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Gombrowicz i Faust

Decyzja Gombrowicza, aby odwrócić się plecami do Europy i pozostać na wychodźstwie w Argentynie w roku 1939 była swego rodzaju podpisaniem faustowskiego kontraktu: zamiast fizycznej i duchowej śmierci czekały pisarza dwadzieścia cztery lata wytnienia i powrót do utraconej młodości. Powrót do Europy był próbą dojrzałości, ale oznaczał ból i nieuchronną śmierć. Gombrowicz zagrał w swym życiu podwójną rolę. Była to jednocześnie rola Fausta i egzekutora wyroku, Mefistofelesa.

gombrowicz and faust

More than twenty years after its author's death, Witold Gombrowicz's *Diary* continues a golem-like existence, seemingly mutating and re-writing itself through various new editions and translations. The appearance of the first English translation of Volume Three of the *Diary*¹ continues this confounding pattern. The Northwestern University Press edition includes additional passages written at the very end of Gombrowicz's life dating from the years 1967-68, giving the three-volume project a quite different thematic and structural closure than exists in any of the Polish editions of the work to date. Last year, in fact, saw the publication in Poland of a so-called "fourth volume" of the *Diary*,² which consisted of a collation of the diary fragments of 1967-68 with the *Conversations with Gombrowicz* (known in English as *A Kind of Testament*). The idea of including these additional diary fragments in the English edition of Volume Three reportedly originated with Rita Gombrowicz, the author's widow and literary executor, and thus can be assumed to be as close to an "authoritative" decision as possible under the circumstances.

To those for whom the *Diary* is their introduction to Gombrowicz, Volume Three is the culmination of the entire project, heightening and recapitulating the concerns of the earlier two volumes. On the surface, the style of the *Diary* as a whole may seem loose and improvisational, but in this version its structure in retrospect possesses a singular rigor and clarity, achieving in its own way the three-part logic and integrity of a sonata or a classical trilogy. Perhaps the central paradox of the work is its achievement of an effect of spontaneity from what was, according to Gombrowicz's confidant and collaborator Konstanty Jeleński, a carefully

planned and meticulously polished undertaking. Perhaps most importantly, Volume Three contains some of Gombrowicz's most eloquent and passionate passages, accompanied as always by his eye for farce, precise wit, and blunt cantankerousness. While scores of writers have addressed the hypocrisy of post-war Germany, for example, the virtue of Gombrowicz is that he can do so without losing his sense of humor. Gombrowicz's most appealing facet — and most effective weapon — is precisely his playfulness.

For those already familiar with Gombrowicz, this version of the *Diary* opens the way for a quite different understanding of the intricate dance of the writer's life, the literary persona he created through his works (especially the *Diary*), and his readers both in Poland and abroad. Indeed, in this form the third volume of the *Diary* can be seen the keystone to Gombrowicz's work as a whole. The first Polish edition of Volume Three, published in 1966 by the emigré *Instytut Literacki* in Paris, ended with the following passage:

I will say honestly: one of the most important tasks that constantly rattled around inside me when I began working on my diary in those years has not been accomplished. I see this now clearly... it depresses me....

I have been unable to express adequately my passage from inferiority to superiority, this exchanging of an insignificant Gombrowicz for a significant one. Neither the spiritual sense of this passage, nor the sense shamefully personal, nor the social sense (the change pertaining to my being grounded in people) was treated adequately. Convention turned out to be more powerful. Whenever I touched upon this subject, it always shattered into little pieces, evaporated, turned into a joke, polemics, into superficial self-praise, into obstreperousness... into a feuilleton.... The usual means of articulation got the upper hand. The passages that brush against this string in my diary lack energy, boldness, seriousness, and ingenuity.

This is a serious stylistic and personal defeat. And I doubt that even in the future I would be able to grab this bull by the horns. The time for that has passed! (Diary, III, 178)

The severity of this self-criticism would be startling in any context, much less as the curtain line of a 750 page manuscript produced over a period of thirteen years. The revised posthumous edition of the *Diary*, published in 1971, added about twenty new pages of material at the end of the Third Volume, and in this case ended with one of Gombrowicz's most withering assessments of his fellow Poles:

So now what, defenders of Polish culture? And as for the swinishness itself, well, I once knew a Pole who was lost deep in thought. After which he shook it off and said: "It takes a pig to screw a pig." Who do you have in mind?" I asked. "I am thinking of Poles." (III, 199)

The acute doubt of 1966 was thus replaced by a lashing out at his compatriots. The disarming vulnerability of the first edition and the venom — and uncharacteristic coarseness — of the second (somewhat softened in Lillian Vallee's translation) both somehow fell wide of the mark. Gombrowicz the writer obviously knew many ways to end the *Diary* with pith and originality, but Gombrowicz the man was somehow flailing at the same time.

