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# Between the East-Central European Burden of History and the Argentinian “Lightness of Being”: Witold Gombrowicz’s Representations of Time in Diaristic Practice

## 1 Introduction

Faced with the turbulent history of the twentieth century and the fluid context of East-Central Europe, Witold Gombrowicz in pursuit of some existential coherence distanced himself from Poland which “due to its geographical location and its history, was sentenced to perpetual tearing apart.”<sup>1</sup> He embarked on an exilic odyssey accompanied by diaristic writing. Born on the threshold of centuries, Gombrowicz was a member of the generation which continuously witnessing historical discontinuities was described by the Slovene writer Ivo Brnčić as “the generation behind the closed doors,”<sup>2</sup> thus devoid of both roots in the past and long-term visions for the future. Immersed in modern History written with a capital letter, which Reinhart Koselleck defined in terms of acceleration, progress and a widening gap between the past (“sphere of experience”) and the future (“horizon of expectation”),<sup>3</sup> Gombrowicz, like many other East-Central European intellectuals, experienced estrangement in rapidly changing spatiotemporal contexts. On his way back from Argentina to Europe he felt “eaten away by time and space.”<sup>4</sup> With the aim of coun-

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<sup>1</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Testament. Rozmowy z Dominique de Roux*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2004, p. 73 (ebook). Gombrowicz writes about the “extremely sad East-Central Europe” where “one night follows the other” and where “thugs of Hitler” are replaced by those of Stalin. His friend Czesław Miłosz similarly notes: “The part of Europe to which I belong has not, in our time, met with good fortune.” Czesław Miłosz: *The Captive Mind*. Transl. by Jane Zielonko. New York: Vintage 1990, p. vii. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Polish, Spanish, and Slovene are in my own translation.

<sup>2</sup> Ivo Brnčić: *Generacija pred zaprtimi vrati*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba 1954, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Reinhart Koselleck: *The practice of conceptual history: timing history, spacing concepts*. Transl. by Todd Samuel Presner et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, p. 110–114.

<sup>4</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*. Transl. by Lillian Vallee. New Haven, London: Yale Books, Yale University Press 2012, vol. 3, p. 659.

tering the sensation of defamiliarization, he followed the exilic path of life and engaged in diaristic practice. His *oeuvre* is underpinned by both nihilistic escape from Form<sup>5</sup> and “a work on forming oneself and understanding the world.”<sup>6</sup> Reconfiguration of time on the pages of diaries and traveling were the two complementary ways in which the writer attempted to redefine himself in the face of the challenges posed to the individual by the twentieth century such as collectivity and the allure of ideology. The latter was described by his friend Czesław Miłosz in terms of the “Hegelian bite” leading to the “captive mind.”<sup>7</sup>

Gombrowicz’s diaries written in exile foreground his temporal displacement in the history of the twentieth century, thus his oscillation between different understandings of time. This contribution will examine the writer’s changeable contours of self-identification which were emerging at the crossroads of different orders of time: historical, cultural, and diaristic. His life was stretched between Europe and Latin America, therefore between two different ways of time perception, between excessiveness of historical happening and a certain “lightness of being” immune to history. Referring to Milan Kundera’s remarks on “the most mysterious” lightness/weight opposition,<sup>8</sup> Gombrowicz’s experience of Argentinean emigration could be interpreted in terms of lightness equivalent to the episodic way of being in the present ephemeral moment opened by the escape from Europe and its weight of eternal return of historical discontinuities (two global wars) – this exhausting dialectics of history.<sup>9</sup> The infinite recurrence of great History strips its witness of individuality, reverberates with feeling of absurdity and

5 I capitalize the word to refer to Gombrowicz’s key concept denoting all forms of being and thinking imposed by society and culture which oppose the strong individual will to be in alignment with the self. Jerzy Jarzębski: Pojęcie “formy” u Gombrowicza. In: *Pamiętnik Literacki* 62, 4 (1971), p. 69–96. For a multidimensional analysis of Gombrowicz’s concept of Form see also: Jerzy Jarzębski: Pojęcie “formy” u Gombrowicza. In: Jan Błoński (ed.): *Gombrowicz i krytycy*. Kraków, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1984, p. 313–346. Józef Olejniczak: *Witold Gombrowicz. Ja!* Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 2021, p. 65–66.

6 Jerzy Jarzębski: *Natura i teatr. 16 tekstów o Gombrowiczu*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2007, p. 106.

7 He referred to the postwar official “New Faith” or “Diamat” (dialectical materialism) in the Soviet bloc based on the dialectical philosophy of history. The concept from the title of the book written in 1953 *captive mind* was used by Miłosz to describe the dangerous allure of “the Method, the Diamat – that is, dialectical materialism as interpreted by Lenin and Stalin” and which “possesses a strong magnetic influence on the men of the present day.” Czesław Miłosz: *The Captive Mind*, p. x–xi.

8 Milan Kundera: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Transl. by Michael Henry Heim. New York: HarperCollins 1984, p. 6.

9 Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień. Opowieść o Gombrowiczu*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2005, p. 105.

imposes a burdensome responsibility for certain political stances (bard of emigration, anti-communist, or nationalist) always avoided by Gombrowicz.

Several questions emerge in the context of research on individual relationships with changeable coordinates of time and space. How was Gombrowicz redefining himself as (East-Central) European and Pole in the mirror of cultural otherness of Latin America? How did different cultural orders of time of particular exilic places influence the writer's self-understanding? What role did reconfigurations of temporality inherent in the diaristic practice play in the process? Was Gombrowicz a transatlantic author negotiating in his *oeuvre* elective affinities between the two regions? This edited volume seems a perfect venue to rethink Gombrowicz's life-writing from the perspective of possible entanglements between East-Central Europe and Latin America. Both areas share many features, such as secondary culture, peripheral location, and the ambivalent *locus* of in-betweenness (forming part of the Western tradition but at the same time being outside) which attribute them with a potential to reshape their relationship with the Western world of central cultures and renegotiate the hierarchies inherent in this asymmetric relation. In view of Gombrowicz, the inhabitants of marginal countries shall regard their secondary, immature cultures not in terms of deficiency but a virtue which favouring individuality and creativity can undermine the dominion of Form and cultural tradition.<sup>10</sup> Instead of replicating

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<sup>10</sup> As Silvana Mandolessi emphasizes in her comparative research on Witold Gombrowicz and Jorge Luis Borges and their ways of conceptualizing relations to their "minor" cultures" of origin and Europe, both writers "reflect on the meaning of belonging to a secondary culture (Poland and Argentina respectively)." Silvana Mandolessi: Cultural Hierarchies, Secondary Nations: The Tension between Europe and "Minor" Cultures in Witold Gombrowicz and Jorge Luis Borges. In: Nele Bemong/Mirjam Truwant/Pieter Vermeulen (eds.): *Re-Thinking Europe Literature and (Trans)National Identity*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi 2008, p. 151–153, 156, 159, 161. Similarly to Gombrowicz who stressed the secondary cultures' creativity, Borges accentuated the creative power of marginal cultures' "eccentric position." Silvana Mandolessi: "Travelling Is Being and Seeing": National Identity and Visual Strategies in Witold Gombrowicz and Jose Ortega y Gasset. In: *Russian Literature* 4, vol. 62 (2007), p. 462. Marzena Grzegorczyk: *Kształt życia i bezkształt tradycji*. Argentyńska spuścizna Witolda Gombrowicza. In: Ewa Plonowska-Ziarek (ed.): *Grymasy Gombrowicza. W kregu problemów modernizmu, społeczno-kulturowej roli plci i tożsamości narodowej*. Transl. by Janusz Margański. Kraków: Universitas 2001, p. 168, 170, 181. However, as Javier de Taboada remarks, instead of finding some common ground between Gombrowicz and Borges, dictated by the wish to integrate the first one into the canon of Argentinian literature, it would be more appropriate to align Gombrowicz with the "eccentric pole" of Argentinian literary sphere represented by Roberto Arlt. Javier de Taboada: *Europeos en Latinoamérica: cine y literatura transnacionales. La visión de Herzog, Buñuel, Aub y Gombrowicz*. Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert 2017, p. 216. See also the comparison of *oeuvres* of Gombrowicz and his Cuban friend Virgilio Piñera from the point of view of "commonalities between the intellectual scenes of their home countries and Argentina during the mid-twentieth century" with the application of the concept of "minor nation". Milda Žilinskaitė: *Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera, the Argentine Experience*. San Diego: University of California 2014, p. 8–10, 62–67,

the forms produced by the central cultures, the inhabitants of peripheries (Poland, Argentina but also many other countries)<sup>11</sup> should ask themselves about their relationship with these forms.<sup>12</sup> As “an atypical exile”<sup>13</sup> or “a border intellectual”<sup>14</sup> Gombrowicz was marked with a certain in-betweenness<sup>15</sup> which shaped “a hybrid sense of his cultural and historical status.”<sup>16</sup> The ambivalent position of being European but at the edge of the Old Continent, between the West and the East as well as between the North and the South defined the writer’s self.

