



Horyzonty Polityki
2019, Vol. 10, N° 33



PIOTR ŚWIERCZ

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6290-879X>
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow
Institute of Political and Administrative Science
swierczu12@wp.pl

DOI: 10.35765/HP.2019.1033.04

Between Realism and Nominalism. Gombrowicz and the Debate on Polish and European Archetypes of Political Culture

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this article is an analysis of Witold Gombrowicz's position in reference to the archetype of Polish political culture.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHODS: The main problem undertaken in the article is an analysis of Witold Gombrowicz's position in reference to the question of Polishness, its components, and its relationship to Latin civilization. The article is based on an analysis of Gombrowicz's *Diary*.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article begins with a synthetic outline of two fundamental issues: the Latinness of European civilization and the debate surrounding the archetype of Polish political culture. This is followed by what constitutes the main body of the article: an analysis of Gombrowicz's views on Polishness.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The most important result of the scientific analysis conducted here is the indication of the main theses of Gombrowicz's understanding of Polishness and of the relationship between Polishness and Latin civilization. Gombrowicz's conception is presented as an innovative approach to the problem, transcending traditional takes on Polishness as a specific type of realism.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: In his conclusions, the author indicates interpretative possibilities resulting from

Suggested citation: Świercz, P. (2019). Between Realism and Nominalism. Gombrowicz and the Debate on Polish and European Archetypes of Political Culture. *Horyzonty Polityki*, 10(33), 61-79. DOI: 10.35765/HP.2019.1033.04.

the perspective taken in the article, as well as areas that require further study, concerning such issues as the relationship between the Sonland and the Fatherland, and the culture of the Polish nobility during the "Saxon Era."

KEYWORDS:

Witold Gombrowicz, Polishness, Polish Political Culture, Realism, Nominalism

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* concerning *Trans-Atlantic*, the work commonly considered to be the most Polish in its overtones, Gombrowicz writes:

Trans-Atlantyk does not fall apart. Its construction is my success; it is a gradual sinking into a deeper and deeper phantasmagoria, the growth of my own autonomous reality; the whole point is that the world is nothing but itself. It is not a satire. It is not a "settling of accounts with the national conscience." It is not philosophy. It is not philosophy of history. What is it then? A story I told. In which, among other things, Poland appears. But it is not Poland that is the subject; the subject, as always, is I, I alone, these are my adventures, not Poland's. Except that I just happen to be a Pole. This in itself is a satire inasmuch as my existence as a Pole in this world is a satire. This is not the fruit of an early pondering of the Polish question – I was writing about myself – myself in Buenos Aires – only later did I begin to think about Poland – and now I draw these thoughts, like so much explosive contraband that I carried unknowingly, from the hull of my bottomless ocean liner. One way or another, it was this ship that took me back to Poland. I returned, but no longer as a wild man. For I had, at one time during my youth in Poland, been completely wild in relations to it, incapable of handling it with style, incapable even of speaking about it – it served only to torment me. Later, in America, I found myself beyond Poland, adrift. Today things are different: I return with specific demands, I know what I must exact from my fellow Poles and I know what I can give them in return. Thus have I become a citizen (Gombrowicz, 2012, pp. 304-305).

Elsewhere in the *Diary*, he asserts with surprise:

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).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the main themes in Witold Gombrowicz's thought concerning socio-political issues within the context of his conception of "Polishness." However, this analysis must also necessarily take into account the wider context, constituted by "Europeanness" and "Westernness." Since it is difficult to determine the precise semantic range of these two concepts and the relationship between them, I will first explain in what sense I will be using these terms.

I do not understand "Europeanness" in a broad sense, i.e. as encompassing all aspects of civilization that can be found in the history of the European continent. Rather, I limit myself only to the aspect of "Latinness." I take "Latinness" broadly, as the quality of historically belonging to the cultural sphere tied to the Roman Catholic Church, of drawing on the Latin-Roman tradition of writing, law, politics, and the like. Therefore, contrary to certain philosophers of civilization¹, I include Germany within the scope of "Latinness."

