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## The Image of Pain (“Translucent Matter”) in Gombrowicz

### ✦ Ključne reči:

*Gombrowicz, the image of pain, anti-metaphysics, Polish literature, Polish writers, novel Mojra.*

Овај чланак се бави сликама бола у текстовима *Witolda Gombrowicza*. Анализа слике бола, једног од најважнијих појмова у читавом делу *Gombrowicza*, помаже нам да разумемо његову специфичну анти-метафизику супротстављену дуалистичкој мисли Запада. У циљу организовања наше мисли о пољској књижевности, овај чланак такође у кратким цртама приказује посебну генеалошку грану пољских писаца које ја зovem „материјалисти-мистици“.

И... вы видите его действительно? [...] Видите ли вы в самом деле какой-нибудь образ?<sup>1)</sup>

— *Tikhon*

Although, images of matter-privation – sand, twilight, and the subsequent night – dominate the settings of most of Gombrowicz’s works, they are not always final destinations of his figures. At the center, behind his detours we can frequently see the problem that seems to be fundamental for Gombrowicz: pain. Or, if we agree that detours are the only reality of his prose, pain is one of

its most essential ingredients. Once, when asked by Arlette Sayac about the fear of death, Gombrowicz shifted his answer precisely to the problem of pain:

Nie, śmierć mnie nie trwoży. Życie jest piękne i radosne w drobnych szczegółach, dramatyczne w głównym wymiarze losu. Istnienie budzi we

1) “And... do you really see him? [...] Do you see some image actually?”

mnie lęk, więc staram się być wesoły, na ile tylko mogę. Strach czuję tylko przed bólem... Myśl współczesna [...] zbyt mocno wiąże rzeczywistość ze świadomością, niedostatecznie zaś z cierpieniem fizycznym. A przecież czymś naprawdę niewiarygodnym, niesłychanym i demonicznym jest ból.<sup>2)</sup>

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/No, death does not frighten me. Life is beautiful and joyful in small details; dramatic – in the major dimension of fate. Existence rouses my anxiety, so I try to be cheerful, inasmuch as I can. I only feel fear of pain... Modern thought [...] ties reality with consciousness too strongly, and not sufficiently with physical suffering. And after all pain is something unimaginable, inconceivable, and demonic (trans. M.O.)/.

The negligence of contemporary thought in this respect leads Gombrowicz back to his early masters, Arthur Schopenhauer and Thomas Mann, who, these days, if mentioned at all are always accompanied by a smile of embarrassment. Let us invite one more philosopher to Gombrowicz's canon – Ludwig Feuerbach, another philosopher, next to Schopenhauer, who fascinated Russians without intellectual embarrassment. His peculiar materialism, yet to be rediscovered, in

many aspects is very close to Gombrowicz's anti-metaphysics. In his two works *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* and *Wider den Dualismus von Leib und Seele, Fleisch und Geist*, Feuerbach introduces pain as the major category constituting being:

Die Freude ist das Gefühl eines Seines, der Schmerz das Gefühl eines Nicht-seines, einer Schranke, Verneinung; das Gefühl des Seines ist aber selbst Sein, das Gefühl der Verneinung selbst Verneinung. Die Freude und der Schmerz sind näher die Prinzipien und Grundbestimmungen alles Daseins, wie sich der Empfindung des Subjekts zur Existenz kommen. Die Freude ist das Gefühl des Lebens im Leben, der Schmerz des Todes im Leben, das Gefühl der Beraubung der Empfindung [...] der Schmerz ist Bewußtsein des abgetrennten unterschiedenen Einzelseins, darum Bewußtsein der Endlichkeit, Schranken, hierin Schmerz und selbst Verneinung.<sup>3)</sup>

How close we are to the painful voyage of Gordon Pym, during which everything, sinking in dead and dense water, was singular; how close we are to the painful adventures of Witold, sinking in loose earth-sand. Pain is a sensation of non-being, necessary for grasping being. Going back to the problem of the

2) Witold Gombrowicz, *Dzieła*, ed. Jan Błoński, Jerzy Jarzębski, vol. 14 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986–1996), 305.

3) Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, "Frühe Schriften, Kritiken und Reflexionen (1828–1834)" (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1981), 228–229. "Joy is a feeling of being, pain is a feeling of non-being, of the limit, of negation; the feeling of being is, nonetheless, being by itself, the feeling of negation is negation in itself. Joy and pain are, more precisely, the rules and fundamental notions of any existence, gaining existence in the affects of the subject. Joy is the feeling of life in life, pain is the feeling of death in life, of the deprivation of the affection [...] pain is a consciousness of the separated and differentiated singular being, therefore it is a consciousness of finitude, of the limit, and in that, it is pain and negation" (trans. M.O.).

present text, the image of pain would show what is outside of being. Thus the concept of pain also helps us to grasp the essence of being. In another place, we read:

Der Schmerz, die 'Empfindung' überhaupt ist nichts anderes als die laute, sehr verständliche Protestation gegen die Unterscheidung und Treibung von Leib und Seele, Existenz und Wesen, die der abstrakte Gedanke macht. Vox populi vox Dei, aber der populus im Menschen ist eben die Empfindung.<sup>4)</sup>

As we can see, metaphysics – separating physics from *meta* – begins to disappear. Pain is pain. For Gombrowicz, it is a figure fulfilling the gap between matter and soul; in other words, it is the real [sic!] substance constituting us, since both matter and soul are impossible to grasp conceptually; they do not exist. Pain is the very existence of nonexistence.

In 1921, Karol Irzykowski writes the essay, "Alchemy of Body. The Problem of Cruelty" [Alchamia Ciała. (Zagadnienie okruciaństwa)]. Seventeen years later, including it in the collection "The Lighter Caliber. Sketches – Essays of the Bottom – Aphorisms" [Lżejszy kaliber. Szkice – Próby dna – Aforyzmy], he inserts in brackets, between the main body of the text and the "Later Endnotes" [Przypisy późniejsze], an explanation that this essay was written as "an ideology for a novel entitled *Body of pain*" [...napisane

jako ideologia do powieści pt. „Ciało bólu”].<sup>5)</sup> Irzykowski indeed planned such a novel or a long story. On January 1, 1920, he makes an entry in his diary: "...beside this, a huge novella, *Body of Pain* – for which, however, I do not have medical studies. Possibly, I will make a film based on this novella" [... prócz tego wielka nowela „Ciało bólu” – do której jednak brak mi studiów medycznych. Z tej noweli ewentualnie zrobię także film].<sup>6)</sup> Gombrowicz's unfinished project, a play or maybe some other literary form devoted to the problem of pain, was in fact a resumption of Irzykowski's abandoned project.

