

**FERDYDURKE (1937)**

Witold Gombrowicz

trans. Danuta Borchardt

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Sixteen years old, in a skirt, sweater, and sneakers, athletic looking, easygoing, smooth, limber, agile, and impudent! The sight of her made my spirit and my face freeze in fear. I understood at a glance—here was a powerful presence, probably more powerful than Pimko himself, and equally absolute in her way, even more so than Syphon. She reminded me of someone—but who, who?—ah, she reminded me of Kopyrda! Remember Kopyrda? Just like him but tougher, similar in type but more intense, a perfect schoolgirl in her school-girlishness, and absolutely modern in her modernity. And doubly young—first by age and secondly by modernity—it was youth multiplied by youth. I was as frightened as someone who comes upon a presence stronger than oneself, moreover, my fear intensified when I saw that it was the prof who was scared of her, rather than she of the prof, that he was somewhat unsure of himself while exchanging greetings with this modern schoolgirl.

“Greetings, young lady,” he called out half-cheerily and affecting refinement. “Miss Zuta is not at the beach? On the Vistula? Is Mommy home? How’s the water in the swimming pool, eh? Cold? That’s good for you! In the olden days I myself used to swim in cold water!”

What was this? I heard in Pimko’s voice old age wheedling up to youth with athletics, obsequious old age—I took a step back. The schoolgirl didn’t answer Pimko—just looked—she placed between her teeth a small wrench which she had held in her right hand, she extended her left hand with an unceremonious indifference, as if he were not Pimko... This disconcerted the professor, he didn’t know what to do with the youthful left hand stretched out to him, so he finally clasped it in both his hands. I bowed. She took the wrench from between her teeth and said, matter-of-factly:

“Mother isn’t in, she should be back soon. Please come in ...”

And she led us into a modern livingroom, took her place by a window, while we took our seats on a sofa.

“Mommy is probably at a committee meeting,” the professor attempted small talk.

The modern one said:

“I don’t know.”

The walls were painted pale blue, the curtains were cream colored, a radio stood on a little shelf, the cute furniture was contemporary, consistently modern, clean, smooth, simple, with two built-in closets and a little table. The schoolgirl stood at the window, unmindful of anyone’s presence in the room, and she picked at her skin, which was peeling off her sunburned shoulders. As far as she was concerned we were not there—she could not care less about Pimko—and minutes passed. Pimko sat, crossed his legs, folded his hands, and twiddled his thumbs, just like someone who’s being ignored. He stirred in his seat, cleared his throat a couple of times, and coughed, hoping to keep the conversation going, but the modern one turned toward the window, her back to us, and continued picking at her skin. He didn’t say a word, he merely sat, yet his sitting thus—without conversation—seemed incomplete, imperfect. I rubbed my eyes. What was going on? Something most certainly was—but what? Was it Pimko’s imperious yet incomplete sitting? An abandoned prof? A prof?

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The incompleteness was clamoring for completion—like those nagging gaps when one thing is ending and another has not yet began. And a void opens up in one’s head. I suddenly saw the prof’s old age showing. I hadn’t noticed until now that the professor was over fifty, never before had this dawned on me, as if the absolute prof were an eternal and timeless being. Is he old or is he a professor? How so-old or a professor? Why not an old professor? No, that’s not the point, it’s that something is brewing here (they were in cahoots against me—there was no doubt about that). O God, why is he sitting? Why had he come here to sit beside



me with the schoolgirl? His sitting was all the more painful because I sat together with him. If I had been standing it wouldn't have been so terrible. But getting up was tremendously difficult, and, strictly speaking, there was no reason to get up. And that isn't even the point—but rather why does he sit with this schoolgirl, why sit agedly with a young schoolgirl? Have pity! But there is no pity. Why does he sit with the schoolgirl? Why is his old age not just a simple old age, rather than a schoolgirl old age? How so — old age with a schoolgirl? What is the meaning of — a schoolgirl old age? Suddenly things became horrible, and yet I couldn't run away. A schoolgirl old age — a young-old old age — these were the incomplete, defective, hideous formulas galloping through my brain. And suddenly I heard singing in the room. I couldn't believe my ears. The prof was singing an aria to the schoolgirl. Startled, I came to my senses. No, not singing, he was humming — hurt by the schoolgirl's indifference, and to stress her inappropriate behavior, her bad manners and brashness, Pimko hummed a few bars from an operetta. Was he really singing? Yes, she had forced the granddaddy to sing! Was this the same awesome, absolute, crafty Pimko, become this granddaddy, abandoned on the sofa, and forced to sing for the schoolgirl?

I felt very weak. After the many ordeals of this morning, since the moment the ghost visited me, my facial muscles had had no chance to relax, my face was burning as if I had spent a sleepless night riding on a train. But now the train seemed to be coming to a stop. Pimko was singing. I was embarrassed at having surrendered for so long to a harmless little old man to whom an ordinary schoolgirl paid no attention whatsoever. My face was imperceptibly returning to normal, I made myself more comfortable in my seat, and I soon regained all my equilibrium, and — oh, joy of joys! — I regained the “thirty-year-old” I had lost. I decided to leave, calm and collected, ignoring all protests, but the professor caught my hand — he seemed quite different now. He had aged, softened, he looked awkward and forlorn, pitiful.

