
1

I, Witold Gombrowicz:

Formal Abjection and the Power of Writing in A Kind of a Testament

I don't know who I really am, but I suffer when I am deformed. So, at least I know what I am not. My "self" is nothing more but my will to be myself.

Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of a Testament*

The recognition of the authorial "I" as the floating signifier which attaches itself to the "will" of the writer constitutes one of the central insights of Gombrowicz's autobiographical writings. The radical divestment from the essentialist conceptions of the "self" enunciated in Gombrowicz's statement points away from the high modernist search for meaning and truth, which are supposedly contained by the human subject. Instead, the perpetually exiled writer returns to the posturing that foregrounds the performative aspect of being: "My 'self' is nothing more but my will to be myself" (*KT*, 77).¹ Following Nietzsche's footprints in *Ecce Homo*, Gombrowicz displays a similar compulsion to leave a definite interpretation of his life and work in a short autobiographical text entitled *A Kind of a Testament*. Sensing that the end of life is near, both Nietzsche and Gombrowicz fear that after their death they could be misunderstood and taken for what they are not. Nietzsche opens *Ecce Homo* with this concern: "Seeing that before long I must confront humanity with the most difficult demand ever made of it, it seems indispensable to me to say

who I am. Really, one should know it, for I have not left myself 'without testimony.'"² In order to prevent misreading of his works, Nietzsche leaves his philosophical testament, hoping that it will clearly define the scope and extent of his "I" within the context of Western thought.

Gombrowicz's textual performance is similar, although far more parodic than Nietzsche's autobiographical concern. The title of the English translation captures Gombrowicz's hesitation to take up the writing of a literary testament with a straight face, since he is too well aware of the limitations placed on him by the demands of such a grand genre. Instead, the confrontation with one's mortality forces him to stay true to his parodic relationship to reality and leave "a kind of" a testimony about his life and work. "A kind of" or "as if" are the perfect linguistic signifiers for the position Gombrowicz occupies both as a creator of absurdist prose and as a human being in search of his own "I." In this "kind of" autobiographical effort, where the writer confronts both his physical mortality and his desire to continue his life-in-writing, one can sense the anxiety related to the future in which the name will remain as the only guarantee of the value of the written. "What returns to the name never returns to the living," says Derrida as he works through the textual layers of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*.³ In other words, the recognition and misrecognition that may take place in the future will never come back to the writer-as-a-body, but will always return to the writer-as-a-name. Name will sustain and project itself beyond "the living," continuing to support the identity long after the body ceases to exist. When Gombrowicz speaks of the "self" he does not know, it is a name speaking of an "I" whose fluid boundaries will gain a clearer outline only at the moment of author's death.

"I don't know who I really am" (*KT*, 77). The complex relationship between writing and identity which ends with less certainty is manifest in Gombrowicz's desire to bridge the gap between the two in his life and work. A desire of the writer "to be" through the written word has obsessed him beyond metaphysical assumptions of the identity of the lived and the written. My reading of *A Kind of a Testament* rests on identification of the paradoxical nature of writing which reflects the failures of modernity: people created by mass culture, like the Youthfulls in *Ferdydurke*, are as unreal as any literary character. Their desire to be like the others evokes a sense of formal abjection in the first-person narrators who dominate Gombrowicz's

poetics of prose. His struggle to escape from the grip of the “inter-human,” a formal imperative which crushes their demonic individualism, brings the reader closer to the degraded, infantile and humorous: “I suffer when I am deformed” (*KT*, 77). His rejections of traditionalism, nationalism, and patriotism are all attempts to free himself from the grip of others, whose massified thought and action have led Europe into numerous bloodsheds and moral failures. His desire for absolute freedom from Form has deeper roots in the recognition of abjection that causes his suffering. This horror of being, which lies at the inception of literary articulations, is a point theoretically elaborated by Julia Kristeva in her analysis of Western subjectivity.

