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## REX CAFÉ, BUENOS AIRES, 1947

### On the Spanish Translation of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*

*As is fairly well known by now, the first translation of the works of Witold Gombrowicz into any language was the collective translation undertaken by the Polish writer with an unruly group of some twenty friends and acquaintances in 1947.<sup>1</sup>*

It was published by the publisher Argos in Buenos Aires that year, and in the translation Gombrowicz credits Virgilio Piñera, the Cuban writer, with leading the group, which was also composed of such people as the Cuban Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu and the Argentine Adolfo de Obieta (son of Macedonio Fernández).<sup>2</sup> The translation was done in the chess room of the Rex Café. I wrote about the relations between *Ferdydurke* and Piñera's novel *Small Maneuvers* [Pequeñas maniobras] more than thirty years ago,<sup>3</sup> but could not have known then that at some point Gombrowicz gave Piñera nineteen pages related to the project, including seventeen pages of hand-corrected typescript. These pages were eventually sold by Piñera's friend and heir Antón Arrufat (along with other Piñera materials and a variety of

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I am very grateful to Klementyna Sukhanow, who shared with me some of her extensive archives on Gombrowicz in Argentina.

1. For a bibliography of subsequent translations of Gombrowicz in Spanish, see [www.gombrowicz.net/Spanish.html](http://www.gombrowicz.net/Spanish.html).

2. Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke: Novela* (Buenos Aires: Argos, 1947), with the notation "Traducido por el autor, asesorado por un Comité de traducción" (Translated by the author with the aid of a translation committee).

3. Daniel Balderston, "Estética de la deformación en Gombrowicz y Piñera" [Esthetics of deformation in Gombrowicz and Piñera], *Explicación de Textos Literarios* 19, no. 2 (1990): 1–7.

things by Arrufat, including correspondence he received) to the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of Firestone Library at Princeton University.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I analyze these pages, most of which correspond to the latter part of what was to be chapter 9 of the Argos edition. Since I do not know Polish, I also refer to the most recent English translation, which was done directly from the Polish by Danuta Borchardt with a preface by Susan Sontag, published by Yale University Press in 2000.<sup>5</sup> The importance of these manuscript pages is that they show some aspects of the translation process, including handwritten corrections (by Gombrowicz). The pages at Princeton also include a letter from Gombrowicz to Graciela Peyrou and some notes for the preface to the Spanish edition, as well as some notes on style (“Decir”).

In the preface to the Argos edition, Gombrowicz explains, “This translation was done by me and only distantly resembles the original,”<sup>6</sup> then goes on to credit Virgilio Piñera for leadership of the committee<sup>7</sup> and Cecilia Benedit de Debenedetti for support (apparently material support) of the enterprise. Others who are credited are the poet and painter Luis Centurión, Adolfo de Obieta (who is identified as the editor of *Papeles de Buenos Aires*), Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu, Jorge Calvetti (1916–2002; later a well-known poet), Manuel Claps (editor of *Clinamen* and *Número*, and a friend of Juan Carlos Onetti’s), Carlos Coldaroli, Adán Hoszkowski, Gustavo Kotkowski, Pablo Manen, Mauricio Ossorio, Eduardo Paciorkowski, Ernesto J. Plunkett, Luis Rocha (at this point, he notes that Brazil, Poland, England, and Argentina all took part in the translation), Alejandro Russovich, Carlos Sandelin, Juan Seddon, José Taurel, Luis Tello, and Patricio Villafuerte. He concludes the discussion of the translation by saying that it was the result of “pleasant discussions . . . almost all of which took place in the chess room of the Rex Café under the enigmatic and generous smile of the director of the room, Master Paulino Frydman.”<sup>8</sup> Frydman

4. Manuscript of the translation of *Ferdydurke* with associated other materials, in Antón Arrufat Papers, CO737, Box 1, Folder 19, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library. Hereafter cited as “manuscript.”

5. Danuta Borchardt, trans., *Ferdydurke* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

6. “Esta traducción fué efectuada por mí y sólo de lejos se parece al texto original” (Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke: Novela*, 13).

7. Piñera’s version of his role is described in “Gombrowicz en la Argentina” [Gombrowicz in Argentina], in *Evocando a Gombrowicz* [Evoking Gombrowicz], ed. Miguel Grinberg (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2004), see especially 30–31. See also Matamoro (especially 84–85); Piglia in José Tcherkaski, *Las cartas de Gombrowicz* (Jorge Lavelli lo recuerda en una conversación entrañable) [Gombrowicz’s letters (Jorge Lavelli remembers him in a warm conversation)] (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI/Catálogos, 2004), especially 96–98; Pablo Gasparini, *El exilio procaz: Gombrowicz por la Argentina* [The daring exile: Gombrowicz in Argentina] (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2007), especially 89–148.

