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Literary Studies in Poland 10, 115-126

1983

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Gombrowicz and His Critics

When the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences held its session devoted to the life and work of Witold Gombrowicz (24–26 IV 1975), a session which provided much of the essential material for the present book*, the questions studied were those outlined by the author himself with reference to *Ferdydurke*: “We ought to [...] establish, state clearly and define whether [it] is a novel, a memoir, a parody, a pamphlet, a variation on subjects of fantasy, a study.” Questions such as: “what is predominant [in it]: jesting, irony, or a deeper meaning, sarcasm, persiflage, invective, absurdity, pure nonsense, pure pretence, and further, is it not after all a mere pose, make-believe, drollery, affectation, deficiency of wit, emotional anaemia, atrophy of imagination, disturbance of order and loss of reason” (*Ferdydurke*, Warsaw 1956, pp. 203–204)—all belonged to the past. At the time no one accused Gombrowicz of “atrophy of imagination” or “loss of reason.” Even if they did, it was not in this circle of people, whose attitude reflects the following words, pronounced only a few years earlier: “Gombrowicz is dead. So let us say, as befits a people of whom Norwid said that their thoughts always come too late, that the most outstanding Polish writer of our times is dead” (J. Błoński, “Heroiczny sceptyk” (A Heroic Sceptic), *Opole*, 1971, n. 12).

Gombrowicz’s literary debut did not predict his later recognition by the Academy. Aleksander Janta remembers him as “a young

* Foreward to the anthology *Gombrowicz i krytycy*, to be published by Wydawnictwo Literackie.

writer, who brought to me his first short essay (I had just started work as a secretary for the weekly *Kultura*, published by the so-called “red press” in Warsaw, and edited by Kazimierz Wierzyński). It was the year 1932. The editor examined it distrustfully, decided it was affected and farfetched, and told me to say he would not insert it in the paper” (A. Janta, “Miny i maska” ‹Faces and the Mask›, *Wiadomości*, 1972, no 28). The very next year, however, thanks to his father’s money, Gombrowicz was able to publish a whole collection of stories. Opinions in the press were far from enthusiastic. *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* said: “It is possible to understand the mental states which give birth to such things, but it is difficult to understand why they appear in print. Chaos cannot be considered an expression of creative talent” (P. Hulka-Laskowski, “Pisarz, książka i czytelnik” ‹The Writer, His Book and His Readers›, 1933, no 40). *Świat* was also wary: “Will this road paved with ‘mental injuries’ and ‘complexes’ lead Mr. Gombrowicz to use words so that they may be worthy of art—this question remains open” (E. Czekalski, 1933, no 40). According to Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski: “the young author’s technique has not yet reached maturity, indeed it has not even entered the period when the means of artistic expression are beginning to form” (“Z okresu dojrzewania” ‹On the Way to Maturity›, *Gazeta Polska*, 1933, no 222). This view is backed by a philologist: “Such hyperboles were amusing in the days of Rabelais, but we do not know if this type of humour still pays off.” Further on, however, the scholar is less severe: “*Zbrodnia z premedytacją* (Premeditated Murder), which is a parody of Sherlock Holmes stories, is told with virtuosity, and it is the only story which allows us to expect of the young author something above the ordinary. Anyone who has such a well developed writing technique that he is able to conjure up particular moods through various fictitious images, fulfils the vital condition for moving the reader” (R. T. Sinko, “*Wśród nowych książek*” ‹Some New Books›, *Kurier Literacko-Naukowy*, 1933, no 36). A more welcoming note may be detected in a review by a representative of the young generation. Jerzy Andrzejewski (5 yrs. younger than Gombrowicz) declared: “Not everything has been thought over well enough in this young writer’s work,” but his debut “nonetheless announces even fuller and more mature achievements in this field” (*ABC Literacko-*

-*Artystyczne*, July 1933). Similar views were expressed by several critics of greater renown and experience. Aniela Gruszecka writes that the stories "leave an impression of great wealth and artistic abundance" ("Powieści polskie" [Polish Novels], *Przegląd Współczesny*, 1933, no 138). Leon Piwiński says they "intrigue by the singularity of their ideas" and "impress with their culture and the dextrous use of the means of literary expression" ("Interesujący debiut" [An Interesting Debut], *Wiadomości Literackie*, 1933, no 32). The great zeal is shown by yet another representative of the young generation, Tadeusz Breza, a close friend of the writer: "The intractable rashness of his words is to me the most evident proof of his talent. This simplicity in expressing the extraordinary overpowers the reader and arouses his confidence. Never before has inscrutability been so convincing and profuse" ("O wyobraźni, humorze i urazach" [On Imagination, Humor and Animosity], *Kurier Poranny*, 1933, no 184).

