

## LITERARY POLEMICS IN/ON POLISH MODERNISM: THE CASE OF GOMBROWICZ AND SCHULZ

Dieter DE BRUYN – Ghent University (UGent)

### *1. Introduction*

It is common knowledge that such major Polish Modernist writers as Karol Irzykowski (1873-1944), Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy; 1885-1939), Bruno Schulz (1892-1942) and Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969), in their respective works of fiction, have blended fictitious parts with autobiographical references and metafictional comments. As a consequence, their texts have often been examined for their biographical, philosophical, literary critical or even polemical function, rather than for their literary value. At the same time, many of these authors' non-literary (autobiographical, epistolary, essayistic, literary critical etc.) texts seem to display exactly the same literary devices which govern their literary works. As a result, it has proven difficult to determine where the literary oeuvre of Irzykowski, Witkacy, Schulz or Gombrowicz ends and where their discursive output begins. Whereas the discursive function of many of these authors' literary works has already been scrutinized in detail, however, much scholarly work remains to be done on the literariness of some of their discursive texts.

In the present article, I will address this question through one of the clearest examples of genre hybridization in Polish Modernism: the epistolary polemic between Gombrowicz and Schulz, which is better known as the "dispute over the doctor's wife from Wilcza Street" (*spór o doktorową z Wilczej*). More specifically, I will argue that in their respective replies, both Gombrowicz and Schulz have clearly borrowed certain motives and reflexive devices from their literary works – to such an extent, that the entire polemic triptych may eventually adopt the same parodic overtones which govern their fiction. Before I will elaborate on the case of Gombrowicz and Schulz, however, I will first further clarify the problem of genre hybridization in the works of the Polish Modernists under scrutiny.

### *2. Genre Hybridization in Polish Modernism*

In the majority of the critical accounts that deal with the narrative works of Irzykowski, Witkacy, Schulz or Gombrowicz, at least some attention is devoted

to these texts' reflexive tendency. Indeed, what most of these texts seem to share, is that they 'encompass' in one way or another their own first critical commentary. In order to illustrate this particular characteristic, it probably suffices to mention the insertion of numerous comments and three explanatory essays in Irzykowski's only novel *Pałuba* (1903), the "informations" (*informacje*) and other digressive comments in Witkacy's novel *Nienasycenie* (1930), the many apostrophes to the reader in Bruno Schulz's stories or the introductory remarks preceding the chapters on Filidor and Filibert in Gombrowicz's first novel *Ferdydurke* (1937). In addition to this, in many of these works the creation of a coherent story world often seems to be less important than the narcissistic demonstration of the author's ego (cf. Eile 1996: 16). Consequently, a certain autobiographical, philosophical, ideological or literary critical discourse comes to the fore, as a result of which the 'narrativity' of these texts tends to be underestimated in favor of their 'discursivity'.

Critics have always had difficulties in coming to terms with this peculiar type of prose fiction in Polish Modernism. As I have already suggested elsewhere (De Bruyn 2007, 2008), the many metafictional comments in these works have insufficiently lead to the active participation of the critic in realizing the reflexive potential of the text. Instead of this, critics seem to overestimate the legitimacy of the most explicitly reflexive comments by attributing them to the real author, rather than to an – indeed – 'authorlike', but at the same time highly equivocal narratorial voice. As these metafictional comments are considered to be authoritative clues to the same text's interpretation, critics tend to simply interpolate them into their own literary critical accounts. As a consequence, a kind of circular reasoning is established: discursive parts of a certain text are used in order to elucidate the same text. What is lost in this self-sufficient critical process, then, is the exploration of more implicit reflexive devices (e.g. parody, the grotesque, stylization), of the narratorial organization of the text (e.g. the narrator's unreliability), and of the ways in which the literary critical self-consciousness of the text and the critic interlock (i.e. the concept of 'metafiction').

