Ferdydurke

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About the author

Witold Gombrowicz [1904, Małoszyce (near Kielce) – 1969, Vence (France)]: writer, dramatist and publicist. He was born into a well-off gentry family in the provincial region of central Poland. Gombrowicz studied law at Warsaw University and spent a year at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Internationales in Paris. On the eve of the Second World War, as a young lawyer, a literary critic, and an active member of the literary circles of the capital, he started publishing in Warsaw. In August 1939, he moved to Argentina, where he spent almost 20 years working as a bank clerk, writing novels, plays, and keeping diaries, some of which were translated into Spanish and published in Argentina. In the post-1945 period he continued publishing in *Kultura*, a Polish journal published in Paris. Published beyond the reach of state censorship, *Kultura* was not officially available in Poland. The first large-scale appearance of Gombrowicz’s literary work in Poland was connected to the liberalization of the communist regime in 1956. In the early 1960s, he received a literary scholarship from the Ford Foundation, moved to West Berlin, and then to France, where he spent the rest of his life. In 1969 Gombrowicz married his secretary Rita Labrosse. During the last years of his life, he enjoyed international recognition, and in 1967 was awarded with the International Publishers Prize. Gombrowicz died in his house in Vence, near Nice, where he had lived since 1964. His work consists of several novels that contributed significantly to the development of the Polish literary canon. Although his works were banned in Poland, Gombrowicz started to become a renowned figure in Polish literary life already by the 1960s. Official campaigns against Gombrowicz targeted his alleged ‘vicious’ anticommunism, his homosexuality, and suggested his cooperation with the German revisionist policy toward Poland. In fact, already in his first novel *Ferdydurke* Gombrowicz commented ironically on Polish patriotism of the inter-war period and evoked his homosexuality. The second most influential work of Gombrowicz was the *Trans-Atlantyk*, a book describing his bitter start in Argentina and providing a mercilessly critical look at what he considered to
be the idiocy and artificiality of national patriotism. His works were not limited to Polish cultural debates. Gombrowicz wrote parodies of Shakespeare (Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda) as well as other fundamental works of world literature. It is argued that his works established an aesthetic framework that foreshadowed the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre as well as post-structuralism, although the writer distanced himself from Jean-Paul Sartre as well as post-structuralism, although the writer distanced himself from the attempts to interpret his oeuvre in philosophical terms. He himself stressed the linguistic import of his works (almost all of Gombrowicz’s works were written in Polish). He also succeeded in enriching the popular language with many neologisms. Gombrowicz is a point of reference for the Polish liberals and the target of criticism of the radical right (the latter continuously seeking to reduce his presence in the school curricula). Although contested in ideological terms, he is broadly acknowledged as the most important Polish writer of the twentieth century.

Main works: Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania [Diaries from the puberty] (1933, second edition as Bakakaj 1957); Ferdynurke (1937); Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda [Iwona princess of Burgund] (1938); Ślub [The Wedding] (1953); Trans-Atlantyk (1953); Dziennik [Diary] (1957–1966); Kosmos (1965); Operetka [The Operetta] (1966); Pornografia [Pornography] (1966).

Context

Gombrowicz was an outsider to inter-war Polish literary life, as he did not participate in the heated artistic and political debates. He distanced himself from the literary manifestations of patriotism, and, using irony, demonstrated the artificiality of compulsory love towards one’s motherland, state and political leaders. A member of the Warsaw literary circles, he was recognized as a promising author. Still, he occupied a marginal position in the Polish cultural life of the inter-war period because he had his own ways in terms of his aesthetic and stylistic approach, and because of his (lack of) ideological affiliation. His position in local literary life deteriorated considerably after the beginning of the Second World War. He decided to stay in Argentina throughout the war (an issue addressed by the main character of his novel Trans-Atlantyk) instead of having to submit himself to the national cause during another war for freedom. After 1945, his cooperation with an independent emigrant group around the review Kultura (edited in Paris by Jerzy Giedroyć) was condemned by both the Polish communist regime and the conservative-nationalist emigrant circles. Gombrowicz gained a distinctive place in the Polish literary canon only after the first decade following his death. Starting from the 1970s, due to the activity of ‘underground’ publishers, his oeuvre was received with interest not only by literary critics and historians but by a broad public in Poland. The quality of Gombrowicz’s work transcends
the aesthetic and theoretical sphere. In discussions regarding Polish cultural and national identity his works are interpreted not only as literary products but as statements constituting an individual ideological stance. In all, despite his initial distance from Polish political debates, and considering his ideological stance, Gombrowicz is one of the most recognizable Polish writers—a clear counterpart of the charismatic codifier of nationalist imaginary, Henryk Sienkiewicz.

