The Fork & the Fear

Remembering Gombrowicz—By JERZY PETERKIEWICZ

GOMBROWICZ at a café in Warsaw, shocking literary ladies with a fork. He picked his teeth with it. The café was called *The Country-Squire's,* but the adjectival form of the name in Polish somehow obscured the image of the squire. Translated into English or French, the name becomes visual; it exudes an almost grotesque *bonhomie.* So I see Gombrowicz at his favourite table as a squire on a prolonged visit to the capital, an absentee landlord, not quite here and never there. In later years he was to be haunted by precisely this mask which many of his foreign reviewers wanted him to wear. A Pole, therefore a nobleman: such a convenient label. He grew tired of it, understandably.

In 1936, however, he acted the part as if determined to impose this social *cliché* not only on the snobbish hangers-on, but also on his friends. As soon as he saw it was fully accepted, he would start poking at his own image with a word, a gesture, or a fork. An idiosyncratic squire can simulate bad manners. Look, I did that, therefore it is done. A circle of literary buddies, their female companions in particular, were duly impressed.

All social shocks and counter-snobberies are infantile because their urge is regressive. Ferdydurke with his pants down, unpunishable for indecent exposure—all is part of the same game in the *kindergarten* of society.

> "Oh, there are plenty of more or less puerile places in the world, but a country house is perhaps the most puerile of all. Here both masters and people turned themselves into children, preserved themselves by turning themselves into children, they were children to each other. Advancing barefoot along the corridor under the mask of night, I seemed to re-enter my aristocratic and pre-pubertal past . . . I succumbed to the anachronistic idea of a gigantic super-slap—an idea at one and the same time infantile and in accordance with immemorial tradition—a gigantic super-slap which should simultaneously liberate both master and child." *(Ferdydurke,* ch. 14).

WITOLD GOMBROWICZ *was born in 1904, studied law in Warsaw, published his best novel* Ferdydurke *in 1937 and his first play* Princess Ivona *a year later. The outbreak of the War found him in Argentina where he had to live for over twenty years. In 1953 he unmasked his Polishness in a highly stylised mock-memoir,* Trans-Atlantic, *and embarked on a long and fastidious Diary, in which the first entry reads: "Monday: me, Tuesday: me, Wednesday: me, Thursday: me."*

In 1963 he went to Berlin, then settled in the South of France where he died in 1969. Gombrowicz is better known in France and Germany than in Britain or the United States, although three of his novels and two plays are available in English. These are:

Ferdydurke, *tr. Eric Mosbacher (MacGibbon & Kee, 1961, Calderbrook Paperback, 1965);* Pornografia, *tr. A. Hamilton (Calder & Boyars, 1966);* Cosmos, *tr. Eric Mosbacher (MacGibbon & Kee, 1967);* Princess Ivona, *tr. K. Griffith-Jones and C. Robins, 1969;* The Marriage, *tr. L. Iribarne, 1970; both published by Calder & Boyars.*

In all his works Gombrowicz is preoccupied with the ritual of transformation. Ferdydurke *is about a thirty-year-old man who is turned into a schoolboy. In* The Marriage, *which is a dream, Henry's father is transformed into a king, then he himself is transformed. In* Pornografia *(the title is misleading) as in* Ferdydurke, *the perennial hide-and-seek game is played between the generations: seduction* versus *submission under "the arch-bum shining in the sky." We are all deformed by one another.* Ferdydurke *ends with these words, addressed to the reader: "Come near, approach, start your work of making me a new face, so that I may run away from you in your turn towards other men, and run, run, and run through the whole of humanity. For there is no shelter from face except in face, and we can escape from men only by taking refuge in other men. And from the arch-bum there is no refuge. I fled, with my face in my hands."*

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Gombrowicz acted his tricks, made himself recognisable; he exaggerated to remain memorable. But memory is also an actor who exaggerates. In my recollections of Gombrowicz I have no continuous sequence from those Warsaw years; I see him in isolated scenes, each grotesquely augmented. And the voice so nasal that it seemed to prolong words—his fine nostrils quivering, like those of a thoroughbred colt, ready to snort at any moment. Or those regressively progressive walks at night in the summer. On the way home, "Come with me," he would say, "as far as Three Crosses Place"—so we walked and talked. Warsaw was not a big town, and soon there loomed the three crosses. "Now I'll walk you half-way back," he said. I lived near the river, and down-hill we went. Then it was my turn to be polite. Back to the Three Crosses. On good talking nights we could do that for hours, progressing and regressing through Warsaw.