Gombrowicz’s testament is shaped by the struggle to formulate the “I” according to the authorial desire which is placed in perpetual conflict with the demands of the established forms. “Where have my assaults on Form got me? To Form. I broke it so much and so often that I became the writer whose subject is Form. That is my form and my definition. And today I, a living individual, am the servant of that official Gombrowicz whom I built with my own hands” (*KT*, 154). Yes, the assault on the established forms can lead only to the creation of other forms. The “living individual” has become the function of the name and can continue to exist only as an appendage to “Gombrowicz,” the name that has assimilated the “self” by using its life and energy to inscribe itself in the history of Western literature. The “self” finds itself in quotation marks which define the fictional and arbitrary quality of its appearance; “I” is nothing more than a manifestation of the “will to be” without the name which would carry its “life” beyond the present, evanescent moment. The metaphysical desire for being and the struggle for recognition by the other are transferred to Gombrowicz’s poetics in a maxim found in the postscript to *Ferdydurke*: “*My work must become myself.*”²⁴ This statement certainly includes the inverse meaning as well: I will become my work. The borderline between my life and my writing will be made invisible and each act I perform in the “private” sphere will be already inscribed as a part of my esthetics. The inverse meaning manifests itself in Gombrowicz’s appearances in his novels: by naming the protagonist and narrator of *Cosmos* Witold, he insists on identifying the narrative “I” with himself. The avant-gardist dream of merging “life” and “art” finds its incarnation in the practice of writing, which erases the boundaries between the creator and the

created. At the same time as the opposition between writing and living is blurred and called into question, the status of what is real and what is imagined becomes very problematic.

Writing appears as a power with a transformative potential, since it carries a promise of bringing the desired recognition to Gombrowicz who has felt "abnormal, twisted, degenerate, abominable and solitary" ever since his childhood (*KT*, 37). He sees writing as a performance that can turn this feeling of constant inadequacy into poetics: if one cannot reach the literary heights achieved by Goethe or Shakespeare, why not explore the sphere of one's own personal pathology? "That slimy pulp of Formlessness in me spilled onto the book—but not to spread like a stinking puddle, no, not at all! In order, rather, to shine with all the colours of the rainbow, to glean with humor, to ennoble with poetry and to attain divine innocence in absurdity" (*KT*, 41). The reality of one's degradation is what constitutes the origins of "I" that emerges from "Formlessness" through the power of writing. Gombrowicz's performance of the "self" takes place on the stage of writing, which is for him a place of struggle between the dark, abject desires that drag him into the depths of dissolution and the formal imperative which demands that abjection be transposed into literature. The writer's "I" claims a double origin, one in the "slimy pulp" which characterizes his most secret desires for the disorder of the instinctual realm, the other in the "divine innocence" which aspires to poetic heights. Writing has the power to assemble these opposing domains into an absurd reality, providing the "I" with a temporary respite from its torments. By helping the "I's" emergence from the "slimy pulp of Formlessness," writing structures reality, which for Gombrowicz has a very different meaning.

"I consider myself a dedicated realist," he claims. "One of the main objects of my writing is to cut a path through Unreality to Reality" (*KT*, 31). Gombrowicz's Reality is obviously not a reality produced by mimesis or a democratic consensus on what is real but a reality peculiar to one's own subjectivity, a reality derived from a "will to be." The task of writing is to attain "Reality" by finding a way out of "Unreality" which surrounds the "I." The discovery of Reality, which is actually never achieved by Gombrowicz's writing, is connected to the gradual takeover by the "I" of all the aspects of the narrative. The narcissistic dimension of writing, which identifies the

“self” with the “world,” subsumes all the aspects of prose to the all-encompassing scope of the narrator’s “I.” That is why Gombrowicz’s characters appear as cartoonish representations of certain aspects of misguided humanity in the twentieth century. “True reality is the one that is peculiar to *you*.”⁵ Reality is for Gombrowicz that which often hides itself from humanity, or that which the humans would rather forget or repress. The “immaturity” and “subhuman greenness” which continue to obsess both him and his works are built into the foundation of his poetics. Instead of striving to stress differences in the experience of reality, dominant culture demands uniformity and conformism as it suppresses the weird, the impolite, and the eccentric discourses within itself. The pressure that Gombrowicz feels from “Unreality” comes from within: “Within me I felt something obscure which nothing could bring to the light of day” (*KT*, 33). This remote, dark, and unknown realm hidden “within” is what constitutes the unreality that plagues Gombrowicz and his narrators. The striving of that subterranean realm within to come to the light of day is what nurtures the desire for writing. This obscure realm within needs to find a voice, a discourse, or an inscription that will allow it to become Reality. Writing allows Unreality to attain a symbolic form, as it struggles to become “literature.” This concept of the real is very close to that of Lacan, who treats this register of experience as something that constantly remains foreclosed from the subject, yet determines his actions in most fundamental ways.⁶

