

Włodzimierz Bolecki

"Gra w Gombrowicza", Jerzy Jarzębski, Warszawa 1982 : [recenzja]

Literary Studies in Poland 17, 126-132

1987

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

The intermediatery language, suggested in Markiewicz's books does not aim—let us stress it once more—to eliminate other ways of dealing with literature. It does however give a chance for the science of literature, for all its methodological and stylistic variety, to preserve its identity. Markiewicz's language is meant for an "internal use," rather without ambition for "external usage." The latter is served by the standard language, the one of dictionaries. To work out it constitutes also a very important task, only partly concurrent with Markiewicz's research programme.

The paradigmatic and multistyle model of the science of literature presented by Markiewicz in his books has been supplemented by him with one more feature. The research paradigms, canons of description, the more or less consistent terms form only a general framework for literary studies. These being also determined to a large extent by the personality of the researcher. Thus the science of literature cannot completely give up names because "a discussion about a work of literature remains always a sort of art" (Wdl, 166).

Bohdan Tomasik

Transl. by *Ludwik Wiewiórkowski*

Jerzy Jarzębski, Gra w Gombrowicza (Game Gombrowicz), Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1982, 515 pp.

In 1981, the Wydawnictwo Literackie of Cracow published Andrzej Falkiewicz's collection of essays called *Polski kosmos. Dziesięć esejów przy Gombrowiczu (A Polish Microcosm. Ten Essays Following Gombrowicz)*. That was the first book on Gombrowicz to appear in socialist Poland. Falkiewicz's essays, however, are extremely learned in character and at places the author is ramblingly moving away from the main topic. This is why Jerzy Jarzębski's book, which appeared in Warsaw a year later, should actually be regarded as a first-ever comprehensive study of Gombrowicz. Apparently, the early 1980s proved an auspicious period for the author of *Ferdynand*.

Shortly after came out of print Jarzębski's book skimmed two prestigious prizes—that awarded by the Scientific Secretary of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the literary award of the Kościelski Endowment of Switzerland.

The book is composed of eight chapters.

Jarzębski starts with an Introduction saying the text was originally a Ph. D. thesis accepted at the Jagellonian University. Jarzębski briefly presents the current state of research on Gombrowicz to describe the place his own book takes in it. But the most important thing in the Introduction is the idea of the title "game" (*gra*), a concept which recurs consistently throughout the book. Jarzębski suggests that "game" should become a notion in literary theory and that its meanings refer to many aspects of Gombrowicz's works.

Jarzębski discusses at length those different aspects in a chapter one called "Applications of the Concept of Game in Literary Studies," which lists applications of the notion of game in various disciplines (mathematics, game theory, psychology etc.) and which ends with the suggestion to interpret game as one element of communication both inside the text itself and communication between the work and the author and his readers. But however erudite and clever his suggestions may be, Jarzębski's argument is not convincing to the end. Jarzębski is fully aware that he is not proposing a new kind of terminology but only trying to put certain terms used in literary research for quite some time into some ordered pattern. Nor does Jarzębski provide any accurate definition of "game" but contents himself with listing its semantic limitations and puts up with its metaphorical meanings.

The second chapter ("The Category of Game in Gombrowicz's Views") provides definitions of the term "game" as applied to Gombrowicz's works. Jarzębski says game is noticeable already at the level of designing a writer's role by Gombrowicz. Then Jarzębski proceeds to discussing Gombrowicz's attitude towards himself, towards readers and critics, and above all towards literature itself as one kind of cultural activity. It is game, according to Jarzębski, which also determines the basic epistemological problem of the author of *Ferdydurke*, namely the relationship between subjectivism and objectivism in the process of creating (exploring) a reality. But a student of Gombrowicz's work will find the greatest number of interpretative opportunities in exploring the relationship between different heroes of Gombrowicz's works. Jarzębski does have a point in saying that it is at this particular level that the most important topics of successive works are pondered. So he suggests

