Crossing the River from One's Native to an Acquired Language when Translating Witold Gombrowicz's Fiction

I assume not many of you are native speakers of your own language translating into English. I am therefore offering an expanded presentation of translating Gombrowicz in general.

Western literature turned, in the early 1900s, from character-driven story telling into a so called "difficult," intellectual, idea-driven writing. In Norway, Knut Hamsun was one of the first such writers who disapproved of his contemporaries' approach, and expressed a preference for writing about a changeable and divided mind. In Poland, in the early 1930s, Witold Gombrowicz became an exponent of this art, and included not only the mind but also humanity's universal issues. And this from John Updike: "A master of verbal burlesque, a connoisseur of psychological blackmail, Gombrowicz is one of the profoundest of late moderns, with the lightest of touches… includes some of the truest and funniest literary satire in print."

Translations of his novels into English were published in the early 1960s by such avant-garde presses as Marion Boyars in Great Britain and Grove Press in the USA.

Towards the end of my career as a psychiatrist and retirement in 1993, I began writing short stories in a similar vein, in English, and Andrei Codrescu published them in his "Exquisite Corpse." When I tried to approach other small literary magazines with similar stories, they were rejected and one of the answers was "please resubmit your work after you have learnt how to create three-dimensional characters." I did not

know that this is what Annie Dillard had written in her 1982 book *Living by Fiction: "In Garcia Márquez, as in Pynchon, we see characters from a great distance, colorful and extraordinary objects… characters tend to be less human simulacra, less rounded complexities of deep-seated ties and wishes, than focal points for action or idea… Traditional characters are "rounded," or "modeled," or "drawn in depth"… Characters' role in this fiction is formal and structural. Their claim on us is not emotional but intellectual. They are no longer fiction's center."*

I want to stress that had I not practiced literary writing I could not have attempted to convey the beauty and complexity of Gombrowicz's prose. My contention was that his works should enter the target language as its literature, just as the Spanish translation of *Ferdydurke*, according to Ilan Stavans, entered the Argentinian literature.

I embarked on my twenty years of living with Witold Gombrowicz's fiction by sheer happenstance. One afternoon, probably in 1992, sitting in my living room, I began to read *Cosmos*, Gombrowicz's last novel, in Polish. As I was looking over the first page, I began to see, and hear, the text scintillating in English. I continued to read and I was discovering in Gombrowicz a kindred spirit. I sensed that, by translating this work, mysterious pages of my own life would be written.

I translated a few pages and sent them to Stanisław Barańczak, at the time the Chief of the Slavic Department at Harvard and an outstanding translator of English literature into Polish. His reply was "may I use your work with my students?" I was ecstatic. I then heard, on his recommendation, from Timothy Garten Ash at Oxford. He asked me to try my hand at translating *Ferdydurke*. Both these pundits considered this to be the first,

groundbreaking book to be translated. In this, as in his other works, Gombrowicz struggled against established mores and wrote about the constraints of Form and the perils of Chaos. He proposed that we should not be ashamed of the brat within us, that immaturity is the wellspring of creativity. He did not want to be considered a creator of any movements and was a phenomenon onto himself.

"Trying my hand" went on for about two years, and Garton Ash concluded that it was not my fault, but that Gombrowicz is untranslatable into English. Stanisław Barańczak disagreed with this opinion and referred me to Jonathan Brent at Yale University Press. Brent had been familiar with Gombrowicz, having published the translation of the author's *Diary* at Northwestern University Press. From then on it was plain sailing.

I had read *Ferdydurke* years ago and, had I not been asked I would never have considered taking on this work, the language in Polish being extraordinarily difficult and innovative. For quite a while I struggled with the issue of a *literal* translation. My colleagues at the American Literary Association regarded this as a taboo. Yet, translation of *Ferdydurke*, in order to preserve its oddities, had to be transposed as close to the original as possible. I later understood my colleagues when translating my father's sea stories. A literal translation would have been totally unacceptable.

Previous translations of *Ferdydurke* were from Spanish, French and German while mine was to be, as I said, directly from the Polish. Finally, all four novels, *Ferdydurke* in 2000 (2001 National Translation Award from the American Literary Translators Association), *Cosmos* in 2005 (with a National Endowment for the Arts grant), *Pornografia* in 2010 (Found in Translation Award) and *Trans-Atlantyk* in 2014 (nominated for the

2015 PEN Literary Translation Award) were published by Yale and Grove/Atlantic Press.

After *Ferdydurke*, I returned to *Cosmos*, then *Pornografia* and finally to *Trans-Atlantyk.*

I learned English and "lived in it" so to speak since the age of thirteen, first the British variety in London (by immersion), now the American since 1959. I have grieved the geographical loss of my native language through escape from the Soviet occupation at the age of eleven. However, I have maintained the language in its spoken and literary form through life among the Polish refugee community in London during wartime (WWII), numerous Polish friends elsewhere, and reading Polish literature.

