


## An Apprenticeship in Immaturity: Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* as an Anti-*Bildungsroman*\*

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### Abstract

This article argues that *Ferdydurke*, Witold Gombrowicz's novel published in 1937 in Poland, formally and thematically subverts the classical *Bildungsroman*. The seminal novel that has propagated the *Bildungsroman* genre is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795). *Bildungsroman*, commonly understood as a narrative of self-formation, was conceived in Germany in the late eighteenth century in the age of humanism and emphasizes the harmonious integration of the individual with society. This social mission also carries over to aesthetic idealism's notion of form, which is modeled on the organic unity of parts and the whole. Comparing Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the article contends that *Ferdydurke* displaces *Bildungsroman*'s notion of "beautiful totality" by a grotesque aesthetics of parts that alludes to the collapse of harmonious social relations in the aftermath of the First World War, and on the threshold of the Second. Gombrowicz's unique articulation of Form as the sedimentation of interpersonal antagonism is embodied in *Ferdydurke*, which, much like its protagonist, sabotages its own formal maturation through manifestoes, theoretical reflections, narrative digressions, and prefaces to the digressions thrown between the chapters. If the classical *Bildungsroman* presents us with the image of man in the process of becoming as Bakhtin has argued, *Ferdydurke* enacts the dissolution of that process in its very form.

**Keywords:** *Bildungsroman*, Gombrowicz, *bildung*, modernism, *Ferdydurke*.

## Toyulukta Bir Çıracılık: Bir Anti-*Bildungsroman* Örneği Olarak Witold Gombrowicz'ten *Ferdydurke*

### Öz

Bu makale, Witold Gombrowicz'in 1937 yılında Polonya'da yayımlanmış olan romanı *Ferdydurke*'ün klasik *Bildungsroman* türünü biçimsel ve tematik olarak alaşağı ettiğini tartışır. *Bildungsroman* türünün yayılmasını sağlayan eser, Goethe'nin çığır açıcı romanı *Wilhelm Meister'in Çıracılık Yılları*'dır (1795). Çoğunlukla bir öz-oluşum anlatısı olarak değerlendirilen *Bildungsroman* türü, on sekizinci yüzyıl Almanya'sında, hümanizm çağında ortaya çıkmış olup, bireyin toplumla uyumlu bir şekilde birleşmesine vurgu yapar. Bu toplumsal amaç,

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estetik idealizmin parçalar ve bütünün organik birliği üzerine modellenmiş biçim anlayışına da taşar. Bu makale, *Ferdydurke* ve *Wilhelm Meister'in Çıraklık Yılları* romanlarını karşılaştırır ve *Ferdydurke*'ün *Bildungsroman*'ın "güzel bütünlük" anlayışını grotesk bir parça estetiği aracılığıyla sarsarak, bu estetiğin Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın sonrasında ve ikincisinin eşiğinde çökmüş olan toplumsal uyumu anıştırdığını iddia eder. Gombrowicz'in insanlararası düşmanlığın çökeltisini yansıtan özgün Biçim anlayışı, *Ferdydurke*'te vücut bulmuştur. Roman da kahramanı gibi bölümleri arasına yerleştirilmiş manifestolar, kuramsal düşünceler, anlatıdan sapmalar ve bu sapmalara yazılmış önsözler aracılığıyla kendi biçimsel olgunluğunu sekteye uğratar. Bakhtin'in dediği gibi, *Bildungsroman*, oluşum sürecindeki insanın imgesini sunuyorsa, *Ferdydurke* bu sürecin çözülümünü kendi biçimi aracılığıyla gerçekleştirir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Bildungsroman*, Gombrowicz, *bildung*, modernizm, *Ferdydurke*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most researched genres in literary history, *Bildungsroman* is commonly understood to be a narrative of development, with a young hero gradually resolving his inner conflicts, finding his vocation and finally achieving a harmonious unity with society after coming to terms with his own limitations. The most notable example, if not the propagator, of the genre is undoubtedly Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1793-1795), in which Wilhelm Meister, a young theatre enthusiast of bourgeois background, resists his father's and his friend's pressure to join the world of commerce and joins a theatre company only to realize his lack of talent. Wilhelm subsequently gains access to a mysterious society called the Society of the Tower, and finds out that the Society has been watching and recording his development all along. The scroll of his past life and the certificate of apprenticeship he is given by the Society help Wilhelm realize the fact that his individuality is inextricably bound with the rest of society; that self-formation is only possible through reconciliation with the world. This recognition at the end of the novel leaves Wilhelm content to "have found a treasure [he] never deserved" and he "would not exchange it for anything in the world" (Goethe 1995: 373).