Making such a connection allows us to use aforementioned Irzykowski's ideological sketch to the problem of pain in reading Gombrowicz. Let us skip the part devoted to Schopenhauer and Simmel and move to the section "What is Pain?," where Irzykowski quotes and comments on two passages: one from J. Ochorowicz's *Psychology and Medicine* and the other from Friedrich Hebbel's *Diary*.

[Ochorowicz] 'Chciałem myśleć o swoim stanie i o sposobach ratunku, ale myśli jakby rozpedzone przez ból, rozwiewały się bez związku; powtarzałem tylko machinalnie wyrazy lub bez woli nuciłem w myśli jakieś chaotyczne melodie jakby opętany przez obce siły [...] poczucie bólu jako obcej przemocy objawia się szczególnie w sferze myśli. Ból rozpedza je i przytłumia; wszelkie wysiłki

4) Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesamelte Werke*, vol. 10, "Kleinere Schriften III (1846–1850)" (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1971), 141 "Pain, the sensation' in general, is none other than a loud and very clear protest against differentiation and separation of the soul from the body, of the existence from the essence, which is done by abstract reasoning. *Vox populi vox Dei*, ale *populus*, in the man, is exactly sensation" (trans. M.O.).

5) Karol Irzykowski, *Lżejszy kaliber. Szkice – Próby dna – Aforyzmy* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze „Rój”, 1938), 188.

6) Karol Irzykowski, *Dziennik*, tom 2 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001), 124.

woli, ażeby myśleć porządnie, są bezskuteczne, co chwila wątek asocjacji przerywa się i znów kojarzy bezładnie, nie tak jakbyśmy chcieli.<sup>7)</sup>

/I wanted to think about my state and about methods of rescue, but my thoughts, as if accelerated by pain, dispersed without any connections; I was only repeating words mechanically, or against my will humming in my head some chaotic melodies, as if possessed by alien forces [...] the feeling of pain as alien force appears particularly in a sphere of thoughts. Pain disperses and muffles them; all efforts of will to put things in order are futile, at every moment a thread of associations breaks, and then again forms something chaotic, but not what we expected (trans. M.O.)/.

[Hebbel] 'K. utrzymywał wczoraj, że także ból cielesny odczuwa się tylko w duszy. Muszę temu zaprzeczyć, bo w takim razie znikłaby *differentia specifica* między ciałem i duszą i doszliśmy do materializmu (Raczej spirytualizmu lub idealizmu. Uwaga K.J.) Myślę, że rzecz ma się tak: ból fizyczny rzeczywiście dostaje się aż do duszy, podobnie jak ból duchowy

wystaje, że się tak wyrażę, aż w ciało. Atoli nie są to dalsze bezpośrednie ciągi lecz echa, wzajemny wpływ obu rodzajów bólu na siebie [...] Ciało koncentrując się w sobie; jest niejako sługa, który nie chce już więcej dbać o pana, bo troska o własne zagrożone istnienie daje mu dosyć zajęcia. To samo czyni wtedy i duch: dlatego w takich wypadkach ustaje myślenie, które jest zawsze świadomym lub nieświadomym porównywaniem, przystosowywaniem się i analizowaniem, a natomiast występuje przypartywanie się, bezpośrednie chwytanie. Ponieważ jednak rozdział pomiędzy duchem a ciałem jest zawsze połowiczny a czyste prawo ducha może działać tylko swobodnie, ale nigdy swobodnie, więc obrazy, czy jak inaczej nazwie się rezultaty wręcz odmiennej od myślenia, wyższej i niezależnej czynności duchowej, zamieniają się w fantazmaty. Zresztą należałoby jeszcze dać filozofię bólu z tego stanowiska.<sup>8)</sup>

/Yesterday, K. argued that one also feels a physical pain in the soul. I have to disagree with this, for in such a case *differentia specifica* between body and soul would disappear, and

7) Karol Irzykowski, *Lżejszy kaliber*, 182.

8) Ibid., 183–184. The translation of the quote from Hebbel's diary is based on Irzykowski's text in which he simplified it and replaced the name of Hebbel's friend Rendtdorf with "K." Here is the text of the original: "Rendtdorff behaupte gestern abend, auch der leibliche Schmerz werde nur im Geist, in der Seele empfunden. Ich muß dies bestreiten, denn damit fiele die *differentia specifica* zwischen Leib und Seele weg, der Materialismus ware also da. Ich denke mir die Sache so. Der leibliche Schmerz wird allerdings bis in die Seele hinein empfunden, wie der geistige, um mich so auszudrücken, bis den Körper hinaus. Aber dies ist nicht die Unmittelbarkeit, sondern die Reziprozität des besiderseitigen Schmerzes. Der leibliche Schmerz *hemmt* den geistigen Werkmeister im freien Gebrauch des Werkzeugs and diese *Hemmung*, die seine Wirksamkeit beschränkt und aufhebt, empfindet er und sie wird ihm zum Schmerz. Wenn die leiblichen Schmerzens- und Krankheits-Zustände steigen, so wird

we would reach materialism (rather spiritualism or idealism – K.I.). I think that it goes that way: physical pain indeed gets as far as to the soul, analogically to the spiritual pain sticks out, so to speak, as far as reaching the body. However, these are not any immediate continuums, but echoes, a mutual influence on each other of two kinds of pain [...] The body gets concentrated in itself; it is as a servant who does not care about his master anymore, for worries about its own threatened existence give it enough work... The spirit does the same: therefore in such moments the process of thinking – which is always conscious or unconscious comparing, adjusting, analyzing – stops, and is replaced by *watching and immediate grasping*. For the discrepancy between the spirit and the body is always only partial, and the pure law of spirit can act more freely, but not completely freely, so *images, or if one wishes to call them differently the results of spiritual activity which is higher and more independent than thinking, turn into phantasms*. In any case, it would be desirable to develop *philosophy of pain* from this perspective" [trans. and italic – M.O.]/.

