

No. 10

**TRONDHEIM STUDIES
ON EAST EUROPEAN CULTURES & SOCIETIES**

– Approaches to Globality –



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THE GLOBALIZATION OF BIOGRAPHY

**On Multilocation in the Transatlantic Writings
of Witold Gombrowicz, 1939-1969**

June 2002

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ISSN 1501-6684

Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies

Editors: Knut Andreas Grimstad, Arne Halvorsen, Håkon Leiulfsrud, György Péteri

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THE GLOBALIZATION OF BIOGRAPHY
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Introduction

As part of a continuing research project on Slavic exile literature from after 1939, mainly Polish, this essay addresses the transatlantic experience as its focus of enquiry.¹ Bearing in mind that so many artists, scholars and writers of this period explored transatlantic connections in the course of their work, it seems fair to conjecture, at a time of globalization (which for some has its origins in the history of the transatlantic experience), that a study of the transatlantic idiom may tell us something about how people adapted to cultural exchange in the past. In this connection, I am interested in exploring the writer's representation of self and, amongst other things, how the thematization of his or her East European homeland forms a rather ambiguous relief to the description of his or her predicament as an émigré.

My main concern is with Witold Gombrowicz, a leading representative of Polish avant-garde prose of the 1930s, but also one of the most influential voices in the postwar development of Polish fiction, especially following the marginalization of Socialist Realism in the wake of the Thaw of 1955-6. By this time Gombrowicz had gained international acclaim both as a rigorous philosopher and as an challenging stylist.

¹ Based on a paper given at the PEECS workshop "Across and Beyond the East-West Divide," Trondheim, 14-16 December, 2001, this essay forms part of my contribution to the interdisciplinary project "Discourses of Global Ambitions and Global Failures." See György Péteri, "Discourses of Global Ambitions and Global Failures: Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in State Socialist Russia and East Central Europe" (Project proposals, ms, Trondheim, 2000). Accessible at <http://www.hf.ntnu.no/peecs/GlobDiscPro.htm>

Gombrowicz as 'immigrant'

Like many East European artists and intellectuals of his generation, Gombrowicz was forced into emigration first by the Nazis then by the Communist regime: a few days before the fateful date September 1, 1939, the already renowned thirty-five-year old writer disembarked from a transatlantic liner that had just brought him to Buenos Aires on its maiden voyage. Instead of several weeks, he remained in Argentina for the next twenty-four years.

During most of the 1950s, Gombrowicz led a rather miserable and precarious hand-to-mouth existence, fully dependent on his Polish compatriots; he performed mind-numbing work for the Polish Bank, gave 'philosophy lessons' to well-bred Polish women, received a modest unemployment benefit from the Polish Embassy, and so on. At the same time, however, he seem to have developed new and alternative networks, befriending people of various nationalities and different social strata. As the author puts it himself in a published curriculum vitae: "He had hardly anything to do with the Polish émigrés and his friends were mainly young Argentinians. Homosexual experiences with lower class boys he picked up in Buenos Aires ... Women who believed in his work gave him some money."²

But, in his new country, Gombrowicz was not cut off from the Old World. On the contrary, he remained in close touch with friends and literary acquaintances in Poland (where the political climate fluctuated between liberalization and reaction) as well as with members of the established émigré community in Paris, the Polonia paryjska, none of whom forgave the writer his 'desertion' from Polish wartime resistance.³ Finally, in 1963 he returned to

² Witold Gombrowicz, "Biography of Witold Gombrowicz. Dictated by Witold Gombrowicz shortly before his death," A Kind of Testament, ed. and intr. M. Nadeau, trans. A. Hamilton, London, 1973, p. 21. Henceforth pagenumbers referring to this work will appear in brackets.

³ Especially provocative was Gombrowicz's novel Pornografia (1960), which revolves around two middle-aged 'perverted' men, Witold and Frederyk, who visit a country estate in occupied Poland of 1943.

Western Europe (Berlin and Paris). In 1967 he was awarded the International Publishers' Prize for the novel Cosmos. In the following year, he married Marie-Rita Labrosse, a Canadian doctoral student 40 years his junior and moved to Vence in the south of France. He died from a heart attack in 1969.

As for Gombrowicz's transatlantic crossing, it should be emphasized that he did not cross over to 'the new language' (as did, for example, Joseph Conrad, Jerzy Kosiński, Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky), but continues to write in his native tongue. Hence his constant struggle for literary prominence, for the right to express himself and not least – the right to be read. Stanisław Baranczak, himself an émigré to the USA in the early 1980s, describes Gombrowicz's plight as follows: "a largely ignored writer from the margins of a marginal literature, as exotic and odd to his émigré compatriots as he was to the Argentinian literary salons."⁴ Characteristically, Gombrowicz was not very comfortable with being a Polish émigré, nor was he prepared to represent the culture of the Polish Republic, which was reborn in 1918 as a result of World War One. Instead, by refusing to function as something larger than himself, that is his nation and its indomitable spirit, he addresses the sizeable Argentinian Polonia in critical and satirical terms. This is evident most notably in the novel Trans-Atlantyck (1953), whose burlesque and grotesque action takes place precisely in the émigré community in and around Buenos Aires, but also in his quasi- or semi-fictional works, his three-volumed Diary 1953-1966 and in his autobiographical reflections written shortly before his death and published as A Kind of Testament (1968).

