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The Novel as Third Space in the Struggle for One's Own Place: Witold Gombrowicz's Hidden Polemic with German Literature in *Pornografia*

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Abstract: This paper deals with Gombrowicz's novel *Pornografia* which can be interpreted as a third space where different literary discourses and philosophical concepts are interwoven. In this respect two German authors deserve special attention: Thomas Mann and Friedrich Nietzsche. It is the aim of this article to show to what extent Gombrowicz refers to the writings of these two authors in his attempt to establish himself as an important writer during his exile in Argentina. The novel *Pornografia* works in this respect as a sphere of interferences and a space of emerging hybridity, where Gombrowicz creates a special textuality consisting of hidden references to and even polemic with both Mann and Nietzsche. The notion of conflict is thus applicable in the description of Gombrowicz's literary practice in this novel.

Keywords: *Pornografia*, Witold Gombrowicz, emigration, cultural transfer, cultural conflict, borders in literature, third space, literary polemic, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Mann

Cultural transfer and the writer's struggle for his own place

This study focuses on Witold Gombrowicz's attitude towards two writers from another cultural circle, namely Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Mann. By writing the novel *Pornografia* [Pornography], the Polish writer engaged with them in a kind of literary struggle. This conflict takes the shape of a fundamental literary polemic. In his clash with the other writers, Gombrowicz first and foremost wanted to highlight his autonomy and significance as a writer in exile, at the periphery of world literature. In such circumstances writing constitutes a practice that strives to create its own place in the face of an already established hierarchy of world literature. In his confrontation with the two prominent German authors, the main task that Gombrowicz faces is the challenge derived from the need to set himself apart as a valuable writer on a global scale.

The literary polemic in this case is transformed into a particular conflict consisting in a clash of two bordering cultures with an added symbolic dimension. In the course of such a polemic, the literary text acquires characteristics of a peculiar third space which intertwines multifarious influences, texts, notions and a whole *imaginarium* related to particular literary practices. This phenomenon has already been widely discussed in debates about the third space¹ and the discussion about cultural transfers occurring especially within literature and researched within intercultural literary studies.²

In Gombrowicz's works, as we know, conflict has a particularly important place.³ In the process of interweaving various literary traditions in *Pornografia* gradually a third space emerges; one which is formed between two cultural circles, namely, between Polish and German cultures. At first glance it is the peripheral location of Gombrowicz that allows an original solution to the writer's problem of self-determination in exile.⁴ Writing constitutes an act of defiance but at the same time an attempt to appropriate literary patterns created within another culture.

The conflict between two prominent German writers, Nietzsche and Mann - both of international acclaim and points of reference for many writers - takes place directly in the very structure of *Pornografia*, which constitutes a significant centre for crystallizing the individual identity of the Polish writer.⁵ A literary text is an area in the borderland of cultures,

¹ H. K. Bhabha, *Die Verortung der Kultur*, Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2000, pp. 55–56, 220–222, 325, 331, G. Wagner, A. Zahn, "Nacja, dyseminacja i trzecia przestrzeń. Wkład Homi K. Bhabha do teorii tożsamości zbiorowej," *Roczniki Nauk Społecznych* 2012, No. 4, pp. 19–39.

² Cf. *Literatur als Text der Kultur*, edited by M. Csáky, R. Reichensberger, Wien: Passagen-Verlag, 1999; *Kultur als Text. Die anthropologische Wende in der Literaturwissenschaft*, edited by D. Bachmann, Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 1996; A. Leskovac, *Einführung in die interkulturelle Literaturwissenschaft*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2011, pp. 7–12; W. Nell, "Interkulturelle Lektüren – interkulturelle Komparatistik: Verstehen und Anerkennen, Grenzerkundigungen im Medium der Literatur," in: *Das Gedächtnis der Schrift. Perspektiven der Komparatistik*, edited by B. Kiefer, W. Nell, Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag, 2005, pp. 141–176, especially p. 142 about the notion of "a work of interference"; W. Welsch, "Transkulturalität. Zwischen Globalisierung und Partikularisierung," *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache* 2000, No. 26, pp. 327–351; idem, "Transkulturalität – Lebensformen nach der Auflösung der Kulturen," *Information Philosophie* 1992, No. 2, pp. 5–20; M. Hofmann, *Interkulturelle Literaturwissenschaft. Eine Einführung*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006, pp. 10–12.

³ See: for instance F. Bondy, "Witold Gombrowicz czyli szlachcica polskiego pojedynki cieniów," in: *Gombrowicz i krytycy*, selection of texts and their edition Z. Łapiński, Kraków – Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984, pp. 129–143; J. Jarzębski, *Gra w Gombrowicza*, Kraków: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1982, pp. 77–80, 388–399.

