

The Pyrotechnics of an Infernal Machine: Fictional Reality in Gombrowicz's *Pornografia*

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The novels of Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969), *Ferdynand* (1937), *The Trans-Atlantic* (1952), *Pornografia* (1960), and *Cosmos* (1965), show their author's special sensibility, his very original seeing of the world. The particular characteristic of this original seeing of the world is the oscillation between an ordinary and an extraordinary vision of reality that prompted Sartre to compare Gombrowicz's novels to "infernal machines."¹ This comparison is especially apt when applied to *Pornografia*,² for in it Gombrowicz provides us with a record of the genesis, practice, and consequence of a particular vision of the world, of its explosive aftermath.

Before an infernal machine finally explodes, it gathers force, it "ripens" as if by regular, almost imperceptible, ticking. Because it is this ripening process that brings about the explosion, the ticking, which is the manifestation of this process, will be analyzed in this paper. In order to show how the violent explosion, the climactic murder, comes about, for what reason, and with what result, I shall, therefore investigate the "changes in fictional reality" in Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* as presented to us by the narrator Witold.

In order to investigate these changes adequately, a somewhat artificial division of the fictional reality, into the "given" reality and the "transformed" reality, is required. The author first "gives" us, through description, a piece of his fictional world in a conventional manner, and when we accept it, he changes its value by "transforming" it. But how does he do it?

All the information available to the reader comes from the narrator who, at the same time, is an important character of the novel. At the beginning he acts only as an observer, but later he joins the action. Since all the information we acquire comes from him, it is impossible to leave him out of the discussion. On the contrary, all the transformation of fictional reality we are able to observe comes from a gradual transformation of his perception. Thus the development of the narrator and the development of the fictional reality (its unfolding) can be seen as a simultaneous process. Since the experience described in the novel comes to us through a narrator whom it significantly transforms, it is clearly marked by his knowledge of its totality.

The very first sentence sets the tone of the novel: "I shall tell you about another experience I had, undoubtedly the most fatal of all" (p. 7). As we can see, the tone is a *familiar* one; it is on a par with stories told to a circle of friends. The fact that it is a *fatal* experience suggests, at the beginning, the

¹"Il existe aussi des romans d'un autre genre, de faux romans comme ceux de Gombrowicz, qui sont de sortes de machines infernales." "Sartre par Sartre," *Nouvel Observateur*, No. 272, January 27, 1970, quoted in C. Jelenski and D. de Roux, eds., *Gombrowicz* (Paris: L'Herne, 1971), p. 299.

²All quotations come from Witold Gombrowicz, *Pornografia: a Novel*, trans. A. Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966). I have also consulted the Polish edition: W. Gombrowicz, *Dziela zebrane*, Vol. III (Paris: Institut Literacki, 1970). The translation, adequate for my purpose, changed the names of some characters, e.g.: Waclaw = Albert; Juziek = Olek, and so on; this, however, is not important for the subject of this paper.

tension necessary for the development of this kind of narrative. The setting is occupied Poland in the war year 1943, and involves a debating circle of artists, writers, and thinkers in Warsaw. These people try to maintain normal existence, allowing their lives to be propelled by the sheer momentum gained in times before the war. In this setting, where debates go on without relevance to whatever is happening outside the circle, into this polyphony of discordant topics like "God," "art," "the people," and "the proletariat," the narrator introduces the main character, Frederick, the detonator of the infernal machine: "But one day a middle-aged man appeared, dark and thin, with a hooked nose. He formally introduced himself to everybody, and then hardly spoke a word" (p. 7). Although Frederick is presented by the narrator as a "mysterious stranger," the overall tone of the narrative is straightforward, with no unusual or strange characteristic. However, when Frederick gains the narrator's attention (perhaps at the very moment he arrives), we notice a decisive break, a change in the narrative. From this point on, we have to adjust our reading to the nuances of the gradual transformation which follows this description of Frederick drinking tea:

He was offered some tea, which he drank; a lump of sugar remained on his saucer—he stretched out his hand toward it, but obviously considered his gesture pointless, and withdrew his hand. Since this gesture was even more pointless, however, he stretched out his hand once more, took the lump of sugar, and ate it—not for pleasure but to behave consistently . . . toward the sugar or toward us? . . . Clearly wanting to eradicate this unfavourable impression, he coughed, then so as the cough should not seem pointless, pulled out his pocket handkerchief—but did not dare blow his nose and simply moved his foot. Moving his foot doubtlessly entailed other complications, so he decided to sit silent and motionless. This strange behaviour (because in fact all he ever did was "to behave," he "behaved" the whole time) aroused my curiosity at the first encounter. (pp. 7-8)

Here we are given information of two sorts: the narrator is revealed as a particular observer who communicates his observations in a particular way (he makes Frederick's tea-drinking—a simply activity—mystifying); and we are also led to believe that Frederick is only "behaving," or acting, letting us speculate about his real identity.