A quest for deciphering the meaning of “reality” underlies most of the narratives constructed by Gombrowicz. For example, the narrator and characters of *Cosmos* are subjected to a torrent of absurd events and clues that proliferate around them, initiated by Witold’s and Fuchs’s accidental sighting of a hanged sparrow. “There is a sort of excess about reality, and after a certain point, it can become intolerable,” says Witold, the narrator-protagonist of *Cosmos* (*C*, 66). The unbearable reality derived from the obscure depths of “interiority” is combined with the “exteriority” of writing as the absurd reality is constructed for the reader. The desire for order that may at some point appear and relieve the oppressive burden of this unreal reality by discovering its purpose haunts Witold as he interrogates himself: “What was I looking for? A basic theme, a *Leitmotiv*, an axis, something of which I could take firm hold and use as a basis for reconstructing my personality here? But distraction, not only my own personal, inner distraction, but also that coming from without, from

the chaos, profusion and excess of things, preventing me from concentrating" (C, 87). The process of constructing the narrative is identified with the process of self-creation, as the "I" searches for the ever shifting ground of reality. Gombrowicz admits that "*Cosmos* is a novel which creates itself, as it is written" (KT, 137). This metafictional dimension of creating the narrative without a firm plan is revealed several times in the narrative itself, as Witold complains of the chaotic structure of reality. "It was chaos, like putting my hand into a ragbag and seeing what came out and whether it was suitable . . . for building my house with, and my house assumed pretty fantastic forms" (C, 118). The identity and reality depend on the chance operation that guides the construction of the narrative. Reality is chasm and a chaos which haunts the "I" whenever it tries to step on any type of *terra firma* of identification. Repeating Nietzsche's autobiographical performance, Gombrowicz locates the double origin and existence of this obscure, yet real, chasm in childhood and youth, which were dominated by the parents. While Nietzsche confronts the reader with a riddle of his "dual descent" by claiming that he is "already dead as his father" and "still living and becoming old" as his mother,⁷ Gombrowicz spells out the origin of his artistic inclinations clearly: "I am an artist because of my mother" (KT, 29).

Because the mother is the embodiment of formlessness and unreality, she teaches the writer some basic mechanisms about form and reality by negative example. Mother is instability itself, since she cannot guarantee reality as a logical order. "It was she who pushed me into pure nonsensicality, into the absurd, which was later to become one of the most important elements of my art" (KT, 30). Gombrowicz's rejection of the mother bears all the marks of abjection, a force of "immaturity" that haunts both the identity he is trying to manufacture and writing which makes its elusive permanence possible. The lack of Form cannot be allowed "to spread like a stinking puddle" since that would abolish the artistic "I" and submerge it into the attractive, yet feared, realm of unbridled instinct and low culture. The abject reality must not be allowed to penetrate the art directly, but only as an esthetically transformed configuration. Interestingly enough, Gombrowicz identifies this domain with the mother, which Kristeva has theorized as a source of abjection for a majority of "true" writers.⁸ The "stinking puddle" of formlessness which "I" inherits from the mother is something that continues to disturb any attempt at unified identity. Abjection is the force that

provides space for ambiguity, defies externally imposed boundaries, and sees order as a threat to the reality which emerges from the obscure depths. That reality is saturated with disgust, violence, and nonsense, and mother is blamed for the failure of reason to restore order to the destructive reign of desire. Gombrowicz's mother is constructed as a chimera of unreality, while the father is seen as a purveyor of a heritage of "lucidity, his level-headedness and his sense of discipline" (KT, 29).

Gombrowicz constructs the father as order itself, an instance that prevents the maternal disorder from continuing to perform its destructive work without a check. The role assigned to the father in the game of double origins is that of a form-giver, a guarantor of a family name that will continue to carry the "I" beyond the transitory realm of death. "My father? Handsome, tall, distinguished, very proper, punctual, methodical, not very broad-minded or artistic, a practicing Catholic but no bigot" (KT, 28). Paradoxically, the father appears as the image of upper-class mediocrity that Gombrowicz sets out to ironize throughout his literary opus. Yet, as a "real" father, he provides a place from which guilt and shame caused by one's "abnormality and degeneracy" can be fully experienced and transformed into a literary value. The very condition of apprehending one's difference from others lies within this identification with the father's name and position, since only then can one discover what is hidden beneath the perfect external form of discipline and order. This paradoxical identification with the father as an expression of the "proper and methodical" allows Gombrowicz to examine the other, less appealing side of his personality. The maternal world of formlessness, the "stinking puddle" which constantly threatens one's sanity and normality, the unreality that forces Johnnie to flee at the end of *Ferdydurke* with his face in his hands—all these are symptoms of the unfathomable obscurity that cannot and should not be known.