⁴ More about Gombrowicz's self-determination and self-localisation within world literature in the conditions of emigration in: J. Margański, *Gombrowicz wieczny debiutant*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001.

⁵ A literary text takes the shape of a certain borderline and becomes a symbolic domain, which is of agonistic nature and is therefore related with a semantic fight around terms,

an area where a third dimension may emerge, when an accumulation of various discourses, polyphony and multivoicedness happens: in other words, the intermingling of various discourses and elements of particular *imaginariums* in the so-called third space, this time constituted in the literary dimension.⁶ As a matter of fact, Gombrowicz selects and even creates these opponents for himself to perform this self-determination in a better way.⁷ Gombrowicz's location at the peripheries, at a clear distance from the centre, leads to a multicoloured and rich diversity and constitutes a certain "dialogic existence"⁸ in his writing. In the case of *Pornografia*, his writing constitutes a hybrid area of interference, in the contact zone with literature and German culture, present in the novel in the form of references to Nietzsche and Mann.⁹

A Nietzschean novel: Thomas Mann and Witold Gombrowicz

Describing references to Nietzsche in *Pornografia* as one of the focal points of this study is not a capricious idea: *Pornografia* reminds one of Thomas Mann's famous novel *Doctor Faustus*, a work that also drew from Nietzschean motifs.¹⁰ In what follows, let us compare *Pornografia* to what Thomas Mann himself in his correspondence explicitly described as "a Nietzschean novel."¹¹

approaches, narratives, style, literary language and the authorial conception. More about the symbolic domain and agonistic features of a similar borderland contact in: L.M. Nijakowski, *Domeny symboliczne. Konflikty narodowe i etniczne w wymiarze symbolicznym*, Warszawa: Scholar, 2006, pp. 119–122.

⁶ S. Uliasz, *O literaturze kresów i pograniczu kultur. Rozprawy i szkice*, Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2001, pp. 11 and 17; E. Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2014, p. 28.

⁷ Cf. about the need for enemies: U. Eco, "Wymyślanie wrogów" ["Inventing the Enemy"], in: idem, *Wymyślanie wrogów i inne teksty okolicznościowe*, translated by A. Gołębiowska and T. Kwiecień, Poznań: Rebis, 2012.

⁸ S. Uliasz, op. cit., p. 17.

⁹ On the notions of "hybrid area of interference" and "zone of contact" see: E. Prokop-Janiec, *Pogranicze polsko-żydowskie. Topografie i teksty*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013, especially pp. 15–43; see also the works collected in *Na pograniczach literatury*, edited by J. Fazan, K. Zajas, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2012. On "the works of interference" see also Nell, op. cit., p. 142.

¹⁰ See: Th. Mann, *Doktor Faustus. Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde*, Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1947.

¹¹ Th. Mann, *Briefe 1937–1947*, edited by Erika Mann, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1963, p. 580. See also: Th. Mann, "Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus. Roman über einen Roman," in: idem, *Werke. Taschenbuchausgabe in zwölf Bänden*, Vol. 5, Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch-Verlag, p. 104.

Mann's work is considered an example of literary confrontation with national misfortune, manifested by war and mass crimes. This ill fortune is exemplarily illustrated by the life of Adrian Leverkühn, a composer, who is the fictional counterpart of Nietzsche.

The significant factor here is not only the literary modelling of Nietzsche's figure. A comparison can also be drawn by means of the explicit - though separate - confrontation with a given national culture. It is still not completely clear whether Gombrowicz really knew Mann's novel. It is equally difficult to prove whether he had acquainted himself with the content of Mann's speech on Friedrich Nietzsche, delivered in 1947.¹² However, it may be presumed that Gombrowicz had an excellent opportunity to become familiar with the novel, precisely in the situation of an emigrant in Argentina: the first Spanish translation of Mann's novel was published precisely in Buenos Aires in 1950.¹³ It cannot be excluded that Gombrowicz in Argentinian exile encountered this issue of *Doctor Faustus*.

The Spanish rendition of the later *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus. Roman eines Romans* (1949) was also published in Buenos Aires; however, at a later date, in 1961.¹⁴ Both publications were also translated into Polish, but were only published in 1962, so two years after *Pornografia* appeared.¹⁵ It is rather striking that as an exile writer, Gombrowicz could have encountered Mann's novel earlier than readers in Poland (at least in translation). Undoubtedly, Gombrowicz followed Mann's oeuvre with great interest and in his *Diary* he even created his own conception of authorship against the background of a confrontation with Mann:

What should Gombrowicz have done then? Could he, leaning on Mann, have overcome him —become a new Mann, a Mann one step ahead? More modern by one generation?¹⁶

In his *Diary*, Gombrowicz refers to the German writer as someone whose habitus is worth following but also worth overcoming.¹⁷ Regardless of whether Gombrowicz knew *Doctor Faustus*, the two novels can easily be juxtaposed based on a typological approach, taking into consideration the structural parallels between them: the explicit characterization of the protagonist as

¹² See: Th. Mann, "Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung," in: idem, *Essays*, Vol. 6: *Meine Zeit, 1945–1955*, Frankfurt am Main 1998, pp. 56–92.

