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# THE DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD OF AN ADULT: AGING AND MATURITY IN WITOLD GOMBROWICZ'S *PORNOGRAFIA*

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## Abstract

Maturity and immaturity are the hallmarks of Witold Gombrowicz's literary texts. They were introduced in his first novel, *Ferdydurke*, and an early collection of short stories, *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity*, and continued to play a central role in his fiction and nonfiction works, including the *Diary*, *A Kind of Testament*, and the penultimate novel, *Pornografia*. Although Gombrowicz has been widely regarded as a staunch critic of maturity and defender of immature spontaneity, playfulness, and formlessness, this view is largely based on his earlier writings. Later works offer a more complex image of Gombrowicz. *Pornografia*, in particular, no longer pits immaturity against maturity with the goal of discrediting the latter through humor and irony. Instead, it experiments with the possibility of a new relationship between the two, a relationship which would ameliorate the discontents that often come with aging.

**Keywords:** *Witold Gombrowicz; Maturity; Aging; Polish Modernism; Transgression*

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*Maturity and Immaturity in Gombrowicz's Writings*

If it were possible to reverse development, to achieve some sort of roundabout way back to childhood, to have once again its fullness and limitlessness. My ideal is to "mature" into childhood ["dojrzeć" do dzieciństwa]. Only that would be true maturity. (Schulz 1989: 424)<sup>1</sup>

Schulz's idea of maturing into childhood might be expected to greatly interest Gombrowicz. And it very well may have done. Although there is no record of Schulz sharing it with Gombrowicz in 1936, when he mentioned it in a letter to Andrzej Pleśniewicz, Gombrowicz reports that at that time he and Schulz were close companions (2012: 520). Their conversations almost certainly included childhood and maturity, especially given that Schulz sought out Gombrowicz after reading his *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* (*Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania*, 1933) and that during the ensuing years of friendship Gombrowicz was writing *Ferdydurke* (1937), in which he returns to the issue of maturity and immaturity that he broached in the *Memoirs*. However, it is less in *Ferdydurke* than much later, in *Pornografia* (1960), where Schulz's idea of maturing into childhood takes root, albeit differently from how Schulz envisioned it. Unlike in *Ferdydurke*, in which the protagonist is caught between the world of childhood and that of maturity and, too old for the former and too young for the latter, rejects both; and equally unlike Schulz's vision of an adult person who recovers the fullness of his childhood experience, in *Pornografia* the discontents of adulthood impel the middle-aged protagonist-narrator to forge a new relationship between maturity and immaturity that rises above the current convention of superior adults and inferior adolescents.

In *Pornografia* Gombrowicz retains the perspective on maturity and immaturity from his early works as more than attributes of one's age. Maturity and immaturity remain two divergent existential and epistemological positions personified in adolescent and adult characters. But now they also become vehicles of Gombrowicz's meditation on aging, in part because he has become older and in part because he feels older, as his nonfictional texts demonstrate. The extensive body of scholarship on Gombrowicz, some of which I engage with below, has stressed the view on maturity and immaturity as philosophical positions and largely shied away from considering them in a more literal sense as notions that underpin Gombrowicz's later inquiry into the disturbing trajectory of human life from immaturity to maturity and his growing conviction that one must doggedly try to disrupt this trajectory. This more literal consideration of these notions is warranted by the gradual shift in Gombrowicz's fictional writings away from the humor and irony that pervade his early narratives, a shift that has important implications for the theme of maturity and immaturity, as we will see.

Moreover, in his nonfictions Gombrowicz reflects with an increasing intensity on the negative impact that aging has had on him. For instance, in *A Kind of Testament* (*Entretiens de Dominique de Roux avec Gombrowicz*) (1968) he confesses: "You know from my diary how difficult it was for me to break with youth. This break came very late. I continued to look and feel young until I was forty. I belong to that race of people who have never known middle age. I tasted age the moment I said farewell to youth" (1973: 122). It is not a coincidence that this confession comes in the chapter that covers the period when *Pornografia* was written. *Diary* (*Dziennik*) (1953-1969) contains a similar confession relating to this period. When in one entry Gombrowicz elaborates on his observation that at the beginning human life is indefinite, a vague promise of the future when one will finally become a concrete person, but that when this future actually comes one is suddenly too much of a concrete person, he laments that the same has happened to him: "This awareness: that I have already become myself. I already am" (2012: 211). He deplores having become too concrete, complete, and definite – that is, mature. Although his maturity is not just an issue of having grown older, age does play a role in it: "My former impulses, my gaffes, my dissonances, all this trying immaturity [...] where has all that gone?" (1973: 154). He wants to rebel against who he has become, but unfortunately "age and ill-health have removed my means" (154-155). While refusing to discuss what exactly this rebellion would look like, he nonetheless notes that his literary texts contain important clues: "I would rather people looked for it in the live matter of my artistic work" (155). *Pornografia* offers by far the most comprehensive literary representation of this rebellion.

Unlike for Schulz, for Gombrowicz immaturity refers to the period of adolescence rather than childhood. Although children are immature as well, inasmuch as they, like adolescents, lack the experience and practical disposition of adults, immaturity emerges only in the intermediary stage of adolescence, which according to Gombrowicz takes place between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four (2012: 666) and sometimes lasts until thirty (2009: 207; 2012: 47). This is because adolescents are oriented toward the world of adulthood. Unlike the relatively self-enclosed period of childhood during which we physically depend on adults but otherwise live in our own childhood world, adolescence is a transitory period that is already suffused with the adult world: adolescents regard the adult world as a site of superiority and the key to the independence they crave. Children are not immature, since no one expects them to be mature. Adolescents, on the other hand, owing to their proximity to adulthood and ambition to join it as soon as possible, stand out as not yet mature, and hence immature. The trouble with the adolescent orientation toward maturity is that the adult world disappoints them soon after they become part of it. Adulthood does

not deliver on its promise of independence and self-determination. And herein lies the paradox that Gombrowicz explores in *Pornografia*: when we are young we are not in control of ourselves and our lives because we are inexperienced and under adult supervision, and we want to quickly grow up to get in control; but once we come of age, we miss the vigor, excitement, and unpredictability of youth because adulthood, instead of granting us the freedom to be and do as we like, entangles us in conventions, social roles, and personal habits that are no less oppressive than the inferiority to grownups that we experienced during adolescence.

