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*Polishness, Politics, and the Facilitated Life in Witold Gombrowicz's Works.*

Some of you may be surprised that I am going to analyze Witold Gombrowicz's works from the perspective of political philosophy, since the author of *Ferdydurke* is not someone whose writings are typically associated with political reflection. So, before beginning my analysis of Gombrowicz, I will try to justify this endeavor. I believe that the key issue here is the notion of political philosophy itself – how it is understood. Therefore, I would like to take a moment to present my views on the concept of political philosophy, its object and its method.

I understand "political philosophy" as reflection on the political as the political, as well as on its first causes and principles. I purposely use "its" ambiguously, without specifying whether I mean "the political" or "reflection on the political," as this is a complicated issue in itself. I will come back to it later.

Regarding the concept of “the political” as such, the matter is also complicated. Due to time constraints, I cannot analyze it in-depth here. Certain clarifications will appear later on in my interpretation of Gombrowicz. For now, very briefly: "the political" refers to the nature of collective human life organized under, and according to, some sort of władztwo. By władztwo I do not mean any particular form of ruling power or even rule (Pol. władza) as such. Both rule and the particular forms it takes are merely consequences of władztwo. But what is władztwo? It is the principle or idea of a "central point of reference" inherent in man, either in his biological nature ("instinct") or intellectual nature ("thought").

Gombrowicz was an extraordinary thinker. The scope of problems he discusses, the number of ideas and suggestions, is overwhelming. Nevertheless, we can indicate a few of the most important ideas contained within his works. In my opinion, the four main ideas that constitute something of a leitmotif of Gombrowicz's thought are: 1) "pure form," 2) the Interhuman Church, 3) the problem of the relationship between Ojczyzna and Synczyzna, i.e. maturity vs immaturity, and 4) the notion of the facilitated life. I would add that the backdrop for all of Gombrowicz's reflections on the four ideas mentioned is the Cartesian *cogito.*

1. Politics.
a. Cogito and the community. Cogito vs the Interhuman Church.

The Cartesian context, as Gombrowicz understood it, is best characterized by the brief remarks Gombrowicz makes in his *A Guide to Philosophy*. In characterizing Descartes Gombrowicz writes as follows: [quotation1] The Cartesian dubito closes Cogito in the impenetrable world of Cogito's own consciousness. This is a double impenetrability: on the one hand, Cogito is not able to go beyond itself; on the other, nothing external to Cogito is able to enter into Cogito, into its world. In consequence, Cogito is a completely closed off, inaccessible world in itself and for itself. Everything seemingly distinct from Cogito is in fact only a product of the latter, of the same type and to the same degree that the dream world is a creation of Cogito.

The context of Cogito plays a crucial role in *The Marriage*. It is revealed *expressis verbis* many times in statements made by Henryk. Like Meister Eckhart's lonely god prior to creation, in the first lines of Act 1 Henryk declares: [quotation2]

Cogito, though fixed within itself, is still accompanied by the anxiety that "perhaps something" (p. 87). It is of this anxiety that Władzio, Henryk's pragmatic alter ego, is born. Władzio, Henryk's dream-nondream (we could use the phrase "dreamingly-created alter ego"), yells "Hola!" (p. 89). Henryk simultaneously does and does not want to yell. He quiets Władzio and at the same time yells "Hola" himself; and this yell, like "yehi'or," creates. It creates a social context. The theme of creating a cultural-social-political context by means of speech will appear again numerous times throughout the course of the play.

Let us briefly summarize what we have established up to this point. Cogito's founding act (act of creation) is a three-step process. First, the pragmatic alter ego is created. Its source is Cogito's uncertainty as to its own “aloneness” (“perhaps something”). This uncertainty seems to be a necessary consequence of the dubito - for it was from doubt that the certainty as to Cogito's esse was born, but no certainty followed as to Cogito's absolute “aloneness.” It is the alter ego, running out in front of the dubito with his pragmatism, who tries to convince Cogito of the reality of the external world. A consequence of this is the creation of society (“Hola!” – the second stage of the act of creation), and finally of power and the political structure (kneeling – the third stage), which complete the act of creation.

In this way, in creating a society and simultaneously joining it, Cogito reveals its unceremoniousness: “Attention! I am here, drop what you are doing now and come to me!”

But Cogito is not only the creator of the world – it is also an actor. It plays roles and gets masks-faces – gęby. What is very important – it also plays before the audience of itself: [quotation3]
This game, the role-playing before oneself and before the “others” one has created shapes both *Cogito* and these “others.” This mutual shaping is what Gombrowicz calls the Interhuman Church. The world, the reality of *Cogito* is set in opposition to the Old Order understood as “Real Reality,” which is subject to an Objective and Absolute Criterion. In reality, of course, *Cogito* is lacking this Criterion. The Interhuman Church becomes something of a substitute. Gombrowicz writes in *The Diary*: [quotation4]

b. Ojczyzna vs Synczyzna (Fatherland vs Motherland).