¹³ See: Th. Mann, *Doctor Faustus. Novela*, translated by E. Xammer, Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1950.

¹⁴ See: Th. Mann, *La novela de una novela*, translated by A.L. Bixio, Buenos Aires: SUR, 1961.

¹⁵ See: Th. Mann, *Doktor Faustus. Żywot niemieckiego kompozytora Adriana Leverkühna, opowiedziany przez jego przyjaciela*, translated by M. Kurecka, W. Wirpsza, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1962 (the book also contains *Jak powstał Doktor Faustus* translated by Maria Kurecka).

¹⁶ W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Vol. II: 1957–1961, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997, p. 153. All the quotations from the Polish sources have been translated by Łukasz Barciński, unless stated otherwise.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–156; the entry comes from 1959.

a Nietzschean double and the epic relation written by a character who is a friend of the protagonist. Above all, some fragments of *Pornografia* can be treated as threads from Thomas Mann's novel, where the dialectics of seduction or impetuosity as the result of thoughtlessness are also thematised. In Gombrowicz, Fryderyk discusses the typical feature of youth, thoughtlessness, which in its lightness performs most murderous deeds. The main issue here is the dynamics of mutual seduction which functions between younger and the older characters. Moreover, it is necessary to indicate the murder perpetrated by the protagonist who as an individual does not care about any barriers, intentionally committing a homicide. All of these qualities can be discerned in Mann's novel, first of all, in the features of the protagonist, Adrian Leverkühn, whose life is narrated by a slightly naïve narrator, Serenus Zeitblom.

The combination of the artist's biography and the experience of WWII in *Doctor Faustus* is based on the presumption that this work will reinterpret Germany's historic fate. As a double novel, which shows the artist's biography and a diagnosis of the era against the background of WWII, *Doctor Faustus* displays parallels with Gombrowicz's *Pornografia*, which, in turn, deals with the experience of WWII in occupied Poland, focusing on stories of two elderly gentlemen, one of whom is an allusion to Nietzsche.

In both novels the protagonist is, therefore, Nietzsche's double; in Mann, the main focus of interest is the biography of the German philosopher (with special attention paid to the outbreak of illness). In one of his auto-commentaries, where Mann attempts to interpret his own literary work, he explains the relation and similitude between Leverkühn and Nietzsche, by referring to the philosopher's visit to a Cologne brothel, and to the medical symptoms of paralysis, as actual biographical events. Furthermore, in Mann's novel it is possible to discern the echoes of the so-called inspirational ecology from Nietzsche's *Ecce homo*.¹⁸ Direct philosophical reminiscences are almost completely missing in *Doctor Faustus* (contrary to *Pornografia*), although the famous conversation with the devil can be identified as a paraphrase of Nietzsche's formulations.¹⁹

The shaping of the Nietzschean figure of Adrian Leverkühn is performed mainly by means of montage, with the author focusing on biographical aspects, based on the study of Ernst Bertram about the life and work of Nietzsche.²⁰ Confrontation with Nietzsche, to whom Mann paid an emphatic

¹⁸ See: Th. Mann, *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus*, pp. 103–104; in reference to this issue see a relevant fragment from the novel: Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, p. 319; F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, in: idem, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by G. Colli, M. Montanari, Vol. 6, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1999, pp. 339–340; T. Meyer, *Nietzsche und die Kunst*, Tübingen – Basel: Francke, 1993, p. 358.

¹⁹ In reference to this issue see: *Ibid.*, p. 359.

²⁰ See: E. Bertram, *Nietzsche. Versuch einer Mythologie*, Berlin: Bondi, 1918; cf. B. Böschstein, "Ernst Bertrams „Nietzsche“. Eine Quelle für Thomas Manns 'Doktor Faustus'"; *Euphorion* 1978, No. 72, pp. 68–83; T.J. Reed, *Thomas Mann. The Uses of Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, pp. 367–381; details about the genesis of the concept