1 I am alluding to the ideas of Feliks Koneczny, who situated Prussia (and, in consequence, all of Germany united in 1871) within the sphere of influence of Byzantine civilization.

As for “Westernness,” I understand it as the region of influence of “Latinness,” historically shaped as a result of conquests and colonization, which remained sensitive to changes occurring within the framework of European “Latinness,” especially to changes in the socio-political and philosophical-ideal spheres.

Though Poland’s belonging to the sphere of “Latinness” seems unquestionable (its connection with Roman-Catholic rite in itself seems sufficient), Poland’s belonging to the sphere of “Westernness” raises doubts. However, the problem is much more complicated. Two things in particular seem controversial here. The first is the nature of the so-called breakthrough of modernity. The second is how the archetype of Polish political culture is to be understood in relation to “Latinness” and “Westernness.” Let us take a brief look at these issues.

The concept of the “breakthrough of modernity” has become a permanent fixture in literature on the history of ideas.² Two great figures are thought to symbolize this breakthrough: in political reflection – Niccolò Machiavelli; in philosophy – René Descartes, who lived approximately 100 years after Machiavelli. It is interesting to note that from the perspective of the history of ideas, modernity is often understood in opposition to “classical philosophy,” which is thought to encompass both ancient philosophy and the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages. Generally speaking, we can say that what distinguishes the “era of classical philosophy” from the “(early) modern era” (and, in consequence, from the “modern era”) is a complete change of perspective: “classical philosophy” was a philosophy of object, “modern philosophy” – a philosophy of subject (*cogito*). In the political sphere, on the other hand, the modern tendency can be grasped in terms of the status of the Good: in “classical philosophy” it was treated as objective and absolute (politics should subordinate itself to the Good); in “modern philosophy,” the Good was treated as subjective and relative (politics should be guided by the Good as it has been established on its own, political base). This would suggest that we are dealing with a change in the paradigm of philosophizing.

2 For example, this idea plays a very important role in the interpretations of the history of European philosophy and European political philosophy made by L. Strauss, P. Manent or E. Gilson.

Due to space constraints, I cannot conduct a detailed analysis of this complex matter here. However, I feel it is necessary to – at least briefly – comment on the theses presented above, since the rejection of the notion of the “breakthrough of modernity” (or, more precisely, a different understanding of it than the standard understanding) plays an important role in my further analyses.

The first problem concerns the source of the “breakthrough of modernity.” As is usually the case with classifications of this sort, everyone is aware that the boundary lines of historical time periods are merely conventional and somewhat arbitrary. In order to speak of a “breakthrough,” it is necessary to indicate the “something” that changes or “breaks through” the functioning of socio-political and cultural institutions and (from the point of view of these analyses) the paradigm of philosophizing. Moreover, it does not suffice to indicate the revolutionary “something” by itself: its roots must also be analyzed. From the perspective of the paradigm of philosophizing, the following question is especially interesting: was the revolutionary “something” born in connection with a new idea, an idea that was external to the old paradigm, or was it born in connection with a development (or reduction) of ideas that were already present within the paradigm? If we are dealing with the first case, then we are genuinely dealing with a “breakthrough.” If we are dealing with the second case – it is simply a correction, even if very far-reaching, within the framework of the same paradigm. In the latter case we may only speak of a “breakthrough” in a relative, partial sense. I am not going to go into terminological matters here, as they are secondary. What is important are the convictions that underlie such terminology. Thus, the question is if ancient philosophy and Christian philosophy really do form one paradigm, while modern philosophy forms another paradigm that is contradictory to the first.