8. “Amenas discusiones . . . realizadas casi todas en la sala de ajedrez de la confitería Rex bajo la enigmática y bondadosa sonrisa del director de la sala, maestro Paulino Frydman” (Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke: Novela*, 14).

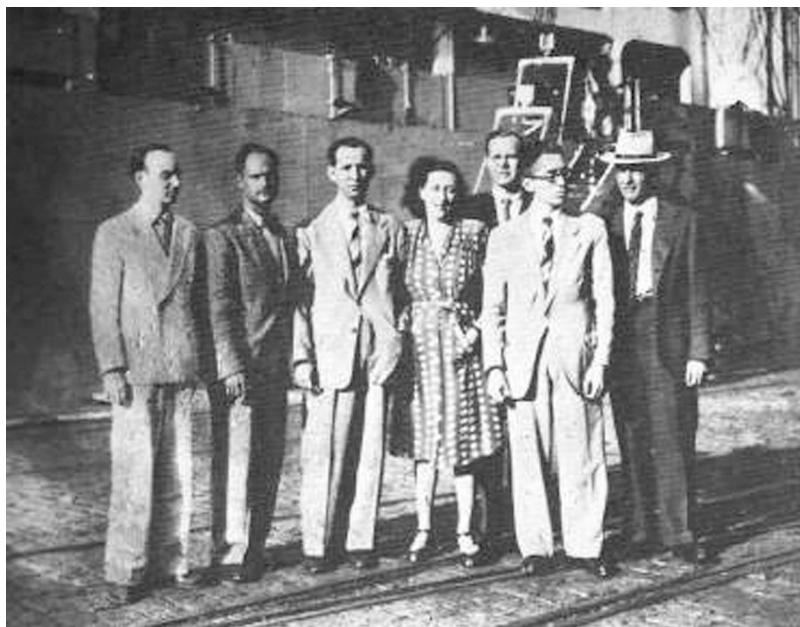


Figure 1. Gombrowicz stands at the right in the hat in this photograph taken at the Buenos Aires waterfront. The others are members of the translation group. From the left: Carlos Coldaroli, Manuel Peyrou, Virgilio Piñera, Graciella Peyrou, Rodríguez Tomeu, and Adolfo de Obieta. *Courtesy of the Witold Gombrowicz Archive, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

was indeed a chess master, who was born in Poland in 1905, emigrate to Argentina in 1939 (the same year as Gombrowicz), and lived there until his death in 1982. He was awarded the title of international master in 1955, eight years after the translation of *Ferdynand*; Gombrowicz's diary credits Frydman with giving him some money in 1943 to go to the Sierras de Córdoba, where he recovered from a persistent fever, though the fever turned out to be the result of Frydman's malfunctioning thermometer.

Materials on the Internet help to identify many of the principals in this enterprise, which includes several letters from Gombrowicz to Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu, written in January 1947 from Cecilia Benedit de Debenedetti's house in the Sierras de Córdoba, in the town of Salsipuedes.<sup>9</sup> In them, Gombrowicz speaks of Benedit's hospitality and support of the translation project, at the same time urging Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu to carry on with the project. There is also the information that Gombrowicz met Benedit at the home of Antonio Berni, the notable

9. See [www.elcultural.es/version\\_papel/LETRAS/1447/Gombrowicz\\_al\\_completo/](http://www.elcultural.es/version_papel/LETRAS/1447/Gombrowicz_al_completo/).

Argentine painter.<sup>10</sup> This article notes that Gombrowicz called Benedit “Condesa” and refers to his life at this point in Buenos Aires as oscillating between the realm of the “Condesa” and the area near the Retiro train stations (which we know from other sources were Gombrowicz’s preferred cruising grounds).

Graciela Peyrou was a writer, sister of the better-known writer Manuel Peyrou. In the letter, Gombrowicz asks her to correct the Spanish translation and to make three typed copies, double-spaced, using only one side of the paper, and maintaining the divisions in the text (and he signs the letter “el noble y desgraciado Witoldo de Gombrowicz” [the noble and unlucky Witoldo von Gombrowicz]). This background helps clarify the first page in the Princeton materials, a letter to Graciela Peyrou. He adds: “Graciela, what have you done with *Ferdydurke*? Be careful not to make any false steps because you know that it is a delicate piece of writing and one on which a lot hangs.”<sup>11</sup> Peyrou is called “Graziella” in the letters to Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu, and this letter seems to establish her as the probable typist, though perhaps of a clean copy, not of the seventeen pages of typescript in the Princeton collection (heavily corrected by Gombrowicz).