### *Maturity and Immaturity in 'Pornografia'*

*Pornografia* tells the story of its protagonist-narrator Witold who has recently met a theater director, Fryderyk, in wartime Warsaw. Together they accept an invitation from Witold's acquaintance Hipolit, his wife Maria, and their sixteen-year-old daughter Henia to visit them on their estate in the countryside. After a Sunday mass in the neighboring village, Witold notices an affinity between Henia and a seventeen-year-old Karol, a farmhand on the estate, an affinity whereof the adolescents do not seem to be aware. Witold suspects that Fryderyk sees it as well, as he often observes the adolescents and talks to them. A few days later they all pay a visit to Henia's fiancé Waław and his mother Amelia. After dinner, Amelia dies of self-inflicted knife wounds following a row with the local boy Józek after catching him stealing in the pantry. For Waław, what is more distressing than his mother's death is that during the row with Józek she bit him, something that he cannot fathom because she was the paragon of decorum and piety. The scandalous biting encourages Witold and Fryderyk, who consider Waław too old and uptight for Henia, to conspire to bring Henia and Karol together. Back on Hipolit's estate, they prepare a short performance with the youths in the garden and secretly show it to Waław without telling him that it is staged. These sudden invasions of immature eccentricities – first his mother's biting and now a quirky side to his wife-to-be – threaten Waław's mature world of dignity, correctness, and proper values. This threat intensifies when the underground resistance organization sentences its leader Siemian, who has recently sought refuge on the estate, to death for desertion. Hipolit is ordered to organize the assassination, which eventually falls on Karol and Henia after no one else is willing to carry it out. Humiliated by his cowardice and the apparent fearlessness of Karol and Henia, Waław kills Siemian, willingly substitutes himself for him, and is in turn killed by the unsuspecting youths.

Witold is a disgruntled adult who has lost all excitement in life. When he encounters Karol and Henia, he is captivated by their youth, even co-

erced by it – Józio, the protagonist-narrator in *Ferdydurke*, calls the sudden moments of intrusion of youth into one's adult life "painful coercion [gwałt bolesny]," adding that it is "the most fruitful of all coercions [najplodniejszym z gwałtów]" (2000: 83). What Witold finds so tantalizingly fascinating about Karol and Henia is that they are no longer children but at the same time they do not yet belong to the world of adults. Admittedly, they do all they can to comply with this world and be permitted to enter it. For instance, Karol wants to get a job in the city to become independent, please his father, and help his mother financially (2009: 63; hereafter cited only by page number), while Henia wants to marry Wacław because she believes that it is an honor to join such an esteemed person in matrimony, with the amendment after a pause that at least she will no longer sleep around with partisans, which only confirms her resolve to become mature (82). These adolescent characters want to be recognized by adults as mature. However, even though they accept the conventional model of growing up as assuming responsibility and becoming serious about life, they also flout this very convention. For example, Karol pulls an obscene prank on the washerwoman (54) and Henia partners with Karol in his insolent accosting of Fryderyk to give him his jacket (96), a behavior that upsets Amalia as juvenile and unbefitting her son's future wife. Importantly, these moments of flouting maturity are spontaneous and without purpose, that is, immature. Karol and Henia want to be mature, but for now they remain immature.

Witold is spellbound by Karol and Henia's immaturity. He thinks that Henia is bewitchingly incomplete, "not yet a woman but merely a prelude to a woman" (79-80), which he contrasts with the "decay, demise, torment, abomination" (56), "monstrosity" (177), and "ugliness" (210) of adults. Adults are ugly because they are too complete. They have settled into serious, stable, finished forms that leave little room for individuality, creativity, and change. For Witold, "seriousness [powaga] is the highest and most unrelenting postulate of maturity" (122).<sup>2</sup> When Wacław wants to win Henia back from Karol, he is certain of his success because they live in the world governed by adults in which he has the upper hand: "I'll call them to – what's important [do powagi]!" (169). Witold is enthralled by Henia's incompleteness and immature playfulness, and angry when she yields to Wacław's seriousness: "So, instead of being splendid with Karol (which she was capable of), she preferred to go for the attorney and whore around with him, cuddling up to his pampered ugliness! Whereas the attorney, in his gratitude, was quietly stroking her" (126-127).

Although Witold despises maturity and celebrates immaturity, the latter also occasionally irritates him. For instance, he is annoyed that to Henia everything is "a game of excitement, a constant teasing" (82). Karol's erratic behavior is similarly infuriating. An immature prankster, Karol is at

the same time ready, whenever called upon by an adult, to become serious and orderly, like a “young soldier” (131). Even though he adores Siemian for his war accomplishments, when summoned to kill him, he agrees to do it with “incredible easiness” (196). Strangely, Witold is angry exactly about what attracts him to the youths: their reckless, frivolous, and fickle behavior that sets them apart from the seriousness, caution, and predictability of the adults. When he exclaims, “Oh, if only they were a few years older!” (34), he intimates that the youths cannot fully grasp the relevance of their immaturity due to their age, thereby inadvertently repeating the hallowed belief of maturity that age is the prerequisite for more informed decisions. Witold’s exclamation shows that he is not immune to the kind of expectations that adults normally have of adolescents. He, too, wants the immature to be more mature, even if for the opposite reason from accelerating their passage to adulthood.