⁴ Stanisław Baranczak, "Gombrowicz: Culture and Chaos," Breathing Under Water and Other East European Essays, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, p. 95.

As an émigré writer, Gombrowicz falls into the dual category of traveller/outsider. True, all travellers are outsiders somewhere (some may be so everywhere), but not all outsiders are travellers. Travellers can go home, by definition, though they may choose not to do so; but one can be an outsider in one's own home town, as members of minority groups are well aware. Gombrowicz was caught by the war in Buenos Aires, then decided to stay for a while (more than two decades) before recrossing the Atlantic; as to being an outsider, he was a poseur 'performing' in the Warsaw literary milieu, "a writer from the margins," even before his departure. I agree here with Małgorzata Smorağ who, amongst others, perceives Gombrowicz's exilic fiction as a manifold emancipatory project of expected happiness, "accompanied by the myth of the Promised Land."⁵

That said, one should not underplay the numerous backward glances that play, I think, an integral part in his capricious and seemingly 'insincere' writings. As many Slavic writers who left home with no thought of return and succeeded, well or badly, in settling elsewhere, Gombrowicz too occasionally casts an intriguing glance at what he left behind.

How then are these various clashing features of transatlantic exile (involuntary/voluntary, home society/new society, own language/alien language) experienced with regard to Gombrowicz?⁶ Such a vast subject deserves a whole book, which would examine each one of his works in detail. In the following discussion, I propose, more modestly, to consider a selection of his texts from a so-called global perspective, with a view to showing how

⁵ Małgorzata Smorağ, "La mise en place d'une réalité de remplacement ou les mécanismes textuels qu'engendre l'exil dans l'œuvre de Gombrowicz et de Nabokov," Littérature et émigration dans les pays de l'Europe centrale et orientale, ed. M. Delaperrière, Paris, 1996, s. 115-128. For a discussion on the emancipatory aspect of Gombrowicz's poetics, see also Dag Solstad, "Nødvendigheten av å leve inautentisk. Om Witold Gombrowicz," Artikler om litteratur 1966-1981, Oslo, 2000, pp. 126-139.

⁶ A paraphrase of a question formulated by Christine Brooke-Rose in her "Exsul," in Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances, ed. S. R. Suleiman, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 16.

the crossing of national and social borders informs a writer's understanding of identity.⁷

Representing self: traumatic form and homelessness

Given Gombrowicz's active interest in metafiction and popular literature, his introduction of 'false identities' imposed upon characters, as well as his characteristic game-playing – involving first-person narrators who always bear his first name, and the real author, who skilfully 'breaks the frame' and blurs the line between fiction and reality – it is not surprising that the pervasive 'me' of Gombrowicz remains an enigma, a titillating cipher, a carefully orchestrated puzzle to which there is no one solution.⁸ Thus one never forgets the notorious opening of his Diary:

Monday

Me.

Tuesday

Me.

Wednesday

Me.

Thursday

Me.

Once this has been established, Gombrowicz devotes Friday's entry to a subtle reflection on some material he has been reading in the Polish press; amongst

⁷ I would like to thank Astrid Brokke, Sissel Furuseth, Yngve Sandhei Jacobsen, Ingunn Lunde, and Ursula Phillips for responding to earlier versions of this article and for their valuable suggestions.

⁸ See Czesław Miłosz "Kim jest Gombrowicz?," Gombrowicz i krytycy. Wybór i opracowanie, ed. Z. Łapiński, Cracow, pp. 185-200.

other observations, he concurs with Nietzsche: “The mitigation of our customs is the consequence of our weakness” (Diary I, 4).⁹ Indeed, a narcissistic streak runs through all his works, where he presents or ‘stages’ himself in some complex cultural borderland, shifting between many different positions.

This in-betweenness is based on a dialectical dualism: ‘Form’ (Forma) and ‘Chaos’ (Chaos). His ‘immature’ hero (niedojrzały bohater) always embodies a set of contradictions which may be envisaged as possibilities: in choosing one form or another he is trapped by the ‘mature’ world (dojrzały świat), only to assume a form not his own but pre-existing, already established through mutual relationships between ‘adults.’ A central obsession in Gombrowicz is the effect of the signifying forms on the formation of subjectivity, which he formulates in A Kind of Testament as follows: “If I am always an artefact, always defined by others and by culture as well as by my own formal necessities, where should I look for my ‘self’? Who am I really and to what extent am I?” (77).¹⁰

Gombrowicz’s statement implies an excruciating conflict which is actualized above all between individuals, in what he calls ‘the interhuman domain’ (sfera międzyludzka), and which is inextricably linked to a series of oppositions – of age (maturity or immaturity), social class (‘aristocrats’ or ‘plebeians’), cultural background (elitist or mass culture), and sexuality (‘accepted’ heterosexuality or ‘ostracized’ homosexuality). Hence ‘Witold,’ the hero-narrator of the novel Trans-Atlantyk, finds himself engaged in a battle of loyalty between, on the one hand, the Polish émigré community (the pompous Ambassador and a chivalrous ex-Major) and, on the other, his new society

⁹ Bracketed pagenumbers refer to Lillian Vallee’s translation in W. Gombrowicz, 1988, Diary: volumes 1-3, Evanston. The Polish original reads: “Złagodzenie naszych obyczajów jest następstwem naszego osłabienia.” Dziennik 1953-1956, ed. J. Błoński, Cracow, 1986, p. 10.