This latest edition of the *Diary* ends instead with a seemingly brief and off-handed entry saying simply "I spilled the compote." Before this comes a series of entries unlike any before them in style and candor. What

is revealed is a bombshell: after winning the prestigious Prix International de Littérature and buying a villa in the south of France there appears unexpectedly a young Brazilian claiming to be Gombrowicz's illegitimate son. What follows is a terse, oblique account of the episode, which seems to be resolved by some sort of financial settlement with the young man in the wake of the author's abrupt sale of his newly bought home. More importantly, it is here for the first time that we see Gombrowicz lose composure and let drop the mask of "Gombrowicz," the carefully wrought public persona that the *Diary* previously evoked. Gombrowicz suffered his first heart attack six months after these entries were written in 1968, and a year later he died.

What is most astonishing about the facts of this episode is that they are so very "literary" in logic. It is only with the inclusion of this section that the true thematic and structural weave of Volume Three is revealed. Gombrowicz in retrospect was quite right to express his frustrations with its form in 1966. Whether a biological son or not, the image of the young man's arrival on the aging and sickly author's doorstep is the uncanny embodiment of the ideas that unify not only the third volume of the *Diary*, but of Gombrowicz's stories, novels, and plays, as well. The vagueness and ambiguities of the case only serve to heighten the reflex to translate the fact of the young man's existence into symbol and allegory, to read life as if it were a fictional narrative. Given Gombrowicz's careful crafting of the *Diary* otherwise, such an impulse is not necessarily inappropriate. As such, the genre of the narrative here would be high tragedy. The cruel mechanism of this dance of life with art is of a precision and subtlety that surpasses any found in Gombrowicz's novels or plays, a world filled with such sinister and baroque interplay of "reality" and "fiction."

As a literary narrative, the circumstances of the young man's appearance at first produces the ready-made appeal of a cliché: he is Gombrowicz's angel of death, the mulatto Tadzio for his Polish Aschenbach. But swimming just beneath the surface of the *Diary*, particularly in Volume Three, is a much larger and more complex presence whose size and shape only becomes discernable in retrospect. While Gombrowicz might well be pleased to have his life understood in the terms of erotic tragedy (the Polish Aschenbach, the bisexual Phaedra, etc.), the archetype that emerges is the somewhat cooler one of Faust.

Like his earlier novel *Trans-Atlantic*, Gombrowicz's *Diary* has a double focus: the exile's relationship to his adopted home (in this case Argentina) and the exile's backward glances to his native land. In 1939, Gombrowicz was handed a triple death sentence: as a Pole, an intellectual, and an avant-gardist, he was marked for eventual extermination by the Germans. On the Polish side, he was expected like others of his age to be martyred in the name of national honor; as a child of liberal bourgeois Europe (whose cultural capital was Paris), he was identified with a dying order, whose cultural and spiritual hollowness was starkly revealed when confronted with the aggressions of the Nazis. To this would later be added the incompatibility of his social and artistic pedigrees with the ideology of Stalinism. The greater part of Volume Three is devoted to Gombrowicz's settling of scores with Europe upon his return in the 1960s on a Ford Foundation grant, and he is quite even-handed in his critiques of post-war France, Germany, and Poland. He very much plays the role of the unapologetic prodigal returning home and tactlessly mocks the fattened calf that is offered in his honor.

