Irrony and Metaphysics. Constructing and Deconstructing Identity in Modern Polish Literature.

Slavic 161
Fall 2002

Professor: Michal Pawel Markowski, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland (Fall Term only)
Office hours: to be arranged
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Course objectives:

The main purpose of this course is to delineate two sides of literary Modernity: the constructive and the deconstructive. Taking as an example the works of two eminent Polish writers we will see how and why the metaphysical part of Modernity calls for its ironic counterpart in the process of making the literary subject. Milosz and Gombrowicz will be usefully compared here as paradigmatic representatives of radically opposite attitudes to being and writing. The course deals with their major works in English translation and besides the helpful introduction to contemporary Polish literature, it provides an original commentary on the modern literary experience as such. The course format is based on both lectures and discussions. All readings are in English. A surplus hour is added for those who want to read texts in Polish.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and active participation, reading assignments and term paper in place of the final exam. Final grades will be based on attendance and participation which will count for 50% of the total, term paper and discussion on it – 50%. Given the lack of a main textbook, students are requested to make notes during the course. The recommended readings are not mandatory, but helpful in discussion, so students are strongly encouraged to complete them.

Term Paper:

Due December 17.

The length of the term paper for undergraduates: 10 pages on the subject matter related to the course. Possible topics for term paper will be suggested; every student is required to discuss the chosen topic with the instructor.
The length of the term paper for graduates: 20 pages. Knowledge of both secondary literature and primary sources not included in the course is required. Research in foreign languages suggested.

**Reading Sources:**

The working basis for all the course readings will be *Diaries* by Witold Gombrowicz (translated by Lilian Vallee, Northwestern University Press, 1986, 3 vols.) and *New and Collected Poems* by Czeslaw Milosz (Ecco Press 2000). Both were ordered in the COOP by the instructor, put on reserve in library, or are available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Other texts both required and recommended will be suggested by the instructor all through the course.

Recommended (and not required) books (they serve to provide the intellectual context of the course):

Schedule of classes:

Week 1: Sep. 17 (TU), 4-6 PM.
Milosz and Gombrowicz: two sides of Modernity. An overview of the course.

Week 2: Sep. 24 (TU), 4-6 PM.
Essences and Existences. Two Attitudes to Being.
“Veritable, true to the very core”. The essential Milosz.
“I felt elusive in being”. Gombrowicz’s excesses of existence.
“How to tell it all?” Milosz, Gombrowicz and the paradoxes of expression.

Week 3: Oct. 1 (TU), 4-6 PM.
“The same and not quite the same”. Literature and the Question of Identity.
Constructions and deconstructions of identity: preliminary remarks.
The Same and the Other: contemporary issues (Nancy and others).
Identity according to Charles Taylor: a place that one speaks from.
The Imaginary and the Symbolic. Lacanian contribution to the question of subject.
Between Clothing and Nakedness: Milosz, Gombrowicz and the aporia of identity.

Week 4: Oct. 8 (TU), 4-6 PM.
Metaphysics and Irony.
Richard Rorty: final dictionaries and contingent descriptions.
What is metaphysical poetry? Milosz read by Heidegger, Heidegger read by Milosz.
Ironic and distance: from Romanticism to Modernism.
“The eccentricities, the little lies, the jokes, the hoaxes”: Gombrowicz as ironist.

Week 5: Oct 8 (TU): 4-6 PM.
Subject, Object, and Abject.
What is “the subject”? A philological commentary.
The object as subject: Descartes and his philosophical and literary legacy.
“I stare and stare”: Desire and disinterested contemplation in Milosz.
“I am too much”. Gombrowicz and the excessive subject.
“God, allow me to vomit up the human body”. Gombrowicz and the conception of abject.

Week 6: Oct. 22 (TU): 4-6 PM.

Home and Exile. Two Models of Literary Experience.


Week 7: Oct. 29 (TU): 4-6 PM.

Memory and Oblivion.


Week 8: Nov. 5 (TU): 4-6 PM.

Texts and Ravings.


Week 9: Nov. 12 (TU) 4-6 PM.

Apology and Degradation.

“Song to praise”. Milosz and the poetics of glorification. Compulsive Compromising: Gombrowicz’s “principle of degradation”.

Week 10: Nov. 19 (TU) 4-6 PM.
Eye and Gaze. Adventures in the Scopic Field.

“Conquered: seen”: Perception and Violence from Descartes to Milosz.
“That stranger’s eyes moving all over my form”: Gombrowicz between Sartre and Lacan.

Week 11: Nov. 26 (TU) 4-6 PM.

Gifts and Laughs.

What is given in literature? Deconstruction against phenomenology.
“And everything simultaneous”. Milosz’s A Gift and a poetic of givenness.
Laughter as expenditure: Gombrowicz and Bataille.

Week 12: Dec 3 (TU): 4-6 PM.

Epiphanies and Events.

The desire for presence: modern epiphanies.
“Searching for the Real”: dimensions of reality in Milosz and Gombrowicz.
“The secrets of things themselves”: Milosz between Cezanne and Zen Buddhism.
“A physical shape of event”: Gombrowicz and “the realm of Unpredictable”.


Signs and Hieroglyphs.

“The true meaning, ready to be decoded”. Milosz and the desire for semiotical transparence.
“Hieroglyphs, puzzles, mistakes”. Gombrowicz and negative hermeneutics.


Conclusions.