### *Reality as a Construct*

Does the incongruity between Witold’s captivation and irritation by Karol and Henia’s immaturity tell us more about him than about them? Is what he sees in the youths and what he believes can help him restore his life’s lost allure purely in his head? Some critics have argued that protagonist-narrators in Gombrowicz’s novels are not abnormally sensitive to furtive glances among characters and hidden links among things, but simply abnormal, that is, psychologically anomalous. According to Stanisław Jasionowicz, perceiving everything as enigmatic and with suspicion, as he believes is the case with Gombrowicz’s protagonist-narrators, is a symptom of unresolved issues from adolescence (1996: 192). This view is shared by Robert Boyers, who claims that in *Pornografia* Witold is inflamed by Karol and Henia because he has failed to acquire the proper human desire to possess another person and is instead satisfied with seeking a mere assurance that desire exists by imposing it on the adolescents (1971: 45). Artur Sandauer even alleges that these anomalies reflect Gombrowicz’s own deviant inclinations, namely his homosexual, voyeuristic, and pederastic propensities (1966: 197, 227). The problem with these psychologizing and pathologizing approaches to Gombrowicz’s novels is that they operate with the concept of normality that is extraneous to these novels. Even Peter Petro, who otherwise steers clear of the psychological perspective, views *Pornografia* through the prism of normality and abnormality when he calls Witold’s reality “transformed” and the reality of other characters “normal” and “given” (1979: 58).

In *Pornografia* there is no given or normal reality as opposed to the abnormal or transformed one. The shared world of adult characters is not

normal or natural. As the leitmotif of behaving demonstrates, the adult world is a construct made of artificialities, rules, and calculated acts. Fryderyk is the character who behaves ("zachowuję się") the most. He is excessively self-aware in social situations, which delights Hipolit, Maria, Wacław, and Amelia because it cements their adult reality of social customs and polite rituals, but Witold detects something feigned in this self-awareness. Fryderyk's artificiality becomes palpable during the Sunday mass when he, an atheist, begins to pray instead of just pretending to pray, as Witold expects him to. This fake yet heartfelt prayer turns the mass into a sequence of empty gestures starved of their symbolic meanings: "nothing could save these boorish, fusty mugs [of peasants], now extracted from any sanctifying mode and served up raw, like offal" (20), while the cultured faces of nobles, too, become "glaringly themselves – caricatures that had been deprived of a model, no longer caricatures of 'something', they were just themselves, and bare as an ass!" (*ibid.*). Even though Fryderyk's behaving is meant to reinforce the adult world of mature values, it throws this world into a disarray by exposing its artificiality.

Witold finds Fryderyk's behaving annoying on account of its artificiality. But at the same time, he is too skeptical to believe that his own way of looking at things is more genuine. Just as the mature world of conventions is an artificial construct, so too is Witold's private reality of unusual links and hidden correspondences. His reality is not more real or natural than that of other adult characters, as critics have argued. According to Hanjo Berressem, Witold operates at a primordial level of reality which serves as "a natural force that unites people of the same nature" (1998: 155). Similarly, Peer Hultberg likens Witold to a modern alchemist who isolates pure elements of the male (Karol) and the female (Henia) and tries to bring them together in a natural harmony (1973: 187). Witold's reality is not purer and more natural and elemental than the adult world of conventions. It is a construct as well, as Witold's frequent questioning of what he sees attests to. For instance, when he notes that the clenching of Henia's teeth as she bites off a sewing thread makes Karol blossom, he admits that Karol "didn't even budge" (33). Likewise, he acknowledges that Henia is genuinely perplexed and even laughs at him when he confronts her about her links with Karol (83-84). And after he realizes that Fryderyk sees the same connection between Karol and Henia as he does, which leads the two adults to combine their forces and start actively nurturing this connection rather than just surveying it from afar, Witold repeatedly questions whether they are not going too far (141, 143-144, 154, 201, 209, 214-215).

In *Pornografia* there is no natural reality opposed to an artificial one, pure to impure, and normal to transformed, regardless of whether we ascribe to Witold the first term or the second. Witold's way of looking at the world is an artificial construct as well, which is something that he does

not try to conceal. In the same way as the extreme situations faced by other adult characters – Amelia's row with Józek, Waclaw's dispute with Karol, and Hipolit's vexation about the order to kill Siemian – expose the frayed seams of their adult world of conventional meanings and the precariousness of their mature values of reason, morality, and duty, so too the situations that Witold creates for himself reveal the seams of his interpretation of reality. He is not more genuine and natural than others. Nor is he closer to some primordial reality beyond social conventions and personal constructs. His way of looking at the world is a construct as well: it is an outcome of his discontent with what he has become as an adult. This discontent makes him look at the world differently from other adults, with a great deal of suspicion and with the intent to change his predicament. As Jerzy Jarzębski has pointed out, Witold's interpretation of the world is a mode of creation and his dismemberment of bodies and established forms into their constitutive elements a step toward their rearrangement (2007: 447; 1982: 327). What drives this creation and rearrangement is Witold's attempt to mitigate his disappointments and frustrations with being an adult by forming a new type of association between maturity and immaturity, one which would transcend the current model of mature superiority versus immature inferiority.

### *Humor and Irony in Dealing with Maturity*

*Pornografia* offers a different approach to maturity than Gombrowicz's earlier works. In short stories collected in the *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* and in the novels *Ferdydurke* and *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953), maturity was subjected to the attack of humor and irony. On the most manifest level, these works use irony to demystify the notion of ontogenesis as progress, the belief that maturity is a higher stage in person's development marked by gradually accumulated experiences and more refined values. In *Ferdydurke*, the thirty-year-old protagonist-narrator Józio does not conform to this notion of progress. Because he does not act as an adult, he is taken back to school, where he does not fit either, for he is no longer a child. He is neither old nor young. In his new environment at school, he resembles neither his classmates nor his teachers. He is also unlike the parents in his recently adopted family and equally unlike their daughter Zuta, who is young but modern – confident and advanced for her age. Józio does not fit anywhere, and as a consequence no one feels comfortable around him. However, this does not mean that he is more natural and authentic than others. Czesław Miłosz's argument that in *Ferdydurke* "the opposition of immaturity and adulthood, authenticity and form can also be phrased as an opposition of nature and culture" (433) is untenable because Józio is always out of place. What unsettles others is not Józio's authenti-

city and naturalness, but the fact that he and his attitude to life are unclassifiable. What is more, he does not try to devise his own identity. Instead, he mocks all identities. He ridicules adults for repeating received ideas, schoolboys for trying to impress each other in silly games, and Zuta for her proud display of how much ahead of her peers and her age she is.