[Irzykowski's commentary] Możliwość przeciw temu pogładowi oponować za to, że posługuje się dualizmem. Ale, jak sędzę, monistyczne zarzuty przeciw próbom wniknięcia w istotę bólu powinny umilknąć, gdyż przeciwstawianie ducha ciału jest w takich analizach nieraz ze względów metodycznych niezbędne jako środek opisu. Zresztą gdy w powyższym wywodzie odrzucimy różnicę między bólem fizycznym a duchowym, pozostanie duch jako świadomość, a 'ciałem' będzie w ogóle owa tajemnicza rzeczywistość bólu, która jak coś obcego wystaje aż w 'ducha'. Daleką perspektywę otwiera zwłaszcza uwaga, że w bólu ustaje myślenie, a natomiast występuje 'przypatrywanie się, bezpośrednie chwytanie'. To jest zapewne istotą bólu, że narzuca nieodparcie, że gwałci niejako świadomość i wypełnia ją sobą jak ogromnym niewidzialnym cielskiem, każąc się sobie bezustannie przypatrywać. Przypatrywać – i nic więcej! Naprózno stara się duch tego intruza zrozumieć, przewyciężyć, ogarnąć doznane wrażenia, – one mu urągają. Duch znajduje się w stanie ciągłej, na nowo odświeżanej klęski, jest obecnym tylko po to, aby być świadkiem

auch die Hemmung, also auch die Empfindung derselben und die reziproke Schmerz um so größer. Der Leib zentralisiert sich in sich selbst; er ist gewissermaßen ein Diener, der auf den Herrn nicht länger achten kann, weil die Sorge für seine gefährdete eigene Existenz seine ganze Tätigkeit in Anspruch nimmt. Dasselbe tut nun auch der Geist; daher hört das Denken, welches ein immerwährendes bewußtes oder unbewußtes Vergleichen, Anpassen und Analogisieren ist, auf und das Anschauen, das unvermittelte Ergreifen, tritt ein. Da jedoch die Trennung zwischen Leib und Geist immer nur noch eine halbe ist und das reine Geistesgesetz nur freier, aber keineswegs frei wirkt, so schlagen die Bilder, oder wie man die Resultate der dem Denken entgegengesetzten höheren und unabhängigeren Geistes-Tätigkeit sonst nennen will, in Phantastereien um. Übrigens ist die Philosophie des Schmerzes aus diesem Gesichtspunkt noch zu liefern" (Friedrich Hebbel, *Werke*, vol. 4 (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966), 510–511.

własnego znikczemnienia, któremu się jednak musi z potępiącą ciekawością przyglądać, bo nie ma nigdzie ucieczki [bold – K.I.].<sup>9)</sup>

/One could argue against such a point of view because it uses a dualist perspective. But, I think that monistic arguments against efforts of infiltrating the essence of pain should stay silent. For juxtaposing spirit versus body in such analyses is often necessary for methodological reasons as a means of description. In any case, if in the above argument we reject the difference between physical and spiritual pain, the spirit will remain as consciousness, and that mysterious reality pain, which as something strange ‘sticks out’ into the spirit, will be the ‘body.’ The remark telling that in pain thinking stops, yielding to ‘observing and immediate grasping,’ opens a wide perspective. It is certainly the essence of pain that imposes itself irresistibly, and, in a way, rapes consciousness and fills it with itself as if with an invisible, huge bulk, ordering to watch itself uninterruptingly. Watching – and nothing more! In vain, the spirit tries to understand this intruder, to overcome it, to comprehend affected sensations – they revile it. The spirit is in a state of constantly refreshed failure; it is present just to witness its own degradation, at what, however, it has to watch constantly with hellish curiosity, for there is no way to escape [bold – K.I.]/ (trans. M.O.).

9) Ibid., 184.

10) Ibid., 187.

11) Ibid.

Pain then is “a crisis of body;” it leads to the edges of being. And this is the reason behind torture, according to Irzykowski. A torturer, by inflicting pain and arranging the human body in equilibristic geometrical figures, wants to see man as a thing and to see something in him that is not from this world. He calls the torturers of the inquisition “horrifying alchemists who leaned over a trembling body as if over a retorta in which they hoped to find deposited gold of some truth.”<sup>10)</sup> The concept of pain was attractive for them as a figure of Satan, for it is an unimaginable (unrepresentable phenomenon); it is “neither spirit, nor body, but some third category that sticks in this world and constantly floods it through breaches of human souls” (...z drugiej strony sam ból był niby inwazją szatana na ziemię, buchnięciem ogni piekielnych otaczających cały świat, albowiem ból nie jest ani duchem ani ciałem, tylko czymś trzecim, co wystercza w ten świat i wciąż go zalewa przez szczeliny dusz ludzkich [bold – K.I.]).<sup>11)</sup>

What is especially important for our investigation of Gombrowicz’s images in these reflections by Irzykowski is the rather contradictory remark that pain slipping away from dualistic thinking could be reflected upon only through a dualistic juxtaposition of body and spirit, or matter and form. This epistemological impossibility leads Irzykowski to a conclusion that pain, the ungraspable concept, can be portrayed only through illegitimate images – phantasms. Pain is a paradigmatic phantasm of an ungraspable! This philosophy of pain could be realized only in the realm of art.

As early as in *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz created his own paradigmatic phantasm of



pain, which would later come back in his *Diary*, his other novels, and his plays.

Złapałem muchę, oberwałem jej nogi i skrzydełka, uczyniłem z niej cierpiącą, bolesną, przerażającą i metafizyczną kulkę, nie całkiem okrągłą, ale w każdym razie przepaścistą i *dołożyłem* ją do kwiatu, wsadziłem cicho do pantofla [...] Mucha tępą i głuchą męczarnią dyskwalifikowała pantofel, kwiat, jabłko, papierosy, całe gospodarstwo pensjonarki<sup>12)</sup> (F, 147).