Gombrowicz's decision to turn his back on Europe and remain in exile in Argentina in 1939 was where he signed his Faustian contract: instead of the physical or spiritual death that loomed very immediately before him, he received a twenty-four year reprieve, which he described himself in Volume One as a return to his lost youth:

[...] I have to confess this: under the influence of the war, the strengthening of the "inferior" and regressive powers, an eruption of some sort of belated youth took place in me. I fled to youth in the face of defeat and slammed the door. [...] the war made me younger... and two factors aided me in this. I looked young, I had the fresh face of a man in his twenties. The world treated me like a young man—for the overwhelming majority of the few Poles who read me, I was a crazy upstart, an altogether frivolous person—and for the Argentineans, I was someone completely unknown, something of a debutant from the provinces who must first prove himself and win recognition. [...] Therefore, everything, my appearance and my situation, and that complete ejection from culture and the secret vibrations of my soul, everything pushed me into the recklessness of a young man, into a young self-sufficiency (I, 130-131).³

In Volume Three, the sixty year-old Gombrowicz has returned to Europe, and while in Berlin in 1964 writes the following:

It was then (while walking in the Tiergarten) that I caught a certain scent, a mixture of herbs, water, stone, wood bark, I couldn't say what exactly... yes, Poland, this was Polish, just like in Małoszyce, Bodzechów, my childhood, yes, yes, the same, why, it wasn't too far away now, a stone's throw away, the same nature... which I had left behind a quarter of a century earlier. Death. The cycle was coming to a close. I had returned to those scents, therefore, death. Death. I had come across my death in various circumstances but there was always some sort of missing each other that gave a perspective on life, meanwhile in the Tiergarten I came to know death head-on—and from that moment it has not left me. I should not have left America. Why didn't I understand that Europe meant my death? (III, 108).

The terms of the contract are quite clear to Gombrowicz after the fact, when he finally confronts the dilemma at its core: either remain in Argentina (the place of his second youth and greatest creativity) at the price of continued poverty and artistic obscurity, or return to Europe (the realm of his own maturity, of European "form," and death) and its promise of worldly success and artistic recognition. Gombrowicz intuits the price of his choice of Europe over Argentina (or in the terms of his novel *Trans-Atlantic*, that of the "Fatherland" over the "Sonland") as soon as he sets foot on the boat to leave Buenos Aires in the early sections of Volume Three.

The dance of youth with maturity is a symbolic image that assumes myriad forms in Gombrowicz's writings. The dance is at times Platonic, at others erotic or violent. Its motive can be either heterosexual or homosexual, and its violence is typically in the form of the threatened murder of the child/son which is prevented only through actual or symbolic parricide. This is the germ of each of Gombrowicz's novels and plays written in Argentina. In his unfinished play *History* (1951), the forty-seven year-old author created a self-portrait of himself as a sixteen year-old whose unfinished mission was to save Europe (and himself) from Hitler, presumably by opposing his own youthful spontaneity and androgynous seductiveness to the mature rigidity and masculine aggressive-

ness of his quarry. In the last entries of Volume Three of the *Diary*, the roles are reversed, with the mature and triumphantly "European" Gombrowicz undone by the appearance of a would-be son of a mother the author cannot for the life of him remember. Mephistopheles has come to collect his due, and Faust cannot even remember meeting Gretchen or Helen. The sense of impending death could hardly be more palpable.

As a twentieth-century Faustian figure, Gombrowicz's self-portrait in the *Diary* does contain parallels to the work of Thomas Mann, whose work he knew and admired. While there are undeniable similarities to Aschenbach in *Death In Venice*, the most telling ones are in relation to Adrian Leverkühn in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. Gombrowicz's voice in the *Diary* also echoes the cynical humor and theatricality of Goethe's Mephistopheles, in effect making the Devil a facet of Faust. In assuming the composite role of Faust/Mephistopheles and then writing in the first person, Gombrowicz in the *Diary* is both more rough and tumble in style and more daring in conception than Mann in his third person narrative. In his best Mephistophelean form, Gombrowicz precedes the confessional last section of Volume Three with his irreverent essay on Dante's *Inferno*, in which he both cavalierly proposes revisions of the poet's work and searches for a point of connectedness with this remote canonical figure. Significantly, Gombrowicz is seeking a relationship with Dante as a human being as much as with his *Inferno*. When he finally finds this point of contact, it is in the following words:

Yes, yes... and now I've got him, I've gotten a hold of him, he offends me, infuriates me, so there he is... behind that wall of time... and now, now he has become a person....

He has become a living person to me through the highest Pain.

