

SUBJECTIVE COURSE OF POLISH LITERATURE

On Witold Gombrowicz Essay by Klementyna Suchanow

I will speak about Witold Gombrowicz, a writer, a provocateur of Polish literature, who irritated many people and was sometimes considered a buffoon. One of his most famous sayings is “the wiser, the stupider”.

The life of Gombrowicz spread, geographically, between Poland, Argentina and France and spanned the first half of the 20th century, a period quite problematic from a historical point of view. He was born in provincial Poland, outside Radom, to a wealthy family with Lithuanian roots, his mother came from a family of landowners-entrepreneurs. He was the youngest son, spoiled by his mother, who was one of the first landowners-feminists, although she was a pietist as well. Witold, however, had quite a critical attitude towards his mother and women in general. Later, the family moved to the capital, and there, in Warsaw, he took his first steps in literature. Actually, he decided about his calling in France. He went to Paris for postgraduate studies, but didn't really commit himself to studying. One day, he took a train to the south, to Pyrenees, and travelling at night he decided to do something with his life and he came up with the idea of becoming a writer. By then, he had no reason to consider himself a writer, he hadn't even yet made any literary attempts. But he didn't finish the studies at the international institute in France. While many of his colleagues would become European, American or Latino diplomats.

Gombrowicz returned to Poland and pursued his career as a lawyer, on the one hand, because he had no other ideas, but also to get money from his father, because as long as he continued his training as a judge and received no remuneration, his father-entrepreneur felt it was his duty to support his son. Gombrowicz got closer to the criminal world, as he was sometimes interrogating people brought by the police (in those times, examining magistrates had the right to interrogate prisoners), and this resulted in his first literary attempts. During a session, under the table, he begins to outline his first short stories, which would later become his debut. Those drafts draw considerably from his experience of getting in touch with the criminal world and investigations. However, in Gombrowicz's work, criminal plots will be made properly bizarre, distorted, it wasn't realistic writing. His debut



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in 1933 was well-received, but Witold Gombrowicz is very sensitive to criticism, and he is bothered by every negative opinion. Which will direct him towards working on a text which would become a debate with literary critics, whom he considers stupid. A man who is placed lower in the hierarchy, i.e. a critic, shouldn't make any statements about writing. That text is his best known novel "Ferdydurke", published by the end of 1937, just before the war. But before his career gets proper momentum, the war begins.

The life of Gombrowicz took place mainly in Warsaw cafés, so every night he leaves his apartment at Chocimska Street and, either via Marszałkowska or Aleje Ujazdowskie, he walks to Mazowiecka Street where Ziemiańska café is located, or to some other of the neighbouring places in this café area. There are many night clubs on Mazowiecka nowadays, but none of the pre-war cafés is open anymore. There was a certain hierarchy in Ziemiańska, so for the sake of provocation, he establishes a counter-table, at which he gathers certain entities – as he says – of secondary importance. At some point his table becomes famous and causes sensation. He is surrounded mainly by people from the province, poor poets, and members of the Jewish community, often leftist, proletarian and poor.

The war approaches and the well-begunn carrier is interrupted. Gombrowicz has a feeling something would happen and he escapes on a ship, using an invitation for a maiden voyage to Argentina. The ship's name is "Chrobry" and she sails by the end of July 1939 from Gdynia to Buenos Aires, where another stage in his life begins. Gombrowicz is a writer who made his debut three times – at first in Poland, then he tried to gain renown on the Argentinian market, and later he begins a career on the world market. For now he lives as a non-writer, because nobody knows him in Argentina, his books are not known, as well as the country from which he comes from. Poland is mentioned only as a victim of the Nazi attack, and in this way, a bit out of pity, some people from the literary community try to help him. But Gombrowicz has a difficult nature and commits numerous faux pas, quarrels and in the end, he is left without any support. He lives – as he likes to say – by a fluke, poorly, sometimes he goes to funeral receptions to get some free food. One day, somewhere on avenida Corrientes, looking at shop windows, he meets a man who takes him to a funeral reception. Obituaries and information on receptions were published in newspapers. The war years seem to be a colourful period in his life, and most of all – liberating.



