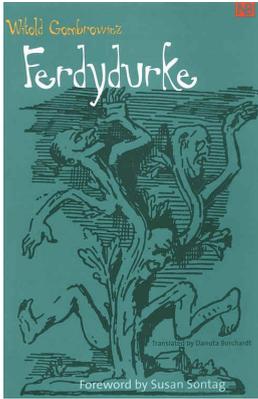


---

**Ferdydurke by Witold Gombrowicz, translated by Danuta Borchartd (2000), 281 pages.**



The author (1904-1969) wrote this novel in 1937, and for a little while there was a "tempest in the teapot" created by contemporary critics and caused by his extravagant style and the puzzling contents. Ominous clouds heralded the approach of historic events in Europe, and this book was promptly forgotten by Polish readers. Gombrowicz booked the maiden voyage of the M.S. Chrobry that reached Buenos Aires just as World War II broke out, and he remained in Argentina for the next 23 years. It was Jerzy Giedroyc in Paris who rediscovered him and opened the pages of his publications to him in the late 1950s. Translations followed, including F. Mosbacher's 1961 English version, based on the French text; this new translation received high praise from experts. It is difficult to evaluate these efforts in detail, but it is evident that Borchartd has done a fine job in English. While she has complete command of Polish, her American husband greatly contributed by his mastery of idioms, badly needed in this book. Besides, the translation of difficult novels is a thankless task requiring great devotion while receiving minor rewards.

The gist of the book is this: a thirty-year old man wakes up one morning and, unexpectedly, is transformed by a magician into a schoolboy. His former school experience is based on rigid teachings he resents. Before long, he is engulfed in a startling new situation: a "liberated" existence which, however, imposes its own limitations. Thus once again he feels estranged and escapes from the school into the countryside. But it is not the narrative line that will catch readers' attention but the various elements of Gombrowicz's ideas. Sometimes he creates absurd situations; then he invents conflicts and their resolution that are difficult to comprehend. He usually appears antagonistic to conventional social or cultural attitudes; occasionally he is carried away to extremes: his recollection of the old teacher's insistence that Słowacki was a fine poet while the entire class of high school pranks boos him - sounds improbable. In fact, on many pages there are subjects ripe for controversy.

Some readers will find this novel exhilarating, some will judge it "lunatic" as did the *London Times*, but everybody will probably agree that it should not be ignored as an example of satire, or, maybe, of a writer who mocks the reader. Quite frankly, it is a difficult book to read.

Consequently, if one likes existentialist writers, surrealist novelists, and wicked ironists, one will appreciate this work by Gombrowicz. But one must be prepared for the stylistic convolutions which make one think that actually two languages are employed by the author: sometimes- it is Polish, and then it is the writer's own lexicon.

***George E. Suboczewski***