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Witold Gombrowicz. *Cosmos*. Trans. Danuta Borchardt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 189p.

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Witold Gombrowicz's last novel, *Cosmos*, is a compulsively unsettling philosophical drama veiled as a quotidian mystery. Originally published in Polish in 1965, Danuta Borchardt's new English translation conveys a world wrought with an interconnectedness, or perceived interconnectedness, that struggles to understand meaningfully a series of events that defy logical association. It is an enigmatic novel that, despite its refusal to answer its own disturbing questions, not so much rewards but compensates the reader with a provoking, if troubled, journey.

The novel is predicated on the mystery surrounding the discovery of a sparrow hanging from a wire in a forest thicket. Two Polish college students, Witold and Fuks, traveling into the Carpathian Mountains to spend their vacation in the countryside, come upon the hanging sparrow and immediately the mystery of its origins consumes them. After they find lodging in a local family's home, the mystery of the sparrow slowly begins to infiltrate their relationships with the new family as connections are sought between the sparrow and a multitude of disparate objects. The deformed mouth of the housekeeper begins to connect to the sparrow and to a mark in the ceiling that resembles an arrow, and the arrow leads (purposely? coincidentally?) to a hanging stick that, in turn, leads to a whole other series of events. The two men act out the parts of detectives until they, too, are integral to the mystery, even performing horrible acts just to give completeness to otherwise possibly unrelated random occurrences.

Intent on finding connections between disparate objects and ideas, the novel finds relationships loaded with potential meaning between things otherwise without correlation. As Witold begins forming a connectivity between the deformed mouth of the maid and the mouth of Lena, the landlord's daughter, he then moves on to mapping those mouths upon each other with the hanging sparrow. Certainly the mouths and sparrow have nothing in common (although this judgment against the character has no more informing it than his belief otherwise), but Witold is compelled to find some correlation between the two and to discover some larger meaning from that answer. He laments that thinking of the sparrow "sent me to the mouth, the mouth back to the sparrow, and I found myself between the sparrow and the mouth" (14). The sparrow becomes the center of Witold's "cosmos" to such an extent that it exerts a sort of gravitational pull on the objects around him, bringing them into a claustrophobic and disastrous orbit.

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A profound sense of sensuality intertwines with all of these surreal associations, mostly inexplicable and nearly always on the north side (or is it south?) of perversity. Witold strangles Lena's cat because of his unspoken and unrequited love for her, and then imagines his pounding on her door as a "banging through to her" (66). Indeed, even the housekeeper's oral deformity provokes him to move "coldly toward her swinish lust" (12) in the middle of the night. The culminating action of the novel occurs with one of the ancillary characters performing an act of self-gratification as a memorial to an affair some twenty years prior, an action that recasts many of the preceding incidents into a sexual light. As Borchardt points out in her translator's note, Gombrowicz's development of the onanistic themes start very early and subtly in the text, and indeed that final climactic moment seems to work backwards through the novel, inflicting a sort of deviancy on the acts of Witold and Fuks particularly.

Born in 1904 and raised in Warsaw, Gombrowicz published his first novel, *Ferdydurke*, in 1937 to some success. Compared to *Cosmos* it is a light-hearted affair, following the adventures of a man who is misidentified as his younger self, and then thrust back into the school of his youth to repeat the past. It is an ironic and playful novel that explores some of the same issues as *Cosmos*, such as of maturity and youth, but errs on the side of the comic despite aggressive social commentary. Soon after its publication and just days before Germany invaded Poland, Gombrowicz left for Argentina on a cruise and never again lived in his native country, as the Nazi occupation was followed by a communist government that banned his works. Interestingly, his fortunate departure had nothing to do with foreknowledge of the coming tragedy, but was merely an amazingly auspicious coincidence that spared him from the atrocities of World War II.

That *Cosmos* is so tonally different than *Ferdydurke* should come as no surprise, given the nearly thirty years between publication and the intervening worldwide turmoil. Gombrowicz's stories often find themselves in Poland and it seems evident that he is very much committed to the people and politics of his native country. Despite escaping the physical occupation of Poland, the decimation of the country and the nearly six million lives lost undoubtedly took a heavy psychological toll on Gombrowicz. While *Ferdydurke* takes aim, lovingly and critically, at Polish culture, *Cosmos* exists beyond cultural criticism in an abstract, yet surprisingly immediate, landscape. The war feels surreally present in *Cosmos* despite no mention of it or of any time, for that matter. But there is something about the senselessness of action in the book that correlates to the horrific atrocities of WWII. As the novel begins, Witold and Fuks march through the hot summer countryside, a march that, through

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his use of brief, relentless phrasing, feels like a death-march across a barren battlefield towards a foretold doom.

But perhaps the relentless sense of connectivity pervading the novel exists as the cause of this desire to connect *Cosmos* to the Nazi occupation of Poland. The meaninglessness of Witold and Fuks and their vein search for answers forces a similar response by the reader that demands that their senselessness be justified in the resolution of the philosophical interrogations their characters seem to pose. Like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, one senses that the characters' quest relates to the reader's as well. Yet whereas Pynchon seeks to mock those interpretative tendencies, Gombrowicz appears to desire the answers every bit as much as either the characters or readers do; he does not believe that asking the question is a waste of time, but perhaps expecting an answer may be.

Gombrowicz does not solve, in fact does not even attempt to solve, the quandaries he poses. Partly, of course, the questions are not solved because they are not solvable, but instead merely part of the "cosmos" and, therefore, undecipherable. But another possibility is that these are the wrong questions to be asking, these terrestrial issues woven together with the imponderables of the universe. But is that even what Gombrowicz is asking? It is a world of causality and meaning, but understanding it is impossible. Or it is all meaningless? Gombrowicz not only refuses to give easy answers or even pose easy questions, he refuses to even acknowledge whether the whole concept of the question is fundamentally flawed. And, somehow appropriately, it all started with a mysterious sparrow hanging in the woods. ✱