This paper’s methodological framework is based on an anthropological approach to personal writings, in particular to diary, which has been applied and thoroughly studied by Philippe Lejeune in his insightful research on diaristic practice intrinsically linked with the processes of self-identification. In this regard,

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9n14r0b5> [January 31, 2024]. Artur Sandauer underlined in Gombrowicz’s writings the role of parody of one’s own tradition as a way of finding an alternative attitude towards the West which goes beyond imitation as well as “Scylla of nationalism and Charybdis of snobbism.” Artur Sandauer: Witold Gombrowicz - człowiek i pisarz. In: Jan Błoński (ed.): *Gombrowicz i krytycy*, p. 109–110. For the analysis of Gombrowicz’s perception of analogies between Polish and Argentinian cultures and literature founded on both countries’ inherent immaturity and nourished by the same tension between reactionist patriotism and uncritical imitation of Europe see Juan José Saer: *Spojrzenie z zewnątrz*. Transl. by Klementyna Suchanow/Krystian Radny. In: Ewa Kobylecka-Piwońska (ed.): *Witold Gombrowicz. Pisarz argentyński*. Antologia. Łódź, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Universitas 2018. For the analysis of Gombrowicz’s *oeuvre* in terms of opposition between formlessness and form see: Małgorzata Grzegorczyk: *Kształt życia i bezkształt tradycji. Argentyńska spuścizna Witolda Gombrowicza*, p. 159–182.

11 For instance Romania or Canada. Witold Gombrowicz: *Testament*, p. 29.

12 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 115, 167. Jerzy Jarzębski: Gombrowicz, the Émigré. In: John Neubauer and Borbála Zsuzsanna Török (eds.): *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe. A Compendium*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter 2009, p. 333.

13 Javier de Taboada: *Europeos en Latinoamérica*, p. 197. The “atypical exile” retains an ambivalent, dialectic and agonistic relationship with both the country of origin and the host society of exilic stay.

14 Abdul R. JanMohamed: *Worldliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home. Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual*. In: Michael Sprinkler (ed.): *Edward Said. A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell 1992, p. 96–97, 102–103.

15 While reflecting on his family background Gombrowicz defined it as stretched “between Lithuania and Congress Poland, between countryside and industry, between the so called better-off and the middle class. These are just the first of the ‘in-between’ that will continue to proliferate around me to such an extent that they will almost become my home, my proper homeland.” Witold Gombrowicz: *Testament*, p. 6, 13. Another significant dimension of Gombrowicz’s in-betweenness manifests in his transatlantic life trajectory.

16 Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek: *Wprowadzenie*. In: Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek (ed.): *Grymasy Gombrowicza*, p. 19. Płonowska-Ziarek interpreted Gombrowicz’s transatlantic journey as “an all-embracing metaphor of cultural ‘in-betweenness’ which became ‘a land of permanent stay’ [ . . . ]” (p. 20).

I will also refer to the temporal condition of autobiographical writing delineated by philosopher Georges Gusdorf whose focus on the impact of accelerated pace of historical happening on autobiographical attitude reminds of Koselleck's theory of time. Moreover, this study draws on Gerd Baumann's concept of "grammar of identity/alterity," which triggers a reciprocal "process of selfing/othering."<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Gombrowicz's temporal displacement will be analyzed in reference to the hermeneutic weak ontology as was already suggested by literary scholar Andrzej Zawadzki, who interpreted Gombrowicz's *oeuvre* applying Gianni Vattimo's theory of weak thought. From this perspective, Gombrowicz as diarist was marked with some fragility (some "awful weakness toward life"<sup>18</sup>) understood not only as a sign of his aging body but related to the experience of both art and time ("Oh, how the present moment was sucking me dry, how it was weakening me!").<sup>19</sup> Therefore, weakness refers to a deeper ontological level of being which, as imbued with temporality and fleetingness, is not stable but always wavering and incomplete. To some extent, this ontologically inherent incompleteness was caused by the uprooting that characterized Gombrowicz's life in exile between Argentina and Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Not only weak thought but also psychoanalysis proves inspiring in shaping the methodological background of this research. Literary critic Michał Paweł Markowski interpreted Gombrowicz's *oeuvre* through the prism of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis and Gilles Deleuze's theories. With reference to Gombrowicz's most well-known novel, *Ferdydurke*, Markowski problematized the theme of escape still awaiting "a separate study under the title *Escaping Gombrowicz*, which, of course, would be the study of unbearable loneliness, which – like boredom – is a dominion of the Same."<sup>21</sup> Does "the dominion of the Same" mean the sensation of absurdity provoked by history which in East-Central Europe in the twentieth century, to put it metaphorically, was repeating itself along a circumference of a wheel hermetically closed by totalizing philosophies of history embodied in totalitarian systems? Could a way out of this encirclement – a form of escape – represent a hermeneutic fissure in a form of inner time mediated in a diary and

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<sup>17</sup> Gerd Baumann: Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach. In: Gerd Baumann/Andre Gingrich (eds.): *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books 2004, p. 18–49.

<sup>18</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 597. The roots of art, in Gombrowicz's view, would lie not in health but sickness.

<sup>20</sup> Andrzej Zawadzki: Gombrowicz a myśl słaba. In: Jerzy Jarzębski (ed.): *Witold Gombrowicz nasz współczesny*. Kraków: Universitas 2010, p. 132–133.

<sup>21</sup> Michał Paweł Markowski: *Czarny nurt. Gombrowicz, świat, literatura*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2004, p. 119.

inscribed in this manner in the cosmic time of sense?<sup>22</sup> Gombrowicz's diaristic practice as a hermeneutic, escapist response to the absurdity of history can be compared – to cite the author's statement from the *Diary* – to "something of a crack in this pitiless homogeneity, something like a door slightly ajar, like some sort of softening. . . and I could sneak out this way. . ."<sup>23</sup> The crack appeared to the writer with the opportunity of journey to Argentina and was widened by the diaristic practice. The paper will address first Gombrowicz's self-understandings in relation to changing spatial contexts defined by particular attitudes towards history. The second part will give an insight into the writer's diaristic reconfigurations of time interpreted as a search for a sense in "the pitiless homogeneity" of history written with a capital letter and echoing with absurdity.

## 2 Topography Experienced: Between the East-Central European Burden of History and the Argentinian "Lightness of Being"

"Geography. Where am I? [ . . . ] I was in South America, but where was north, west, south? Where am I positioned in relation to China or Alaska? Where is the polar cap?"<sup>24</sup> Gombrowicz as an emigrant and person "out of place"<sup>25</sup> was more

<sup>22</sup> I am interested here in the third time reconfigured by means of a diary which Paul Ricoeur characterized as "the proper historical time – that mediates between the time lived and the cosmic time." Paul Ricoeur: *Czas i opowieść*, vol. 3: *Czas opowiadany*. Transl. by Urszula Zbrześniak. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2008, p. 143. Diaristic writing combines historical account and fictional narrative which in Ricoeur's view are tools of poetics of a story and respond to different aporias of the phenomenology of time. The third time reconfigured in a diary and thus meaningful for the author, mediates between the time of consciousness and time of the universe which both silent are awaiting some meaning constructed by the individual.

<sup>23</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 646.

<sup>24</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 244.

