

Ferdydurke A.D. 1947

The translation and publication of Gombrowicz' *Ferdydurke* in Argentina in 1947 was an unusual event which became legendary soon afterwards. Rarely, if ever, are translations carried out the way as it was in that particular case. To realize the craziness of this act, one has to remember that no Spanish-Polish dictionary existed at that time, and that the rough draft of the translation was submitted by the author himself, despite the fact that he was not fluent in Spanish at that time. Thus, French was applied for the purpose of communication and explanation of more sophisticated expressions. It is also peculiar that the translation sessions took place in a cafe, where the visitors normally enjoyed chess plays. Approximately 20 young Argentinians took part in the sessions, not to mention the prompts by waiters or incidental customers. Strange as it may seem, however, Virgilio Piñera, a Cuban, played a major role while translating the book in Argentina. This Polish-Cuban cooperation resulted in the creation of a new language, a mixture of Lunfardo and Cubanisms aiming at rendering a peculiar language of the Polish author – an accomplishment, as later jokingly stated, more significant than Joyce's literary achievements.

Gombrowicz did not take any copy of his *Ferdydurke* to South America. Only Paulino Frydman, a friend of his, succeeded miraculously in importing the book to Argentina. After years of literary non-existence, Gombrowicz prepared two translation drafts, initially in 1944 and then again in 1946.¹ Still, money was a serious obstacle. The writer did not have any permanent financial support. His cafe friends got very much involved in collecting money for this purpose. The project was finally lucky enough to find a certain lady - Cecilia Benedit de Debenedetti, a music publisher, who financed it entirely.

Virgilio Piñera, a Cuban once called by Gombrowicz "South-American jefe de Ferdydurkianism", his fellow countryman Humberto Rodriguez Tomeú and Adolfo de Obieta never abandoned their belief in success of the book. "Initially we all worked together. – Tomeú recalls – Often there were ten of us. We were having a great time. We were standing against a wall while Frydman was silently strolling around, his hands against his back, came up to the table to listen to a few sentences and then

¹ In 1944 the magazine "Papeles de Buenos Aires" printed chapter *Filidor gone childish* translated by the author and Carlos Sandelin.

went away. [...] Later on we stopped going to >>Rex<<. The noise, and all those billiards and chess games – no way to concentrate. Piñera and I decided to work more seriously, at ours. [...] We discussed each sentence from different viewpoints: its euphony, cadence and rhythm. [...] Not only [...] was it necessary to translate, but we also had to coin new words as possible equivalents for Polish words."²

The search for a publisher also took a substantial period of time. Finally the book was accepted Argos, a small publisher run by Luis M. Baudizzone, Jose Luis Romero and Jorge Romero Brest. Gombrowicz fought head over heels since the success of his book depended on the quality of the translation, which was not the aspect he had influence on. The translation controlled by Piñera, and done in Rex cafe abounding with fervent debates, needed a critical insight by an Argentinian specialist in a language stylistics. Consequently, Gombrowicz familiarized with the text Sábato, Plá, Capdevila and most definitely also some other authorities. Both Sábato and Plá had reservations but due to the lack of time, since the publisher was pressing, no improvements were introduced.

The arrangements to promote the book, the "South American battle for the Ferdydurkianism" as Piñera put it later, started relatively early. Gombrowicz, experienced in debuts, wanted to avoid the mistakes committed in the pre-war Poland and to divert the course of critical discussion to a higher level. That was the reason for discussions with his Argentinian friend writers: they were supposed to be introduced into the idea of immaturity and form. The book was also preceded by efforts to print another excerpt in, for instance, "Anales de Buenos Aires" or in the exclusive "Sur" edited by Victoria Ocampo. All those plans misfired. However, Gombrowicz' efforts caused anxiety about the book.

Gombrowicz meets with Piñera and Tomeú in Café Querandi, the corner of Moreno St. and Perú St. It happened on April 25 or 26, 1947³ - the two existing sources contradict each other. He is nervous and unable to hide his emotions, he starts talking again about his grandmother's pretensions to Spanish crown and about his arrival to Argentina.⁴ Finally, Tomeú goes to the Argos publishing house located

² Rita Gombrowicz: *Gombrowicz w Argentynie (Gombrowicz in Argentina)*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1991, p. 53.

