing easier! I am blunted thought, a being of median temperatures, a spirit in a certain state of relaxation” (D1 92).

Ultimately, what compels Gombrowicz to take his parodic stand against all philosophical systems is his attitude toward seriousness. Of Sartre’s existentialism, Gombrowicz asks, “why, now, when my existence grows more monstrous with each year, so very mixed with dying, and beckons me, forces me to seriousness, why is their seriousness of no use to me at all?” (D1 181). Of the process of writing *Trans-Atlantyk*, Gombrowicz comments, “Instead of seriousness – laughter, idiocies, somersaults, fun!” (xxiii). Seriousness in Gombrowicz’s system is tantamount to dishonesty; and for his characters it amounts to an indictable offense – when Witold suggests, in *Pornografia*,

that Albert is “serious” (29), we know he is doomed. The “world has become morally and stupidly serious,” writes Gombrowicz, “and our truths, which are denied play, bore themselves and through their vengeance begin to bore us” (D1 74). Gombrowicz reiterates this point in his discussion of Milosz’s review of *The Marriage*: “He saw what was timely in *The Marriage*, the despair and the moan that result from the degradation of human dignity and the violent crash of civilization, but he did not notice how far delight and play – which are ready to raise man above his own defeats at a moment’s notice – hide behind that façade of today!” (D1 18).

“Is not play also a basic need?” asks Gombrowicz in *Diary* (D1 52). It is this aspect in Gombrowicz’s novels, play in opposition to seriousness, that allows Interhumanity to function as both philosophy and as a parody of philosophy. While attempting to shed light on the vagaries of existence, Gombrowicz engages in play: “My pen touches mighty and ultimate issues all the time, but if I have reached them, it was done while playing” (D1 173). His comment in *Diary* regarding one of his literary precursors, Rabelais, is equally applicable to himself: “He wrote for his and another’s delight and he wrote whatever came to mind” (D1 57). All systems, all constructs, are suspect, Gombrowicz argues. They are “measly palliatives” and “formulas” (KT 77). They cannot, as if by magic, solve all the mysteries of existence, or dispel its difficulties. It is out of this belief that Gombrowicz constructs Interhumanity as a parody of a philosophy.

Parody is an integral aspect of Gombrowicz’s work, and it is not only philosophical systems that are parodied. Throughout his novels, Gombrowicz parodies various literary genres: *Ferdydurke* is a parody of a philosophical tale “in the manner of

² “Dionys Mascolo: *Le communisme, revolution et communication ou le dialectique des valeurs et des*

Voltaire” (KT 137), and also a sort of *Bildungsroman* in reverse; *Trans-Atlantyk* parodies a specifically Polish literary form, the *gaweda*,³ and could also be described as a parody of the novel of manners; *Pornografia* (as the back-cover blurb of the *Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics* edition suggests) functions equally as a parody of the pastoral romance, the political thriller and the murder mystery; while *Cosmos* operates as a parody of the detective novel, and as a forerunner (like some of the work of his contemporary, Borges) of the category of the metaphysical detective story. Even Gombrowicz’s pseudonymously published novel *Possessed* (which falls outside the bounds of this study) parodies the gothic novel.

The term “parody” is often employed by Gombrowicz’s critics to describe the tone and the point of view one encounters in his novels; Longinovic, for example, speaks of his “parodic relationship to reality” (GG 34), while Jan Kott maintains that in the works of Gombrowicz, “ceremony is a parody of ceremony, ritual, a mockery of ritual” (M 11). Yet it would be more accurate to speak of Gombrowicz’s “satiric” relationship to reality, or to ceremony and ritual. This relationship may best be evidenced by an examination of Interhumanity from yet a third perspective. Interhumanity appears to function in Gombrowicz’s novels in three specific ways: as a philosophical system, as a parody of a philosophical system, and as a basis for satire regarding both the individual and its role within society. Gombrowicz’s entire system represents a broad satire on human relationships, at both the interpersonal and the communal level, through the portrayal of the individual’s participation in the conventions and rituals of society –

besoins” (D1 83)

which in Gombrowicz's vision becomes a closed system of fabrication, secrecy and deceit. Within this blanket satire, however, particular concepts are targeted.