The problem of Synczyzna appears in many of Gombrowicz’s works. Already in his first story, *Ferdydurke*, we can find a foretaste of the analyses Gombrowicz later dedicates to this problem. We can also find Synczyzna in *Trans-Atlantic, Pornography*, the *Diary*, and in a way that is especially interesting to philosophers of politics, also in the play *Marriage*.

Gombrowicz created the neologism „Synczyzna” as a contrary of “Ojczyzna.” According to Gombrowicz, the latter’s despotism, its complete subordination, almost enslavement, of what is younger and dependent on it, requires a proper reaction. Synczyzna should be able to express itself independently: for itself, through itself, and in view of itself. Under Ojczyzna’s despotism, Synczyzna is treated solely as an extension of Ojczyzna, as an instrument serving the despot’s need for grounding, self-expression, and self-realization. But how does Ojczyzna justify its privileged position? Two things: precedence and causation. However, this argument is not so certain and unambiguous. Ojczyzna is the cause of Synczyzna, but only in the Natural order, so to speak. In the social order, things are quite the opposite: it is Synczyzna that is the cause of Ojczyzna, since children grant their parents the status of “parent”; it is thanks to youth that maturity becomes what it is. Moreover, childhood and youth are also first in the natural order from the perspective of the individual; childhood and youth are the causes of maturity, not the opposite. Therefore, the dominance of Ojczyzna seems to be a usurpation, based more on the law of the jungle, than on justice.

In many places in his works, Gombrowicz indicates a need for the “emancipation” of Synczyzna, a need for rebellion, so Synczyzna can come to power and take control of the socio-political order.

But is what Gombrowicz writes really so unambiguous? Is he really an uncritical glorifier of Synczyzna? Certainly not. The „heroes” of Synczyzna always suffer defeat. This is the case with Henryk in the *Marriage*, whole downfall is even more painful because it occurs on the grounds of principles established in the order of Synczyzna. Henryk’s defeat and
helplessness are best illustrated by his own words from the last scene of the play directly preceding his warrant for his own arrest: [quotation5]

The New Order introduced by Henryk, which seems to be a realization of Synczyzna, constitutes a radical negation of freedom. The enslavement of everyone and everything, including oneself – is a greater defeat even conceivable?

In Pornography, likewise, Synczyzna suffers a defeat that is no less severe. An innocent pair of sixteen year-olds – Karol and Henia – is manipulated into murder, which is only the culmination of an ongoing, perverse, “purely Formal” manipulation on the part of Ojczyzna – Witold and Fryderyk. Their manipulation finds exceptionally fertile ground. The shocking description of the innocently sadistic crushing of the bug reveals the true (?) face of Synczyzna. Its innocence is just as real as its perverse sadism. How, then, does the real relationship between Ojczyzna and Synczyzna, between maturity and youth, look in the thought of Gombrowicz? Let’s take a look at two significant quotations from the Diary: [quotation6] and a little later: [quotation7]

2. Polishness.

There can be no doubt that the ambition of Witold Gombrowicz was to create a universal work of literature that transcends the boundaries of national culture. At the same time, however, he was aware that such universality would not remove the Polish aspect from his work. In his comments in the Diary, he asserts with surprise: [quotation8]

a. Optimism vs Pessimism.

The context of Gombrowicz attitude toward Polishness is created by the two main factions in Polish reflection on the so-called problem of Poland. The critics (“pessimists”) and apologists (“optimists”), formulated two fundamental approaches, respectively: a modification of the Polish archetype so that it models the European archetype (following Europe), and the cultivation of Polish archetypical traditions along with the rejection of the European archetype as a model to be followed.

b. Poland vs Europe.

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1 “There is peace. All the rebellious elements are/Under arrest. Assembly has also been taken into custody along/With military and civilian circles, vast segments of the popula-/tion, the High Court, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Boards and/Departments, all public and private authorities, the press/Hospitals and orphanages. All the Ministries have been placed/Under arrest, and everything else besides; in short, Your Maj-/esty – everything. The police have likewise been imprisoned./There is peace. Quiet. It’s humid”, Gombrowicz 1998, p. 155.
Gombrowicz, like many others before him, emphasizes the difference between “Polishness” and “Westernness.” He writes in the *Diary*: [quotation9] It is important to note that this difference is not treated by Gombrowicz as a handicap. On the contrary: this is our potential superiority, which we cannot take advantage of, because we are constantly trying to imitate “Westernness.” In the same place in the *Diary*, he states: [quotation10]

In his exceptional essay on Sienkiewicz, Gombrowicz points out to the essence of Polishness: [quotation11]

3. „Facilitated life”.