One important page among the Princeton materials is the fourth, a brief (and partly illegible) handwritten notation called “Decir,” mentioned earlier, in Gombrowicz’s handwriting. In it, Gombrowicz writes: “Saying. Sacrificing truth to irony doesn’t seem right to me. If we say that ??? should be understood as saying that what it tells about has been distorted, or mysteriously altered [?], in every interaction [?], and not the probable gaffes that the translation contains, the typographical errors, the changes of letters, and so forth, all things that happen in the majority of translations.”<sup>12</sup> In this note, written on the verso of the page on which he outlines the Spanish edition (starting with a preface to that translation), where he also notes “Attention: some parts of the text are not yet corrected and the final revision has not been done,”<sup>13</sup> showing concern over the accuracy and style of the translation, something that is also a concern in the note by the translators (perhaps written by Piñera, who also wrote the note on the inside of the book flap).

10. See <http://witoldgombrowicz.blogspot.com/2010/06/witold-gombrowicz-la-condesa-y-retiro.html>.

11. “¿Qué hizo, Graciela, con *Ferdydurke*? Cuide de no dar un paso en falso porque ya sabe que es un escrito delicado y de mucha responsabilidad” (Princeton materials, 2).

12. “Decir. Sacrificar la verdad a la ironía no me parece acertado. Si decimos que ?? debe entenderse que ello queda referido a lo que se ha distorsionado, o alterado misteriosamente [?] en toda interacción [?], y no a las probables gaffes que encierre la traducción, a los errores tipográficos, al cambio de letras, etc.—cosas éstas que aun en la mayoría [?] de las traducciones siempre se *dan* [calireten?]”

13. “Ojo. Algunas partes del texto no están todavía corregidas y falta la última revision.”

Now it is worth examining the translation and comparing it to the Danuta Borchardt translation.<sup>14</sup> Page 5 of the Princeton materials, which is page 161 of the typescript and corresponds to page 161 of the Argos edition, reads: “*La colegiala, en verdad, dormía no privada sino públicamente, no tenía vida nocturna propia y la dura publicidad de la muchacha la juntaba con Europa y América, con los campos de trabajo, con los cuarteles, las banderas, los hoteles y las estaciones, creaba perspectivas enormemente vastas, excluía la posibilidad de un rincón propio*” (the typescript is identical to the Argos edition here). The English version reads: “The schoolgirl actually slept in public, not in private, she had no private life at night, and this hard public life united her with Europe, America, with Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, with labor camps, flag waving, hotels, railroad stations, giving her an immensely wide scope, eliminating the need for a room of her own.”<sup>15</sup> The notable change between the two is the exclusion of specific mention of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin from the Spanish version. On the same page, there is an identical typo in the manuscript and in the Argos edition: a reference to Fred Astaire and Gingers, not Ginger, Rogers; a strikethrough eliminates a reference to 2 zlotys (6 in the English version).

On this and the following pages, it is clear that the handwritten corrections—in fountain pen in Gombrowicz’s handwriting and in pencil in some other hand—correspond precisely to the version that was published by Argos. A minor difference, however, appears on page 164 of the typescript: “¡Oh, el pandemaonio de la colegiala moderna!” which becomes “¡Oh, el pandemonium de la colegiala moderna!” on page 163 of the Argos edition. (The English translation reads: “Oh, what pandemonium in the modern schoolgirl’s life!”)<sup>16</sup> Here the correction of the spelling, in pencil, then cedes to use of the Latin word. Later in the same paragraph *hermosura* (prettiness) is corrected to *belleza* (beauty) and *belleza* to *hermosura*, no doubt because of a prejudice in Spanish style against the repetition of words in near proximity; the English here repeats “beauty.” The passage is interesting in the typescript, since it shows an extended concern with questions of style:

*Hay algo ultra conmovedor en eso de que sólo las personas sujetas a la disciplina de la belleza hermosa tienen acceso a ciertos vergüenzas vergonzosos contenidos psíquicos de la humanidad. ¡Oh, la muchacha, aquel receptáculo de la infamia vergüenza cerrado con la llave de la hermosura+beldad! Aquí, a en este temple, cada uno, joven o viejo depositaba tales cosas que posiblemente preferiría morir tres veces seguidas y quemarse a fumaza lenta (?) fuego lento antes de que eso fuesen dados a la publicidad. . . Y el rostro del siglo—el rostro del siglo XX, del siglo de la confusión de las edades, aparecía dubitativamente como un Sileno: desde la espesura.*

14. For some interesting notes by Danuta Borchardt on *Ferdynand* and her translation, see [www.corpse.org/archives/issue\\_5/critical\\_urgencies/borchar.htm](http://www.corpse.org/archives/issue_5/critical_urgencies/borchar.htm).

