

# Bruno Schulz

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## "Ferdydurke"

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Literary Studies in Poland 10, 25-33

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1983

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Bruno Schulz

*Ferdydurke*

Our literature has long been disaccustomed to phenomena so overwhelming, to literary discharges on the scale of Witold Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke*. What we are dealing with here is an extraordinary manifestation of literary talent, a new and revolutionary novelistic method and form, and finally, a fundamental discovery: the annexation of a new sphere of spiritual phenomena, a vacant strip of no-man's land where previously there was nothing but the gambollings of irresponsible word-play and nonsense and puns.

Let us try to trace the borders, map out the location of the spot on which Gombrowicz has worked his revelation. Strangely enough, this area, the extent of which was only made apparent to us as a result of this extraordinary discovery, has remained nameless hitherto: no existence was ascribed to it, it did not even occupy a blank space on the map of the spiritual world.

Hitherto man has only seen himself—has only wanted to see himself—from the official angle. He did not grant existence to the things that occurred within him but beyond the pale of official notions: he barred them from the forum of the mind, refused to accept them. These things led an orphaned existence, as if beyond the bounds of being and actuality, the pathetic life of concepts never accepted or recorded. The anathema that hung over idiocy, frivolity and nonsense closed the approach roads to it—and too close an approach threatened blindness. Consciousness requires a certain indulgent distance on the part of reason; whatever lies too close and lacks this indulgence falls outside reason's scope.

Whilst man's shadow acted out its official, mature, approved

actions on the stage of his consciousness, his true reality strove hopelessly to cope with blitherings and idiocies, stumbled helplessly over chimeras and stupidities in a realm without place or name. The shadow arrogated all the prerogatives of existence to itself while the homeless human reality led the hole-and-corner life of a lodger whose presence is not accepted. Gombrowicz has demonstrated that the matured, distilled forms of our spiritual being are more like a *pium desiderium*, that they inhabit us more as eternally strained intentions than as realities. In our reality we persist in living at a level below these heights, in a realm that is downright dishonourable and inglorious and so undistinguished that we hesitate to grant it even the semblance of existence. Gombrowicz's momentous achievement has been unwaveringly to recognize that this region is the true and all-too-human realm of the real man; to adopt it, homeless and disinherited, for consciousness; to identify it and give it a name — the first step towards the brilliant literary career opened up to it by this entrepreneur of immaturity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The analogy with Freudianism springs to mind of itself. But whereas Freud, once he had discovered the domain of the unconscious, turned it into a psychological curiosity, a separate island, the incomprehensible manifestations and peculiar, paradoxical logic of which he illustrated in a clear isolation, as it were behind the railings of psychology, in separation from the context of normal events, Gombrowicz has trained his spy-glass on these ostensibly normal and mature processes and has demonstrated that their legality and correctness are the optical illusions of our consciousness, which being itself the product of a certain training, only admits the concepts to which it is fitted and does not notice the element of immaturity, which gushes in a flood around the shallow lagoon of official concepts. The area concerned comes under none of the categories of official cognition, and no organ at our disposal comprehends it. Here Gombrowicz has worked a trick of genius. He has taken the psychic apparatus that normally functions as a safety-valve, an isolator buffering the rickety framework of the official against the pressure of subterranean chaos — he has taken comedy, convulsive laughter shrugging off the usurpations and encroachments of that bubbling element — and onto it, because this will open up that problematic area most directly to art, he has grafted a new organ for perceiving and recording these matters. In Gombrowicz the grotesque is nothing but the organ of resistance and repulsion, modified to serve cognitive ends. Freud showed the small section of this underground world which can be reached with the methods of the psychologist, which he used to neutralize the destructive action of nonsense and the ridiculous. Basically he remains on the level of scientific seriousness. But a general assault on this area could not succeed until there had been a complete shifting of ground, an abandonment of the position of seriousness by opening up a front for the element