I caught [the fly], tore off its legs and wings, I turned it into a suffering, dolorous, frightful, and metaphysical little ball, not quite round, but most definitely abysmal, [I *added* it to the flower, put it quietly into the shoe] [...] The fly, through its numb and dumb suffering, vitiated the shoe, the flower, the cigarettes, the schoolgirl's entire households.<sup>13)</sup>

Not accidentally twenty four years later, the theme of pain and its phantasm returns. In the *Diary* of 1958, there is an entry which can be read as an extensive commentary on the quoted passage from *Ferdydurke*. At the same time, it is the most exhaustive and systematic exposition of the theme of pain in his works.

Dziś 'byłem zabijającym muchy' to znaczy po prostu zabijałem muchy drucianą packą.

W moim pokoju, ni wiadomo skąd (bo okna mają siatki) biorą się muchy. Co dzień prawie likwiduję je

w ten sposób. Dziś zabiłem około 40. Naturalnie nie wszystkie uśmiercam od razu – niektóre, silnie pokiereszowane, upadają na podłogę i co pewien czas odkrywam taką muchę, pozostawiam sam na sam z konaniem. Natychmiast ją dobijam. Ale zdarza się, że ucieknie w szparę podłogi, wtedy staje się mi ze swoim bólem niedostępna.

W młodości dręczyłem zwierzęta. Przypominam sobie jak w Małoszycach zabawiałem się z chłopakami wiejskimi. Siekliśmy batami żaby. Dziś boję się – oto właściwe słowo – cierpienia muchy.

[...]

2. *Intronizacja bólu*. – Ból staje się dla mnie punktem wyjścia egzystencji, doznaniem zasadniczym od którego wszystko się zaczyna, do którego wszystko się sprowadza. Egzystencjalności ze swoim 'życiem dla śmierci' nie zadawałają mnie, ja życie ustawiłbym tylko wobec bólu.

3. *Ból jako ból, ból sam w sobie*. – To jest najważniejsze. To jest dopiero zmiana odczuwania naprawdę groźna i okropna i olbrzymia. Polega na tym, iż coraz mniej obchodzi *kto cierpi*... Myślę, że współcześnie istnieją w tym względzie dwie szkoły. Dla ludzi dawniejszej szkoły ból kogoś z rodziny jest najokropniejszy po własnym: ból dygnitarza ważniejszy od bólu chłopca; ból chłopca ważniejszy od bólu psa. Przebywają w ograniczonym kręgu bólu. Ale dla ludzi nowszej szkoły ból jest bólem, gdziekolwiek by się pojawił, równie

12) Witold Gombrowicz, *Dzieła*, vol. 2, 147.

13) Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Danuta Borchartd (New Haven: Yale University Press 2000), 157.

straszliwy w człowieku, jak w musze, wykształciło się u nas doznanie czystego cierpienia, piekło nasze stało się uniwersalne. Mnie, na przykład, niektórzy uważają za nieczułego, ponieważ trudno mi ukryć, że ból najbliższych nie jest bynajmniej najbliższym mi bólem. I cała moja natura jest nastawiona na odkrywanie cierpienia tamtego – niższego.

Te bogobojne rodziny – przypominam sobie z dawnych czasów – we dworze wiejskim przy podwieczorku, gwarzące pocziwie, niewinnie... a na stole był lep, na lepie muchy w sytuacjach okropniejszych niż potępieńcy na obrazach średniowiecznych. To nikomu nie przeszkadzało ponieważ w zdaniu 'ból muchy' akcent padał na 'muchy' nie na 'ból.' A dzisiaj – wystarczy naftalinować pokój żeby chmary drobnych istnień zaczęły się wic – i nikt się nie przejmuje.

Tak. Ale jak pogodzić to moje odkrywanie powszechnego cierpienia z tym, co zanotowałem wczoraj – z niechęcią ową do uznania świata pozaludzkiego, niższego? To jedno z najdziwniejszych rozdarć we mnie. Przeraża mnie niższa męczarnia i całe moje jestestwo jest nastawione na odkrywanie jej. A jednak lodowata nuda, senność nieomal mnie zdejmuję, gdy chcę zrównać się z tymi stworzeniami w egzystencji i próbuję przyznać im pełne prawo istnienia. To myśl nużąca i ospała – czy dlatego że przekracza moje siły? Do czegoż więc doprowadziła mnie ewolucja, którą zawarłem w powyższych trzech punktach – mnie i wielu jak ja? Jesteśmy bardziej mętni – i bardziej

niepewni wobec natury niż ludzie dawniejsi, którzy, trzeba przyznać, mieli w tym więcej od na stylu.<sup>14)</sup>

/Today, I [was "a killing flies person"], which simply means that I killed flies with my wire swatter.

Who knows where the flies come from (the windows in my room have screens). I liquidate them this way almost every day. Today I killed about [40]. Of course, I don't kill all of them right away – some of them, seriously mangled, fall to the floor, and every so often I find such a fly, [left alone with its dying]. I immediately finish it off. But it does occasionally happen that one escapes into a crack in the floor, and becomes inaccessible to me with its pain.

In my youth I tortured animals. I remember how in Małoszyce I amused myself with the country boys. We chopped up frogs with whips.

Today I am afraid – this is the right word – of the suffering of a fly. And this fear, in turn, terrifies me, as if some awful weakness toward life were contained in it. I am in fact afraid of this, that I cannot bear the pain of a fly. With age, I underwent a general evolution, whose tragic and malignant character I do not want to hide; on the contrary, I would like to emphasize it as strongly as I can. And I claim that it is characteristic not just of me, but of my entire generation.

I will note its silent points:

[...]

2. *The enthronement of pain.* – Pain becomes the starting point of existence, the basic experience from

14) Witold Gombrowicz, *Dzieła Zebrane*, vol. 7 (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1971), 35–37.



which everything begins, to which everything is reduced. Existentialists with their "fear for death" do not satisfy me, I would pit life only against pain.

3. Pain as pain, pain in itself. – This is the most important of all. Only this shift in feeling is really horrifying and awful and enormous. It relies on my caring less and less about *who suffers*...I think that currently two schools of thought exist on this point. For people of the old school, the pain of someone in the family is, aside from their own, the worst: the pain of a dignitary is more important than the pain of a peasant; the pain of a peasant is more important than the pain of a boy; the pain of a boy is more important than the pain of a dog. They exist in a limited circle of pain. But for people of a more recent school, pain is pain wherever it appears, equally horrifying in man as in a fly; in us the experience of pure suffering has become informed, our hell has become universal. Some consider me insensitive because it is difficult for me to hide that the pain of those nearest to me is not the pain nearest to me. And my whole nature is attuned to discovering that – lower – suffering.

