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Performing "History": A Translator's Introduction

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illuminations

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Performing *History*:

A Translator's Introduction

The road from the writing to the staging of Witold Gombrowicz's plays has consistently been a torturous one. *Princess Ivona* (*Iwona, Księżniczka Burgunda*) made what should have been an auspicious debut in the Polish literary review *Skamander* in 1938, and yet waited until 1957 for its first professional production in Warsaw. The critical and popular success of the Polish premiere was repeated in Paris in 1965, and the play has since become not only Gombrowicz's most frequently staged work, but one of the best-known works of modern Polish drama around the world. *The Marriage* (*Ślub*, 1944) waited twenty years for its professional theatrical premiere in France, and another ten for its professional Polish premiere.¹ *Operetta* (*Operetka*, 1966), which Gombrowicz spent at least ten years writing, was not staged until its world premiere in Italy a few months after the playwright's death in 1969. Though belatedly, these three works established Gombrowicz as Poland's most cosmopolitan playwright, with performances of *Ivona*, for example, now as frequent in Germany as in Poland itself.

If Gombrowicz's plays resemble a nest of ugly ducklings, the runt of the litter would seem to be his unfinished posthumous play *History* (*Historia*), published here for the first time in English translation. In content, form, and theatrical history, the play is both typical and exceptional as part of Gombrowicz's drama. Drafted between 1951 and 1954, *History* was lost among the playwright's unpublished papers until 1975 when Konstanty Jeleński discovered the text and published it in the Polish emigré journal *Kultura*. The appearance of the play accompanied by Jeleński's detailed and daring introduction immediately drew attention in Poland, where an abortive workshop production was begun by director Jacek Zembrzusi at the Warsaw State Drama School in 1976. Following the pattern of Gombrowicz's other plays, *History*'s professional premiere took place abroad in translation, in this case in West Germany in 1977.² Its Polish professional premiere occurred in

Gorzów Wielkopolski in 1981, and the play has since had almost a dozen productions by Polish theatres — now enjoying an established place in the Polish repertory alongside Gombrowicz's other three plays. The Polish stagings of the play have been remarkably varied in production style and handling of the text. It has been staged as a satirical cabaret sketch, a play with puppets, a period costume piece, as well as adapted for television. At times its fragmentary text has been collaged with other writings by the playwright. Jacek Bunsch's effective adaptation and staging of the text at Wrocław's Teatr Polski in 1985 was later presented for an international audience of critics and theatre artists at the Festival of Contemporary Polish Plays in Wrocław in 1987. The French theatrical premiere of the play is planned for the spring of 1995,³ using Jeleński's translation published in 1977.

History is both Gombrowicz's most openly personal play and his most Polish in detail. His earlier works set a precedent for younger Polish playwrights, such as Sławomir Mrożek, in their avoidance of any specifically Polish references. *History* begins with a witty and concise satire on the mores and complexes of the Polish gentry at the turn of the century, and ends (at least in the manuscript that remains) with a no less pointed satire of the literary and political culture of Piłsudski's Poland. Jeleński aptly suggested that the play revealed the autobiographical basis for the typology of characters consistently found in Gombrowicz's other plays. Thus the transformation of the family into the courts of Tsar Nicholas II, Kaiser Wilhelm, and Piłsudski in the play makes theatrically explicit the analogous transformation of the Gombrowicz family into the conventional figures of a fairy tale court (*Ivona*), a Shakespearean court (*The Marriage*) or the aristocratic Viennese setting of *Operetta*. In one of his most daring and effective dramaturgical conceits, Gombrowicz double casts the members of his family with the leadership of these various European political regimes up through Hitler, suggesting a Polish "nest of the gentry" as the political archetype or hologram of



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his age. The paradox of *History* is that in spite of the specificity of its personal and Polish points of reference, its message is ultimately no less "European" or universal than that of *Ivona* or *The Marriage*. In his introduction to the first edition of the play, Jeleński suggests that Gombrowicz's intended final scene was a confrontation between Witold and Hitler. Director Wojciech Maryński's 1989 adaptation of *History* took its cues from Jeleński, adding a final scene where Witold meets with both Hitler and Stalin, with the dialogue largely borrowed from *The Marriage*.