The reader has ostensibly no other way of looking at Frederick but through Witold's eyes. But when the narrator's perception differs radically from that of the reader, the reader has to create a distance of credulity between himself and the narrator. The reader realizes, for example, that the information contained in the sentence, "Since this gesture was even more pointless, however, he stretched out his hand once more," is not available directly to any observer. It is indeed available to any *omniscient* narrator, but the first sentence of this novel designates a narrator who is unable to supply information of the kind an omniscient narrator could supply.

The narrator, therefore, makes things strange by seeing activities and connections which, to an impartial observer, must remain hidden. Things which are sometimes implicit, but also things whose existence is dubious. On one hand, we have the tea-drinking activity with the obvious paraphernalia (a saucer, a lump of sugar), which are the primary information of which the fictional reality consists and, on the other hand, we have the tea-drinking as "behaving."

This tea-drinking and Witold's interpretation of it set the basic pattern of the work. From this point in the novel, we witness only modifications of the basic pattern. The fictional reality must be seen in a double perspective ("given" and "transformed"), with attention to the dual presentation of everything of importance in the novel.

From war-stricken Warsaw the action shifts to the countryside. Witold and Frederick stay in Poworna, in Sandomierz district, in the house of Witold's friend Hippolytus, a landowning squire. There, away from the bustle and fears of a big city under occupation, they find themselves at the mercy of Germans, A.K. (Polish underground resistance army), various gangs, Polish police, and local authorities. Constant danger, typical for times of war, is still with them.

In this setting begins the dramatic story of the psychological development (or derangement) of the narrator, Witold. He is fascinated by the enigmatic Frederick, who, by this time, gains in stature, though not in kind, to rank with some of the more remarkable eccentrics: Huysmans's des Esseintes, Céline's Courtial des Pereires, and Flann O'Brien's de Selby. This fascination is the mark of the intense influence that Frederick wields over Witold, who concentrates totally on solving the painful enigma of Frederick and who engages all the power of observation he can muster for this end. Consequently, Witold pierces Frederick's armor of acting, "behaving," when he observes him praying in the village church. This time, Witold's penetrating gaze goes much deeper: "It seemed to me, and I suspected, that Frederick, on his knees, was 'praying' too—I was even sure, yes, knowing his lack of integrity I was certain that he was not pretending but was really 'praying' for the benefit of others and for his own benefit, but his prayer was no more than a screen to conceal the enormity of his 'non-prayer'" (p. 18). What is happening to "given" reality here, after an inauspicious and cautious opening ("It seemed to me," "I suspected"), is that to its explicit significance is added an implicit one. Things are no longer only strange (as in the tea-drinking episode), they possess a hidden meaning. And their "given" reality is thus unmasked as only a superficial form (envelope) which covers an enigmatic content. The impulse of approach "given" reality in this way is furnished by Frederick, who *personifies* the ambiguous fictional reality. But he is not a thing to be made strange: he is a model for the surprising takeoff that makes the narrator more suspect than Frederick, and it triggers an irrevocable process: "The process taking place before my eyes was revealing reality *in crudo*. . . . The church was no longer a church. Space had broken in, but it was a cosmic, black space and it was no longer happening on earth, or rather the earth was turning into a planet suspended in the void of the universe, the cosmos was present, we were in the centre of it" (p. 19). This sudden illumination shifts the values of the narrative. The "given" reality as we know it from information about the countryside, Germans, peasants, and so on, seems to pale into insignificance when contrasted with "the cosmos." It is a sudden adoption of a different point of view, perhaps a *cosmic point of view*. Since this change is caused by Frederick, his importance is further increased, and he emerges from the church as a gigantically powerful being whose fatal influence is already sensed by the narrator who, moreover, shares in this greatness ("we were in the centre of it"). This development, just as the turning of the planet, cannot be arrested.

Thus we have reached a stage where the narrator's sensibility is changed to such a degree that he no longer sees the "given" reality as *opaque* only. This is demonstrated in his encounter with Karol, a sixteen-year-old lad, and Henia, Hippolytus's daughter of the same age. This young couple is seen as emitting a powerful magnetic aura of earthy yet delicate sensualism that forces both the narrator and Frederick independently to submit to its power.