Just as mature human existence has its equivalents in the forms and concepts of higher culture, so this underground, unofficial existence has its world of matching equivalents in which it functions and moves. From the point of view of culture these equivalents comprise certain cast-offs and side-products of the cultural process, a zone of subcultural concepts, rudimentary and unformed: the towering heaps of rubble that litter the periphery of culture. This world of sewage and discharges, this enormous cess-pit of culture, is however the matrix, *prima materia*, the life-giving dung and pulp from which there sprout all cultures, all values. It is here that there lies the reservoir of all the powerful emotional tensions the subcultural concepts have succeeded in collecting and merging. Thousands of filaments, thousands of atavisms bind our immaturity (and perhaps, when all is said and done, the vital core of our life) to that array of second-rate forms, that second-class culture: an age-old alliance and fellowship roots it fast there. While, festooned with mature, official forms, we pay homage to the higher, sublimated values, our essential life is being played out here, without license and approval from above, in our soiled native zone; and the emotional energies invested in it are a hundred times stronger than those at the disposal of the thin crust of the official. Gombrowicz has demonstrated that it is in this despised and dishonoured realm that life teems abundant; that life can get along very well without endorsement from above; that it thrives better under five crushing fathoms of abomination and shame than on the heights of sublimation.

Gombrowicz has introduced an exceptional and isolated conceptual item into the psychic world. He has shattered the myth of its divine origin and has delineated its zoological genealogy, its descent

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of laughter, for the limitless incursions of the comic. It appears that the main drawback had lain in scientific seriousness itself, in the dignified posture of the researcher, which prevented a thorough unmasking of the mechanisms of thought. The official and the hypocritical, once they had been flushed out of their unmasked position, took refuge in the serious stance of the researcher. This blind-man's-buff was ended by Gombrowicz, who broke through the barriers of seriousness with unheard-of daring. He succeeded in turning the instrument of destruction into a constructive organ. By means of this organ he released rays of humanizing humour into an area that hitherto had resisted any documentation by the powers of the human spirit.

from the lower spheres from which it had proudly stood aside. Gombrowicz has shown that the spheres of culture and subculture are cast in the same mould; what is more, one could say that he sees the subcultural sphere, the sphere of immature concepts, as the prototype and model of value in general, and that he has found in the mechanisms by which they function—brilliantly revealed by himself—the key to the comprehension of the mechanisms of culture. Hitherto man has viewed himself through the optics of a finished, polished form, from the side of the official façade. He has not noticed that while in his aspirations he was straining towards the ideal, in actuality he remained eternally incomplete, botched up, cobbled together—not up to it. He overlooked the whole pathetic tailoring of his form, stitched with a coarse thread. Gombrowicz provides an inventory of the backyard, the outhouse, of the self—an inventory that is astonishing. In the salon at the front everything proceeds in accordance with etiquette and form, but in the kitchen of the self, behind the scenes of the official action, the worst of conduits is being administered. Not one outworn, trashy ideology, not one cheap and rubbishy form, ever loses its current value here or forfeits the right to circulate. Here the mythological structure, the violence concealed beneath the forms of linguistic syntax, the brigandish force of cliché, the power of symmetry and analogy, stand revealed in all their tawdriness. Here the gross mechanics of our ideals, which is based on the prevalence of naïve literalism, on metaphorical figures and on the vulgar imitations of linguistic forms, is disclosed. Gombrowicz is a master of this laughable caricature of mental machinery, in which he knows how to induce the most violent static and magnificent explosions in the strangest of grotesque condensations.

Just how Gombrowicz brings the plasmoidal creatures of this foggy zone to the stage of granulation, just how he evokes them in tangible, visible form on the boards of his theatre—is the mystery of his talent. The instrument of the grotesque he constructs to this end—the grotesque as a microscope under which these imponderabilia assume corporal shape—this instrument ought to be made the subject of a special study.

But the chain of Gombrowicz's discoveries does not end here. It also includes a profound diagnosis of the very essence of culture.