This disorientation among critics which may be seen in the above extracts is probably due to Gombrowicz's decision to make use of the tragic farce. At that time realism triumphed in morality and psychology. There was a clear-cut division between serious literature and literature meant for distraction only. Gombrowicz's type of fantastic imagination, his particular type of humour, his use of popular forms (sensational novels and adventure stories, stories of romance for teenage girls, etc.) did not allow his work to find a place in the literary topography of his day. His critics looked back to tradition, and spoke of romantic grotesque, referring to Poe, Hoffman and others. But as far as the present was concerned, Gombrowicz could not be classified. The cause of this was seen to lie in the internal non-adjustment of the elements of his prose, which in turn was a consequence of the writer's youthful distraction and immaturity.

It was much simpler to link the book with some ideas which were alive at the time: "From the viewpoint of psycho-analysis it is easier to understand" (Sinko), "it may be of greater interest to a disciple of Freud than to an ordinary reader" (Czekalski). All in all: "Eccentricities of an untamed fantasy, subconscious sublimations, mutations and exhibitionisms, expressed in the jargon of a particular field of knowledge" (Hulka-Laskowski).

This affinity with a "particular field of knowledge" could also be looked upon differently. This is what Leon Piwiński wrote about it: "although the book is not a laboratory-type study in psycho-analysis, nonetheless the spirit of Freudian psychology permeates it throughout. Each of these seven stories is an elaboration or illustration of some 'complex', and each deals with matters deeply rooted in the subconscious. Their originality consists in bringing out the unexpected comic side of psycho-analytical themes".

This idea has been developed by another critic, G. K. from *Kurier Poranny*. It is a relief to come across an article where the writer's merit is measured according to a proper scale, and which not only sees the dissonance of Gombrowicz's works but also detects their intention and aim. G. K. also discerns the writer's aesthetic preferences, though he disapproves of them:

Up till now we have made fun of everything: the horror of death, various social taboos, ideals and concepts, morality and civilization, but we have never yet been made to laugh at the disquieting depths of our consciousness. Gombrowicz was probably the first to choose this subject not for serious study but as an object of cold-blooded sour derision.

This brilliant book has been written with acute intelligence and great imagination. It shows an original and outstanding talent. It is both very profound and very shallow. Strange that the author should descend so deep down into the human soul just to amuse himself. It is in vain that we might look for the author's aesthetic or philosophical views in *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (*Diary from Adolescent Days*)—we could get no further than the reader's attitude: being amused at the strangeness of existence (...Postawa nowych autorów. Choromański. Gombrowicz. Rudnicki" 'The Attitude of Young Authors', 1933, no 328).

Gombrowicz's admirers may be pleased to know (and probably not surprised) that the initials at the end of the article (G. K.) stand for the writer himself. (The attribution has been made thanks to A. Rudnicki, "Rana Witolda Gombrowicza" 'Witold Gombrowicz's Wound', *Literatura*, 1979, no 391.)

In this way the author of *Pamiętnik* made his debut both as a writer and as his own critic, happy to resort to the use of pastiche or parody. This double role will also characterize his future career. Many years later, Janusz Sławiński will write this about him: "Gombrowicz has turned out to be the Chief Authority on Gombrowicz; not only has he initiated a sub-discipline in Polish literary studies, but he has also become an unsurpassable

expert on himself" („Sprawa Gombrowicza" ‹The Gombrowicz Case', *Nurt*, 1977, no 2; see also the present vol. p. 112).

Meanwhile, however, *Ferdydurke* appeared. If in the preceding period there had been a disparity between Gombrowicz's writing and what the critics had to say, the book now became the object of turbulent discussions. It was generally accepted as something more—something less?—than a work of art: as a proposition which entred within the field of “personal philosophy.” The press from that period provides us with rich documentation on the book's reception—there are a great many reviews, essays and pamphlets. Yet it is difficult for us today to assess the extent and intensity of the novel's influence. Kazimierz Czachowski writes: “The book and its author are surrounded by an atmosphere of idolatrous adoration. In the interpretation of his worshippers, Gombrowicz is a genius, and *Ferdydurke* has become the navel of the literary world of the capital” (“Z *Ferdydurką* na bakier” ‹On Hostile Terms with *Ferdydurke*», *Kurier Literacko-Naukowy*, 1938, no 17). Bruno Schulz gave a lecture which might be considered a formal expression of the atmosphere (“*Ferdydurke*”, *Skamander*, 1938, fasc. 96/98; reprinted in the present vol.), but he was a friend of Gombrowicz and his partisan, and besides he did not belong to the circle of people whose opinion mattered.