Gombrowicz had rooms in a residential suburb, in a flat belonging, I think, to one of his aunts. An object on display was a pianola, and he teased his guests with mechanical tunes in much the same manner as he teased the café crowd with a fork. Look, how we love music, every Pole is a potential Chopin; so let's have Maestro Witold doing the grand stuff at the pianola.

MOCK-POLISHNESS, like the mock-squire, was a style against the style, the anti-cliché. He remained faithful to this technique and there are revealing pages in his *Diary* where he attacks the obsession: what-do-they-think-of-us? This adulation of the West by his countrymen—we are as good as they are, our bards are just like their bards, our cafés are just like their cafés. The same tunes of an old pianola to be replayed without effort.

But Ferdydurke doesn't care about *them* and their opinion: he shows the world his Polish tongue, a juvenile jester incapable of keeping a solemn face. That's what I am, my own immaturity can teach as much history as the stuffed eagles in the patriotic zoo.

In *The Marriage*, the hero pleads:

Enough of these gods! Give me man!
May he be like me, troubled and immature,
Confused and incomplete, dark and obscure
So that I can dance with him! Play with him!
Fight with him!
Pretend to him! Ingratiate myself with him!
And rape him, love him and forge myself
Anew from him, so I can grow through him...

[1] In *The Marriage*, Henry addresses his father: "Father is a title the same as King is. Can't you speak like an ordinary man? Must you always get dressed up in some title or other?"

One of the best comments on Gombrowicz's involvement with his native tradition came years ago from Professor Folkierski, a comparativist of unusual acumen (he was, significantly enough, half-French). It was soon after the publication of *Trans-Atlantic* and the professor said to me: "You know, Gombrowicz is more traditional than one would imagine, he is the literary heir of Henryk Rzewuski, he works within the style of *gaweda* (a chatty narrative), the only form we Poles treat as our own invention." This sounded ironic: choosing an old-fashioned formula to explain a modern novelist, but Folkierski was too subtle for a mere reversal of terms. He stated something critically accurate.

Rzewuski (1791-1866), a pro-Russian aristocrat and a tireless raconteur, exploited the casual and anecdotal manner of social prattle in a collection of tales about originals, cranks and practical jokers in the Polish nobility of the 18th century. His own fictitious raconteur was a certain Soplica, a noble of course, and a candid admirer of every extravagance and absurdity which his class tolerated for the sheer joy of living, despite the approaching end of the Polish kingdom. Instinctively, Gombrowicz adopted this stylistic buffoonery because it suited him well, with its polite forms of address, its nudging asides and regressive humour. Moreover, it was the best medium with which to capture the self-perpetuating myth of adolescence, whether personal or national. Now he could laugh at the inflating preoccupation of Poles with their Polishness, which is not unlike the Frenchmen's preoccupation with their communal ethos. *La Gloire* and Self-destruction, the dichotomy of a patriotism which is particularly good at accusing. *J'accuse* of Emile Zola. Writing on the wall, putting men against the wall. Adolescents love scribbling their righteous protests on walls, and common citizens invariably fall short of the demands of the national Super-Ego. The language they inherit is also their undoing.

Gombrowicz understood his national identity because he was partly in love with *La Gloire* of his own ego. Perhaps the Pole is an *enfant terrible* among the Slavs, asking awkward questions, always on the run from the parental myth.[1] A squire or a peasant, he has enough aristocratic defiance to accept disillusionment.

WRITERS DO NOT, on the whole, acknowledge those literary debts which have affected their style: these are probably too intimate to reveal, even if one keeps a diary for public confessions, as Gombrowicz did. His

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manner of writing stemmed from his Polish predecessors, both 19th century and more recent. Parody and mimicry need models to work on: a style cannot pull faces at nothing. The past was more useful to Gombrowicz than the present. And there were iconoclasts of genius before him. Irzykowski was one of them. His *Paluba,* a very early psycho-analytical novel (1903), owed nothing to Freud, but it probed deeply into patterns of self-deception, into bashful moments hiding behind big words and poses, it exposed both social and patriotic cant. The author saw his experiment as the triumphant comedy of character. Ferdydurke's comedy is in essence triumphant.