tribute in a talk from 1924, calling him “a visionary and a leader towards a new future of man,” “a visionary of higher humanity” and “a teacher of overcoming,”²¹ proceeds by means of a story about a genius’s paralysis, rooted in his biography.²² The analysis of Nietzsche’s deliberations was thus replaced by a biographical framework of the history of the disease.²³ The tribute recedes to be replaced by a prudent distance, which allows critical reflection of Nietzsche’s work, analysing it both in connection with Nazi ideology and as a substance not contaminated by ideological manipulation.²⁴ Mann’s criticism culminates in the description of Nietzsche’s life as a path towards “a martyr’s death on the cross of thought,” as an existence which “in its perfect uniformity and compactness integrates his work and life, ending with a disaster,”²⁵ or the final act of “self-crucifixion.”²⁶ Disease equals moving beyond the ordered life and goes hand in hand with the reduction of surrounding people to the role of objects of aesthetic disposal. Coldness towards people is one of the requirements of artistry, which excludes love by its inaccessibility. The unconditional lack of a genius’s relationships with others appears in conversation with the devil as the foundation of creativity, which can be seen in this context as compensation for the prohibition of love.²⁷ The lack of bonds allows aesthetic sovereignty. The troublesome position of an artist in modern society devoid of magic constitutes a foundation of the perspective of aesthetic permeation of the world of modernity, as prefigured by Leverkühn.²⁸ The convergence with Fryderyk in Gombrowicz’s novel can be clearly seen since Fryderyk also disposes of the people surrounding him in a selfish way and creates a totally new world, or rather he at least undertakes a similar attempt. Fryderyk

of the novel and the figure of Adrian Leverkühn in E. Heftrich, *Über Thomas Mann*, Vol. 2: *Vom Verfall zur Apokalypse*, Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1982; see the creation of the novel based on Mann’s diaries: M. Meyer, *Tagebuch und spätes Leid. Über Thomas Mann*, München–Wien: Hanser, 1999, pp. 173–280, especially pp. 38–39, 250–251, 259–260.

²¹ See Th. Mann, “Vorspruch zu einer musikalischen Nietzsche-Feier (Rede, gehalten zur Feier des achtzigsten Geburtstages Friedrich Nietzsches am 15. Oktober 1924),” in: idem, *Das essayistische Werk*. Taschenbuchausgabe in 8 Bänden, Vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1968, pp. 234–237, reference on p. 236. This text is seen as a “calque” of the subsequent conception of the figure of Adrian Leverkühn: M. Neumann, *Thomas Mann. Romane*, KlassikerLektüre, Vol. 7, Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001, p. 164.

²² Mann, *Briefe 1937–1947*, p. 580.

²³ Meyer, *Tagebuch und spätes Leid*, p. 259 and the following ones.

²⁴ Mann, “Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung,” pp. 68–82. Details about Mann’s relation to Nietzsche: Ch. Schmidt, “Ehrfurcht und Erbarmen.” *Thomas Manns Nietzsche-Rezeption 1914–1947*, Trier: WVT, 1997, especially pp. 204–304.

²⁵ Meyer, *Tagebuch und spätes Leid*, p. 260; Mann, *Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung*, pp. 59, 65–66.

²⁶ Mann, “Nietzsches Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung,” p. 61.

²⁷ Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, pp. 297–335; on the theme of prohibition of love see ibidem, p. 334.

²⁸ P. Pütz, *Kunst und Künstlerexistenz bei Nietzsche und Thomas Mann. Zum Problem des ästhetischen Perspektivismus in der Moderne*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1987, pp. 117–122.

endeavours to overcome the existing order of things in the name of a new reality, conceptualized as the result of the director's boundless artistic imagination, by treating people as tools used for the purpose of creation.

A significant factor in the context of this comparison is the juxtaposition of both narrators, who model the experience of history. They are both situated in the centre of the extreme historical experience of WWII and describe the fate of the protagonist. It is worth noting that contrary to Serenus Zeitblom, Witold plays an active role in Fryderyk's project and only in the subsequent course of the narrative, with growing terror, he concludes that Fryderyk is going insane. The position of the authors is quite similar as well: neither Mann nor Gombrowicz lived in their home countries during the times portrayed in their narrative, and depict the events of war from the perspective of an emigrant. While Mann develops a wide-ranging confrontation with German history and culture, but also with the question of the genesis of Nazism and the consequences of the war, Gombrowicz additionally expresses his distance towards his nation, resigning from a detailed presentation of specific events from the period of war.²⁹

In *Pornografia*, Nietzsche is not present as one of the predecessors of German Nazism, but appears, first of all, in the form of philosophemes inscribed in the novel. Certainly, it seems significant that Gombrowicz focuses his attention on the literary transformation of Nietzschean philosophemes, which could be treated as a specific way of dealing with the issues that determine the horizon of European modernity on the plane of history of metaphysics through "the death of God." This horizon includes a specific world of historical experience of WWII, since the historical dimension and the philosophical conceptuality permeate one another.