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Gombrowicz was a creator of certain specific philosophical terms. In “Ferdydurke”, one of them is ‘form’. It was exactly during the Argentinian years that he had the opportunity to free himself from the form. Form could be everything: school, family. In “Ferdydurke”, it all starts with school, then there is the progressive community, bourgeois, which the main character Józio also exposes, and then his natural community, in which he grew up, i.e. landowners and manor houses. He tries to escape this form using all sorts of provocations, for example placing a man with a twig in his mouth outside Młodziakówna’s house, a girl coming from a progressive family. Nobody knows what it means, but those are the bizarre gestures of Gombrowicz. In his life, that escape is provided precisely by Buenos Aires. But as it turns out, you cannot escape from form and ‘gęba’ [mug] – yet another of Gombrowicz’s terms. ‘Gęba’ is a mask we put on because we are never natural, we constantly act out some role, we exist in a configuration “I and the other one”, the one who observes me or with whom I interact. We can escape form by putting on yet another gęba, but it’s a never-ending escape. That’s why often on theatre posters of Gombrowicz – because he’s also an author of three theatre plays and that’s the main source of his popularity around the world – masks being torn off a face are depicted.

For him, Buenos Aires means liberation, freedom. Here, he engages in new erotic adventures, but finally the war ends and a question appears: should he come back or should he stay? He decides to stay in Argentina, he cannot imagine a life under the communist regime and he starts to translate “Ferdydurke” into Spanish. It takes place in cafés, because this is a lifestyle he remains faithful to until the end. Once a decade, he was changing the circle of people, his admirers, always young – his apprentices in a way. He has a table in a chess club Rex at avenida Corrientes, managed by a Polish Jew, who came to Argentina for a chess tournament at the same time Gombrowicz did – shortly before the war. Gombrowicz conducts his life in Rex, because privately he rents a small room at 615 Venezuela Street. In that café, with a group of friends, he works on the translation, even though there was no Polish-Spanish dictionary in existence by then. Gombrowicz invented many words, which were very difficult to translate, some of them were incorporated into everyday language, like for example “pupa” [ass] and “łydka” [calf], which appear in “Ferdydurke”. They became keywords containing a certain philosophical message. “Pupa” is related to „upupianie” [making an ass out of somebody], but how to translate it into other languages?



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In Spanish, the world is „culo”, but for Gombrowicz also the onomatopoeic properties are important and the sound of this word doesn't suit him. And so the game of invention begins and he arrives at the word “cuculeito”, which for some reason sounds more attractive to him. The crazy game of translation takes place in a group of around 20 people, and later the text is polished by his Cuban friend, Virgilio Piñera. The book appears in print in 1947. Gombrowicz starts a promotional campaign, it's important for him to gain renown, but he cannot subject himself to certain codes of the circle. He's conflicted with Jorge Louis Borges, who's gradually becoming a great writer, and a wealthy patron, Victoria Ocampo. He leads the life of an outsider, a strange bird, and the Argentinian “Ferdydurke” will not become popular, for several generations it would remain a weird lecture of the insiders. The book will circle between people, used, overread, but in this way a certain aura of secrecy will be created around that Pole, a count – because Gombrowicz liked to present himself as an aristocrat.