³ Virgilio Piñera claims that it was April 26 (In: *Gombrowicz in Argentina*, p. 51 or: *Tango Gombrowicz*, p. 63), but according to *Ferdydurke Calendar* by Gombrowicz, it was April 25, 1947. *Ferdydurke Calendar* (11 sheets, handwriting) – the original is now deposited in Beinecke Library and encompasses notes by Gombrowicz taken between April 25 and October 7, 1947.

⁴ V. Piñera in: *Gombrowicz in Argentina*, p. 51.

at Moreno St. and about 5:30 p.m. fetches the newly printed copies of the book. Afterwards, the gentlemen start the solemn conquest of Argentina. *Ferdydure Calendar*, a set of unpublished notes by Gombrowicz with reference to the events accompanying the publication of the book, deposited by Rita Gombrowicz in Beinecke Library, reveals numerous secrets pertaining to this Argentinian debut. Upon collection of the books from the publishing house, Gombrowicz notes down:

"We moved my things to hot. [hotel] Congreso and went on foot to Rex. In Rex Piñera treated us with Cinzano. We showed [the books] to Manero and Rochy. Then I took [the books] to Retiro and showed [them] to Judge Campeon de Cordoba on my way there.

We had a supper in Luxor and went again to Rex, but there was nobody there. I left [the books] at the Piñeras' overnight."

Gombrowicz starts reveling in enthusiasm. Every day after collecting the printed books, and especially after May 8, when the book enters the market, he takes various actions to promote it. The obsession which seizes control of the writer can best be recognized through his notes made in *Ferdydurke Calendar* next to the names of his friends giving account of their reading impressions. Gombrowicz applies the percentage estimation of the level of "liking" and records all noticeable hesitation. For instance, when Graziella Peyrou says that she is "encantada" (delighted), Gombrowicz puts a question mark in parentheses next to her name as he notices earlier that she was reserved before. Critiques and possibilities of their publications are estimated exactly the same way. Gombrowicz closely listens to all rumor, hearsay, opinions and impressions delivered with reference to *Ferdydurke*, so sentences constructed according to the model "A said that B had said that..." are fairly frequent. The notes burst with zest, desire for success and a strong will to distinguish himself. After ten years of silence, for Gombrowicz, this is a comeback to literature; hence his symbolic farewell to Retiro.

What is Retiro

Farewell – a walk in the vicinity of the station and showing to it a freshly printed copy of *Ferdy*, which is a milestone marking the end of the anarchic epoch in his life and a

comeback to creative work. Not always are the days of efforts focusing around the debut in Argentina happy; sometimes they are full of failures and disappointment. Most poignant is the passage in which Gombrowicz, having recorded the events of June 3, adds in parentheses: "Five gruesome days: stress, illness, loneliness, misery. When will this stop?"

In Argentina Gombrowicz has to deal with a different reader; the situation is atypical. While publishing his *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (*Memoirs of the puberty period*) in the pre-war Poland, Gombrowicz was a beginner, but the first Polish publication of *Ferdydurke* saw him as an author of a certain renown; however, while publishing the same book for foreign audience in 1947, as an emigrant he becomes a beginner again; a beginner enriched with the experience of previous beginnings. That is why the writer decides to act in a professional way. His care reaches such a dimension that he reads almost all of the critiques by himself in order to check before they are published. His artistic creed was also laid down in the preface to the book. Apart from that he spreads intriguing rumors about himself (for instance, with reference to his aristocratic origin) in order to sell the book in the scandalous atmosphere to draw readers' attention.