God-fearing families – as from bygone days – sat in their country manors at supper, speaking decently, innocently...while flypaper dangled right over the table, and on the flypaper flies in predicaments worse than those of the damned in medieval paintings. This did not disturb

anyone because in the sentence "the pain of a fly" the accent fell on "fly" not "pain." Today it is enough to spray a room with insecticide for clouds of tiny beings to begin to writhe – and no one pays any attention.

Yes. But how am I to reconcile my discovery of universal suffering with what I jotted down yesterday – with my reluctance to recognize the ahuman, inferior, world? This is one of the strangest rifts within me. I am overcome by inferior suffering and my entire being is attuned to uncovering it. Yet an icy boredom, almost drowsiness, overtakes me when I want to equate myself with these creatures in existence and try to acknowledge their full right to exist. This is a tedious and sluggish desire – is it tedious and sluggish because it exceeds my strength? To what, therefore, has evolution, contained in the three points above, led me, me and many more like me? We are even more muddled – and even more uncertain in relation to nature than people of bygone times, who, one has to admit, exhibited more style in these matters than we do" (D-E, II, 27–29).<sup>15)</sup>

What is this "tiresome and dreamy thought" about "the metaphysical little ball "not exactly round," and which coordinates our entire existence? It is perhaps an image of pain in itself.

Most likely, a purely humanistic dimension of pain as suffering is important for Gombrowicz, as it was for one of the inhabitants of *Der Zauberberg* [The Magic Mountain],

15) Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, ed. Jan Kott, trans. Lillian Valee, vol. 2 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 27–29.

Herr Settembrini, a contributor to the encyclopedia bearing the title “Sociology of Suffering,” and commissioned by the League for the Organization of Progress. Let us, however, focus on pain as a figure of one of the key categories of Gombrowicz’s ontology. This substance, filling the breach of dualism, is for Gombrowicz a certain kind of matter. Gombrowicz’s characteristic motif of slackening of forms of a given status quo, which brings back the unwanted crude nature, is nothing other than the image of reemerging matter, the only reality. And matter for Gombrowicz, that most originary and terrifying substance, would be precisely pain. In the quoted passage from the interview given to Arlette Sayac, I omitted one phrase and replaced it with ellipses and brackets for the sake of clarity. Let us bring back the content of these brackets. The omitted phrase says: “especially Sartre’s existentialism.” Sartre’s existentialism, according to Gombrowicz, does not sufficiently associate reality with physical suffering. Yet it is possible to integrate even that thought of Sartre with Gombrowicz’s artistic system.

To understand better the rules of construction of Gombrowicz’s image of pain, we need to refer to *Being and Nothingness* again. The concept of pain developed there helped Gombrowicz to conceptualize his own founding image of pain from *Ferdurke*. (which, as Gombrowicz has always underlined, preceded the works of Sartre). There is no need to establish a precise relationship between the philosophical thought behind Gombrowicz’s prose and its affinity to Sartre’s system. There is no philosophy in Gombrowicz’s prose, there are images. Isolated images from Sartre’s book then, can serve as auxiliary figures for a more detailed inves-

tigation of Gombrowicz’s own images. What is interesting, and what seems to confirm the proposed intuition about the inadequacy of discursive language in coping with matter, is that the passages from *Being and Nothingness* devoted to pain (often called matter, as we will see) are even more evanescent and overloaded with metaphors than the rest of this rather garrulous book.

In what we call “physical” pain, Sartre, like Feuerbach, sees pure affective qualities which could be apprehended in their purity; that is, the manner in which consciousness exists in its purity. Sense data for Sartre and Gombrowicz would be the very texture of consciousness “in so far as it surpasses this texture toward its own possibilities.” When we direct ourselves towards pain, consciousness transcends itself – but emptily. Speaking about pain, we use intermediaries – pure knowledge and true affection; we use “emotional abstracts.”

Grief is there, objective and transcendent, but it lacks concrete existence. It would be better to give for these insubstantial significances the name of affective *images*. Their importance of artistic creation and psychological understanding is undeniable. But the important thing here is the fact that what separates them from real shame, for example, is the absence of the quality of being *lived*.<sup>16)</sup>

And this quote could be one of the formulations of Gombrowicz’s artistic program (supplementing the pole defined with the help of Feuerbach): creation of images that stress this gap – “the absence of the quality of being lived.” In other words, we can re-

16) Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. with an introd. Hazel E. Barnes (New York Philosophical Library, 1956), 436.

lease Sartre from Gombrowicz's accusation of forgetting the "life that is there," to use George Herbert Mead's term. He tried rather to show, like Gombrowicz, the breach between bare life and pure consciousness. Even if had he wanted to negate his ties with the third part of *Being and Nothingness*, which he never did (let us not forget that Gombrowicz called *Ferdydurke* the precursor of *Being and Nothingness*), he would probably have excepted one peculiar passage devoted to pain as a way of grasping pure affect, the affect of an affect, whose image is the only way of turning the attention of literature to this fundamental aspect of life, also, or first of all, of that life which is lived beyond any theoretical reflection.

This pain however does not exist anywhere among the actual objects of the universe [...] Pain then is not in space. But neither does it belong to objective time; it temporalizes itself, and it is in and through this temporalization that the time of the world can appear. What then is pain? Simply the *translucent matter* [italic – M.O.] of consciousness, its being there, its attachment to the world, in short the peculiar contingency of the act [...]. The pain exists beyond all attention and all knowledge since it slips into each act of attention and of knowledge, since it is this very act in so far as the act is without being the foundation of being.