Yet, the power of writing allows one to perform the cathartic act of externalizing abjection by way of metaphor, parody, and allegory, which turn the everyday into the absurd. Speech (at first) and writing (later) introduce the symbolic as a force which gradually hollows out the abject by providing it with communicable articulation, while the ambiguity continues to follow Gombrowicz throughout his life: "That was the source of my relationship with all that is repugnant, disgusting, horrible—for, though it disgusted me, yet I felt drawn to

it, not to say attached to it" (*KT*, 39). This ambivalence is solved by the constant return to the origins of one's ego through writing: the source of inspiration is the defiled muse of abjection. "*The abject would thus be the 'object' of primal repression,*" Kristeva affirms in *Powers of Horror*⁹ (Kristeva's emphasis). Gombrowicz intuitively accounts for the work of primal repression (*Urverdrängung*) which is at once repeated and revealed: the maternal within the "I" continues to corrupt the proper, ordered "reality" by its formlessness as it perpetually exchanges one metaphor for another. The paternal is the external shell in this process of masking and unmasking within the medium of writing, while it provides a configuration which Gombrowicz sees as essential in the creative process. His lifelong preoccupation with the ability of writing to simultaneously construct and deconstruct any given identity is predicated on the effects of this primal repression. The maternal and paternal legacy therefore appear in yet another hierarchical configuration within the "I" whose power is derived from the writing that imposes its "Form" on others, subjecting them to various types of "deformations." Those who are active and creative impose their form on those who are its passive recipients and consumers. The form assumes two separate functions: first, it is a tool of self-creation which allows an author to project the identity he desires by literary means; second, the "I" created in this way has the power to fashion other identities, through the construction of literary characters and their relationships. The reality created by the "I" articulates its own conflicts, which are transposed into a form of a parodic existential drama. The "I" and its reality can never be fully known and accessible, since that would signify the surrender to the conventional, the boring and the predictable. This desire for perpetual transcendence of its own limits places the "I" on the side of life itself, since the surrender to forms and limits imposed from the outside can only bring about its death. "I" is therefore conceptualized as an "oscillation around an inaccessible center," while at the same time it constantly "endeavors to be the assertion of an identity" (*KT*, 77). Oscillation is a repetition with a difference, a constant forward and backward motion of signification which can never fully reach the plenitude of meaning or being. Although identity is striven after, it is always perceived as a construction dependent on identifications which take place outside the domain and control of the authorial "I." This undermines the possibility of a complete or serious identification and leads the "I" away

from identity. The impossibility of identity to ground itself as a stable and recognizable center parallels and predates some of the most important insights of Derrida: "Or else we might say that 'différance' was the center that allowed the play of differences among themselves, while withdrawing itself from that play."¹⁰ In other words, the "inaccessible center" cannot be fully reduced to a definition or a formula, since the center itself is fluid and constantly shifting. The writing which oscillates around it is therefore aware of its performative nature, while at the same time always attempting to reach for the inaccessible. The center is dispersed and dissipated through the act of writing, as the "I" continues to take on different external masks and shells. Writing lays bare the effects that form has on the creation of the "I" and its multiple and often contradictory identifications. This is essential for understanding Gombrowicz's poetics, which is predicated on "cutting through" the immense layers of unreality which everyday life and interpersonal relationships throw his way. Writing is the only practice which can embody these contradictions without trying to impose a preconceived, rational order on them. It examines "unreality" by turning it into the "reality" of the written, which for Gombrowicz has the status of enunciated desire of the subject "to be." Being is equated with writing, while the relationships to others are seen as the negative but inevitable confrontations with them and their institutions. While writing provides some hope for authenticity, the world of others and their artificial relationships cause the subject to fall into the "interhuman" sphere of unreality. The "interhuman" space opens up a multitude of possibilities for misperception, misrecognition, and miscommunication. The unreality plunges the "I" into boredom and desperation, since its life is perceived as the effect of conventions people are subjected to as they engage in a dialogue.