<sup>25</sup> Interested in the Argentinian reception of Gombrowicz's *œuvre*, Pablo Gasparini interprets the writer's life in terms of being "out of place" which was shaped not merely by his exilic uprootedness but also by his "intellectual eccentricity," Heraclitean personality, "continuous desertion as a safeguard against the detention in any definition or territory of shelter." See Pablo Gasparini: *El exilio procaz: Gombrowicz por la Argentina*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora 2006, p. 24, 29, 34–35, 41. Silvana Mandolessi also stressed Gombrowicz's displacement by reflecting on his ambiguous position of being both in exile (from the point of view of Polish tradition) and a traveler (from the Argentinian perspective). These two attributions were complementary. Silvana Mandolessi: *Heterotopía y literatura nacional en Diario argentino de Witold Gombrowicz*, <https://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v18/mandolessi.html> [January 19, 2024].

interested in the question “where am I?” rather than “who am I?,” thus shifting his attention from the inward immersion towards his place<sup>26</sup> and self in relation to Other.<sup>27</sup> The changing spatial coordinates of his life made him deeply absorbed by his location in space and his fluid, ungraspable self-identification shaped in “confrontation with externality,”<sup>28</sup> another person, culture, landscape. The writer’s works abound in “analytic mirrors”, that reflect and refract the structures of host and home cultures.<sup>29</sup> Faced with the abstract vectors classifying the space and inevitable relativism preventing from acquiring a stable ground, an absolute position, Gombrowicz introduced another dichotomy of the concrete and palpable world of direct experience easily dissolved by the dusk in its opposite, thus “the cosmos” and “astronomical space.” He would find himself “in a bottomless abyss, in the womb of the universe,”<sup>30</sup> unable to clearly define his place.

Notwithstanding this situation of loss in the geographical space, Gombrowicz’s main axis of wandering and literary production can be conceptualized as extending from the North, identified with rationality, spirituality, metaphysics, darkness and repression, to the South, equivalent to emotionality, materiality, carnality, light and liberation.<sup>31</sup> What “bothered” the writer in Europe was “the collision of North and South [ . . . ]. Where the metaphysics of the North tumbles head over heels into the corporeal concreteness of the South.”<sup>32</sup> In this respect Gombrowicz’s perspective was alternative to the Cold War West–East division and his reflection contributed to a vertical, meridional paradigm in conceptualization of Europe initiated in the 1930s by other Polish writers during their south-bound journeys. In this sense Gombrowicz’s *oeuvre* could be interpreted as the instance of revaluation of the dominant horizontal way of defining Europe which ‘trapped’ the Slavic nations between ‘more civilized’ West and ‘greater imperial’

26 Julia Kristeva: *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Transl. by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press 1982, p. 8, cited after Katarzyna Jerzak: *Potwarz i wygnanie*. Witold Gombrowicz i Emil M. Cioran. In: Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek (ed.): *Grymasy Gombrowicza*, p. 219.

27 As literary scholar Jan Błoński remarks, Gombrowicz “seeks out his neighbour for confirmation” and tries “to find himself in the gaze and consciousness of others.” Jan Błoński: O Gombrowiczu. In: Jan Błoński (ed.): *Gombrowicz i krytycy*, p. 203, 218

28 Katarzyna Jerzak: *Potwarz i wygnanie*, p. 219.

29 Milda Žilinskaitė: *Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera, the Argentine Experience*, p. 12. She refers here to Jan Mohamed’s concept.

30 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 245.

31 Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 66–68.

32 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 382.

East forcing on them the inferiority complex. This shift of paradigms which accentuates the uniqueness of historical experiences of the small nations in East-Central Europe enables them to recover from the self-deprecating perception.<sup>33</sup>

Gombrowicz's existential map nourishing his "grammar of identity/alterity" consisted of East-Central Europe, the western part of the Old Continent, and Latin America. He recognized in these parts of the world nations living "under the sign of truth" or those ruled by the principle of beauty (Latin America)<sup>34</sup> and identified them with cultures of either central, mature (French, German, English) or peripheral, immature character (Eastern Europe and Latin America). These binary classifications are, however, neither clear nor stable. Gombrowicz's map was a dynamic, heterogeneous space where immature cultures immersed in a certain formlessness could influence and undermine central cultures characterized by established, mature forms of expression.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the imagined topography of the author, who himself experienced the "cultural colonialism,"<sup>36</sup> was critical of the colonial discourse founded on the categories of center and periphery<sup>37</sup> as well as the rigid duality between civilization and barbarism imbued with power structures.

To nuance this map even more, there were many differences within both the mature and immature countries. Even though Argentina and Poland pertained to the same category of periphery, they were divergent. Whereas Poland in "the Least Known Europe"<sup>38</sup> seemed to Gombrowicz to be condemned by "the paradox of his-

33 Jagoda Wierzejska: Mit Południa jako kontrapunkt dla opozycji Wschód – Zachód i podstawa mitu Europy Środkowej. In: *Porównania. Czasopismo poświęcone zagadnieniom komparatystyki literackiej*, vol. 11 (2012), p. 71–85. Aleksandra Konarzewska: Witold Gombrowicz, Again: Between Argentina and Germany. In: *Russian Literature* 120–121 (2021), p. 267. Gombrowicz's interest in the South was thus shared by other Polish travelers. Their explorations of Latin America shall be placed in a broader interwar context of the development of Polish commercial and passenger navy, construction of a new harbour in Gdynia and the colonial agenda of the Polish mass organization – the Maritime and Colonial League. Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 91–92.

34 Witold Gombrowicz: *Peregrinaciones argentinas*. Transl. by Bożena Zaboklicka and Francesc Miravitles. Buenos Aires: El cuenco de plata 2016, p. 26.

35 Silvana Mandolessi: Ohyda i podmiotowość: *Dziennik, Testament i Wędrówki po Argentynie*. Transl. by Judyta Woźniak. In: Ewa Kobylecka-Piwońska (ed.): *Witold Gombrowicz*, p. 95. Pablo Gasparini: Amerykańska niedojrzałość i przybysze z zewnątrz: w stronę przemilczanego i nieoprawnego Gombrowicza. Transl. by Magdalena Olejnik. In: Ewa Kobylecka-Piwońska (ed.): *Witold Gombrowicz*, p. 53.

36 Małgorzata Grzegorczyk: Kształt życia i bezkształt tradycji. Argentyńska spuścizna Witolda Gombrowicza, p. 181.

37 Milda Žilinskaitė: *Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera, the Argentine Experience*, p. 65

38 In the lecture given in Teatro del Pueblo in Buenos Aires in 1940 titled *Experiences and Problems of the Least Known Europe* Gombrowicz focused "on the cultural regression" of East-Central Europe as a consequence of totalitarian ideologies and being "between Bolshevism and Hitler-

tory" to the "role of a one-horse town of Europe situated in its center, [...] Argentina, although geographically speaking is lost in the most extreme periphery, drowned between the oceans, in reality is a space open to the world, an international country, maritime, intercontinental." In Argentina, which "is exposed to the most distant winds, [...] one feels to be a citizen of the world and has a premonition of playing a global role. . ."<sup>39</sup> Gombrowicz contraposed Polish culture as "a product of the landowning nobility" with the Argentinian bourgeois culture, the same one as in Western Europe. Consequently, he situated Argentina and not Poland closer to Paris or Rome. This juxtaposition of Polish immersion in nature and Argentinian urban life also shaped different national characters and mentalities.

These somewhat simplified and stereotypical dualities served Gombrowicz – "a Nordic"<sup>40</sup> to mirror himself in the South, Latin American otherness, this "screen reflecting Polish national psychology."<sup>41</sup> The binary mechanism of the pursuit of otherness in people and nature through the opposition with the Polish self was unstable and fragile since it was not possible to mitigate entirely the alterity and epistemological aporia in its representation.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, otherness is not only located in the foreign outside world but becomes internalized and projected on compatriots. Exilic perspective made Gombrowicz's homeland an instance of alterity turning each contact with a Pole into an anthropological study ("I devour them with a look, I observe, I investigate how they move, how they talk, what faces they have"<sup>43</sup>). The perception of Poles in terms of the Other results in their exoticization. As the writer remarked, every time he encountered a compatriot abroad he was forced "to view him in his mystery" just in the same way he would perceive "for instance a Spanish or a Bolivian." He believed in "an authentic Polish mystery, a

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ism." He viewed this regression as an opportunity for cultural reinvigoration with the help of culture's immature side. Jerzy Jarzębski: *Gombrowicz*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 2004, p. 83. Jerzy Jarzębski: Gombrowicz' s Wild Youth: The "Ferdydurkean Individual" Fades Away. In: Silvia G. Dapía (ed.): *Gombrowicz in Transnational Context: Translation, Affect, and Politics*. New York, London: Routledge 2019, p. 197–206. Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 121. For more information on the controversies the lecture provoked and responses in the Polish press in Argentina see: Klementyna Czernicka: Odczyt Gombrowicza w Teatro del Pueblo. In: *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2002), p. 252–256, [https://rcin.org.pl/ibl/Content/55861/PDF/WA248\\_70615\\_P-I-2524-czernicka-odczyt.pdf](https://rcin.org.pl/ibl/Content/55861/PDF/WA248_70615_P-I-2524-czernicka-odczyt.pdf) [January 19, 2024].

