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| Gombrowicz, Witold (1904-1969) |
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| Witold Gombrowicz was a Polish writer who is best known for his works *Ferdydurke* (1937), *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953), *Pornographia* (1960), and *Cosmos* (1965) as well as his personal diaries, which were published in 1969. Born into a wealthy landed family, Gombrowicz debuted in the avant-garde milieu of interwar Warsaw. In 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland, he was on a journalistic assignment in Argentina, where he spent most of his adult life. Most of Gombrowicz’s works were first printed by the Polish expatriate press in Paris. In 1963, he returned to Europe. Retiring to Vence, in the south of France, he never saw his native land again. |
| Born into a wealthy landed family, Witold Gombrowicz debuted in the avant-garde milieu of interwar Warsaw. In 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland, he was on a journalistic assignment in Argentina, where he spent most of his adult life. Most of Gombrowicz’s works were first printed by the Polish expatriate press in Paris. In 1963, he returned to Europe. Retiring to Vence, in the south of France, he never saw his native land again.  *Ferdydurke* (1937), Gombrowicz’s major work, appeared after a collection of short stories, *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (*Memoirs from the Time of Immaturity* (1933, subsequently published, with additions, as *Bakakaj* [1957]). *Ferdydurke* tells the tale of a man who, unable to grow up and assume the responsibilities of adulthood, finds himself transported back to school—an ungainly adult among ungainly boys—by the magic of a diabolical pedant. Besides a series of awkward encounters, in which the hero’s displaced existence provokes mounting anarchy in the lives of those he meets, *Ferdydurke* contains chapters that take up the subject matter in other ways—for example, the narrative of a duel between rival academics that devolves from the sphere of learning to physical altercations, and manifesto-like passages celebrating the eloquence of the inarticulate. Throughout his omnidirectional satire, Gombrowicz deflates the pretensions of others by offering himself as an object of ridicule.  *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953), which the author wrote while working at a bank in Argentina, describes further picaresque adventures, including forays into the criminal and homosexual underworlds of his adoptive country. Written in the mannered style of seventeenth-century mock epic, the novel takes on the salon culture of South American letters (especially the ‘court’ around Jorge Luis Borges), the doomed nationalism of exiles longing to restore the glory of Poland from abroad, and the cabals and petty intrigues of bureaucratic functionaries. Like *Ferdydurke*, *Trans-Atlantyk* is a semi-autobiographical account of false martyrdom, a willfully hypocritical tale of remaining true to ideals that, because they reject the promise of perfection, can only ever count as wrong.  File: Image 1 Gombrowicz in Argentina.jpg  Image 1 Gombrowicz in Argentina  Source: Witold Gombrowicz in Argentina. Image taken by Maria Swieczewska (1963). Cannot find link to image online.  In his *Diaries*—which he wrote for publication beginning in 1953—Gombrowicz addressed a wide range of philosophical and literary topics, advocating that the exiled Polish intelligentsia stop trying to follow English and French models and instead embrace ‘inferiority.’ While the scathing and polemical tone of much in the *Diaries* violated the decorum of learned discourse, Gombrowicz showed himself to be conversant in the philosophy and intellectual debates of the day (e.g., existentialism and structuralism), and his critiques of academic pieties are full of nuance and subtlety. Often playing the part of the devil’s advocate, Gombrowicz offered ingenious defenses of institutions in which he did not believe (Catholicism, among other things). The *Diaries* also contain instructive commentary on the author’s own works. If his calls met with incomprehension and hostility—his works were forbidden in Poland until 1956, only to be banned again two years later—Gombrowicz nevertheless made a name for himself in Polish letters by putting his principles into action.  Gombrowicz’s plays treat the concerns of his novels and critical writings in a different medium. *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* (1935) is the story of a prince who realizes that marriage to an unappealing girl represents the ultimate act of sovereignty. To assert his autonomy, he takes a bride who is a blank slate but for a vaguely irritating quality no one can account for. The mere presence of Ivona provokes unease until, finally, the royal house verges on collapse; only when the courtiers conspire to murder her is balance restored. Written in a fantastical style reminiscent of both seventeenth-century drama (e.g., Calderón’s *Life is a Dream*) and twentieth-century absurdism (for example, the works of Samuel Beckett), *The Marriage* (1953), likewise centres on a symbolic act in which the welfare of a community hangs in precarious balance. Returning from war, the hero seeks to redeem his family and fiancée from the hardship and disgrace into which they have fallen. The means to this end is a ceremony requiring cooperation by people who escape his control; therefore, order emerges only to collapse again.  File: Image 2 Gombrowicz in Vence.jpg  Image 2 Gombrowicz in Vence  Source: Witold Gombrowicz in Vence. Image taken by Bohdan Paczowski (1965). Image can be found at <http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/tag/witold-gombrowicz/>  Gombrowicz’s last two novels, *Pornographia* (1960) and *Cosmos* (1965), are cooler in tone and display a more malevolent tone (in the sense of Edgar Allan Poe or Charles Baudelaire). In *Pornographia*, Gombrowicz tells the story of an alter ego—also named ‘Witold’—who, in the company of another blasé Warsaw intellectual, makes an excursion to the Polish countryside during wartime. Enchanted by a boy and a girl who seem made for each other yet refuse to have an erotic relationship, the elder pair conspires for them to be united in the assassination of a military officer who has lost his nerve and therefore represents a weak point in the war effort. *Cosmos* likewise presents a tale of obsession culminating in death (this time, the suicide of the husband of a young woman who intrigues the narrator). Creatively perverse until the last, Gombrowicz married Rita Labrosse the year before he died.  File: Image 3 Gombrowicz and his wife Rita.jpg  Image 3 Gombrowicz and his wife Rita  Source: Witold Gombrowicz and his wife Rita (1966). Image can be found at <http://skotkacy.com/tag/gombrowicz-witold/>  The various strands of Gombrowicz’s oeuvre are united by an abiding interest in the immature, the youthful, and the marginal—especially as it conflicts with the rigid demands of family, education, religion, and social hierarchy. Life in its raw state, which has not yet reached a condition of completion and fullness, provides both the theme and the substance of Gombrowicz’s narratives and dramas, where the order that prevails between characters is ultimately undone when one (or more) of them fails to ‘play along’ with the conventions others follow. Although such an understanding of the literary craft is not unique to Gombrowicz—modernism, according to Peter Gay, follows the ‘lure of heresy’—the author’s fondness for slapstick and the grotesque set him apart from contemporaries who explore the same themes in a more earnest manner. Key Works *Ferdydurke* (1937, English translation 2000)  *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953, English translation 1995)  *Pornographia* (1960, English translation 2010)  *Cosmos* (1965, English translation 2011) Selective Timeline of Works Published 1933 *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (*Memoirs from the Time of Immaturity*)  1935 *Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda* (Ivona, Princess of Burgundia)  1937 *Ferdydurke*  1953 *Trans-Atlantyk*  1953 *Ślub* [first published in Spanish translation 1948]  1960 *Pornographia*  1965 *Cosmos* |
| Further reading:  (Giroud)  (Ziarek) |