Gombrowicz's narrators are irritated by the triviality and predictability of characters and situations which surround them as they endlessly seek an exit from the world of oppressive social decorum and falsified human relationships. The act of narration which creates form and reality is something that oppresses the narrator, although he is driven to continue the process: "How exhausting was this superabundance and excess from which new persons, events and things constantly emerged. If only the flood would stop for a moment" (*C*, 109). The escape is usually found outside the bounds of reason, in the exhilarating absurdity of nonsensical clues whose

interpretation turns into a narrative fuel for the entire novel. The "I" of the narrator is usually obsessed with the problem of knowledge of its surroundings, which supposedly hide the secret truth behind the proliferation of insignificant and often absurd clues. In *Cosmos*, the main narrative axis is established between the "hanged" entities that the narrator first discovers and then acts upon: a sparrow, a piece of wood, and, finally, a cat. One of the main concerns of the narrator is his inability to tell the story "as it really happened," since the infinite number of events have constantly to be forgotten in favor of an ordered "reality." The exasperated narrator Witold asks himself: "Will no one ever be able to reproduce the incoherence of the living moment at its moment of birth? Born as we are out of chaos, why can we never establish contact with it? No sooner do we look at it than order, pattern, shape is born under our eyes" (C, 31). The desire for disorder, caused by the failure of the universe inherited from the mother, persists in the face of this compulsive ordering of reality. It is indeed the telling of the story, the construction of the narrative pattern that creates order out of chaos while precluding Witold from establishing a direct contact with the "incoherence of the living moment." Writing has the power to lend form and provide order even in the hardest of cases, when one is confronted with such absurd events as the hanging of the sparrow in the middle of the forest. The ability of writing to create sense out of nonsense by laying bare the effects of form is something that intrigues and even frightens Gombrowicz: "For me nothing is more fantastic than to *be* here, now, and to be *as I am*, defined, concrete and not someone else. And I fear Form as if it were a wild animal!" (KT, 134). This fear drives the "I" to escape the reality of unreality caused by the form and to constantly expand its boundaries. "I" perceives itself as fantastic in any "defined and concrete" form. The existence shaped by Form is the source of the "fantastic," as the "I" attempts to escape its effects and fears for its own independence from it. But, the realization that escape from one Form leads to the creation of another causes the author to fear it "as if it were a wild animal." Writing is a paradoxical process which promises liberation from Form, while imposing its own at the same time. Subjecting oneself to the tyranny of Form leads to the gradual ossification of the "I" and its slow departure into death and oblivion. Gombrowicz's prose gives the expression to this anxiety of the "living individual" confronted by Form: "Do other people share my anxiety? To what extent? If a man doesn't see Form

as I see it, in its autonomy, its perpetual malleability, its creative fury, its caprices and its perversions, its accumulations and its dis-solutions, its intricacies and continual confusions, what can *Cosmos* mean to him?" (*KT*, 134). The drama of Form is at the bottom of the creative process which reproduces the drama of self-creation. The fact that every identity depends on that of the other, however hard it strives to be autonomous, illustrates how deeply Form penetrates relationships between humans.

Gombrowicz was obsessed with the problem of form and identity throughout his life and writing career. In a 1964 entry to his diary, he rethinks his exile in Argentina upon landing in Berlin: "If this tourism did not leave me barren, it was because, luckily, as a writer used to manipulating form, I could undertake the shaping of my person from this new position, in this situation . . . but wasn't Argentina one of my predestinations, since as a child in Poland I did everything I could to march out of step in the parade?" (*D III*, 109). The advantage of the writer in exile is the ability to subject his life to the laws of form as if it were a literary text, especially since he has stopped envisioning himself in essentialist terms since he was a child. "Marching out of step" and becoming an other is fully realized only in Argentina, where the operation of self-creation has to begin all over again. Exile is perceived as a beneficial condition in this process of distancing from one's own roots, which are perceived as obstacles to the process of artistic and personal self-creation. This process includes the gradual rejection of all identities that were unconsciously imposed at some time on the author's life.