Yet even on this plane of pure being, pain as a contingent attachment to the world can be existed non-thetically by consciousness only if it is surpassed. Pain-consciousness is an internal negation of the world;

but at the same time it exists its pain – i.e., itself – as a wrenching away from self. Pure pain as the simple 'lived' can not be reached; it belongs to the category of indefinables and indescribables which are what they are. But pain-consciousness is a project toward a further consciousness which would be empty of all pain; that is, to a consciousness whose contexture, whose being-there would not be painful. This *lateral* escape, this wrenching away from self which characterizes pain-consciousness does not for all that constitute pain as a psychic object. It is a non-thetic project of the For-itself; we apprehended it only through the world [...] In addition – and this is the unique character of corporal existence – the inexpressible which one wishes to flee is rediscovered at the heart of this very wrenching away; it is this which is going to constitute the consciousness which surpass it; it is the very contingency and the being of the flight which wishes to flee it. Nowhere else shall we come closer to touching that nihilation of the In-itself by the For-itself and that apprehension of the For-itself by the In-itself which nourishes the very nihilation.<sup>17)</sup>

Thus the *for-itself* is nihilated by the *in-itself* and vice versa. The concept of pain grasps the main subject of academic existentialism, which was already expressed in *Ferdydurke* according to Gombrowicz: "Ferdydurke is existence in a vacuum, that is, nothing except existence" (D-E, I, 181) [*Ferdydurke* to egzyscencja w próżni, czyli nic prócz egzystencji (DZ, VI, 236)]. Pain is the original un-

17) Ibid., 438–439.

reflective awareness of our body, in opposition to illness which is reflective; pain is an immediate awareness of our body before it is surpassed and engulfed in a project. Pure pain becomes united in the non-thetic totality, just as our immediate past, by its internal relation to the present and the future, forms a totality of the temporal *ekstasis*. Whenever I become aware of pain, it immediately takes some structure, e.g., as “pulsating,” or “penetrating,” as being on a surface or somewhere deep. It is projected on the body as the *in-itself*. The pain forms a part of distanceless existence of the positional consciousness of the *for-itself*. When I am absorbed in apprehending my pain, it means that I direct a reflexive consciousness on my present “consciousness-as-vision.” Thus the actual texture of my consciousness reflected on (my pain) is apprehended and posited by my reflective consciousness.

What is at the center of Gombrowicz’s prose is the product of an act of reflection: pain as object, pain as something given through transcending the pure quality of consciousness in pain. But, as we will see in a moment, the unreflective “perspective” (non-perspective) of the *in-itself* constantly comes back, and its image always stays be-

tween pure affectivity (absence) and “pulsating” series of structured pain as illness. It is a vision of fluctuation between *translucent matter*, to use Sartre’s synonym for pain, and *prime matter* (which could be an excess of forms, i.e., degraded structure).

This fluctuation between these two images of matter, between two levels of dissemblance, can be seen in all Gombrowicz’s works. Even in the most innocent travel guide-type reflections on Argentina, Gombrowicz uses the metaphor of *prima materia*: “Here we possess decent enough prime material (raw material) even though we cannot yet afford manufactured products [...] What is Argentina? Batter that has not yet become cake, or something that [has no definite shape]...<sup>18)</sup> [Posiadamy tu [w Argentynie] niezłą „materia prima” (surowiec) choć nie stać nas na jeszcze na fabrykaty [...] Czym jest Argentyna? Ciastem, które jeszcze nie stało się plackiem, czymś po prostu niedokształtowanym...].<sup>19)</sup>

*Prima materia* has a trace of form. And, for example, *Ferdydurke* could be scrutinized as its complex images; somewhere in the deep darkness of *Kosmos*, there is matter with no trace of form – pain.<sup>20)</sup>

18) Gombrowicz, *Diary*, vol. 1, 71, 72 [trans. modified by M.O.]

19) Gombrowicz, *Dzieła Zebrane*, vol. 6, 94, 96.

20) To use Sartre’s idiom, illness – pain as a psychic object apprehended through pain – the image of prime matter. Illness as graspable matter: “This object has all the characteristics of pain, but it is transcendent and passive. It is reality which has its own time, not the time of the external universe nor that of consciousness, but psychic time [...] illness in so far as it is apprehended through consciousness has all the characteristics of unity, interiority, and spontaneity which consciousness possesses – but in degraded form. This degradation confers psychic individuality upon it. That is, first of all, the illness has an absolute cohesion without parts. In addition it has its own duration since it is outside consciousness and possesses a past and a future. But this duration, which is only the projection of the original temporalization, is a *multiplicity of imagination* [italic – M.O.]. Illness is ‘penetrating,’ ‘caressing’ etc. And these characteristics aim only at rendering the way in which this illness is outlined in duration; they are melodic qualities. A pain which is given in twinges followed by lulls is not apprehended by reflection the brief respites *are a part* of the illness just as silences are part of a melody. The ensemble constitutes the rhythm and the behavior of the illness. But at the same time that it

The discussed problem of pain and its image in Gombrowicz, as in Sartre, breaks Cartesian dualism in any form; the distinction between consciousness and material activity does not imply that consciousness

is substantially different from matter. In Gombrowicz and in Sartre, to use Catalano's words, "[t]here is only matter, although, because of consciousness, there are various states of matter, including consciousness

is *passive object* [italic – M.O.], illness as it is seen through an absolute spontaneity which is consciousness, is a projection of this spontaneity into the in-itself. As a passive spontaneity it is magical; it is given as extending itself, as entirely the master of its temporal form. It appears and disappears differently than spatial-temporal objects [...] There is produced here a phenomenon analogous to that what psychologists of form call the *stroboscopic illusion* [italic – M.O.]. [...] There is an animism of illness; it given as a living thing which has its form, its own duration, its habits [...] In fact when the illness goes away it disappears for good. "Nothing is left of it." But the curious consequence follows that when the illness reappears, it rises up in its very passivity by a sort of spontaneous generation. For example, one can feel its "gentle overtures." It is "coming back again." "This is it." Thus the first pains just like the rest are not apprehended for themselves as a simple, bare texture of the consciousness reflected-on; they are the "announcements" of the illness or rather the illness itself which is born slowly – like a locomotive which gradually gets underway. On the other hand it is very necessary to understand that I constitute the illness *with* pain [...] each concrete pain is like a note in a melody: it is at once the whole melody and a moment in the melody [...] But the matter of the illness does not resemble that of melody. In the first place it is something purely lived; there is no distance between the consciousness reflected-on and the pain nor between the reflective consciousness and the consciousness reflected-on (BN, 443–442)."

