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A scene from the play *Going Astray*, a theatrical story about Witold Gombrowicz, which premiered in May 2004 in Warsaw

## The Year of Gombrowicz

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**The year 2004 has been named the “Year of Gombrowicz” in commemoration of the author’s 100th birthday. Scholars both in Poland and abroad are taking a new look at his output and originality (or “authenticity,” as the author himself might have preferred)**

Research on Witold Gombrowicz’s work has passed through many stages in Poland and abroad; dozens of books and literally thousands of articles have been published on him. For this reason, the idea of the “Year of Gombrowicz,” now being celebrated around the world,

perhaps led many to expect pompous and grandiloquent ceremonies more than new approaches to literary research on his texts. This is especially true since the commemorative year in Poland comes in tandem with the country’s accession to the EU, and Gombrowicz has been portrayed by some to be the Polish writer that is “leading his country into Europe.” An amusing paradox, if one recalls the writer’s downright allergic reaction to any and all attempts at recruiting him to march under the banners of any sort of collective body, the Polish nation included, needless to say.

### “Form” and “play”

As it turns out, however, research has indeed proceeded in a truly interesting fashion in this commemorative year, and undoubtedly taken new directions. Bear in mind that so far, Gombrowicz has mostly been read according to the interpretative formulas that he himself prescribed. According to these self-imposed interpretative schemes, Gombrowicz was a champion of individual



authenticity and someone who shattered stereotypes (both those of a cognitive nature and those that people use to present themselves within the social dimension).

In such research, critics have most often made use of the category of “form,” which Gombrowicz understood in a very extensive sense: as the individual’s way of behaving in contact with others; as the external shape of linguistic messages, artistic and literary works; and also as a set of categories through which reality manifests itself to man. In Gombrowicz’s opinion, it is the duty of everyone who strives for authenticity to overcome stereotypical forms.

A second category that has been used to describe the author’s intellectual and social escapades is that of “play,” meaning action of a sort that contains a spontaneous and unthinking element, but at the same time lends support to autocracy because everyone who presents themselves somehow in the social world is, in Gombrowicz’s opinion, a “player” (“naturalness” does not exist for the writer, rather, it is a universally employed falsehood). By presenting themselves everyone is “playing roles,” and only by observing themselves as they are playing, by tracking the moments when the mystification inherent in play is divulged, can they learn something important about themselves.

Researchers have to date viewed Gombrowicz as someone who never acquiesces to the role that the exegete offers to him, since he himself is always “in motion,” always escaping from any ready-made formula we want to force upon him. Such “existence in motion” constitutes Gombrowicz’s contribution to existentialist thought, but

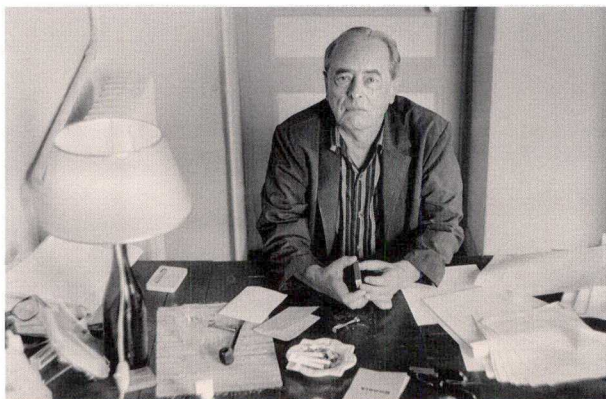
at the same time it presents a considerable obstacle to anyone who would like to interpret the writer by means of any sort of set formulas. And so researchers (the author of the present article included) have tried to find categories for Gombrowicz that could accommodate the dynamics of his personality, and have portrayed his books as texts that project many indefinite readings, or even as a kind of space of interpretations from which we are free to choose.

### New interpretations

Recent years, however, have seen the rise of a new trend in research on the Gombrowicz phenomenon: his discourse is firstly juxtaposed with the philosophical and literary discourses of the epoch, in order to prove that he not only parodied them and took them to the point of absurdity, but also continued certain threads, engaged in debate with them, and above all knew how, *en passant*, to weave very serious issues into ostensibly trivial dialogs or fictional events. A superb analysis of this type of phenomenon was presented by Janusz Margański in his book *Gombrowicz the Eternal Debutante* published two years ago, as well as in articles and papers presented at commemorative meetings in Poland and France.

Another fascinating attempt at pinning Gombrowicz down so he can no longer escape into the formula of “play” can be found in the abundant recent works of Michał Paweł Markowski, who describes Gombrowicz through his experiences of anxiety, pain, and bafflement at what is stupid, what is incredible, and what defies categorization. Such a Gombrowicz would perhaps be closer to the existentialists, or perhaps to the deconstructionists, but in any case he would no longer fit within the structuralist model that functionalizes his behavior and imposes a more stable and at the same time rational nature upon both his views and his literary forms.

At this point we should also call attention to interesting attempts made by American scholars in the collective book *Gombrowicz’s Grimaces* edited by Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek, who have tried to analyze Gombrowicz using the tools of *queer theory*, associating his homosexual tendencies with his endeavor to rehabilitate everything that runs counter to the dictates of the political and cultural “Center.” This leads the way to an apology of what was rejected (within the realm of both spirit and custom, as well as that of national culture). This best explains Gombrowicz’s criticism, and at the same time apotheosis, of “the provinces,” of nations and cultures that are young and ill-refined. ■



Bogdan Paczowski

**Witold Gombrowicz** (born 1904, Poland, died 1969, France), writer, playwright, and essayist. Debuted in 1933 with the collection of stories *Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity*, and gained prominence with the novel *Ferdydurke*. His novels *Trans-Atlantyk*, *Pornografia*, *Cosmos*, dramas *Yvonne*, *Princess of Burgundy*, *The Marriage*, and his *Diaries* ensured him a place among the classics of Polish and world literature. **2004 - the Year of Gombrowicz** proclaimed in Poland by the Polish parliament, and in the world by UNESCO. Most important conferences: Jagiellonian University; Université Paris IV, Sorbonne; Université Lille III; Yale University; Institute of Literary Research PAN.

### Further reading:

- Jarzębski J. (2000). *Peeping at Gombrowicz* (in Polish). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.  
Płonowska-Ziarek E. (ed.). (1998). *Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality*. New York, State University of New York Press.