On a less manifest level, these earlier works are ironic about maturity as a higher social rank. *Ferdydurke* and several short stories in the *Memoirs* feature passages that juxtapose to ironic effect, on the one hand, the mature superiority and refinement of aristocrats, land proprietors, and the modern urban middle-class, and, on the other, the coarseness, immaturity, and inferiority of servants, villagers, and schoolchildren. These texts are also ironic about the notion of maturity as a higher stage in the development of nations, the idea that certain nations are more mature than others, whether because they are further along the line of development or because other nations have fallen into decadence and have become "countries of degraded form" (Starosta 2016: 101-137). For instance, two short stories in the *Memoirs*, 'A Feast at Countess von Doff's' ('Biesiada u hrabiny Kotłubaj') and 'The Memoir of Stefan Czarniecki' ('Pamiętnik Stefana Czarnieckiego'), poke fun at how less developed nations like Poland suffer from an inferiority complex, and how in order to compensate for their second-rate status they measure themselves against more advanced countries like France, either by imitating them or by claiming their own superiority in certain areas, such as purity of character. In *Trans-Atlantyk* it is the imaginary superiority and maturity of Poland that are mocked. Witold, again a homodiegetic narrator, tells his story in a Baroque style that parodies the traditional Polish form of the tale (*gawęda*) and the antiquated Polish syntax and phraseology. By imitating the stiff structures and linguistic opulence of traditional Polish narration, the stylistic extravaganza of Witold's narrative in *Trans-Atlantyk* derides the superiority of established identities, above all national identity that relies on the preeminence of cultural heritage, including literature and language, but also other established identities, such as sexual, as Ewa Płonowska Ziarek has shown (1998: 230).

Unlike Gombrowicz's earlier works, *Pornografia* no longer mocks maturity. It is not a parody of maturity and its values, not even a constructive parody, as Michał Głowiński proposes, one which *invents a new world by parodying the old one* (1973: 293). Witold in *Pornografia* does not rely on irony and humor, neither as a character nor as a narrator, because his situation is different from that of characters and narrators in Gombrowicz's earlier works. He has been accepted by everyone as an adult, which makes his life easier but also deeply unsatisfying. Like Józio in *Ferdydurke*, Witold in *Pornografia* initially revolted against maturity. But unlike Józio, Witold has learnt how to give the appearance of a mature person so as not to stand out. The problem is that by putting up this appearance for too long, it

has become an intrinsic part of him. Against André Gide's conviction that mature age is a role that, if one has to remind oneself to play, as Gide confesses was his case, one can keep at arm's length (1997: 753), Witold suggests that protracted playacting transforms the actor into his role, which then progressively weighs him down (143, 176-177).<sup>3</sup> Witold does not want to act and pretend. He wants real change, a concrete alternative to his debilitating adulthood, and ironic debunking is therefore no longer a viable option.

Witold is a more earnest character than Józio and a more somber narrator, too, with a sense of urgency in his attitude to the world and storytelling. Józio's comic disposition is all but gone and with it much of the sarcasm that is the most salient trait of Gombrowicz's earlier fictions. Witold's task of finding a way out of his predicament demands a different approach. As Gombrowicz explains, if in *Ferdydurke* humor and irony served the purpose of eluding the trap of presenting a mature portrait of immaturity – “that is why *Ferdydurke* is to some extent immature and infantile not only at the level of the story, but also the form” (1995: 327) – in *Pornografia* he resigns from humor because humor has an isolating effect (2012: 480). Although he does not elaborate on this remark, another *Diary* entry from a few years earlier gives a hint as to how to understand it. When in the early stages of writing *Pornografia* he was reading Marcel Proust's *In Search for Lost Time*, he was impressed above all by the narrator's honesty (348). Marcel is honest, not ironic or funny. Gombrowicz must have come across the passage in which Marcel describes how M. de Charlus rejects humor and irony because they provide a purely external view of the self and the world by situating one at a safe distance from everything (Proust 2003: 204). *Pornografia* resigns from humor, or at least significantly reduces it compared with Gombrowicz's earlier works, because later in life Gombrowicz comes to believe, in a decidedly non-Bakhtinian fashion, that humor isolates, dulls honesty, and hampers real change, which is precisely what Witold in *Pornografia* wants to counteract.

Witold does not ironically debunk maturity in favor of immaturity. He knows that as soon as one identifies with one of the terms in the current arrangement of the superior maturity versus the inferior immaturity, the other is implied. Indeed, *Ferdydurke* does not skirt the implicit bond between maturity and immaturity, either. As Jean-Pierre Salgas argues, Józio's immature mockery of maturity is determined by mature forms to the same degree as the latter are never free of the subversive influence of the former: “immaturity does not exist outside the spectacle of Form [and] there is only a Form that is deformed, dissolved by Immaturity” (2000: 233). Nevertheless, in *Pornografia* the problematic nature of the current convention of maturity and immaturity comes to the fore for a more prosaic reason: the fact that most adolescents actively pursue adulthood because

they want to become independent, and that many adults continue to be romantically drawn to immaturity because they idealize it as a world free of routines and obligations. Witold does not dismiss maturity for immaturity, for he knows that maturity and immaturity are inextricably linked with one another. He understands that total separation of the two is impossible since almost everyone eventually joins the ranks of adults. Aside from the fleeting moment of despair during a particularly dreary dinner – “I felt like calling out to Karol and to Henia, oh, be separate, don’t associate with us, avoid our dirt, our farce!” (130) – Witold is fully aware that the inexorable process of aging entails a slow encroachment of maturity and mature values even upon those who, like him, have tried to resist them and who continue to regard them as an existentially insupportable position.