Hence the constant chatter in my brain is both in Polish and in English. Earlier in British, now mostly in American. When speaking with those who know both languages, I sometimes don't remember which language we have used.

However "living in the language" and knowing it quite well would not have been sufficient for translating such a difficult writer. As it happened, there was synchrony between Gombrowicz's and my style and idea-driven writing. I have since concluded that the practice of literary writing, not necessarily published, is essential to not only for a native foreign speaker but also for native speakers of English.

A few words about the characteristics of Gombrowicz's prose. It is crisp, uses shortcuts rather than full sentences and is replete with innovations. It was essential to maintain the élan of Gombrowicz's language, sometimes by going to extremes. If there was a choice between synonyms (or any words, for that matter), I used the most outrageous one (if the English text would bear it). If Gombrowicz repeated a word several times in a

sentence or in a paragraph, I did not change it into its synonym so as to preserve a sense of emphasis and rhythm and, at times of monotony, as had been Gombrowicz's intent. Gombrowicz changed the usual idioms to convey his ideas. In Polish, it is not always necessary to use a verb in a sentence, the meaning is clear. In Polish grammar verbs contain the nouns, it is therefore not necessary to specify the I, we, you, etc.

Gombrowicz made fun of the Polish use of diminutives, which in English are hard to convey. He had a way of changing an abstract concept into concrete, for example, "she did not like mother" instead of "mothering." To comply with Gombrowicz's style, I had to bend some of the more usual rules in English prose such as maintaining long sentences and paragraphs, and tense changes in the same sentences and paragraphs. The Polish *dom* for a house also means a home, so I had to use the appropriate word, depending on the context. I could never understand why in English *fingers* on a hand are *toes* on the foot.

As I mentioned above, previous translations of Gombrowicz's works (except for his volumes of Diary) were from other languages and it would have been impossible to accurately deal with the above issues. Also, there were omissions and at least one philosophical misunderstanding of the original.

Before I discuss the individual novels, I want to mention some translators into English, an acquired language, whose language was native to the original. As far as I know there were few if any such translators before I began my translation of *Ferdydurke* in the early 1990s. Vladimir Nabokov, not a native speaker of English, first wrote and published *Lolita* in English in 1955. But he complained: "the story of this translation is the story of disappointment." He then wrote and published it in Russian in 1967.

Others followed: Czesław Miłosz, in 2001, translated his poetry with the assistance of Robert Hass. In 2007, Richard Pevear translated Russian literature into English with his wife Larissa, a native speaker of Russian. In 2010, Stanisław Barańczak published his translation of Wisława Szymborska with the assistance of Clare Cavanagh. In 2012 Aron Aji, a native speaker of Turkish translated into English (*A Long Day's Evening* by Bilge Karasu). His entry into English came through reading English literature in English. I would like to note here that his approach was didactic while mine was intuitive and emotional. I could not cull more names of such translators. As you can see all these translators had assistance from a native speaker of English. In my situation, the input of my American husband, Thom Lane, was invaluable. He was well versed in European literature, in American literary, colloquial and slang language. He did not know any Polish, and yet, with some knowledge of philosophy, he could correct my lack of understanding and hence erroneous translation. Thom also suggested that I "free up" my English by reading Beckett's novels.

Much has been written about this issue, for and against. I will confine myself to presenting my own view, namely, that knowledge of and sensitivity to one's language and culture are an advantage. There is less chance of important matters being lost in translation. Since the focus here is on Gombrowicz I will deal with examples from his writings.

Let me start with Susan Sontag and my first translation, namely of *Ferdydurke*, which began in the early 1990s. It is of interest that in 1997, on the back flap of the 46 issue of AGNI, on its 25th anniversary, Sontag noted *Fedydurke* as one of the books whose publication had been Unfairly Neglected.