The Nietzschean dimension of *Pornografia*

Pornografia was published in 1960 by the Paris Literary Institute and received a literary reward from "Kultura" magazine.³⁰ Gombrowicz's novel functions as a staging of philosophical foundations derived from Nietzsche.³¹ The novel³² is set in Nazi-occupied Poland during WWII, so it

²⁹ For this theme see: A. Gall, op. cit., pp. 200–208.

³⁰ W. Gombrowicz, *Pornografia*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994.

³¹ I discuss in detail the Nietzschean thread in Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* in the book: A. Gall, *Humanizm performatywny. Polemika literacka z filozofią w praktyce literackiej Witolda Gombrowicza*, Polonica leguntur, Vol. 12, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2011, pp. 198–278.

³² A short synopsis of the plot can facilitate understanding of my further discussion of the link between *Pornografia*, Mann and Nietzsche: After going into the country to visit Witold's acquaintance, Hipolit, the two elderly gentlemen, Fryderyk and Witold, hungry for youth and freshness, try to match a couple of sixteen-year-olds, Karol and Henia. What the two men have in common is their sensitivity to the form, because they attach a lot of attention

refers to historical events not experienced by Gombrowicz himself. Nevertheless, the author creates an alter ego in the novel who shares his name: the narrator in *Pornografia*. Yet, Gombrowicz opposed the attempt to read *Pornografia* as a historical study.³³ As a consequence, it seems necessary to focus on the relations of the novel with philosophical ideas formulated by Nietzsche. In Gombrowicz's novel, a similar issue is related with the character of Fryderyk, who refers to Nietzsche not only with his name but constitutes almost his double.³⁴

One of the most explicit threads in the novel is the reference to Nietzsche's famous statement that God is dead, which is enacted at the beginning of the novel in a scene that describes Holy mass. Here, the established social hierarchies, sacrally legitimized, become delegitimized. The cosmos loses its transparent measure related to man and succumbs to derealisation, and at the same time, dehumanization. A new reality is experienced as an amorphous space:

But it has already happened. The ongoing process was reaching the reality *in crudo*... first of all was the annihilation of salvation, which is why nothing could save these loutish mugs any more [...]. The church ceased to be a church. A space irrupted, but a cosmic, black space and it was not happening on Earth any more but rather the Earth was transformed into a planet suspended in the universe, the cosmos became present, it was happening in one of its places. [...] So we were not in a church, in this village, nor on Earth, only — [...] — somewhere in the cosmos, suspended with our candles and our glow, and somewhere in the expanse we were doing these peculiar things with ourselves and between ourselves, like a monkey that would contort in a vacuum.³⁵

Only the above experience corresponds to an authentic experience of reality. The multifariousness of incompatible perspectives in a cosmos

to each gesture, word, as well as body part. Fryderyk and Witold delight themselves in each detail of the events and in a way direct the meetings of Karol and Henia. The developing relationship, created by the elderly men, between the two sixteen-year-olds is associated with cruelty. Fryderyk himself, created as a Nietzschean superman, annihilates the metaphysical dimension of the Catholic liturgy during a mass and at the end of the novel murders little Józek, a thief caught in the mansion, only to complete the events taking place in the novel. *Pornografia* shows how the rural environment, idyllic at first glance, hides powerful destructive forces, which are revealed when an experienced director, with his unlimited cynicism, starts to model reality according to his own vision. Unfortunately, an appeal by Amelia (the mansion housekeeper) to the protagonists to stay decent and stick to the moral code, is futile. The protagonists, individuals destroyed by the war, eventually annihilate the domestic order in all its dimensions (social, moral and metaphysical) and distraught Witold takes part in those actions and gives an account of the horrifying events.

³³ In a conversation with Piero Sanavio and Dominique de Roux (November 1968, April 1969), see: P. Sanavio, "Gombrowicz: Forma i rytuał," in: *Gombrowicz filozof*, selection of texts and their edition F.M. Cataluccio, J. Illg, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1991, pp. 52–53.

³⁴ Cf. the first systematic interpretation of *Pornografia*, taking Nietzsche's work into account: M. Legierski, *Modernizm Witolda Gombrowicza*, *Badania polonistyczne za granicą*, Vol. III, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 1999 (especially p. 19 and the following ones, p. 120 and the following ones). Convergence between Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* and particular deliberations by Nietzsche are enumerated by: Jarzębski, *ibid.* (p. 320 and the following ones, p. 367 and the following ones).

