

'On Deviation and Divestment, or Gombrowicz's Contradiction of Form (an inadequate address)'

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I am speaking of character types in our educated society. Here, however, I must stubbornly and insistently note that it would not be a good thing were we to change suddenly like weather vanes, because the most abhorrent trait of our educated individuals is precisely this volatility and lack of content. There is something servile in it, something of the lackey dressed in his master's coat. [...] Parallel to this lack of understanding of such a fundamental thing as a sense of personal dignity there is, I think, merely a lack of understanding among almost everyone in this educated, European age, of freedom and what it consists of: but of that, later [...] in the majority of decent Russian people there prevails specifically this quickness to yield, to need to concede, to come to terms. And this certainly is not due to good nature and not, by any means, cowardice; it is just there, due to some sort of politeness or goodness knows what. (Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, Oct. 1877, 2.2)

Possibly sequent but certainly related to matters of inner principle (*logos*) and disposition (*ethos*) stands the question of appropriate form (*tropos*), a profound question of human culture and personal life: how—in what mode or mood—do we comport ourselves with integrity and belong in time with each other? This matter has engaged many great artists, as far back as Rabelais, Swift, Flaubert, and Dostoevsky; in our own recent memory, Lawrence and Gombrowicz have drawn us in to their own particular ways of figuring this out. This matter, on the whole, has proved central to satirical prose: how does one comprehend the Player King's dictum that 'our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own' (*Hamlet*, 3.2.208). Perhaps the task of addressing our own time has its peaks—for example, Gombrowicz on tonality, Bresson on rhythm—but their exemplary and edifying work still needs our complement, our own making sense of what it means to be here now.

The general stance adopted by many artists and intellectuals is one of confrontation: they come face to face with their own time and place, and participate somehow in its vitality. Broadly and provisionally speaking, one may distinguish within this general confrontational stance two further possible habits of mind: contradiction and conformity. In this sense, and following its own roots, contradiction means uttering one's own 'word' to meet the world's 'word' in productive tension. In this particular kind of dialogue one may sound or take the measure of one's environment and strive to juxtapose, renew, complement, or inhabit it well, leading to more life. On this same ground, conformity means being 'formed with' one's own time, finding oneself in tune or step with it such that one's inner landscape of meaning echoes

the prevalent or popular currents of modernity; bound by either acceptance or rejection, one 'comes to terms' with the world as it is and remains in its thrall. This is a complex and significant form of capitulation, often unwitting, the fruit of which is a strange blend of novelty, cliché, and froth. In this process of conformity—for it is an ongoing activity rather than a one-time agreement—a 'secondhand' word overbears one's own word, and one suffers definition from without, a condition explored brilliantly by Bakhtin. Yet there is another register here, addressed by Dostoevsky and Bakhtin but perhaps most finely articulated by Gombrowicz: when one 'comes to terms' with one's own images and imperceptibly allows a kind of stilling, inward definition. It is this finely-grained condition that Gombrowicz addresses in various guises, especially those that seem most appropriate, in order to better understand the meaning of freedom.

I.

In Gombrowicz's *Diary*, written beginning in 1953 for publication in the Parisian monthly *Kultura*, he includes a transcription of his public address 'Against Poets' (1956), which he says he wrote 'in the name of elementary anger, which all errors of style, all distortion, all flights from reality arouse in us' (264). It is a fine polemic, written to contradict what he terms elsewhere poetry as 'mystification' (*A Kind of Testament*, 60) and what he sees as poetry's distance from and thus distortion of reality, a condition of stylistic error which provokes Gombrowicz's elementary passion. Earlier in his remarkable *Diary*, Gombrowicz writes 'against' a certain kind of literary critic:

Contemporary criticism lacks sufficient intelligence and also sufficient strength to overcome the most difficult tasks: to return to matters that are elementary but eternally relevant, which seem to be dying among us because they are too easy, too simple. [...] this, as any other characteristic of literature, is the result of interdependencies which arise between the artist and other people. If you want a singer to sing differently, you must bind him to other people, make him love along with someone else and make him love differently. The combinations of styles are inexhaustible, but they are all basically a combination of persons, the enchantment of one person with another. (120-1)

