



WITOLD GOMBROWICZ

**FERDYDURKE**

TRANSLATED BY DANUTA BORCHARDT

FOREWORD BY SUSAN SONTAG

**WINNER OF THE 2001 NATIONAL TRANSLATION AWARD**  
given by the American Literary Translators Association

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“Extravagant, brilliant, disturbing, brave, funny . . . wonderful . . . Long live its sublime mockery.”—**Susan Sontag**, from the foreword

In this bitterly funny novel a writer finds himself tossed into a chaotic world of schoolboys by a diabolical professor who wishes to reduce him to childishness. Originally published in Poland in 1937, *Ferdydurke* was deemed scandalous and subversive by Nazis, Stalinists, and the Polish Communist regime in turn and was officially banned in Poland for decades. It has nonetheless remained one of the most influential works of twentieth-century European literature.

**Witold Gombrowicz** (1904–1969) is the author of *A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes*, *Trans-Atlantyck*, *Cosmos*, and *Pornografia*, the first three available from Yale University Press. These, along with his plays and his *Diary*, have been translated into more than thirty languages.

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**Danuta Borchardt** has translated several works by Witold Gombrowicz. She is also a writer of short stories, which are regularly published on the website *Exquisite Corpse*.

*Cover illustration:* Drawing by Bruno Schulz from the title page of the first edition of *Ferdydurke*.

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*Ferdydurke*



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Witold Gombrowicz

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*Translated from the Polish by Danuta Borchardt*

*Foreword by Susan Sontag*

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The Margellos World Republic of Letters is dedicated to making literary works from around the globe available in English through translation. It brings to the English-speaking world the work of leading poets, novelists, essayists, philosophers, and playwrights from Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to stimulate international discourse and creative exchange.

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Foreword  
*Susan Sontag*

**S**tart with the title. Which means . . . nothing. There is no character in the novel called *Ferdydurke*. And this is only a foretaste of insolence to come.

Published in late 1937, when its author was thirty-three, *Ferdydurke* is the great Polish writer's second book. The title of his first, *Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity* (1933), would have served beautifully for the novel. Perhaps this is why Gombrowicz opted for jabberwocky.

That first book, whose title was pounced on by the Warsaw reviewers as if Gombrowicz had made a shaming confession inadvertently, was a collection of stories (he'd been publishing them in magazines since 1926); over the next two years more stories appeared, including a pair ("The Child Runs Deep in Filidor" and "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert") that he would use, with chapter-long mock prefaces, as interludes in *Ferdydurke*, as well as a first play, *Princess Ivona*; then, in early 1935, he embarked on a novel. Had the title of his volume of fanciful stories seemed—his word—"ill-chosen"? Now he would *really* provoke. He would write an epic in defense of immaturity. As he declared toward the end of his life:

“Immaturity—what a compromising, disagreeable word!—became my war cry.”

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Immaturity (not youth) is the word Gombrowicz insists on, insists on because it represents something unattractive, something, to use another of his key words, *inferior*. The longing his novel describes, and endorses, is not, Faust-like, to relive the glory days of youth. What happens to the thirty-year-old who, waking up one morning roiled in the conviction of the futility of his life and all his projects, is abducted by a teacher and returned to the world of callow schoolboys, is a humiliation, a fall.

From the start, Gombrowicz was to write, he had chosen to adopt a “fantastic, eccentric, and bizarre tone” bordering on “mania, folly, absurdity.” To irritate, Gombrowicz might have said, is to conquer. I think, therefore I contradict. A young aspirant to glory in 1930s literary Warsaw, Gombrowicz had already become legendary in the writers’ cafés for his madcap grimaces and poses. On the page, he sought an equally vehement relation to the reader. Grandiose and goofy, this is a work of unrelenting *address*.

Still, it seems likely that Gombrowicz did not know where he was going when he began the novel. “I can well remember,” Gombrowicz declared in 1968, a year before he died (*did* he remember? or was he massaging his legend?),

*that, when I started Ferdynand, I wanted to write no more than a biting satire that would put me in a superior position over my enemies. But my words were soon whirled away in a violent dance, they took the bit between their teeth and galloped towards a grotesque lunacy with such speed that I had to rewrite the first part of the book in order to give it the same grotesque intensity.*

But the problem was less (I suspect) that the first chapters needed a further infusion of lunatic energies than that Gombrowicz did not anticipate the freight of argument—about the nature of eros, about culture (particularly Polish culture), about ideals—his tale would carry.