¹⁰ “Albowiem, jeśli zawsze jestem sztuczny, określony własnymi koniecznościami formalnymi, to gdzież szukać tego mojego ‘ja’? Kim jestem naprawdę i w jakim stopniu w ogóle ‘jestem’?” Gombrowicz, Testament. Rozmowy z Dominique de Roux, Cracow, 1996, p. 75.

whose main spokesman is an Argentinian queer (puto) millionaire. Here the in-betweenness reflects Gombrowicz's exilic imagination, as well as his monomaniacal quest for identity, in both its national and social aspects.

In A Kind of a Testament, suggestive statements such as "I don't know who I really am" and "my 'self' is nothing but my will to be myself" (77) may be substantiated by backward glances at the origins of his life:

In that Proustian epoch of the beginning of the century, we were a displaced family 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, more middle-class society. These were the first 'betweens,' which subsequently multiplied until they almost constituted my domicile, my actual homeland. (28)¹¹

Note how Gombrowicz already describes his Polish childhood as a kind of in-between state, and also how these "betweens" increase in number and accompany him until they finally come to make up his "actual homeland" (właściwa ojczyzna). With this one declaration alone, it is as if he were responding to Mikhail Bakhtin's call for emancipation from monoglossic bondage. As we shall see, Gombrowicz shows all the signs of a writer who is linguistically and ideologically 'homeless,' who "has no language of his own, but does possess his own style, his own organic and unitary law governing the way he plays with languages and the way his own real semantic and expressive

¹¹ "Tak więc w owej proustowskiej epoce, na początku stulecia, byliśmy rodziną wykorzenioną, o sytuacji społecznej niezbyt jasnej, pomiędzy Litwą a Kongresówką, pomiędzy wsią a przemysłem, pomiędzy tzw. lepszą sferą a średnią. To tylko pierwsze z tych 'pomiędzy,' które w dalszym ciągu rozmnożą się wokół mnie do tego stopnia, iż prawie staną się moim miejscem zamieszkania, moją właściwą ojczyzną." Gombrowicz, 1996, p. 22.

intentions are refracted within them.”¹² He appears to turn exile into an experiment performed on himself, by himself; as implied by Tomislav Longinović, the writing of his transatlantic texts allows him “to achieve the greatest possible distance from his roots and create an ever changing persona for himself.”¹³

With regard to Gombrowicz’s tendency towards heteroglossia and ‘linguistic homelessness’ (Bakhtin’s phrase is *iazykovaia bespriutnost’*), the following entry describing his early years as an expatriate, is symptomatic:

In March 1942 ... I had to scam [from my hotel] ... I told [a Pole, a journalist named Taworski, who had lived in Argentina for many years] ... what had happened ... I spent about six months in [his] villa ... Taworski was goodness itself and looked after me like a father ... I was very popular at Morón, both at the ‘pizzeria’ and at the café where I played billiards and chess ... at the pizzeria a mozo [young bloke] who had taken a liking to me gave me a sandwich costing twenty centos, but with a slice of ham in it four times thicker than usual ... (A Kind of Testament, 87-88)¹⁴.

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Austin, 1981, p. 311.

¹³ Tomislav Z. Longinović, “I, Witold Gombrowicz: Formal Abjection and the Power of Writing in A Kind of Testament,” Gombrowicz’s Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality, ed. E. P. Ziarek, New York, 1998, p. 44.

¹⁴ “W marcu czterdziestego drugiego roku ... trzeba było wiać [z mego hoteliku] ... Powiedziałem [polakowi, od dawna już przebywającemu w Argentynie, dziennikarzowi nazwiskiem Taworski] ... spędziłem w [jego] willi ... ze sześć miesięcy ... Taworski, człek zacy, opiekował się mną jak ojciec ... cieszyłem się w Morón wielką popularnością, zarówno w ‘piceryji,’ jak w kawiarni, gdzie był bilard i szachy ... w piceryji zaprzyjaźniony ze mną ‘mozo’ dawał mi sandwicza za 20 centów, ale szynkę kroił poczwórnej grubości ...” Gombrowicz, 1996, pp. 85-86.

As is indicated by the above quotations portraying homelessness in in-betweenness, the understanding of identity and human relations in Gombrowicz's exilic texts so obviously hinges on transnationality – the criss-crossing of national borders – and on multilocation – being intimately linked to many different places simultaneously – that the writer could perhaps be considered a casual globalist. I use the word casual, because Gombrowicz does not have 'the global' or 'globalization' as a programme; that is he is not explicitly preoccupied with the integration of the Argentinian world into his literature, or vice versa, with the incorporation of his own literature into the Argentinian culture.

