

Tul'si Bhambry (Polish)

The Polish émigré writer Witold Gombrowicz has won international acclaim for his modernist plays, novels and diary. Leaving Poland as a young man in 1939, he spent close to a quarter of a century in Buenos Aires and died in France in 1969, never returning to Poland. Some of his fictional and autobiographical portrayals of his life in South America are available in English, but one important gap remains to be filled. In the late 1950s, Gombrowicz wrote audio essays for Radio Free Europe, including a series of semi-fictional accounts of his travels in Argentina. These remain largely untranslated.

The little book is brimming with lively and perceptive observations of the land and its people, while Gombrowicz's ironical self-portrayal complements his better-known autobiographical texts. The writing is imaginative, humorous, and often moving; it can be provocative and it can be poetic. Gombrowicz's essays are more than a Pole's portrayal of social mores and local cultures in mid-century Argentina. For him – as for many modernists – travel writing is more about the self and the imagination than it is about landscapes and reality. His creative approach makes his Travels in Argentina (Wędrówki po Argentynie) a complex and fascinating text, which I am sure, will interest a broad readership.

from *Travels in Argentina*

Witold Gombrowicz

Poland in Argentina

Let's have a chat, my friends, about the Poles in Argentina – but how? What do you find interesting? The current state of the Argentine Polish community? Their numbers? Distribution? Organisation? Their cultural and economic activities?

To hell with this questionnaire! You find it deadly dull, and so do I! You don't care one iota, do you? Instead, I imagine, you'd be interested in another question, namely how the Argentine sees and feels about us Poles over here; yes, why not admit that you find that far more exciting ... and you get more and more excited the longer your shameful isolation endures, and history's malicious paradox condemns you to the role of Europe's provincial backwater, right at its very centre.

Unlike Argentina. Although in terms of geography Argentina is lost in some godforsaken hole, drowned between two oceans, in reality it is open to the world, international, maritime, intercontinental. So what do we look like in this Argentina?

It's not a topic we can exhaust in a few short words. Let us begin with the most eye-catching feature – the body – and we'll see where that leads us.

As a physical type, the Pole around here – how shall I put it? – cuts an unclear, complicated figure ... In Argentina, which is swarming with foreigners, it turns out that as a body type the Pole is much less clearly defined than not just the conventional Scandinavians or the English, but also the Germans, Italians, Spaniards, Russians or the French. The Poles present a wealth of physical resolutions, a multiplicity of types, an abundance of faces; just one Pole alone often looks as if he got his nose from one place, his ears from another, his rear from yet another – all fitted with an unpredictable expression and moving in a direction that's equally unforeseeable, or even in several directions at once. And there's a considerable force of expression that accompanies this Tower of Babel of shapes. How many saints are there among us, how many criminals, chieftains and worthies, goofs and boors, and how visible are our pathos and crookery, virtue and roguery ... Of course, the Argentine fails to grasp all this; all he knows is that it is hard to recognise a Pole from his appearance, and that our national type is like those languages he overhears on a tram or an underground train: fascinating because he can't understand a word. He's incapable of even a rough guess at the linguistic group that language belongs to; it usually turns out to be Hungarian.

Thus we could encapsulate the effect the Polish body produces in Argentina in a single word: diversity. Diversity, and perhaps we could even say disorder. And also: extremity ... naturally, without mentioning a whole series of other characteristics that are easy to guess, such as the fact that a Pole will be fairer, he will generally be blond, he will be grander, taller, and heavier. And yet none of this, in my opinion, matters as much as the sort of physical disarray that distinguishes us here. We should add that in terms of appearance the Argentines, men and women, carry themselves quite well; unlike us, what characterises them is a serenity and discipline of form, as well as a discreet way of expressing themselves. What's more, thanks to this discretion, physical advantages are no cause for pride here; as I have had occasion to suggest elsewhere, no kind of superiority is aggressive in South America. But against this serene and discreet backdrop our untidiness stands out all the more.

However, this lack of order, this diversity, doesn't end with the body. We can also find it in our manner – and in Argentina this shows infinitely more clearly than in Poland. Every now and then I take Argentines to Polish parties. You see, a typical dance in Argentina will be calm, polite, measured, monotonous, nothing offensive ever happens, everyone looks proper and is properly dressed, you won't see anything to astound you ... A Polish party, by contrast, is like a virgin forest, and one that is shot through with pitfalls; alongside gentility, vulgarity is rife. When someone opens his mouth you never know if you're going to hear a refined intellectual subtlety or some naïve remark from Hicksville. The emigrant's cosmopolitan refinement and wide experience go hand in hand with undying parochialism. His wife's gown has an equal chance of being tasteful and modest or gaudily provincial; a hand-raising gesture that begins with ultra-fine delicacy might end in a punch in the face. Quite recently, at one of those dances an elegant former cavalry officer, an athletic giant, squeezed his partner's hand so very heartily that he broke it ... Out of sheer enthusiasm! Such things fill the Argentines with awe, but leave them somewhat baffled. And we can see the same Slavic or Polish tendency to stand at the edge of the abyss in any context, for example in letters to the editor printed in Polish-language newspapers in Argentina. It is instructive to compare them with readers' letters in the Argentine press. Although the Argentine's literature is not in the same league as Polish literature, although he is only just beginning to try out his powers in this field, his letter to the editor will be sharp and to the point, relatively enlightened, well bred and impeccable in terms of language and style. A Pole's letter, meanwhile, is liable – I say 'liable' because it is not always the case, this is just a constant danger for us – the Pole's letter is liable (and how often!) to be gauche, untidy, immature.