### *A New Pact between Maturity and Immaturity*

Witold’s answer to his exasperation with maturity is to look for a new arrangement between maturity and immaturity because the current configuration makes neither group happy: the period of immaturity is irksome because one is constantly reminded of one’s inferiority, whereas the period of maturity is equally displeasing because it is too regimented and predictable. Even Witold’s contradictory handling of Karol and Henia – the fact that he is mesmerized by their immaturity yet upset when they act immaturely (82), that he disparages adults for posing and playacting yet observes that Karol and Henia do the same (66) – is symptomatic of the impasses that the current configuration of the superiority of maturity and inferiority of immaturity generates and that he himself has not been able to bypass. In a *Diary* comment on *Pornografia* Gombrowicz declares that in this novel he wanted to find “an approach to youth that is sharper and more dramatic than that which is currently in use. To thrust it into maturity” (2012: 481). Thrusting immaturity into maturity is a different approach from *Ferdydurke*, in which it is maturity that is thrust into immaturity and discredited in the process through humor and irony. To thrust immaturity into maturity, instead of the usual adult injunction that the youth slowly acquaint themselves with mature values during their adolescence and while retaining their inferior position, is bound to bring changes for the adults and adolescents alike. Exactly what changes is hard to predict, but Witold and Fryderyk believe that if they relate to Karol and Henia as equals, the new arrangement will be mutually beneficial. Unlike Hipolit, who behaves towards Karol as to a servant, and Siemian, who relates to him as a senior officer dispensing orders to an ordinary soldier, and unlike Hipolit, Maria, Waław, and Amelia who all treat Henia as a malleable juvenile to be converted into a good wife, Witold and Fryderyk want to form a partnership

with the youths in which the latter can remain who they are, namely immature adolescents.

Witold and Fryderyk do not exploit Karol and Henia for their “voyeuristic, twisted, vicarious sexual and artistic satisfactions,” as Patricia Merivale claims (1978: 999). The adolescents are not Witold and Fryderyk’s passive victims. They have their own agency in almost all their dealings with Witold and Fryderyk. What is more, this agency is not diminished by these dealings, but bolstered by them. In contrast with their mechanical obedience of other adults, Karol and Henia do not submit to Witold and Fryderyk’s authority, which is exactly what Witold and Fryderyk find attractive, if occasionally frustrating. Henia resolutely declines Witold’s proposal that she sleeps with Karol (81). Karol is obstinate as well: “This child was already aware of his advantages. He knew that if there was anything we wanted from him it was his youth – so he approached us, scoffing slightly, but also ready to have fun” (195). Witold states that the adolescents “were perfectly cognizant that they were ravishing us” (198), and Fryderyk opines that they hold out against his and Witold’s proposal that they be a couple because that “would have been too BRIMFUL for them. Too COMPLETE” (145), suggesting not only that the youths make their own decisions, but also that they have their own reasons for socializing with him and Witold. There is no “innocent, normal reality of Henia and Karol” opposed to “the arbitrary, perverted construction” that Witold and Fryderyk impose on them, as Charles Kraszewski argues (2005: 61-62). Both realities are constructs, and the adolescents join Witold and Fryderyk’s construct because they are unhappy with theirs and increasingly also with their heretofore only alternative represented by Hipolit, Maria, Wacław, and Amelia. They are curious why Witold and Fryderyk want them together and what options this might open up for them.

The new arrangement that Witold and Fryderyk wish to establish with Karol and Henia is one of complementarity and partnership, not exploitation. It includes adults and youths in equal measure and immaturity and maturity with an equal standing. This partnership may be “overtly perverse”, as Pawel Wojtas argues, but only in the sense of twisting and perverting the status quo, not in the moral sense of “guilty sexual fancies”, as Wojtas suggests (2014: 88). What galvanizes this partnership is the awareness of those involved in it that it goes against the convention, for the latter dictates that mature and immature persons should not interact in a complementary, much less conspiratorial fashion. The participants know that what they are doing is unconventional, even wrong when judged by the criteria of the mature values of duty and responsibility, since Henia is betrothed to Wacław. And yet they are excited about violating these values. Witold is thrilled when Fryderyk designs the garden performance: “The slyboots! The schemer! The fox! He was turning out such marvels – he

contrived such fun and games!" (137). The youths are amused as well. When Waclaw suspects that they are more than childhood friends, which Witold and Fryderyk actively encourage but which Karol and Henia leave at a vague stage of teasing Witold and Fryderyk over their conviction that they are meant for one another, and when he subsequently loses his temper and slaps Henia, Karol and Henia laugh: "Maliciously yet amused. Not really – not overly – they were just snickering a bit. What elegance in their snickering! And they rather enjoyed his 'hitting' her, they seemed to get off on it" (197).

The motif of sin encapsulates the illicit nature of Witold, Fryderyk, Karol, and Henia's pact. When the adolescents crush an earthworm, Witold regards it as a sin because they caused an unnecessary death and created pain where there was none before, interpreting it as a message to him and Fryderyk: "Don't be fooled. Don't believe that we don't have anything in common. [...] Surely you saw it, didn't you: one of us crushed [...] and the other one crushed [...] the worm. We did it for you. To unite ourselves – in front of you and for you – in sin" (76). Sin brings the mature and the immature together by bridging the traditional divide between the presumed innocence of youth and the sinfulness of adulthood: "sin will not spoil their beauty, on the contrary, their youth and freshness will be more powerful when they become black, pulled by our overripe hands into decay and united with us" (143). For Witold and Fryderyk, everything that they do together with Karol and Henia, be it the garden performance, the teasing of Waclaw, or the plot to assassinate Siemian, has this aura of sin. Although the adolescents at first do not see it this way, as they are unaware that Waclaw witnessed their performance and are puzzled by Witold's inquiry into the crushing of the worm (83), with the snickering and teasing of Waclaw they, too, like Witold and Fryderyk, become enticed by breaking the rules.