Gombrowicz wrote *History* in exile in Argentina in the early 1950s, after completing his novel *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953) and just before beginning work on *Pornografia* and the first volume of his *Diary*. It is appropriate that the play first appears in English within a year of the translation of *Trans-Atlantyk*, with which it shares much in common. The two works are linked by their complex and complementary apologies for Gombrowicz's own position as a "shirker" of patriotic duties in the wake of the invasion and occupation of Poland in World War II. Both *Trans-Atlantyk* and *History* represent radical applications of a strain of pacifism, or perhaps more precisely antimilitarism, present in Gombrowicz's writings beginning with his early short story *The Memoirs of Stefan Czarniecki* (*Pamiętnik Stefana Czarnieckiego*, 1933).

Inseparable from the antimilitarism present in both works is their homosexual subject matter, and larger questioning of the interconnecting mythologies of masculinity, nationalism, and war. Gombrowicz would return to this theme in the first volume of his *Diary*. In *Trans-Atlantyk* the object of homosexual desire is the youthful Ignacy, whose father demands that he enlist in defense of the "fatherland." Later, Ignacy becomes the intended victim of a perverse murder plot by other Polish emigrés as a symbolic sacrifice in the name of patriarchal and national honor. Though his sexuality remains undetermined at the novel's end, Ignacy's "fraternizing" with the Argentine transvestite Gonzalo saves him from a fate worse than homosexuality: death in the name of the hollow mythologies of *machismo* and militaristic nationalism. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, the sexuality of the narrator Witold is also ambiguous: he is essentially the observer and agent of those around him, and seemingly lacking in both sex appeal (the wildly promiscuous Gonzalo tactfully assures Witold that he is not his type) and desire (with the significant exception of a fleeting fascination with the sight of the naked Ignacy asleep).

In *History*, the youthful sexual object (Ignacy) merges with the narrative subject (Witold). The result is a theatrical "impossibility" by the playwright: the speeches of Witold in Gombrowicz's text at times are indicated as spoken by "I." The impossibility of the effect is seemingly twofold: the playwright is somehow to assume the role of lead actor, and as such a forty-seven year-old is to play a seventeen year-old. "Witold" in *History* is, in fact, one of a series of Faustian self-portraits by Gombrowicz, a gallery of adult men turned into adolescents that begins with the narrator of *Ferdydurke*.

The innovation in *History* is not only to merge narrative subject and object, but also the desiring gaze and its object: Faust (Witold) becomes one with Gretchen (Ignacy). As a result, Witold in the play assumes an androgynous character, proving himself unfit for both marriage and military service and the unwitting catalyst for paranoia among the closeted homosexuals of Kaiser Wilhelm's court.

Among Gombrowicz's many agendas for the play was to present a satirical "history play" about the scandal surrounding the homosexual "Liebenburger Tafelrunde" in the German court. In his original introduction, Jeleński emphasized the importance of the play's homosexual elements, arguing for it as an organic and inevitable extension of the playwright's philosophical system. In this system, the manifestations of "form" exist in opposition to a matrix of forces including (according to Polish critic Jan Błoński) nudity, beauty, youth, energy, nature, inferiority, and chaos. To this sequence, Jeleński adds homosexuality. By implication, "compulsory heterosexuality" (to borrow Adrienne Rich's phrase) is thereby also added to the symbolic matrix of "form." Witold's theatrical emblem, his bare feet, embodies all these Dionysian qualities of "anti-form" with catalytic effect.

Witold in *History* is one of many "Witolds" in Gombrowicz's works, and exists in significant relationship to the others. "Witold" in *History* provides the rationale for the decision of "Witold" in *Trans-Atlantyk* both to remain in Argentina and to fraternize with transvestites while war rages in Europe. An inverted version of "Witold" in *History* appears in the timid and truly perverse narrators of *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*, neither of whom possess the capacity for creative rebellion found in the others. The "Witolds" found in *History* and *Trans-Atlantyk* also anticipate the "Witold" who narrates the *Diary*, a no less a self-conscious construction or performance by Gombrowicz.