Gombrowicz as transnational actor

But globality may also refer to the fact that we have been living for a long time in a 'world society'; or more precisely, that the notion of closed spaces has become illusory. No country, no group or individual can shut itself off from others. According to the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, certain economic, political and cultural forms have always collided with one another, and "all things that used to be taken for granted (including the Western model) will have to be justified anew."¹⁵ Globalization, however, denotes the processes through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying degrees of power, orientation, identities and networks.¹⁶ Here 'the G-word' may be understood dialectically, that is, as a process which creates transnational social links and spaces, revalues local cultures and promotes so-called 'third cultures.'¹⁷ Or, we could say, in a more

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck, What Is Globalization?, Cambridge, 2000, p. 10.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁷ See Jan N. Pieterse, "Globalization as Hybridization," Global Modernities, ed. M. Featherstone et al., London, 1997, pp. 45-68.

Bakhtinian vein, that when cultures that are monolithically held together by a central national myth (a linguistic and ideological strait-jacket) lose their sealed-off and self-sufficient character, these cultures are always already in the process of disintegration, or decentering, passing into a state of heteroglossia and cultural multiplicity.¹⁸

From this perspective, it makes sense, I believe, to speak of Gombrowicz and globality on two different levels: on an inner, textual level, where various cultural elements blend together in his exile fiction; and, on an outer, metalevel, where Gombrowicz as a writer emerges as a transnational actor in the context of literary and cultural history. I shall refrain from addressing Gombrowicz's modernity and/or modernism (which is a separate question), but concentrate instead on his continued challenging of the primacy of the national.¹⁹

A main theme in his texts is stereotypical 'Polishness' (polskość). In her foreword to the English translation of Gombrowicz's debut novel Ferdydurke (1938), Susan Sontag is right in observing that he "never stopped arguing with Polish culture, with its intractable collectivism of spirit (usually called 'romanticism') and the obsession of its writers with the national martyrdom, the national identity."²⁰ The way in which the Romantic vision of Poland has dominated both literature and the mentality of Polish intellectuals over the last two centuries always intrigued as well as vexed Gombrowicz;²¹ because Nation

¹⁸ Bakhtin, 1981, p. 370.

¹⁹ For a discussion on Gombrowicz's place in the context of modernity and (post)modernism, consider Włodzimierz Bolecki, Polowanie na postmodernistów (w Polsce) i inne szkice, Cracow, 1999.

²⁰ Susan Sontag, "Foreword," in W. Gombrowicz, Ferdydurke, trans. D. Borchardt, New Haven, 2000, p. xiii.

²¹ By 'Romantic vision' I understand the messianistic paradigm of Poland as the Christ of Nations, as the innocent but brave sufferer for the crimes of other European powers, above all, those of Imperial Russia. As Ursula Phillips explains: "All individuals – including poets – should put commitment to patriotic causes before any selfish interests. For an individual not to

as 'form' forces upon the Poles an identity which is false and oppressive, he wished his Poles to liberate themselves from Poland. And this applied not only to himself and his compatriots; he says, "instead of 'Poland,' put the Argentine, Canada, Romania and so on, and you'll see that my allusions (and my sufferings) can be applied to most of the globe. They concern all secondary European cultures" (A Kind of Testament, 53).²² In other words, Poland may be replaced with many "secondary" hybrid-places and quasi-European or non-European cultures, and so the writer's personal experiences obtain universal meaning.

Let me try to elucidate by comparing Gombrowicz's deflation of unambiguous Polishness with his description of Argentina and 'Argentinianness':

What is Argentina? Batter that has not yet become cake, or something that is simply unshaped, or, perhaps, a protest against the mechanization of the spirit, the reluctant, devil-may-care gesture of a man who is removing himself from a too automatic accumulation ... ? (Diary I, 72)²³

It is onto this "devil-may-care gesture" that Gombrowicz inscribes himself as a homeless writer, an alienated human being:

commit himself in this way, was not only dishonourable, it was tantamount to treachery." U. Phillips, "Gombrowicz's Polish Complex," New Perspectives in Twentieth-Century Polish Literature: Flight From Martyrology, eds. S. Eile & U. Phillips, London, 1992, pp. 28-29.

²² "Podstawcie pod słowo 'Polska' Argentynę, Kanadę, Rumunię itd. a moje wywody (i moje cierpienia) rozszerzą się wam na sporą część świata, na wszystkie kultury europejskie wtórne, drugorzędne." Gombrowicz, 1996, p. 49.

²³ "Czym jest Argentyna? Ciastem, które jeszcze nie stało się plackiem, czymś po prostu niedoksztalowanym, czy też protestem przeciwko mechanizacji ducha, niechętnym, niedbałym gestem człowieka, który oddała od siebie zbyt automatyczną akumulację ... ?" Gombrowicz, Dziennik 1953-1956, ed. J. Błosiński, Cracow, 1986, pp. 113-114.

I was suddenly in Argentina, completely alone, cut off, lost, ruined, anonymous. I was a little excited, a little frightened. Yet at the same time, something in me told me to greet with passionate emotion the blow that was destroying me and upsetting the order I had known up to now.

(Diary I, 130)²⁴

These two passages are typical of the manner in which Gombrowicz mythologizes his own exilic existence, while at the same time identifying with the young ‘unformed’ country; this is where his transformation can take place, here, far away from the “automatic accumulation” of his lifestyle in the old country. From now on, any (Western) attempt to think nationality in terms of homogeneity seems to be counteracted by vacillation: “The Argentine is a European country. One feels the presence of Europe there, far more forcefully than in Europe itself, yet at the same time one is outside Europe ...” (A Kind of Testament, 84).²⁵ By collating the Old World with the New in this way, Gombrowicz provides the representation of his self with the contours of a third-culture project, of an in-between place which does not entail a clashing of civilizations, but which is both global and local. Argentina is Europe and yet “at the same time one is outside Europe.”