Although it has become common parlance in literary studies to suggest that *Bildungsroman* is the predominant genre of the nineteenth century, the reasons for this historical significance are often overlooked. After briefly describing the historical and ideological conditions under which *Bildungsroman* was conceived at the end of the eighteenth century in the age of humanism, this article will go on to contrast Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* with Gombrowicz's *anti-Bildungsroman*, *Ferdydurke*, and explain how the classical *Bildungsroman* meets its demise through a relentless dehumanization of form in *Ferdydurke*, in the moment of modernism.

*Bildungsroman* is the aesthetic corollary of the paradigm of *bildung* of the late eighteenth century, which means self-formation and self-cultivation. The concept of *bildung* was first used by medieval mystics and eighteenth-century Pietists as God's transformation of the passive individual who has become deformed (*entbildet*), and who would be redeemed by identifying with God's image, *imago dei*. It thus originally referred to "both the external form or appearance of an individual and to the process of giving form" (Kontje 1993: 2). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the religious and preformationist understanding of the term is to a large extent supplanted by a secular account of *bildung* that emphasizes epigenesis (self-generation) particularly in the works of Herder, Humboldt, Blumenbach, Goethe, Kant and Schiller.

There seems to be two main reasons behind this shift. The first one has to do with the growing dissatisfaction with the mechanical account of nature put forward by Newton. Particularly after Blumenbach's emphasis on the formative drive of organisms (*Bildungstrieb*) in his *Über den Bildungstrieb und das Zeugungsgeschäfte* (1781), organicism becomes more pronounced in the cultural sphere. Herder, for instance, delineates an organic trajectory behind the rise and fall of cultures in his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1784-1791), and similarly Humboldt mobilizes organic metaphors to describe the development of human beings in *Limits of State Action* (1792). Around the same time, Goethe publishes his *Botanical Writings* (1790), as Kant puts forward an epigenetic model of rational development in his Critiques. Thus, in the course of the eighteenth century, Cartesian mistrust in the world and the rigid rationality of cogito seems to be partly mitigated by *bildung's* more optimistic affirmation of life and a dynamic, developmental model of

rationality. Consequently, organicism becomes the master narrative of modernity, as well as its aesthetic model.

It must be noted that organicism is an inherently ideological position, in so far as it “generates ideologies by suggesting that their origin be natural,” as Müller-Sievers notes about epigenesis (1997: 6). Indeed, the dominance of organicism around the end of the eighteenth century is also due to Weimar Classicists’ disapproval of the violence and terror imparted by the French Revolution. Against the aggressive and abrupt change brought about by the Revolution, Goethe and Schiller advocate the slow, steady and harmonious process of plant metamorphosis as the ideal trope for social change. Schiller, in particular, argues that Freedom can only be gained through the aesthetic, and not by a violent revolution that suppresses man’s true nature. Schiller extends the idea of organic causation to the operation of the State, which is “formed by itself and for itself” and thus demands the harmonious attunement of the parts to the whole (1967: 33).

In fact, given that Germany had neither attained political unity nor undergone industrial revolution, the social base of Germany was contradictory with the lofty ideals of humanism. In fact, in his preface to *German Realists of the Nineteenth Century*, Lukàcs attributes the dominance of humanism in Germany of the eighteenth century precisely to its backward condition and fragmented political landscape:

*In the absence of a nation as a real political entity, the attempts to overcome such provincialism – the struggles to achieve a national character, a national ethos, etc. – degenerated into abstract cosmopolitanism or general humanism... Nowhere else in world literature do notions such as ‘man’, ‘humankind’ and ‘the human race’ receive such emphatic expression as they do in German Classicism (Lukàcs 1993: 2).*

Indeed, Lukàcs claims that “the clear-sighted realist Goethe” could not have entertained the illusion that “the miserable and backward Germany of his day” would ever achieve the social realization of his ideals (1969: 56). The *Bildungsroman* is thus structurally founded upon the contradiction between the ideals of humanism and Germany’s concrete historical situation. Although the ideals of humanism had already begun to be crushed under the reality of capitalism (as evident in Wilhelm’s desire to escape from the world of commerce into the world of theatre), Lukàcs argues that Goethe did not consider this antagonism “insoluble in principle” (1969: 56). Yet, it is perhaps in Goethe’s virtuosic use of irony that his suspension of belief in the bourgeoisie becomes manifest as a forewarning. In *Ferdynurke*, we will see that this subtle touch of irony will not be as easily suppressed for the sake of an illusory reconciliation.