*Ferdydurke* starts with a dreamlike abduction to an absurd world, in which the big become small and the small monstrously big: those great buttocks in the sky. In contrast to the landscape Lewis Carroll conjured up for a prepubescent girl, Gombrowicz's wonderland of shape-shiftings and re-sizings seethes with lust.

*Everything was expanding in blackness. Inflating and widening, yet at the same time shrinking and straining, evading something, and some kind of winnowing, general and particular, a coagulating tension and a tensing coagulation, a dangling by a fine thread, as well as transformation into something, transmutation, and furthermore—a falling into some cumulative, towering system, and as if on a narrow little plank raised six stories up, together with the excitement of all organs. And tickling.*

In Alice's story, a child falls into an asexual underworld governed by a new, fantastic but implacable logic. In *Ferdydurke*, the grownup who is turned into a schoolboy discovers new, puerile freedoms for giving offense and owning up to disreputable desire.

Starts with an abduction; ends with an abduction. The first (by Professor Pimko) returns the protagonist to the scene of true, that is, unmanageable, feeling and desire. The second abduction shows the protagonist making a provisional flight back into so-called maturity.

*If someone were to spot me in the hallway, in the darkness, how would I explain this escapade? How do we find ourselves on these tortuous and abnormal roads? Normality is a tightrope-walker above the abyss of abnormality. How much potential madness is contained in the everyday order of things—you never know when and how the course of events will lead you to kidnap a farmhand and take to the fields. It's Zosia that I should be kidnapping. If anyone, it should be Zosia, kidnapping Zosia from a country manor would be the normal and correct thing to do, if anyone it was Zosia, and not this stupid, idiotic farmhand . . .*

*Ferdydurke* is one of the most bracing, direct books ever written about sexual desire—this without a single scene of sexual union. To be sure, the cards are stacked from the start in favor of eros. Who would not concur in the silencing of *this* social babble by the clamor of rumps, thighs, calves? The head commands, or wishes to. The buttocks reign.

Later, Gombrowicz referred to his novel as a pamphlet. He also called it a parody of a philosophical tale in the manner of Voltaire. Gombrowicz is one of the super-arguers of the twentieth century—“*To contradict, even on little matters,*” he declared, “is the supreme necessity of art today”—and *Ferdydurke* is a dazzling novel of ideas. These ideas give the novel both weight and wings.

Gombrowicz capers and thunders, hectors and mocks, but he is also entirely serious about his project of transvaluation, his critique of high “ideals.” *Ferdydurke* is one of the few novels I know that could be called Nietzschean; certainly it is the only comic novel that could be so described. (The affecting fantasia of Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* seems, in comparison, riddled with sentimentality.) Nietzsche deplored the ascendancy of slave values sponsored by Christianity, and called for the overthrowing of corrupt ideals and for new forms of masterfulness. Gombrowicz, affirming the “human” need for imperfection, incompleteness, inferiority . . . youth, proclaims himself a specialist in inferiority. Swinish adolescence may seem a drastic antidote to smug maturity, but this is exactly what Gombrowicz has in mind. “Degradation became my ideal forever. I worshipped the slave.” It is still a Nietzschean project of unmasking, of *exposing*, with a merry satyr-dance of dualisms: mature versus immature, wholes versus parts, clothed versus naked, heterosexuality versus homosexuality, complete versus incomplete.

Gombrowicz gaily deploys many of the devices of high literary modernism lately re-labeled “post-modern,” which tweak the traditional decorums of novel writing: notably, that of a garrulous, intrusive narrator awash in his own contradictory emotional states. Bur-

lesque slides into pathos. When not preening, he is abject; when not clowning, he is vulnerable and self-pitying.