It is interesting that such fluid cultural relations also yield a significant loneliness: “In this ripe and overwhelming silence, two exceptional, singular, specific words began to make themselves audible: Witold Gombrowicz. Witold

²⁴ “Nagle ja w Argentynie, zupełnie sam, odcięty, zaprzepaszczoney, anonimowy. Byłem trochę podniecony, trochę przestraszony. Ale jednocześnie coś we mnie kazało mi powitać z namiętnym wzruszeniem cios, który mnie niszczył i wytrącał z dotychczasowego mojego porządku.” Ibid., 204.

²⁵ “Argentyna to kraj europejski, tu się czuję silnie Europę, silniej niż w samej Europie, a jednocześnie jest się poza nią ...” Gombrowicz, 1996, p. 82.

Gombrowicz” (Diary III, 108).²⁶ Owing to the dictates of isolation, the writer seems to be bringing his implied self, ‘Witold,’ back to point zero; his existence is constructed as a transatlantic place, where he is no longer hampered by European nationalisms and their totalizing demands.

Similarly, the hero-narrator in Trans-Atlantyk manages to suspend the suffocating ‘form’ imposed on him by the Polish émigré community (“‘Tis a feast day – Gombrowicz our guest! ... a guest of ours, the Genius Gombrowicz himself ... Genius of that Glorious Nation of ours! ... Great Man of that Great Nation of ours!’”),²⁷ because he allows himself to escape with the Argentinian millionaire into the gender-bending world of homosexual desire: “Upon seeing those lips, the which although a Man’s with woman’s rouge bled, I could have no trace of doubt that my lot was to have happen to me a Puto. It was he and I who before all Walked, Walked as in a couple forever coupled!” (36).²⁸

A word on Gombrowicz’s use of stylization in Trans-Atlantyk, where he has chosen to imitate a specific style typical of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Polish country squire (szlachcic). Significantly, the novel has adopted the generic principles of the Baroque nobleman’s oral tale, known in the Polish tradition as gawęda. For many nineteenth-century writers, this over-embellished style-cum-genre evoked a nostalgia for the sunk Atlantis of

²⁶ “W ciszy, wypełniającej, przepelniającej, zaczynają dochodzić mnie dwa słowa wyjątków, jedyne, szczególne: Witold Gombrowicz. Witold Gombrowicz.” Gombrowicz, Dziennik 1961-1966, ed. J. Błoński, Cracow, 1986, p. 141.

²⁷ Pagenumbers in brackets refer to the translation made by Carolyn French and Nina Karsov in W. Gombrowicz, Trans-Atlantyk, intro. S. Baranczak, New Haven, 1994, p. 15. The Polish original reads: “Święto bo Gombrowicza gościemy! ... Gombrowicz gościem jest naszym, sam Geniusz Gombrowicz! ... Geniusz to Narodu naszego Sławnego! ... Wielki Mąż Narodu naszego wielkiego!” Gombrowicz, Trans-Atlantyk, ed. J. Błoński, Cracow, 1986, p. 21.

²⁸ “Wargi te ujrzawszy, które różem kobiecym, choć Męskie, krwawiły, ani cienia wątpliwości mieć nie mogłem, że los mój Puto takiego mnie zdarzył. Z nim to ja wobec wszystkich Chodziłem, Chodziłem, jak w parze jakiej na zawsze sparzony!” Gombrowicz, Trans-Atlantyk, 1986, p. 41.

Poland's provincial landed estate and came to symbolize what was most original and endearing in the traditional, so-called Sarmatian culture. Not so in Gombrowicz, who, by endowing the hero-narrator of his novel with his own name and his own real-life experiences, achieves a jarring incongruity between the hero-narrator's identity and the speech he uses consistently in his narrative monologue. Needless to say, when what happens to the modern Polish writer after his arrival in Buenos Aires is told in a style which is considered to be 'quintessentially Polish,' the effect is both humorous and provocative.²⁹

In the multi-ethnic and multi-social city of Buenos Aires, Gombrowicz embraces above all youth and youthfulness (młodość) as the only 'value in itself,' as a constant guarantee of rebirth and rejuvenation. Consider the following passages:

I, Mr Gombrowicz ... became young again, both morally and physically. In the street people called me joven ['young'], as though I wasn't thirty-five ... in those hot streets packed with people ... I let myself be dragged ... into this multilingual bivouac. I became part of it." (A Kind of Testament, 86)³⁰

With his utopian idea of immaturity, Gombrowicz continues his incessant struggle to remain the only free man among prisoners of 'form':

I could at last approach what was most sacred to me, something I defined as 'inferiority,' 'degradation,' or 'lowness,' or 'freshness,' 'simplicity,'

²⁹ Even a preface written in 1954 by the popular poet and novelist Józef Wittlin (himself an exile in New York), could not save Trans-Atlantyk from the émigré public's negative responses, which ranged from contemptuous dismissals to uncontrolled fury.