A notable illustration of this is the "literature lesson" in *Ferdydurke*, in which Kotecki and his colleagues are enlightened as to why exactly the poet Slowacki is capable of arousing admiration, love and ecstasy, of drawing tears from the eyes, of swelling breasts with exultation (44). Gombrowicz, through the use of ridicule, satirizes the methodology and the philosophy of a pedagogical system that relies on learning by rote and the unquestioned acceptance of the authority of both the material and the "masters." The "literature lesson" is not a satire on literature – a "Latin lesson" occurs shortly after – but rather a satire on pedagogy.

Class relations are also satirized in *Ferdydurke*, beginning with but extending beyond the basic paradigms of "aristocrat" and "peasant." The aristocracy is represented by Uncle Edward, with his "refined and distinguished manner," his "extraordinary ease," his "negligent elegance of a man of the world" (211). Through this lampoon of Uncle Edward, with his pretensions to nobility and his guilty associations with the peasants – his attempted seduction of the kitchen-maid, his "climbing" of the gamekeeper to escape a charging boar – Gombrowicz satirizes illusions of class superiority. Yet, equally, Gombrowicz lampoons the "lower classes," as in his depiction of Mientus' and Johnnie's encounter with villagers who, hoping to "evade the omni-rapacious activities of the representatives of urban civilization" (204), have adopted the mannerisms of dogs. Gombrowicz's satiric view of class relations maintains that each "class" is dependent on

³ An "oral or quasi-oral style," characterized by colloquial vocabulary, convoluted syntax, and auditory features, "as a rule listened to rather than read, and performed in front of a small group" (Baranczak, TA xvii)

the other in order to reinforce hierarchical concepts of superiority and inferiority. Uncle Edward's "baronial good breeding" is "acquired in contact with four hundred waiters, seventy barbers, thirty jockeys, and the same number of butlers" (232). He is only able to maintain this façade via his relationship to the perceived inferiority of his servants and underlings: "The clue to the gentry," says Johnnie, is "the common people. Against whom did my uncle yawn, against whom did he put an extra sugared plum in his mouth? . . . Whatever these people did was in some way directed at and against their servants" (227). By the same token, the servants are able to justify *their* sense of superiority by comparing themselves to the "masters," as in the hilarious kitchen scene in which Bert unleashes his mockery: "So delicate 'ey even 'as to 'ave 'un's noses wiped for them, cos 'ey can't do it 'emselves . . . If oi 'ad to be coddled like that, oi'd rather be dead, I would!" In fact, just as the peasants have sub-human status imposed on them by the masters, the masters have infantilism imposed on them by the servants: "neither the latter [Johnnie's aunt] nor her husband's sternest orders prevented the master from being the people's baby boy and the mistress from being their baby girl" (240).

Gombrowicz's satire of class relationships serves to reinforce his concept of the inevitability of struggle due to the hierarchical nature of Interhumanity: "The traditional hierarchy depended on the domination of the baronial parts of the body, and it was a tense, feudal hierarchy, in which the master's hand was as good as the servant's face and his foot reached to half the height of the whole rustic body . . . it was only within the hierarchy that the masters could make contact with the people. Hence the magic of the slap in the face" (F 229).

Another target of satire in *Ferdydurke* is the worship of “Art.” Gombrowicz unleashes this satire not through a fictional portrayal, but rather in the form of an essay, in the “Introduction to Philifor Honeycombed with Childishness” chapter (as well as through numerous diatribes on the subject in *Diary*). Gombrowicz saw the adoration of “Art” as merely another attempt by the individual to tune oneself to the Form of others – in this case, by meekly adopting their attitudes and opinions. In *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz urges the reader to “break once and for all with the words ‘art’ and ‘artist’ . . . why this cult, this admiration, only for the kind of art that results in so-called works of art? Whence this naïve belief that men so hugely admire works of art and that we go into ecstasy and pass away when we listen to a Beethoven symphony?” (79). Gombrowicz describes such reactions as “adjust[ing] our feelings to our behavior” (80), and provides an explanation for it in *Diary*: “In truth, a hand has grabbed you by the scruff of the neck, led you to this painting [or symphony, or poem by Slowacki], and thrown you to your knees. A will mightier than your own told you to attempt to experience the appropriate emotions . . . That hand is not the hand of a single man, the will is collective, born in an interhuman dimension” (D1 25).