From this point on, Karol and Henia are the focus of the two main characters' activity. Whatever dramatic action is forthcoming is inspired or forced by this young pair. And their fictional reality is modified in the same way as the "given" reality of the church scene was modified. This is achieved by inferring from the actions of Karol and Henia more than is seen by the eye. But it will transpire that this inference, outrageous as it often is, has a firm basis: the subjugation of the old (Frederick and Witold) by the young (Karol and Henia).³ The young gradually realize that they possess an enormous power which makes the old react in a peculiar way. They have always possessed this power, but it has lain dormant within them. However, when Frederick and Witold show them the possibilities of this potential power, when the young ones realize how seductive they really are, they become seduced by their desire to please Frederick and Witold who from that moment are at their mercy. Yet from the very beginning we are assured that Karol is indifferent to Henia and vice versa. It is Witold's interpretation, his way of looking at the world, that informs the reader of the possible connection between the young couple. Therefore we learn about the occult link between Karol and Henia by way of another perverse illumination: ". . . and suddenly I realised, it was easy and entailed no effort, yes: this neck and the other neck. These two necks. These necks were . . . What? What was it? It was as though her (girl's) neck broke away to join that other (boy's) neck, this neck dragged by the neck and dragging the other neck by the neck!" (p. 21). This vision of blurring necks reveals to Witold the reason for the interest he has taken in Karol. Now he knows that the two young people were made for each other without their awareness: "This love, this wild desire advanced so calmly with the crowd in affected indifference! Ah, that was it!—I now knew what secret had attracted me to him at the first moment" (p. 22).

This new mode of looking at things is not yet firmly established in the narrator. Since the experience he relates is presented as a gradual development, it is only fitting that he should have doubts about the reliability of his own impressions:

No, it was really unbearable! Nothing, absolutely nothing! Nothing but my pornography to feast on them! And my fury with their unfathomable stupidity—this little fool, this stupid little goose—because stupidity was the only reason I could give for there being nothing, nothing whatsoever between them! . . . Ah, if only they had been two or three years older! But Karol was sitting in his corner, with his lantern, with his childish hands and feet—and had nothing to do but repair his lantern, immersed in his work, turning the screws—and so much the worse if the greatest happiness were concealed in this adolescent god! . . . he turned the screws. And Henia drowsing at table with bored arms . . . (p. 28)

Here (in the example of Karol and Henia, more precisely in the change in their representation), the narrator reverts back from "transformed" reality to "given" reality. This quotation shows a break, a sudden awakening from a reverie where the whole order of things is rearranged to the *status ante quo*. In the first place, the narrator's erotic fascination is replaced by resentment ("this little fool, this stupid little goose"), and the thing which excited him most, the tender age, their being only sixteen years old, is seen as a drawback ("if only they had been two or three years older!"). What seems unbearable

³The subjugation of the old by the young is the main theme of an earlier novel of Gombrowicz, *Ferdynand* (1937), where it is presented in the manner of a ferociously grotesque satire.

to him is the fact that he is humiliated for imagining circumstances being different. Different in the sense that he ceases for the moment to perceive the implicit dimension of the "given" reality! He sees only what he sees! In other words, Karol and Henia do not appear translucent as when their necks blurred, but become opaque, and for a while the world appears normal, without enigmas. Since the narrative on this level reverts to the beginning, the development of the narrator and also the development in the direction of changes in fictional reality can be seen in retrospect. This brief period of "normalcy" is accentuated by the narrator's curious illness, which may be the cause or the result of the changed perception; he feels feverish, unsure of himself, and insecure because his experience places him in a dilemma: are things as they seem, or is he going mad? It is at this point that he discovers Frederick spying on Karol and finds out that his conjectures are shared by Frederick. This is indeed a curious reversal. It places the interpretation of fictional reality beyond the facile resolution of the progressive lunacy of the narrator. The change in fictional reality, the other way of seeing, is now attested to by two characters and thereby gains additional reliability. The skeptical reader is defeated.

It is at this point that the four characters vital to the narrative are definitely determined and their function delineated: "All around could be felt the disintegration of being that invariably comes with the night. We gradually entered the dusk—Frederick, myself, Henia, Karol—like a curious erotic combination, a strange, sensual quartet" (p. 37).

After the mechanics of the narrator's play with fictional reality, the general framework of the setting of the novel—which concerns the situation of Poland in 1943—can now be considered.⁴

We are told about the occupation in a matter-of-fact way; indeed, at the beginning, the narrator rather carelessly disposes of this information. This should not deceive us, however, and we should perhaps consider the effect of the turbulent times in which the action of the novel evolves. For war strips men of the shield provided by civilization. Primordial barbarity, or perhaps the unrestricted wildness at the core of human personality, the unspoiled but raw animal-like center open to the pull of many gravities or powerful sexual impulses, is ready to act, unbridled by customary restrictions. Relevant as this aspect of the war may be, at the beginning of the narrative we are not yet aware of it. We are told about the precariousness of existence when we learn that Poworna, the country seat of the squire Hippolytus, is threatened by the Germans, A.K., gangs, and so on, and this danger is real insofar as it preoccupies the characters who cannot afford to be lighthearted about it. The narrator comments on the contrast of the "theatrical," peaceful-looking house and the underlying, "given," reality, the war, when he goes for a walk the morning after his arrival in Poworna (p. 14).

