

---

Witold Gombrowicz. *Polish Memories*. Trans. Bill Johnston. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 191p.

ALEKSANDRA GRUZINSKA  
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

The recollections of Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) were intended for Radio Free Europe. Aside from the first and longest undated segment of almost forty pages, there are thirteen shorter ones dated from May 30, 1960 through August 30, 1961. During those months Gombrowicz still lived in self-imposed exile in Argentina. In his mid-thirties he received an invitation to take the maiden voyage of a cruise ship. The invasion of Poland and the onset of World War II found Gombrowicz, who chose exile, in Buenos Aires. What fills *Polish Memories*, however, is his homeland, its intensely rich intellectual, cultural, and social life between World War I and II, and the lucid and candid, painful and illuminating trajectory of a bashful and rebellious youth who became a writer. It ends with the *Anschluss*, Hitler's Annexation of Austria into the German Reich.

The rebellious youthful sadist projects a multifaceted image of Poland. Oppressed by a deep yearning for Europe, he first saw the Polish farce, Poland's marginality, its provincialism and ugliness. But he also noticed some changes, for instance in the rigid Polish code of honor that led to duels or hilariously comic situations, told with sobriety: "A certain gentleman visits a public bathroom and realizes too late that there is no paper. Without a second thought he pokes his head over the wall to the next stall and says, 'Allow me to introduce myself. I'm X. Could I ask for some paper?' Upon which the gentleman in the next stall also pokes his head over, and says, 'I'm Y. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Here you are'" (30). The stiff formality in a men's room makes the episode stilted and utterly humorous.

Gombrowicz admits that "later on a great deal in me changed." As a young man he went to Paris where he began what he calls the formation of "a Pole of his generation" (73). I am a Pole, he will say (22), but at the same time he remained much attached to Europe. This yearning for Europe became more oppressive in Argentina: "[Its] literature leaves much to be desired which forces [the Argentineans] to read foreign books. We Poles suffer additionally from having a decent literature, one that is good enough to fill the hours we devote to reading but not good enough to compensate for the resulting lack of familiarity with the great writers of the world, whom we no longer have time to study" (29). Travels and exile soon taught him that provincialism also exists in other countries. The world for instance knows little about the great stars of Polish literature, Mickiewicz who wrote the finest 19th-century epic, Nobel Prize winner Sienkiewicz, Prus, Żeromski, and Maria Rodziewiczówna.

---

Just to mention them pricks and irritates the fledgling writer who wants to break away from the past.

In 1939 Gombrowicz found himself for the first time penniless and without any Spanish in Spanish-speaking Argentine. Until then he led a fancy-free life in Poland devoid of financial worries, in a privileged society. He frequented lively literary groups and literary cafés where the next generation of poets and talented women writers was born: “Dąbrowska, Nałkowska, Kossak-Szczucka, Kuńcewiczowa, Krzywicka, Naglerowa, or Gojawiczyńska were the providers of novels discussed high and wide in the press and popular with readers” (150).

Gombrowicz had mixed feelings about the emerging militarization (emancipation) of young women: “Polish women are not excessively womanly.... [T]hey have a few good masculine qualities. Their courage, energy, self-reliance, resourcefulness, their ambition, their desire to lead, their rich mental life and intellectual interests mean that they are far from resembling the ‘little woman’ type often found among the Spanish, the Italians and also frequently the Germans” (148). He points to the different feelings of the older and younger generations: Polish mothers blushed recounting what their daughters were up to.

Gombrowicz did not take great interest in politics. He was fifteen at the time of the Warsaw uprising in 1920 and was frankly too afraid to want to join the military. But there are numerous references to Piłsudski and a revealing description of the way the Poles met the news of his death, “he who indeed liked obedience, but ... valued dignity, freedom and pride in Poles” (134-135). Halfway through the book, he tackles his ambiguous relationship with Bruno Schulz, a Jew who died in a German concentration camp. They were kindred spirits intellectually: “The most outstanding artist I knew in Warsaw” (113) admits Gombrowicz, who engaged in many conversations with Schulz, though they remained strangely separate socially.

The text is dense and rich. We need constantly to ask who is speaking in order to account for some contradictions and dissonances. Do we hear the voice of the rebellious youth critical of Poland, or that of Gombrowicz who has traveled abroad and now looks at Poland from the outside so to speak? Or better yet, is it the exile who regrets the decent Polish literature good enough to fill all the hours that we devote to reading? The rebel sneers at Piłsudski, but later he calls him a superman and a genius whose death left a profound void in the Polish Nation.

Although an index would have been most welcome, readers should enjoy Bill Johnston's very fine English translation. Those unfamiliar with Polish will miss, however, the flavor, the unique linguistic creativity and music; but the Polish nicknames are left intact, and one of the most charming and truly delightful if not delicious aspects of this volume is the tenderness and gentleness associated with them, creating

---

between the writer and the reader/listener an intimate conspiracy of closeness. The nicknames alone speak tons about the complex social and sentimental relationship that Witold (Witek, Itek, Ita) Gombrowicz enjoyed or endured with family and friends (Kazio, Zaza, Staś, Tadzio, Bebuś, Antoś, Miecio, Adaś, Krysia, Lizia, Zosia, to name just a few). After they have gobbled up Johnston's translation, readers of Polish may want to read and re-read the volume in its original language. ✱