In Ferdydurke, Gombrowicz depicted, within the framework of a grotesque story, several important features of Polish culture in the inter-war period. The novel articulates on the nightmare of many adults: finding yourself back in your high school. The hero is forced to adapt himself to the idiotic regime of the school, where he and his peers are treated as innocent lambs stuffed with patriotic values and “our great literature.” Gombrowicz ridiculed the conservative and patriotic regime as well as the outdated customs of the gentry. His criticism also included an ironic picture of the ‘progressive’ intelligentsia, no less artificial than the archaic culture of the Polish gentleman. The question of individual maturity is, without any doubt, the core of the story, but it is important to underline the way Gombrowicz questions both the Polish national canon and European culture as a whole. A particular target of his ironic comments and criticism was the Romantic language that sought to describe even primordial realities. From the beginning, Ferdydurke was praised by liberal and leftist literary critics (Bruno Schulz, Artur Sandauer), and criticized by right-wing radicals, such as Stanisław Piasecki. Unfortunately, any wider intellectual debate on this novel became impossible, and the patriotic ethos of national sacrifice and martyrdom went unquestioned until the end of the Second World War (see Aleksander Kamiński, Stones for the rampart).

Ferdydurke did not enjoy a wide readership during the communist regime, though it was increasingly appreciated by literary critics and foreign readers. A Spanish translation was published in 1947, and Ferdydurke was subsequently translated into many other European languages. Beyond any doubt, Gombrowicz was one of most influential emigrant writers. His cultural critique as well as his philosophy had a formative influence on the work of Slawomir Mrozek and many others. His Polish ‘comeback’ in the late 1970s and 1980s led to a wider celebration of his work in the 1990s, when his oeuvre finally overcame the bitter fate of émigré literature. During the Polish radical right’s term in office (from 2005 to 2007) Ferdydurke was excluded from the school curricula. The decision, taken by the nationalist minister of education, met with strong criticism by various segments of the Polish intelligentsia,
and was condemned by adherents of diverse political affiliations. This conflict illustrates the present-day relevance of Gombrowicz, whose criticism of primordial nationalism remains a relevant political statement.

MG

Ferdydurke

He was the sad, anemic body who had maintained in the staff-room that biscuits were going down. He took his seat, opened his book, brushed the crumbs from his waistcoat, closed his mouth, pulled down his cuffs to prevent his sleeves from wearing at the elbows, repressed something in himself, and crossed his legs. Then he sighed, and tried to say something. The din redoubled; everyone yelled, with the possible exception of Siphon, who adopted a positive attitude. The master looked at his class, pursed his lips, opened them, and then closed them again. The boys went on yelling. The master frowned and made a gesture of annoyance, adjusted his sleeves, drummed on his desk, thought about something a long, long way away, took out his watch, put it on the desk, sighed, again suppressed something in himself or swallowed something, and devoted a long moment to collecting his energy. Finally he banged the top of his desk with his book and called out:

“That’ll do! Silence! The lesson is about to begin!”

At this the whole class like one man (again with the exception of Siphon) expressed the imperious necessity of immediately leaving the room.

The master, who was known to his pupils as Droopy because of his worn and frail appearance, smiled bitterly.

“That’ll do! he said in the acid tone that came naturally to him. So you would like to go to the lavatory! So would the soul like to go to paradise, wouldn’t it? And why can’t I leave the room? Sit down, all of you! Nobody may leave the room!”

No fewer than seven boys thereupon produced certificates testifying to various complaints which had prevented them from doing their homework. Four others complained of violent headache, another had a rash, and yet another convulsions.

“Gracious heavens!” Droopy exclaimed. “Why doesn’t anyone give me a certificate explaining that through no fault of my own it is impossible for me to do my work? Why can’t I have convulsions? What I want you to tell me is why I should have to come here every day, except Sundays and public holidays, instead of having convulsions. Quiet! The certificates are faked, and you are nothing but a lot of malingerers. Sit down, I know you!”
Three boys went up to his desk and started telling him a good story about Jews and birds, but he stopped his ears.

“No, no!” he groaned, “spare me, I mustn’t listen to you, spare me, we must get on with the lesson. Supposing the headmaster walked in!”

At this he started trembling, looked towards the door, and paled with fright.

“And supposing the inspector caught us? I warn you, gentlemen, that the inspector is paying a visit to the school at this very moment. It is a fact. I warn you. Enough of this folly, let us be ready in case the inspector walks in. Let me see. Which of you know his lessons best? Tell me, so that I may shine by letting him shine... Well? Doesn’t anybody know anything? You’ll be the ruin of me! Come, come, somebody must know a little about something, speak up and tell me frankly. Ah! Pylaszczkiewicz! Pylaszczkiewicz, speak up! Thank you, Pylaszczkiewicz, I’ve always thought you a boy I could rely on. But what are you good at, Pylaszczkiewicz? Which of our glorious poets do you know best?”