In the end, he accepts a job in a Polish bank in Buenos Aires, which depresses him totally, because he keeps writing all the time, and now he has to sit for eight hours as a clerk and pretend to work. Colleagues complain about his inappropriate behaviour, that he takes off his belt, he spits orange seeds into the bin, he provokes and quarrels. He feels those years are important for his creative work, and at the same time he wastes time for a bureaucratic job. Under his desk at the bank he writes more novels. That's how “Trans-Atlantyk” is created, and then he starts to write “Diaries” – an important key to his oeuvre. I often recommend that book as the first reading, an introduction to Gombrowicz. Although there are many Polish topics there, which from today's perspective, especially for a foreigner, might be incomprehensible, but still you can hear the general voice of Gombrowicz-provocateur, who takes apart the whole world. “Diaries” start with in the following way: „Monday/ Me./ Tuesday/ Me. Wednesday. Me ...”. This „me” is the key feature of Gombrowicz's writing, and since “Trans-Atlantyk”, he becomes one of the characters in his novels under his own name. This is how he starts “Trans-Atlantyk”: “I feel a need to relate here for Family, kin and friends of mine the beginning of these my adventures, now ten years old, in the Argentinian capital”. Since then, he repeats this operation in every novel. Which obviously irritates critics, Polish readers living abroad and critics in the communist Poland,



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even though his books are not published there. He is a typical writer in emigration, without a passport, a stateless person, as many people coming from behind the Iron Curtain were.

And so his life goes on, at its centre provocations in cafés in the company of a group of boys from Buenos Aires and other cities, where he sometimes goes for vacation. After he leaves, they will keep the memory of that strange Polish writer. Most of them are dead today, only two remain alive. And while his position in the emigrants' world becomes stronger, his name is not well known in Argentina. But at some point, there is an opportunity to move to Europe and Gombrowicz, tired of his failure on the Argentinian market and stagnation in his career, decides to accept the invitation for a residency in Berlin. In 1963, he says goodbye to Argentina. During the ship voyage, a very particular meeting with his own self takes place. The 35-year-old Witold on his way to Buenos Aires meets the 59-year-old Witold coming back from his Argentinian adventure and moving, as it seems to him, towards death. This literary meeting with himself from the past will be described in "Diaries". In Europe, he will spend the last several years, between 1963 and 1969, the year of his death, i.e. six years. For some time now there had appeared translations of his work into French, English, German and other languages and so Gombrowicz's career gains momentum. Today he is known in all European languages, you can read him also in Chinese and Russian.

Gombrowicz makes it to the lists of the Swedish Academy, he's among the writers who were observed. As it turns out, when you analyse the Academy's documents, it was theatre which brought Gombrowicz fame and the interest of the Swedes. In general – as was proved by one of the researchers, Allen Kuharski – more people know Gombrowicz from his theatre than from reading his books. The first drama, "Ivona, Princess of Burgundia", was created still in Poland, before the war. Later, "The Marriage", written right after the war in Argentina. Based on Shakespearean drama, its topic is the return of a prodigal son to his home, to the family which used to be successful, but now fell into decline. The parents seem strangers and as for the son himself, it's not clear if he's the same or different. He appears with his double – which is yet another of Gombrowicz's themes. A man is never the same, there is always someone behind his back, and he has two faces – one positive, one demonic. The third play, "Operetta" was written already in France. It is difficult to stage in theatre, because it parodies the form of an operetta. The topic of the play is revolution, which perfectly fits in the atmosphere of the cultural revolution of 1968. But Gombrowicz is



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interested in what is happening to revolution, how it ends. It's again a parody, because the revolution breaks out during a ball at court, guests carry dangerous ideas hidden in their costumes. The most often staged is "Ivona", which strengthens Gombrowicz's position, and in 1968 and 1969, it is whispered more and more often that he might receive the Nobel Prize. Unfortunately Gombrowicz dies in July 1969, and the Nobel is awarded in October. In 1969 it was given to Samuel Beckett.