From a psychological point of view the issue is more complicated than it might seem. How can we explain the confident form that characterises the Latin race? I remember my amazement the first time I looked through a little journal published by a group of young local poets. Why is it that at an age when a Polish lad is still so inexperienced, these twenty-year-old Argentines of Spanish or Italian blood have already attained an early maturity that expresses itself smoothly, even gracefully? What's behind this tiresome lack of *savoir faire* in us Poles?

And are the Argentines as clearly aware of all this as I am, that is to say a Pole observing other Poles against the backdrop of a foreign country?

So far, admittedly, in this treatise of mine I haven't yet said anything particularly

new – after all, this Slavic 'unevenness' has been tainting our blood for a long time. But now I believe I'm about to enter upon terrain that is less familiar and even quite surprising. Listen to this: from many conversations with Argentines, from many observations, I came to the conclusion that for them those shortcomings in Polish form are not in the least off-putting – and they may even find them quite impressive. How very often their reactions have astonished me – for instance, their docile acceptance of the eccentricities and tomfoolery of those wags of ours, those jokers under the influence, those 'fanciful' types.

How are we to understand this? Does the Argentine let himself be overawed by the Pole? Does our stronger temperament win out? Or – maybe – they find those gaffes and blunders of ours exotic, and therefore neither painful nor irritating? No doubt, in many cases that's how we should explain it, but let us also look for a slightly deeper interpretation. I think they are too paralysed and perhaps tired, or even bored, by their own form – that's why their reaction to poor form is much more sympathetic than one might assume. While the Pole horrifies me with his lack of *savoir-vivre*, the Argentine will see in the Pole, above all, a saviour who takes him into the sphere of the Incalculable. Who knows, perhaps what he values most in the Pole is that he is not ashamed to be the way he is ... Oh what a mistake! For it's nothing but shame that prompts our constant overacting.

This might seem an odd comparison, but I would compare the Argentine world, bourgeois as it is, to the military world, and the Polish world, though chivalrous and heroic, to the world of actors. While General Form is in charge among the Argentines and imposes his iron discipline, for us it is bohemianism that reigns, as well as rowdiness, larking about, the ham acting of travelling players who give a different performance every night and, what's more, who never know what kind of performance they're going to let forth. The great truth about us that reveals itself to us abroad is that we are ARTIFICIAL. But never mind! Artificiality can be a gangway to many wonderful achievements that are out of reach for good-natured simplicity. This artificiality means that, for all their shortcomings, the Poles are seen over here as interesting people, not only more interesting and richer than the monumentally boring British, Dutch, Belgians, Swiss, Danes, Swedes or Norwegians, but also than many other nationalities who really are interesting. Polish charm is not a myth, either. "You are delightfully annoying!" That's what an Argentine lady said to me as she was leaving a party of mine, at which we had harassed her for three whole hours.

Women on the beach

The beaches of Mar del Plata are swarming with exquisite femininity – lithe, passionate, luscious, with immense eyes and as delicate as flowers. Curiously, the Poles who turn up in South America need quite a while to figure out these eye-catching wonders. I used to know a clerk at the Banco Polaco in Buenos Aires who, a year into his stay, still went on about how Argentine women are no good and there's nothing like Polish women ... A misunderstanding rooted in the fact that the Argentine woman is a different kind of beauty, and one must get used to her first. This excessive delicateness, this daintiness, this femininity at its zenith are not always to the taste of an imagination filled with a different ideal, one that is sportier, stronger, more resistant, and coarser even.

Two decades ago I made my first entry into Rio de Janeiro, straight off the boat, in the company of two fair Polish ladies. Exceedingly pretty, they were devoured by the gaze of the locals (all women are visually devoured here). I remember thinking them a pitiful sight, those – famously beautiful! – Brazilian women with their dazzling eyes, teeth, jewellery and colourful costumes. All this struck me at once as an extravaganza, something unpleasant and flashy – I remained faithful to my companions' modest berets and unpainted faces.

Today, as I look at the coffee-brown curves of those *niñas*, *chicas* and *damitas* on the Plaza Grande in Mar del Plata, I have already learned to appreciate their charming and graceful deportment and the fine harmony of hues and shimmers they represent. The fillies between thirteen and fifteen are especially exquisite – airy, quivering, incredibly straightforward, astonishingly comfortable in their unrestraint. There are plenty of other types and species: there are the students, more Europeanised, 'modern', who have friendly and familiar manners; there are the well groomed and well bred *niñas* of the oligarchy, poised, English, with a coolness that adorns their Southern temperament; there are the beauties who have come here from Central America – Cuban women, also Mexicans, among whom there are lionesses and tigresses capable of ruining roulette players by the hundred. But they are outnumbered by the Argentine petty bourgeoisie, those *damitas* whose husbands are sweating away in their offices while they come here to parade their nakedness with the same care they devote to their outfits about town. The work an Argentine woman puts into her appearance, both dressed and undressed, truly impresses me. During the war I used to live in various second-rate boarding-houses. The corridors were full of female clerks and teachers in negligees, none

too polished ... but when one of them had to nip around the corner to buy, say, cigarettes, she would spend half an hour getting dressed and putting on her make-up. Dress is a matter of the utmost importance over here; dress defines you and places you in the social hierarchy – men and women alike. This is why people on an Argentine street are always properly decked out, neatly and with polished shoes and pressed trousers.