15. Borchardt, *Ferdynand*, 155.

16. *Ibid.*, 157.

The corrected version is very close to the published one, save that *dubitativamente* (doubtfully) is changed to *dudoso* (doubtful) in the latter. (The English version here ends: “lurked ambiguously like Silenus in the thicket,”<sup>17</sup> which shows that the deleted *desde la espesura* [from the thickets] corresponds to a detail in the original that was left out in the Spanish translation.)

In the following paragraph, a series of people are mentioned whose names are somewhat Hispanized: “Zuta,” but then “Marisita” and “Luis” and “Enrique,” then “Ducho y Tace” changed to “Bobek y Hopek.” In the English, they are Zuta, Marysia, Olek, Heniek, Mizdral, and Hopek, showing that at least in the final case “Tace” was entertained as a possibility but then discarded in favor of the original “Hopek.” Earlier in the paragraph, a reference to King Sigismund Augustus (in the English) is nowhere to be found in the Spanish, confirming a pattern that begins to emerge of the erasure of some of the Polish specificity of the text.

The following paragraph gives several examples of *lapsus linguae*, cleverly rendered in the Spanish: *tremolo de la bandera* (triumph of the flag) becomes *tremuslo de la bandera* (three calf flag) and *el muro de la patria* (wall of the fatherland) becomes *el muslo de la patria* (calf of the fatherland) (page 166 of the manuscript, 165 of the Argos edition). Borchardt notes the importance of the body part in question in the novel, and a bit later a whole translated poem consists of the reiteration of “calf” and “calves”; here the English version is a bit clumsier than the Spanish, with “onward, don’t lag behind” becoming “onward, don’t leg behind,” which is OK, but then with a very forced reference to “citizens from the town of Lemno” who say “we-Lemnites” instead of “we-Legnites.” The bawdiness of the novel is a concern, with another example of a careful stylistic revision: “*Asimismo en los escritos, bastante, por otra parte, bastante lujuriosos*” (The same in the writings, enough, on the other hand, somewhat bawdy) (page 166 of the manuscript, 165 of the Argos edition). In fact, after the reference to the Jazz Age, there is an additional reference in the Spanish (but not in the English) to licentiousness: *la “desnudez en la playa”* (nudity of the beach) (page 166 of the manuscript, 165 of the Argos edition).

On page 167, there are dozens of corrections of lower-case nouns that were made into upper-case nouns (which turns them into abstractions instead of concrete entities, though the corresponding articles were mostly changed from upper to lower case). Since the novel is known for its allegorizing of abstract qualities, Gombrowicz paid careful attention to make sure that his team wrote *la Amargura Joven y los Ojos Jóvenes* (the Young Bitterness and the Young Eyes) and not (as at first) *La amargura joven y Los ojos jóvenes*. There are handwritten insertions of *asonantes* (assonant rhyme or half-rhyme) twice here, suggesting that the group struggled with the correct rhetorical term.

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17. Ibid.

The next page contains the translation mentioned earlier. A poem called “El Verso” reads:

*Los horizontes estallan como botellas*  
*La mancha verde cruce hacia el cielo*  
*Me traslado de nuevo a la sombra de los pinos*  
*desde allá:*  
*Tomo el ultimo trago insaciable*  
*De mi primavera cotidiana*  
 [The horizons burst like bottles  
 The green spot grows toward the sky  
 I move again to the shadow of the pines  
 From there  
 I drink a last insatiable drink  
 Of my everyday spring]<sup>18</sup>

This is translated as:

*Los muslos, los muslos, los muslos,*  
*Los muslos, los muslos, los muslos, los muslos*  
*El muslo*  
*Los muslos, los muslos, los muslos*  
 [Calves, calves, calves  
 Calves, calves, calves, calves  
 Calf  
 Calves, calves, calves]<sup>19</sup>

Argentina enters the picture just afterward, when what Borchardt translates as “urban and rural citizens”<sup>20</sup> becomes *estancieros* (ranch owners) on page 169 of the typescript and 167 of the Argos edition. (There is a similar reference to *hacendados* (landowners) on the following page.)