In this novel one of the main metaphors is the word *pupa.* It means any of the words for buttocks, backside, etc. Gombrowicz used it to convey the belittlement we convey on other people. *Pupa* is a soft word and primarily refers to a child's behind. I struggled for a long time how to convey it in English. None of the usual words had the correct tone. One day, when I visited my Polish husband in a nursing home he said: "you know, a nurse asked me to lift my tush to straighten my sheets." Voila, that was it! I then realized that it had also been used by mothers to their children and, additionally, had a homoerotic connotation, not unusual for Gombrowicz and his works. Gombrowicz also used *pupa* as a verb *upupić*, his invention. An additional bonus for this in English would be a neologism, a verb *to tush*. None of the other English words lent themselves to an appropriate verb connotation.

I assumed that Jonathan Brent knew Susan Sontag, and that she had been one of Gombrowicz's aficionados. He asked her to write a Foreword to the translation. Her reaction to *tush* was, in my opinion disastrous. She said that this word, derived from the Yiddish, would not sit well with American readership. As a non-speaker of Polish, she did not sense the particular child-like tone that was necessary here, nor the possibilities of its related verb *to tush* for *to belittle.* Eventually Brent suggested using the Polish word. For the verb I had to resort to someone *dealing the pupa* to another person. Please note Eric Mosbacher's, the previous translator's version: "to endow with a childish little backside."

I feel honored that Susan Sontag wrote the Foreword, and then included it in her collection of essays "Where the Stress Falls," but to this day I yearn for *tush.*

Belfer is another Polish word which, in Polish parlance is derogatory for a teacher. Mosbacher's *maste*r did not convey this meaning. I used *proph*.

I needed an appropriate emphasis by an unusual placing of a verb at the end of a sentence; here I used Edward Lear as my model: "Oh, what a wonderful Pussy you are, you are!"

To mock the use of diminutives in Gombrowicz's text, such as *główka* for *head,* I had to resort to a construction such as *her cute little head.*

Podszyty wiatrem is an idiom, which usually refers to a coat that is lined by a wind, for no good. Gombrowicz used it for a person who is *lined with a child*. In Polish the idiom has a certain dynamism, which *a child within* does not have and it is not an idiom. To satisfy both requirements I decided on *a child* (like water) *runs deep.*

In Gombrowicz's time social distinctions played a part, and still do. A difficult subject to convey to the American (though not the British) readership. The last chapter "Mug on the Loose…" is mostly a satire on this issue. A mug is a derogatory term for face and Gombrowicz used it as a metaphor for disdain. Therefore fraternizing with peasantry was not acceptable. Here is an excerpt: *He could endure agricultural reform and legal and political equalization in a general sense, but his blood boiled at the thought of personal and physical equality, at fra...ternization of his person. .. To strive toward peasantry out of sheer longing for them, how can that be? Isn't that betrayal of one's race—this adulation of servants, this naive and downright adulation of a servant's body parts, movements and utterances, this love of a yokel's very existence?*

The book ends with a couplet, omitted in the previous translation. The word *trąba* means a trumpet, but it is also a derogatory word for a silly, idiotic person—an ass.

It's the end, what a gas,

And who's read it is an ass!

As I am remembering translating these pages I felt like an extrovert, thinking "come what may" and hoping for the best.

Translating *Cosmos* was another matter. I turned into an introvert, sensing that dark issues were to come. I think that it is important for a translator to maintain a certain emotional tone in order to transpose it, whenever necessary, into the target language.

Gombrowicz liked to use old classic traditional models, and this book is presented as a *who dun it* spy novel. It deals with minutiae of life as they impinge on the sum of our total system of ideas and experience, and man's attempt to bring order out of chaos in his psychological life. It was his last novel, a most somber and private of his works. It won the Editors' Award in 1967.

I needed to address the oddities in of one of the chief protagonist's speech. He used language similar to what I had come across in my schizophrenic patients. For example, was *milkie* linguistically and phonetically an adequate transposition of the non-existing Polish word *mlimli,* which referred to milk?

For the purpose of this presentation, the details of Polishness in this book are minor and few. There is an allusion to the hostess' cousin Katasia who may be of a lesser social class. Also a reference to the Zakopane-style of the house. This originated from this internationally known ski resort in the Carpathian Mountains. These are decorative wooden carvings for indoor and outdoor use. Also, there are dietary peculiarities such as radishes served with butter, but the most poignant is at the end: an elegant chicken fricassee topped with sour cream, served for dinner, but no solution to humankind's cosmic dilemmas.

Pornografia begins with Gombrowicz's introduction into wartime Poland, though he has never been there in wartime. This evokes my own sensitivity when, during my teenage years I longed to be there with my cousins during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, to minister to the wounded and carry messages through the city's sewers. The Russians stationed on the opposite bank of the river Vistula were supposed to cross over and help the insurgents, but they did not until it was all over and Warsaw in total ruins.