A similar critical strategy can be discerned in discussions on the overall discursive dimension of the fictional texts under scrutiny. As I have already indicated, a peculiar kind of 'discursivity' is central to the literary output of all four authors. Irzykowski can be said to have authored not a single canonical literary work, as his main artistic aim was rather the documentation of a certain literary idea than its realization – a preference which Adam Wiedemann has appropriately termed 'literary conceptualism' (*konceptualizm literacki*; 1995: 3). Witkacy, for his part, devised his own literary concept of the 'novel-sack' (*powieść-worek*), which could be stuffed full with all kinds of reflections of a philosophical, sociological or aesthetical nature, regardless of the overall artistic

shape of the resultant piece of prose.<sup>1</sup> Schulz, then, whose fantastic stories are undoubtedly less ‘discursive’ when compared to the works of the other three, could not resist blending his imaginative prose with clear references to his own biography and with bits and scraps of what could be considered a more or less ‘discursive’ philosophy of (verbal) art. In a similar way, Gombrowicz let his novels develop into works of ‘autofiction’, in which the quest for his own discursive self could be most fully represented. When discussing these hybrid forms of prose fiction, literary and academic critics alike appear to be oscillating between two critical strategies: either they stress the ‘incomprehensibility’ (*niezrozumialstwo*; cf. Bolecki 1996 [1982]: 331-336) of these works and eventually accept them as a legitimate artistic attack on the existing conventions of narrative prose, or they circumvent the question of their literariness by focusing on the biographical, philosophical, literary critical or polemical function of these works.

So, whereas the exploration of the discursive function of many of these literary texts has always been at the core of literary critical attention in the past decades, few scholars have done the reverse exercise: the investigation into the literariness of some of the discursive texts of the Polish Modernists. Indeed, all four writers have written a lot of texts that do not belong to the literary realm strictly speaking: Irzykowski’s collected works not only include several volumes of literary and theatrical criticism, but also diary fragments, polemics (with Witkacy, Tadeusz ‘Boy’ Żeleński, etc.) and even a film theoretical essay; apart from his novels and dramas, Witkacy wrote several philosophical and art theoretical texts; Schulz, for his part, complemented his story collections with literary critical and poetological texts, but also with intriguing private letters and even with graphics with a clear ‘textual’ character;<sup>2</sup> Gombrowicz, finally, continued the construction of his own self in all kinds of minor writings as well as in his literary diary, which turns out to be abundant in the author’s autobiographical, philosophical, literary critical and polemical views. In many ways, however, quite a lot of these texts do not clearly fit into the categories of non-literary genres either: it would not surprise us, for instance, if parts of Schulz’ letters and poetological texts would appear in his stories, nor is it always clear which parts of Gombrowicz’s ‘discursive’ writings are sincere representations of the writer’s convictions and which are merely the result of a literary game. In other words, as I have indicated earlier, it is often difficult to determine where the literary oeuvre of these authors ends and where their discursive output begins. Therefore, in order to somehow conceptualize this striking characteristic of Polish Modernism, I would suggest to adopt the notion of ‘genre hybridization’.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bolecki (1996 [1982]: 27-118) for an excellent analysis of the ‘subgenre’ of the *powieść-worek* in Polish Modernism.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. De Bruyn & Van Heuckelom (2008) for an analysis of the ‘textual’ character of *The Idolatrous Booke* (*Xięga bałwochwalcza*; 1920), Schulz’s famous cycle of engravings.

Even though most critics are aware of the contiguity between the literary and non-literary texts of the authors under scrutiny, they are inclined to uphold a certain hierarchy between the two groups of texts. As a consequence, the ‘discursive’ function of these ‘more reliable’ non-literary texts is overestimated in many critical accounts, whereas their ‘literary’ function tends to be underestimated. In order to make this critical strategy explicit, it probably suffices to bring to mind the many writings in which Witkacy’s ‘aesthetics’, Gombrowicz’s ‘philosophy’ or Irzykowski’s ‘literary theory’ are discussed, as if these men of letters were primarily concerned with the creation of a certain essentialist theoretical system. Moreover, by predominantly stressing the ‘discursivity’ of these diverse texts, critics might eventually cut them off from their ‘real’ literary counterparts, thus denying the intricate ironic, parodic, grotesque and thoroughly ‘literary’ interplay that takes place between them. What I would like to propose in this paper, therefore, is to undertake a rereading of these genre hybrids by focusing more on their ‘literariness’.

### 3. The “Dispute over the Doctor’s Wife from Wilcza Street”

As I have already indicated, one of the most striking examples of the phenomenon of Polish Modernist genre hybridization is undoubtedly the public “dispute over the doctor’s wife from Wilcza Street” between Gombrowicz and Schulz. Before we can take a closer look at the epistolary triptych itself, however, it should be noted that it lies at the basis of a series of various texts in which both authors – under the guise of ‘ordinary’ literary critical responses to each other’s works – have preformed the literary myth which would later (and for the most part posthumously) be woven around them. As we have just seen, this process was started with the “dispute over the doctor’s wife” on the pages of the literary monthly *Studio* in July 1936, at a time when the literary careers of Gombrowicz and Schulz had just started.<sup>3</sup> It was continued in 1938, when both authors published a favourable review of each other’s works (of *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą* and *Ferdydurke* respectively).<sup>4</sup> This series of mutual comments was eventually concluded by Gombrowicz after Schulz’s death, when he looked

---

<sup>3</sup> More specifically, Schulz and Gombrowicz each had published a collection of stories almost simultaneously and with the same publishing house (Rój) – *Sklepy cynamonowe* (“Cinnamon Shops”; 1934) and *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzenia* (*Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity*; 1933) respectively.