The Polish archetype of the “facilitated life” differs from everything else that has appeared in the European history of ideas. It differs from Catholicism, liberalism, communism, fascism, etc. From the Polish perspective, it is the only truly “liberating” project. How can one characterize Gombrowicz's attitude?

In his works we can find four fundamental issues:
1. an indication of the essence of Polishness, which is “freedom-immaturity-childhood-the facilitated life”;
2. the apologetics for this essence;
3. its critique;
4. a remedial program.

Regarding the first two points, Gombrowicz seems to follow the path indicated by Orzechowski, Lelewel, and other “optimists.” The third point, on the other hand, is worthy of the Kraków School and Józef Szujski! – the “pessimist” camp. In crisis conditions, the “facilitated life” becomes something of a caricature of itself. What was of a “master’s nature” becomes petty, parochial, and even pathetically shallow. Is it possible to avoid such degradation? What is Gombrowicz's remedial program?

The remedial program is based on the antinomy of immaturity-maturity. The point here is to achieve a higher level of immaturity, which would be the result of experiencing and overcoming maturity. An adult's play is not the same as a child's play. A child's play is the result of ignorance of non-play. The adult who has not become aware of non-play, who runs away from knowledge of it, is both amusing and helpless. His choice of play, then, is not a true choice. Rather, it is the result of fear of an alternative, fear of the unknown, of escaping from the world. It is only in overcoming immaturity by way of maturity, play by way of non-play, which makes it possible to see the true significance of both immaturity and play. It is only then that achieving the desired state of “mature immaturity” and “non-playful play” becomes possible. As
Gombrowicz writes: [quotation12] It is only then that the “unserious” can become “serious.” The best way of organizing life in society, the premises of which we find in the Polish archetype, is precisely such “mature-immature non-playful-play.”

Gombrowicz reveals to us the absurdity and downright criminality of all Forms of order, both those that refer to a transcendent Absolute (the Old Order) and those that refer to an immanent one (the New Order). What do we receive in exchange? What would constitute the essence of Synczyzna? Maybe it would be order-non-order, form-non-form, childhood-non-childhood, maturity-non-maturity. Maybe it would be the fully actualized “innermost content” of Polishness – a synthesis of freedom and community consciously deprived of Form.

QUOTATIONS

Quotation 1:
"I am certain that this is in my consciousness but does not correspond to reality. For example, the centaur. Systematic doubt. Puts the world in doubt, in parentheses: 1. the object. 2. everything involving the object. The only certainty is that they exist in my consciousness. […] the sciences which relate to reality (supposedly objective): sociology, psychology, except for the abstract sciences; mathematics and logic, because they do not concern the outside world, but are laws for my own consciousness” [Gombrowicz, A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes, transl. B. Ivry, New Haven & London 2004, p. 2].

Quotation 2:
“A void. A desert. Nothing, I am alone here
   Alone

Quotation 3:
„And yet if I, I, I alone am, why then
(Let’s try that for effect) am I not?
What does it matter (I ask) that I, I am in the very middle, the very centre of everything, if I, I can never be
Myself?
I alone.
I alone.
Now that you’re alone, completely alone, you might at least
stop this incessant recitation
This fabrication of words
This production of gestures
But you, even when you’re alone, pretend that you’re alone
And you go on […]
Pretending to be yourself
Even to your very self. […]
Such are the
Attitudes I might adopt…in your presence
And for your benefit! But not for my own! I’m not in need
Of any attitude! I don’t feel
Other people’s pain! I only recite
My humanity! No, I do not exist
I haven’t any ‘I,’ alas, I forge myself

Quotation 4:
„‘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. We are like tones from which a melody issues – like words forming themselves into sentences – but we are not in control of what we express, this expression of ours strikes us like a thunderbolt, like a creative force, it arises from us unrefined. […] Doesn’t this phenomenon possess divine attributes, which are a result of interhuman power, that is, superior and creative, in relation to each of us separately?” [Gombrowicz, Diary, 2012, transl. Lillian Vallee, Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania, pp. 357–358].

Quotation 5:
“I am innocent.
I declare that I am as innocent as a child, that I have done
Nothing, that I am ignorant of everything…
No one is responsible for anything here!
There is no such thing as responsibility! […]
No, there is no responsibility
Still, there are formalities
To be attended to…” [Gombrowicz, 1998, p. 199].
Quotation 6:
„to pass the world through youth; to translate it into language of youth, that is, into the language of attraction…To soften it with youth…To spice it with youth – so it allows itself to be violated” [Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 372].