Gombrowicz's charges are clear enough: the poetry and criticism he addresses have become hermitic, closed off from reality through self-indulgent self-involvement, and have neglected elementary matters in life which in some constellation form the basis of the flourishing and strong personality. How a person *is* depends on their fundamental relationships with others—things are determined 'in between', so to speak—and so to address and change the 'higher' matters of poetry and criticism we must return to and renew the elemental registers of life, for how and who we love changes the voice in which we sing.

The most elemental aspect of human life for Gombrowicz is what he calls our struggle with 'Form'. He writes in his *Diary* that:

The most important, most extreme, and most incurable dispute is that waged in us by two of our most basic strivings: the one that desires form, shape, definition and the other, which protests against shape, and does not want form. Humanity is constructed in such a way that it must define itself and then escape its own definitions. Reality is not something that allows itself to be completely contained in form. Form is not in harmony with the essence of life, but all thought which tries to describe this imperfection also becomes form and thereby confirms only our striving for it. (113-4)

In one of his only instances of 'naming' something, and thereby appealing to theorists, Gombrowicz names this inner impulse 'the Formal Imperative', an impulse which lies in the 'deepest essence' of a person and which he states is likely 'indispensable for any organic creation' (*Testament*, 73). Gombrowicz's immediate example is what he calls 'our innate need to complete incomplete Form: every form that has been started requires a complement' (*Testament*, 73). The remainder of this essay is an attempt to comprehend and address this basic struggle of Form, which underlies or is echoed in Gombrowicz's *Diary* as whole. While I will try to do this through a kind of essayistic exploration of certain things Gombrowicz writes, Gombrowicz himself is subtle and more provocative. Noting that each particular style (which with Gombrowicz in mind we may construe as *form made personal*) of combining elemental ingredients renders a person's life its own, we see that this in itself is a transformation of personal relating, of how a person—indefinable, inexhaustible—'enchants' another person. Thus Gombrowicz writes that in his *Diary* he aims 'to seduce, to produce a certain style, a certain tonality' (*Testament*, 131). If style is form made personal, then tonality is the intimate essence of style, the ground of its appeal which opens and closes desire and apprehension.

Gombrowicz writes that 'we have only to change our tone of voice for certain things within ourselves to become inexpressible—we can no longer think them, or even feel them' (*Testament*, 79). Tonality conditions what we are able and desire to draw near, which is the locus of truth. This is approximately what Gombrowicz means when he writes that 'truth is not a matter of arguments. It is only a matter of attraction: that is, a pulling toward. Truth does not make itself real in an abstract contest of ideas, but in a collision of persons' (*Diary*, 89). In the *Diary* Gombrowicz exemplifies the relation between 'seduction' or 'pulling toward' and 'collision', and yet his aim is not to complement but to contradict at large. For Gombrowicz, to contradict or be 'against' something or someone does not necessarily mean to oppose or disregard them. Contradiction also means, as I say above, a word facing or confronting another word about some commonly held, valued matter. This in turn involves pressing against it, using

friction to get a good feel of the texture of its integral meaning (logos) and condition (ethos). Gombrowicz speaks of contradiction more than once in his work. In his summative, vespereal regard of his life's work—titled *A Kind of Testament* (1968)—Gombrowicz writes that 'art is born out of contradiction' (84), and that 'to reassemble contradictions is the best method of creation' (131). And at the end of that work, he is vehement: '*to contradict, even on little matters, is the supreme necessity of art today*' (157). This contradiction, figured most dramatically in one's collision with another through elemental matters, also includes an upheaval internal to the personality, a resisting, conditioning word pressed against our own favoured forms and set of established habits. On this ground, provisionally speaking, we may note three registers of Gombrowicz's sense of contradiction: contradiction of other persons; contradiction of Form itself; and contradiction within one's own personality of the impulse toward completeness in one's own formative activity. And the locus—the nexus—of contradiction comes through the transgressive authority of the inner movement of one's own vital personality.