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An immature narrator is some sort of candid narrator; even one who flaunts what is usually hidden. What he is not is a “sincere” narrator, sincerity being one of those ideals that make no sense in the world of candor and provocation. “In literature sincerity leads nowhere . . . the more artificial we are, the closer we come to frankness. Artificiality allows the artist to approach shameful truths.” As for his celebrated *Diary*, Gombrowicz says:

*Have you ever read a “sincere” diary? The “sincere” diary is the most mendacious diary . . . And, in the long run, what a bore sincerity is! It is ineffectual.*

*Then what? My diary had to be sincere, but it could not be sincere. How could I solve the problem? The word, the loose, spoken word, has this consoling particularity: it is close to sincerity, not in what it confesses but in what it claims to be and in what it pursues.*

*So I had to avoid turning my diary into a confession. I had to show myself “in action,” in my intention of imposing myself on the reader in a certain way, in my desire to create myself with everyone looking on. “This is how I would like to be for you,” and not “This is how I am.”*

Still, however fanciful the plot of *Ferdydurke*, no reader will regard the protagonist and his longings as anything other than a transposition of the author’s own personality and pathology. By making Joey Kowalski (as the Polish name of the protagonist-narrator is here rendered in English) a writer—and the author of an unsuccessful, much derided book of stories entitled, yes, *Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity*—Gombrowicz dares the reader *not* to think about the man who wrote the novel.

A writer who revels in the fantasy of renouncing his identity and its privileges. A writer who imagines a flight into youth, represented

as a kidnapping; a discarding of the destiny expected of an adult, represented as a subtraction from the world in which one is known.

---

And then the fantasy came true. (Few writers' lives have so clearly taken the shape of a destiny.) At the age of thirty-five, a few days short of the fateful date of September 1, 1939, Gombrowicz was dropped into unexpected exile, far from Europe, in the "immature" New World. It was as brutal a change in his real life as the imagined turning of a thirty-year-old man into a schoolboy. Stranded, without any means of support, where nothing was expected of him, because nothing was known about him, he was offered the divine opportunity to lose himself. In Poland, he was well-born Witold Gombrowicz, a prominent "vanguard" writer, who had written a book many (including his friend, the other great Polish writer of the same period, Bruno Schulz) considered a masterpiece. In Argentina, he writes, "I was nothing, so I could do anything."

It is impossible now to imagine Gombrowicz without his twenty-four years in Argentina (much of which was spent in penury), an Argentina he made to suit his own fantasies, his daring, his pride. He left Poland a relatively young man; he returned to Europe (but never to Poland) when he was nearing sixty, and died six years later in the south of France. Separation from Europe was not the making of Gombrowicz as a writer: the man who published *Ferdydurke* two years earlier was already fully formed as a literary artist. It was, rather, the most providential confirmation of everything his novel knows, and gave direction and bite to the marvelous writings still to come.

The ordeal of emigration—and for Gombrowicz it was an ordeal—sharpened his cultural combativeness, as we know from the *Diary*. The *Diary*—in three volumes in English, and anything but a "personal" diary—can be read as a kind of free-form fiction, post-modern *avant la lettre*, that is, animated by a program of violating decorum similar to that of *Ferdydurke*. Claims for the staggering genius and intellectual acuity of the author vie with a running ac-



count of his insecurities, imperfections, and embarrassments, and a defiant avowal of barbaric, yokel prejudices. Considering himself slighted by, and therefore eager to reject, the lively literary milieu of late 1930s Buenos Aires, and aware that it harbored one indisputably great writer, Gombrowicz declared himself “at opposite poles” from Borges. “He is deeply rooted in literature, I in life. To tell the truth I am anti-literature.”

As if in agreement, shallow agreement, with Gombrowicz’s entirely self-serving quarrel with the idea of literature, many now regard the *Diary* instead of *Ferdydurke* as his greatest work.

No one can forget the notorious opening of the *Diary*:

*Monday*

*Me.*

*Tuesday*

*Me.*

*Wednesday*

*Me.*

*Thursday*

*Me.*

Having got *that* straight, Gombrowicz devoted Friday’s entry to a subtle reflection on some material he had been reading in the Polish press.

Gombrowicz expected to offend with his egocentricity: a writer must continually defend his borders. But a writer is also someone who must abandon borders, and egotism, so Gombrowicz argued, is the precondition of spiritual and intellectual freedom. In the “me . . . me . . . me . . . me” one hears the solitary émigré thumbing his nose at “we . . . we . . . we . . . we.” Gombrowicz never stopped arguing with Polish culture, with its intractable collectivism of spirit (usually called “romanticism”) and the obsession of its writers with the national martyrdom, the national identity. The relentless intelligence and energy of his observations on cultural and

artistic matters, the pertinence of his challenge to Polish pieties, his bravura contentiousness, ended by making him the most influential prose writer of the past half century in his native country.