to approach the interaction of individual characters in Gombrowicz's drama of human existence from the vantage-point of game. Viewed this way, game is a feature of all forms of interaction in which heroes of *Ferdydurke*, *The Wedding* or *Cosmos* get involved incessantly. Jarzębski quotes many of Gombrowicz's own remarks showing that he placed great significance on such a dynamic (and also slightly theatrical) presentation of his characters. But it should be realized that for Gombrowicz the main character of his works is the author in person, Witold Gombrowicz himself. The games individual characters play between themselves are thus ancillary to the most important of all games, the one Gombrowicz plays with his own readers. This is where many interesting problems arise for possible interpretation. Gombrowicz's world is submitted to constant deformation, change, conflict. It is a world without any finished element, least of all finished characters, personalities, or the main hero. Jarzębski thus shows the daunting difficulties faced by anyone trying to characterize individual characters walking about in Gombrowicz's world. They do not yield to description in terms of traditional statical formulas describing human characters, they cannot be "picked out" of the events in which they are involved, least of all of their ties with other characters. Gombrowicz's heroes are thus being created in a string of many interaction "games" and if you want to characterize them you cannot do that without scrutinizing all his ties to the other characters. However, even after such analyses you may realize that individual characters, as well as entire works, still contain a host of puzzling facts and ambiguities Jarzębski points out that ever since he began to write Gombrowicz indulged in a sophisticated game of ambiguity. Apparently, all elements of his texts are comprehensible for readers, but actually they slip all attempts to furnish any definitive interpretation. Jarzębski construes this as one of the most important elements of Gombrowicz's world outlook, namely his belief that the reality is "unfinished." Nor are there any "finished" meanings in Gombrowicz's works; meanings in them only emerge out of a medley of different possible senses, and it is this peculiar game of communication a reader of Gombrowicz is compelled to join.

The third chapter outlines philosophical questions which can be inferred from Gombrowicz's works when using the concept of

“game.” Jarzębski gave this chapter the title “Between Creation and Interpretation: Gnosiological Problems.” The purpose of this chapter is to prop the idea formulated in the preceding chapters that the questions we become aware of when applying the concept of “game” were indeed introduced by Gombrowicz into his own philosophy of literature. Jarzębski therefore reviews the main philosophical questions Gombrowicz articulates both discursively (say, in his letters, in the *Diary* or in interviews) and implicitly in his literary works. Gombrowicz’s fundamental question is, “Just what is reality?” Jarzębski quotes a number of Gombrowicz’s statements in which the notion of reality dominates his main ontological as well as literary reasoning. Gombrowicz not only asks himself about the mode of existence of reality but, as a man of letters, is looking for a most eloquent literary formula to describe that reality. But this question, apart from its ontological sense, has also a gnosiological meaning. Gombrowicz asks himself not only “What is the reality?” but also “How is it emerging, what and how is creating it?” This, of course, is the chief question of his *Cosmos*, where Gombrowicz himself repeatedly asks it, but it is also contained in different earlier works (including *Ferdydurke*).

It is remarkable, says Jarzębski, that Gombrowicz produced his own personal history of philosophy. He defined individual philosophical currents he was fascinated by. But actually his main interest was less in philosophy as such than in philosophers. He was fascinated by personalities of thinkers—the movement itself of philosophizing thought rather than philosophy as a separate area of human knowledge. Of the questions Gombrowicz deemed significant, the relationship between subjectivism and objectivism is no doubt the most important one. For Gombrowicz, this question appeared both as a cognitive problem and as two complementary areas of perception of reality. That relationship was undoubtedly a basic existential problem of human beings. In each of his works, Gombrowicz raises the question of where the real world ends and a person’s subjective perception begins; indeed, this question turns out to be a personal quandary for several of his characters (e.g., in *Ferdydurke*, in *Cosmos*, or in *The Wedding*). Existentialism is another major philosophical motif Jarzębski notices in Gombrowicz’s works. Several years ago, this was also pointed out by Artur

Sandauer, who described *Ferdydurke* as “a Polish formula of existentialism.” Jarzębski follows Sandauer’s line of argument. Incidentally, this line is quite conspicuous because Gombrowicz himself analyzed his links with existentialism and, with usual persuasiveness, exposed his own original and separate character of thinking. To sum up the philosophical motifs in Gombrowicz’s works as listed by Jarzębski, it can be said Gombrowicz was fascinated by the problem of reality as an outcome of a game between a person’s subjectivity and the reality of the outside world.

Philosophy of literature is a next topic raised by Jarzębski, who points out such things as motives of acting characters, the functions of literary conventions used by Gombrowicz. his interpretation of the act of literary creation itself (as a social and communicative function, and not just as expression alone), and, lastly, the inherent ambiguity of literature involved in various strategies of readers. Jarzębski concludes this chapter by studying the link between Gombrowicz’s philosophy of “immaturity” and its literary picture in his different works. To put it differently, Jarzębski analyzes the way in which Gombrowicz creates the author’s own “me” and how he conducts the game with his readers. Gombrowicz’s game, says Jarzębski,

has as though two facets: on the one hand, it appears as pure spontaneity, as a mirror image of the Ego’s nonreflecting dynamics, and, on the other, as the only trace, the only possible articulation of that “me”, and hence as a process in which readers must look for structure and order to meet the author’s expectations, his desire of concreteness, his attempt to paint his own picture in his reader’s mind (p. 138).