The contrast between the harsh ("given") reality and the "theatrical" ("transformed") one at first shows the awareness of the war that the narrator displays when he makes the contrast. As the story progresses, the harsh ("given") reality subsides and the narrator comes to believe that the theatrical ("transformed") one is the only one that counts. He loses interest in the worries

⁴The fact that Gombrowicz spent the war years in Argentina is only incidental to this discussion of fictional reality.

that the occupation has brought with it, and his interest in Karol and Henia produces in him a kind of detachment that makes him ignore the war altogether.

The events and characters gain importance in proportion to the degree to which they are connected with the locus of the narrator's and Frederick's interest—Karol and Henia. All their activity is directed to one purpose: to unite these two young people, to blend them in embrace while Frederick and Witold stand by in fulfillment of their voyeuristic fantasy. Once the narrator is committed to this, "given" reality is unimportant to him.

The powerful influence of Karol and Henia over the narrator, their ability to change his perception of "given" reality by their mere presence, is also shown by the narrator's perception of other people connected with this locus.

It is obvious that the narrator's changed outlook dominates his perception of "given" reality, of the political background of the action, and of the church, the house, and things in general. But the sharp contrast between the narrator's two descriptions of Albert, Henia's fiancé, indicates the change in point of view caused by the conspiracy against Albert. With Albert, the narrator perceives at first the elegant aristocracy so different from the youthful, earthy sensualism that attracts him to Karol and Henia. The first description (p. 39), notwithstanding a mild streak of irony, stresses Albert's good looks. Consequently, his later hatred for the body of this man (p. 119) can be explained only by the evolved change of sensibility documented by the examples given so far.

The narrator has progressed so far in this process of transforming "given" reality that he does not consider Albert as a person as he did in the first description, but only as a depersonalized, dehumanized body. Now the body looms large—it is the only "true" fictional reality; the soul has been snuffed out.

The transformation of fictional reality becomes still more refined as it progresses, reaching the level of pure abstraction, where "given" reality is exchanged for symbols and their equations, mere formulas. The fictional reality becomes intensely rarefied and thus emptied of conscience, when matters of life and death are turned into formulas that mock future "deconstructions" in a prophetic feat of unintended satire (p. 117) where the transformation reaches a pinnacle which cannot be exceeded in any way other than by the actual uniting of Karol and Henia in the murder of Albert.

It is this murder that represents the explosion of the infernal machine. When "transformed" reality clashes with the underlying "given" reality (from which it departs), people die. With these deaths Karol and Henia lose their immaturity and, consequently, also their hold over their obsessed conspirators. Their savagery, openly displayed, lacks all of its former secret hellish charm. The blood, then, clearly contradicts the dry formulas devised by Frederick because its appalling existence is both the result and the antithesis of the abstraction.

In the development of the changes in fictional reality, as presented by the narrator Witold, the reader is able to make the following observations:

1. Witold's observations could be arranged into contrasting pairs chronologically: "given"—"transformed."

2. The transformation of Witold's perception proceeds in stages, heralded by illuminations.

3. The changes concern the entire point of view of Witold, the sum total of the fictional reality.

4. The changes are simultaneous with, or identical to, the internal changes in the narrator.

5. The changes in fictional reality result in the climactic denouement of the novel, and are therefore the dominant device on which the whole construction of the novel rests.

The dizzying heights reached in this novel cannot be explained by the enumeration of the various roles played by the central device of tampering with fictional reality. Witold's penetration into the essence of events gives him an inkling of mysteries too profound to plumb: "All situations in the world are figures. The appallingly significant events that happened here could not be understood or fully deciphered. The world was pitching in an unexpected way" (p. 45).

The pyrotechnic that caused the explosion of the infernal machine belongs to a borderline art. On the other side of the border is real pornography: the discovery and exploitation of the nexus between eros and murderous immaturity by mature observers who use this discovery for an erotically and sadistically heightened vicarious experience. The participation of a nefarious imagination in the seeing of the other ("transformed") reality is its outstanding characteristic.

Only the sheer imaginative *tour de force* of Gombrowicz manages to keep our attention riveted to the inventive distortions of fictional reality while, hovering above the borderline, we pretend to be unaware of the awful truth betrayed by the stench of decaying bodies.