I can find no arguments to support such a division. The introduction of Christian revelation into the philosophical paradigm of antiquity undoubtedly constitutes a greater *novum* than any change in approach to Christian philosophy conducted within the framework of modern thought. The key problems and concepts present in Christian reflection stem from revelation and were unknown to Greek philosophy. It is worth noting that such concepts like “the will” and “existence,” which transformed our views of ontology and

anthropology, remain timely and fundamental not only in modern philosophy, but also in contemporary philosophy. Of course, we can indicate important differences, but they are, it seems, only differences within the framework of one common paradigm. I believe that using the term “post-Christian philosophy” to describe both modern and contemporary philosophy is well-grounded. The secularization of philosophical reflection (including political philosophy) did not cause a return to the reflection of antiquity; it also did not result in the elaboration of a new paradigm concentrated on new problems. In addition, the fundamental problem of the philosophy of subject, which plays such an important role in modern philosophy, can be traced back to Christian philosophy, more precisely – to the voluntarist trend. Modern philosophy is simply the consequence of a debate within the framework of Christian philosophy, while Christian philosophy is not the consequence of a debate within the framework of ancient philosophy – it is a qualitatively new form, which uses the achievements of ancient philosophy out of context, endowing them with new content and meaning from the perspective of its own paradigmatic assumptions. Thus, I propose a different division of the history of European philosophy than the one that is commonly accepted: the paradigm of ancient philosophy, and the paradigm of Christian and post-Christian philosophy. From this perspective, the “breakthrough of modernity” is much less significant: it would have to be examined within the context of Christian philosophy, as its secularization or, more precisely, as the secularization of a certain version of Christian philosophy – voluntarism. It is worth noting that voluntarism appeared within Christian philosophy as an unavoidable consequence of the fundamental assumptions of the whole Christian paradigm, especially of the problem of “existence” in light of the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and the problem of the will, understood as *appetitus intellectionis*.

Now, let us take a look at the problem of the Polish archetype of political culture and its relationship with the political culture of modern Europe.

The problem of the distinctness of the Polish archetype of political culture vis-à-vis the dominant tendencies in Europe appeared in Polish politico-legal reflection in the second half of the XV century, in Jan Ostroróg’s work *Monumentum pro comitiis generalibus regni sub*

rege Casimiro, pro Reipublicae ordinatione (Pawiński, 1884, pp. 123-181) from 1475. One of Ostroróg's main postulates concerning the political system of the *Rzeczypospolita* was the strengthening of the king's power. An even stronger opinion on this matter was voiced by Filip de Tedalio Buonacorsi at the end of the century in his work *Consilia Calimachi* (Baczkowski, 1989, pp. 26-32). In the following century, two authors outlined models for the two dominant approaches to the political system of the *Rzeczypospolita*: the critical approach and the apologetic approach. These two authors were, respectively, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, the author of *Commentatorium de Republica emendanda libri quinque* (Frycz Modrzewski, 1953), and Stanisław Orzechowski, author of *Politycja Królestwa Polskiego na kształt arystotelesowych Polityk wypisana i na świat dla dobra pospolitego trzema księgami wydana* (Orzechowski, 1984; and also: Sinko, 1939, and Lichtensztul, 1930). We can accept that in general, the entire Polish debate on the archetype of political culture fits with these two attitudes, critical and apologetic. What links these two approaches is that both acknowledge the distinctiveness of the Polish archetype from the archetype that had been forming in Europe since the XV century. The European tendency leads straight to absolutism, whereas the Polish tendency leads in the opposite direction, towards the consolidation and expansion of the sphere of freedom. The European tendency is philosophically grounded in *cogito* and in Machiavelli's political doctrine; both of these sources of modernity are foreign to the Polish tendency. The European tendency leads through religious wars to secularization. In contrast, religious wars are foreign to the Polish tendency and so the process of secularization is also much weaker. The European tendency ultimately appeals to theories of the social contract, which are based on broadly-understood nominalism. The Polish tendency, on the other hand, appeals to the concept of natural laws, based on broadly-understood realism.

As a consequence, 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 archetypal traditions along with the rejection of the European archetype as a model to be followed (Lelewel, 1855; Bobrzyński, 1987;

Adamus, 1958; Adamus, 1961; Adamus, 1964; Sobieski, 1908; Kaute, 1993; Świercz, 2002).