Chapter four (“The Maturation of the *Diary*”) presents Gombrowicz’s first narrative works which were subsequently collected into his literary debut called *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (*Diary of Pubescence*, 1933). Jarzębski argues Gombrowicz’s design to play a game with his readers was designed already in his first book. Gombrowicz took different stereotypes of social life and literature as the main objects of his attack, specifically stereotypes of personalities, of authority, but above all various stereotypes governing the community’s internal life. Whoever abides by such stereotypes, says Jarzębski was Gombrowicz’s message, “is bound to make a fool of himself” (p. 151). One major element in that game of Gombro-

wicz's with readers is his exploitation of popular literary patterns, as Gombrowicz deliberately wanted to make a perusal of his works easier for readers, but only to make it more involved after a while. So, his *Diary of Pubescence* signalled as well as predetermined Gombrowicz's artistic attitude in the future—"writing 'with his entire self' and 'for any reader', be he wise or dumb" (p. 185).

Chapter five ("On *Ferdydurke*") presents the public's reception of the *Diary of Pubescence*, which was dominated by psychologism and authenticity as interpretative formulae. Jarzębski then proceeds to a discussion of the novel *Ferdydurke* (which was originally published as a collection of short stories). Lastly, Jarzębski proceeds to an analysis of the novel concentrating mainly on rules of semantics in novels. Jarzębski describes Gombrowicz's style in this as pansemiotism, a strategy for coding different meanings along with specific symbolic suggestions which always bar any unequivocal construction. In this context, too, Jarzębski discusses the philosophy of Gombrowicz's language. The final section of this chapter ("Players, conflicts, strategies") deals with the semblance of Gombrowicz's characters to those occurring in puppet theaters. In *Ferdydurke*, says Jarzębski, the main character introduces jarring tones into what is apparently a harmonious world whereby that "world" is turned into a maddening chaos. In other words, the main character, the narrator or the author—each in his own way—confuse the strings that used to move the puppets.

Chapter six is devoted to a discussion of the novel *Pornografia* ("*Pornography*—an Attempt to Create a New Language"). Jarzębski first discusses the controversy that novel set off, to proceed to a description of its characters and to say why that novel stands somewhat apart from Gombrowicz's previous works. "In *Pornography*, the world is not falling apart," it endures apparently unaffected, and yet it decomposes as though from inside.

The concluding chapter of Jarzębski's book analyzes the motif of crime in Gombrowicz's works ("Ritual and Crime"). Jarzębski focuses on such topics of Gombrowicz's works as eroticism, family life, crime, clashes of different forms, or attitudes towards the literary tradition including that towards Romanticism. Crime and ritual are taken by Jarzębski as an opportunity to interpret many details of Gombrowicz's work. Concluding his reflections Jarzębski

says, "In his early years, literary form as a tool of captivating human beings was the real enemy for Gombrowicz." He treated crime solely as a literary abstraction. Towards the end of his life Gombrowicz slightly changed his perspective, for crime appeared to him the price to pay for rejecting normalcy (pp. 502–503).

Jarzębski's book offers many interesting interpretative ideas. He must no doubt be credited with having tried to sum up all the most important motifs in studies of Gombrowicz. Jarzębski underlines he did not manage to take up all aspects, but even what he has done is a long step forward in exploring the work of the author of *Ferdydurke*. Jarzębski's wide scope, which is really impressive at different places in his book, is unfortunately counterproductive now and then. Readers will notice the book's lack of balance, specifically the evident disproportion between his analysis of Gombrowicz's first two books and his subsequent works. Despite Jarzębski's assurances, the concept of "game," ubiquitous though it is in his book, does not make his argument fully selfconsistent. One serious drawback of Jarzębski's book is the total omission of Gombrowicz's style, one area of linguistic creation in which Gombrowicz was doubtless a perfect master. Gombrowicz was also one of the most complete artists of the word. Some other objections could be raised against Jarzębski book. But by and large this book is a must for all readers of Gombrowicz an important and, probably for a long time to come, irreplaceable contribution.

Włodzimierz Bolecki

Transl. by Zygmunt Nierada

Tango Gombrowicz. Collected, translated and supplied with a preface by Rajmund Kalicki, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1984, 390 pp.

Witold Gombrowicz spent nearly 24 years in Argentina, from August 22, 1939, through to April 8, 1963. His everyday life there was little known, for apart from some minor mentions in his *Diary* and *Roaming Argentina* Polish readers had access to no other accounts. Rajmund Kalicki has now filled this gap with his book. He had contacted Gombrowicz's friends from his Argenti-