“Joey,” he whispered in my ear, “don't follow the example of this modern girl, this new species from the postwar era of athletics and jazzbands! Custom and tradition gone wild since the war! No culture! No respect for

one's elders! This new generation's thirst for pleasure! I'm beginning to worry that the atmosphere here won't be right for you. Promise that you won't let this unbridled girl influence you. You're both alike,” he went on as if in a fever, “you have a lot in common, I know, I know, actually, you're also a modern boy, and I brought you to this modern girl quite unnecessarily!”

I looked at him as if he'd gone crazy. What? I and my thirty-year-old had something in common with this modern schoolgirl? Pimko seemed downright stupid. And yet he went on warning me against the schoolgirl.

“These are new times!” he continued, “you young ones, you present-day generation. You scorn your elders, and “right off the bat you're on a first-name basis with each other. No respect, no reverence for the past, just dancing, kayaking, America, impulse of the moment, carpe diem, oh, you young ones!”

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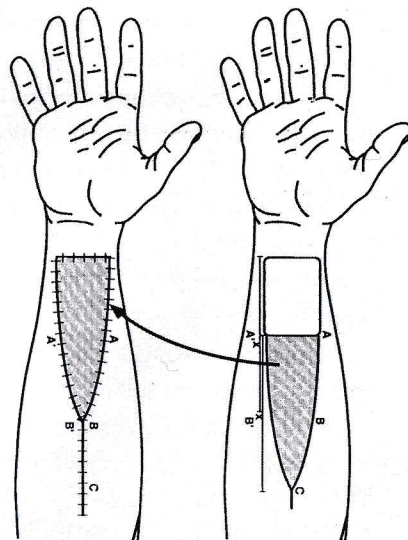
And he went on, fast and furious, flattering my supposed youth and modernity — whereas we were the modern youth, whereas for us it's only legs, whereas whatever else — meanwhile Miss Youngblood stood there, indifferent to everything, picking at her skin, unaware of what was brewing behind her back.

I understood at last what he was up to — he wanted, quite simply, to make me fall in love with the schoolgirl. His scheme was as follows: he would draw me into the girl, so to speak, in one fell swoop, hand me over — from one cute little hand to another — so that I couldn't escape. He was inculcating me with an ideal, and he was quite sure that once I had acquired this paradigm of youth, as Syphon and Kneadus had done, I would remain imprisoned forever. The professor didn't care much what kind of a boy I would become, as long as I never again crept out of boyhood. If he succeeded, right then and there, in making me fall in love, and if he inculcated me with the paradigm of the ideal modern boy, he would then be able to walk away in peace, to embrace his numerous, sundry pursuits, no longer having to personally hold me prisoner to belittlement. And here was a paradox: Pimko, who ostensibly cherished



his superiority above all else, had now deigned to play the humiliating role of an old-fashioned good soul shocked by the modern generation of young women in order to lure me to the schoolgirl. By using his fuddy-duddy, avuncular indignation he was uniting us against himself, and, by means of old age and antiquated ways, he wanted to make me fall in love with youth and modernity. But Pimko had yet another, no less important, goal in mind. To make me fall in love was not enough — he wanted me to bond with her in the most immature way, it would not have served his designs for me to simply fall in love with her, no, he wanted me to become infatuated with that particularly trashy and disgusting young-old, modern-antiquated poetry born of the union of the prewar fuddy-duddy and the postwar schoolgirl. Obviously, the prof wished to participate, however indirectly, in my enchantment. Although utterly stupid, it was all ingeniously conceived, and therefore, imagining that I was totally free of Pimko, I listened to his inept old-uncle flatteries. Stupid me! I didn't know that only stupid poetry can really entangle you!

And out of nothing evolved a monstrous configuration, a horribly poetic cast of characters: there under the window the could-not-care-less, modern schoolgirl, here on the sofa the fuddy-duddy professor bemoaning postwar barbarism, and I, between the two of them, hemmed in by the young-old poetry. God help me! What about my thirty-yearold?! I must leave, leave as fast as I can! But the world seemed to have collapsed and reorganized itself on new principles, the thirty-year-old grew pale again and out-of-date, while the modern one, there by the window, grew ever more alluring. And the accursed Pimko would not let up.



## DON QUIXOTE, WHICH WAS A DREAM (1986)

by Kathy Acker

### THE FIRST PART OF DON QUIXOTE THE BEGINNING OF THE NIGHT: DON QUIXOTE'S ABORTION

When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is love. How can a woman love? By loving someone other than herself. She would love another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound. The abortion was about to take place:

From her neck to her knees she wore pale or puke green paper. This was her armour. She had chosen it specifically, for she knew that this world's conditions are so rough for any single person, even a rich person, that a person has to make do with what she can find: this's no world for idealism. Example: the green paper would tear as soon as the abortion began.

They told her they were going to take her from the operating chair to her own bed in a wheeling chair. The wheeling chair would be her transportation. She went out to look at it. It was dying. It had once been a hack, the same as all the hacks on grub street; now, as all the hacks, it was a full time drunk, mumbled all the time about sex and how no longer not even never did it but didn't have the wherewithal or equipment to do it, and hung around with the other bums. That is, women who're having abortions.

She decided that since she was setting out on the greatest adventure any person can take, that of the Holy Grail, she ought to have a name (identity). She had to name herself. When a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you're lying on your back and you do exactly what he and the nurses tell you to do; finally, blessedly, you let go of your mind. Letting go of your mind is dying. She needed a new life. She had to be named.

As we've said, her wheeling bed's name was 'Hack-kneed' or 'Hack-