

Literary and
Cultural Theory



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Translating Gombrowicz's Liminal Aesthetics



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Introduction

The principal aim of this book is to show that a comparative textual analysis of Witold Gombrowicz's selected works and their English translations – one carried out within historical and cultural milieux of Polish, English and American critical and literary traditions – exposes hermeneutically conditioned interpretations of the writer's account of existentialism which approximates the condition of translation. Gombrowicz's idiosyncratic linguistic and existential tropes will be investigated through the theoretical lens of deconstruction. This investigation involves drawing together a number of conceptual threads, chiefly coined by the poststructuralist as well as postmodernist theorists, in order to indicate metatextual parallels between the philosophers of the limit and Gombrowicz's existentialism. These are revealed in their common denominator: the liminality between language and being. Therefore, the selected works used for close reading, namely *Cosmos*, *Trans-Atlantyk*, *Ferdynand*, *The Marriage*, and *Pornografia* and their English translations, have been chosen on the grounds that they best exemplify instable reciprocal relations between the philosophy of existence and language, which lends itself as a propitious starting ground for the existential study of language.

In this context, Gombrowicz divulges that "The artist who realizes himself inside art will never be creative. He must remain on its peripheries where art meets life" (*Diary* 54). Gombrowicz's awareness of the 'peripheries' symbolising the liminality between art and existence, as well as dramatising an unstable relation between immanence and transcendence, resonates with the poststructuralist interest in the limit, which constitutes the main focus of the present study. Gombrowicz's fiction produces a peculiar double bind of language, which is itself a metaphor of the existential concerns it conveys. Generating metalinguistic and metafictional effects, Gombrowicz's text constructs a symbiosis between language and being, whose evident boundaries refuse to materialize. Therefore, Gombrowicz's language does not merely function as a carrier of fiction and metaphysical existentialist philosophy, but in fact unveils linguistic operations structured as the events it refers to. At any rate, the reciprocally transposable axes of language, fiction and existence are not approached as detached textual categories.

It is precisely the linguistic-ontological misalliance of the text as the exemplification of the deconstruction of metaphysics that kept poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophers busy; it also dramatises Gombrowicz's self-reflexive writing and language. The writer was perfectly aware of the metaphysical dimension of his writing, manifested by prefaces, commentaries, forewords, essays, and diaries, which served to delineate his direct philosophical route also

at a discursive level. It is not, however, Gombrowicz's overt existentialist manifestos as such that are at stake in the following research, but the ways they are disclosed in the fibre of language, or rather – in order not to disregard linguistic credence on the one hand, and to play down its totalising textual hegemony on the other – within the limits of being and language, as well as their shifting reciprocal differences.

With regard to the selected methodology, the central concern of this study will address the inner workings of the language of Gombrowicz's texts and their translations. Therefore, the orientation towards structuralist schools of thought would appear as an accurate theoretical ground from which to further the textual analysis in question. However, the reservations over adopting linguistic or structuralist orientation (with which Gombrowicz was contemporary, and relatively in agreement with, yet by no means uncritical about) stems from the conjecture that although the method would prove functional in terms of the analysis of language solely, it might fail to address some central issues pertaining to the existential study of discourse.

Furthermore, unable to renounce its evident 'transcendent objectivity'¹ in relation to the subject/object of its scrutiny, structuralism makes metatextual assumptions about texts by organising them according to preprogrammed principles and restricting their semantic possibilities. Such a method entraps the text not only in a homogeneous scientific interpretation, but also in a particular historical moment, disregarding its potential temporal and socio-cultural variations, wherein the text generates further interpretations yet to come, contingent upon the liquidity of existence. To take the argument further, structuralism fails to respond to the singularity of literature as it stands outside of its subject and treats literature as an object through transcendent objectivity, which entails an encapsulation of the subject of study within a totalising discursive theory, and squanders its interminable becoming that is realised in the liquidity of existence.