³⁰ "Ja, pan Gombrowicz ... odmłodziłem nagle i gwałtownie pod względem psychicznym i fizycznym, na ulicy mówiono mi joven, jakbym nie miał dwudziestu pięciu [sic] lat ... wtedy, na przepelnionych, gorących, ulicach ... wsiąknęłam w to wielojęzyczne koczowisko bez wahania, gładko, byłem jednym z nich." Gombrowicz, 1996, p. 84.

‘immaturity,’ or even as an ‘obscure and unmentionable element’ – these words do not even approximately convey the nature of this secret ... (94)³¹

In order to approach simplicity and naturalness, I had to don masks, and it was a trick, a sleight of hand, it grated, it sounded hollow, I repeat, I didn't get anywhere in the end, I only got closer. And getting closer emphasized my falseness! Miserable buffoon! (95, my underlining)³²

The anti-‘form’ crusade is a formidable task, as there is really little or no escape from the process of being created by others (even the chameleon-like Gonzalo from Trans-Atlantyk, for whom everything has lost its distinct shape, is ultimately nothing more than a man enslaved by his sexuality).³³ It is significant, therefore, that by spanning his life between Europe and South-America, by straddling nationalities and cultures in his representation of self, Gombrowicz undermines not only Poland and Argentina as sovereign national states, or ‘forms,’ but also emerges as a transnational writer drawn into the kind of lifestyle that Anthony Giddens refers to as “the intensification of worldwide social relations”: acting and living (together) over distances, across the apparently separate worlds of national states, regions and continents.³⁴

³¹ “[Mogłem] na koniec zbliżyć się do największych moich świętości, do tego co określam czasem ‘niższość,’ albo jako ‘dół,’ albo jako ‘świeżość, prostotę,’ albo ‘niedojrzałość,’ lub ‘ciemny, nie nazwany żywioł’ – te nazwy nie wyrażają ani w przybliżeniu natury owego sekretu ...” Ibid., p. 94.

³² “Żeby zbliżyć się do prostoty i naturalności musiałem nakładać maski i to była chytrność, przebiegłość, zgrzyty, fałsze, przecież mówię, że nie zdołałem niczego osiągnąć, a tylko zdobyłem pewne przybliżenie ... przybliżenie, które bardziej wyjaskrawiało mą sztuczność! Biedny pajac!” Ibid., p. 94.

³³ Stanisław Eile, “Clown Turned Bard: Witold Gombrowicz,” Modernist Trends in Twentieth-Century Polish Fiction, London, 1996, p 110.

³⁴ Anthony Giddens, 1990, The Consequences of Modernity, Stanford, s. 64.

Multilocation and globalization of biography

In most of Gombrowicz's writings, distant localities are linked in such a way that local happenings are shaped by the events occurring on the other side of the Atlantic and vice versa. While 'Witold,' on the one hand, corresponds with various intellectual and literary personages in Poland and in France,³⁵ assesses European philosophers and Latin-American writers and enters into dialogue with the political regimes of the Soviet Union and of Eastern Europe as a whole, he just as readily reflects, on the other hand, upon his own childhood, adolescence, and literary apprenticeship, comments upon the superficial patriotism among Poles in Buenos Aires, and alludes to his homoerotic adventures in the old and the new country alike. Therefore, Gombrowicz's continuous communication with different places in different worlds can be seen as an expression of his transnational 'place polygamy' (to use Beck's coinage), or, better still: the gateway to globality in his own staged life.³⁶ In his self-creation, the confrontational or 'heteroglossic' forces of culture occur not only 'out there' but also at the centre of his life, in circles of friends, at work, at the café, playing chess, listening to music, drinking, having sex, and so on:

And my chance acquaintances, with whom I made superficial and non-committal friends with astonishing facility ... helped me as they could. One day, as I walked along the Calle Corrientes ... I told the [Argentinian] boy I was with that I was hungry ... We took a tram and rode into the suburbs, to a house in a workers' quarter, where, sure

³⁵ For Gombrowicz's extensive European correspondence 1941-1969, see Gombrowicz: Walka o sławę 1: Korespondencja Witolda Gombrowicza z Józefem Wittlinem, Jarosławem Iwaszkiewiczem, Arturem Sandauerem; and, Gombrowicz: Walka o sławę 2: Korespondencja Witolda Gombrowicza z Konstantym A. Jeleńskim, François Bondym, Dominikiem de Roux, ed. J. Jarzębski, Cracow, 1988, 1989.