39 Witold Gombrowicz: *Peregrinaciones*, p. 11, 70–71.

40 Gombrowicz calls himself "a Nordic" in the *Diary*. Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 382–383.

41 Marian Bielecki: *Kłopoty z Innością*. Kraków: Universitas 2012, p. 40.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 38–45.

43 Witold Gombrowicz: *Peregrinaciones*, p. 113.

certain Polish ‘way’ which attracts and interests the foreigner.”<sup>44</sup> The exilic “condition of outsider” and immersion in the Argentinian “most diversified human material” of different ethnicities allowed Gombrowicz to “refresh his sensibility”, which enriched him with a new view of Poles (perceived as foreigners) and thus a new perspective on himself. Exile enabled him to verify his previous impressions from the period of life in Poland when he was still “imprisoned” and “quite tormented” by “Polishness”<sup>45</sup> equivalent to ethnocentrism and oppressing national myths. Argentina also presented a chance to distance oneself from Europe and its cultural heritage founded on “the eighteenth-century philosophical myths including the myth of predetermined rationality and vision of progress as well as modernity.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore the movement in space beyond the Old Continent was for Gombrowicz parallel to travel in time backwards “down the steps of the process of civilisation in Europe. Being the emigrant from Poland and Europe, he was simultaneously an emigrant from modernity.”<sup>47</sup>

What were Gombrowicz’s perceptions of time in his homeland and later in exile? The mere process of traveling is inseparably related to the act of trespassing divergent “regimes of historicity,” which as “a tool for comparative study [...] can elucidate our experience of time”<sup>48</sup> in different parts of the world. “Regimes of historicity” differ in combination of past, present and future.<sup>49</sup> Sensitivity to the passage of time becomes stronger with change in space, which then becomes primarily a journey in time. Thus, Gombrowicz’s travels took place not only on a map but also within himself. In the light of the approaching World War II and in fear of the imposed role of witness to a historical avalanche in Europe, he emigrated to Argentina, where he became “one of the many disinherited deprived of even a longing for the past that the pampa was receiving.”<sup>50</sup> His escape meant “creative forgetting.” Contrariwise his return to Europe in 1963 after almost a quarter century away incited the intensified act of remembering.<sup>51</sup> Before settling in southern France, Gombrowicz spent one year in West Berlin, where he felt overwhelmed by the excessive

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 69–70. However, “the eighteenth-century ideologies (the utopian state, the ideal society and ‘the good savage’)” as well as “the myth of South” still resounded in many Europeans’ accounts of journeys to South America. Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> Paweł Rodak, “Dziennik Gombrowicza: między mową, pismem i drukiem (wstępne rozpoznanie).” In: *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki* 4 (2004), p. 88 (p. 87–118).

<sup>48</sup> Francois Hartog: *Regimes of historicity. Presentism and experiences of time*. Transl. by Saskia Brown. New York: Columbia University Press 2015, p. xvii.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. xv–xvi.

<sup>50</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 171.

<sup>51</sup> Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 209, 211.

history. Suddenly very close to his homeland the writer became inundated by memories of childhood in Poland. However, he never returned to his native country.<sup>52</sup> The burden of the past was accompanied by the shadow of the inevitable future. In the sensation of approaching death, he felt as if the circle of his life was drawing nearer its enclosure, as if “the cycle was coming to a close.”<sup>53</sup>

What was the temporal dimension of reconfigurations of the self in the mirror of otherness? The response lies in different cultural orders of time dominant in particular countries as shaped by their collective historical fate and historical experiences. Whereas in some places history can be experienced as a burden, elsewhere a distance towards the historical unfolding would give rise to a certain atmosphere of lightness, which in the Latin American context Gombrowicz characterized as “Spanish, Italian, Latin, and also Indian; the smile, the courtesy, the happiness result here more easily [ . . ].”<sup>54</sup> All the news in the Argentinian press about the financial crisis, general strike, and potential *coup d'état* in the country seemed to the Polish writer as if they were imbued with a certain “exotic air” and thus referring to some other distant continent such as Europe. In contrast, the

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52 In this *short period* in Berlin Gombrowicz experienced the anti-German atmosphere dominant in Poland at that time. He was accused by the Polish communist press for accepting the fellowship from the Ford Foundation and became a target of campaign aimed at his discreditation. One of the strongest participants of this campaign was a journalist Barbara Witek-Swinarska who was an agent of security service. In a distorted, misinterpreted and manipulated conversation which in reality was not destined to be published, Gombrowicz was accused of fascism, downplaying of Nazi crimes in Poland and cynicism towards Polish war victims. After more than two decades in Argentina far away from the political affairs in Europe he suddenly found himself in the entirely new geopolitical situation in the vicinity of Berlin Wall. He was unaware of the intricacies of the Cold War politics. His new place of stay between the two ideological blocs, on the western side but still very close to Poland made him more vulnerable to the communist propaganda which in the end deepened his feeling of loneliness and disenchantment. This incident not only worsened his health but also influenced his decision never to return to Poland. Klementyna Suchanow: *Gombrowicz. Ja, geniusz*, vol. 2. Wołowiec: Czarne 2017, p. 296–319. Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk: “Their Astounding Strength in Overcoming Their Past. . .” The Memory of Nazism in the Berlin Diary. In: Silvia G. Dapía (ed.): *Gombrowicz in Transnational Context*, p. 217–218, 220. Kowalczyk noted that Gombrowicz’s superficial knowledge regarding the World War II was shaped not only by the exilic distance but also by Argentinians’ general indifference and the government’s sympathetic attitude towards Nazism manifested in acceptance of many war criminals.

53 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 626. “[ . . ]. Berlin was already too close to Poland, Małoszyce, Bodzechów, his childhood, and he perceived this proximity as the closing of a cycle, as a harbinger of death.” Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk: “Their Astounding Strength in Overcoming Their Past. . .”, p. 218. This return meant not only a triumph as a writer but also a confrontation with everything he had tried to escape from before: North, Europe, Poland, family. Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 208.

54 Witold Gombrowicz: *Peregrinaciones*, p. 36.

same information encountered in a European newspaper would be received as shocking and petrifying.<sup>55</sup> The decision to leave Europe in 1939 allowed Gombrowicz – the “outsider”<sup>56</sup> to distance himself from the loud and disturbing cacophony of history, “the feverish din of European radio speakers, [. . .] the wartime roar of newspapers.”<sup>57</sup> Life in Argentina enabled him to perceive European history and political events in East-Central Europe from a safe “chilling distance of years and kilometers.”<sup>58</sup> He observed the situation in his homeland “as if through a telescope” which enabled a view in “only the most general contours [. . .].”<sup>59</sup>

Gombrowicz’s travel narrative on Latin America problematizes the colonial images of the continent imposed by Europeans.<sup>60</sup> Was he the first “post-colonialist”?<sup>61</sup> As literary scholar Piotr Seweryn Rosół notes, Gombrowicz’s attempt to go beyond the modern dualities (immaturity-maturity, inferiority-superiority) by foregrounding the in-between sphere was aimed at “the rejection of modern values – such as [. . .] the idea of progress, rational and colonial civilization [. . .]” and “the appreciation of those which modernity rejected as non-modern and consequently stigmatized as abnormal or pathological.”<sup>62</sup> In this sense his attention was drawn to the marginalized and the peripheral, thus the indigenous people. Nevertheless, his reflection, underpinned by fascination with youth which force lies in its being beyond the scale of values and any connotations with ideology or morality, did not acquire a moralistic tone in defence of this group.<sup>63</sup>

Gombrowicz’s critical approach to the colonial narrative does not mean the absolute refutation or a radical re-evaluation but a certain reformulation. The writer’s imagined topography is still structured in binary terms of immature and mature cultures. This dualism also nourished the colonial discourse. In line with

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 38–39.

<sup>56</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Testament*, p. 72.

<sup>57</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 626.

<sup>58</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 444.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 293, 452.