## 2. FERDYDURKE: AN APPRENTICESHIP IN IMMATURITY

If we take Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* as the quintessential *Bildungsroman* in which Wilhelm, after years of trials and tribulations, eventually gains maturity by reconciling with society, then *Ferdynurke* is a story told in reverse. The protagonist Johnnie Kowalski, a thirty-year-old writer preoccupied with his own immaturity, wakes up one morning from a nightmare in which he goes back to adolescence. The same morning, he is kidnapped by his old schoolteacher and much to his chagrin, sent back to school. The novel proceeds in the same surrealist fashion, as he is forced to live with an ultramodern family, eventually manages to escape only to become trapped in a feudal manor, and ultimately becomes imprisoned in a pseudo-romantic relationship. Published in

1937, the novel eerily echoes the fate of the country of its inception, Poland, caught between centuries of subjugation and the impending Nazi occupation.

*Ferdydurke's* form mirrors its protagonist's obsession with immaturity. The novel consists of parts that mock each other, and it continuously self-sabotages the process of its formal maturation through manifestos, theoretical reflections, narrative digressions, and prefaces to the digressions. A case in point is the unjustified inclusion of two stories from Gombrowicz's earlier work, *Memoirs of Time of Immaturity*, that bear no thematic relation to the plot, but serve the purpose of the narrator's decision to compose a work of art that consists of parts unassimilable into any organic whole.

The regressive plot of the novel has often been contrasted to the progressive narrative of the classical *Bildungsroman*. For instance, in *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism, and the Subversion of Form*, Michael Goddard points out that "*Ferdydurke* consists of a reverse initiation from adulthood into the world of adolescence and immaturity" and hence "constitutes a profound complication of the linear narrative of the *Bildungsroman*" (Goddard 2010: 32). While Goddard's diagnosis of *Ferdydurke* as a subversion of the *Bildungsroman* is accurate, there are problems with reaffirming the commonplace and often hasty assumptions regarding the genre's linear and teleological narrative trajectory. Instead, one must understand the *Bildungsroman* as the master narrative of the project of modernity, core values and founding concepts of which it communicates. Thus, Gombrowicz's intervention will not be fully comprehended unless one acknowledges the stakes involved in his repudiation of modernity.

Gombrowicz's subversion of the *Bildungsroman* by and large involves the displacement of aesthetic idealism's understanding of form as a self-determining notion. Schiller, in particular, emphasizes "*the inner necessity of form,*" claiming that "*the form must, in the true sense of the word, be self-determining and self-determined*" (Schiller 2003: 166). Schiller's stress on self-determination is not restricted to the aesthetic realm, but carries over to social relations in the form of freedom, which can only be attained through aesthetic appreciation: "*it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom*" (Schiller 2004: 27). Thus, for Schiller, a harmonious society is only possible as long as the individual re-enacts the harmonious relationship between the parts of an aesthetic whole, and aesthetic education is key to the progress of humanity.

In stark contrast, Gombrowicz's idea of Form derives from his fierce repudiation of the possibility of self-determination, be it that of an aesthetic form, of an individual, or of society as a whole. Gombrowicz's concept of "Form" does not simply refer to aesthetic form, since in his view, art is only one of the spheres on which the network of relationships taking place in the inter-human realm leaves its indelible and often antagonistic mark. Thus, Form for Gombrowicz denotes the totality of oppressive and infantilizing relations that also dictates the rules of art; for Form demands that the artist compose the parts of his/her work with a view of the whole, whereas the reader assimilates only the parts.

*But what do you think, tell me—in your opinion, doesn't the reader assimilate parts only, and only partly at that? He reads a part, or a piece of it, then stops, only to resume reading another piece later, and as so often happens, he starts from the middle or from the end, then backtracks to the beginning... Might not just a phone call, or a fly, interrupt his reading precisely at the point where all the individual parts unite in a dramatic resolution? Oh, horrid parts! Is this why we construct a whole, so that a particle of a part of the reader will absorb a particle of a part of the work, and only partly at that? (Gombrowicz 2000: 71)*

Similarly, the individual is not of his/her own making, but essentially defined by the opinions society holds about him/her.

*Mankind is accursed because our existence on this earth does not tolerate any well-defined and stable hierarchy, everything continually flows, spills over, moves on, everyone must be aware of and be judged by everyone else, and the opinions that the ignorant, dull, and slow-witted hold about us are no less important than the opinions of the bright, the enlightened, the refined. This is because man is profoundly dependent on the reflection of himself in another man's soul, be it even the soul of an idiot (Gombrowicz 2000: 5).*

It is *Ferdydurke's* emphasis on the essential impossibility of self-determination, along with its scathing attack on modernity, autonomy, unified subjectivity, aesthetic totality and progressive rationality that makes it such an exemplary *anti-Bildungsroman*. Gombrowicz displaces *bildungs's* notion of beautiful form in which parts harmoniously unfold into the whole by a grotesque aesthetics of parts that alludes to the collapse of all harmonious social relations in the aftermath of the World War I, and on the threshold of the second.