In *Trans-Atlantyk*, patriotism – what Gombrowicz refers to as the “national Form” – is the object of satire. Though Gombrowicz deals specifically in this novel with Polish patriotism, there is no reason to assume it could not as easily be applied to British, American, or Chinese patriotism. Gombrowicz satirizes Minister Kosiubidzki Feliks by making him guilty of being a “nationality” rather than a person. When the Minister instructs Witold to champion “Copernicus, Chopin, or Mickiewicz,” he makes the very mistake Gombrowicz rails against in *Diary*: “We are not . . . the direct heirs of past

greatness or insignificance, intelligence or stupidity, virtue or sin and each person is responsible only for himself. Each is himself" (D1 7). Patriotism operates also as a further indication of the hierarchical nature of Interhumanity, as when the Minister seizes the prospect of a duel between Tomasz and Gonzalo as an opportunity to showcase his cherished ideal of national superiority to "foreigners": "Ergo, 'tis important, gentlemen, that that Manliness of ours is not hidden under a bushel, and indeed is to all four sides of the world trumpeted to the greater fame of our name" (64). "Review your platitudes," Gombrowicz advises in *Diary* (D1 55). Patriotism, in his view one of the most heinous, is a mask, an intrinsic sign of the inauthenticity of the individual. "[Y]our country is you!" claims Gombrowicz. "Has man ever lived anywhere other than in himself?" (D1 59).

Like the villagers in *Ferdydurke* who have "dogness" thrust upon them, the parishioners in *Pornografia* are similarly relegated to canine status: "the congregation," says Witold, "was left to its humble, tender, strident, awkward chant, which kept it well under control and made it as harmless as a dog on a leash" (17). Both Catholicism and its adherents are satirized here – the former as dogma, and as a series of gestures and rituals which can be "dispatched" by nothing more than an opposed set of gestures and rituals (Frederick's prayer and genuflection); the latter for their dog-like unquestioning submission to these gestures and rituals, whereby piety becomes merely another mask.

Gombrowicz's last novel, *Cosmos*, satirizes the formulation of concepts of reality. In *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz writes, "we see how a certain reality endeavours to arise from our associations, indolently, awkwardly . . . in a jungle of misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations" (136-37). In *Pornografia*, Gombrowicz had already defined his perspective on the bizarre and surreal nature of our perceived reality: "we

were no longer in church, nor in this village, nor on earth, but, in accordance with reality – somewhere suspended in the cosmos with our candles and light and it was there, in infinity, that we were playing our curious games with each other, like monkeys grimacing into space. It was a very special game, there, somewhere in the galaxy, a human challenge in darkness, the execution of curious movements in a contorted abyss” (19).

Gombrowicz’s perspective is, as he states, “in accordance with reality,” but it is not a comforting reality, being too complex, too cold, too suffused with seemingly irresolvable conundrums. In *Cosmos*, Witold wants to make sense of existence; this desire leads him on an extensive search for links and connections in the hope of discovering an overall pattern or design. In this voyage of discovery, Witold is both unsuccessful and all-too successful, experiencing equally the futility of apparent randomness (chaos) and a profusion of potential connections. This satire of humanity’s desire to ascertain what is inexplicable corroborates Gombrowicz’s claim that he identifies and defines Form while at the same time parodying it. Witold’s quest in fact functions as a satire of the Formal imperative.

Perhaps the most complex target of Gombrowicz’s satire is “maturity,” which in Gombrowicz’s system is synonymous with Form, the force compelling the individual to adopt masks, to disguise its inauthenticity. “Thus is man at the very outset stuffed full of verbiage and grimaces,” writes Gombrowicz, “such is the anvil on which our maturity is formed” (70). Maturity is portrayed, on the one hand, as the donning of masks of “culture” and “cultivation,” of “the upright and respectable,” of an assumed superiority which denies, or attempts to conceal, inferior aspects of its nature; and on the other as the

cynicism that in its bitterness resorts, in a kind of vampiric frenzy, to attempt the desecration of youth.