<sup>60</sup> Ewa Kobyłecka-Piwońska: *Spojrzenia z zewnątrz. Witold Gombrowicz w literaturze argentyńskiej (1970–2017)*. Łódź Kraków: Universitas 2017, p. 123.

<sup>61</sup> Aleksander Fiut in his article on Gombrowicz’s reflection on the postcolonial discourse in Argentina gives the affirmative response. The paper’s title refers to the writer’s self-perception as a forerunner of the main intellectual trends of the twentieth century which made him call himself the first existentialist or the first structuralist. Aleksander Fiut: Gombrowicz the First Post-Colonialist? In: *Russian Literature* 4, vol. 62 (2007), p. 433.

<sup>62</sup> Piotr Seweryn Rosół: Becoming Gombrowicz. On the Way of Trans-Subjectivity and Trans-Modernity. In: Silvia G. Dapía (ed.): *Gombrowicz in Transnational Context*, p. 115.

<sup>63</sup> Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 195, 201.

the tradition commenced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he identified Argentina with a space of immaturity unburdened by history. What, however, distances Gombrowicz from the colonial imagination is deconstruction of the power structures and the granting to subaltern cultures the subversive agency. As literary scholar Silvana Mandolessi remarked, he did not view the American formless potentiality in negative terms of deficiency of spirit passively awaiting final fulfillment by imitating European values. His observations did not entail an imperative imposing on the fragmentary and unfulfilled American reality an obligation to imitate mature Europe. On the contrary, it is American materiality and youth viewed as a value in itself which should inspire and subversively influence the more mature and abstract rest of the world. Latin America under the sign of continuous becoming and imbued with a reinvigorating atmosphere of youth, a source of authenticity, seemed to Gombrowicz a promise which could enable him to approach the inferior side of his self. Remaining beyond verbalization and articulation it could be only experienced, grasped by the senses and Eros.<sup>64</sup>

Gombrowicz's travels in Argentina gave way to impressions different from those shared by other European visitors (José Ortega y Gasset, Hermann von Keyserling, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle or Le Corbusiere)<sup>65</sup> who claimed that "this country appears as devoid of essence and requiring clarification from outside."<sup>66</sup> As literary critic Aleksander Fiut remarks, the divergence in perspectives between Gombrowicz and other travelers was conditioned by their origins. Whereas Keyserling did not problematize the colonial violence, "Gombrowicz, inhabitant of Central Europe, continuously devastated by historical cataclysms, never loses sight of genocide in Latin America and extremely cruel treatment of Indians by conquistadors."<sup>67</sup> While

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<sup>64</sup> Silvana Mandolessi: *Ohyda*, p. 72–99.

<sup>65</sup> For more information about the debate on the fate of America, different responses to "the obsession with immaturity of America during the first decades of the twentieth century" nourished by divergent interpretations of Hegelian conceptualization of America in the writings of Gombrowicz and other travelers from Europe and North America (for instance Waldo Frank) see: Pablo Gasparini: *El exilio procaz*, p. 44–59. As Gasparini claims, Gombrowicz's originality which distinguishes him from other intellectuals who reflected on Latin America shall not be explained by "his distance from Hegel but his inversion of value" (p. 54). Consequently, whereas Ortega y Gasset or Keyserling tried to redefine "the Hegelian negation of America" and "repair" or nuance the American a-historicity," Gombrowicz cherishes it by regarding the immaturity not as a deficiency or a transitory stage needed to be overcome but as a positive value required to undermine the European maturity (p. 58–59).

<sup>66</sup> Ewa Kobylecka-Piwońska: *Spojrzenia*, p. 120–121.

<sup>67</sup> Aleksander Fiut: *Zwiedzanie "Kontynentu z Trzeciego Dnia Stworzenia": Gombrowicz i Keyserling*. In: Jerzy Jarzębski (ed.): *Witold Gombrowicz*, p. 576. Aleksander Fiut: Gombrowicz the First Post-Colonialist?, p. 437. In Santiago del Estero (Argentina), Gombrowicz noted: "Spears,

other European travellers directed their attention towards national psychology and metaphysical depths in an attempt to rationally find a spirit of the place, its cultural identity,<sup>68</sup> Gombrowicz preferred the more superficial view of a tourist<sup>69</sup> attentive to the empirical aspect of his exilic condition. Therefore, he decided to remain on the surface and experiential margins, visiting peripheral places and providing an alternative perspective on Latin America. Instead of intellectual debates, inspired by “territorial imagination” (territory shaping national identity) and thus not free from stereotypical representations, about possible essence of Latin America, he was more absorbed by directly experienced phenomena, the concrete materiality of landscape, objects and carnality of inhabitants.<sup>70</sup> Gombrowicz’s discourse of

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swords, spurs, armor, the plumed helmets of the white, bearded conquerors invading the naked defenselessness of those Huries, Lules, Vilelas three or four hundred years ago . . . And a hundred years ago? In his memoirs, General Paz describes how in the 1840s, the governor ordered that two Indians have their throats cut daily . . . These were Indians (“whose eyes I often saw,” writes the general) chosen from the heaps of rotting prisoners in the dungeon and then led out to be slaughtered . . . sadism and masochism still play in that colored air and dance in the streets. Their stench poisons me. Such is the perversity of Santiago!” Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 385. However, Gombrowicz, distant from the engaged writing, would not become an advocate of marginalized people. As Piotr Seweryn Rosół remarked, “he places himself on the side of what is excluded and stigmatized, but does not support the emancipation of groups omitted by history and does not create emancipatory, insurrectional counter-stories focused on a fight for justice and a new identity politics. When he talks about the painful experience of exclusion he is never the political voice of the excluded. The goal is to see value in what modernity has rejected and not in the equivalence of various Others.” Piotr Seweryn Rosół: *Becoming Gombrowicz*, p. 122.

**68** Silvana Mandolessi: *Ohyda*, p. 72–99. Silvana Mandolessi: *Heterotopía y literatura nacional*. As Mandolessi argues, contrary to other European intellectuals who referring to historical facts and other types of knowledge tried to define identitarian features of Argentina, Gombrowicz would rather speak about this country in terms of lack of definition.

**69** According to Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, Gombrowicz acquired this perspective also before in the interwar period during his travels to Western Europe, to Italy and Austria. He was observing the ascent and spread of fascism as a tourist interested in the external phenomena on “the surface of life” and not in the in-depth analysis or moral judgement. Gombrowicz’s attitude of tourist can be explained with his scepticism, relativism and belief in separation of art from politics, ideology manifesting in his indifference towards political matters. Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk: “Their Astounding Strength in Overcoming Their Past. . .”, p. 211–214.

**70** Silvana Mandolessi: *Ohyda*, p. 72–99. Pablo Gasparini: *Amerykańska niedojrzałość*, p. 25–41. Ewa Kobylecka-Piwońska: *Spojrzeńia*, p. 124. Silvana Mandolessi: “Travelling Is Being and Seeing,” p. 458. Mandolessi also emphasized an important aspect about the travellers’ perspective as not devoid of ideological underpinnings which legitimized and preserved power structures (p. 461). As Gombrowicz noted: “Volumes have been written about the psychology of the South American; they are often metaphysical, almost always too ‘deep’— knowledge about a man or a nation is not always a deep-water fish – sometimes spiced with a tasty homegrown mysticism (that there is some undiscovered truth in the ‘silence’ of an Argentinean, for example). All right,

Latin America is founded on “the language of the body”<sup>71</sup> and as such imbued with eroticism which for him played a crucial role in the human life.<sup>72</sup> “Mortally in love with the body,” it constituted his “touchstone.” Even though a Nordic, Gombrowicz’s metaphysics would be never free from flesh.<sup>73</sup> Eroticism identified with values of youth, beauty and inferiority constituted to him “a mother tongue” and a natural worldview framework [. . .], in particular his anthropology,” centred on a new interpersonal vision of human being.<sup>74</sup>

In the debate on the Argentinian national character and the ways to replace epigonism with creative originality, Gombrowicz as a convinced social constructionist argued that it was not an intellectual in-depth analysis of roots which could promise an insight into the true essence of a nation but action. Whereas abstract theorization may only enforce certain forms of perception and clichés, action understood as a “self-creation”<sup>75</sup> can reframe the way of thinking and being. It also emphasizes the importance of speaking in one’s own voice liberated from the plural form. Only life not subordinated to a theory and action not following a prescribed program can become original and provide some answers to the questions: Who are we? What is our reality? The starting point, however, must be always the individual man who can respond to creative potentiality of his *milieu* only by overcoming it in himself.<sup>76</sup> These debates about one’s own way to creativity were present not only in Argentina but also Poland and thus seem to

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let it be most profound where it should be, but why should one look for a chasm on the straight-away? Ninety percent of Argentina and South America can be explained by the life these people lead, a life that is, in spite of their complaints, quite easy in comparison with other continents.” Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 416.