<sup>4</sup> More specifically, Gombrowicz published the essay “Twórczość Brunona Schulza” (“The Works of Bruno Schulz”) in *Apel* no. 31 (a supplement to *Kurier Poranny*), whereas Schulz’s review of *Ferdydurke* was published in *Skamander* no. 96-98 (July-September 1938). As a matter of fact, the latter review was the written version of a lecture which Schulz had delivered earlier that year, and Gombrowicz (symptomatically) responded to it by means of a (private) letter.

back on his curious relationship with Schulz in the 1961 part of his famous *Dziennik (Diary)*.<sup>5</sup>

The same need for contextualizing the public dialogue between both authors reappears as one takes a closer look at the dispute itself. Their joint publication was instigated by Bogusław Kuczyński, who was at the time the editor in chief of *Studio*. The triptych starts with a letter by Gombrowicz, in which he challenges Schulz to take up a position against the depreciatory opinion of a (fictitious?) doctor's wife whom he had met on a streetcar near Wilcza Street in Warsaw. It is followed by a surprising response by Schulz, after which Gombrowicz is given the last word for some concluding remarks. When critics comment on this famous epistolary duel, however, they usually single out the doctor's wife's provocation from the rest of Gombrowicz's letter, then treat Schulz's reply as his 'artistic credo', without even mentioning Gombrowicz's concluding letter.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the open letters are predominantly used for discursive purposes, e.g. as supplementary arguments in the discussion on the differences in character or worldview between both authors – a discussion which was provoked by Gombrowicz in the 1961 part of his diary – or as useful comments when analyzing their literary output. The question remains, however, how the epistolary triptych was conceived and what it means in itself. In order to tackle this question, I will both explain its rhetorical structure and try to single out certain textual devices that are similar to the techniques which are used in each writer's 'purely' literary works.

As has already been indicated, Gombrowicz commences his letter with the following oft-quoted provocation:

Długi czas myślałem, jaką by tu myślą wystrzelić w Ciebie, dobry Bruno, lecz na żadną nie mogłem wpaść, aż dopiero wczoraj wpadłem na myśl żony pewnego doktora, spotkanej przypadkowo w osiemnastce. – *Bruno Schulz* – powiedziała – *to albo chory zboczeniec, albo pozer; lecz najpewniej pozer. On tylko udaje tak.* – Powiedziała – i wysiadła – bo akurat tramwaj przystanął przy Wilczej. (Schulz 1989: 447)<sup>7</sup>

(For a long time, I've racked my brains over what kind of thought I could [shoot at] you, dear Bruno, but absolutely nothing occurred to me until yesterday I bumped into the opinion of a doctor's wife whom I met by accident on Line 18. Bruno Schulz, she said, he's either a sick pervert or a poseur, but most probably a poseur. He's only pretending. – She said this and got off, for the streetcar had just stopped at Wilcza Street; Schulz 1988: 117)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In the same part of his literary diary, Gombrowicz also gave impetus to the Trinitarian image of Witkacy, Schulz and himself by calling them "a fairly characteristic triad" (*trójca [...] dosyć charakterystyczna*; 1986: 17).

<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, after its publication in *Studio* in 1936, Gombrowicz's second letter did not even appear in print until it was included in the 1989 edition of Schulz's collected works (cf. Schulz 1989: 456-459).

<sup>7</sup> Further references will be marked parenthetically as Op.

<sup>8</sup> Further references will be marked parenthetically as LD.