The first half of this equation is personified in *Ferdydurke* by Pimko and Uncle Edward, whose status as “masters”— either of the pedagogical or the aristocratic persuasion — becomes the badge of maturity (superiority) that enables them to relegate others to positions of immaturity (inferiority), thus fixing Johnnie with a *pupa* and making a punching bag of Bert. Both class relations (Uncle Edward) and the worship of art (Pimko) are in fact specific aspects of this will to maturity — which is itself an aspect of the hierarchical nature of Interhumanity. In a system based on interpersonal and communal relationships, maturity depends on immaturity to feed its own ideal of itself. “Is it not true,” asks Gombrowicz, “that every mature, superior, major and perfected human being depends in a thousand different ways on human beings who are at a less advanced stage of development” (F 84). Gombrowicz satirizes the ideals and the platitudes of maturity through his revelation of the “immature” sides of Pimko and Edward, what they try to conceal, their guilty secrets. Uncle Edward’s have been previously noted; Pimko’s consist of the various duplicities he employs in his attempts to seduce the Modern schoolgirl.

These attempts provide a segue into the second aspect of maturity satirized by Gombrowicz, the parasitical relationship between maturity and immaturity, with the former invariably the parasite, and the latter invariably the prey. Such relationships, foreshadowed in *Ferdydurke* by that of Pimko and Zutka, receive their most profound treatment — one that in fact goes beyond satire, to an indictment of monstrosity — through

the depictions of Frederick and Witold in *Pornografia*. The submission, for their “intoxication,” that Witold and Frederick demand, results in a triple murder – Siemian’s, Albert’s, and Skuziak’s. Maturity, posited as the slide into bitterness and cynicism, may result in mere buffoonery, but can also result in evil.

Within the genre of the twentieth-century novel, Gombrowicz deserves recognition as one of its major satirists and parodists, perhaps *the* novelist most actively engaged in a tradition that looks back to Cervantes, Rabelais, Voltaire, Swift, and Sterne. Examples of a body of work by a twentieth century novelist in which satire and parody figure as largely are rare, even among those most noted for such qualities – Jaroslav Hasek (though he wrote only one novel), Mikhail Bulgakov, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Heller, and more recently Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. While one often finds in the works of these novelists examples of satire, or parody, rarely are they found to co-exist to the extent one finds in the novels of Gombrowicz, which are so replete with satire and parody that it would seem there is scarcely a moment when one or the other is not at work.

VI Witold Gombrowicz and the 20th-Century Novel

Gombrowicz’s first novel, *Ferdydurke*, was published in 1937. He spent much of his life in exile, and exile forms the subject matter of *Trans-Atlantyk*. It is perhaps for these reasons that critics often refer to Gombrowicz as a “Modernist” or “late Modern,” a term that hardly seems accurate when comparing his novels to those most often associated with Modernism, the novels of Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Conrad, Proust, Mann, Broch, Musil, or Kafka.

In his essay "The Language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy", David Lodge provides a "working list" of general characteristics of Modernist fiction, which might be paraphrased as follows: it is "experimental or innovatory in form"; it is "much concerned with consciousness, and also with the subconscious or unconscious workings of the human mind"; it has "no real 'beginning'," but "plunges us into a flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves by a process of inference or association"; its ending is "usually open or ambiguous"; and it "eschews the straight chronological ordering of its material" and "tends toward a complex or fluid handling of time, involving much cross-reference back and forward across the temporal span of the action" (481). Lodge acknowledges that no one Modernist novel possesses all of these characteristics, yet there is little, if anything, that is applicable here to the novels of Gombrowicz, which demonstrate more a reaction against such a program than any allegiance to it.