II.

If 'Form' is the first key to Gombrowicz's work, the second is 'immaturity', or incompleteness. Immaturity is the roiling personal energy under Form, the ferment which protests against all finalities of focus, style, and voice. Immaturity is not delimited to youth—although it is often found there—and it is not a categorical term: more than once Gombrowicz discusses the significance of maturity as a desirable end. Immaturity is, however, related to incompleteness, imperfection, the natural spoiling of the tendencies of Form—which we recall involve the urge to 'complete incomplete Form'. While I will discuss this here in terms of identity and identification, Gombrowicz sometimes figures the tension between immaturity and Form as that between person and idea, or person and self-image. This tension always involves struggle—strife. A person strives through and with their ideas, the images of Form which threaten to complete or finish their world. Gombrowicz writes that this is 'the drama of human form, [...] the ferocious battle between man and his own Form (that is to say his battle against his way of being, feeling, thinking, talking, acting, against his culture, his ideas, his ideologies, his convictions, his creed ... against everything by which he appears to the outer world' (*Testament*, 59).

The 'danger is in the neatness of identifications', as Beckett puts it at the opening of his essay on Dante, Bruno, Vico, and Joyce. Or, to put it in terms more befitting for Gombrowicz, the great danger is imagining that any one personal aspect or quality is enough to complete the self—the danger is that the self is seen to be wholly one thing, to be exhausted in one direction ... or three, for that matter, or two dozen. The struggle between person and idea, between one's impulse for and resistance to Form, must be ongoing. Since it's impossible to do without

Form, one must approach it both warily and lightly—for here seriousness is a form of capitulation to that which would dominate. A person who is full of energy, incomplete, rough around the edges, playing lightly and yet deeply in relation to the elemental matters of life and humankind, cannot pretend to be something pure or isolated (this is the gist of Gombrowicz's piece 'Against Poets'). Rather, without leaving aside other persons or neglecting the lifeworld of tradition—both of which are evidently significant for Gombrowicz and for us—a person ought to make form their own, appropriate it so that it becomes their own style of engagement with reality, and begin to participate in the life of the world through the register of their own distinct tonality. In addition and contrast, there are tonalities larger than one's own which we could consider in these terms—think of the experience one undergoes at large academic conferences—but here I'll limit myself to two of Gombrowicz's own examples. 'In the realm of culture', he writes, the following happens: 'as long as we keep to the rules of the game, everything is respectable and worthy of consideration. But as soon as we break the rules, the game is spoiled' (*Testament*, 128). One thinks of poetry- or novel-reading evenings, or the false camaraderie displayed at awards ceremonies. Another example, central to Gombrowicz's life because he has a restlessly Polish spirit, is one's country. Considering in his own exile possible faults in his memories and ideas of home, Gombrowicz writes that 'no, even 'constructive' criticism of one's own country's faults—undertaken in a patriotic spirit, in order to improve it—was no longer sufficient. Such criticism was itself conditioned by the country. To break away! To keep one's distance!' (*Testament*, 61). It is, for Gombrowicz, 'a matter of honesty, dignity, lucidity, and vitality' to be rid of all such 'mystifications' (*Testament*, 60). In this instance, one could think of many things by merely remembering the special status bestowed on particular cities in America or France. This 'mystification' of country or culture involves a misapprehension of the Forms by which we are born and nourished. It is to prefer the means over the lively ends which through the means have been gathered unto their own delightful particularity. To prefer culture or nation over the concrete person serves both to obscure personal life and, paradoxically, render it abstract—i.e., apparently clearer. In this matter, Gombrowicz holds, the mystifications of Form and scientific notions of truth share in a devaluing activity. Both approaches work to isolate, reduce, and then render abstract the concrete person through worship of abstract Form. In Gombrowicz's *Diary* we read that:

Science will always remain an abstraction, but our voice is the voice of a man made of flesh and blood, this is the individual voice. Not an idea, but personality is important to us. We do not become real in the realm of concepts, but in the realm of people. We are and we must remain persons, our role depends on the fact that the living, human word not stop resounding in a world that is becoming more and more abstract[...] We must oppose our own, individual intelligence, our personal life, and our feelings as emphatically as possible to the truths of the laboratory. (104-5)

This 'truth of the laboratory' is a truth 'severed from the person', which means it is 'laborious' and deathly (*Diary*, 89). With this in mind, Gombrowicz admonishes his readers: 'do not allow an idea to grow in you at the price of your vitality' (*Diary*, 89). To gloss this with an aside: considering our own time specifically, our abstractions have had terrible concrete results for many years on our environment and then on persons, and now we have just come to the point where concrete people must be turned into things in order for our disregard for them to be excused or 'justified'. This is evident in the 'infernal logic' of war; one thinks of Benjamin's image of the fragile, individual human being facing the vast technology of destruction. Benjamin's image is compelling, but we must be wary in our comprehension: the thorny part of his image—like his images of ruins—is not its striking memorability; it is its poetic character; adapted without sobriety, it feeds the habit of thinking 'poetically' (in Gombrowicz's terms), in terms of a 'mystification' or lyricism which needs to recognise its own colouration or tonality in something in order to comprehend it (which means that kitsch becomes a determining factor in common perception and response). This is akin to thinking in terms of 'crisis time' of the various crises we face today (instead of thinking patiently and personally) it is a kind of thinking which is dangerously close to being unable to discern 'kinds' of greatness—and so Stalin becomes similar to Milton.

III.

To return to Gombrowicz, when one identifies 'too much' with Form, different variations of this initial closure and elementary confusion occur. Three versions of this type of identification stand out in the *Diary*, which one may briefly sketch as ground for imaginative elaboration. A first form of identity occurs when Form is seen as sufficient for reality, when we figure that reality is given enough through one part of Form for our satisfaction. This can happen when we let a favourite novelist or orator see for us; when we allow an image, however rich, to supplant the world. On this front, Gombrowicz warns that 'no thought, no form at all is capable of encompassing being, and the more all-encompassing they are, the more mendacious' (*Diary*, 144). A second form occurs when our regard for something or someone outstrips its bounds, and begins to render the world whole through that regard. We reduce ourselves to service, and thereby deny the parts of our person which are not service. In 'Against Poets', Gombrowicz writes that 'we, however, up to now anyway, have spent a lot more time and effort perfecting ourselves in this or that style, or in this or that position, rather than maintaining a certain inner freedom and independence from them, in order to work out the right relationship between ourselves and our position' (*Diary*, 266). Finally, a third (and most elevated) form of confusion occurs when something alive and ungraspable (as a whole) is identified with and thus replaced by something of a lower order. It is the substitution of still-life for life, and it is the subtlest difficulty with Form, for it seems to work so well and to complete that which needs to be completed. For Gombrowicz, it mars something's true beauty, often in

the name of virtue. Thus he states to his readers that he is 'concerned that your being right does not change your faces into mugs, and that being right does not make you repulsive, hateful, and impossible to swallow' (*Diary*, 104). On this ground, one blasphemes against humankind when one allows one Form—even an admirable one like truth or goodness—to become the mask, cast finely in one expression, through which a person's countenance may not be discerned. This freezing of one's features lies close to death.

Following Gombrowicz's lead, we may recognise that we need to be free of these temptations of closure and identity, but on the other hand—not too free. We ought to resist allowing strict freedom to be equated with life, or to admit it in such a way that it counterfeits or degrades life. If the ability to transgress is often seen as an index of freedom, the perils of transgression become apparent. When transgression becomes some kind of ideal, a Form through which we touch freedom or even life, we know we are in the embrace of completion and have forgotten our humanity, even our own person.

IV.