The Polish sense of being marginal to European culture, and to Western European concern while enduring generations of foreign occupation, had prepared the hapless émigré writer better than he might have wished to endure being sentenced to many years of near total isolation as a writer. Courageously, he embarked on the enterprise of making deep, liberating sense out of the unprotectedness of his situation in Argentina. Exile tested his vocation and expanded it. Strengthening his disaffection from nationalist pieties and self-congratulation, it made him a consummate citizen of world literature.

More than sixty years after *Ferdydurke* was written, little remains of the specifically Polish targets of Gombrowicz's scorn. These have vanished along with the Poland in which he was reared and came of age—destroyed by the multiple blows of war, Nazi occupation, Soviet dominance (which prevented him from ever returning), and the post-1989 ethos of consumerism. Almost as dated is his assumption that adults always claim to be mature.

*In our relations with other people we want to be cultivated, superior, mature, so we use the language of maturity and we talk about, for instance, Beauty, Goodness, Truth . . . . But, within our own confidential, intimate reality, we feel nothing but inadequacy, immaturity . . .*

The declaration seems from another world. How unlikely it would be for whatever embarrassing inadequacies people feel now to be covered over with hifalutin absolutes such as Beauty, Goodness, Truth. The European-style ideals of maturity, cultivation, wisdom have given way steadily to American-style celebrations of the Forever Young. The discrediting of literature and other expressions of “high” culture as elitist or anti-life is a staple of the new culture ruled by

entertainment values. Indiscretion about one's unconventional sexual feelings is now a routine, if not mandatory, contribution to public entertainment. Anyone now who would claim to love "the inferior" would argue that it is not inferior at all; that actually it's superior. Hardly any of the cherished opinions against which Gombrowicz contended are still cherished.

Then can *Ferdydurke* still offend? Still seem outrageous? Exception made for the novel's acidic misogyny, probably not. Does it still seem extravagant, brilliant, disturbing, brave, funny . . . wonderful? Yes.

A zealous administrator of his own legend, Gombrowicz was both telling and not telling the truth when he claimed to have successfully avoided all forms of greatness. But whatever he thought, or wanted us to think he thought, that cannot happen if one had produced a masterpiece, and it eventually comes to be acknowledged as such. In the late 1950s *Ferdydurke* was finally translated (under auspicious sponsorship) into French, and Gombrowicz was, at last, "discovered." He had wanted nothing more than this success; this triumph over his adversaries and detractors, real and imagined. But the writer who counseled his readers to try to avoid all expressions of themselves; to guard against all their beliefs, and to mistrust their feelings; above all, to stop identifying themselves with what defines them, could hardly fail to insist that he, Gombrowicz, was not *that book*. Indeed, he has to be inferior to it. "The work, transformed into culture, hovered in the sky, while I remained below." Like the great backside that hovers high above the protagonist's half-hearted flight into normality at the end of the novel, *Ferdydurke* has floated upward to the literary empyrean. Long live its sublime mockery of all attempts to normalize desire . . . and the reach of great literature.



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## Translator's Note

**F**or several years the question has been whether *Ferdydurke* could be translated into comprehensible English, and if so, would it still be *Ferdydurke*?

*Ferdydurke* was published in Poland in 1937 and translated into Spanish in 1947 in Buenos Aires, the result of a collaboration between Gombrowicz and his Hispanic literary friends. In the early 1960s it was translated into French and German. An English version was derived from the French, German, and possibly the Spanish translations, but some of the most beautiful and important passages were omitted. This is the first unabridged English translation, and it is taken directly from Gombrowicz's original text. I hope that it will establish that it is possible to translate *Ferdydurke*, at least for the most part.

I arrived at the task of translating *Ferdydurke* by a circuitous route. I was born in Poland, and my mother tongue is the language in which Gombrowicz was creating his works and on which he was already exerting an influence. I began to learn English at the age of thirteen when, as a refugee during World War II, I found myself living in England and Ireland. I settled in the United States in 1959

and began, some years later, to write short stories in English—rather idiosyncratic in content and style—and discovered an affinity with Gombrowicz’s writing. After reading Gombrowicz’s last novel, *Cosmos*, in Polish, I thought that it would sound beautiful in English. I translated the first chapter of *Cosmos*, as well as some of Gombrowicz’s short stories, and began to explore the possibilities of having them published. This brought me into contact with publishers and scholars, and with Gombrowicz’s widow, Rita Gombrowicz. They all encouraged me to translate *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz’s first major work.