Witkiewicz's novels and plays,[2] though uneven in dialogue, had much in common with Gombrowicz's handling of the plot, now coy, now arrogant. Both he and Gombrowicz were teasers, and literary teasers do sometimes irritate. They provoke the reader or the audience, but are surprised when the provocation works.[3]

Operetta comes towards the end of Gombrowicz's development, a stylistic résumé, full of conscious echoes and obvious borrowings. The revolutionary antics remind one of *The Undivine Comedy* (1835), a visionary and violent play written by the young romantic, Krasinski. The ridiculous songs with their obsessive repetitions belong to the evergreen musical *kitsch,* but real brutality is planted in the text like a time-bomb. As an artistic instrument the operetta is a sort of pianola, with Gombrowicz banging it until the whole pretence breaks to pieces. Another recollection intervenes. Among our contemporaries at *The Country-Squire's* was a character out of real operettas, who danced in the male chorus. Gombrowicz had a special nasal intonation whenever he addressed him, a curious respect for the triumphant courage of *kitsch,* and though the young man soon betrayed the glitter of the stage for the dimmed lights of literature, he had passed the test.

Undoubtedly, much of the 1930s is reflected in Gombrowicz's mimicry: the grand gestures of the silent films, the teasing eroticism of popular entertainment, the impoverished families that could still afford servants. And the intellectual mania for paradox. I was not surprised to see G. K. Chesterton mentioned alongside Joseph

[2] See Jan Kott's article on Witkiewicz ENCOUNTER, February 1970.

[3] The fairy-tale trappings of Gombrowicz's plays belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, but the weakness of this type of drama lurks in the ritual of transformation itself, without which the absurd seems unable to function.

Khrushchev Remembers

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André Deutsch

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Conrad in Gombrowicz's article which he contributed over a year ago to the *Times Literary Supplement*.[4] But of course he could not have mentioned any other names because Chesterton and Conrad were the fashionable writers in Poland before the War, read by the young in translation. Chesterton's clowning must have impressed him at the time. My feeling is that Grombowicz disliked the avant-garde writers as much as Byron disliked the romantics. In his Diaries he poured scorn on Borges. At the mention of Joyce he shrugged his shoulders. Nathalie Sarraute—"yes," he had met her, a sniff and a pause, and that was that. I sometimes suspect that he really didn't want to read any of them. But why should he? One thing remains certain: the importance of his Polish reading, from the 17th-century diarist Pasek to Sienkiewicz whom he mocked in much the same way as he mocked the world of his aunts.

He cared about language. The letters we exchanged in the last years were mainly about the translations of his works into English. He wanted my opinion about their style before they went to press. He was worried that the translators had to use the French or German versions. I argued that the translator's knowledge of his own tongue mattered more than his ignorance of Polish. The idiosyncratic style of Gombrowicz has structural patterns which can be reproduced in another language, and on the whole he translates better than most Slavonic novelists. He is essentially the writers' writer. Will he ever become popular?

The next thirty years should determine Gombrowicz's place in European literature. How his books will read in the future is difficult to predict. They are light, not ponderous, and the charm is in their lightness. The public unfortunately confounds weight with seriousness, length with permanence. Brevity may be the soul of wit, but the immortality of that soul is another question.

Fame needs an aura of perpetual mystery. Gombrowicz took pains to project himself, and in his situation he had every right to do so. He argued with his critics in the Diaries, denigrated the denigrators and hailed those who hailed him. But my impression is that in the final analysis Gombrowicz's Diaries work against him. All artists are vulnerable. But Gombrowicz was so much preparing himself for the hostile world that he tended to over-explain himself. Twice I implored him to remove the personal prefaces he had written to guide his English critics. He persisted in building up a protective watch-tower. This he had done from the very beginning. In the name of sincerity, I suppose. He believed in the importance and survival of the printed word. Sometimes he seemed to forget that words too have their built-in obsolescence. They corrupt the sincerity that pushed them out. Pop art thrives on this transience.