³⁵ Gombrowicz, *Pornografia*, pp. 17–18.

devoid of God reverts the narrator back to “being himself”, uncertain of any protections and yet free to develop his possibilities without any interruptions.³⁶ The narrator has a sense of the impenetrable dynamics of his “self” in this limitless self-creation:

As if the liquidation was a certain desired end: at the very end, only me, without anybody and nothing except for myself, alone in absolute darkness... so I reached my ultimacy, I reached darkness! [...] But it was also terrible and, deprived of any foundation, I felt as if in the claws of a monster, being able to do anything with myself, anything, anything!³⁷

The relation between desacralisation and the perspectivisation of experience and the sense of omnipotence experienced by individuals clearly relates back to Nietzsche’s thought that God is dead. Nietzsche first writes about “the death of God” in *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (aphorism no 125), and Gombrowicz read and commented on *The Gay Science*.³⁸ In the above aphorism³⁹ a crazy man looking for God, states that God is dead and considers this epochal event to be the result of human crime.⁴⁰ The consequence is the loss of the metaphysical centre of orientation.⁴¹ When “the death of God” occurs, the dissolution is also inflicted upon other guarantees of social stability, e.g. the absolutized subject, positivist science or teleologically directed historiosophy.⁴² Nietzsche describes the death of God as the onset of night:

How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe the whole horizon away? What did we do when we unleashed this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not falling unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an ‘above’ or ‘below’? Do we not stray, as through endless nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder? Is the night not coming continually, darker and darker?⁴³

“In the horizon of the infinite”⁴⁴ there is no consolidated reality, organized around a solid centre. After this event, man finds himself all at sea. The only force that can organize the emergent chaos is the will to power:

³⁶ On the theme of “being oneself”: D. Henrich, “Subjektivität als Prinzip,” in: idem, *Bewußtes Leben*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999, pp. 49–73; idem, *Versuch über Kunst und Leben. Subjektivität – Weltverstehen – Kunst*, München: Hanser, 2001, p. 29 and the following ones, p. 33 and the following ones.

³⁷ Gombrowicz, *Pornografia*, p. 18.

³⁸ W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Vol. II, pp. 230–231.

³⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in: idem, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by G. Colli, M. Montanari, Vol. 3, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1999, pp. 480–481 (No 125).

⁴⁰ See: *ibid.*, p. 481. Cf.: G. Figal, *Nietzsche. Eine philosophische Einführung*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999, pp. 172–180; M.P. Markowski, *Nietzsche. Filozofia interpretacji*, p. 122 and the following ones; E. Kuhn, *Friedrich Nietzsches Philosophie des europäischen Nihilismus*, Berlin – New York: de Gruyter, 1992, pp. 122–137, pp. 261–267.

⁴¹ See: M. Heidegger, “Nietzsches Wort ‘Gott ist tot,’” in: idem, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994, pp. 209–267, especially p. 209.

⁴² Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 467 (No 108). F. Volpi, *Il nichilismo*, Roma – Bari: Laterza, 1999, pp. 50–55.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 481 (No 125).

⁴⁴ This is the title of Nietzsche’s aphorism in *The Gay Science*, see: Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 480 (No 124).

We have left the land and have gone aboard the ship! We have destroyed the bridge behind us - even more, the land behind us! Now, little ship! Look out! Beside you is the ocean [...]. But times will come when you will feel that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more frightful than infinity. Oh, the crying of a poor bird that felt free, and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Alas, if homesickness for the land should strike you, as if there had been more freedom there - and there is no "land" any longer!⁴⁵

As depicted by the narrator in *Pornografia*, everything is now possible. In the darkness after the death of God, the world is measured by means of coordinates created by man himself, as the result of interpretation.⁴⁶ The number of possible interpretations remains in fact infinite.⁴⁷

The discovery of this new reality motivates Fryderyk's manipulations in *Pornografia*. The process of discovery begins with the establishment of physical resemblance between Henia and Karol, who attract the attention of the two elderly gentlemen.

By focusing their attention towards the two young characters, Witold and Fryderyk change the interpretative perspective towards the world. The two men attempt to match Henia and Karol, striving to create a new reality. Fryderyk's manipulations, performed with support from Witold, lead to the creation of a new constellation of forces. Gombrowicz continues to follow the Nietzschean perception of reality as the result of interpretation. And a new interpretation can lead to the creation of a new man (which refers to the controversial notion of a "superhuman being," a "superman").

A superman is the expression of a new anthropological reality, which after the death of God resigns from any transcendent grounding of sense. In the utopian project of a superman, existence becomes self-transcendence, in which a man "creates beyond himself."⁴⁸ As a being "moving beyond itself," the superman is always a being who transcends a given reality and is directed towards a new, unopened future.⁴⁹ The rebirth of humanity is described by Nietzsche as a transformation of man, with the child being at the end of which is transformation into a child. The apotheosis of childness is based on the intention of overcoming the existing shape of humanity and creating a new human order. This ideal of existence is supposed to release and develop the superhuman potential in man, who is already beyond himself.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Ibid. according to: Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 167.