Gombrowicz himself would be a most ardent opponent of *a priori* judgments made on literature as organised in keeping with scientific taxonomies, and an advocate of the self-reflexive language, as well as literature constituting a metaphor of existence.² As Gombrowicz would have it, a human being must re-

1 As put by Derek Attridge (2004: 6).

2 "Look at the white-hot oven where existentialisms are cooked up; here Sartre turns molten lead into his freedom-responsibility... here bottomless cauldrons bubbling with ideologies, worldviews, and beliefs; here is the cavern of Catholicism. Further down the foundry of Marxism; then the hammers of psychoanalysis; Hegel's artesian wells and the looms of phenomenology; and further yet are the galvanized and hydraulic pyres of surrealism or pragmatism... yet I walk among these machines and products with a thoughtful air and without much interest... trying this or that product ... I say : ... This is somewhat overwhelming to my taste" (*Diary* 92).

lently escape *form* (which, as a metaphor of individual existential enslavement through dependence on social impositions, comprises the writer's main existential trope) in order to manifest his/her singularity; literature must escape the analogous form of discursive theory: it should be the textuality and texture of text that provokes auto-commentary, something which remains the only metaphor of itself. Literature that attempts at doing justice to existence is inherently autotelic as it creates its own textual and linguistic reality structured as the existence it refers to.

Concomitantly, the literary text has an advantage over its commentary ever since it constitutes its own metatext that stems from intratextual practice producing heterogeneous discourse always in the process of becoming. The very process is realised in the act of reading as an active event, which is redolent of Gombrowicz's existential tropes that may draw parallels with the existential experience of reading: always vacillating and shunning discursive objectivity.

For that reason, theory (as form) serves to restrict the semantic scope of textual phenomena, which, by oscillating within and exploding the liminality of space between word and being, is done justice to only in the reader's response to the textual heterogeneity, through a creative reading of the text that is not merely subject to interpretation but inspires further interpretations itself. On the reader's part the interpretation of text cannot be limited to a single approach; rather this is the accumulation of cultural assumptions based on a never-stable geographical, historical situation, as well as social hierarchies that pave the way for interpretations recorded by experience.

In Gombrowicz the event of reading plays a crucial role in recognising and exploring the text as the other. Metatextual qualities create another dimension for the reader to explore the text from an alternative anamorphic angle; and it is through interpretation that the reader is committed to generating textual others. The act of interpretation is based on the existential experience that is anchored in the narrator-reader relation. With the intention of doing justice to the textual issues indicated above, the next part will employ theories investigating intratextual complexities of language and existence, namely postmodernist theories, deconstructive criticisms of textual difference, and, in order to explore the ways the text as *being* corresponds to the act of interpretation as an existential experience of heterogeneous literary text by the reader, poststructuralist hermeneutics.

Jan Błoński in his article "O Gombrowiczu" ("On Gombrowicz") claims that Gombrowicz deliberately refused to follow any particular philosophical doctrine as a token of refusal to the system (1984: 206). Gombrowicz denied affiliations with his contemporary philosophical canon on account of the uncritical emulation entails closure in immanent doctrine, which contradicts Gombrowicz's existential ethics, postulating that human existence should be conceived away from the form it is enslaved by.

The shifting of interpretative grounds between philosophy and literature in Gombrowicz (or rather the insistence that the writer's oeuvre be conceived beyond such conventional disciplinary divisions) will help articulate the niche of my work, extending beyond a traditional classification of Gombrowicz as an existentialist, by situating the writer's existentialism in postmodern English and American contexts, and by exploring the ways in which it corresponds to deconstructive assumptions filtered through hermeneutic practices.

With all this in mind, I consider it justified that the methodology of this analytic inquiry comprise nonessentialist approaches committed to textual reading practice as opposed to a programmatic reading method offering a descriptive explication of the text's meaning. This orientation has been substantiated by the conviction that the liminality between language and existence can be explored in no other way than through active engagement in the intratextual workings of a self-reflexive language of text (as opposed to investigated through a discursive theory) dramatising its inherent textual difference and/or polysemy. With regard to the latter, the author proves his partial methodological indebtedness to deconstructionist and hermeneutic textual practices.