I am glad I met him in my green youth. His integrity, his charm, his stylised manners were of the kind that elevate memories. He observed and described the regressive appetites of man at a time when fear pushed societies towards catastrophe. He was not, however, a prophet of doom; such prophets are many and are replaceable. Instead he played with a dainty fork, picking his teeth to shock the easily-shockable. How convincing is the violence of manners? The brutal forces today are horribly simple. They would knock the teeth out for a start. And then what would be the use of the fork, symbolic or otherwise? Our existence, like our literature, is becoming shock-proof.

[4] Published posthumously, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 September 1969.

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Private Chambers v. Public Chambers

By Wilfred Sheed

A REVIEWER is not, thank God, often required to judge an author on his legal merits. But the strange warp of Whittaker Chambers' career insists that even a benign collection of posthumous letters, *Odyssey of a Friend*,[1] must be read in the gloomy light of litigation. Never mind about his literary virtue—would the writer of this prose lie under oath or wouldn't he? When he testified against Alger Hiss, Chambers went for good from the anonymity of a *Time* editor to a desk in Macy's window where his words and his personality could never be separated again.

William F. Buckley, who received the letters in the first place, bows to the inevitable and introduces them as a character reference. They are not a bad one at that: certainly better than Chambers' own floundering attempt at one, the elephantine *Witness*. It could be that the subject was more plausible in private than in public; and he was certainly more plausible by 1961, when the collection ends, than in 1954 when it starts.

The Hiss case was largely a question of character even then (to younger readers that is all the question that's left). Long before the investigation had passed from dentures and prothonotary warblers to pumpkins and typewriters, the public had chosen up sides on a basis of Which Kind of Man do you Prefer. Chambers knew his revolutionary politics and was able to trace that part of Hiss' support which came from Communist whispers. But for several reasons, he was not up to date on American psychology, and never saw why at that particular moment a good many people found him hard to take, all on his own.

He was right about one part of it: people distrusted his religiosity. This distrust was supposed at the time to have something to do with the West's rejection of God. But if the Chambers of 1961 had re-read *Witness* (he could not bear to see it lying about the house by then), he might have distrusted the religiosity himself. It is very much part of the period: the post-war spirit boom, when all kinds of unlikely people were hearing voices and receiving signs. Chambers himself left the Party because he heard "words," telling him to choose freedom—a motive which even religious sympathisers might now advise him to keep under his hat. And he rested his case against Communism entirely on theology, or holy-war theory, where secular readers could hardly be expected to join him. Later, Max Eastman was to lead a charge against compulsory theism for conservatives: but at that point, the words atheistic and communism were seldom far apart.

Curiously, in these later letters there is very little reference to God. Chambers presumably remained a religious man to the end, but the confessional fever subsided, as it did with other converts of the time, and his case against Communism became more earthly. "The West . . . has two main goods to offer mankind: freedom and abundance" we find him writing—a far cry from the days when it offered God, or nothing.

CHAMBERS' RELIGIOSITY was also served a poor turn by his conditions of employment. As a writer for a news magazine, he had taken it upon himself to reduce his spiritual gropings to simple big-picture terms: the West, History, Man's Spirit, the hundred great capital letters. Most intellectuals would have given up the struggle as hopeless. A news magazine is not obliged to cover the Mysteries. But Chambers had a mission to fight Communism, and this was the only way he could do it. He was shunted out of Foreign News, and anywhere else where he could attack the enemy head-on. So he took to plugging the Western Tradition in Dick and Jane terms in any department that would let him. I had assumed that the florid simplifications were foisted on him by the magazine. But it seems likely that he foisted them on the magazine. And several of the pieces that had one wincing the hardest (*e.g.*, the Arnold Toynbee cover story) were among Chambers' special prides.

The democratisation of great ideas was again part of the period, and perhaps it was snobbish to jeer at it. Anyway, people did, and it was part of the extra-legal case against Chambers, which he never seemed to fathom.

[1] *Odyssey of a Friend, Whittaker Chambers Letters to William F. Buckley, Jr., 1954-1961.* Putnams.

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