Gombrowicz spent the last days of his life in France and it is the last point on the map of his travels. His admirers like to follow Gombrowicz's footsteps. There are several places like that worth visiting in Warsaw, also in Buenos Aires and Berlin – in my biography "Gombrowicz. Me, Genius" there are maps you can use during travels. In Buenos Aires, for several years now literary tours are organized, following the footsteps of Gombrowicz, Borges and Cortázar. They circled the same streets and squares, but their paths have never crossed. All three of them turned out to be icons of literature and the city of Buenos Aires from the same period, although their lives went on separately. In Europe, such places are in West Berlin, where he spent a year in residency, from middle 1963 to middle 1964. It was the time of a particular rise of communist nationalist tendencies in Poland, and it touched also Gombrowicz, when he became the victim of a political provocation. His statements about Germans and the war were twisted and in this way quoted in Poland, which started a witch-hunt. He receives death calls, he has nightmares, about the war he didn't live through, his health declines, he feels threatened. He ends up in a clinic because of health problems and that's the beginning of the end.

He's had problems with asthma since he was a child, and that's why after leaving Berlin he chooses good climate and settles in the south of France, in Vence on Côte d'Azur, between the sea and the mountains. There, he finds a home with his partner, the first serious woman in his life. It's a young Canadian, Rita Labrosse, who works on a doctoral thesis devoted to the theme of childhood in Colette. It's a subject very dear to Gombrowicz, as he also created the terms "maturity" and "immaturity", as well as "superiority" and "inferiority". He himself is of course the eulogist of immaturity. And so he worships farmhands, barefoot and dirty, in whom there is true life, and not artificial boys from good homes. And also an eulogist of immaturity juxtaposed with for example high culture or the dignity of professors.



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The presence of Rita Labrosse is yet another breath of youth in his life, even though he's over 60 years old. They rent a flat in villa Alexandrine on the main square of the town. Nowadays, there's a tourist and cultural centre there – another stop on the journey with Gombrowicz. In the last months they move to a villa with a terrace further from the centre, but with an elevator, because Gombrowicz couldn't move from the flat for months. He dies in July 1969 during a heatwave, similar to the one in 1904, when he was born. On the Vence cemetery you can find Gombrowicz's tombstone, under tall cypress trees. There is a story related to the tombstone, told to me by Rita Gombrowicz – they got married before Witold's death. There was no cross on the stone, as Gombrowicz was an atheist. But Poles living nearby stubbornly left signals for Rita and placed crosses on the tombstone. At some point Rita surrendered and placed a small cross next to the name.

I've been following the reception of Witold Gombrowicz around the world for years, and I noticed a certain tendency, i.e. Gombrowicz becomes fashionable during crisis situations. During political and economic crises – just like during a big crisis in Argentina in 2001, and also in Poland during the short thaw in 1956, he's also read in China. In turbulent times, when the established order shakes, Gombrowicz as an exposé writer who calls things by their proper names, becomes a very needed author. After the system changed in 1989 in Poland, Gombrowicz became very fashionable, finally all his books were published. Although he provides us with no answers or solutions, he gives us tools to disarm lies, manipulations, grandiloquent words and propaganda. He perfectly defuses mines.

Now his position is very well established, and his books are being taught at schools, but when a conservative government got the power at the beginning of 2000s, there were ideas to remove him from the curriculum. Gombrowicz remains an uncomfortable writer, who gets on people's nerves. On the one hand, a landowner, on the other – a revolutionary in art. Gombrowicz defended himself from political involvement, he believed that as an artist he should deal only with art. He didn't allow anyone to drag him into political discussions, but he always liked to provoke, and so when he spoke to a leftist, he pretended to be a conservative, and when he spoke to a right wing supporter, he pretended to be a leftist. But privately – when I asked Rita Gombrowicz about it – Witold appreciated British parliamentary democracy.