Gombrowicz's sense of an appropriate personality in reality and in relation to Form draws near a rich understanding of ethos in terms of integrity—the capacity to integrate things without letting them dominate or undermine one's own personality. However, in his most explicit querying of the self, he poses this at first negatively, figured through a lack or emptiness. In response to his own questions 'where should I look for my 'self'? Who am I really and to what extent *am I*?', he writes that 'I have only found one answer: I don't know who I really am, but I suffer when I am deformed. So at least I know what I am not'. He proceeds to muse that 'my 'self' is nothing but my will to be myself', before exploding: 'a measly palliative! Another formula!' (*Testament*, 83). Gombrowicz's self is found in his *Diary* and other works on the whole, but it is possible to consider the inexhaustibility of personality through his remarks on the inherent surplus of a work of art. At the end of *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz states that 'art is always *something more* and it is precisely in that that it escapes from the interpretation which approaches it most closely' (171). In a similar manner, for Gombrowicz that which comes closest to one is what one must resist most firmly, through one's own spiritual energy and vitality. In terms of art, Gombrowicz speaks of the 'deviation' that distinguishes and yet does not assume a state of isolation. He writes that with art he 'likes the mysterious deviation the best, the deviation that causes a work, while adhering to its epoch, nevertheless [to be] the work of a separate individual who lives his own life' (*Diary*, 19). In this way, a work of art may be of the world and yet remain its own. In terms of thinking, which often tends unto abstraction, Gombrowicz reminds us that 'an idea abstracted from man does not fully exist' (*Diary*, 105). Even the most rarified idea is given style through its form, and it is uttered by a voice which has its own tonality and environment of address: 'there is no word

that is not also flesh' (Diary, 105), Gombrowicz writes. A word that is 'flesh', 'embodied' (Diary, 105) is 'born from contact with the matter which it forms, like something auxiliary, like the demands of matter itself, like the requirement of a form in the process of being born' (Testament, 63). Thinking emerges with matter, not before or after. The genesis of the word is that of the flesh, which means that thought 'is born from the desire to make something live, to create something living ... and real ... so it is deeply rooted in life' (Testament, 64). In terms of personality, divesting oneself of the urge for Form, of the desire to be complete and completing, means recognising that the assumed perfection of Form is finally a sort of confinement. To be aware of oneself through 'lack of form, underdevelopment, [or] immaturity—not only does not weaken, but strengthens', for Gombrowicz (Diary, 115), for it grants room for one's own elemental energy and vitality to play, and to flourish in relation yet not in thrall to other persons and forms in general.

When this happens, one may be or become free, but this is a freedom attended by a kind of lightheartedness, a point which Gombrowicz makes repeatedly: 'freedom, the ordinary, everyday, normal freedom, needed by us to live, a matter of instinct rather than cerebral meditation, is a freedom that does not want to be anything absolute—a freedom that is devil-may-care even in relation to its own freedom' (Diary, 109). This is a freedom that would suffocate if capitalised, theorised, or made to march. Gombrowicz goes on: 'in order to be free one needs not only to want to be free. One must not want to be free too much. No desire, no thought taken too far will be capable of opposing extremisms' (Diary, 109). For if one utters freedom and totality or oppression or completion in the same tone of voice, one is lost in that which one presumes to contradict. Finally, Gombrowicz speaks with an affirmative tone of voice: 'yes! To be sharp, wise, mature, to be an 'artist', 'thinker', 'stylist' only to a certain degree but never too much. And to make from this 'never too much' a power equal to all the very, very intense forces. To maintain one's own human scale in the face of all gargantuan phenomena' (Diary, 133). For one is more than one's talents and delight; and this means that one strives to refuse being subsumed by a mask or habit, even if it is precisely the centre of one's desire or talents. This form of freedom is a lighthearted or lightfooted one, unconcerned to demonstrate itself for it partakes of a different spirit than proof. It is an embodied element, not a virtue, and as such remains within the welter of tensions Gombrowicz locates between the impulse for and the resistance to Form.