Later Sartre asks about the body in relation to pain and the illness. "For the unreflective consciousness pain *was* a body; for the reflective consciousness the illness is distinct from the body, it has its own form, it comes and goes [...] The reflective consciousness is consciousness of the illness" (BN, 442–443). Illness, however, with its peculiar form, and a melodic rhythm, "adheres to the for-itself by means of its matter since it is revealed through the pain and as a unity of all pains" (BN, 443). As we remember, pain is a "translucent matter." Illness is "apprehended as sustained and nourished by a certain passive environment in which the passivity is precisely the projection into the in-itself of the contingent facticity of the pains. It is my passivity. This passive environment is not apprehended for itself except as the matter of the statue is apprehended when I perceive its form, and yet it is there. The illness feeds on this passivity and magically derives new strength from it just as Antaeus was nourished by the earth. It is my body on a new plane of existence; that is pure correlate of a reflective consciousness. I shall call it a psychic body" (BN, 443). Thus a psychic body provides "*the implicit matter* [italics – M.O.] of all phenomena of the psyche" (BN, 443). It is a body recaptured by the in-itself: "It represents the tendency of each psychic object beyond its magical cohesion to be parceled out in exteriority; it represents beyond the magical relations which unite psychic objects to each other, the tendency of each one of them to be isolated in an insularity of indifference. It is therefore a sort of *implicit space* supporting the melodic duration of the psychic. In so far as the body is the *contingent and indifferent matter* of all psychic events, the body determines the psychic space. This space has neither high nor low, neither left nor right; it is without parts inasmuch as the magical cohesion of the psychic comes to combat its tendency toward a division in indifference. This is nonetheless a real characteristic of the *psyche* – not that the psyche is united to a body but under its melodic organization the body is its substance and perpetual condition of possibility. [...] It is this

itself.”<sup>21)</sup> There is “inert matter” or “translucent matter” – the in-itself, and its negation and transcendence – the for-itself (“implicit matter”). The for-itself, a consciousness is then a “continual degradation of inert matter and the coming-to-be of the world”<sup>22)</sup> We never encounter inert matter; it is always in the process of nihilation by the for-itself. We cannot grasp pain, just illness.

Consequently, *Kosmos* can be read as the impossible task of presenting the pure image of pain (inert matter). Such an interpretation would classify *Pornografia* as an image of illness (implicit matter); in *Ferdydurke* – which, according to Gombrowicz, resembles *Being and Nothingness* following it (unconsciously) – we find more balanced images with two dialectically united abstractions: the for-itself and the in-itself – inert matter, or dead matter to use Neoplatonic language, and matter pregnant with possibilities. In *Ferdydurke*, we do not find a dominant figure fixing the relationship between light and darkness, like in the other two novels. In a way then, *Ferdydurke* could be read as his last novel, as an image of the dialectics of matter. A reverse reading of the trilogy unfolds a sort of cosmogony that starts with an accidental “fricassee of chicken” and ends at dawn with the dream (or the awakening) of

the protagonist, a writer and the author of the book *Memoirs from the Time of Immaturity* [Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania].<sup>23)</sup> The sentence opening *Ferdydurke* (1937) is: “Tuesday morning I awoke at the pale and lifeless hour when night is almost gone but dawn has not yet come into its own” [We wtorek rano zbudziłem się o tej porze bezdusznej i nikłej kiedy właściwie noc się już skończyła, a świt nie zdążył jeszcze zacząć się na dobre];<sup>24)</sup> and the sentence closing *Kosmos* (1965) is: “Today there was a fricassee of chicken for dinner” [Dziś na obiad była potrawka z kury].<sup>25)</sup> Following such a trajectory (starting from the last novel), on the way to the beginning of *Ferdydurke* (the first novel of the cycle), where we meet Witold alias Józio, a writer, i.e., a creator (yet immature), we go through combinations of various objects – e.g. a stick, a wire, a leather sole, or four rabbit skins, stones, a teapot – with people and animals. The movement leads from disorder to emerging immature form that also appears to be an illusion. Let us not forget that the logic of the dream with which *Ferdydurke* begins is governed by *suspicio*, bastard reasoning – the only possible way of reasoning about *khora*, or matter (cf. II. 2. 1).

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which is at the basis of the mechanistic and mechanical metaphors which we use to classify and to explain the events of the psyche. It is this which we aim at and which we form into images (image-making consciousness) which we produce in order to aim at absent feelings and make them present (BN, 444).” The body becomes a psychic space in which such phenomena as pain take place. Psychic space conceived in that way is not arbitrary, it seems to come about by a kind of a natural reflection of the for-itself on the body as the in-itself. The for-itself tries to flee the immediate awareness of the body as my contingency. It comes back, however, as nausea.

21) Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Critique of Dialectical Reason'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 45.

22) *Ibid.*, 45n.

23) This was also a title of Witold's Gombrowicz's first book.

24) Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, 5.

25) Gombrowicz, *Dziela*, vol. 5, 148.



However, taking into account Gombrowicz's growing pessimism, we should not eliminate the possibility of reading *Kosmos* as the last and the darkest novel, thereby respecting chronological order and the author's commentary. What was Gombrowicz's next step after *Kosmos*? He wrote two important plays, *Operetka* and the unfinished *History*. But in his various utterances, he underlined that his next serious project would be a play about pain. We have documentation of this plan. In an interview given to Piera Sanavio for Italian television in 1968 and 1969 Gombrowicz once more goes back to the problem of pain. His remarks are worth quoting *in extenso*:

Wydaje mi się... wydaje mi się, że tym razem będę pisał o bólu. Wydaje mi się, że cała, powiedzmy, intelektualna dialektyka naszych czasów jest skażona, ponieważ nikt już nie zdaje sobie sprawy z ważności bólu. Ból jest faktem podstawowym, fundamentalnym. W tym sensie obecna ignorancja wobec Schopenhauera... we Francji, ale prawdopodobnie to samo dzieje się także we Włoszech... Schopenhauer uważany jest za pisarza niemodnego, większość jest jeszcze pod wpływem Hegla, egzystencjalizmu, czego tylko chcieć, słowem... tak, ta ignorancja to według mnie wielki błąd. Prawdziwa, naprawdę realistyczna postawa wobec życia – to wiedzieć, iż konkretną rzeczą, prawdziwą rzeczywistością jest ból. Współczesna filozofia natomiast przybiera ton akademicki, profesorski, jak gdyby nie istniało coś takiego jak ból. Sartre posuwa się aż do stwierdzenia, że nawet tortura może być przyjemna, jeśli wyobraża się sobie, że po śmierci idzie się do nieba. Moim zdaniem to

całkowita nieprawda. Myślę, że taki sposób mówienia o bólu, z lekkością, tonem akademickim, to jeden z największych błędów współczesnej filozofii, która jest skrajnie mieszczańska i przeważnie tworzona przez ludzi z uniwersytetu. A więc wydaje mi się... chcę powiedzieć, że jeśli chodzi o mnie... chciałbym napisać coś, co mogłoby dać wyobrażenie bólu, który jest prawdziwie przerażający i absolutny, jest samą podstawą rzeczywistości. Wszeczeństwo jawi mi się jako coś całkowicie czarnego i pustego, gdzie jedyną realną rzeczą jest ta, która wywołuje cierpienie: właśnie ból. To prawdziwy diabeł, reszta to tylko deklamacje. Wyobrażam sobie zatem, że jeśli napiszę dramat, o którym wspomniałem, będzie się zwracał w tym kierunku. Ale nie mogę jeszcze zapewnić, że tak będzie – kiedy zabieram się do pisania, nie wiem nigdy, co stanie się później; zaczynam coś i ewoluuje w nowym kierunku, którego wcale nie planowałem.

... Myślę jednak, że tym razem nie zmienię już wiele i ból pozostanie głównym tematem dramatu lub innej rzeczy, którą napiszę. Za bardzo mi na tym zależy, a na dodatek sprawa jest dziś przemilczana. Niech pan weźmie na przykład strukturalizm. Wygląda na to, że on też nie uznaje tego faktu. Dla mnie człowiek jest istotą delikatną i wrażliwą, a ludzka wrażliwość ujawnia się, kiedy badać żywego człowieka w jego konkretnym życiu. Taki pan Foucault, który pozwala sobie na stwierdzenie, że człowiek nie istnieje, wygłasza oczywiście paradoks i wie o tym. A jednak to, co mówi, pozostaje dla niego prawdą do momentu, w

którym po raz pierwszy zabolą go zęby: wtedy będzie pewny swojego istnienia i w ten sposób jego filozofia utraci wszelkie znaczenie.<sup>26)</sup>

/I think... I think that his time I will be writing about pain. I think that the entire, let us say, intellectual dialectic of our time is infected, for no one realizes the importance of pain. Pain is the major, fundamental fact. In this sense, the present ignorance of Schopenhauer... in France, but perhaps also in Italy... Schopenhauer is presumed to be an outmoded author; the majority is still under the influence of Hegel, existentialism, whatever you want, in a word... yes, that ignorance, in my opinion, is a big mistake. The authentic, truly realistic attitude towards life – is to know that pain is a concrete thing and the true reality. Modern philosophy, however, puts on an academic, professorial tone, as if something like pain does not exist. Sartre goes as far as to state that even torture could be pleasant if one imagines that after death one goes to heaven. In my opinion it is not true. I think that such a way of speaking about pain, with lightness, in an academic tone, is one of the biggest mistakes of contemporary philosophy which is extremely bourgeois and usually created by people from the university. And thus I think... I want to say that as far as I am concerned...I would like to write something that could give an idea of pain which is truly terrifying and absolute, which is the ultimate basis for reality. The

universe appears to me as something entirely black and empty, where the only real thing is that which causes suffering: precisely pain. This is a true devil, all the rest is just a declamation. Thus I imagine myself that if I write the play which I mentioned, it will go in this direction. But I cannot be sure that it will be that way – when I start writing, I never know what will happen next; I begin something and that evolves in a new direction which I did not plan at all.

... I think however, that this time I will not change much and pain will stay the main subject of a play or of some other thing that I will write. I care about it too much, and what is more, nowadays this matter is ignored. Take for example structuralism. It seems that it does not accept this fact too. For me, man is a gentle and sensitive creature, and human sensitivity manifests itself only in an inquiry of a living man. Such mister Foucault, who allows himself the statement that man does not exist, obviously utters a paradox, and he knows it. But still what he says remains for him the truth until the moment when he has a toothache for the first time: he will be then sure of his existence, and in that way his philosophy will loose all its significance (trans. M.O.)/.

In the same year Gombrowicz dies. Although, his project remains unfinished, we can see its traces. Through *Kosmos*, Gombrowicz constructed the background, that dark and empty universe about which he was talking to Piera Sanavio. And the only

26) Gombrowicz, *Dzieła*, vol. 14, 393–394.

graspable elements, contrasting somehow with darkness, are painful and deadly chokings of a sparrow, of a cat, and of Ludwik. Christian Skrzyposzek is perhaps a writer of different stature than Gombrowicz, but he faithfully fulfills his testament devoting two novels, *Free Tribune* [Wolna Trybuna] and *Mojra*, precisely to pain. In *Mojra*, he

almost explicitly takes his point of departure from the place where Gombrowicz abandoned his project: in the Tatra Mountains landscape which is also built to some extent out of Young Poland clichés.<sup>27)</sup> Irzykowski's project, a novel devoted to pain was finished, maybe not perfectly, but still...

## резюме

### Σ Картина боли («прозрачная материя») у Гомбровича

Настоящая статья посвящена картинам боли в произведениях Витольда Гомбровича. Анализ картины боли как одного из центральных понятий творчества Гомбровича в целом дает возможность понять специфику его антиметафизики, противоборствующей дуалистической мысли Запада. Для того, чтобы сформировать более правильное представление о польской литературе, в кратких чертах представлена отдельная генеалогическая линия польских писателей, именуемых нами «материалисты-мистики». Генеалогия эта ведется от Кароля Ижиковского через Гомбровича до Кристиана Скшипошека. Двух первых писателей роднит незаконченный литературно-творческий проект, посвященный «боли». Третьему из них – писателю несколько иного, кажется, масштаба по сравнению с Гомбровичем и Ижиковским – удастся реализовать проект этот в своем романе «Мойра».

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