Siphon rose and replied:

“Excuse me, sir! If you ask me in front of the inspector, I shall answer, but in the meantime I cannot tell you what I know best, because that would mean betraying myself and my principles.”

“Very well, then,” said the master. ‘Pylaszczkiewicz’s feelings in the matter are most praiseworthy, and I was only joking. Principles above everything, of course! Let me see, then,” he went on severely, looking at the syllabus, “what are we in for today? Oh, yes, explain and demonstrate why the great poet Słowacki¹ awakens our love, admiration and ecstasy. Well, then, gentlemen, first I shall say my piece and then you shall say yours. Quiet!” he called out, and all the boys bent over their desks, holding their heads in their hands, while Droopy surreptitiously opened his text-book, shut his mouth, sighed, suppressed something in himself, and began:

“Hm! Hm! Hm! Well, then why does Słowacki arouse our admiration, love and ecstasy? Why do we weep with the poet when we read that angelic poem In Switzerland? Why does exaltation swell our breasts when we listen to the superb and heroic stanzas of ‘The Spirit King’?² Why is there no escaping the magic and seduction of the Balladyna?³ Why do the sorrows of

¹ Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849): a Romantic poet exiled to France in 1831.
² Juliusz Słowacki, Król Duch, published 1847.
³ Juliusz Słowacki, Balladyna, published 1839, its first performance took place in 1862.
Lilla Weneda⁴ rend our hearts? Hm! Why? Because, gentlemen, Słowacki was a great poet. Walkiewicz, tell me why! Tell me, Walkiewicz. Why the enchantment, the love, the tears, the exaltation, the magic? Why are our hearts rent? Tell me, Walkiewicz!” [...]  

“Because he was a great poet, sir,” said Walkiewicz.

The boys were carving up the desk-tops with their pen-knives and screwing up little balls of paper and putting them in the ink-wells. The master sighed, choked, looked at his watch, and continued as follows:

“He was a great poet, don’t forget that he was a great poet. Why do we feel love, admiration, delight? Because he was a great poet, a great poet. You ignorant dunderheads, get this firmly fixed in your heads and repeat after me: Juliusz Słowacki was a great poet, a great poet, we love Juliusz Słowacki, and his poems delight us because he was a great poet—and because his verses are of immortal beauty which arouses our deepest admiration.”

This level of exposition got on one boy’s nerves and he had an acute attack of the fidgets. When he could stand it no longer he burst out:

“But if he has no effect on me whatever, if he simply doesn’t interest me, if I can’t read two verses of his without falling asleep... Heaven help me, sir, but how am I to be sent into transports of delight if I am not sent into transports of delight?”

His eyes were nearly popping out of his head. He sat down again, as if overwhelmed by what he had said. His naive confession took the master’s breath away.

“For heaven’s sake hold your tongue, Gałkiewicz,” he said. “Gałkiewicz, you’re trying to ruin me. No marks for Gałkiewicz. He doesn’t realize what he is saying.”

Gałkiewicz: “But I don’t understand, sir. I don’t understand how I can be sent into transports of delight if I am not sent into transports of delight.”

The master: “But Gałkiewicz, how can you not be sent into transports of delight if I have already explained to you a thousand times that you are sent into transports of delight?”

Gałkiewicz: “You have explained it, sir, but I am not sent into transports of delight.”

The master: “In that case it’s a personal peculiarity. Gałkiewicz seems not to be intelligent. Other people are sent into transports of delight.”

Gałkiewicz: “No! No! On my word of honour they’re not, sir! Nobody can be sent into transports of delight by Słowacki’s poetry, because nobody reads him, except at school, when they’re forced to.”

The master: “Gałkiewicz, for heaven’s sake sit down and keep quiet. The explanation is that only a limited number of intelligent and cultivated people are capable of appreciating him.”

Gałkiewicz: “Nothing of the sort, sir, even cultivated people don’t read him. Nobody reads him, sir, nobody at all!”

The master: “Gałkiewicz, I have a wife and a young child. At least have pity on the child, Gałkiewicz. Gałkiewicz, it is a well-known and established fact that great poetry necessarily arouses our admiration. Now, Juliusz Słowacki was a great poet... It may be that Słowacki doesn’t move you, my dear Gałkiewicz, but don’t tell me, don’t tell me that you’re not profoundly moved by Mickiewicz, Byron, Pushkin, Shelley, Goethe...”

Gałkiewicz: “He doesn’t move anyone, everyone thinks him ridiculous. No one can read more than two verses of him. Heavens, I can’t!”

The master: “Come, come, Gałkiewicz, but that’s impossible, absurd. Great poetry, being beautiful, profound, inspired, and great, is bound to move us to the very depths of our souls.”