Among the surprises found in *History* is the way the play looks back to the Polish romantic drama. The prototype for the solipsistic merging of dramaturgical subject and object found in *History* is none other than Adam Mickiewicz's play *Forefathers' Eve, Part III* (*Dziady, Część III*, 1832), the seminal work of the Polish classical repertory. *History* is by no means the only work Gombrowicz irreverently modeled on Mickiewicz, and indeed it has become a commonplace of

Gombrowicz criticism to cite the similarly parodic use of Mickiewicz's epic *Pan Tadeusz* in the form and action of *Trans-Atlantyk*. Like Mickiewicz before him, Gombrowicz wrote his play in exile during a period of artistic and political oppression in Poland itself; in different ways the solipsism that unites the two works results as much from these psychological and historical circumstances as from any narcissism in the authors themselves. While Mickiewicz became an icon of the Polish artist engaged in the fight for the national cause, Gombrowicz sought to separate the theatrical aesthetics of the Polish romantic tradition from the politics of nationalism. Like Mickiewicz, Gombrowicz placed himself at the



theatrical center of his play, but from that position rebelled against the romantic mythology he saw limiting himself and destroying those around him.

History's action and structure also parody another major work of the Polish Romantic drama, Juliusz Słowacki's *Kordian* (1834). *Kordian* is an example of the Polish romantic drama at its best and worst, mixing pithy, political drama with calls for seemingly impossible stage effects, and written in verse that ranges from great brilliance to dense obscurity. In the play, Kordian is a poetic and sensitive son of the Polish gentry who embarks on a journey of sexual, spiritual, and political self-discovery against the backdrop of Poland's oppression by Prussia, Russia, and Austria-Hungary in the nineteenth century. Kordian's journey includes climactic encounters with historical figures such as the Pope, the Russian Grand Duke Constantine, and Tsar Nicholas I. Like Gombrowicz's *History*, *Kordian* is in effect an unfinished work, only the first part of an intended trilogy. Gombrowicz's Witold can be understood as a composite and a parody of Mickiewicz's self-portrait in *Forefathers' Eve, Part III* and Słowacki's *Kordian*. Like Kordian, Witold's life is dramatized in the form of a personal and historical picaresque; like Gustaw/Konrad, he delivers powerful soliloquies which swing between feelings of helplessness and megalomania. And in a fashion recalling both of his romantic prototypes, Witold has an uncanny knack for always being where the political action is.

Gombrowicz's play not only looks back to the Polish romantic repertory, but also forward to the late work of experimental director/designer Tadeusz Kantor in pieces such as *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980) and *Let the Artists Die!* (*Niech szczerą artyści*, 1985). *Wielopole, Wielopole*, like *History*, is an openly autobiographical settling of family accounts. On one level, the play is a series of vignettes portraying the eccentric, but still banal, life of the Kantor clan in the years during and after World War I. On another, the petty domestic world of the play becomes a microcosm of Poland as a whole, where dream logic can suddenly suggest the later events of World War II and the Holocaust and where historic or allegorical figures unexpectedly appear in the midst of the family's modest and quarrelsome life. In both, Kantor appears on stage as subject, author, and director of the performance, and in *Let the Artists Die!* the program lists Kantor as "I," a set of identical twins as "I-Dying," and a child actor as "I-When-I-Was-Six." Kantor thus accomplishes the "impossible" effect of merging theatrical subject and object Gombrowicz contemplated thirty years earlier.

For both Gombrowicz and Kantor the most significant political experience was of an independent Poland in the years 1919-1939. In Gombrowicz's words in the *Diary*:

It is not surprising [...] that independence turned out to be more burdensome and humiliating than bondage. As long as we were absorbed with the revolt against a foreign power questions such as "Who are we?" "What are we to make of ourselves?" lie dormant, but independence awakened the riddle that was slumbering within us. [...] We wore the Poland of that time on our chests like Don Quixote wore his armor, preferring not to test its strength, just in case.

The period of Polish independence was not a joyous creation, but a painful struggle with the invisible thread of our own inner slavery. A period of coded existence, a period of great masquerade. (151)

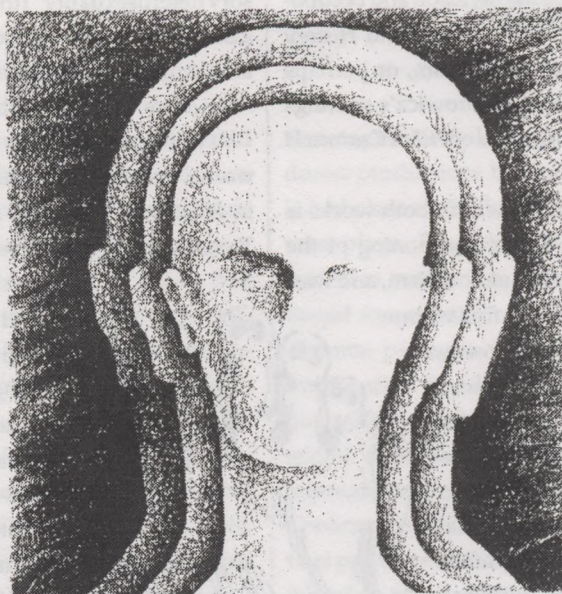
Gombrowicz's passage above has assumed a new significance since the changes of 1989, when once again Poles, like the ageless adolescent Witold, must ask themselves "Who are we?" and "What are we to make of ourselves?"