Though Gombrowicz at various times expressed admiration for the works of Proust and Thomas Mann, he was hardly a proponent of the ideals and aims he saw these "contemporaries" as expounding. "Some day we will know," he writes in *Diary*, "why in our century so many great artists wrote so many unreadable books. And how in the world did these unreadable and unread books influence the century, nevertheless, and become well known? I have had to interrupt my reading of many of these books with genuine wonder and unfeigned acknowledgement simply because they bored me to tears. Someday it may be obvious what sort of warped marriage of artist and recipient spawned these works so deprived of artistic sex appeal. What a disgrace!" (D1 97).

What deprives these works of “sex appeal,” asserts Gombrowicz, is their “religious attitude,” a deadly combination of sincerity and solemnity coupled with an excessive sense of introversion. As has been noted, Gombrowicz satirizes the “religious attitude” adopted by “worshippers” of art; he further points out that it is not only the “consumer” of art who is compromised by such an outlook; the artist is as well. In *Modernism*, Fletcher and Bradbury write, “[o]ne of the great themes of the Modernist novel has been, in fact, the theme of the art of the novel itself” (396); it is precisely this perspective that Gombrowicz takes exception to. He emphasizes this point in a discussion of the Modernist novel in *Diary*: “this religious attitude has also wrought great devastation in prose, too, if we take such works as Broch’s *Death of Virgil* or *Ulysses* or some of Kafka’s work, then we will have the same sensation – that the ‘excellence’ and ‘greatness’ of these works realize themselves in a vacuum, that they belong to those books which everyone knows are great . . . but which, nevertheless, are somehow remote, inaccessible, and cold . . . for they were written in a kneeling position with thought not about the reader but Art or some other abstraction” (D1 219-20).

These arguments suggest that it would be misleading to designate Gombrowicz a Modernist author; but there are grounds for the argument that Gombrowicz, if not a postmodern novelist, is at least a “proto-postmodern,” a forerunner. Such a perspective acknowledges Gombrowicz’s foresight in articulating questions that would indeed “become increasingly relevant to contemporary thought.” As Susan Sontag writes in her introduction to Danuta Borchardt’s translation of *Ferdydurke*, “Gombrowicz gaily deploys many of the devices of high literary modernism lately relabeled “post-modern,” which tweak the traditional decorums of novel writing: notably, that of a garrulous,

intrusive narrator awash in his own contradictory emotional states” (Sontag x-xi). In Gombrowicz’s novels the assumptions and techniques of Modernism are abandoned. Self-consciousness, the relationship with the self, becomes less the problem for the Gombrowiczian character than its relationships with others. At the same time, the questions raised in Gombrowicz’s novels are more in keeping with those issues that seem particularly contemporary: issues of reproducibility and aura (“everyone swoons away in the presence of a fine canvas, though no one ever thinks of fainting in the presence of a copy which may resemble it like two drops of water” [F 80], of canonicity (“Do you not see, then, how many different and often non-aesthetic factors . . . have accumulated in the greatness of our masters?” [F 80]), of gender (“I had to find a different position for myself – beyond man and woman – which would nevertheless not have anything to do with a ‘third sex’ – an asexual and purely human position from which I could begin airing these stuffy and sexually flawed areas” [D1 145]). When Milosz writes of Gombrowicz’s “destructive talent” (HPL 436), he might as well have written of his “deconstructive talent,” since Gombrowicz uses satire and parody to deconstruct traditional ideologies, ideals, and patterns of thought.

A particular aspect of Gombrowicz’s work that distances it from Modernism and allies it to the postmodern is comedy. This is not to imply comedy is absent from the Modernist novel, but that, with the exception of the novels of Italo Svevo (and arguably of *Ulysses*), it is by no means prioritized. In the postmodern novel, however, the opposite seems to hold true; for many of the novelists generally designated postmodern, comedy forms a distinguishing feature of their work. It is a characteristic attribute of such postmoderns as Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, Robert Coover, John Barth, Italo Calvino,

Georges Perec, Don DeLillo, Umberto Eco, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Salman Rushdie. This is true also of play, a term not generally associated with the Modernist novel, but frequently featured in the postmodern, often through the form of games (Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*) and puzzles (Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*). Play is also featured in the postmodern novel through the incorporation (parodic or otherwise) of fictional genres generally considered to be outside the realm of literature, for example DeLillo's use of science fiction in *Ratner's Star*, the gothic mystery of *The Name of the Rose*, detective stories within Auster's *New York Trilogy* or Coover's *Gerald's Party*, folk tales and fables in Calvino's *Our Ancestors* trilogy. As in the novels of Gombrowicz, comedy and play are typical attributes of the postmodern novel.