In keeping with this theoretical premise, chapter 1 will endeavour to complete theoretical gaps left over in the studies of Gombrowicz by approaching the writer's texts from both a contemporary literary and critical angle. Such an approach is justified by the analytic perspective contingent upon the historical situation from which I analyse Gombrowicz's literature, which is different from the positions in which earlier critics and philosophers (along with Gombrowicz himself) interpreted Gombrowicz's existentialism. Apart from this historical variation, this research will extend to an alternative cultural context, namely the English and American literary traditions in order to complement the state of research in Polish, British and American critical and translation studies of Gombrowicz, as well as account for the ways the writer's version of existentialism is interpreted in diverse historical, social, cultural and political contexts, generating alternative interpretations of his peculiar existentialism.

This chapter will then venture to inspect Gombrowicz's critical reception by the Western intellectual tradition. The choice of English and American literary and philosophical traditions, from which to further the deconstructive analysis of Gombrowicz's existentialism in English translations, has been motivated by the resistance of the Anglo-American readership to the writer's literary output, which is demonstrated by the scarce production of literary criticism on Gombrowicz there. In view of that, I will seek to account for the reasons Gombrowicz's fiction has been neglected in the Anglophone tradition (which will contribute to filling in the theoretical lacunae in the proposed context) and how far the translations allow the foreign interpreter to delve into Gombrowicz's poetics.

Such recapitulation of Gombrowicz's existential tropes as well as summary of the existing state of research will now allow to introduce in chapter 2 the theoretical framework inspiring the present line of inquiry: namely, deconstructionist and hermeneutic theories. Therefore, the concepts of Derrida's *différance* and Gadamer's variety of hermeneutics will be explained in the context of the conceptualisations of translation. The following section juxtaposes Baudrillard's concept of *simulacrum*, which centres on destabilising the assumptions of the source text as authoritative in relation to its translations. It will be posited that the source text is nothing but its own simulacrum, because, existing only in the event of interpretation, it is subject to a constant differentiation and simulation of itself. Derrida's and Gadamer's theories will be informed by simulacrum, which here refers to the translated text as not merely a simulation of the source text, but in fact a new and, in Baudrillardian terms, more legitimate text than the original. This is to create an analogy with the Derridean notion of supplement, consisting in reversing the accepted prioritisation of the source-text over its translation. It will follow that the translated text, existing in no other way than as the simulacrum of itself, constitutes a 'dangerous supplement' (a Derridean coinage) to the text subscribing to the practice of *différance*, since the event of interpretation essentially conditions subsequent interpretations of the 'original' text.

Chapter 3 will use the accumulated assumptions pertaining to deconstructive and hermeneutic acts of reading in order to scrutinise the non-places of alterity of Gombrowicz's self-reflexive text articulated by the concepts of liminality and liquidity. It is to attempt to explicate the ways that the notion of liminality – which approximates Gombrowicz's autobiographical status as an expatriate – corresponds to *différance* as well as shows parallels with various textual axes. The inquiry seeks to confirm that Gombrowicz's deployment of tropes results in the rigorous existential thought that is intricately woven into the tissue of his texts and designates the processes by which his version of liminality helps situate the writer amongst postmodern writers and thinkers – although not unquestionably. Gombrowicz's urge towards utilising archaic, neologised language and well-worn genres in new contexts stimulates a peculiar liminal space between canon and tradition, cliché and neologism, imitation and innovation. These dichotomies are not to be methodologically unravelled with either of the components being clearly delineated and favoured over the other. Rather, I argue that the very state of liminality constitutes a necessary affirmation of the *becoming* of text as fiction, language and existential thought, as a token of Gombrowicz's philosophical consistency in his literature. This said, liminality exposes analogous mechanisms on the reader-text axis in hermeneutic terms. The text as *becoming* remains liminal when confronted with the reader, who negotiates its

shifting meanings, never to be pinned down by a decontextualised univocal interpretation and translation.