On manuscript page 170 the most interesting details are the details in the description of the *suboficial* of the words *con calma sensual y sentimental* (manuscript page 170); the English refers to his “exceptually [*sic*] sensuous and lyrical soul” (manuscript page 161) and the very odd change from *mi métrica* to *mi fe de nacimiento* (from “my metrics” to my birth certificate). This last, an emendation of an obvious mistake by the committee (the English refers to “my birth certificate” [manuscript page 161]), is a pencil correction in a hand that is not Gombrowicz’s, and on this page that other person made numerous other corrections. A particularly interesting instance here is the clause *ningún estanciero hacendero hacendado, sino un muchacho exilado*,

18. P. 168 of the manuscript, 166 of the Argos edition.

19. Pp. 168–69 of the manuscript, 166 of the Argos edition.

20. Borchardt, *Ferdydurke*, 160.



*muchacho perdido* (no industrious ranchowner-landowner) (manuscript page 170), where the first insertion is not by Gombrowicz, but the second one is.

On manuscript page 172 of the typescript “Kopyrda” is changed to “Kopeida,” which is the name that appears in the published version, although the English has “Kopyrda,” which I assume was in the original. A similar phonetic detail is on manuscript page 173, where *Así* (Thus) is changed to *O si* (Or rather), which suggests that the typescript is based on an oral rather than a written text.

A final example of an interesting insertion is: *Penetrantes y conmovedores secretos de la vida íntima de una adolescente, el contenido demoníaco de un cajón colegial* (Penetrating and moving secrets of the intimate life of an adolescent, the devilish contents of the drawer of a high school student) (manuscript page 174). This insertion by Gombrowicz must derive from the Polish original, since the English here reads “the seventeen-year-old’s private life, the demonic content of the schoolgirl’s drawer” (manuscript page 165).

To sum up, then, the typescript at Princeton shows us several important things:

- that Gombrowicz in 1947 knew a lot more Spanish than is usually stated, since the insertions in his handwriting, and the prefatory notes (the letter to Graciela Peyrou, the outline, and the note “Decir”) are quite fluent;
- that it is not at all clear that the translation was really done by twenty people, since only two kinds of handwriting appear in the typescript, Gombrowicz’s in pen and the unidentified other corrector in pencil;
- that the translators slightly toned down the Polish context and subtly added some Argentine language, what Lawrence Venuti calls a “domesticating translation,” one that makes its home in the new language and culture;
- that the translators were concerned about conveying the raciness of the original, occasionally adding an additional element (like the nudity on the beach) to make sure that the licentiousness of the original comes through;
- that Gombrowicz selected Piñera as the recipient of at least this portion of the manuscript and that Piñera somehow also ended up with the letter to Graciela Peyrou and with the prefatory materials (which are of undoubted importance).

In the preface to the translation Gombrowicz writes:

I dare to believe that in any case the publication of *Ferdydurke* in Latin America has its reason for being. There are various analogies between the spiritual situation of Poland and that of this continent. Here as there the problem of cultural immaturity is vibrant. Here as there every effort is wasted in literature in imitating “mature” foreign literatures.<sup>21</sup>

21. “*Me atrevo a creer que en todo caso la publicación de Ferydurke en la América Latina tiene su razón de ser. Existen varias analogías entre la situación espiritual de Polonia y la de este continente. Aquí como allá el problema de la inmadurez cultural es palpitante. Aquí como allá el mayor esfuerzo de la literatura se pierde en imitar las ‘maduras’ literaturas extranjeras*” (Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*: Novela, 12).



Gombrowicz's point is echoed by Piñera in his blurb on the inside front cover of the book, where Piñera says that the translation "*es una revisión especialmente valiosa para Hispanoamérica—clásico continente de la inmadurez*" (it is an especially valuable revision for Spanish America, a classical continent of immaturity). The collective translation of *Ferdynand*, then, is intended as an intervention in Latin American literature in 1947, echoing the impact that the book had had in Poland just before and during the war.

Sergio Romanelli, in his study of an Italian translation of Emily Dickinson, *Gênese do processo tradutório*, argues that looking at the drafts of a translation can suggest intertextual and intratextual dialogues with other translations of the same author, with the literature that is important to the author, and with texts on the theory of translation.<sup>22</sup> This particular case is interesting for the ways in which *Ferdynand*, in its reflection on cultural immaturity, is profoundly concerned with destabilizing relations between the periphery and the center. It is fascinating to see in detail, then, relations not with the "center" (which, for Gombrowicz and Piñera, was no doubt Paris) but between periphery and periphery, no doubt in an uneasy dialogue with Jorge Luis Borges's ideas about the irreverence of the periphery and his defense of translation as textual product in itself, a library of texts (as he says in his essay on the English translations of Homer's *Odyssey*).

22. Sergio Romanelli, *Gênese do processo tradutório* [Genesis of the translation process] (Vinhedo: Editora Horizonte, 2013), 172.