A final feature linking Gombrowicz to the postmodern is his tendency to look backward, to pre-Modernist literary techniques, in order to look forward, beyond Modernism. Edward Mendelson, in an essay on Thomas Pynchon, writes, "Like all literary innovations, Pynchon's novelty [. . .] is in part a recovery of a literary past." This is equally true of Gombrowicz, who, as he reiterates in *Diary*, looks back to Cervantes and Rabelais for novelistic inspiration.

VII Conclusion

Some general conclusions may be drawn regarding Gombrowicz's system of Interhumanity as an analysis of the human condition. Though it predates Sartre's existentialism, it shares many perspectives with that philosophy: in its atheism, its denial of "essence," its emphasis on "authenticity", its common goal – freedom of action. "Subjectivity, nothingness and liberty, the free creation of value, doesn't all this," asks

Gombrowicz, “imply distance from Form?” (KT 149). But the lingering image of Interhumanity is not so much Munch’s “The Scream” as the double mask of the painful grimace (accompanied by the contorted gesture) – and laughter.

In summary, the consequence of Interhumanity for the individual is pain. Pain – the agony of inauthenticity, the torture of interaction – is Gombrowicz’s ultimate vision of the human condition, and the underlying theme of all of his work. In *Diary*, Gombrowicz writes, “No matter what we are told, there exists, in the entire expanse of the Universe, throughout the whole space of Being, one and only one awful, impossible, unacceptable element, one and only one thing that is truly and absolutely against us and absolutely devastating: pain. It is on pain and on nothing else that the entire dynamic of existence depends” (D3 184). In *Ferdydurke*, the chapter “Introduction to Philimor Honeycombed with Childishness” features Gombrowicz’s most thorough novelistic discussion of the various agonies of existence. It portrays Gombrowicz’s attempt to establish a “hierarchy of griefs,” in the attempt to isolate the fundamental grief, the “great-grandmother of all other griefs,” in order to clarify his sense of the essential misery of being: “which torture shall we take as basic?” asks Gombrowicz. “The Metaphysical torture? The physical torture? The sociological torture? Or the psychological torture?” Gombrowicz subdivides these categories into a list of forty-nine specific sources of torture, and adds, in conclusion, “the terrifying torture of mutual interdependence and mutual barriers, of reciprocal interpenetration of all torments and all parts, the pain of one hundred and fifty-six thousand three hundred and twenty-four and a half other pains, not counting women and children (as a sixteenth-century French writer would say)” (190).

Pain is often symbolized in Gombrowicz's novels through the portrayal of the suffering of insects – an indication of Gombrowicz's opinion of *homo sapiens* as a superior being. His description of the suffering caused by Johnnie's mutilation of the fly has already been discussed. In *Pornografia*, when Karol and Henia crush the worm, Witold comments: "suffering is as distressing in the body of a worm as it is in the body of a giant, suffering is 'one,' in the same way that space is 'one,' it is indivisible and every time it appears it is abomination itself" (57). For Gombrowicz, to be human is to experience pain. But it is also to experience laughter. This is Gombrowicz's ultimate response to the terror of existence. As he writes in *Diary*, "in moments when devastating conditions force us to a complete inner transformation, laughter is our last resort" (1, 101). So in *Trans-Atlantyk*, just as interhuman relationships threaten yet again to disintegrate into the melee, the novel resolves itself in the "salvation" of a collective outburst of laughter.

Ultimately, Gombrowicz's philosophy must be accorded secondary status in his work. Though his interest in philosophical questions and concerns is genuine, Gombrowicz essentially utilizes philosophy as a basis for engaging his most profound weapons, satire and parody. For Gombrowicz, Interhumanity is a torment, our primary source of pain. In his novels, however, he makes of it – through parody and satire, through an overriding sense of play – a primary source of laughter.

VIII

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