By the same token, the concept of liquidity opens up a new interpretative space for conceptualising Gombrowicz's tropes, in that it serves to explicate the mechanisms governing the self-reflexive text. Given that Gombrowicz's fiction exposes a heavy metafictional and self-reflexive load, the notion of liquidity points to the ways in which the limits between the text and existence are fluid. This, however, as demonstrated in Gombrowicz's texts, does not take place between fiction and a metacommentary, but within the linguistic fabric, and is actualised in the act of reading.

In his *The Singularity of Literature* Derek Attridge juxtaposes 'creative' with 'mechanical' (that is conventional) modes of reading:

Not all works will have something to offer to a reader's openness to alterity... mechanical and instrumental interpretation is complicated by what we may term readerly hospitality, a readiness to have one's purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding... A creative reading is not one that overrides the work's conventionally determined meanings in the name of imaginative freedom but rather one that, in its striving to do full justice to the work, is obliged to go beyond existing conventions... To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same (2004: 80).

This definition in a way resonates with Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons', whereby only the interpreter's 'creative reading' can respond to the heterogeneity of the culturally and historically contingent text. Culture should by no means be conceived as a monolithic entity, but rather a blend of interimplicated assumptions always in the process of flux, mutual contagion and inter-amalgamation. The critic assumes that to read creatively is to responsibly delve into the text's alterity instead of mechanically reducing the text's other to the familiar. The text's potential lies in its ability to manifest its otherness by resisting the inclination of reducing textual estrangement into cultural familiarity; as the domesticated alterity proves to be nothing but a semantically totalising mechanical interpretation. Hence, it is imperative that the *readerly* (pace Barthes) interpretation – that is the translation of the other to the same – be engaged in resisting the reduction of the other to the familiar (which in translation studies is referred to as *domestication*, as opposed to *foreignisation*).

This reduction or translation into the same, inherent in interpretation, is in fact embodied in the process of translation, whereby the translator is confronted with the dilemma of choice between domestication and otherness. Since every translation is interpretation in the first place, and since interpretation involves the encounter with the indeterminacy of the text – offering no possibility of exploring a univocally determined meaning – the translator as interpreter is con-

fronted with the impossibility of translating or pinning down any semantically protean meaning.³ The resultant translation represents another interpretation; another instance of creative reading, and becomes another simulacrum of the source text, just as the source text becomes the simulacrum of itself in the process of heterogeneous interpretation determined by the reader's *idioculture*.⁴

This chapter will thus venture to explicate the ways Gombrowicz's existential rhetoric provokes the existential sense of alterity of text. Using an existential study of discourse, I propose that Gombrowicz's text is larded with the blind-spots of alterity complicating interpretation, accepting that they evoke the interpretative anxiety of shifting significations of text and problematise the space between language and existence.

The consolidated conclusions drawn from chapter 3, pertaining to a deconstructive reading of Gombrowicz's chosen works and translations aligned with specific hermeneutic context, will act as a theoretical prelude to chapter 4. The interpretation of Gombrowicz will not be central to this chapter, which is more theoretically oriented, and undertakes to pair up the process of translation with the liminal acts of participation.

Therefore, the translations of Gombrowicz's selected works, *Trans-Atlantyk* and *Cosmos*, will be juxtaposed to argue the extent to which Gombrowicz's metaphysical as well as autotelic and intratextual motifs, hermeneutically comprehended through the lens of Polish cultural and historical assumptions, preserve their otherness when translated into English; as well as position them within the English and American cultures, in order to test the ways *creative reading* as translation responds to the alterity of texts determined by different hermeneutic conditions.

The textual analysis will be inspired by the metaphysics of *exile* and *participation* as crucial cogs in Gombrowicz's machine of *becoming*. Here, the ways in which Gombrowicz's acts of exile match the experience of liminality will be suggested. The liminal experience will be used in the textual sense of the word, wherein the above tropes of exile, participation and becoming approximate the acts of reading. Translation in this instance constitutes a peculiar case of interpretation exemplifying the metaphoric of the suggested tropes. This inquiry largely draws on Foucault's notion of *heterotopia*, which, constituting a peculiar instance of existential or textual alterity, informs the ways in which a being or text occupy non-spaces, problematizing their definite presence or location. Ex-

3 As argued by Gadamer: "[L]iterature' ought to be definable in quite general terms by virtue of the fact that its translation always involves a loss ... What is unique, the unity of sense and sound, remains untranslatable" (1980: 7).