Some light on the stir created by *Ferdydurke* may be shed by various casual remarks, rather than by essays specifically devoted to that subject. The essays contain such views as: “It is easy to see all this when one has read Pirandello. Yesterday's discoveries have now become truisms” (A. Laszowski, “Szkola Gombrowicza” ‹The School of Gombrowicz», *Mysł Polska*, 1937, no 22). But here is an extract from a newspaper article on this matter:

“I wished that in Poland creative writing might not be identified with chewing over models of literature from abroad, often taken from an intermediate source, and that we might no longer try to chase Western thought in a fiacre, when it is speeding along in a car [...]

“It so happened that my much ridiculed and craving optimism suddenly found itself in a pleasant setting, at a well-laid table and in a very smart suit.

“It all started when Witold Gombrowicz sent me his *Ferdydurke*.

"I knew the story of the countess Kotlubaj, and I was aware that I was not dealing with just anybody. Then I started to read *Ferdydurke* and could not believe my eyes. A new style. Gombrowicz's own vision. His very own idea! My God, a Polish noble, without his (traditional) coat and not dancing the Polonaise, as bare as the dead body of Leonidas which Słowacki waved before our eyes. It makes one shiver to see this new Polish courage. And these real Polish Thermopylae at the highest summit of intellectual life..." (L. Chwistek, "Fala optymizmu" 'A Wave of Optimism', *Czas*, 1938, no 36).

These metaphors proved that Chwistek was a clairvoyant. At that time probably even Gombrowicz himself could not foresee his later embodiments, so well depicted in this imagery.

But let us turn to the less para-psychological symptoms of *Ferdydurke's* influence. Jan Kott recalls ("Gęba i grymas" 'An Ugly Mug and a Grimace', *Wiadomości*, 1969, no 50/51) how a few years after the novel was published, in the middle of a war which was to turn reality upside down, he came across a face-pulling contest. Jerzy Andrzejewski and Czesław Miłosz, the main representatives of the "tragic outlook" (as classified by Kazimierz Wyka), were kneeling face to face, abandoning themselves in private to the "derisory outlook."

Yet the very point is that they were doing it privately. Almost the entire "1910 generation" was convinced that it was necessary to talk seriously about serious matters. Gombrowicz's bewitching power was limited. The experiences gained from *Ferdydurke* were applied above all in interpersonal contacts, i. e. in social life. There, the novel served as a source of practical philosophy. Obviously in the late 1930's this was not the most important field of interest for writers.

That is why it is not Chwistek but Kott (of the prewar generation) who was able to express fully the spirit of the period, when he wrote: "*Ferdydurke* is not the best, but it is certainly the most interesting Polish book of the last few years. It has the style and charm of a conversation between young, intelligent, arrogant people in a traditional salon. But that very fact imposes certain limits" (*Wiedza i Życie*, 1938, fasc. 4).

Other critics were less kind. Wit Tarnawski, author of the most

extensive study on *Ferdydurke* and an honest critic, considered it necessary to state the facts quite clearly: "One has to choose: either to amuse oneself [...] or to upbraid seriously [...] If this is a grave matter, there is no serious premise; if it is grotesque—what is the problem?" ("Rzeczywista niedojrzałość *Ferdydurki*" <*Ferdydurke's Real Immaturity*>, *Przegląd Współczesny*, 1939, no 8/9).

The main reason for the disapproval—just as in the case of *Pamiętnik*—was Gombrowicz's aesthetic preference for the tragic farce. Yet there was also another reason, connected with his method. Gombrowicz believed that ultimate values and the ultimate truth could only be found in direct contacts between people. A person's mind, as well as products of culture, or nature, or even the notion of the absolute (Gombrowicz's "God") were secondary in relation to what could be seen to happen between people.

The literary work was often seen as a paradox, as an impossible thing, as something which tries to overcome its own nature. The paradox of Gombrowicz's works results from the interactional essence to which the work aspires but which it cannot fully achieve.

Proper interaction takes place face to face, and it consists of successive moves performed by the partners. The literary process, which has a consequence and a cause—the work of literature—takes place along different lines.

It is an interaction in which the various components have become separated in space and time. The author is far from his reader and each move is removed from its counter-move. The work can only pretend to be interactional.