His scalpel brings to light—disentangles from dense thickets of secondary, obfuscating themes—the leitmotif of culture, its nerve and its pith. Gombrowicz has uncovered and done full justice to the paramount significance of the problem of form. One could repeat after Gombrowicz that all human culture is a system of forms, in which man sees himself and displays himself to man. Man finds his nakedness intolerable, he cannot meet himself or his neighbour except by means of forms, styles and masks. So complete was the absorption of human attention by the application of forms and hierarchies, by the manipulation and transfer of values, so steeped was it in the merits of the case, that the activity that creates hierarchies, that produces forms, became—as it were—a non-issue. The achievement of Gombrowicz has been to grasp this matter, which had always been treated absolutely and on merit, in relation to content, in relation to its genetic development. He has put on show the embryology of forms. He has identified the full range of the multiplicity of human ideologies and has reduced them to a common denominator, demonstrating that one and the same human substance underlies all their manifestations. Meanwhile, he has located the thickets in which forms are made in an area previously inaccessible to view, an area so dubious, deprecated and cheap that one can only call the linking of such disparate matters at a glance, the placing of an equals-sign between them, a true flash of clairvoyance. The site of that laboratory of forms, that factory of hierarchies and sublimations, is known to us now. It is the cesspit of immaturity, the place of shame and disgrace, of the misfit and the miscarriage: culture's pathetic junk-heap, laden with potsherds and with cheap ideologies made of straws, none of them named in the language of culture.

Discoveries such as these are made by way of smooth, safe pure speculation or dispassionate cognition. Gombrowicz came to them from side of pathology—his own. We all go through the crisis of adolescence, the painful process of defeats and shortcomings, coming off lightly or badly, emerging from these scrapes with deeper or more superficial scars, grazes and deformations. For Gombrowicz, the pains of maturation—all its abominations and defeats—have not come to an end in some form of balance or other, not subsided into a compromise of sorts, but have

become a problem in and for themselves—matured to self-knowledge, aroused to expression and speech.

Gombrowicz's attitude is not that of the objective, dispassionate researcher; his book is steeped from start to finish in the fervour of an apostolic mission, in a militant intensity of proselytizing and reform. This apostolic mission is perhaps the root and kernel of the book, upon which other parts and branches have grown, as on the trunk of a tree. It is no easy task to expound the merits of this apostolic mission: it is difficult because what is at stake here is not an isolated point of view or doctrine or slogan, but the reconstruction of an entire life-style, a reformation more fundamental in branch and root than any yet undertaken. And should anyone think that the author's point of departure lay in some kind of generalization or abstraction, he too would be wrong. The point from which the book departs could not conceivably be more concrete, vital and urgent, and Gombrowicz programmatically stresses that the genesis of his work lies in his own private, circumscribed situation. Gombrowicz shows that all the "fundamental" and "universal" motives of our behaviour, all our voyages under the flags of slogans and ideals, fail to express us truly and in full; that they only ever express a part, and what is more, a circumstantial and inessential part. Gombrowicz opposes the fundamental trend of culture, which is based on man's perpetual subsistence on a diet of some portions, ideologies, banalities or forms extrapolated from himself, rather than on his own living for himself, through his own integral totality, through the gist of himself. Man has always considered himself to be an imperfect, unimportant appendix to his cultural concepts. Gombrowicz wants to bring this relationship back into proportion—to turn it right side up. He demonstrates that we are closer to the truth when we are immature, ridiculous, "whipper-snapperish", struggling for expression in the lowlands of the concrete, than when we are unctuously rounded off, matured, sublimated. That is why he takes us back to the lower forms, why he orders us to go through, fight through, work through the whole of our cultural childhood, to enter into the child. Not that he sees salvation in these ideologies — which grow progressively lower, more primitive, trashier — but because as man developed from the state of primal naïvety, he squandered.

wasted and forfeit the living treasure of his own specificity. All these forms, gestures and masks grew a coat of humanity, contained within themselves vestiges of the miserable—but concrete and only human—lot; and Gombrowicz revindicates them, recollects them, recalls them from their long exile and diaspora. The more these masks of forms and ideals unmask and compromise themselves, the cruder, more transparent and scandalous their mechanisms are revealed to be, the more definitely man frees himself from the forms that had held him captive. However, Gombrowicz's attitude to forms is less direct and unambiguous than would appear from this exposition. This demonologist of culture, this fervent tracker-down of cultural lies, is in a strange sense in bondage to them, loving their rubbishy charms with pathological, incurable love. His love is for the human, ridiculous, ineffectual and movingly helpless creature who is inadequate to the insatiable demands of form. The mismatches, slip-ups and practical jokes arranged by form, the tortures man endures on its Procrustean bed, passionately thrill and absorb him.