### 2.1. Immaturity as a Theme in Gombrowicz

Poland's uneasy experience with modernity has a direct bearing on Gombrowicz's aesthetics, particularly on his preoccupation with immaturity. He explains in *A Kind of Testament* that "in that Proustian epoch at the beginning of the century," his family was a displaced one, "whose social status was far from clear, living between Lithuania and the former Congress Kingdom of Poland, between land and industry, between what is known as 'good society' and another, middle-class society," the first between, which "multiplied until they almost constituted [Gombrowicz's] country of residence" (Gombrowicz 1973: 28). As a consequence of its belated transition to modernity, Poland was characterized by uneven development of its urban and rural parts; a split allegorized in *Ferdydurke* by the theme of an everlasting adolescence, and by the grotesque body imagery, some parts of which "were still those of a boy," and others "vividly raping each other in an all-encompassing and piercing state of pan-mockery" (Gombrowicz 2000: 2). By the time Gombrowicz was writing *Ferdydurke*, Poland had long gained its independence, but it would turn out to be a transitory era because its democratic ideals were brought down by Marshall Pilsudski's coup in 1926. Thus, the sense of in-betweenness Gombrowicz had as a child would intensify in the period of Independence, a "paradoxical one of freedom and anxiety, experimentation and conformity, cosmopolitanism, and increasing nationalism of a fascist and anti-Semitic nature," in a Poland stuck "between the powerful nations of Germany and the Soviet Union, between its brutal past and the increasing likelihood of an even more brutal future" (Goddard 2010: 10). Gombrowicz's disparagement of Poland's superficial freedom ultimately carries over to his conviction about the impossibility of self-determination: one of the core features of *bildung*.

In *Ferdydurke*, Johnnie's apprenticeship in immaturity begins in a moment of in-betweenness, at a "pale and lifeless hour when night is almost gone but dawn has not yet come into being," (Gombrowicz 2000: 1) that sets the twilight mood of uncertainty which will prevail in the rest of the novel. As existential darkness dispels the light that is the source of biological life, Johnnie feels the trepidation of nothingness: "It was the dread of nonexistence, the terror of extinction, it was the angst of nonlife, the fear of unreality, a biological scream of all my cells in the face of an inner disintegration when all would be blown to pieces and scattered to the winds" (Gombrowicz 2000: 1). Johnnie's fear has in fact been generated by an eerily prophetic dream that foreshadows the grotesque turn of events in the novel. The prophecy is unsettling in

that it actually involves regression, for in his dream, Johnnie is taken back to his youth and he sees himself as he was fifteen or sixteen: “I heard my long-buried, roosterlike squeaky little voice, I saw my features that were not yet fully formed, my nose that was too small, my hands that were too large—I felt the unpleasant texture of that intermediate, passing phase of development” (Gombrowicz 2010: 1). The dream scene recalls Freud’s theory of dreams to the extent that Johnnie’s dream sets in motion an underlying impulse, immaturity, that is ultimately threatening for the ego that strives for Form. Freud considers dreaming to be “on the whole an example of regression to the dreamer’s earliest condition, a revival of childhood, of the instinctual impulses which dominated it and of the methods of expression which were then available to him” and states that “it is only dreams that can tell us about the regression of our emotional life to one of the earliest stages of development” (Freud 1957: 268). Yet, it is equally important to note that Johnnie does not regress to childhood, but precisely to adolescence; for childhood still involves well-defined forms, little noses, chubby cheeks and bright eyes. Johnnie, on the other hand, feels that his body assumes a monstrous amorphousness as his parts were “vividly raping each other in an all-encompassing and piercing state of pan-mockery” (Gombrowicz 2010: 2).

In his *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (2009) that constitute the underpinnings of this theory of *bildung*, Goethe explains the harmonious metamorphosis through which the plant transforms itself, passing from the cotyledon to the seed, leaf, calyx, corolla, stamen, petal and all the way into the fruit. In stark contrast, Gombrowicz’s body parts are at war with each other. If, in Goethe’s delicate morphology we discover “the laws of metamorphosis by which nature produces one part through another, creating a great variety of forms through the modification of a single organ” (2009: 30) in Gombrowicz we find a “biological scream of inner disintegration when all would be blown to pieces and scattered to the winds.” (2000: 1) Indeed, a disharmonious morphology foregrounds Gombrowicz’s aesthetics built on what he calls the “part-concept,” as we will shortly see. For now, suffice it to note that *Ferdydurke*’s cosmos is a far cry from the self-originating, self-organizing one of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Johnnie’s fear does not lessen, but intensifies as he wakes up and realizes that he is as unsettled and torn apart in his waking life. Johnnie’s frustration with his own immaturity is coupled with an equally forceful conviction in the illusory nature of maturity, since he does not believe in the idea of a fixed, well-defined identity, or an essence that will determine one’s life:

*In the world of the spirit, rape is the order of the day, we are forced to be as others see us, and to manifest ourselves through them, we are not autonomous, and what’s more—my personal calamity came from an unhealthy delight in actually making myself dependent on green youths, juveniles, teenage girls, and cultural aunts. To have that cultural aunt forever on your back—to be naïve because someone who is naïve thinks you are naïve—to be silly because some silly person thinks you are silly—to be green because someone who is immature dunks and bathes you in greenness of his own (Gombrowicz 2000:9).*

The tension between maturity and immaturity never gets resolved in the rest of the novel. As Gombrowicz himself later writes in his *Diary*, in *Ferdydurke*, two loves fight with each other, “the striving for maturity and the striving for eternally rejuvenating immaturity. *Ferdydurke* is the image of the battle for the maturity of someone who is in love with his own immaturity” (Gombrowicz 1988: 49).

## 2.2: Immaturity and Form

The problem of Form constitutes the axis of Gombrowicz's lifelong artistic preoccupation with which themes such as immaturity, chaos, authenticity and the dynamics of intersubjectivity are inextricably bound. Although Gombrowicz's adventures with Form never cease to play a big part in his later novels, *Trans-Atlantic*, *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*, along with innumerable pages of journal entries, memoirs and critical writings on his own works, it is in *Ferdydurke* that we find its most intense and forceful articulation. In many ways, this is not surprising; for the treatment of form in *Ferdydurke* is to a large extent inspired by the scathing attacks his first collection of stories, aptly titled *Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity*, received from literary critics – and that burning need to retaliate clearly shows in *Ferdydurke*.

In Gombrowicz, Form is almost always articulated as the foil for “immaturity,” as the irreducible force that gives the amorphous immaturity a well-defined shape, making it mature. Broadly, Form stands for the totality of interpersonal relations that determines the individual, and artistic form is only one of the areas which this higher Form molds after its own shape.

*A human being does not express himself forthrightly and in keeping with his nature but always in some well-defined form, and this form, this style, this manner of being is not of our own making but is thrust upon us from outside...Oh, the power of Form! Nations die because of it. It is the cause of wars. It creates something in us that is not of us. It governs our slightest impulses. It is at the base of our collective life. For you, however, Form and Style still belong strictly to the realm of aesthetic—for you, style is on paper only (Gombrowicz 2000: 81).*

Form, according to Gombrowicz, is thus the reified shape of social relations. Even from such a perfunctory explanation, it becomes clear that aesthetics is not the principle sphere in which Gombrowicz articulates the problem of Form; if by aesthetics one simply understands contemplation of artistic beauty. On the contrary, by acknowledging society's impact on art, Gombrowicz unsettles high-modernism's quasi-religious belief in aesthetic autonomy. It is precisely by restating form as an inherently social construct that Gombrowicz presents a critique of the formalist impulse of modernism. If, as Adorno argues, the autonomy of art was sustained by the idea of humanity following the dissolution of its cultic function (Adorno 2004: 1), in *Ferdydurke* the idea of humanity is itself abolished, abolishing art's autonomy in turn.

For all their differences, Gombrowicz's notion of Form has a lot in common with that of the *bildung* paradigm insofar as it is intimately related with the idea of self-determination (or lack thereof). In “The Critique of The Teleological Judgment” part of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant identifies self-organization as the unique purposive trait of organic forms, which defy the model of mechanical causation. As opposed to a watch, for instance, parts of a natural being “reciprocally produce each other”, and thus “produce a whole out of their own causality” (Kant 2001: 245). Aesthetic form is likewise governed by the principle of self-causation, since a form is only beautiful “if it explains itself without a concept,” if it is “self-determining and self-determined” (Schiller 2003: 155). In Kallias (2003), by means of a synthesis of Kant's understanding of freedom as morality and his model of organic causation, Schiller arrives at the idea that freedom comes about because each part of a composition restricts its inner freedom to allow other parts to express the freedom of the whole:

*It is necessary for every great composition that the particular restrict itself to let the whole reach its effect. If this restriction by the particular is at once the effect of its freedom, that is, if it posits the whole itself, the composition is beautiful...Everything in a landscape must refer to the whole*



*and yet the particular should only be constrained by its own rule, should only seem to follow its own will. But it is impossible that the process of cohering to a whole should not require some sacrifices on the part of the particular, since a collision of freedoms is unavoidable...Freedom comes about because each restricts its inner freedom such as to allow every other to express its freedom* (Schiller 2003: 172).