The illicit pact injects Witold and Fryderyk's mature world with the immature spontaneity and joy that they have been yearning for, and, conversely, it endows the immature world of Karol and Henia with a sense of worth and purpose that they have been lacking in their inferior position as adolescents. The key dynamic in *Pornografia* is not the movement "from rigid, developed, mature form to transforming, immature, incomplete force", as Michael Goddard argues (2010: 95), but a movement that goes in both directions: from maturity to immaturity, and vice versa. In the particular case of Witold, the pact is his way of reinventing himself as a mature person. He is not trying to revive an earlier stage in his development and discard all that took place after. His reinvention of maturity is more akin to Bruno Schulz's idea of maturing into childhood, with the proviso that one does not vacate the position of maturity. In *Pornografia*, Schulz's notion of true maturity becomes an issue of connecting the person who has

reached mature age and adopted the position of maturity with immaturity while at the same time keeping him firmly rooted in his maturity, as the latter is the condition of possibility of one's liberation from the constricting conventions of adulthood. The *Diary* offers a clue as to why this is the case. When Gombrowicz denounces Poland as a "childish, secondary, ordered and religious world" (2012: 218), he differentiates it from the "adult independence of other cultures" (218-219). In an earlier entry he specifies that immaturity is incompatible with "personal consciousness, maturity, depth" (71). In these entries, maturity is, surprisingly, a positive term. It does not signify something that is self-important yet laughable, pretentious yet lackluster, paralyzing yet overbearing. It stands for independence, personality, and depth: "the ease of people spiritually liberated, the proportion and sobriety of a mature people" (6). In Gombrowicz's later works such as *Pornografia* and the *Diary* his earlier depictions of maturity as something deplorable undergo a significant transformation. These texts contain a different conception of maturity from his earlier writings, a maturity that is not so sharply opposed to immaturity.

### *The Failure of the Pact*

Although in *Pornografia* Gombrowicz does not abandon his critical perspective on mature values as preprogrammed and anesthetizing, he no longer mocks maturity, because mocking it does not make it go away. As they inexorably grow older, maturity slowly creeps into most people's lives, including Witold's in *Pornografia* and, as the *Diary* shows, Gombrowicz's own, and that despite their effort to resist it. If one wishes to minimize the torpor that comes with aging, maturity must be redefined and its values rearranged, not mocked or rebuffed. Gombrowicz ceases to be interested in the clash between the immaturity of an adolescent and the maturity of an adult, as in his earlier works. He is now concerned about the intersection between the two: "the difficult childhood of an adult" (219).

The main stumbling block in *Pornografia* with respect to Witold and Fryderyk's attempt to find this intersection by establishing an illicit pact with Karol and Henia is that this pact is ultimately inseparable from what it opposes. The sticking point is that the pact repeats the contradictions it sets to eliminate. Although it aims to introduce an alternative arrangement between maturity and immaturity to that of superiority and inferiority, it depends on the very status quo it contests. Witold, Fryderyk, Karol, and Henia's conspiratorial actions are meant to create an alternative arrangement by transgressing the old one, yet in so doing they remain determined by the old arrangement: their actions keep the norms they transgress in place by reiterating them in the act of transgressing them. This circular logic

of interdependence between the pact and what it opposes resembles the above-discussed interdependence between form and deformation in *Ferdynand* identified by Salgas. The pact between the adults and the adolescents in *Pornografia* hinges on what it is against in the same way as Józio's immature mockery of maturity deforms the form on which it depends for its existence.

That Witold and Fryderyk's pact with Karol and Henia repeats the contradictions it seeks to eliminate – contradictions like adults using their superior position to enforce their mature values on adolescents while at the same time being fond of their own period of adolescence and often feeling nostalgic about it; and adolescents aspiring to quickly join the adult world, but as soon as they do, they feel weighed down by its constricting regimen of social roles, responsibilities, uniform beliefs, and obligatory activities – becomes evident after the plot to murder Siemian when the pact starts unraveling. This unraveling has nothing to do with the moral reprehensibility of the deed. Rather, the trouble is that by agreeing with Hipolit and Waław to get Karol and Henia involved in the murder, Witold and Fryderyk betray the pact. Although Witold is appalled by the order from the underground resistance that they dispose of Siemian, whose dejection and lethargy have made him an inconvenience, since this order invokes the mature values of patriotism, duty, and courage that he detests (150), his acquiescence in it and, even more so, consent to getting Karol and Henia involved reinstate the same manipulation of adolescents by adults for the latter's own self-serving purposes that he loathes so much. His appreciation of Karol and Henia's independence, self-determination, and resolve to make their own decisions and follow their own goals vanishes the moment he and Fryderyk plot with Hipolit and Waław how to shift the burden of killing Siemian from themselves to the adolescents. This plot reverts Karol and Henia back into their position of immature adolescents who are merely obeying adults' instructions.

And yet Witold and Fryderyk's decision to embroil Karol and Henia in Siemian's murder is not just a mistake which, if not made, would save the pact; it is an inevitable corollary to the interdependence between the pact and what it challenges. This inevitability is corroborated by Witold's awareness as a character of what is happening. He knows that the decision is outrageous and contrary to his convictions, tantamount to issuing "orders" (196) to Karol and Henia, that is, treating them exactly how adults normally treat adolescents. He also acknowledges that when Karol and Henia are sneaking up the stairs at night to kill Siemian, this sneaking is done "for 'the older ones' [and so is] a poor surrogate for another sneaking, a hundredfold more desirable, when she would have been the goal of his sneaking steps" (217). The reason why this decision is not just a mistake but the inevitable outcome of the nature of the pact is the prominent place of the

theme of failure in Witold's narrative. When Karol and Henia agree to undertake the mission to assassinate Siemian, Witold comments that it is "one of those acts 'done unto oneself' [popelnianych na sobie]" (200) that are typical of adolescence, for adolescents often carry out impetuous acts that they know will precipitate their defeat. Interestingly, when Witold later hesitates whether he should put a stop to Karol and Henia's mission, conscious of his power to do so but giving in to the feeling of abandon and likening himself to a small boat on the open sea that has already lost sight of land (212), he, too, commits an impetuous, self-intoxicating, immature act that is done unto himself. He understands the disastrous implications of surrendering to this feeling, but succumbs to it all the same.