³⁶ Beck, 2000, p. 72ff.

enough, a dead man lay in his coffin ... after saying our prayers we went into the next room where a buffet had been prepared for the guests – sandwiches, wine! We ate and my friend told me that he often looked for corpses in this barrio and that the best way was to get the addresses from the sacristan ... thanks to this paradoxical taste for decomposition I discovered in myself, I triumphantly survived war and poverty ... I feel no remorse for having used the defeat, my misfortune or that of my [Polish] family – or, indeed, of half the world – as a bridge towards a bitter, accursed enjoyment. (A Kind of Testament, 86-87)³⁷

It may not happen consciously or with deliberation, but in his texts Gombrowicz actually leads a ‘glocal’ life, that is, he moves both globally, in this case, across “half the world,” and locally, now among working-class young men in the backstreets of Buenos Aires, now on the landed (szlachta) estate of his Polish childhood.³⁸ His exile is not tied to a particular place; it is not a staid, settled life. It is a life ‘on the road’ (in a literal and transferred sense); it unfolds as an unbroken chain of journeys by bus, train, ship, and so on, to and from various connections in different national, cultural and social spheres. In this way, Gombrowicz’s representation of self becomes an example of the

³⁷ “A moi przygodni towarzysze, z którymi przyjaźń powierzchowna i nieobowiązująca przychodziła mi zdumiewająco naturalny ... pomagali mi, jak mogli. Kiedyś spacerując z jednym z nich po ulicy Corrientes ... powiedziałem, że jeść mi się chce ... Wsiadliśmy do tramwaju i pojechaliliśmy na przedmieście, do jakiegoś domku w dzielnicy robotniczej, gdzie rzeczywiście nieboszczyk ... leżał w trumnie ... pomodliwszy się przeszliśmy do sąsiedniego pokoju, gdzie był poczęstunek dla żałobników, bufet, kanapki, wino, jedliśmy i opowiadał, że nieraz wyszukuje sobie trupów w tym barrio, że najlepiej dowiedzieć się od kościelnego ... dzięki temu paradoksalnemu rozmiłowaniu w upadku przetrwałem wojnę i nędzę zwycięsko ... nie doświadczam wyrzutów sumienia, iż wówczas klęska, nieszczęście moje, czy bliskich, czy połowy świata, stało mi się pomostem do czegoś w rodzaju gorzkiej, przeklętej, rozkoszy ...” Gombrowicz, 1996, pp. 84-85.

³⁸ This new amalgam, ‘glocalization,’ can also be said to serve to underline the main claim of cultural theory: namely, that it is absurd to think we can understand our contemporary world, with all its breakdowns and new departures, without grasping what is expressed in the key-words “politics of culture, cultural capital, cultural difference, cultural homogeneity, ethnicity, race and gender.” See Roland Robertson’s article “Globalization,” in Global Modernities, ed. M. Featherstone et al., London, 1995, p. 145.

globalization of biography: his fiction is informed by the kind of multilocation which involves crossing the borders of separate worlds – nations, religions, cultures, sexualities – and whose oppositions must or may lodge in his own life.

Here are a few examples of how the transatlantic crossing (now the return journey to Europe) is described in the diary: “Farewell, America! Yes, but what sort of America? ... what had they really been, those twenty-four years that sail with me to Europe?” (Diary III, 71).³⁹ In fact, this quote reverses the blending of culture which we discussed earlier: there, the first-person narrator was dragging Europe, the Old World and ‘the formed’ with him into Argentina; here, he is carrying Argentina, the New World and ‘the unformed’ back with him to Europe. It is as though the elderly writer, while glancing backwards, dramatizes the very problem of straddling different worlds:

Argentina had won me over to the extent ... that I was deeply and forever in love with her (and at my age one does not cast these words to the ocean winds) ... Twenty million lives in all possible combinations, that’s a lot, that’s too much, for the single life of one man. Could I have known, what took hold of me in this mass of tangled lives?⁴⁰

Having this American Latinness somehow complement my Polishness ... I don’t know... Te quiero. An Argentinian says, ‘I want you’ instead of ‘I love you’ ... I needed desperately to get close to Europe in no other

³⁹ “Zegnaj Ameryko! Jaka Ameryka? ... Och, co to właściwie było, tych lat dwadzieścia i cztery, z czym ja płynę do Europy?” Gombrowicz, Dziennik 1961-1966, ed. J. Błoński, Cracow, 1986, p. 93.

⁴⁰ “Argentyna mnie zjednała sobie do tyła, iż ... byłem w niej głęboko i na zawsze zakochany (a w moim wieku nie rzuca się na tych słów na wiatr oceaniczny) ... Dwadzieścia milionów żyć we wszystkich możliwych kombinacjach, to dużo, za dużo, jak na pojedyncze życie jednego człowieka. Czyż mogłem wiedzieć, co mnie w tej masie żyć splecionych wzięło?” Gombrowicz, Dziennik 1961-1966, ed. J. Błoński, Cracow, 1986, pp. 96-7.

way except in a state of passionate intoxication with Argentina, with America. (74-75)⁴¹

In so many of Gombrowicz's texts, multilocation seems to imply that he keeps falling in love with what is different in different places; in some cases, he can even be said to marry the faces and histories of these places, and initiate, as it were, an erotic 'relationship' with them. It must be stressed here that in Gombrowicz eroticism is sublimated, so that it becomes a play with reality, in which the experience of the body is neither motivated nor evaluated ethically.⁴² In the words of Janusz Pawłowski: "eroticism constitutes a hidden laboratory, the touchstone of life, as well as a peculiar metalanguage of [Gombrowicz's] artistic and spiritual achievement as a whole."⁴³

Moreover, places become new opportunities for discovering and testing out particular aspects of himself. To what extent is a place 'Witold's place,' and 'Witold's place' his own life? How are the different places related to one another in the imaginary map of 'Gombrowicz's world,' and in what sense are they 'significant places' in the longitudinal cross-section of his own life? On board the transatlantic liner bound for Europe, Gombrowicz reminisces:

... I wrote a short story [in 1931] entitled "Events on the H.M.S Banbury." In this story I sail to South America. Sailors sing: Under the blue skies of Argentina, where wonderful girls fill our desire. Let us sing,

⁴¹ "Ta łacińskość amerykańska jakoś uzupełniła moją polskość ... nie wiem ... Te quiero. Argentyńczyk zamiast powiedzieć 'ja cię kocham' mówi 'ja ciebie chcę' ... było mi gwałtownie potrzebne żeby nie zbliżać się do Europy inaczej, jak w stanie namiętnego odurzenia Argentyną, Ameryką." Ibid., p. 97.