71 Aleksander Fiut: Gombrowicz the First Post-Colonialist?, p. 433. Fiut perceived Gombrowicz’s “language of the body as an interpretational tool in defining the nature of the Latin American identity.”

72 Jerzy Jarzębski: *Gombrowicz’s Wild Youth*, p. 205.

73 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 383.

74 Janusz Pawłowski: Erotyka Gombrowicza. In: Jan Błoński (ed.): *Gombrowicz i krytycy*, p. 533, 537–538. “For in culture, only eroticism has created a sufficiently rich language that can be used to express artistically that reality which Gombrowicz describes as ‘interpersonal’” (p. 533). As Kowalczyk reminds, Gombrowicz’s new vision of man, always remaining in relation to another man and thus reshaped in the “human church”, was born “on the ruins of Western individualism and Eastern collectivism.” Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk: “Their Astounding Strength in Overcoming Their Past. . .” p. 216–217.

75 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 411.

76 Ibid., p. 478. “What is America, Americans? A concept, generality, abstraction. What is the ‘American reality’? Something that each person can understand as he wishes. [. . .] In my view, one must begin with man, the individual man, and I will say more: the development of America can only be the work of people who have overcome America in themselves.”

return obsessively in the peripheral countries, which, deprived of “direct relation with life,” can be characterized as “secondary” cultures ready to imitate the more mature cultures.<sup>77</sup> Argentina would be in a better situation here than Poland and more likely to escape epigonism due to its shorter history and literary tradition. Devoid of this burden Argentinians could open themselves to “universal thought and art.”<sup>78</sup>

Notwithstanding the reinvigorating impact of Latin American immaturity, in 1963 Gombrowicz decided to go back to the “mature” part of Europe. Interestingly, as Janusz Margański argues, both continents were not so distant from each other. Thus the writer’s stay in the South was not equivalent to the immersion in an entirely unknown otherness. Contrariwise, in European Buenos Aires and faced with the well organised Polish diaspora of long traditions, he encountered in Argentina “Polish-European ‘the same’: [ . . . ] myth of Paris as a capital of art, [ . . . ] a ritual of anachronic Polishness performed in the exotic pampa.”<sup>79</sup> While living in Buenos Aires, Gombrowicz, remaining “loyal,”<sup>80</sup> identified himself with the Old Continent (important for the writer’s next debut). What is more, his stay in Argentina made him feel “perhaps more European than the Europeans of Rome and Paris.”<sup>81</sup> However, having returned, in line with the “anti-Parisian reaction,”<sup>82</sup> he commenced to criticize Europe/Paris from the perspective of Argentina<sup>83</sup> as if, in fear of the imposed Form of famous writer, he tried to prolong the Argentinean youth and independence. Far away from Latin America identified with beauty, in France he

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 479. Witold Gombrowicz: *Peregrinaciones*, p. 54–56.

<sup>78</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Peregrinaciones*, p. 76.

<sup>79</sup> Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 91, 110. “It occurred to him to recognise Poles in Argentinians, and Polishness in Argentinianness.” Ibid., p. 116. “Gombrowicz transposed the Polish experiences into the Argentinian experiences, and with the help of the Argentinian experiences he interpreted what he lived through in Poland.” Ibid., p. 122. More about the Polish diaspora in Argentina see: Ibid., p. 116–119. According to Miguel Grinberg, Gombrowicz was fascinated with Argentina because he could find in this Latin American country his place of origin, pre-World War II Poland. Miguel Grinberg: Gombrowicz in love. Transl. by Klementyna Suchanow and Krystian Radny. In: *Literatura na świecie* 4 (2001): p. 83–85.

<sup>80</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 659.

<sup>81</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Testament*, p. 38.

<sup>82</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Dziennik*, vol. 3, p. 608. The same strategy Gombrowicz had chosen already before the war.

<sup>83</sup> Marian Bielecki: *Kłopoty*, p. 18–29. As Bielecki remarks, Gombrowicz’s ambivalent attitude to the Old Continent was marked by oscillation between acceptance and refusal, the need to keep a strong bond with Europe and a fear of its alienating effect. Not disrupted during his stay in Argentina, this bond was reformulated in a critical approach towards Europe underpinned by “a polemics with modernity.”

sought for ugliness in order “to beautify Argentina” and “this seeking of eyesores was something like an act of love on behalf of the Cast Off (Argentina).”<sup>84</sup> In Paris, embodying “nothing but the ever-receding present,” Gombrowicz tried to shape out of a fog of a fleeting moment a fist necessary to face and irritate the inimical culture representing center and power.<sup>85</sup> Forced into “a double impasse” in Europe by the inaccessibility of a foreign reality of the Cold War period and the distorting Form imposed by critics, readers he opted for an active stance of assault.<sup>86</sup>

Contrary to the French South which was easily conquered by the writer, Berlin, due to its closeness to Poland, trapped him in the past.<sup>87</sup> Latinized Gombrowicz felt lost in the North<sup>88</sup> and instead of keeping an attitude of “an alert observer,” he preferred to speak about his dreams. In Germany, surrounded by the phantoms of the past and covered by “sleep-inducing snow,” “the silence of whiteness, its drowsiness” blurring the contours of reality, he noticed that since his departure from Argentina he was asleep.<sup>89</sup> “The enfeebled” writer recognized in himself lack of “the strength to overcome the stony foreignness of Europe,” which seemed to him “a pyramid, Sphinx, and an alien planet, [ . . . ] a fata morgana,”<sup>90</sup> unrecognizable and unrecoverable in time and space. Europe identified

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<sup>84</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 605–606. Gombrowicz contraposed “the great, real beauty of the human race, the young and naked beauty” with encountered in France “surrogates of beauty such as *belles manières, élégance, distinction, esprit, bon goût*, etc., etc” (p. 607).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 601, 605.

<sup>86</sup> Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 215.

<sup>87</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 601. Gombrowicz defined his strategy upon his arrival to Europe and France in terms of conquer. Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk: “Their Astounding Strength in Overcoming Their Past. . .” p. 218. “While he managed to defeat Paris [ . . . ] Berlin put up resistance. Argentinian nature, youth, exuberance, nudity, allowed him to unveil the shameful secret of Parisians who did not know how to cope with the greatness of their city [ . . . ]. If Paris stood wide open before Gombrowicz, Berlin proved difficult to access. The writer defined his attitude toward France without much difficulty. In Berlin, he was confronted with the memory of the Polish-German past, which he could not set aside, which he could not ignore.”

<sup>88</sup> Klementyna Suchanow: *Gombrowicz. Ja, geniusz*, vol. 2, p. 281, 286. As Gombrowicz wrote to his friend Juan Carlos Gómez just after his arrival to Europe he was “overwhelmed by homesickness, lost in the world, distracted [ . . . ].” He longed for Argentina. The new encounter with Europe was for him “a cause of terrible anguish [ . . . ].” Gombrowicz’s letters to Juan Carlos Gómez (Berlin, 24 May 1963; Berlin, 15 June 1963). In: *Literatura na świecie* 4 (2001), p. 9–10, 12. According to Margański, Gombrowicz in Berlin, thus lost in the North, surprisingly, recreated the South in the revalorized Sarmatian “old-Polish tradition of nobility” identified with “distance, loosening and liberty.” Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 222–223. Błoński also mentioned Gombrowicz’s rehabilitation of Sarmatian tradition. Jan Błoński: *O Gombrowiczu*, p. 221.

<sup>89</sup> Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk: “Their Astounding Strength in Overcoming Their Past. . .” p. 218. Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 639–640.

<sup>90</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 659.

with “an infinite emptiness”<sup>91</sup> lacked clear spatiotemporal coordinates; in the same way, his self was deprived of such unvarying points of reference. Existential feebleness shapes outside reality, stripping it of stable foundations, and *vice versa*. An “insufficiently real” world undermines unity and coherence of self, which in consequence becomes marked by a particular feeling of inadequacy of being on the margins of reality.<sup>92</sup> Faced with foreign Europe, Gombrowicz, whose homeland became Argentina,<sup>93</sup> was yearning for the South. Since he left the Latin American shore, as he confessed in one of the letters, he did not have any good day.<sup>94</sup> Undecided which direction to choose (Argentina, the USA, Canada, or Spain – Barcelona or the Balearic Islands),<sup>95</sup> “suspended in a complete void,”<sup>96</sup> and unable to embark on the transatlantic journey again, his last southbound itinerary led him to Vence in Southern France.