The decision to get Karol and Henia involved in Siemian's murder is not a mistake. It is an act that is consistent with the pact. For the youths, the pact is attractive because it allows them to join maturity while remaining immature, and for the adults it is appealing because it enables them to simultaneously stay mature and shake off some of the burden of their mature age. In a comment on *Pornografia* Gombrowicz points out that "life must lose its weight so that it can be lived, and therein lies the role of youth and its mysterious influence" (1998: 67). If Karol and Henia's agreement to join the plot is at once an immature act committed on themselves and a mature act of taking up responsibility in an adult scheme, Witold and Fryderyk's partaking in the plot is simultaneously a mature gesture of duty to a higher cause and an immature act done unto themselves. Witold and Fryderyk's decision to involve Karol and Henia in Siemian's murder is a reckless and self-defeating act, that is, an immature act that they must commit for the sake of the pact, heedless of the fact that it will destroy it. The pact must contain an element of immaturity, imperfection, and incompleteness. It must fail, otherwise it would be mature.

The failure of the pact has been presaged since its earliest stages. Already before the assassination order from the underground resistance, Witold enters "on this demonic, separate road [knowing] it would take [him] too far!" (144). Failure is integral to the pact because safety and predictability are the mature values that weigh Witold down the most. If the pact were impeccably designed and cautiously implemented with regard to circumventing failure and minimizing all unpleasant repercussions that were bound to follow on account of its illicit nature, it would be pointless from the start because it would be entirely on the side of maturity. The motif of pain is emblematic of this compulsion on the part of Witold and Fryderyk to embrace failure. For them, pain has a different meaning than for Karol and Henia, who, as Witold observes with fright, crush the worm with no empathy and then watch it in its death throes with cool detachment (76). Karol and Henia's short lives have given them only limited experience of pain, which means that they are more likely to inflict it than adults and

with less compassion. However, this limitation also makes adolescents less prone to dwell on their own pain. Young people rarely ponder the potentially painful outcomes of what they do, and if pain arises as a result of their actions, they are able to forget it faster than most adults. Adults are more under the auspices of the death drive than young people, not in the sense of desiring death, but in Sigmund Freud's sense of scrupulously protecting themselves to ensure that they die of natural causes in old age (1990: 46-47). Adults are less willing to risk pain in exchange for the prospect of pleasure and excitement. Gombrowicz's diary entries in *Kronos* from the time of writing *Pornografia* show that he was all too familiar with how incapacitating suffering from frequent pains can be and how it influences one's decisions about taking risks (2013: 226, 231).<sup>4</sup>

### *Aging as an Ongoing Project*

In *Pornografia* Gombrowicz does not abandon his earlier emphasis on maturity and immaturity as more than aspects of one's physiological age. They are still existential and epistemological positions, which he puts in play by locating them in adolescent and adult characters so as to inspect them and extrapolate their various implications. Nevertheless, he now also uses these positions for his meditation on aging, which he has come to regard as a process that mercilessly heads toward maturity and that one cannot stop or sidestep by holding onto the position of immaturity. The two perspectives on maturity in this novel are not opposed. Mature and immature characters are figures that substantiate diverging philosophical positions while at the same time serving as instruments of Gombrowicz's investigation of the trajectory of human life. *Pornografia* is a literary inquiry into the paradox of the trajectory of human life that when we are young, we want to be older and when we become older, we want to be young. Youth in this novel is a missed encounter: a retrospective imagination of what one used to have when one was young but did not have a chance to really possess because of one's immaturity, aimlessness, and dependence on adults. Aging here is not the Bildungsroman ideal of maturation as gradual attainment of experience, wisdom, and nobler values, but a slow process of the corrosion of one's creative energy as one grows older and the concomitant retreat into the safety of social roles and personal habits. Crucially, however, in the narrative this corrosion belongs to the expositional past, that is, the part of Witold's life that antedates the narrated action. The narrative depicts events that follow Witold's decision to stand up to this corrosive effect. *Pornografia* is therefore less about this corrosive effect than about aging as an attempt by the adult individual to reinvigorate his adulthood by incorporating immaturity into it. Even though Witold

ultimately fails in this attempt, his failure does not discredit the legitimacy of his motivation and the validity of similar attempts of this kind.

The planned title for *Pornografia* that Gombrowicz used in his correspondence was *Actaeon*, after the ancient hero who was torn to pieces by dogs as a punishment for seeing Diana, the goddess of wilderness, naked. Witold and Fryderyk, too, are figuratively torn to pieces after they venture to experience life in its untamed excitement and blinding beauty, as the closing sentence of Witold's narrative suggests: "And for a second, they and we, in our catastrophe, looked into one another's eyes [spojrzeliśmy sobie w oczy]" (221).<sup>5</sup> It is true, as Michał Paweł Markowski points out (2004: 146), that in Gombrowicz's novels characters' effort to challenge established norms and infuse the universe with alternative meanings ends either in tragedy or in a chaos of disconnected elements, such as the twisting mass of bodies at the end of *Ferdydurke*, the rambunctious dance at the end of *Trans-Atlantyk*, the dismaying murders of Siemian and Wacław in *Pornografia*, and the bizarre hanging of Ludwik at the end of *Cosmos* (*Kosmos*). However, this does not mean that the effort is without relevance and justification. Forming alliances at the margin of the status quo, taking risks, and defying pain are all vital endeavors. They are part and parcel of the continuous practice of self-reinvention that, though interspersed with frequent and inescapable failures, even catastrophes, is invariably followed by new attempts, as Gombrowicz's next and final novel, *Cosmos* (1965), demonstrates. Witold's opening line in *Pornografia*, "I'll tell you about yet another adventure of mine, probably one of the most disastrous" (3), is picked up in *Cosmos*, which the narrator, yet again Witold, begins: "I'll tell you about another adventure that's even more strange..." (2005: 1).