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His last novel “Cosmos”, completed in Venice, seems to draw new readers the most today. In a way, it is more universal than „Trans-Atlantyk”, which is a crackdown on Poland, homeland, forms of old patriotism and an attempt to create of a new way of being a Pole or a French person. “Cosmos” is a novel describing two friends going on a trip to the mountains, from Warsaw to Zakopane. What’s interesting, writing the novel about a famous Polish spa, where Gombrowicz often travelled before the war, took place most of all in a seaside resort in Uruguay. Even though he spent 24 years in Latin America, his imagination was forever linked to Poland. Argentina appears only once in “Trans-Atlantyk”, in the figure of the provocative gay Gonzalo. Gombrowicz’s method of work reminds of surrealism. He starts writing not knowing where it will take him, he is carried from one scene to the next, from one association to another. In “Cosmos”, there is a motif of a hanged sparrow. That’s how an investigation starts, which instead of discovering a crime, leads to a crime. An introduction to that atmosphere can be the last movie by the Polish director Andrzej Żuławski, filmed in Portuguese mountains. It’s more of an adaptation, but in a particular way, Żuławski style, it depicts the craziness of “Cosmos”.

Today, Gombrowicz is considered a classic, together with the poet Czesław Miłosz, the Nobel Prize winner, they are the greatest writers of the 20th century in Polish literature. In case of Gombrowicz, reception of his works abroad is not easy, because it is made difficult by his language, body parts as philosophical terms of existentialism, before Jean-Paul Sartre managed to define that term. When Sartre appeared, Gombrowicz said „I was the first existentialist”, and when structuralism appeared, he considered himself the first structuralist. And in truth, Gombrowicz was a precursor of ideas developing in the 20th century – grotesque and absurd, before the theatre of the absurd appeared.

You should approach the world of Gombrowicz with certain preparation, as it will be a meeting with something new, surprising. It’s not an output you can place inside any template we were taught to deal with. It’s a journey into the unknown, which seduces many and leaves a lot of room to shape yourself as a human. I myself started reading Gombrowicz when I was 15, and I have a feeling he became my spiritual father. He allowed me to go through my life with freedom and distance. Gombrowicz is a man of distance, discipline towards himself, a master of looking at himself with full awareness, although not free from peculiarities and inconsistencies. He’s aware that you can constantly search for your true



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“self”. For him a human being is not an established form, but a process. Constant search and at the same time escape, life on the move, which forces us to consider who we are in relation to the world. You will find many questions there, but Gombrowicz will provide no answers. But he'll make you perform a vivisection on yourself, he'll make you try to live your life in a conscious way. It won't be easy, but it'll certainly be interesting.



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Appendix

Key concepts related to the work and philosophy of Witold Gombrowicz

FORM – a key concept created by Witold Gombrowicz to describe all ways of manifesting, expressing and behaving of humans in social relationships;

BERG – a key word from the novel „Cosmos”, German for “mountain”. Its meaning is never literally explained, but it describes perverse thoughts;

GAME – a tool used by Gombrowicz on a variety of levels, among others in literary provocations, in neologisms and wordplays;

GEŁBA [mouth] – one of the philosophical concepts created by Witold Gombrowicz in “Ferdydurke”. ‘Gełba’ describes all relationships between people in society, based on convention and masks which cannot be taken off – only replaced with yet another one;

THE INTERHUMAN CHURCH – a concept created by Witold Gombrowicz to describe the totality of interhuman relationships as the only source of values defining existence;

ŁYDKA [calf] – one of the philosophical concepts created by Witold Gombrowicz in “Ferdydurke”. ‘Łydka’ is yet another mask used by people, symbolizing youth, vitality and erotic freedom;

MASK – any of the conventions and social behaviours assumed by humans in relation to other humans. Witold Gombrowicz advocated tearing off masks, at the same time stating that it is impossible to function without them;

MATURITY/IMMATURITY – an opposition presented by Witold Gombrowicz in, among others, “Ferdydurke”. According to him, only what is mature can be expressed, but what is immature, not ordered is hidden in every human;

ME – a key feature in Gombrowicz’s writing. The author made himself one of the main characters in his writing, since “Trans-Atlantyk” using his own name;

PUPA [ass] – one of the philosophical concepts created by Witold Gombrowicz in “Ferdydurke”, related to ‘upupianie’ [making an ass of somebody] understood as imposing infantilization, putting on somebody a mask of an innocent child.



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