
Witold Gombrowicz. *A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes*. Trans. Benjamin Ivry. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 109p.

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John Updike once introduced him as “one of the profoundest of the late moderns,” but Witold Gombrowicz remains little known in American literary circles. He is admired in Europe and other countries, in Argentina for instance where he lived in exile during the Cold War years of the 1950s. In 1969 Gombrowicz died, still in exile, in France. He did not witness the rise of the Polish *Solidarność* and Lech Wałęsa, nor the fall of the Berlin Wall that followed in 1989, or Ceausescu’s demise in 1990 marking the end of the Cold War.

A Gombrowicz book holds the spell of a detective novel that grips our attention to the very end. Some may read the 109 pages in a few hours but most readers will want to pause between chapters and reflect on the various lessons of philosophy or the spirit in which they are delivered. Even when it is limited to modern times, philosophy encompasses such a vast field of knowledge that it takes a true linguistic genius who attempts to tell it in six hours and fifteen minutes.

With “sardonic wit, brilliant insights and provocative criticism,” Gombrowicz guides us through a maze that has its roots in Socrates and Aristotle. Next follow the Stoics, St. Augustine, and St. Bernard. Pascal and Kierkegaard reign supreme on the trunk of the tree of philosophy and pave the way to phenomenology. Here the branches of the tree multiply and each bears the name of a once-powerful thinker. On one side of the tree we find Nietzsche, Sartre (and Husserl), Heidegger, La Bretonnière, Blondel, Bergson, Landsberg, and Scheler; on the other, Jaspers, Personalism, Gabriel Marcel, and Berdaiev, who share the spotlight with French poets Peguy and Breton. In the Baroque (Barok or Barroco) category we find Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Kant, Hume, and Berkeley. The names appear in Polish, Spanish, or French, the languages that Gombrowicz spoke fluently. As for Faust, he acquires a suffix that makes him eminently Polish: *Faustenski!* Gombrowicz not only conceived his tree of philosophy, he made a drawing of it as well, included in

the book. Sprinkled with humor, the tree provides a quick yet lucid overview of the thinking of key modern philosophers, including Descartes. We should read with tongue in cheek the mention that “Nietzsche, like Kant and Schopenhauer, was Polish” (100). The three famous Germans were three thinkers for whom Gombrowicz felt a marked preference. They were born in border towns with Russian, Prussian, and Polish names at a time when national borders were subject to political earthquakes. Nietzsche also claimed pureblooded Polish ancestors! In the end, what matters most is that all three were Europeans.

Benjamin Ivry has several fine translations from French to his credit. His Gombrowicz is no exception. Let us simply say that *A Guide to Philosophy* reads as if it were written in English rather than translated from French. Only on one occasion, in the chapter on Sartre and Existentialism, did this reader feel a slight sting in reading “chair is chair.” During my first introduction to Existentialism and Sartre at the State University of New York at Buffalo, the expression “a chair is a chair” remained deeply imbedded in my mind. The SUNY professor probably spoke very correct English, but Ivry remains more faithful to the concise style of Gombrowicz, stripped to bare essentials.

What matters most is what Gombrowicz says, for instance about the collapse of philosophical systems: “metaphysical systems have a rather fantastic structure. Even when the systems collapse, they are useful in understanding reality and the world a little better. This idea of the progress of reason in Hegel is achieved through a dialectical system which is of the greatest importance today” (38).

With astounding accuracy he foresaw the collapse of Marxism in the 1980s. Gombrowicz calls the “celestial phase” of Marxism the *idiotic* phase (95; my emphasis). “I imagine,” he concludes, “that in twenty or thirty years they will discard Marxism” (95). Here his thinking meets with that of the Romanian philosopher, Constantin Noica, who in 1957 also predicted the downfall of Marxism and the triumph of European values.

Disagreeing with Sartre for whom acts define the essence of man, Gombrowicz proposes that we judge history’s monsters (Hitler and Stalin, for instance) by their *intentions* as well as their acts.

As an example of sardonic wit, we find that “In order to understand Nietzsche, it is necessary to understand an idea as simple as that of raising cows” (101). Whatever surprise one may feel in seeing Nietzsche, agriculture and cows so intimately associated, it all leads to a perfectly logical and sound explanation of natural selection and the survival of the fittest in order for the species to survive!

To physicians, psychologists, and historians, Gombrowicz offers the following jewel of wisdom: “Between the way of seeing man as object, from the outside,

characteristic of medicine, psychology, history ... and that of existentialism, which is to feel ... *from the inside*, within his being, there is an ABYSS” (60).

Elsewhere, Gombrowicz reflects on the fate of Schopenhauer’s writings: “For me, it is a mystery that interesting books like Schopenhauer’s (and my own!) do not find readers” (36). His guide to philosophy is full of jewels of wisdom definitely worth exploring. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of his birth, Poland had declared 2004 the year of Witold Gombrowicz. Ivry’s 2004 English translation is a welcome and timely publication. ✱