The particularly Polish matter that Gombrowicz addresses here is the episode of the killing of Siemian, one of the troubled leaders of the Polish Underground Army fighting the Germans.

To my mind, the last paragraph of the previous translation lacked poignancy demanded of the tragic events, and the word *catastrophe* was omitted.

Gombrowicz required a sense of humor from his translators, and translation of *Trans-Atlantyk* is certainly a case in point. It was translated directly from the Polish and published by Carolyn French and Nina Karsov in 1970. Allegedly this took them seventeen years to complete. It had mixed reviews. Charles Simic wrote in his 2006 article "Salvation Through Laughter": "For Stanisław Barańczak and other eminent Polish critics, this is one of the funniest and most original works in their literature, but an English reader can hardly glimpse that from the translation we now have." More importantly, although the translation was an accurate rendition of the original, it did not enter the English literature as one of its own.

Also, according to Stanisław Barańczak, "*Trans-Atlantyk* is the most memorably compact among Gombrowicz's fictional embodiments of his recurrent system of ideas."

I struggled for a long time with the temptation of translating it. Besides the "how to," I did not think I had seventeen years ahead of me.

Gombrowicz wrote the book in Argentina where he was stranded for twenty three years from the beginning of WWII. He created it in several varieties of the Polish language, from its archaic to its contemporary form, from its usual colloquial to its peasant style. I finally asked Jerzy Jarzębski, my friend, and one of the foremost authorities on Gombrowicz for advice. He responded, in essence, that this was no simple matter, that Gombrowicz used a variety of the Polish language from the turn of the 17th century, moreover he filtered it through the language of the Polish gentry's *gawęda*, an informal story-telling, from the beginning of the 19th century. He also used a lot of peasant language, rather archaic, modeled on that of the Polish peasants who had arrived in Argentina from Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries, furthermore there was also the language of the Polish romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz. "In a word: quite a mélange, but try and see what you can do," he said. Clearly, Gombrowicz's most untranslatable work.

I just happened to have read *Moby Dick* a couple of years earlier, and this gave me clue as to direction in which to go.

I learned older English from this work and from Laurence Sterne's and Jonathan Swift's language how to assimilate its vocabulary and rhyme, as well as to use capital letters of that time, which Gombrowicz had done. The g*awęda* form was difficult to convey. I turned to tales of the American Wild West but did not find much written in that style. The main point was that the language was conversational, it had to flow easily and quickly, yet raise the tale to the level of a written work of art.

WWII was raging in Poland, and Gombrowicz was terribly worried about his family and friends. This is how he began: *I*

feel the need to convey to my Family, to my friends and kinfolk this the beginning of my adventures, now ten years long, in the Argentinean capital. I'm not inviting anyone to eat these old noodles of mine, the turnips that may even be raw, because they're in a common a pewter bowl, Lean, Paltry, even Embarrassing withal, cooked in the oil of my Sins, of my Embarrassments, these my heavy grits, Dark, together with this black gruel of mine, oh, you better not put them in your mouth, unless 'tis for my eternal damnation and degradation, on my Life's unending road and up this arduous and wearisome Mountain of mine.

The war, and the first Polishness in the book, again reverberated in my psyche—this "arduous and wearisome Mountain of mine."

As we move along, Gombrowicz's language functioned not only as conveyor of the story but also of its philosophical meaning. The author remarked to his friend, Dominique de Roux, that *Trans-Atlantyk* is *sclerotic.* This meant that he was using it to expose the artificiality of contemporary ideas and behavior. According to Jerzy Jarniewicz, another Gombrowicz scholar, this meant using time-worn expressions and idioms, rather than inventing new constructions.

Passages of humor and satire abounded: in references to the silliness of Polish society in Buenos Aires, in the description of a duel and the arrival of the Polish gentry on their horses to watch it.

Let me take the liberty of quoting from John Donatich, Director of Yale University Press: "I'm nearly finished with your translation of TRANS-ATLANTYK, which I am enjoying immensely. You've really captured its manic lunacy, its parade of noisy characters who seem to blurt and blast and almost instantly disappear with hardly an echo. I've always felt a

cinematic quality to Gombrowicz's work (especially T/A and COSMOS) and here I visualize a Polish Fellini in South America. The rhetorical posturing and ridicule is nicely captured…"

Translating this author's works was an arduous, challenging, and a most interesting endeavor. My guiding principle was to approach Gombrowicz with humility and the reader with audacity.

Respectfully submitted,
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