⁴⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887*, in: idem, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, edited by G. Colli, M. Montanari, Vol. 12, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1999, p. 315 [No 60].

⁴⁷ See: Nietzsche, "Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887," pp. 626–627 (No. 374).

⁴⁸ About the theme of a "superman" as a new anthropological reality which should be created: F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1882–1884*, in: idem, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, edited by G. Colli, M. Montanari, Vol. 10, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1999, p. 209.

⁴⁹ A. Pieper, "Ein Seil geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch". *Philosophische Erläuterungen zu Nietzsches erstem 'Zarathustra'*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990, pp. 37–46; T. Meyer, *Nietzsche und die Kunst*, pp. 47–49; G. Figal, *Nietzsche*, pp. 200–216.

⁵⁰ M. Heidegger, "Wer ist Nietzsches Zarathustra?," in: idem, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Stuttgart: Neske, 1954, pp. 97–122.

The revival of humanity also entails, in the physiological sense, a program of revitalization in which the purpose of efforts is constituted by childness as the new ideal of a successful confrontation with European nihilism. In the space of possibilities no longer limited by “God” brave experimentation is unbounded, including experimenting with oneself,⁵¹ with a new childness proclaimed as the ultimate goal. A land of children will be achieved, Nietzsche claims in *Also sprach Zarathustra*:

You should be exiles from the land of your fathers and forefathers! You should love your children’s land; let this love be your new nobility – an undiscovered land in the farthest sea! I command your sails to seek it incessantly!⁵²

The ideal of creative self-transcendence⁵³ corresponds to the naivety and innocence of a child who disintegrates within its activity.⁵⁴ The rebirth of man will bring not only rejuvenation as the facilitation of far-reaching creative powers but also beautification.⁵⁵ All of the Nietzschean ideas described above can be found as key motifs in *Pornografia*.

The fascination with Henia and Karol is based, in both Fryderyk’s and Witold’s case, on the similarity of both young people, which is supposed to connect them. The beauty of youth, its lightness is contrasted with the decrepit state and ugliness of adults. Witold describes Fryderyk’s face, which has already started to decompose, with repugnance:

The face of an elderly man does not fall apart by the effort of will, the aim of which is to mask the decomposition or at least to organize it in a likeable whole – inside occurred disillusionment, resignation from hope, from charm, from passion and all the wrinkles perched there and fed on it as if on a corpse. He was obediently and meekly wicked in this succumbing to his own hideousness – and he infected me as well with this crappy stuff so much that bugs swarmed inside me, crawled in and all over.⁵⁶

In one fragment of a commentary on his own novel, in a later conversation with Dominique de Roux, Gombrowicz states that Fryderyk, like Christopher Columbus, goes on an expedition, searching for a new land, with this metaphorical periphrasis referring to the pursuit of a new beauty that still remains hidden between the adult and the young.⁵⁷ In his intrigues

⁵¹ F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in: idem, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, edited by G. Colli, M. Montanari, Vol. 4, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1999, p. 100; translation according to: F. Nietzsche, *Tak mówił Zarathustra*, translated by G. Sowinski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa, 2005, p. 77.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁵³ See: Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, pp. 6367 (No 382). For the theme of a child as an ideal of existence see: Nietzsche, *Tak mówił Zarathustra*, p. 189: “Then again something said to me voicelessly: ‘You have to transform into a child and get rid of embarrassment!’”

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, pp. 110–111.

⁵⁵ See: Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 112.

⁵⁶ Gombrowicz, *Pornografia*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ See: W. Gombrowicz, *Testament. Rozmowy z Dominique de Roux*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 1996, pp. 121–134, especially pp. 126 and 132.

and stagings, Fryderyk moves beyond the role of a voyeur and becomes a director who imposes a new order on reality, which turns all interpersonal relationships upside down. Their new arrangement, especially the two young people being matched together, is supposed to give rise to a new beauty, a new type of man:

My Fryderyk is neither a devil nor a voyeur; he's got something of a director, or maybe even a chemist, who matches people with one another, trying to create an alcohol of a new charm.⁵⁸

A synthesis of the adult's world with the beauty of youth is Fryderyk's aim, as his intentions correspond with Witold's observations that Fryderyk's goal is to create a new youth, which will be released from its own entrapment to gain a new shape thanks to the mediation of adults:

Yes! I knew it! Enough with obedient youth and simply grateful – at stake here is the creation of another youth, tragically permeated with us, the elderly.⁵⁹