Gombrowicz considered not only the style and subject of a book to be important (how poignant, innovatory or profound it was), nor was the author and his experience of primary significance. He would also take into account his readers. Gombrowicz knew that a book was read in diverse circumstances, in various ways, by enlightened as well as ignorant people. He wanted to foresee these different perspectives and include them in his works, in order to have control over every one of his readers. These predicted reactions were to give him extra impetus, and allow him to exert a tangible influence. This was to assure the fulfilment of the interactional conception of the work.

For Gombrowicz's contemporaries, such an attitude was beyond

comprehension. Even Bruno Schulz could not come to accept a literary philosophy which took into consideration the tastes of "the doctor's wife" (this provoked a lively exchange of views in the periodical *Studia*, 1936, no 17).

But let us do justice to Gombrowicz. He not only catered for "the doctor's wife", that new symbol of the old "Philistine"; but also for quite a different type of reader. As he himself has written, *Ferdydurke* was not only "for town dwellers," "for land-owners," "for civil servants, doctors and lawyers with broader horizons," "for the aristocracy" and "for the common people"—it was also "for the chief figures of contemporary Polish literature and for the most accomplished, well-constructed and inflexible critics" (*Ferdydurke*, pp. 202–203).

It is hard to guess what would have happened to Gombrowicz's writing if there had been no war. After 1945, he was best known for his *Ferdydurke*. *Pamiętnik* was quickly forgotten, *Iwona* never really caused much of a stir. In this period Gombrowicz was liked for his biting satire. "In this sense the pages of *Ferdydurke* are more realistic than a volume of Gojawczyńska," wrote Kazimierz Wyka ("Tragiczność, drwina i realizm" <The Tragic, Derision and Realism>, 1945, [in:] *Pogranicze powieści*, Kraków 1948, p. 22). *Ferdydurke*'s technological usefulness was also emphasized: "For a writer this book is a perfect and most instructive laboratory substance" (Wyka, p. 33). Gombrowicz was to exert his influence only through his successors (usually Stanisław Dygat was named).

Later years were to bring about complete degradation. How could it have been otherwise, since: "Mr. Gombrowicz and Mr. Mieroszewski express in literary form (and very bad form at that) what has become the ideology of the Polish owning class when the Polish nation cast them down from the heights of class rule." The author of this book goes on to say: "an émigré scribbler," "author of obscure novels which no one reads," "that crazy *Ferdydurke*" (S. Arski, *Targowica leży nad Atlantykiem* <*Targowica is on the Atlantic Coast*>, Warszawa 1952, pp. 94–95; Arski's book was published in 30 thousand copies, while the only postwar edition of *Ferdydurke* (in 1956)—in 10 thousand copies.

Some mercy was shown towards Gombrowicz by Ryszard Matuszewski. Although he wrote about *Ferdydurke*: "The very title

which does not mean anything, creates an atmosphere of absurdity, which characterized (for Gombrowicz) the whole world." he later added: "Gombrowicz's work was an intentional grotesque, and in fact it had some clever satirical accents" (*Literatura międzywojenna* [Inter-war Literature], Warszawa 1953, p. 255).

Several years earlier Karol Irzykowski wrote a few words on this matter, and concluded that it was "quite an original attempt at presenting a grotesque psychological vision by means of drama." But he added that "it is rather like a dramatized short story. Gombrowicz's new thrilling experience has not yet been legalized as a piece of drama" (*Rocznik Literacki*, 1938, p. 68).

A change in the way Gombrowicz's old works—and new—were viewed did not occur till the end of 1956. We now know what impact they made at a time when there was so little visible proof of their existence. (Compare e. g. J. J. Lipski, *Ferdydurke, czyli wojna skuteczna wydana mitom* [Ferdydurke or a Successful War Waged with Myths], *Nowa Kultura*, 1957, no 12).

From that moment onwards, Gombrowicz's presence makes itself felt constantly and with increasing strength. Not only is he present in literary and theatrical life, but also in some unexpected places. For instance a few years ago one of the faculties at Warsaw University organized a psychological seminar devoted entirely to Gombrowicz. In the mid-sixties Gombrowicz's international fame starts to grow, and even before then he takes part in the literary life of the Polish emigration. Any research on the influence of his works must therefore be carried out by a considerably large group of people. It is our intention here to concentrate on only one form and one place—the opinions of critics in Poland during the last twenty years.

Several of the most typical approaches can be studied in Artur Sandauer's critical essays. The prewar essay "Powieść o udawaniu" (A Novel about Pretending, *Nasz Wyraz*, 1939, no 3) was possibly the most successful attempt at establishing the premises of *Ferdydurke* as well as exploring the mechanism of their literary expression. The categories used then—though they had not been named—still awaited their existential baptism. It was performed by Sandauer just after the war.