The story of the Argentinian debut seems to be similar to that referred to in his *Memoirs*. And, just as years before in Poland, the reception of *Ferdydurke* in Argentina was much warmer than the author claimed. Several critiques appeared (approximately 15), they were mostly friendly and some even enthusiastic. So far, I have managed to identify only eight of them and my knowledge of the remaining reviews is only fragmentary.⁵

⁵ Carlos Coldaroli: *Witold Gombrowicz Ferdydurke*, "Los Anales de Buenos Aires" May/June 1947, pp. 70-72; Virgilio Piñera: *Ferdydurke*, "Realidad" (3), June 18, 1947, pp. 469-471; Isidoro Sagüés: *Acotaciones*, "La razón" (13.938), July 8, 1947, p. 15; Roger Plá: *La vida y el libro*, "Expresión" (8), July 1947, pp. 167-172; Anonymous (Sánchez Rosas): *Ferdydurke por Witold Gombrowicz*, "Qué" (55), August 19, 1947, p. 33; Anonymous: *Ferdydurke por Witold Gombrowicz*, "La Nación" (27.397), September 21, 1947, p. 4 (sección cultural); Adolfo de Obieta: *Ferdydurke de Witold Gombrowicz*, "Orígenes" (Cuba), Spring 1948, pp. 255-258; Sergio Winocur: *Ferdydurke*, "Savia" (2-3). November 1947, pp. 68-69; Jorge Calvetti [rev. of *Ferdydurke*] in: [a province newspaper], June 1947; Emilio Soto: [rev. of *Ferdydurke*] in: "Los Andes". July 3, 1947; Virgilio Piñera: [rev. of *Ferdydurke*] in: "Guía de la Com. de Cultura", August 8, 1947; [?]: [a mention of *Ferdydurke*] in: "Heraldo", approx. August 12, 1947; Troiani Osiris: [rev. of *Ferdydurke*] in "Crítica", September 11, 1947; [?]: [rev. of *Ferdydurke*] in: ["Cuadernos Mexicanos?"], October 7, 1947.

The data from the second part of the bibliography originate mainly from the notes by Gombrowicz, which, however, have not been verified so far. In *Ferdydurke Calendar* they are shown as completed facts. Gombrowicz mentions also other reviews, but I ignore them since they were never acknowledged; thus, it is not known whether they were really published. Humberto Rodríguez and Sandelin are supposed to have written for *revistas americanas*, Plá to "Orientación", La Fleur (Lafleur) to "the Jewish per.[iodical] and some other too" (August 18), also Graziella Peyrou (July 24), and a

It may generally be stated that out of those eight critiques, probably the most significant ones, only two are negative (by Sanches Rosas in "Qué", a popular magazine and by Isidoro Sagüés in "La Razón", one of the main daily newspapers). Gombrowicz claims that at least one more critique, written by Osiris Troiani for "Crítica"⁶ was "attacking". In the others, written by his friends – Piñera in "Realidad" (a new ambitious periodical counterbalancing "Sur"), Obieta in "Orígenes" (a Cuban counterpart of "Sur"), Plá in "Expresión" (a new leftist magazine), Coldaroli in "Anales de Buenos Aires" (edited by Borges) and anonymous notes in "La Nación" (the major daily) and in "Savia" (edited by José Luis Ríos Patrón), dominate positive opinions. Most definitely, the unfound texts by Calvetti, Lafleur and Piñera must have burst with enthusiasm as well.

Some elements repeat in every critique: they always mention a foreign writer who immigrated to Argentina shortly before the war and fell prey to his own misery. They stress literary experience and inform about a group of admirers in the his fatherland as well as about the unusual translation rendered by the author hardly speaking Spanish himself and a group of Argentinian youngsters not speaking Polish at all. Much appreciation is shown towards the language, sense of humor and innovativeness of *Ferdydurke*. Summaries and attempts to explain the concept of the form constitute another constant element. The reviewers frequently quote the author's words from the Argentinian preface to the book. However, they show different attitudes to the artistic values and interpretation of the work. They all function within the framework of the world created by Gombrowicz, but at the same time show personal opinions about the novel itself and philosophy it offers. I will not go into more detailed analysis of the reception of the book.