But how thin and dry, how impoverished, is the mere skeleton of these issues stripped of the living flesh of *Ferdynand*. This is merely a single cross-section through the vibrant, billowing mass of its flesh, one of the thousand aspects of this thousandfold creature. Here at last we encounter an intellect that is spontaneous and has been come by at first hand, and is not crammed full with ready-made notions. Wherever we allow our fingers to sink into the flesh of this work we touch on the powerful muscles of its thought, the bulging limbs of an athletic anatomy, without the artificial make-weights of stuffing and cotton-wool. The book is packed to bursting with an infinity of ideas; it overflows with creative, subversive energy.

What are the consequences for the practice of literature and life derived from his insights by Gombrowicz? Gombrowicz holds the individual form in contempt — he scoffs at its backbreaking efforts to anchor itself in reality. No pedigrees, no alibis prepared for some absolute forum to decide the merits of the case, can rescue this form in his eyes. But this positivist and devotee of the fact will forgive it everything providing it proves effective, successful, providing it succeeds in holding its ground and prevails



in the intermonadic medium we term "opinion". It is then that there comes the moment of form's beatification. Success is the final yardstick of all human value, the supreme judge against whose judgements there is no appeal. Gombrowicz has an infinite respect for this final instance, even though he is acquainted with its substance and make-up, even though he knows it to be a rough average of the judgements of X and Y, a vulgar pulp of the narrow and two-a-penny views of Joe Soap. And yet—as Gombrowicz shows—no other, higher auditing body exists. It alone wields a sheerly arbitrary jurisdiction over the valuation of our personal tenders: it is the goal of our most secret yearnings, and upon it our most fervent aspirations founder. For all the tawdriness of its conduits, it is the prototype of the force of evaluation, and in the last instance all the absolute criteria and bodies can be reduced to it. Its constrictions press on us; our form is based squarely on it; the shape we seek to give ourselves adheres to it.

However, the preface to "Philidor", for all the positivist cult of the fact, indicates the shaking of this ideology, its malversation, for here Gombrowicz limits it, places certain matters beyond its jurisdiction. Gombrowicz ought not to have been afraid of his own one-sidedness: every great intellectual system is one-sided and has the courage of its one-sidedness. The concession Gombrowicz makes for the "first-rate" writers is a purely formal one, and a double standard ought not to have been introduced here. The exceptions Gombrowicz makes are also a drain on his theory's credit with regard to the facts he does place under its jurisdiction. For Gombrowicz demands that the personal motives that incline a writer to write—and according to his bold declaration these motives are invariably a matter of ramming home one's quality before the forum of opinion—cease to represent the underground, shameful and concealed mechanism of his work, that they cease to transmute their energy into completely alien and far-removed contents, and become instead simply the open subject of his work. His aim is to lay bare the machinery of the art-work in its entirety—its connection with the author—and when it comes down to it he provides both the postulate and the proof of its possibility, since *Ferdydurke* is nothing other than a magnificent example of just such a work. This he considers to be the only

way out of the general and irredeemable hypocrisy, and towards the healing of literature through a powerful injection of actualities. But what does a "second-rate" writer mean? A master of relativism, a partisan of the concrete, of the calibre of Gombrowicz ought not to have employed closed categories of this kind, to have condemned people to a predetermined second-rateness — by force of definition. Gombrowicz knows the way the careers of great works and ideas go; he knows greatness to be the result of a happy coincidence, a conjunction of internal and external circumstances. So Gombrowicz's loyalty to the great spirits of mankind ought not to be taken too seriously. And it is worth recalling—without casting a slur on the undoubted originality of *Ferdydurke*—that this book had a precursor of which perhaps even the author himself was in ignorance: Irzykowski's premature, and therefore ineffective, *Paluba (The Hag)*. Only now perhaps is the situation ripe for a general assault on this section of the front.

The critic is condemned to translating the discursive prose of *Ferdydurke* into conventional popular speech. But how his stripping, his preparation of the dry skeleton lacks the endless many-sidedness, the multiplicity of meanings and the metaphorical expansions which accord the ideas of Gombrowicz the value of a microcosm—a universal model of life and the world!

*Skamander*, July—September 1938, fasc. XCVI—XCVIII

Transl. by *Paul Coates*