Gombrowicz's disdain for any form of shared inter-human project, and especially for that of national belonging, matures fully only after he settles in Argentina. It is especially his Polishness that begins to irritate him: "I had to break with Poland and turn against it" (*KT*, 56). The native country, similarly to the maternal realm, has to be rejected in order for the "I" to experience the sense of boundless freedom and rejuvenation. The national belonging has the potential of leveling differences and dulling a sense of subjective encounter with the world. "A Pole is a Pole by nature. Whereby the more a Pole is himself, the more will he be a Pole. If Poland does not allow him to think and feel freely, it means that Poland does not allow him to be himself fully, that is to be a Pole fully . . ." (*D II*, 14). This paradox of becoming a Pole by rejecting Polish nationalism underlies most of Gombrowicz's thinking about collective identities. Polishness is

oppressive if it is imposed in its vulgar, populist form. It operates by using stereotypes and leveling the possibilities for individual variance. "Thus my desire to 'overcome Poland' was synonymous with the desire to strengthen our individual Polishness. I simply wanted the Pole to stop being the product 'of' an exclusively collective life and 'for' a collective life" (*D* II, 15). Like any other ideology, nationalism has the power to mold and stabilize identities according to the interests of the collective. Needless to say, this process imposes the most oppressive forms of identity onto the individuals who have a strong need to be different. While the silent majority may accept this vision of Polishness, Gombrowicz sees the strength of the Pole in the exact opposite. "I strove for a Pole who could take pride in saying: I belong to an inferior nation. With pride" (*D* II, 15). Instead of glorifying his country as the superior product of civilization, this type of Pole would reject the collective illusion and ground himself in the reality of inferiority. The only way to really love Poland would be to admit its real position of a secondary European country and accept it as such. Any other way could lead one into the delusion of collective Form, which extends its malignant influence both among the Poles in Poland and those living in exile.

This collectivization of being is unacceptable for individualists like Gombrowicz, who seeks a way out of any massified vision of reality: "To break away! To keep one's distance! The writer, the artist, or anyone who attaches importance to his spiritual development, must feel no more than a resident in Poland or Argentine, and it is his duty to regard Poland or Argentine as an obstacle, almost as an enemy" (*KT*, 57). The rejection of one's nation is a duty, since it breaks the chain of identifications which begin with the family and continue to restrict the writer throughout his life. To break away and keep one's distance from any identification with a collectivity is a process which is only reinforced for Gombrowicz in Argentina. He is able to turn exile into an experiment performed on himself, by himself: the writing of the diary allows him to achieve the greatest possible distance from his roots and create an ever changing persona for himself. The power of writing to constitute the "I" through the "manipulation of form" leads him out of the "parade" into exile, which is also the moment of tremendous artistic liberation. The author describes the atmosphere of departure from 1939 Poland as the escape from "the feverish din of European radio speakers," which emit "the stifling fury of nationalists" (*D* III, 108-9). What he

encounters in Argentina is the silence of the land which knows nothing of him or his work. "A silence like that in the forest, a silence such that one hears even the drone of a tiny fly after the commotion of the previous years, makes a strange music—and in this ripe and overwhelming silence, two exceptional, singular, specific words began to make themselves audible: Witold Gombrowicz. Witold Gombrowicz" (*D* III, 108). The silence of Argentina is welcome because the name of "Witold Gombrowicz" can now become audible; the trans-Atlantic exile is therefore constructed as a space where one is finally free from the constricting environment of European nationalisms and its totalizing demands by becoming an "I" which knows no bounds or national allegiances. The name of "Witold Gombrowicz" is not yet perceived as a form of oppression for the "living individual" since it emerges anew in a completely alien linguistic and cultural environment. The age-old traditions which prevent the artist from having a sense of freedom by placing constant demands that his art serve the nation are dismissed as a noise of history which drowns subjective, personal voices. Argentina offers silence, distance, and freedom from history that makes the emergence of "Witold Gombrowicz" possible.

But, at the same time, the emergence of the name-in-exile is difficult because that name means nothing in the Porteño literary salons: "Alone, lost, cut off, alien, unknown, a drowned man" (*D* III, 108). Gombrowicz in Argentina stops being identified with his name; this creates a simultaneous sense of liberation and desperation. At the same time as hunger, cold, and homelessness begin to threaten it, the "I" feels rejuvenated by the fall into poverty and uncertainty: "I, Mr. Gombrowicz, plunged into degradation with passion!" (*KT*, 86). Degradation is a guarantee that life will prevail over the demands of Form for definition, order, sense, and identity. Finally, the dark realm of abjection that had plagued him while he was living his upper class life is fully externalized: Gombrowicz is destitute and free from the oppressive bonds of "good society" he left behind in Poland. He begins to share a destiny of those whom he could only observe across the invisible, yet impenetrable, boundary that divided the nobility from the peasants. Remembering his youth on the family estate, he realizes that the comfortable life of the Gombrowicz family depends on the servants. "They were the ones who really worked, while we simply ate the roasted geese" (*KT*, 32). What oppresses him the most is the unbearable boredom of the family