Quotation 7:
„And here one comes upon extreme formulas: maturity for youth, youth for maturity” [Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 373].

Quotation 8:
“Perhaps I am more yoked to the nation than it seems? Again this suspicion. And if Pornografia is an attempt to revive Polish eroticism? An attempt to recover an eroticism more appropriate to our fate and our history of recent years, which consists of rape, slavery, humiliation, dog fights, a descent into the dark extremes of the consciousness and the body? And perhaps Pornografia is a modern Polish, erotic, national poem? A rather unexpected and strange idea – it never occurred to me while I was writing it. Only now. I do not write for the nation or with the nation or from the nation. I write with myself, from myself. But isn’t my thicket joined in secret passage with the thicket of the nation? I, an American, I, an Argentinean, walking the coast of the Atlantic…I am still a Pole…yes…but just from my youth, childhood, from the awful forces which formed me then, pregnant with what was to follow…There, beyond Malvin, the proud insolence of land conjured up by the setting sun, like the most noble philosophy and the most splendid poetry. Downward! Downward! Degradation! I am my own degradation! How mercilessly man has to cast himself from the peaks – foul his own nobility – violate his own truth – destroy his own dignity – for his individual spirit to undergo slavery once again and submit to the herd, to the species…” [Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 487].

Quotation 9:
“Our Slavic attitude to artistic matters is lax. We are less involved in art than the Western European nations and so we can afford a greater freedom of movement. This is exactly what I often said to Zygmunt Grocholski, who takes his Polishness (which is very elemental in him and is crushed by Paris) very seriously. His struggles are as hard as those of so many Polish artists, for whom the one rallying cry is ‘Catch up to Europe!’ Unfortunately they are impeded in this pursuit by their being a different and very specific type of European, born in a place where Europe is no longer fully Europe” [Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 31].

Quotation 10:
“I said something to this effect to Eischler when we talked at the Grodzickis’: ‘I am amazed that Polish painters do not try to exploit their trump card, which is their Polishness, in art. Are you going to imitate the Western forever? Prostrate yourselves before painting, like the French? Paint with gravity? Paint on your knees in great deference, paint timidly? I acknowledge this type of painting, but it is not in our nature because our traditions are different. Poles have never been especially concerned with art. We were inclined to believe that the nose was not for the snuff box but the snuff box for the nose. We preferred the thought that ‘man is higher than what he produces’. Stop being afraid of your own paintings, stop adoring art, treat it in a Polish manner, look down at it, wield it, and then the originality in you will be freed, new avenues will open before you and you will gain that which is the most valuable, the most fertile: your own reality. […] Do not waste your precious time in pursuit of Europe. You will never catch up with her. Don’t try to become Polish Matisse, you will not spawn a Braque with your deficiencies. Strike, rather, at European art. Be those who unmask. Instead of pulling yourselves up to someone else’s maturity, try instead to reveal Europe’s immaturity. Try to organize your true feelings, so that they will gain an objective existence in the world. Find theories consistent with your practice. Create a criticism of art from your point of view. Create an image of the world, man, and culture which will be in harmony with you, because if you can paint this picture, it will not be difficult to paint others’” [Gombrowicz, 2012, pp. 31–32].

Quotation 11:
“A nation is its own justification. But, outside of the nation, there is also God. For this work as conceived by Sienkiewicz and his admirers is writing that is moral par excellence, based solidly on a Catholic worldview, a ‘pure’ literature. […] It is easy to notice that these two concepts – God and Nation – are not entirely reconcilable, or at any rate are not conducive to appearing one next to the other. God is absolute morality, and a nation is a group of people with specific aspirations, fighting for its daily existence…we must decide, therefore, if the highest right is our moral feeling or the interests of our group. It is certain that in Mickiewicz as well as in Sienkiewicz, God became subordinated to the nation and virtue was primarily an instrument in the battle for a collective existence. […] Therefore, Sienkiewicz is a Catholic writer only superficially and his lovely virtue is a hundred miles away from true, painful, ugly Catholic virtue, which is a categorical rejection of easy attractions – his virtue not only harmonizes with the body, it also decorates it like a smile. That is why Sienkiewicz’s literature can be defined as a proposal for ‘an uncomplicated life’ (maybe better: ‘a facilitated life’ – P. S.), a disregarding of absolute values in the name of living” [Gombrowicz, Sienkiewicz, in: Diary, p. 281].

Quotation 12:
“there is no spiritual posture, taken consistently to the ultimate, which would not be worthy of respect. There can be strength in weakness, determination in vacillation, consistency in inconsistency and also
greatness in what is small. Bold cowardice, softness sharp as steel, an aggressive retreat” [Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 215].