Gombrowicz's response to these queries was precisely the two variations on the persona of Witold he sketched in *History* and *Trans-Atlantyk*. Rather than deny the vulnerability of their armor, Gombrowicz's heroes embrace their status as the fools of history, and thus aspire to become history's oracles, shamans, and philosophers. Instead of assuming the attitude of Polish romantic messianism, Gombrowicz's "Witolds" play a sophisticated harlequinade, choosing to play a youthful Falstaff rather than Prince Hal or Hamlet. The heraldic symbol emblazoned on these characters could well be that of the Fool in the Tarot. In Juliet Sharman-Burke's words:

[The Fool] is like a child discovering life for the first time, or the adult searching for a new meaning or sense of purpose. The Fool seeks the truth, and turns his attention towards the spirit in search of truth. His madness or foolishness links him to the divine, for originally the word "silly" meant "blessed." The Fool is simple, trusting, innocent and ignorant of the trials and pitfalls that await him, yet he is prepared to abandon his old ways and take the leap into the unknown. (27)

In the Tarot, the Fool is an archetype, the zero point for a Jungian spiritual journey. His appearance augurs well, symbolizing a spiritual rebirth. Such must be the essential effect of the actor playing Witold in *History*, an essence reflected in his soliloquies in the play — soliloquies that must be counted among Gombrowicz's most eloquent and energetic writing for the stage.

The protagonists in *History* and *Trans-Atlantyk*, like the Fool in the Tarot, are each an *alpha* in search of a spiritual and existential *omega*. The message of these works to contemporary Poland and the world beyond is that a tragic history need not be an inescapable destiny, but can rather be turned into a liberating and healing comic improvisation — that history should not be merely reenacted but rather actively performed.



The translation that follows is the fruit of seven years of intermittent work involving many people besides myself. A first working draft was produced by Dariusz Bukowski and myself using the Jacek Bunsch adaptation of the text which I obtained from the director in 1987. Only later did I obtain a copy of the original text as published in *Kultura*, on which this version is modeled. I worked on the text as a member of Robert Glück's writing workshop in San Francisco in the summer and fall of 1989, and am indebted to Lillian Vallee, Halina Filipowicz, and Tadeusz Witkowski for their readings of the translation in various drafts. My special thanks to Rita Gombrowicz for her support of the project through its development, and to Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale of Milan for permission to publish the translation in *Periphery*. Jan Lebenstein's illustrations first appeared in the French edition of the play in 1977, and are gratefully reproduced here with the permission of the artist.

With two exceptions, I have refrained from taking any significant liberties with the text. The first is in the choice to anglicize many of the characters names. The second was at times to depart from the line divisions found in the original Polish edition of the text, which on the page gives much of the play the appearance of a kind of free verse. When the spoken affect of a particular line seemed realistic and prosaic rather than stylized and poetic, I have disregarded the original line divisions. I have with due hesitation assumed that the inconsistencies of punctuation and style of the original text on this score reflect its unfinished condition rather than a final and coherent stylistic choice on Gombrowicz's part. In sections such as Witold's soliloquies, the original line divisions have been preserved. When otherwise in doubt about specific passages, I have consulted Jeleński's 1977 French translation of the text (published by Éditions de la Différence) for comparison with the original Polish edition.

Allen Kuharski

Notes

¹ The world premiere of *The Marriage* was in fact a student production in Gliwice, Poland, in 1960, directed by Jerzy Jarocki and designed by Krystyna Zachwatowicz, who both subsequently worked on a series of major professional productions of the play in France, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, and Poland itself.

² The world premiere of the play took place on April 5, 1977, at the Bayerisches Staatstheater in Marstall, West Germany, directed by Andras Fricksay, designed by Wolf Münzer, and musical direction by Peter Vogel.

³ By the Académie Experimental de Théâtre of Paris, to be directed by Eugène Nel.

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