The pressing desire for harmony expressed both in Kant and Schiller is in fact a symptom of the deep terror caused by The French Revolution. Schiller, in particular, radicalizes Kant's notion of "beauty as the symbol of morality," and asserts the precedence of beauty over freedom in his *Aesthetic Education of Man* (2004), which was written against the background of the revolution and in a climate of cultural degeneracy in which society was "relapsing into its original elements" instead of "hastening upwards into organic life" (2004: 35). It is striking that Schiller opposes organic life with the "the intricate machinery of the State" (2004: 39) which destroys the harmony between the individual's diverse powers. Schiller argues that the totality of man's powers can only be brought together by the aesthetic; "the middle disposition between sensuousness and reason" (2004: 99) and as long as the State does not pay heed to the variety present in the individual's nature, its political interventions will end up in violence and oppression. Freedom can only be gained through the aesthetic, and as such, beauty has precedence over freedom: "It is through beauty that we arrive at freedom" (2004: 27).

Under the oppression of Form, *Ferdydurke's* universe is neither free nor beautiful, but grotesque and tyrannical. A fierce negation of aesthetic idealism's understanding of form as the gateway into beauty and freedom, Gombrowicz's Form is unmistakably detached from its eighteenth century humanist mission. In Gombrowicz, Form, as the calcification of social relations, does not emerge organically and in harmony with the individual; rather it is "thrust from outside" (2004: 80) denying one the possibility of self-determination: "The son of earth will henceforth understand that he is not expressing himself in harmony with his deepest being but always in accordance with some artificial form painfully thrust upon him from without, either by people or by circumstances" (2000: 85).

Unlike Schiller's, Gombrowicz's Form is not a mediation through which one passes in order to arrive at freedom, beauty and harmony. Quite the contrary, the grotesque element in *Ferdydurke* results from the novel's attempt to destroy the idea of the wholeness by dissecting it into parts that refuse to unite. Gombrowicz's main target here is the idealist aesthetics of totality, which models art after the unity of parts of organic beings. Mocking the idea of a sublime aesthetic unity, Gombrowicz claims that no matter how meticulously structured, the work is destined to fall into its parts, because life itself denies the reader the possibility to assimilate the work's wholeness all at once. Whatever human beings do, they do it only in parts, but Form demands wholeness and the surrender of autonomous parts to its absolute mastery. In an effort to escape from Form, he comes up with a new aesthetics built on the "part-concept." The following passage reads almost like the exact negation of Schiller's idea of parts achieving their true freedom in the whole:

*Do we create form or does form create us? We think we are the ones who create it, but that's an illusion, because we are, in equal measure, constructed by the construction. Whatever you put down on the paper dictates what comes next, because the work is not born of you—you want to write one thing, yet something entirely different comes out. Parts tend to wholeness, every part surreptitiously makes its way toward the whole, strives for roundness, and seeks fulfillment, it*

*implores the rest to be created in its own image and likeness... A total inability to encompass wholeness marks the human soul* (2000: 72).

Although, as Goethe and Schiller, Gombrowicz articulates Form as a dynamic notion, his account nevertheless imparts a sense of foreclosure and imprisonment, since the process of socialization that constitutes the dynamic essence of Form involves manipulation, indoctrination, constant duels and symbolic rapes to such a degree that Form symbolizes disintegration and imprisonment instead of a beautiful totality. He thus decides to build a work composed of individual parts, *"treating the work itself as a particle of the work, man as a union of the parts, and mankind as a composite of parts and pieces"* (2000: 74). Ferdydurke is nothing less than a mockery of sublime art, as he attests: *"If anyone were to complain: this part-concept is not ...a concept at all but sheer nonsense, a mockery and leg pulling, and that I'm trying, instead of complying with strict rules and cannons of art, to evade them by mocking them- I would reply: yes, yes, indeed"* (2004: 74).

In a sense, *Ferdydurke* stands as an example of what would have happened if the classical *Bildungsroman* had not reconciled the two essential, but contradictory features of modernity that Moretti has characterized: boundless dynamism of youth inspired by the principle of self-determination, and the acceptance of compromise as demanded by socialization. Moretti claims that youth is chosen as the new epoch's material sign because of *"its ability to accentuate modernity's dynamism and instability"*, and adds that *"if it had been able to do only this, on the other hand, it would have run the risk of destroying itself as form"* (1987: 5):

*To become a 'form', youth must be endowed with a very different, almost opposite feature to those already mentioned: the very simple and slightly philistine notion that 'youth does not last forever'. Youth is brief, or at any rate circumscribed, and this enables, or rather forces the a priori establishment of a formal constraint on the portrayal of modernity. Only by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism, only by agreeing to betray to a certain extent its very essence, only thus, it seems, can modernity be represented. Only thus, we may add, can it be 'made human'; can it become an integral part of our emotional and intellectual system, instead of the hostile force bombarding it from without with that 'excess of stimuli; which – from Simmel to Freud to Benjamin –has always been seen as modernity's most typical threat* (1987: 5).