As we have seen, critics have predominantly focused on the provocative character of the doctor's wife's opinion, as it is indeed tempting to accuse the creator of *The Idolatrous Booke* (*Xięga bałwochwalcza*; 1920) either of inclining toward masochistic and perverse desires, or of just striking this pose in order to attract attention. As a consequence, few critics have actually questioned the reliability of Gombrowicz's account of his encounter with the doctor's wife. Immediately after the publication of the triptych in *Studio*, for instance, Włodzimierz Pietrzak (1936) wrote a comment for the same periodical, in which he mocks the doctor's wife for her shortsighted view on art, instead of focusing on the rhetorical function of her opinion in the entire dispute. Moreover, by treating Gombrowicz's opening lines so seriously, the profound playfulness which characterizes them tends to be overlooked. The imagery of the game and, more specifically, of the duel, at which is already hinted by the verb *wystrzelić* 'to shoot' in the excerpt above, indeed permeates Gombrowicz's entire letter. First of all, in the very first sentence of the text (the one right before the oft-quoted fragment), Gombrowicz immediately puts forward this idea of an epistolary duel between two noblemen of letters, when stating that "how much more enticing still [it is] to take aim at a concrete person than to shoot off into empty space a bulletin that is addressed to everyone and therefore to no one" (LD 117; *o ileż rozkoszniej wystrzelić, celując w konkretną osobę, niż strzelać w przestrzeń okólnikiem, adresowanym do wszystkich, zatem do nikogo*; Op 447). A bit further, Gombrowicz once more 'shoots' (in Polish *strzelać*) with the doctor's wife's opinion, after which he asks Schulz "to take [his] stand against this woman" (LD 117; *aby zająć stanowisko wobec żony*; Op 448). Toward the end of his letter, when it has become clear that he wants to put Schulz's 'form' to the test, Gombrowicz resumes the idea of "challenging" his literary friend "to a formal fight with a woman" (LD 118; *wzywać do walki formalnej z kobietą*; Op 449). Moreover, by continually referring to the doctor's wife and thus stressing her role in the upcoming duel, the reader may eventually become aware that maybe she was only invented by Gombrowicz as a pretext to start the intended game.

What Gombrowicz makes clear by means of the imagery of the duel and of the game, is that his provocation is not directed against Schulz's 'essence', but against his (authorial) form: "What will this Bruno Schulz of yours do, then, in such a situation – this very Schulz [with whom you write your books] and who must represent you, how will you wind up your Schulz and put him in position facing this person?" (LD 448; *Co pocznie ten Twój Bruno Schulz w tej sytuacji – ten Schulz, którym piszesz książki i który musi Cię reprezentować, jak nakręcisz i nastawisz swojego Schulza względem żony?*; Op 448). In other words, Gombrowicz expects Schulz not to hide behind his work anymore, but to take on a more human form and prove that he is able to play the game of life:

Forma Twoja dzieje się na wysokościach. Nuże! Zliż na ziemię! Puść się w taniec z pospolitą! [...] Cóż byłaby warta Twoja forma, gdyby miała zastosowanie jeno na

wysokości dwóch tysięcy metrów nad poziomem życia? Trzeba rozgrywać się z ludźmi na każdym poziomie i w każdym możliwym przypadku. (Op 449)

(Your form is manifested *in excelsis*! Get back down here on earth! Dance with an ordinary [one]! [...] What good would your form be if it were only being put into use at two thousand meters above the level of life? One must play the game with people on every level and in every possible situation; LD 119)

In other words, Schulz the writer is explicitly turned into a character in a literary game, and in a similar way as in Gombrowicz's novels, this character is exposed to the Other, his form is compromised and the reader is made curious of what will happen next.

Quite surprisingly, however, Schulz does not lose control over his form and even launches a counterattack. An important thing to note here, is that the author of *Sklepy cynamonowe* explicitly sticks to the conventions of a game, thus implicitly indicating that he is willing to continue the literary game which was started by Gombrowicz:

Chciałbyś mnie zwabić, drogi Witoldzie, na arenę obstawioną ze wszech stron ciekawością tłumu, chciałbyś mnie widzieć, rozjuszonego byka, w pogoni za wiejącą płachtą pani doktorowej, jej powiewny peniuar koloru amarantu ma Ci służyć za kape, poza którą czekają mnie sztychy Twej szpady. (Op 450)

(You'd like to lure me into an arena, dear Witold, beset on all sides by the curiosity of the mob, you would like to see me as the enraged bull in pursuit of the doctor's wife's fluttering banner; her flimsy amaranthine peignoir is supposed to serve as your cape, behind which the thrusts of your sword await me; LD 120)