I decided at the outset to use American rather than British English because it is less formal and therefore better suited to Gombrowicz’s style. My own English is influenced by my having learned it in London and Dublin. For this reason, and also because the translation, was going to be from a native language to an acquired one, it became apparent that I would need the assistance of a born speaker of American English. My husband’s reviews of the many drafts proved to be most useful in this respect. In some instances, however, when he would interject, “But we don’t say it this way,” my reply would be, “In Polish we don’t either; it’s pure Gombrowicz”—and this would be the final court of appeal. Clearly I was dealing with yet another language: Gombrowicz’s Polish.

Gombrowicz had availed himself of four idioms: colloquial Polish; literary Polish; the language of the intelligentsia and the landed gentry; and the language of the peasantry. But he also introduced his own idiosyncrasies by playing *with* and *on* words, by changing nouns into verbs and adjectives, by using unusual phraseology, and by inventing new forms, some of which have entered colloquial Polish. Had I not worked as a psychiatrist with English-speaking schizophrenics who invent their own languages, I may not have felt comfortable “neologizing” English in such crucial words and phrases as “proffed” and “he had dealt me the *pupa*.” The Polish word *pupa*

(pronounced “poopa”) presented a special problem. It means the buttocks, behind, bum, tush, rump, but not one of these (nor any others that I considered) adequately conveys the sense in which Gombrowicz uses “pupa” in the text. While the “mug” is Gombrowicz’s metaphor for the destructive elements in human relationships, the pupa is his metaphor for the gentle, insidious, but definite infantilizing and humiliation that we inflict on one another. We made the decision to stay with the Polish word.

*Ferdydurke* is a tragi-farce, in which events are often tragic and comic at the same time, and in which the mug and the pupa are the metaphors for violence and belittlement. Names of body parts are given meaning beyond the usual, often through wordplay. This wordplay is, whenever possible, translated literally. Some plays on words are impossible to translate—for example, Gombrowicz uses the fact that the Polish term for fingers and toes is same word to create wordplay between “fingers” and “tiptoeing.”

I had to bear in mind that in English the sequence of words is crucial to meaning, whereas in Polish there is a more complicated grammar that clarifies the meaning of a sentence. Mishaps such as “he threw his mother from the train a kiss” do not occur in Polish.

Gombrowicz delighted, it seems, in compressing the abstract into the concrete: it is not the thought of the farmhand but the farmhand himself that “paints the morning in bright and pleasant colors,” or, “she was generally a bit disgusted with mother,” instead of “mothering.”

Gombrowicz’s long sentences and paragraphs, frequent use of dashes, and his grouping of entire conversations into single paragraphs were part of his style, and I preserved these. The same applies to his repeating a word rather than providing its synonym; by doing so he evokes a sense of emphasis and rhythm.

I was equally faithful to Gombrowicz’s changes of tense between past and present in the same paragraph and even in the same sen-

tence. The metamorphosis of a thirty-year-old man into a teenager is often indicated by past tense becoming present. Also, the change of tense imbues the story with a surreal sense of time.

In translating idioms I sometimes had to use an English one that had the same meaning as the Polish but was entirely different. For *z palca*—"from the finger"—I substituted "out of thin air." However, the English idiom "the end justifies the means" was changed to "the end sanctifies the means," preserving a nuance of the Polish.

In Polish, the use of diminutives imparts, in many instances, an aura of affectation and artificiality, and they often sound ridiculous. Gombrowicz spared no effort in pointing this out by his frequent and exaggerated use of diminutives. I have tried to capture this with diminutive adjectives, as in "cute little head," or by using the ending "-ie."

In Poland, French was not the language of the aristocracy, as it had been in Russia until the early 1800s, but the occasional use of French and other languages was, nonetheless, a common affectation and a fruitful field for Gombrowicz's satire. I have followed Gombrowicz in not offering a translation of familiar foreign words and phrases.

Two important names—Kneadus (from the verb "to knead") and Youngblood—were translated into English because they have definite connotations in Polish that contribute to the meaning of the tale. The title itself, *Ferdydurke*, has no meaning in Polish, although there is some conjecture that the word was a contraction and alteration of the name Freddy Durkee, the chief character in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, which was widely read in Poland in the early 1930s. Gombrowicz himself never explained the title.

Gombrowicz has presented us with a remarkable novel in a bold and innovative style—with élan, humor, beauty. No translation is final, but it was incumbent on me to make a valiant effort to transfer the original text to the English-speaking reader with fidelity and with



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