*Ferdydurke* does not make such a concession, and consequently, it does destroy its own form. *Ferdydurke* resists the organic unfolding of its essence, immaturity, into form precisely by dehumanizing it, and instead fashioning itself after body parts – legs, calves, heads, pupas, mugs-- that do not make up a body.<sup>1</sup>

While *Ferdydurke* certainly operates as a kind of Deleuzian machinic assemblage, it is important to keep in mind that Gombrowicz's construct ultimately cannot escape from the final descent of Form. Indeed, the novel ends with Johnnie's conviction that *"from pupa there is absolutely no escape"* (2000: 281). Even though the novel's last words consist of the nonsensical limerick, and the novel thus strikes its final blow on maturity at the expense of its self-negation, it is worth remembering that in these final pages of the novel, a pupa-shaped sun rises in the sky and reaches its zenith, scorching Johnnie and his pseudo-lover as a constant reminder of Form (2000: 279).

<sup>1</sup> In her "Translator's Note," *Ferdydurke's* translator Danuta Borhardt explains that in Polish, the word pupa means "the buttocks, behind, bum, tush, rump" but she adds that none of these convey Gombrowicz's usage. Similarly, mug means face: "While "the mug" is Gombrowicz's metaphor for thee destructive elements in human relationships, the pupa is his metaphor for the gentle, insidious, but definite infantilizing and humiliation that we inflict on one another" (2000: xix).

In fact, *Ferdydurke* is at all times self-conscious about its oscillation between form and formlessness, and establishes symmetries and repetitions throughout the work to sustain the parody of a formal unity. For instance, "The Child Runs Deep in Filidor" section is later mirrored by "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert" section, which has to have its own preface, just because the former had its own: "I'm a captive to a preface... because the law of symmetry requires that the story in which the child runs deep in Filidor should have a corresponding story in which the child runs deep in Filibert... Even if I want to I can't, I can't, and I can't avoid the ironclad laws of symmetry and analogy" (2000: 193). Thus, ironically, Gombrowicz's relentless attack on Form ultimately results in the final affirmation and sublation of Form, since form is cancelled, retained, and raised to the level of the concept all at once, bearing testimony to Adorno's assertion of the residual irony in modern artworks:

*Every other element can be negated in the concept of form, even aesthetic unity, the idea of form that first made the wholeness and autonomy of the artwork possible. In highly developed modern works, form tends to dissociate unity, either in the interest of expression or to criticize art's affirmative character... Today artists would like to do away with unity altogether, though with the irony that those works that are supposedly open and incomplete necessarily regain something comparable to unity insofar as this openness is planned (2004: 141).*

Given his appetite for antinomies and contradictions, it is not a surprise that Gombrowicz attests to this irony. The more he is on the outside of form, the stronger he feels in its power. It is indeed from the retention of these oppositions and contrasts as opposed to reconciliations of the classical *Bildungsroman* that *Ferdydurke* draws its strength to attack Form once again.

For all its apparent surrealism, *Ferdydurke* presents a far more accurate picture of the contradictory social order of its day than the novels generally categorized under the rubric of "realism," including the *Bildungsroman*. After all, as Jameson argues, realism "requires an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order" (2007: 263) and the classical *Bildungsroman*'s residual illusory social harmony sinks down to the bottom of *Ferdydurke* as a problem of form. In fact, in response to Włodzimierz Bolecki who problematizes the current "post-modernisation of Polish modernism" and asks if we "should rather call it unexplored modernism?" (1999: 134) it could be argued that *Ferdydurke* could very well be called a work of "unexplored realism"; provided that, in this case, we understand realism as the expression of "a grisly and terrifying objective real world beneath the appearances of our own world: an unveiling or deconcealment of the nightmarish reality of things, a stripping away of our conventional illusions or rationalizations about daily life and existence" (Jameson 1986: 70) as Jameson argues to be the case in Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* (1918), another literary instantiation of belated modernity.

It is worth noting that the category of reality as it is taken up by the classical *Bildungsroman*, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* for instance, is not so much an expression of reality as such, as it is of the Freudian "reality principle" that demands ego to compromise with the social world. Indeed, Franco Moretti notes that we have Freudian interpretations of tragedy and myth, or fairy tale and comedy, but nothing comparable for the novel, for the same reason that we have no solid Freudian analysis of youth because

*the raison d'être of psychoanalysis lies in breaking up the psyche into its opposing forces- whereas youth and the novel have the opposite task of fusing, or at least bringing together, the conflicting features of individual personality. Because, in other words, psychoanalysis always looks beyond*

*the Ego –whereas the Bildungsroman attempts to build the ego, and make it the indisputable centre of its own structure (1987: 10).*