By evoking the image of a corrida, Schulz magnifies the playfulness of the situation, as it were, and adds certain grotesque traits to it, to such an extent that its complete artificiality is exposed. This rhetorical strategy becomes particularly evident as Schulz lays bare the fictitiousness of the doctor's wife: "You somewhat overestimate my sensitivity, trying to foist this ragstuffed puppet on me" (LD 120; *Przeceniasz nieco mą wrażliwość, insynuując mi tę kukłę wypchaną szmatami*; Op 450). In much the same way as in Schulz's stories, the *kukła* 'puppet' (cf. the *manekin* 'tailor's dummy' in the stories) arises here as a metaphor for human inauthenticity, for the emptiness of human form. Moreover, by stressing the shoddiness (cf. *wypchana szmatami* 'ragstuffed') of its execution, the very artificiality of the puppet comes to the surface and some kind of 'authentic inauthenticity' is achieved.<sup>9</sup>

After having made clear that he is aware of Gombrowicz's true intentions, Schulz is ready to strike back:

A cóż, gdybym okazał się bykiem wbrew konwencjom, bykiem bez honoru i ambicji w piersi, gdybym zlekceważył niecierpliwość publiczności, odwrócił się tyłem do

<sup>9</sup> Cf. De Bruyn (2003) for an analysis of the problem of inauthenticity in the works of Irzykowski and Schulz, and De Bruyn & Van Heuckelom (2008) for a few thoughts on the reflexive function of the *manekin* in Schulz's artistic world.

pani doktorowej z Wilczej, ku której mnie popychasz, i ruszył na Ciebie z podniesionym walecznie ogonem? Nie żeby Cię zwalić z nóg, szlachetny Toreadorze, ale żeby Cię wziąć na grzbiet – jeżeli to nie jest megalomanią – i wynieść Cię poza obręb areny, jej prawideł i kodeksów. (Op 450)

(But what would have happened if I had turned out to be an unconventional bull, a bull without honor or ambition in his breast, if I had spurned the audience's impatience, turned my back on the doctor's wife from Wilcza Street you are pushing me to and, tail up for the battle, made a rush at you instead? Not to bump you off your feet, O noble toreador, but to take you on my back if this is not megalomania – and carry you out of the arena, beyond the confines of its rules and statutes; LD 120)

It is important to note here, that the imagery of a corrida, although it does not literally appear in Schulz's stories, shows great resemblance with certain motives which he often uses. Indeed, as a popular public event with kitschy and grotesque traits, it may easily be compared to the waxwork show, the provincial museum, the cinnamon shops full of knickknacks and many other items of the carnivalesque that show up in Schulz's phantasmagoric literary world.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, however, Schulz is not really interested in the conventional events that take place in the centre, but rather in what happens on its margins, "out of the arena, beyond the confines of its rules and statutes" (*poza obręb areny, jej prawideł i kodeksów*). In other words, whereas Gombrowicz aims at compromising the adult form of the ascetic writer Bruno Schulz (cf. supra: "this Bruno Schulz of yours") by exposing it to the mob, Schulz wants to strip reality of all its forms (of its "rules and statutes") by laying bare the artificiality and inauthenticity of its most conventionalized artifacts: not only the duel or the corrida, but also the "popular joke, the joke with crowd appeal, the joke that hits the enemy from behind his reasons and arguments, sentencing him to mockery, knocking the weapon out of his hand without any crossing of [the swords of merit]" (LD 121; *dowcip popularny, dowcip po myśli thumu, dowcip, który bije przeciwnika poza jego racjami i argumentami, skazując go na śmieszność, wytrąca broń z ręki bez skrzyżowania szpad merytorycznych*; Op 451).

Quite surprisingly, after his comments on the mystifying and playful character of Gombrowicz's attack, Schulz still feels obliged to somehow respond to the doctor's wife's opinion. He does this by stressing the *janusowość* (Op 452) or "Januslike duality" (LD 122) of his own nature, which allows him to take on different forms when dealing with the doctor's wife (and with women in general):

Tak jest, wyznaję to szczerze, nienawidzę pani doktorowej z Wilczej, istoty wypranej z wszelkiego merytoryzmu, żony lekarza w czystej, wydestylowanej formie, szkolny przykład żony lekarza, a nawet żony po prostu... chociaż w innej i odrębnej zgoła sferze trudno mi jest oprzeć się czarowi jej nóg. (Op 452)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Schönle (1991) for an excellent analysis of the rich semantic value of the concept of kitsch (or more specifically, the concept of *tandeta* 'trash') in Schulz's stories.