From this perspective, the thesis superficially formulated earlier – that Polishness fits into the framework of “Latinness,” but not into that of “Westernness” – seems justified. Thus, let us accept this thesis-hypothesis as justified for the moment, and in our further analyses we will follow Gombrowicz and attempt to verify it.

The question I would like to pose and analyze in this paper is: to which of the two factions, critical-pessimistic or apologetic-optimistic, could we count the views of Gombrowicz in regards to the Polish question?

One thing is certain: Gombrowicz, like many others before him, emphasizes the difference between “Polishness” and “Westernness” (for an interesting analysis of Gombrowicz’s attitude towards Hobbes’s political philosophy, see: Śniowska, 2019). He writes in the *Diary*:

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).

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:

I said something to this effect to Eischler when we talked at the Grodzicki’s: “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).

In the cited passage, the opposition of "Polishness-non-sacredness" and "Westernness-sacredness" is striking. I will risk the hypothesis (leaving it unjustified and unelaborated for now) that "Easternness" would possess the quality of "sacredness" to the same degree that "Westernness" does. One further hypothesis: this "non-sacredness" is a fundamental trait of "Polishness." Gombrowicz emphasizes this many times in the *Diary*. We can find brilliant comments on this subject in his recollections on Bruno Schulz:

A landowner – whether he is a Polish squire or an American farmer makes no difference – will always harbor distrust of culture, for his remoteness from the great centers of human activity makes him resistant to human confrontations and products. And he will have the nature of a master. He will demand that culture be for him, not he for culture; all that is humble service, devotion, sacrifice, will appear suspect to him. To which of the Polish gentry who imported paintings from Italy in their day would it have occurred to humble himself before a masterpiece hanging on the wall? Not to a single one. Both the workers and the artists who created them were treated high-handedly (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 525).

But how are we to understand the "non-sacredness" of "Polishness"? Does it result from the fact that the "sacredness" of "Westernness" itself was born out of the desacralization of the Christian *sacrum*? Does "Polishness" oppose the "sacralization" of

the profane, the “sacralization” of the products of “secularization,” standing in defense of what has been wrongly “secularized”? A positive reply from Gombrowicz to the last question would ground his notion of Polishness on the foundation of “Latinness.” Let us take a brief look at Gombrowicz’s view of Polish Catholicism.

In his exceptional essay on Sienkiewicz, Gombrowicz writes:

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.Ś.), a disregarding of absolute values in the name of living (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 281).

Simply speaking, Polish Catholicism is more *not* Catholicism, than it is Catholicism! It is Catholicism only to a small degree, only superficially – only insofar as it helps in achieving the “facilitated life.” What does its role in the “facilitated life” consist in? As Gombrowicz states in the *Diary*, in the context of reflections on Simone Weil’s *La pèlerine et la grâce*:

Polish Catholicism. I understand a Catholicism such as the one that has historically developed in Poland as the shifting of burdens beyond one’s own powers to someone else – God. This is entirely the relationship of children to their father. A child is under the protection of the father. A child is supposed to listen to him, respect and love him, and abide by his commandments. A child, therefore, can remain a child because all “finality” is passed on to God the Father and his earthly embassy, the Church. This way the Pole gained a green world,

green because it is immature, but also green because the meadows and trees blossom in it and are not black and metaphysical. To live in the lap of nature, in a limited world, leaving the black universe to God (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 218).

Alas... "Latinness" does not seem immanent to "Polishness." No, it is only a selectively-treated addition, a supplement, which is less of a formative element vis-à-vis "Polishness" than it is a quasi-metaphysical substrate, a substitute for the pain, hardships, and anxieties of "true" metaphysics. I will risk yet another hypothesis: "Polishness" never treated Catholicism and "Latinness" seriously and literally. "Polishness" was not interested in their depth concerning human nature after original sin and in the ensuing anthropological consequences. "Polishness" created its own version of Catholicism suited to its needs. This being the case, it is clear that there can be no talk of a true reception of modernity within the framework of "Polishness." Modernity is a serious reaction to Christian ideas. It is difficult to speak of a serious reaction to something that itself was not treated seriously. Modernity was simply unnecessary for "Polishness." The Polish version of Catholicism already contained a form of this reaction, however peculiar. It was, to paraphrase Gombrowicz, a "master's" reaction: "non-sacred," one that did not throw one to one's knees in supplication. Catholicism is for the Pole, not the Pole for Catholicism!