### 3 Gombrowicz’s Diaristic Struggles with Time

Gombrowicz embarked on two different but complementary types of diaristic writing: the public, literary *Diary*,<sup>97</sup> regarded as a duel with readers in his attempt at self-fashioning as a writer, and the second intimate diary *Kronos*, written by a vulnerable person and published only posthumously. Literary critic Grzegorz Jankowski

91 “[. . .] where all places are good – and bad – at the same time.” Witold Gombrowicz’s letter to Juan Carlos Gómez (Berlin, 22 September 1963). In: *Literatura na świecie* 4 (2001), p. 21.

92 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 659.

93 Witold Gombrowicz’s letters to Juan Carlos Gómez (Berlin, 15 November 1963; Berlin, 29 November 1963; Berlin, 21 December 1963; Royaumont, 12 June 1964; Royaumont, 5 August 1964). In: *Zeszyty Literackie* 49 (1995): p. 95, 97–99, 101–102. Witold Gombrowicz’s letters to Juan Carlos Gómez (Berlin, 9 May 1963; Berlin, 24 May 1963; Berlin, 22 September 1963; Royaumont, 27 July 1964). In: *Literatura na świecie* 4 (2001), p. 7, 9, 20. In the letters written from Berlin and Royaumont to his friend Juan Carlos Gómez, Gombrowicz expressed his disorientation in Europe and willing to come back to Latin America, Argentina which he called his Homeland written with a capital letter. He also planned to have another flat in Uruguay. Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 226–227.

94 Witold Gombrowicz’s letter to Juan Carlos Gómez (Vence, 28 February 1965). In: *Zeszyty Literackie* 49 (1995): p. 105.

95 Anders Bodegård: Jerzy Giedroyc–Witold Gombrowicz. Listy. In: *Zeszyty Literackie* 49 (1995): p. 107. Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 601.

96 Witold Gombrowicz’s letter to Juan Carlos Gómez (Royaumont, 27 July 1964). In: *Literatura na świecie* 4 (2001), p. 27.

97 Alex Kurczaba: *Gombrowicz and Frisch. Aspects of the Literary Diary*. Bonn: Bouvier 1980, p. 6, 9. The literary scholar mentions among features which characterize a literary diary its aficionality (blurred boundary between fiction and nonfiction).

wicz analyzes Gombrowicz's "two ways of writing about life"<sup>98</sup> with reference to opposite categories describing life that are derived from the culture of ancient Greece and discussed by many intellectuals (Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben): *bios* and *zoe*. While the first term *bios* designates a finite life of a concrete individual represented as a line, personal history and identity, the second category *zoe* refers to a recurrent infinite existence of all species in general, a succession of generations, bare life without properties. Whereas the *Diary* refers to *bios*, life captured in words, sculptured in some form, sense, *Kronos* on the other hand, as an enumeration of facts devoid of narrative, elaborate structure, contains all the rest which escaped form and should be placed closer to *zoe*.<sup>99</sup>

The temporal dimension of Gombrowicz's self-understanding reshaped in diaristic practice can be analyzed at various levels. The first fictitious level is constituted by the text of the *Diary* and regards the narrator's relations to time. The second one can be characterized by the relationship between the author immersed in calendar time and his intimate diaristic writing (*Kronos*). Thirdly, there is a more general interrelation between diaristic practice and the concept of time. I will start with the last and broadest perspective of autobiographical writing as such and its temporal aspect referring to the ideas of Georges Gusdorf. Then I will analyze narrative temporality reconfigured by Gombrowicz in his *Diary* and the one emerging at the junction of the text (*Kronos*) and the reality (historical context).

Gusdorf described the cultural conditions of autobiography with reference to history and anthropology and in connection with the concept of modern Western subjectivity. In his view, an autobiographical attitude expressed in the consciousness of oneself as an individual was a Western concern about the meaningful narrative unity of one's existence. This autobiographical inclination, rooted in a linear concept of time, is thus associated with distressing consciousness of its accelerated pace accompanied by a widening abyss between the present and the past. Therefore, autobiographical genres would emerge together with the perception of historical time as a force uprooting an individual from the mythical frames of being. The lack of earlier given *a priori* patterns of identity (social class, religion) required a search for some new mediations of self-identification such as autobiographical

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<sup>98</sup> Grzegorz Jankowicz: *Gombrowicz-loading. Esej o formie życia*. Wrocław: Książkowe Klimaty 2014, p. 39.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 69–73, 103–105. However, as literary scholar Michal Oklot notes, *Kronos* is not entirely devoid of confabulation and mythologization, possessing also an element of self-fashioning and creation as a response to annihilating forces of pain and overwhelming dissolution. Michal Oklot: Gombrowicz's *Kronos*: The Pornography of Aging. In: *Slavonica* 19, 2 (2013), p. 120, 125.

forms which would allow one to reconstruct the coherence of one's life and continuity in time.<sup>100</sup>

What are the narrative reconfigurations of temporality in Gombrowicz's diaristic writing? Literary scholar Michał Oklot distinguished "Gombrowicz measured by [Ch]ronos (the lining) and 'Gombrowicz' redeemed, flickering in a-temporal breaches, Kairos (the artistic/messianic façade); in short, *Kronos* and the *Diary*."<sup>101</sup> Oklot concurrently accentuated the important temporal axis structuring this diaristic practice founded on the oscillation between *chronos* and *kairos*. In the *Diary* there is no trace of continuity in time. The construction of temporality does not abide by the typical, linear and retrospective procedure of capturing the reflections of one's old self in the mirror of the present moment.<sup>102</sup> Instead, as literary scholar Daniel Pratt claims, Gombrowicz's central concept of Form entails a self-construction alternative to the predominant narrative and episodic ways of self-understanding. It would be rather "a present-oriented striving toward self-creation [...] emphasizing the present over any unknowable future or inalterable past."<sup>103</sup> The emphasis on the performative, creative dimension of Gombrowicz's *Diary*, contrary to the traditional retrospective orientation of this genre, directs its temporal construction towards a future "meaningful structure" of the self in the world.<sup>104</sup>

Despite all the renewed efforts to capture, as Gombrowicz noted, the "ardently desired" but irretrievable time in order to make contact with himself from the past, the *Diary*'s narrator had to admit his failure. "I spend a lot of time reconstructing my past: I diligently establish a chronology and stretch my memory to its limits, looking for myself the way Proust did, but to no avail. The past is bottomless and

<sup>100</sup> Georges Gusdorf: *Warunki i ograniczenia autobiografii*. Transl. by Janusz Barczyński. In: Małgorzata Czermińska (ed.): *Autobiografia*. Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria 2009, p. 20.

<sup>101</sup> Michał Oklot: *Gombrowicz's Kronos*, p. 109.

<sup>102</sup> Katarzyna Chmielewska: *Strategie podmiotu. Dziennik Witolda Gombrowicza*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo IBL 2010, p. 113–116.

<sup>103</sup> Daniel Pratt: Narrative and Form: Gombrowicz and the Narrative Conception of Personal Identity. In: *The Polish Review* 60, 2 (2015), p. 9. Czesław Miłosz also emphasizes Gombrowicz's focus on the present moment and the way a man is continuously reshaped in the interpersonal sphere here and now, which would distinguish the writer from Marxists or Freudians who in the attempt to reconstruct the genealogy of certain phenomena (history of society or history of disease) are more interested in the past. However, Gombrowicz shares their conviction about the subordination of the individual will and freedom to collective categories such as subconsciousness, class or "interhuman church." Czesław Miłosz: *Kim jest Gombrowicz*. In: Jan Błoński (ed.): *Gombrowicz i krytycy*, p. 195.

<sup>104</sup> Jerzy Jarzębski: *Podglądając Gombrowicza*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2000, p. 182.