(Of course – I confess it frankly – I hate the doctor’s wife from Wilcza Street, a creature leached void of any substance, the pure distillate of a doctor’s wife, the textbook case of a doctor’s wife or simply of a wife... though on an altogether different plane I find it difficult to resist the charm of her legs; LD 122)

This extract not only reintroduces one of Schulz’s favorite artistic motives (the male adoration of a female idol in all its ambiguity), but it may also serve as an example of the idea of the looseness of human form, and of form in general. In the continuation of his letter, Schulz in deadly earnest (and therefore not without irony) expands on what he now terms the “multilayered structure of our psyche” (LD 122; *wielowarstwowość naszej psychiki*; Op 453). Next, in preparation of his last countermove, he accuses Gombrowicz of sympathizing too much with the unofficial system of values which underlies the doctor’s wife’s opinions, that inexpressible and therefore harmful complex of banalities which threatens any attempt at superiority “with the powerful weapon of ridicule” (LD 123; *potężną bronią śmieszności*; Op 454). Whereas Gombrowicz, according to Schulz at least, has always been the first to warn for this system, he now considers it to be “the face of life” (LD 124; *oblicze życia*; Op 455) and employs it in order to challenge Schulz’s superior form. By treating this compromising system as just another example of human masquerade, Schulz takes away his adversary’s last weapon, after which he in all humility invites Gombrowicz, in whom he observes “the stuff of a great humanist” (LD 124; *materiał na wielkiego humanistę*; Op 456), to launch an attack on this very complex of values, which is hidden like a *smok* ‘dragon’ in a cave, and on its representative on earth, the doctor’s wife:

Nie, Witoldzie, wierzę w Ciebie. Czarujesz go tylko ruchami magika, okadzasz pochlebstwami, hipnotyzujesz i unieruchamiasz w pozie wiecznego idola, którą mu insynuujesz. Owszem, będę Ci w tym sekundował. Posadźmy ją na tronie, panią doktorową z Wilczej, hosanna, hosanna, bijmy pokłony. Niech się rozpiera, niech wypina biały brzuch, wzdymając się w pysze – pani doktorowa z Wilczej, idol wieczysty, meta wszystkich tęsknot naszych, hosanna, hosanna... (Op 455)

(No, really, Witold, I believe you. You are only charming him with a magician’s sleight-of-hand, fumigating him with the incense of praises, hypnotizing and immobilizing him in the pose of timeless idol you impute to him. Oh, well, I will second you in this. Let us enthrone the doctor’s wife from Wilcza Street, hosanna, hosanna, let us prostrate ourselves before her. Let her sprawl, push out her white belly, swell up with pride – the doctor’s wife from Wilcza Street, the timeless idol, object of all our yearnings, hosanna, hosanna...; LD 123-124)

In other words, instead of letting his own form be compromised, Schulz now challenges Gombrowicz, whom he ironically bids farewell as follows: “With greetings to you, I am Yours Bruno Schulz” (LD 125; *Pozdrawiam Cię, Twój Bruno Schulz*; Op 456).

In much the same way as in a real duel, as long as both opponents have not obtained satisfaction, it should be continued. In his response, therefore,

Gombrowicz from the very beginning once more reinforces the playfulness of the literary enterprise:

Bruno, stary dzieciaku, jak my wszyscy zresztą! Wyznaję, że nie miałem zamiaru zabierać głosu powtórnie w tym numerze *Studio*. Gdy jednak Bogusław dał mi do przeczytania Twoje pismo, od razu pojąłem, że nie mogę nawet na okres miesiąca zostawić publiczności bez repliki. Rzeczywiście – odwróciłeś role; uchyliłeś się od pikantnego sądu doktorowej, a natomiast mnie sądem swoim postawiłeś w sytuacji niezmiernie drażliwej, o krok od najjaskrawszej groteski. (Op 456)

(Bruno, you old kid, just like all of us anyway! I must admit that I did not expect to be speaking once again in this issue of *Studio*. When Bogusław allowed me to read Your letter, however, it was immediately clear to me that I could not leave our readership without a response for a full month. Now look at that – you have reversed roles; you have disregarded the daring opinion of the doctor’s wife, and with that judgment of yours you have put me into a very awkward position instead, but one step from a complete grotesque.)<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Gombrowicz is totally aware of Schulz’s brilliant counterstroke in calling him a prospective “great humanist”, which now makes him vulnerable to the opinion of his *ciotki* ‘aunts’. As compromising his adversary by sensual means has proven ineffective, Gombrowicz now resorts to the similar strategy of *upupienie* (a possible English translation is ‘fanny-fication’), which he would soon elaborate in his first novel *Ferdydurke* (1937). The technique of condemning Schulz to immaturity, which is already announced here by addressing him as *stary dzieciak* ‘old kid’, is further developed by evoking a complete series of “compromising, disqualifying, immature, derisive, second-hand, inferior, tricky and green concepts” (*pojęcia kompromitujące, dyskwalifikujące, niedojrzałe, szydercze, pośrednie, pośrednie, śliskie, zielone*; Op 457) such as “aunt, calf, leg, short pants” (*ciotka, łydka, noga, krótkie majtki*; Op 457). In other words, Gombrowicz puts to the test the metaphorical vocabulary which will soon permeate *Ferdydurke*, to such an extent even that the letter might be considered a true blueprint for his upcoming first novel. Toward the end of the letter, as a matter of fact, one may come across more evidence of this hypothesis:

Przejrzałem Twoją grę! Nie umiając zająć stanowiska wobec trywialnego, niesmacznego faktu z doktorową, którą Cię poszczułem, aby skubała Ci łydki, uciekłeś się do pochlebstwa, wywyższyłeś mnie w nadziei, że ja, wywyższony, przestanę Ciebie poniżać. [...] Nie, nie, huzia, huzia, doktorowo, huzia, bierz go, łapaj, kłaj, po łydkach, po łydkach! (Op 459)

(I think I get Your game here! As You were not able to take a position toward the trivial, tasteless incident with the doctor’s wife, with whom I have tormented You by making here nibble at Your calves, You have resorted to flattery, You have praised me to the skies in the hope that I, after being praised to the skies, would stop putting

<sup>11</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

you down. But no, no, get him, get him, doctor's wife, get him, stop him, give it to him, bite him, bite his calves, his calves!)

It should be clear that, by including such passages in his letter, Gombrowicz indeed adds "a certain little touch of "don't take it too serious"" (*pewien akcencik 'nie na serio'*; Op 459) to his argument. In order to reaffirm the playfulness of the entire epistolary project, Gombrowicz concludes with a frivolous formula which to a certain extent bears resemblance to the famous closing sentence of *Ferdydurke*:<sup>12</sup> "I kiss You on the forehead, Your Witold Gombrowicz" (*Caluję Cię w czoło, Twój Witold Gombrowicz*; Op 459).

#### 4. Conclusion

In their public 'dispute', as we have seen, both Gombrowicz and Schulz have borrowed certain motives and artistic devices from their literary works. From its very beginning, the epistolary triptych presents itself as a conscious 'stylization', as a parody even of a literary polemic, which lays bare its own artificiality and, as a consequence, reflects upon its own form in much the same way as both writers' literary works reflexively put into question their own status as a literary artefact. When analyzing the 'dispute', therefore, one should be careful not to "take it too serious". This is exactly what happened to Jan Emil Skiński, who reacted to the public letters with the essay "Łańcuch szczęścia" ("Chain of Luck"; 1936) in the weekly *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, in which he accuses Gombrowicz and Schulz of being pretentious. Not surprisingly, in the next issue of *Studio*, Gombrowicz published "Łańcuch nietaktów" ("Chain of Indiscretions") as a (this time more straightforward) counterattack on Skiński:

Kapitałnym argumentem p. Skińskiego jest, iż naśladowaliśmy wielkich pisarzy i przybierali pozy, że to była nieświadoma czy też półświadoma mistyfikacja. P. Skiński zapomniał, albo może nie wie, że element bardzo świadomej mistyfikacji jest nam obu wspólny i jak najdobitniej zaznacza się w utworach Schulza, a wszystko, co ja dotychczas napisałem, było właściwie tylko mistyfikacją i parodią. [...] Dla mnie pewna wykrętność formy nie tylko na piśmie, lecz i w mowie, wynika z poczucia, że żadna forma nie jest równoważna mej rzeczywistości; stąd, nie będąc nigdy zupełnie prawdziwy, wolę podkreślić dysproporcję, niż pokryć je wypracowaną i bardziej jeszcze kłamliwą prostotą. (1973: 109)

(Mr. Skiński's main argument is that we have imitated major writers and that we have struck poses, that it was an unconscious or maybe even half-conscious mystification. Mr. Skiński has forgotten, or maybe does not know that both of us have the feature of a very conscious mystification in common and that it manifests itself most clearly in Schulz's works, but everything which I have written until now was actually a mystification and a parody as well. In my opinion, a certain deceitfulness of form, not only in written but also in oral communication, results from the feeling that no single

<sup>12</sup> "It's the end, what a gas, / And who's read it is an ass!" (2000a: 291; "Koniec i bomba / A kto czytał, ten trąba!"; 2000b: 292).

form is equivalent to my reality; therefore, as I can never be fully honest, I prefer to emphasize the disproportion rather than to hide both [form and reality] under an artificial and even more deceitful simplicity.)