As could be expected, such a formulation of "Polishness" relationship with "Westernness" (on the one hand) and "Latinness" (on the other) causes the "optimism-apologetics" – "pessimism-criticism" debate to appear in a different light. Let us take a closer look at this issue.

This issue seems to fill Gombrowicz's works to a large extent. Let us put forward the hypothesis that the antinomy of maturity-immaturity constitutes a *leitmotif* of all of his works. *Ferdydurke*, *Trans-Atlantyk*, and *Pornography* are all directly about this problem. We can also find it in *Cosmos*, in his stories, and in his plays. This is an incredible amount of material, giving scholars of Gombrowicz's thought enough to work on for the rest of their lives without running out of material. Here, I will limit myself only to a few comments based on his *Diary*, merely indicating one possible interpretation.

Let us begin our analysis with another lengthy quote from Gombrowicz. He writes in the *Diary*:

I, who am terribly Polish and terribly rebellious against Poland, have always been irritated by that little, childish, secondary, ordered, and religious world that is Poland. I attributed Poland's historical lack of dynamism as well as Poland's cultural impotence to these characteristics because God led us around by our little hand. I compared this well-behaved Polish childhood to the adult independence of other cultures. This nation without a philosophy, without a conscious history, intellectually soft and spiritually timid, a nation that produced only a "kindly" and "noble-minded" art, a languid people of lyrical scribblers of poetry, folklorists, pianists, actors, in which even Jews dissolved and lost their venom... My literary works guided by the desire to extricate the Pole from all secondary realities and to put him in direct confrontation with the universe. Let him fend for himself as best as he can. I desire to ruin his childhood. But now in this pursuant din, in the face of my own helplessness, in this inability to straighten things out, it occurs to me that I have just contradicted myself. Ruin a childhood? In the name of what? In the name of a maturity that I myself can neither bear nor accept? It is the Polish God, after all (in contrast to Weil's God), who is that splendid system that has maintained man in a sphere of indirect being, who is that veering away from the ultimate that is demanded by my insufficiency. How can I desire that they not be children if I myself, *per fas et nefas*, want to be a child? A child, yes, but one that has come to know and has exhausted all the possibilities of adult seriousness. This is the big difference. First, push away all the things that make everything easier, find yourself in a cosmos that is as bottomless as you can stand, in a cosmos at the limits of your consciousness, and experience a condition where you are left to your own loneliness and your own strength, only then, when the abyss which you have not managed to tame throws you from the saddle, sit down on the earth and discover the sand and grass anew. For childhood to be allowed, one must have driven maturity to bankruptcy. I am not bluffing: when I pronounce the word "childhood," I have the feeling that I am expressing the deepest but not yet roused contents of the people who gave me birth. This is not the childhood of a child, but the difficult childhood of an adult (Gombrowicz, 2012, pp. 218-219).

In the above passage we 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.

In terms of the first two points, Gombrowicz seems to follow the path indicated by Orzechowski, Lelewel, and other “optimists.” But he elaborates the main concept, the concept of “freedom.” This concept is in fact ambiguous, and to say that the essence of “Polishness” is freedom, without specifying what this “freedom” really is in the context of “Polishness” is equivalent to saying nothing at all. Here is a simple example with reference to concepts proposed by Benjamin Constant: “ancient freedom” – “freedom to the state,” “modern freedom” – “freedom from the state.” What was the noblemen’s freedom in this context? It was “freedom to the state” to guarantee “freedom from the state” for themselves. But to what end? As a justification of the *laissez-faire* principle? No! The end was precisely the “facilitated life.” It is this life that constitutes the essence of “Polish freedom.” How does Gombrowicz justify his apologetics? Again, it is necessary to refer to several lengthy quotes from the *Diary*. The first of these concerns his analyses connected with the work of Simone Weil mentioned earlier. We read:

Gustave Thibon writes about Weil: “I recall a certain young worker, in whom, she discovered, or so it seemed to her, a vocation for the intellectual life and on whom she relentlessly bestowed splendid lectures on the Upanishads. The poor girl was bored to death but did not protest out of politeness and shyness.” So the “poor girl was bored to death”? This is exactly how ordinary humanity is bored by profundity and loftiness. And “did not protest out of politeness and shyness”? Just as we, through politeness, put up with wise men, holy men, heroes, religion, and philosophy (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 214).

A little later, he states:

“Finality” has surrounded me on all sides. This is an encirclement ripe with dread. Yet (...) I extinguish all powers in myself. A Romantic in my circumstances would gladly surrender himself of these furies. An existentialist would plumb his anxieties. A believer would prostrate himself before God. A Marxist would reach the bottom of Marxism. I don’t believe that any of these serious people would deny the profundity of this experience, I, on the other hand, do what I can to return to an everyday dimension, ordinary life, nothing too serious. I don’t want peaks and an abyss, I want the plain... (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 217).

This banal truth – that culture is for man, not man for culture – was lost in the chronicles of European history. It was replaced by the falsehood that man is for culture, that the appropriate attitude is one of almost slavish servitude. The absurdity of the latter idea is most visible when we attempt to apply it to the very beginnings of culture: the hand-axe is not for man, but man is for the hand-axe! Man should be a servant, a slave to the pieces of rock he himself shaped. However, did not man shape the rock to make his life easier? Could anything be more obvious? “Polishness,” due to the fact that it remained “on the margin” of the chronicles of history, retained this obvious fact – culture is for man.

The mentioned falsehood characterizes all dogmatic conceptions and ideologies that have appeared in the European history of ideas. Gombrowicz sets it in opposition to openness. We read in the *Diary*:

How are we supposed to come to an understanding with someone who believes, who wants to believe and will not entertain any other thought except the one that dogma will not include in its prohibitory index? Does any sort of mutual tongue exist between me, who derives from Montaigne and Rabelais, and that correspondent so passionate in her faith? Whatever I might say, she will measure it against her doctrine. Everything is already resolved in her, because she already knows the ultimate truth about the universe. Which means her humanity has an altogether different character and from my viewpoint an immeasurably strange one. In order to come to terms with her, I would have to demolish her ultimate truths, and the more convincing I become, the more satanic will I become in her eyes and the harder she will cover her ears. She is not allowed to entertain doubt, and my reasons will become nourishment for her *credo quia absurdum*. A dangerous analogy comes to mind here, however. When you talk to a Communist, don't you have the impression that you are speaking to a “believer”? (...) Doesn't it seem to you that when your words were bouncing off this hermeticism like peas off a wall, that the real line of demarcation runs between the believers and nonbelievers and that this continent of faith encompasses such diverse churches as Catholicism, Communism, Nazism, Fascism. At that very moment you felt like someone threatened by a colossal Holy Inquisition (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 34).

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. Could it be true, then, that “Polishness” developed its own version of nominalism (though without the ideas that guided modern reflection, independently of them)? This would be too simple. As I mentioned earlier, Gombrowicz’s “Polishness” corresponds with Lelewel’s “gminowładztwo.” (“communal self-government”³) This is not nominalism, though it is also not realism. The point of reference here is not what is absolute. This is not a state built upon the idea of absolute Good or on the idea of Divinity. But it is also not the sum of the interests and views of individuals. It is not a state built on a social contract or on the general will. Here, we come into direct contact with what Gombrowicz calls the “interhuman church”:

“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 (Gombrowicz, 2012, pp. 357-358).