Another type of writing used by Gombrowicz is illustrated in

two other essays, "Szkoła nierzeczywistości i jej uczeń" (The School of Unreality and Its Pupil, *Życie Literackie*, 1957, no 34) and "Początki, świetność i upadek rodziny Młodziaków" (The Beginnings, Splendour and Fall of the Młodziak Family, *Polityka*, 1958, no 43). In both essays *Ferdydurke* serves as an arsenal of figures—figures of thought and speech—for an attack on people and issues quite remote from the contents of the book. By means of this method Sandauer creates a critical grotesque, which is reminiscent of Gombrowicz not only in wording, but also in spirit. Others are less consistent. They take some elements from the writer's universe and use them to make up their own system. It is not even clear for what purpose: to interpret the writer or the world?

Sandauer has also written a few critical essays which have a different purpose, for their intention is to weaken the energy which emanates from Gombrowicz's works. This is not difficult: you only have to find a sufficiently discrediting source for that energy.

In this way Sandauer initiated the three most popular varieties of criticism pertaining to Gombrowicz, he provided three prototypes. The first aims at understanding the writer, the second wants to use him for its own ends, while the third tries to put him to shame.

These varieties do not occur in their pure form, but the division illustrates the general tendency. The tendency, as well as the immense number of critical reviews, can be a source of nightmares: "The following vision appears before my eyes: Wide open mouths of critical essays—the one that is most widely open will engulf the others" (A. Falkiewicz, "Niczym tekst wpisany w tekst" <Like a Text Contained in a Text>, *Teksty*, 1974, no 5).

This situation provoked a different reaction in an outsider like Janusz Sławiński, whose ideas have been reproduced here, though less colourfully than in the original. In his article in *Nurt*, he calls upon all critics to free themselves from the language of interpretation imposed by Gombrowicz, for the sake of literary history and common sense. He is probably right in mocking their docility. Yet this docility should not only be judged, but also explained. Gombrowicz's case is not any more or any less extraordinary than that of other writers—at a certain time in history—for example. Dostoevski in the literary culture of Russia in the period of symbolism.

Dostoevski was also commented upon by means of Dostoevski. He, too, served as a means of passing comments on other issues, such as: man, the common people, Russia, Christ. Faced with Dostoevski, the critics were quite helpless. A few great thinkers, among them V. Rozanov and L. Shastov, paraphrased his ideas, speculated on them, parabolized them. Others made furious attacks on the writer, and they not only attributed to him the same kind of emotional capacity as his characters, but also their most atrocious deeds.

I do not think that this rich range of literary and paraliterary essays is now only a pile of waste-paper or that it even belongs to the archives. It had to give rise to protest, as when the treatises of L. Grossman and V. Vinogradov sprung into being, in the circle close to the formalists. They used a set of theoretical and historical notions which was just being forged to describe the singularities of Dostoevski's art. It is true that his art was tamed and its disarming charm was taken away. But there was also a dissonance between the technique which had been analyzed by the critics and the vision created by means of that technique. Then M. Bakhtin introduced some new notions ("dialogue," "polyphonic novel," etc.) which meant that at long last Dostoevski's novels had a worthy researcher.

Keeping everything in the correct proportions, it may be said that for the last twenty years or so Gombrowicz has had to face a similar situation. Since the time of Norwid, he has been the first to create his very own vision of the world, and he has been able to convey it to his readers in a variety of ways, from poetry to short essays. It is not in vain that Norwid has so skilfully evaded historians of literature. So far neither he nor Gombrowicz have had their Bakhtin.

These freely operated analogies are a form of self-defence. All who write about Gombrowicz have to face an awkward choice. Should we paraphrase, popularize and comment on what the author himself has done, much earlier and far better? Or should we perhaps embark on some good solid research using existing notions and techniques, which—we suspect—will not produce an integral result? An integral approach in this case would be just as revolutionary as the phenomenon itself was in literature.

In the meantime readers are presented with a book which should provide some orientation in what is known about Gombrowicz. Some of the pieces of information to be found here are only documents from the past, others prepare the way for a future synthesis, others still are artistic entities in themselves. Yet they go to make up the best existing introduction to the work of Gombrowicz, an author whose presence has been strongly felt, but neglected.

Finally let us draw attention to those works which may be called full-fledged critical studies. It may surprise the reader that they were initiated by someone from afar. Perhaps it was necessary to be a postgraduate student from Zagrzeb to be able to look at Gombrowicz as an "object of research." In any case Zdravko Malić's essays were followed by Polish ones which advanced our knowledge considerably.

Could this mean that the "Chief Authority on Gombrowicz" is going to be dethroned?

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*