Admittedly, though one should be aware that this casual publication is also an integral part of Gombrowicz's deceitful textual output, I am very much tempted to exceptionally treat this statement as an authoritative argument for the present analysis of Schulz's and Gombrowicz's textual world as a generic continuum.

## LITERATURE CITED

- BOLECKI, W., *Poetycki model prozy w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*. Kraków 1996 [1982].
- DE BRUYN, D., “‘Rozbić skorupę nomenklatury’: Irzykowski i Schulz a zagadnienie nieautentyczności”, T. Soldatjenkova & E. Waagemans (eds.), *For East is East. Liber Amicorum Wojciech Skalmowski* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 126). Leuven, Paris, Dudley (MA) 2003: 237-256.
- DE BRUYN, D., “The Janus-Faced Author: Narrative Unreliability and Metafiction in Karol Irzykowski’s *Pałuba* and Witold Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke*”, *Russian Literature* 62/4 (2007): 401-422.
- DE BRUYN, D., “Masterpiece or Poetical Workshop? Karol Irzykowski’s *Pałuba* as a Literary Work”, *Proceedings of the Second International “Perspectives on Slavistics” Conference (Regensburg, September 21-24, 2006)* (Die Welt der Slaven Sammelbände-Sborniki; ed. P. Rehder & I. Smirnov). Munich 2008. (in print)
- DE BRUYN, D. & K. VAN HEUCKELOM, “Artistic Reflexivity and Interartistic Contamination in Polish Modernism. The Graphic and Literary Works of Bruno Schulz”, *Symposium* 62/3 (2008). (in print)
- EILE, S., *Modernist Trends in Twentieth-Century Polish Fiction*. London 1996.
- GOMBROWICZ, W., “Łańcuch nietaktów”, *Varia* (Dzieła zebrane 10). Paryż 1973: 203-207.
- GOMBROWICZ, W., *Dziennik 1961-1966*. Kraków 1986.
- GOMBROWICZ, W., *Ferdydurke* (Trans. D. Borchardt). New Haven & London 2000a.
- GOMBROWICZ, W., *Ferdydurke*. Kraków 2000b.
- PIETRZAK, W., “Święte szukanie”, *Studio* 9 (1936): 312-315.
- SCHÖNLE, A., “Cinnamon Shops by Bruno Schulz: the Apology of Tandeta”, *The Polish Review* 36/2 (1991): 127-144.
- SCHULZ, B., *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz* (Trans. W. Arendt). New York 1988.
- SCHULZ, B., *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*. Wrocław 1989.
- SKIWSKI, J.E., “Łańcuch szczęścia”, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 42 (1936): 794.
- WIEDEMANN, A., “Konceptualizm literacki Karola Irzykowskiego. Dziennik, wiersze, dramaty”, *Pamiętnik literacki* 86/4 (1995): 3-27.

## РЕЗЮМЕ

В прозе таких выдающихся польских писателей-модернистов, как Кароль Ижиковский, Станислав Игнаций Виткевич, Бруно Шульц и Витольд Гомбрович, литературно-художественные фрагменты переплетаются с автобиографическими отсылками и метафигциональными комментариями. Поэтому их тексты до сих пор часто исследовались скорее благодаря их биографической, философской, литературно-критической или даже полемической функции, чем благодаря их литературной ценности. В то же время во многих не относящихся к художественной литературе (т.е. автобиографических, эпистолярных, эссеистических, литературно-критических и т.д.) сочинениях упомянутых авторов, видимо, задействованы те же приемы, что и в их литературных текстах. По этой причине оказывается сложным определить, где кончается литературное творчество данных писателей и где начинается их дикурсивное наследие. В настоящей статье этот вопрос рассматривается на материале одного из самых типичных примеров жанровой гибридации в польском модернизме, а именно эпистолярной полемики между Гомбровичем и Шульцем, или “спора о жене врача с улицы Вилчей” (“spór o doktorową z Wilczej”). В статье выдвигается предположение, что в своих реакциях и Гомбрович и Шульц прибегали к определенным мотивам и рефлексивным приемам, встречающимся в их литературных текстах, причем до такой степени, что весь триптих в конце концов может получать те же пародийные коннотации, как и их литературные произведения.