The worst were the unwritten critiques or the unfavorable opinions resulting from personal dislikes. Baudizzone, the editor, sent – as claimed by Gombrowicz in his *Ferdydurke Calendar* – "to intellectuals (Borges and Ramón de la Serna among

Mister Capello (June 30). Apart from that he announces several reviews to be published, by Carlitos (May 22), Emilio Soto (July 24), Stanisław Odyniec (June 1), Gustaw Kotowski (May 14), Martínez Estrada, Claps – most probably in Montevideo, "in his periodical" (July 25). He also mentions the expected publication in "La Prensa" (July 12), Gálvez' recommendation of the book to "Tribuna" (June 12), and Richard Augenblick's sending critiques from the States to Rio (July 8).

⁶ On September 11, 1947 Gombrowicz notes: "I bought <<Crítica>>. The review by Troiani Osiris attacking but favourable". Gombrowicz also mentions the review in one of the fragments of his *Diary* published in *Publicystyka... 1939 – 1963*: "<<Undoubtedly>> - as ironically stated by one of the popular local dailies, <<Crítica>> - <<a group of writers promoting *Ferdydurke* with a lot of stir wanted to cause a scandal>>." (p. 24)

others); 50 copies of the book accompanied by a letter asking for opinions". This returned no reaction. Gombrowicz collected individual opinions of various authors, which were frequently transmitted on the grapevine by his friends. Thus, we can have a close look at the reception he was given by Argentinian elites. Borges considered *Ferdydurke* "cynical – just like I am – but *momentos magnificos* [sometimes magnificent]" (May 29); Ramón de la Serna said that "the book must be good if it (was) so praised" (May 18); though further notes reveal that "Borges did not read [it] yet but said that enough had been done for the book" (June 27).

Apart from "producing publicity" also other actions to promote the book were undertaken, but some of them failed. For instance, Ezequiel Miartínez Estrada (1895-1964) offered Gombrowicz (June 18) a lecture at Sociedad Hebráica and meetings with the elites. All of them, as it seems, fell through. Gombrowicz notes down Baudizzone's plan to organize a conversation meeting accompanying an exhibition and the signing of copies of his book and, further on, a radio hearing in Córdoba featuring Piñera and Gombrowicz himself.⁷ Most definitely such events as an interview for the press, radio hearing, readings in the literary room of the Fray Mocho bookshop and even a banquet were successful. The interview was given by Gombrowicz and his Cuban friends for a provincial magazine. The text cannot be found, but Humberto R. Tomeú remembers the event:

"Witold was in Cecilia Debenedetti's country villa, in the vicinity of Mercedes. He was working on his *Ślub* [*Wedding*]. He invited us, Piñera and me, as he was bored. (...) During this stay we gave an official interview, very funny by the way, for a newspaper issued in Mercedes. We were surrounded. We talked about *Ferdydurke* in that godforsaken Argentinian province. Still, we were listened to."⁸

However, the whole text of the conversation between Piñera and Gombrowicz, recorded in the El Mundo radio station in Buenos Aires on Sunday, June 29, 11:30 a.m. remained preserved. A day before the hearing Gombrowicz remembers: "Virgilio says that Malbran has said that they are making trouble in the radio because the author is unknown". The talk turns out a success, but the usually demanding Gombrowicz having evaluated it as "fairly good" adds, however, that "because of the

⁷ The former is mentioned in *Ferdydurke Calendar* on June 4th and Córdoba on July 2nd.

⁸ *Gombrowicz in Argentina*, p. 54.

aviso [announcement] hardly anybody [could] listen". A month later a banquet in honor of Gombrowicz is organized most probably by Henryk Gruber, a pre-war president of the PKO Bank (Polish Savings Bank). I can imagine "His Lordship Witold" in a borrowed suit, or was it given to him by Gruber, standing with a glass in one hand and welcoming all his guests with dignity. I can see him bow and greet people and dream of conquering the Argentinian soul, lined with the pampas.