4 A concept introduced by Attridge and defined as "the deposit of our personal history as a participant in a number of ill-defined and often conflicting cultural fields" (2004: 82).

tended to the study of Gombrowicz's life and works, this concept will help elucidate how Gombrowicz's exilic discourse exposes blind-spots of alterity that pair up with the metaphysics of translation.

Gombrowicz's oeuvre will be presented in various hermeneutic contexts so as to posit that the act of translation becomes a metaphor of the postmodern condition from an existentialist standpoint. At this stage, regardless of the hermeneutic contextualisation of interpreters, Gombrowicz's tropes – interpreted by both Polish and English speaking scholars – expose the reader to the interpretative experience of textual alterity, resulting from the semantic volatility and impossibility of their univocal placement in deep structures. Again, Baudrillard's notion of *simulacrum* will be employed to account for the ways Polish and Anglo-American post-war realities were experienced, with their common denominator being the perception of the real as a simulation of itself, which will be used here in the context of the conceptualisation of translation.

As regards the latter, language in Gombrowicz plays a crucial role in plot development and thus becomes fiction on its own merit. Language is a translation of existence into the stylistic matrix, and the fiction it conveys is nothing but the metaphor of its own inner workings; that is to say the event of fiction is the event of language in the first place. If it be so, if Gombrowicz's existential tropes and fiction are not merely carried by language, but act as its mirror image, mistranslation may further exacerbate the socio-historically biased interpreter's confrontation with the text's otherness, realised in the semantic indeterminacy caused by historical and linguistic displacement. The mistranslation of language will thus entail the misinterpretation of Gombrowicz's existential tropes. After all, it is the sense of a culturally conditioned impenetrable otherness (let alone commercial reasons) that has put off the British and American audience from assimilating Gombrowicz's fiction. By way of analogy, the aspect of translation will be adopted for theorising linguistic alterity of Gombrowicz's fiction as well as research the hermeneutically determined reception of his works in the proposed contexts.

In turn, it will be demonstrated that Gombrowicz's existentialism as philosophy is translated into existentialism structured as 'text', in a way that the very text entails the reader's confrontation with liminality. Translation functions as a peculiar instance of interpretation as it involves the reader's response and responsibility reflected in the choice of meaning adopted by the translator from a dense thicket of semantic textual possibilities. At this point, a certain liminality between existential acts of choice and language, as the fruit of the very choice, calls for attention.

Furthermore, taking into account both textual and cultural dimensions of simulacrum, the experience of the text's shifting meanings, undermining the ex-

istence of the 'original' text, provides parallels with the external world, in the sense that if the original text does not exist – as it, relentlessly distanced from itself, merely simulates itself as the source-text – the same befalls all possible extratextual relations, including the presence and tangibility of the book, whose interrelations draw analogies with the order of reading and interpretation. Gombrowicz's text commences inside of the text, and goes beyond it, just to return to the very text, suspending thus a fixed immanence–transcendence border. Bearing this in mind, after having placed Gombrowicz in various contexts, the return to the original (Polish) context will harbinger a hermeneutically conditioned *new* text – that is to say another simulacrum of itself – resulting from the production of new interpretative stimuli emerging from the reassessment of cultural assumptions and conditions. This provokes the question of whether reading Gombrowicz in English impinges on the reinterpretation of the writer's works in Polish, given that the latter is a revision of the former comparative analysis of Gombrowicz's discourse in Polish and English respectively.

This will guide me to a final round-up of the reception of Gombrowicz's philosophy in the light of hermeneutic conditions of various cultural assumptions confronted with the self-reflexivity of Gombrowicz's text of existence; the text which is little else than its own translation; its own simulacrum; always exposed to liminal tensions; always other to itself.