⁴² As noted by Miłosz (1984, p, 193), Gombrowicz's treatment of eroticism is unique in that he does not offer a single description of copulation.

⁴³ Janusz Pawłowski, "Erotyka Gombrowicza," Gombrowicz i krytycy. Wybór i opracowanie, ed. Z. Łapiński, Cracow, p. 558.

brothers! ... By strange coincidence, the short story was translated into French a few months ago ... I am sailing towards it. (Diary III, 81)⁴⁴

Here Gombrowicz refers to his pre-exile short-prose collection Memoir from a Time of Immaturity, which, incidentally, offers a paradigm for cultural self-construction in a hybrid culture, involving a confrontation between ‘young’/‘old’ worlds and mentalities. What is more, the novella “Events on the H.M.S Banbury,” happens to contain the master-plot for all Gombrowicz’s later works – the ‘European’ passenger on his way to ‘Argentina’ and the decision to stay en route.⁴⁵

In view of the fact that Gombrowicz virtually completes a transatlantic full circle (he never returns to Poland), the globalization of his biography seems to require a new understanding of mobility. As opposed to mobility in the old sense – the mobility of a single living or acting unit (family, couple or individual) between two places (points) in the social hierarchy or landscape – we are now dealing with the inner mobility of the writer’s represented life, for which coming and going, being both here and there, across borders, between Poland, Argentina and France, ‘high’ and ‘low,’ hetero- and homo-, becomes the norm. Likewise, I would argue that just as inner mobility is no longer felt today as the exception to the rule, but as something familiar which occurs constantly in many different forms, so it is with Gombrowicz’s hero-narrator: the need to constantly ‘find his place’ between different places, each with their

⁴⁴ “... napisałem wówczas opowiadanie pod tytułem Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury. Płynę w tym opowiadaniu do Południowej Ameryki. Marynarze śpiewają: Pod modrym niebem Argentyny / Gdzie zmysły poja cud dziewczyny ... Ta nowelka dziwnym trafem została przed paru miesiącami przetłumaczona na francuski ... Ku niej płynę.” Gombrowicz, Dziennik 1961-1966, ed. J. Błofski, Cracow, 1986, p. 105.

⁴⁵ See my forthcoming “Co zdarzyło się na brygu Banbury? Gombrowicz, erotyka i prowokacja kultury,” Teksty drugie, 2002.

special social demands, has become his second nature. Besides, inner mobility and multilocation – transcontinental, transreligious, transpolitical, transerotic, both in the biographical context and in the longitudinal cross-section of life – are two sides of the same coin.

Concluding remarks

Multiple location or transnationality is one of the main reasons why national sovereignty in Gombrowicz's writings is undermined and a nationally based understanding of identity is pronounced obsolete. As the link between place and community is broken down in his 'interhuman sphere,' change and choice of place appear as the very model for the globalization of his biography. With regard to the question of nationality and national affinity, we could say that the motif of the Trans-Atlantic Journey signifies his 'homeland,' insofar as the journey emerges as an all-embracing metaphor for cultural in-betweenness.⁴⁶ In this way, the transatlantic exile is constructed as a space where the writer is finally free from the constricting environment of European nationalisms and their totalizing demands by becoming a 'Witold Gombrowicz' who knows no bounds or allegiances whatsoever.

And yet, as with Gombrowicz's autobiographical project, transnational 'place polygamy' does not mean either emancipation or non-emancipation, anomie or non-anomie, an automatic 'cosmopolitan vision' or a new fundamentalism; nor does it mean something too generalized or alarmist or defamatory (for example, the equating of Communism with totalitarianism and violence). Suffice it to say that multilocation in Gombrowicz's texts entails 'something new,' about which the hero-narrator – homeless, rootless and 'wandering' – as well as his reader may become curious, as he or she may do about new things, in order to decipher their view of the world. In his

⁴⁶ Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, 1998, "Introduction," Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality, ed. E.P. Ziarek, New York, p. 8.

transatlantic writings, the “miserable buffoon” Gombrowicz appears to be staging himself in a carnivalesque mood as one of ‘life’s maskers.’ Essential to him, however, is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege: the right to be ‘other’ in this world, “the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available.”⁴⁷ Inasmuch as none of these categories, or ‘forms,’ quite suits him, he exposes the conventional masks of life, which renders him, in fact, one of life’s great unmaskers.

On this and on his transatlantic experience in its entirety, the author might indeed have said: I didn’t get anywhere in the end. I only got closer.

⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics,” The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Austin, 1981, p. 159.

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ISSN 1501-6684