Satisfaction, I jot down: yes, Pain makes real. Only pain is capable of joining men in time and space, it is Pain that reduces the generations to a common denominator (III, 188)

It is precisely the revelation of Gombrowicz's own pain that makes the end of his *Diary* gripping, moving and disturbing twenty-four years (again the Faustian clockwork...) after his death. As with Mann's Leverkühn, the work has survived the artist, but whether the judgement of the artist's life is one of damnation or apotheosis, following the scenario of Marlowe or Goethe, remains deeply ambiguous.

If Gombrowicz's *Diary* is his *Faust*, then Dominique de Roux's *Conversations with Gombrowicz* is the counterpart to Johann Peter Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*. In fact, there is little doubt that this was precisely how Gombrowicz wished it to be seen. Gombrowicz's Polish editors are not without justification in combining the *Diary* with de Roux's *Conversations*, for unlike Goethe, the persona of Gombrowicz/Faust/Mephistopheles in the *Diary* is inseparable from that of Gombrowicz/author in the *Conversations*. Thus the audacious implied equation is Gombrowicz = Goethe + Faust + Mephistopheles. Could any of Gombrowicz's "controversial" statements on post-war Germany hold a candle to this tacit agenda of the *Diary* as a whole?

A final question also begs for an answer: why turn to Goethe and Mann at all, especially in the wake of World War II? Polish culture provided Gombrowicz with a wealth of archetypal images of the artist-in-exile (in the lives of Chopin or Mickiewicz) and the artist-as-Faust (in the plays of Mickiewicz or Krasiński). Gombrowicz's great heresy was to look outside the Polish tradition for models just as that tradition was most

besieged by Nazi and Soviet cultural politics. His controversial judgement was that these archetypes had degenerated into facile stereotypes that precluded the meaningful political, intellectual, and artistic renewal of the tradition, much less effective resistance to hostile foreign powers. Always a pacifist-anarchist at heart, Gombrowicz chose to fight his battles in precisely the cultural sphere targeted by Hitler and Stalin's ideologues. Ultimately, Gombrowicz's strategy was not to abandon the Polish Romantics in favor of their German counterparts, but rather to provoke both into an unprecedented (and possibly compromising) relationship. Among the Poles he played Faust, toying with forbidden knowledge and demonic powers. Among the Germans, he played Mephisto, shamelessly bargaining for nothing less than the German cultural soul. Gombrowicz ultimately had no desire merely to follow in the footsteps of Mickiewicz, Goethe, or Mann, instead he wanted to stand on his own at once among and apart from them.

The publication of *Dziennik 1967-69* in Poland last year came in the wake of an unprecedented number of new productions of Gombrowicz's works by Polish theatre companies following the end of communist rule of 1989. *The Marriage* alone received four productions in one year, and has assumed the status of a kind of theatrical emblem of the complexes and anxieties of the post-communist period. In June of this year, the First International Gombrowicz Theatre Festival was held in Radom, featuring productions from Poland, France, and Hungary, and attended by critics, scholars, and translators from a half-dozen countries. High on the agenda for the festival was a tacit promotion of Gombrowicz as a key writer for the "new Europe" coalescing after the fall of the Berlin Wall. On the surface, the case for Gombrowicz as part of a new pan-European canon is compelling: his life and work did undeniably cross the cultural lines of not only Eastern and Western Europe, but also of Europe and the Third World. Emigre writers such as Gombrowicz do indeed perform an essential function in post-Soviet Europe that no Western European writer can fulfill, given the one-sided flow of artists and intellectuals from the former Soviet Bloc. What in Gombrowicz once seemed an eccentric and exceptional process of self-definition has begun to assume the status of a new archetype — or rather of the unexpected mutation of a familiar one. Gombrowicz's *Diary*, however, also stands as a deep challenge to any facile rhetoric about "a common European house" even as it eloquently and quirkily defines a key twentieth-century European life. In the midst of the Radom festival, I repeatedly caught myself looking over my shoulder, fearful that I had heard a mocking and decidedly Mephistophelean laugh from beyond the grave.

Allen Kuharski

¹ Witold Gombrowicz. *Diary, Volume III*. trans. Lillian Vallee, General Editor Jan Kott, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

² Witold Gombrowicz. *Dziennik 1967-69*. General Editors Jan Błosiński and Jerzy Jarzębski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1992

³ Witold Gombrowicz. *Diary, Volume I*. trans. Lillian Vallee, General Editor Jan Kott Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.