Gałkiewicz: “I can’t read him. Nobody can.”

The master’s brow was wet with perspiration. In an attempt to move Gałkiewicz he produced from his wallet some photographs of his wife and child, but Gałkiewicz’s relentless, piercing repetition of I can’t, I can’t, grew, multiplied and became infectious. It started as the murmur here and there; and it turned out that nearly all of us suffered from the same disability as Gałkiewicz, and the master found himself threatened with it from all sides. He was in a terrible fix; at any moment he might find himself encompassed by a universal disability, the unrestrained proclamation of which might reach the ears of the headmaster and the inspector; at any moment the whole educational edifice might come tumbling about his ears, engulfing his child in the wreckage; and Gałkiewicz obstinately persisted with his I can’t, I can’t. Poor Droopy felt the general inability and helplessness spreading to himself.

“Pylaszczkiewicz!” he exclaimed: “Pylaszczkiewicz, will you please show me, and Gałkiewicz, and the rest of us, the beauties of a selected passage. Be quick, for delay is dangerous. We must be able to be moved, because otherwise my child is done for.”

Pylaszczkiewicz rose and promptly started declaiming a glorious passage from a great poem, the glorious work of one of the greatest poets.
And Siphon went on declaiming. He had been left totally unaffected by the sudden general helplessness and inability. There was no question of can’t for him. On the contrary, because of his pure and vigorous principles, he always could; and this was due less to his native talents than to the strength of his principles. So he declaimed, with emotion in his voice, meticulous elocution, spiritual fervor, and emphasis. He put into it all the beauty of which he was capable, and the beauty of his recitation multiplied by the beauty of the poem and the greatness of genius and the majesty of art was imperceptibly transformed into a monument of all beauty and all greatness. Moreover, he recited with piety and mystery, inspiration and strength; and he sang the poet’s sublime song as the poet’s sublime song ought to be sung. Oh, what beauty, what greatness, what genius, what poetry! Fly, wall, finger-nails, roof, black-board, windows, the threat of impotence were spirited away, wife and child were out of danger, everyone started proclaiming that of course he was fully able to appreciate great poetry, and the only thing that everyone now wanted was that it should stop. At that moment I noticed that my neighbor was smearing my hands with ink—his own were completely smeared with it, and his reason for smearing mine was that his toes were covered by his shoes and socks, and other people’s hands are, after all, more or less the same as one’s own, so why not? What else was there to do? What could one do with one’s legs? Move them; and then what? After a quarter of an hour of this even Gałkiewicz groaned that he had had enough, confessed his appreciation and admiration, apologized, and admitted that he could.

“So you see, Gałkiewicz, there’s nothing like school for inculcating a love of art. Which of us would have been capable of admiring the great geniuses if the knowledge that they were great geniuses had not been hammered into our heads at school?”

The audience, however, was presenting some very queer symptoms. Everyone’s back was bent beneath the weight of the poet, the bard, the master, his child, and the general torpor. The bare partition walls and the bare school-room desks with their ink-wells offered not a glimmer of distraction; through the window a small area of wall was visible on which someone had written the simple words: ‘He’s gone.’ So there was nothing for it but to busy oneself either with the pedagogic body or one’s own body, and that was why those who did not occupy themselves by counting Droopy’s hairs or trying to plumb the mystery of his long nails, tried such things as counting their own hair or unscrewing their necks. Myzdral was twisting about, Hopek was grumbling to himself—trying painfully to disarticulate himself, so to speak—some seemed completely immersed in themselves, others had given in to the
fatal device of talking to themselves, others were tearing off their buttons and ruining their clothes—in other words, all round there was arising a jungle of absurd reflexes, a desert of senseless actions. The only one to flourish in the midst of this general aridity was Siphon, who was more and more firmly rooted in his principles. The master, who kept remembering his wife and child, endlessly repeated: “Poet, bard, messianic spirit, the Christ of the nations, the torch of beauty, sacrifice and redemption, hero and symbol.”

The words came in through ears and tormented minds, while faces twitched convulsively, and ceased to be human; fatigued, battered, exhausted, reduced to nullity, they were ready to assume almost any shape—what an exercise for the imagination! And reality, bettered and exhausted too, became a world of dreams—oh! escape into a dream...

I realized that I must get out of this.  


5 The translator of the text, Eric Mosbacher decided to change several names of the characters of the novel. Thus in his translation Gałkiewicz is replaced with Kotekci, and Myzdrał with Bobek. In the current volume the original names as well as the Polish orthography of other names in the text has been restored (with the exception of the nickname Droopy – in Gombrowicz’s text, it is Bładaczka). Moreover, the title of Słowacki’s play Balladyna appears in its Polish version (in the translation as Balladina).