drawing-room, as he secretly begins to adore "the pantry, the kitchen, the stables, the stable lads, the farm girls" while social and economic degradation becomes his "ideal forever" (*KT*, 33). The provincial culture of the landowning class demands denial of the physical and instinctual aspects of life, while that of the peasants reveals "life" in all of its aspects. "The servants! the servants! They knew what life was about" (*KT*, 32). This romanticization of the existential vitality and freedom of the peasant and the servant serves as a narrative device for the imaginary liberation the author constructs through the process of his "becoming through abjection."

In Buenos Aires, Gombrowicz encounters the life and freedom of the have-nots, an encounter that is followed by the transformation of his personality. He embraces youth as the only "value in itself" which is able to guarantee the rebirth of the "I" in this new, trans-Atlantic realm. "Here, youth, already degraded as youth, was subjected to a second degradation, as rural youth, proletarian youth. And I, *Ferdydurke*, repeated the third section of my book, the story of Mientus who tries to fraternize with a stable boy" (*D I*, 132). The new life that "I" embarks on in exile feeds off this new "fraternization" with youths from Retiro, which challenges the established boundaries of both class and gender. At the same time, the "I" from the fictional world of *Ferdydurke* becomes identical with the "I" of the living experience in Argentina. The postulated world of writing finds its form in the lived experience of exile, bridging once again the gap between "art" and "life." Denying that his associations with the doubly degraded boys from the Retiro are motivated by erotic attraction, Gombrowicz affirms his desire for youth itself that leads him to seek out these relationships. The "I" discovers its own youth in these boys and excludes women from the sphere of identifications on esthetic grounds: "For a man, youth, beauty and grace in a woman will never be as final in their expression because a woman is still something else and she creates a possibility of that which to a certain biological extent rescues us: a child" (*D I*, 132). In other words, male youth is "final in its expression" because there is no hope of continuity through the biological extension; women can extend their youth by bearing children. Male inability to create life lends a tragic dimension to their youth and beauty, causing a nostalgic identification and temporal regression for Gombrowicz. "I" sees the possibility of rejuvenation in homoerotic encounters with the boys who possess that paradoxical quality of youthful degradation which gradually

evaporates with age. The discovery of oneself in the other is tragic because there is a perception that youth is perishable and irreversible: "My own because it was also mine, it [youth] came to life in someone like me, not in a woman, but in a man, this was the same youth that had cast me off, now blossoming in someone else" (*D I*, 132). This narcissistic longing for the boys from Retiro turns them into mirrors used by Gombrowicz for imaginary returns to the world of his own youth. The other is never understood as other, always as an extension of oneself. The desire for "beauty and grace" within the same gender is the desire for the past, when "I" possessed the same youthful paradox of the degraded, yet authentic, life. Youth appears as the idealization which the "I" needs in order to sustain its struggle for authenticity and the preservation of its narcissism. Others are incorporated into the "I" as a direct function of this narcissism, never loved as others in their specificity and difference. The boys from Retiro never have names in Gombrowicz's autobiographical writing, but they always appear in writing simply as "boys" whose main quality is contained within their physique. Love of the other is never possible, since the energy of the "I" is always centered around the act of rejuvenation and self-creation through writing. The recognition of one's past within the other serves the purpose of placing the origins of the "I" within one's own youth and degradation. That is why women and boys can be treated only as resting places along the road of perpetual self-discovery through writing, never as the aim of the journey itself.

"Love was refused me, once and for all, from the start, but was that because I couldn't give it a form, an expression of its own, or because I didn't have it in me? I don't know. Was it lacking or did I strangle it? Or maybe my mother strangled it" (*KT*, 33). Mother emerges again, this time as the strangler of love, which cannot find its way out and fashion a proper, acceptable form in reality. The oppressive Form of amorous relationships, which involves mutual idealization and admiration, creates one of the most bizarre spectacles in the theater of interpersonal relationships. Gombrowicz's lovers are always grotesque caricatures acting under the spell of conventional expressions of love. The three honeymoon couples from *Cosmos* exhibit all the forms of love in "good society" during the final excursion in the novel, as they exhibit "superficial and frivolous gaiety" (*C*, 97). Cousin Isabel from *Ferdydurke* is also the incarnation of an object that does not deserve to be loved since she lives

