

Professor Michał Paweł Markowski

Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities  
Jagiellonian University

***Witold Gombrowicz: Literature and Existence***

**Course description:**

The course aims at presentation one of the most original writers of European Modernism, Witold Gombrowicz (1908-1969) through reading of the three volumes (in excerpts) of his *Diary*, kept and published in installments in Paris, between 1953 and 1969. The *Diary* was conceived not as a neutral record of life events but as a creative strategy of presenting the writer's self to the Polish readers living abroad. Gombrowicz was very sensitive to the image he was imposing on his audience so he was meticulously building his literary persona very different from his actual personality. Thanks to many fictional devices used to confuse the reader, Gombrowicz, as he appears from reading the *Diary*, is a man hard to pin down and characterize, always elusive and turned into a literary character. The course helps to understand both Gombrowicz and the fundamental issues related to literary self-presentation. Emphasis is put on existential problems (and their character) as they turn out to dominate the whole text.

**Course requirements:**

- Attendance and active participation
- Reading assignments
- Short term papers and oral presentation in place of final exam

All readings and discussions are in English.

All materials are included in a course packet, available in the library.

Writing assignments are due every second meeting.

The length of writing assignments is varied. The topic is to be discussed with the instructor. The paper should include an interpretation of a literary text mentioned during the course, however not analyzed fully in the class.

**Approx. Class Schedule.**

Indicated topics will be discussed freely in the class during the whole course.

1. Meeting one:

Who was Witold Gombrowicz? Introductory remarks and discussions. Gombrowicz and emigration. How we should read his *Diary*?

2. Meeting two:

The self in literature. Modes of literary self-presentation depending on the concept of the self. The first entry of the *Diary* as an example. Performing as opposed to expressing the self.

3. Meeting three:

Being oneself and becoming oneself as presented in the course of the *Diary*. An active role of the reader in constructing the literary persona.

4. Meeting four:

Life and Existence: introductory distinctions. Why literature of existence is not existential literature?

5. Meeting five:

Gombrowicz as an existential writer. Why *Diary* suited his existential project the best. What does it mean to project oneself? Reading of chosen excerpts.

6. Meeting six:

Chapter 14 of the second volume of the *Diary* as an example of obsessive desire to figure out what life means.

7. Meeting seven:

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8. Meeting eight:

The diabolical principle of the world. Gombrowicz and Evil.

9. Meeting nine:

Psychoanalytical reading of Gombrowicz: between Freud and Lacan.

10. Meeting ten:

Looking for stable reference points in life bereft of any. How literature can cope with changing reality.

11. Meeting eleven:

*Diario Rio di Parana* as an autonomous literary piece within the *Diary*. The existential meaning of it.

12. Meeting twelve:

“Uneventfulness” as the most fundamental principle of *Diario*. How to present what does not happen?

13. Meeting thirteen:

How *Diario* is related to *Diary*?

14. Meeting fourteen:

Wrapping up the course. All topics discussed again.

15. Meeting fifteen:

Student’s presentations.

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