Witold describes Fryderyk as a personality acting with the highest focus of attention. Consciousness is the highest manifestation of instinct for the Nietzschean superman. Witold presumes that Fryderyk realizes how ambivalent this consciousness is. He thinks that Fryderyk is not only an explorer of a new human reality animated by the spirit of love for adventure but also somebody who is driven by his own manipulations:

His consciousness was so tormenting and unpredictable, that he himself did not experience it as lightness but as darkness – it was for him an element as blind as an instinct, he did not trust it, he felt overwhelmed by it but he did not know where it would lead him.⁶⁰

Fryderyk's intention, i.e. the synthesis of youth and elderliness, beauty and maturity reaches its climax in the killing of Siemian: an officer of the Home Army, who wishes to withdraw from the resistance movement and is treated as a potential traitor; he is sentenced to death and is to be executed by people gathered in Amelia's mansion. According to a plan conceived by Fryderyk, Henia and Karol enter the officer's room and kill not Siemian but Waclaw, who had killed Siemian earlier with a knife. Waclaw is waiting peacefully for the young people to put an end to his life. Surprised by the semi-suicide, secretly intertwined by Waclaw into the plan of eliminating Siemian, Witold and the young couple look at the two corpses in a confused way. Fryderyk joins the consternation and with an innocent expression on his face, he states that Józek is also already here since he has just killed him. Witold, dismayed by his innocent facial expression, ends the account with the laconic remark that amidst this disaster everybody looked each other in the eyes.⁶¹

According to Nietzsche, one of the transformations man has to experience in order to become a superman is from innocence to crime. It is no longer possible to talk about successful self-transcendence – supposedly

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

⁵⁹ Gombrowicz, *Pornografia*, p. 97.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

⁶¹ See: *ibid.*, pp. 149–150.

the mark of a superman - but rather it is a case of being lost in one's own trickery. The intention of self-transcendence, outlined by Fryderyk, develops into a criminal act. The dynamics of transgression do not lead to any results except for murders. Exposure of the fatal dynamics of self-transcendence is the last stage of the eponymous pornography which in the bloody finale shows the atrocious dimension of the Nietzschean pursuit of a new anthropological reality. The new interpretation of reality offered by Fryderyk is nothing new but a coercion of violence on other participants.

The Nietzschean idea of superman constitutes a matrix, which delineates the structure of Gombrowicz's work. *Pornografia* can be described as a polemic with Nietzsche's thought. The novel refers to the Nietzschean utopia of a new anthropological reality and disassembles its foundations. The collapse of this utopia is also shown by the ruin that the human order can become under the influence of Fryderyk's and Witold's manipulative strategy.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Pornografia* against the background of Nietzsche's particular philosophemes shows that a literary text can constitute a specific form of reflection on the philosophical diagnosis of an era ("God is dead"), situated in a historical reality of the most extreme nature, namely during WWII in occupied Poland. The novel functions as a textual machinery which thoroughly reworks Nietzschean philosophemes, inscribed in the narrative, and even implicitly polemicizes with Nietzsche, thus undermining and annihilating Nietzscheism. The process of eroding the philosophical premises spreads throughout the whole text of *Pornografia* and focuses on the character of Fryderyk. The groundwork and the structure of the novel constitute a peculiar field of interference. The narrative proceeds as a hidden confrontation with selected concepts of Nietzsche's philosophy in a search for a literary approach to the wartime experience. In *Pornografia* the Polish writer generates his own narrative order, reflecting his contemplation of Nietzsche's key ideas. A model of a similar approach could have easily been found by Gombrowicz in Mann's works, especially in *Doctor Faustus*.

In his commentary to Nietzsche's philosophy, Gombrowicz openly writes about the experience of history in the 20th century, in which the emphatically heralded will to power has annihilated itself. In his *Diary*, Gombrowicz is sceptical about the Nietzschean apotheosis of life. From this point of view, he even confirms a certain compatibility with Catholicism:

That which in Nietzsche's proud day passed for a travesty of Dionysian life, exactly that moderate politics of Catholicism with regard to natural forces has become dearer to me since the will to live, raised to its maximum tension, began to devour itself.⁶²

⁶² W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Vol. I: 1953–1956, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997, p. 50.

Against this background the novel seems to be an appeal to overcome the Nietzschean approach to man and the world. It was probably Gombrowicz's intention to convey this message when he stated that "*Pornografia* is humanism"⁶³ in a letter to François Bondy in 1964.

Translated by Łukasz Barciński

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⁶³ *Gombrowicz. Walka o sławę. Korespondencja część druga. Witold Gombrowicz. Konstanty A. Jeleński. François Bondy. Dominique de Roux*, layout, introductions J. Jarzębski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1996, p. 223.

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