September is marked lectures given by Gombrowicz which took place in the literary room of the Fray Mocho bookshop. Apart from promoting the book, they had an important financial aspect – the listeners gave voluntary contribution to the reader. The writer prepares diligently for the presentations. The press publishes announcements. This is an important event for Gombrowicz – a few days before his first lecture he notes down: "Cold feet before the course" (August 19), "Stress" (August 20). What are the topics of his lectures? *Form and maturity, The importance that this activity may have for the development of the spiritual life of South America, The necessity of abandoning the role of a disciple and reaching a more independent and authentic style, America vs. Europe, Buenos Aires vs. Paris.*⁹

45 people attended the first lecture on August 21, 1947; however, it is impossible to establish which subject was presented then. The next lecture took place a week later, on August 28. That one was attended by 40 people, who collected 57 pesos. It was then that Gombrowicz read his famous text *Contra los poetas – Against the poets*. The introduction was given by Mirtínez Estrada - the fragments of poetry illustrating Gombrowicz' theses were chosen by Piñera and Tomeú. Estrada, while reading them, stressed their "pretentiousness and comicality".¹⁰

The shape of the lecture *Against the poets* as presented in 1947 is different from what was printed in "Kultura" in 1951 and then included into *Dziennik (Diary)*.¹¹ The version of the text we know is larger than the Argentinian one. The tone of the lecture was rebellious, it was evidently addressed to an easily recognizable receiver, that is the writers concentrated around the "Sur" magazine, performing the type of "pure poetry" based on Valéry or Baudelaire. It was an obvious attack on Victoria

⁹ Stanisław Lis-Kozłowski: *W Argentynie o Witoldzie Gombrowiczu*, cz. 3 [In Argentina about Witold Gombrowicz, part 3] in: "Kurier Polski" (32/675) August 6, 1979, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Gombrowicz in Argentina*, p. 72.

¹¹ W. Gombrowicz: *Contra los poetas*, a lecture of 1947, sent by Nicolas Espiro R. Gombrowicz. Beinecke Library. The text by V. Piñera – "El País del Arte" ("The World of the Art") printed also in 1947 does not have much in common with *Contra los Poetas*.

Ocampo, who supported "Sur" with her enormous fortune. At that time she was already 66 and everybody yielded to her either due to her wealth or influence or age. The Argentinian version of *Contra los poetas* finished with the following words:

"I do not much care that you will brand me with infamy for this text – can it be expected of you to accept the judgments depriving you of the right to exist? And apart from that, I address my words to a new generation. The world would really be tragic if the number of the fresh, the free of the past, the unbound with anything and anyone, the unparalyzed with positions, fame, duties and responsibility, the human beings unlimited with what they have done and thus free to make choices, did not grow in number every year."

Humberto Tomeú remembers that "(...) after the lecture, the people, mostly young, started to bomb him [Gombrowicz] with questions, which he answered with raciness. The atmosphere was lively. Someone stood up and started to scold us. Some people whistled. Gombrowicz was in his elements, he enjoyed the atmosphere of polemics".¹² The lecture on poets caused objections even in those listeners who supported the writer. He himself notices down: "More of a *fracaso* [failure]". Finally, the third and last, as it appeared, lecture took place on September 4. It was attended only by 15 people (raising 22 and a half pesos). Gombrowicz noticed: "I close down".

"Aurora. Pismo ruchu oporu" ("Aurora. Paper of the resistance movement") established by Gombrowicz is his last effort to draw public attention to himself. Initially, Gombrowicz and Piñera want to join their energy and set up a magazine which would counterbalance the Argentinian literary establishment. However, they can not reach agreement with reference to the character of the paper and they finally create two separate papers of minor importance, each appeared only once. "Aurora" on October 6, 1947; and a day later Piñera's "Victrola. Paper of the resistance movement" sees daylight. Gombrowicz openly argues against famous Argentinian personalities, whom he enumerates by their names. He brutally attacks Victoria Ocampo, Borges and others. He mocks the Argentinian elite's fascination with *La Ville Lumière*. The "articles" are interwoven with short and absurd advertisements like: "Beautiful fat dogs with two dogs and a doghouse for sale".

¹² *Gombrowicz in Argentina*, p. 72.