The title *Pornografia* is from the outset a misnomer. Not only are there no pornographic scenes in this novel, but even Witold's bid to expose the presumed hidden link between Karol and Henia and tell a story about it is driven less by the goal of making everything intelligible and visible to the tiniest detail than by his effort to get beyond the pragmatic factuality of the adult world that is so hopelessly stripped of all charm and mystique. The clash between the title and the narrative resembles a similar clash in *Cosmos*, in which we also get a mismatch between the title, which suggests an ordered universe, and the narrative, which gives us a cacophony of elements and futile attempts of the protagonist-narrator to make sense out of them. As Ewa Płonowska Ziarek (1996: 219) and George Z. Gasyna (2011: 220-249) have argued, in *Cosmos* this mismatch launches readers into a confusing literary space in which they are urged to regard everything critically and with suspicion because the interpretive endeavors of the protagonist-narrator are in blatant conflict with his ineffective effort to place the signs that he sets out to interpret within any intelligible framework

of knowledge. The misnomic title in *Pornografia* has the same activating effect on the reader: it encourages critical involvement with the text.

As Dominique Garand points out, Gombrowicz's fictions do not solve the contradictions they introduce, but lay them out and experiment with different approaches to them (2003: 213). *Pornografia* is no exception. It does not offer a solution to the dilemma of aging. After all, Witold and Fryderyk's project fails. Furthermore, the novel's narrative style is conspicuously tentative, relying heavily, as Michał Okłot has observed, on words like "can", "could", and "possibility", as well abundant parentheses (2010: 261). Like the misnomic title, this tentativeness is important because even though this novel represents a considerable shift in Gombrowicz's literary fictions away from their earlier humor and irony, it is not a complete reversal of his skepticism about rational solutions and positivistic expositions of views. *Pornografia* does not pretend that it can resolve the problem of maturity and immaturity, for in that case Gombrowicz would fall into the same trap that the protagonist Witold eschewed by letting the pact fail, namely he would offer a logical, mature answer to something that resists it. Consequently, Gombrowicz remains unpredictable with respect to maturity after *Pornografia*. In *A Kind of Testament*, he unexpectedly craves "to return to the time before the beginning, to hide again in the thicket of that initial immaturity" (1973: 155). This unembarrassed nostalgia for immaturity is at odds with the portrayal of aging in *Pornografia* and Witold's refusal to idealize immaturity. Even more so, as Adam Zachary Newton has noted, it is at odds with the resolute anti-sentimentalism of Gombrowicz's writings in general (2005: 126). Yet being inconsistent and at odds with himself and his views is one of Gombrowicz trademarks. He is often ambivalent to his own philosophical program, as the frequent bouts of self-loathing of the liminal individual attest to. He also sporadically suspends his characteristic skepticism and all of a sudden romanticizes something, such as the lower classes: "The servants! The servants! They knew what life was about" (1973: 32). These occasional spells of sentimentalization and romanticization are not an indication of the volatility of Gombrowicz's views. They are strategies of repelling maturity. Inconsistency, ambivalence, and romanticization, much like the misnomic title, tentative style, and the refusal to offer an unambiguous solution to the quandary of aging in *Pornografia*, are literary strategies that activate readers and make them constantly alert and unremittingly critical in their attitude toward aging.

Gombrowicz's inquiry into maturity and immaturity is not brought to a close in any of his texts, whether fictional or nonfictional. In *Pornografia* the predicament of adulthood and its discontents is not solved; it is explored and experimented upon. The goal of this experimentation is to incite readers' critical reflection on the trajectory of their own life. All Gombrowicz's texts are, to varying degrees, incitements to this reflection. Beyond

what they say, the issues they address, and the characters and situations they create, they employ devices that elicit new reactions from us. Devices such as humor and irony in earlier works and relativization, tentativeness, inconsistency, and ambivalence in later narratives are designed to provoke us and throw us off balance. By destabilizing social conventions and unsettling our habitual ways of thinking about them, these devices facilitate a more critical and dialectical attitude to oneself and the cultural norms that prescribe how one ought to think and conduct oneself at different stages of one's life. Each of Gombrowicz's texts stimulates this attitude in its own way, but what all of them have in common is that they reject final solutions. For Gombrowicz, any answer to the dilemma of aging is necessarily partial, provisional, and temporary. It is part of an ongoing process of questioning the status quo.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> English translations are used whenever possible, and sometimes modified to follow the original texts more closely. Where English translations were unavailable, translations are mine and references are given to original editions. All ellipses are in the original texts unless in brackets.
- <sup>2</sup> Derived from *waga* (weight), *powaga* means seriousness, but also solemnity and gravity. The adjective *poważny* is commonly used in the phrase *muzyka poważna* (classical music), and *poważny człowiek* is someone who is reliable.
- <sup>3</sup> Although Gombrowicz does not cite Gide's observation about aging and acting, he must have been aware of it, given his fondness for Gide's *Journal* (2012: viii) and familiarity with some of its other passages, such as the role of drama in Mozart's music (505).
- <sup>4</sup> For a comparative analysis of the motif of pain in *Kronos* and *Pornografia*, see Michał Okłot (2013: 112-114).
- <sup>5</sup> The phrase *spojrzeliśmy sobie w oczy* has connotations of truth, owing to the idiom *spojrzeć prawdzie w oczy* (to face the truth, to look the truth in the eye).

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