Freedom like this often emerges through contradictions embodied, and here I want to consider briefly two passages from Gombrowicz great novel *Pornografia*. Both passages centre on the deeply troubling figure of Fryderyk, the narrator's acquaintance and mysterious companion. The first scene occurs at a Catholic church:

But Fryderyk! I thought, I suspected, that Fryderyk, who after all had also knelt, would also be 'praying'—I was even sure that, yes, knowing his terrors, he was not pretending but really 'praying'—in the sense that he wanted not only to deceive others but to deceive himself as well. He was 'praying' in relation to others and in relation to himself, but his prayer was only a screen covering up the immensity of his non-prayer ... so this was an ejecting, an 'eccentric' act that was taking him outside the church, into the boundless territory of total nonbelief—a refutation to the core. So what was going on? What was about to happen? I had never experienced anything like it. I would never have believed that anything like this was possible. But—what happened? In fact—nothing. What actually happened was that a hand had removed all the content, all the meaning from the Mass. (19)

In this case, the words—or more precisely, the tonality—of the praying voice contradicts the form of prayer itself, and so undoes the observed event. In the second scene, it is not the words but Fryderyk's countenance and presence that contradict Form. It occurs at a family toast:

this sudden rising to his feet and the emergence of his person among us who were seated created unwelcome panic [...] but as his speech progressed, behind his words something was mounting that he was not saying, oh, constantly the same story! In the end, and to the horror of the speaker himself, it became clear that his speech merely served to turn our attention away from his real speech that was taking place in silence, beyond words, and expressing what words did not encompass. Cutting through the courteous platitudes, his actual being gained voice, nothing could erase the face, the eyes expressing some relentless fact—and, sensing that he was becoming frightful and thus dangerous to himself as well, he stood on his head to be nice, he conducted his conciliatory rhetoric in an arch-moral spirit, arch-Catholic, about 'family as the unit of society' and about 'venerable traditions'. At the same time, however, he was hitting Amelia and everyone else in the face with his face that was deprived of illusion and inescapably present. (98-9)

V.

Gombrowicz holds that like Fryderyk, whose character can only emerge through Gombrowicz's cultivated style, the word (or literature) has a special place in its contradiction of form, one which emerges almost as a form of fine, steady disdain. For his own part, when contrasting himself with Borges, Gombrowicz states that he and Borges 'are at opposite poles. He is deeply rooted in literature, I in life. To tell the truth, I am anti-literature' (*Testament*, 96). Work like this is interested in colliding with persons in reality, not in its own literariness. Its aim is to be a part of lived life, not a library (which Gombrowicz sees as an incident by-product).

Gombrowicz holds this idea so firmly that he makes it a standard: in his *Diary*, he writes that ‘the measure of great literature is its unliterariness, its capacity to overcome itself and get at reality’ (582). In this way, Gombrowicz suggests, ‘use of the word in its fullest sense makes the re-humanisation of Form possible’ (*Testament*, 150)—as long as the word remains free, but not ‘too much’. With literature and the spoken word, Gombrowicz writes, ‘one can be all the more human the more one is inhuman, all the more concrete the more one is abstract’ (*Testament*, 150). He concludes: ‘yes, contradiction, the spirit of contradiction, is very necessary. Life must once again be opposed to art and its Forms’ (*Testament*, 150).

With Fryderyk, with the life-world and literature thus construed, we have things which both are and are not themselves—they are their own but their own is at ease, not taking itself too seriously, not believing in itself too much, seeking to be strong and vital but neither to encompass nor to overwhelm. Here we see the authority that comes from within an unfinished vitality—the personality in ferment, free of the need either to adhere or to transgress, at ease with itself, its own integrity in relation with the elements of life. It is the opposite, or rather the contradiction, of finality, perfection, and completion. In this sense it measures up to reality, which as Dostoevsky reminds us is never complete or final or even still: ‘for nothing ever comes to an end, and so nothing ever can be too late; every event continues and takes on new forms, even though it may have finished its initial stage of development (*A Writer’s Diary*, May 1876, 1.2). The meaning of life is openended and provisional, and so are our own meanings and the contradictions through which we live.

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