The magazine does not range far; however, Tomeú recalls having carried a few copies to the "Sur" editorial office. It is not surprising then that the literary salons of Buenos Aires remain out of Gombrowicz' reach, especially due to the fact that a few days after the delivery of *Contra los poetas* "Adolfo [de Obieta] said that the Ocampo group already knew (...) about the attack on Victoria".¹³

The answer to the question why Gombrowicz never broke through in Argentina seems to be fairly simple and known for a long time. *Ferdydurke* did not fit within the then-current concept of "literature" or "art". Authoritative circles considered Gombrowicz' work to be an "over-act" and mockery and the author himself to be a weird and barbarian. His attacks on the "Sur" magazine supported this attitude. Why did Gombrowicz attack Borges and Ocampo so sharply? There were a few reasons – first of all, mutual personal animosity and intellectual choices. However, there were also some more substantial motives – the *Contra los poetas* lecture was written a few months before its delivery and it was sent from Salsipuedes in January or February 1947 to Graziella Peyrou, who was supposed to transfer it to "Sur".¹⁴ As it can easily be presumed, the text was never published there. Thus, Gombrowicz, while delivering the *Contra los poetas* lecture, was taking revenge for everything: for having been ignored, for the rejection of both the text of his lecture and the excerpt of *Ferdydurke*, and also for the lack of any mention of his book later on. Years after that, Silvina Ocampo, Victoria's younger sister, a writer as well, when asked by Rita Gombrowicz, who was collecting reference materials about her husband, "Why did <<Sur>> disregard *Ferdydurke* in 1947, would briefly answer: "We did not like it". She would then add: "We discovered the book later". It is thanks to the very word "discover" that we can unveil the whole hypocrisy.

The lack of good relations with the literary ambience was the reason why no influential person wanted to recommend the book of a Polish writer. Its limited sale can admittedly be justified by a general decrease in the book market; however, the diagnosis presented by Manuel Gálvez in his letter to Gombrowicz seems to be more accurate:

¹³ *Ferdydurke Calendar, September 8, 1947.*

¹⁴ In his letter to the Cubans Gombrowicz writes: "Apart from that I sent Graziella the text of *Against the poets*, which is meant to be published in "Sur". Please, correct the text and have it typed in three copies, all according to the instructions I included in my letter to Graziella" (*Gombrowicz in Argentina*, p. 56)

"If you were a Yankee, *Ferdydurke* would sell out fast and it would be reprinted. But you are unlucky enough (just as I am) – or perhaps lucky – not to be a Yankee."¹⁵

This way Gombrowicz would sink in oblivion up to the 60's, in spite of the fact that Polish, but also foreign, readers would slowly show more and more interest in his work. However, the Argentinian elites would not accept him and would ignore his presence on their own territory. He would thus live on the margin and the few critiques he would write to earn his living would remain unnoticed. He would separate himself from the "high" Argentina and sink into the "bottoms". He would attract groups of 16- or 17-years old boys, with whom he would have cafe discussions. They would remember him as a perfidious interlocutor, a man stimulating to independent thinking, sarcastic, and for some chosen ones a man full of fatherly care about their fortune and development. The reprint of *Ferdydurke* by Sudamericana in 1964, executed to a large extent thanks to the here-present Miguel Grinberg, was not much successful, either. That time, the political matters, that is the engagement of the Argentinian youth in leftist and revolutionary movements, were an obstacle. Gombrowicz was contrary to political extremities. However, the book was an inspiration to a change of the writing style, thinking about the art and also the attitude to language, which is testified by many Argentinian writers, Juan José Saer and Ricardo Piglia among others. Only now, that his books were published in Argentina again, during Witold Gombrowicz Year, can I observe some changes. It seems that the interest in the writer's work in that country has increased. For the past years Gombrowicz was an author familiar to a small group of the initiated. All of a sudden, his plays have now started to be staged, more and more place is devoted to him in the press and first analytical works have appeared. In other words – changes can be felt. A general situation in Argentina after the crisis is also favorable for that. Gombrowicz is the kind of a writer which is poorly adsorbed at the prosperity times but perfectly stimulates when the times are twisted. Perhaps it is now, after 50 years, that the era of Gombrowicz comes to the American continent.

¹⁵ M. Gálvez, a letter of June 10, 1947, Beinecke Library