perpetually "in the expectation of meeting someone to whom she could belong" (*F*, 266). Love appears in Gombrowicz's novels as the most compromised of human relationships because it is so dependent on idealization. And idealization is exactly what Gombrowicz poetics constantly tries to undermine. Those whose identities are too stable and well defined cause him endless irritation, since they close off their human potential for degradation and play roles assigned them by the "interhuman form." Since humans are not willing to confront their immature side, they find a way out by overidentifying with their gender roles and seeking fulfillment through mutual idealization of the loved object. After divorcing himself from the sense of national belonging, Gombrowicz attempts to break with yet another identification that he feels is an obstacle to "life." Gender roles produce an excess of reality, turning masculinity and femininity into petrified models whose demands ruin those who identify with them too closely. It is especially masculinity that bothers Gombrowicz, since it constitutes the main pressure inflicted on his own "I." "I knew the masculinity that they, men, fabricated among themselves, goading each other into it, mutually forcing each other to it in a panic-stricken fear at the woman in themselves" (*D I*, 145). The appearance of the woman in the midst of masculine identity causes men to repress her at the expense of enhanced manliness which is fabricated through various homoerotic games. That sort of male bonding is repulsive to Gombrowicz, who would rather overcome all traits of massively imposed identity. Instead of identifying with the assigned gender role, Gombrowicz attempts to overcome identity once again and achieve a transgendered position of someone who is male only by the accident of birth. "In order to prevent this, I had to find a different position for myself—beyond man and woman—which would nevertheless have nothing to do with a 'third sex'—an asexual and purely human position from which I could begin airing these stuffy and sexually flawed areas" (*D I*, 145). The power of Form that influences both sex and gender is so strong that "I" feels compelled to go beyond the constricted binarism of identities and manufacture a position "beyond man and woman." This desire to create an "I" beyond identities is seen as the driving form of life and youth. To be unable to evade identification with Form means surrender to old age and death.

The life behind the name "Witold Gombrowicz" can continue as long as its protagonist continues to affirm immaturity, surprising

both himself and those around him. Once there is no more energy for combating Form, a kind of metaphysical entropy, combined with the awareness of biological aging, begins to assail Gombrowicz. "This awareness: that I have already become myself. I already am. Witold Gombrowicz, these two words, which I carried on myself, are now accomplished. I am. I am too much" (*D I*, 172). Like Nietzsche, whose *Ecce Homo* is subtitled *How One Becomes What One Is*, Gombrowicz has a sense that he has finally become himself and that any further experiments with Form will always be contained within the realm of those "two words" that somehow fix his identity, as death inevitably closes in. Gombrowicz's name subsists on the body of writing like a parasite, feeding off its power to give birth to Form, while constantly attempting to escape its "creative fury." The "I" can have a Form only because writing constantly transfers its power back to it, constructing an endless chain of identities which are continually assumed and then rejected. Gombrowicz's "will to be" is actually a "will to write," to inscribe oneself as a Form in all its plurality and multiplicity. Therefore, Form "becomes the tool with which man is shaped," a form of writing which converts various aspects of the "self" into literary objects. The triangular loop among the artistic "I," the power of writing, and the Formal Imperative assures that "Witold Gombrowicz" is remembered as a name for a particular approach to literary creation within the traditions of the European avant-garde.

Notes

1. Gombrowicz's *A Kind of Testament* was originally published in French as *Entretiens de Dominique de Roux avec Gombrowicz* by Editions Pierre Belfond in 1968. The book supposedly evolved from a series of conversations with Dominique de Roux about Gombrowicz's life and work. However, the preface to the Polish edition of *Testament* (Warszawa: Res Publica, 1990) claims that Gombrowicz refused to be interviewed by de Roux, but constructed the entire text of the testament in the form of the self-interview.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1968), 217.

3. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell (New York: Schocken, 1985), 7.

4. Witold Gombrowicz, "Postscript," *Ferdydurke*, trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York: Penguin, 1986), 273.
5. Gombrowicz, "Postscript," 273.
6. For the concept of the real (*réel*) in Jacques Lacan's work see *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 1977), especially the chapter "On the Possible Treatment of Psychosis."
7. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 222.
8. See especially the case of Louis-Ferdinand Céline in Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).
9. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12.
10. Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993), 78.