It could be argued that the classical *Bildungsroman* reflects the ego-ideal of its age; in other words, what modernity perceives and wants itself to be, rather than its actuality. And, as opposed to the “closed past” of the older types such as the historical novel, if the *Bildungsroman* involves “the assimilation of real historical time” (Bakhtin 1986: 52) as Bakhtin has observed, it is also the fantasies and illusions of its time that are being assimilated into the novel, along with the consciousness of its hero. Indeed, Wilhelm Meister is not only thrown into a world dominated by the reconciliatory tendencies of bourgeois individualism; more importantly, he is an agent of this world that emerges “in and through him”:

*He emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to another. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. What is happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man (Bakhtin 1986: 23).*

So it is in *Ferdydurke* that we see this process in reverse, the regression of a man on the border between two epochs— between maturity and adolescence, between the two world wars— who cannot really make that transition and instead sinks back into his youth as an allegory of his present moment in history, and it is first and foremost through the novel’s form that the dissolution of the older type of man is enacted.

*Ferdydurke* closes with an anticlimactic fall into normality and Form, which this time is disguised as romantic love. Neither Johnnie nor Zosia are genuinely in love, but they wrap themselves around its form like ivy around oak. As they walk and walk on the green meadows, the glorious pupa rises in the sky above them, “in its absolute continuance, brilliant and blazing, infantile and infantilizing, closed, sunken, magnified within itself and standing still at the apogee of its zenith” (2010: 280). After passing through the oedipalization of desire in the modern family’s house, the novel reaches its anal stage and it is ultimately consumed by its own pupa as the penultimate moment of regression of its own bizarre psychosexual development that disturbs the order of Freud’s successive stages. It is ironic that, having travelled through form and formlessness, this great *anti-Bildungsroman* ultimately ends with Johnnie staying true to Form by making “the appropriate attitude,” “getting the girl,” “settling down” and becoming like others, as Hegel once said about Wilhelm Meister.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if Wilhelm’s final sentiment was bliss, Johnnie’s is desperation. This anticlimactic ending is also the final affirmation of the supremacy of Form, which molds everything into a parody. But if everything is a parody, then Form is a parody, too. So the novel mocks Form for the last time by ending with a nonsensical limerick, in a similar way it began with its title that does not mean anything: “It’s the end, what a gas, and who’s read it is an ass!” (2000: 281). Immaturity, thus, has the final word in *Ferdydurke*, and oral stage as its temporal correlative is the final destination of Johnnie’s regressive apprenticeship in a world where everyone is ultimately dependent on each other, where “there is no escape from the mug, other than into

<sup>2</sup> “For such years of apprenticeship end when the subject sows his wild oats, schools his desires and opinions to conform to the current circumstances and to accept their rationality, and takes up a suitable position in the social network. No matter how much he once quarreled with the world or was shoved around, in the end he usually gets his girl and some sort of job, marries and becomes a Philistine like everybody else. The wife runs the household, children arrive, and the adored wife, who was once the only one, an angel, looks more or less like everyone else. The job provides work and annoyances, the marriage vexation, and so he has the same hangover as everyone else” (Hegel 1986: 593).

another mug”, and where “from a human being one can only take shelter in the arms of another human being” (2000: 281).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Conceived in Germany in the late eighteenth century and the most notable aesthetic legacy of the Enlightenment humanism, The *Bildungsroman* was the expression of a desire for social harmony, for parts seamlessly integrated into the whole, as the individual into the State. The difficulty, if not the impossibility, of realizing this utopian vision was already recognized and conveyed by Goethe through subtle irony in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. But as the brief period of optimism inspired by the French Revolution came to an end and capitalism expropriated the humanist dreams of a fully cultivated man to replace it with the more efficient model of subject production, it became increasingly difficult to suppress irony in brief textual moments, and irony eventually broke out as a form problem in modernism.

As a great modernist *anti-Bildungsroman*, *Ferdydurke* lays bare the illusory notions of social harmony and aesthetic unity that were inherent to the classical *Bildungsroman*. *Ferdydurke* presents a much grimmer picture of its day, given that it was published in 1937, when the world was about to descend into the chaos and the sheer barbarity of World War II. Thus, as opposed to the idealist notion of form as an organic unity, in *Ferdydurke*, Form is articulated as the sedimentation of social antagonism. For all his denigration of autonomy and his damnation of Form, even Gombrowicz tries to escape from the tyranny of Form by seeking solace in another Form. But the strength of his critique derives precisely from the fact that he does not attempt to resolve this tension for the sake of an illusory reconciliation. Instead, by composing his work in the form of parts that refuse to unite, *Ferdydurke* provides a new model of formal realism as an alternative to the putative realism of the classical *Bildungsroman*.

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