In consequence, a hierarchy or vertical structure becomes inevitable – equality and democracy are only a myth. Could such an “interhuman church” transform into a freedom-destroying institution? Certainly! How did “Polishness” manage to avoid this threat? I will risk the hypothesis that this was the result of keeping a distance from and a lack of trust of...that same “interhuman church”! A paradoxical situation! Gombrowicz illustrates this paradox with reference to himself: “I have never been capable of prostrating myself – and between the interhuman God and me grotesqueness was always born instead of prayer...” (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 358), and elsewhere asks rhetorically: “There is artificiality in even the most intimate reflexes, behold the element of human essence, submitted to the ‘interhuman.’ In that case, why does the falsity and artificiality of man, submitted to Communism, disturb me? What interferes with my acknowledging

³ I use this English term for “gminowładztwo” after Steven J. Seegel, see: Seegel, 2005, p. 26.

that this is exactly how it should be?" (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 237). This is a sort of private *liberum veto* and *nihil novi*. Recognizing the "interhuman church" while simultaneously maintaining a distance from it and suspicion – that is the recipe for combining freedom and societal life!

Thus, we see that we are dealing with a conception which fits neither into the category of "Latinness" – realism nor into the category of "Westernness" – nominalism. This in itself makes Gombrowicz's concept of "Polishness" impossible to classify. Maybe we would at least be allowed to describe Gombrowicz as an apologist, contrary to popular opinion? Unfortunately, here, too, the matter is complicated. Gombrowicz's apologetics are inescapably bound with his criticism. He is both an apologist and a severe critic of the "facilitated life."

Analyzing the Argentine version of the "facilitated life" in his *Diary* within the context of political events (doing so as if he were discussing the *I Rzeczpospolita*), Gombrowicz writes:

The source of these sad phenomena you could probably find in the easy life (facilitated life), in the enormous or sparsely populated expanse, where a person can allow himself a great deal without punishment because ultimately "things will somehow work out." If the private life of an American is still characterized by a certain regularity and if it is still obvious, for example, that if he does not repair the roof, it will rain on his head, then this social, wider, higher political life becomes something like a Great Frontier (*Polish*: "Dzikie Pola") – one can clamor, riot, and frolic, for where there is no logic, there is also no responsibility, nothing will happen to so vast a country. And so demagoguery, claptrap, political lunacy, illusions, theories, phobias, manias, megalomaniacs, caprices, and especially the most ordinary *viveza* (we can pull the wool over their eyes but they'd better not do it to us!) abound! One can tell people absurdities strewn with the cheapest banalities and life will never unmask them, because collective reality is *laxer here* – and a bluster will walk in glory in his old age. An easy life (a facilitated life) exudes beneficence, good humor, sentimentality, naïveté, unresourcefulness, delicacy – a softness in which one slowly drowns. But a society that is threatened by softness, that feels the danger subconsciously, wants to defend itself – this is where that famous *viveza* comes from, a little bit of cunning that is supposed to prepare them for life, make reality accessible to them anew, save them from the shame of gullibility and naïveté (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 416).

This is critique worthy of the Kraków School and Józef Szujski! 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?

As I noted above, 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: “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). 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.”

A detailed analysis of this problem would be too long to include here. I would however, like to indicate a direction for further inquiry. A good indication is, of course, provided by *Ferdydurke* with its “gęba,” “dupa,” and “pupa.” The Fatherland-Sonland relationship from *Trans-Atlantyk* (among others) is significant in this context as well. Gombrowicz’s plays also warrant special attention. An important role is played by the “Polish notion of beauty,” with *Pornography* as a key source.

Inquiries into the historical aspect are also vital to research on the Polish archetype of political culture. What I mean by the historical aspect is an analysis of Poland’s Saxon period, which Gombrowicz found so interesting in the context of the “Polish notion of beauty.”

The outline presented above is not exhaustive and is not meant to solve anything. I am aware that the theses and hypotheses presented still require much research. At the current stage of research, this paper is only a proposal of a possible method of interpretation, or, to be more precise, the proposal of a project which could make such an interpretation possible.

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