Proust lies. Nothing, one can do absolutely nothing.”<sup>105</sup> In order to withstand the immersion in these hardly differentiated but sensually experienced overlapping temporalities, the *Diary*'s narrator grasped some dates and numbers which constitute the *kairotic* order of time. They were the landmarks whose repetition could give the impression of predictability and thus contribute to restoring some sense of constancy. In the *Diary* the narrator noted: “Today, the twenty-second, I touched European soil, I have long known that two twos are my number. I also touched Argentine soil for the first time on the twenty-second (of August). Hail, magic! The analogy of numbers, eloquence of dates. . .you miserable creature, if you can't catch yourself in anything else, at least try this.”<sup>106</sup> In another place, the narrator manifested his attention to dates as follows: “My growing sensitivity to the calendar. Dates. Anniversaries. Periods. With what diligence I now surrender myself to this tallying of dates.”<sup>107</sup> The cult of the numbers 22 and 2 allowed Gombrowicz to discern some parallel paths and erect bridges connecting the present moment with the past and the future.

While the *Diary*'s narrator noticed that the systematic recording of his own existence made day by day would not assure a firm ground under his feet, constantly undermined by the flow of time, the author of *Kronos* did not resign his endeavor to bring some order to his immersion in the chaotic reality by inscribing himself within the continuity of facts. In the opinion of Gombrowicz's wife and the first editor of *Kronos*, the writer started his notes at the end of 1952 or the beginning of 1953,<sup>108</sup> thus concurrently with the public *Diary*. From this moment he tried to reconstruct his past life year by year, month by month since the inter-war period in Poland (starting in 1922), not forgetting in the beginning to add the date of his birth (August 1904) and even earlier the probable date of his conception (December 1903). Naturally, the earliest recalled period of life spent in Poland before the World War II, due to the temporal distance, abounds in silence, which prevails over the remembered facts.

Chronology, almost absent in communication with readers of the published *Diary*, became of primary importance for the hidden communication with Gombrowicz's bygone selves in *Kronos*. The strict structure introduced by the calendar may indicate the writer's need to endow his life, “running through fingers,” with some rhythm. First, he imposed the calendar frame for listing of dates. Then he abided by this timeline in his patient attempts to reconstruct his life by gather-

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<sup>105</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 92.

<sup>106</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 601.

<sup>107</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 2, p. 306.

<sup>108</sup> Rita Gombrowicz: Na wypadek pożaru. In: Witold Gombrowicz: *Kronos*. Rita Gombrowicz, Jerzy Jarzębski and Klementyna Suchanow (eds). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2013, p. 7, 9.

ing fleeting traces of memory and facts. Literary scholar Jerzy Jarzębski noted that the events remembered from the period between 1939 to 1952 were written in the special column of years and months. Some of the places had to remain blank due to the inability to remember what had happened dozens of years ago. Closer to 1953, the moment when Gombrowicz probably started to write *Kronos*, the journal becomes more detailed and filled with events.<sup>109</sup>

Continuity and chronology, undesired in the *Diary*, were placed in the foreground in *Kronos*, allowing the author to some extent to reconstruct his life and then to reread his own fate.<sup>110</sup> On the intimate journal's pages, it is possible to find some traces evoking Gombrowicz's recurrent journeys in time. They can be interpreted as constituents of a deeper *kairotic* time emerging at the diaristic crossroads of the objective order of calendar time and the inner experienced time. *Kairos* as a qualitative aspect of temporality marked by the recurrence of memory and dates opens forms of experiencing time other than linear and indicates the individual need for some meaning of being in historical time. *Kairos* also means proper timing and consists of crucial existential moments revealing some individual sense, which undermines for a while the power of *chronos*. In this respect, as the contemporary writer Olga Tokarczuk remarked, *Kairos* as a "god of occasion, passing moment, uncommon possibility" refers to an "extraordinary, decisive moment which changes everything" and thus it depends on the individual readiness to notice a promise of "shift of the trajectory of fate."<sup>111</sup>

The traces of Gombrowicz's imagined travels in time, attributing *Kronos* with some elements of *kairos*, can be found in the comparisons between the past and the present made in the act of rereading the diaristic records, which sometimes also resulted in comments being added in hindsight and changing the original meaning of the previous notes. These journeys in time realized on the pages of *Kronos* were facilitated by Gombrowicz's sensitivity to numbers and anniversaries. It seems that the most important one was the anniversary of his leaving *Banco Polaco*, the bank in Buenos Aires where he was employed for several years. The post of a clerk being just a cog in the bureaucratic machinery was certainly not existentially satisfactory for the writer and his exuberant individuality. After Gombrowicz had left the office (May 10, 1955), each year he celebrated the anniversary of this "liberation" from senseless tasks, mechanically performed and intellectually not rewarding at all. Finally, he could entirely devote himself to literature.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Jerzy Jarzębski: Afterword. In: Witold Gombrowicz: *Kronos*, p. 422.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 425.

<sup>111</sup> Olga Tokarczuk: *Czuly narrator*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2020, p. 24–25.

<sup>112</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Kronos*, p. 181.

Even though the traces of Gombrowicz's act of rereading his intimate diary are not numerous, it does not mean that he was not using *Kronos* to move within his inner time (between memories and predictions, hopes) more often with the aim of reconstructing and understanding his fate. One of the traces is a note which he made in retrospection in Vence. To the information about leaving the post in the bank recorded in May 1955, the writer after many years added: “**in 10 years Vence** [highlighted in the source, A.T.]” This later note was inserted just between the statement: “Tuesday – today, i.e. the 10th, I left the bank after 7 years 6 months 10 days” [underlined in the source, A.T.] and the question “for good or for bad?”<sup>113</sup> Originally the latter hesitation referred to the author's decision about leaving the bank. However, in the new context created by the added information about Vence, the question might also refer to the writer's later fate after his return to Europe. Was it a good decision to leave Argentina? This dilemma accompanied Gombrowicz for some time after the return to Europe and manifested itself in his plans to go back to Latin America.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

Gombrowicz's temporal displacement in historical time, expressed in the diaristic oscillation between *chronos* and *kairos*, was shaped by his escape from the great history of the twentieth century and by different cultural orders of time experienced in divergent places of stay: Poland, Argentina, Germany, and France. Furthermore, the process of traveling itself had an impact on the writer's perception of temporality because he experienced his intercontinental journeys as unfolding not only in space but also inwardly within himself. Consequently, during his spatiotemporal travel to Europe, Gombrowicz encountered his bygone self approaching on a phantasmagorical ship from the opposite side immersed in the past of the prewar times. On its board emerged “something like a lost brotherhood, like a killed brother, dead brother, mute brother, a brother lost forever and indifferent . . .”<sup>114</sup> The past seemingly lost and mute was yet not so irrevocably dissolved in oblivion. Evoked by a need for some meaningful symmetry in existence, it suddenly emerged on the surface of the present moment, which, due to its ephemerality and contingency, faded and became a mere apparition in comparison to a vivid trace of the past. This shift in perspectives reverberates from Gombrowicz's

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 181. The statements added by Gombrowicz in hindsight are highlighted and printed in bold in publisher's note ibid., p. 428.

<sup>114</sup> Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 600.

words: "Finally I thought about myself on that deck—and that for him over there, I am probably the same sort of phenomenon as he is for me."<sup>115</sup>

The writer described more explicitly his transcontinental travel in space in terms of time as follows: "What is this journey if not a trip into death?... people of a certain age should not move at all, space is too tied up with time, rousing space provokes time, this whole ocean is made more of time than of boundless distances, this is infinite space that calls itself: death. What the heck."<sup>116</sup> The return to Europe in 1963 was experienced by Gombrowicz as a farewell bidden to youth and a presage of death. The writer as the "ahistorical newcomer" in Berlin, in "a place that is more bespattered with history than ever" found himself trapped in historical being again.<sup>117</sup> In this sense Gombrowicz's exilic odyssey could be conceptualized in terms of a shift from the Latin American "lightness of being" and formless immaturity explored by the young writer fighting for fame towards the European burden of history manifesting itself in maturity of Form of increasingly recognized in Europe writer.

When comparing the two phases of Gombrowicz's life, Latin American and European, one contrast becomes evident, namely the opposition between the experience of reinvigorating youth in Argentina and of deteriorating health in Western Europe.<sup>118</sup> While Gombrowicz's period in Latin America was marked by the ascending line of fame, the one on the Old Continent was unfolding along the descending line of his bodily decomposition. The Argentinian duel for recognition as a writer still in search of his own voice among many potential ways of expression can be contrasted here with the European phase of the struggle with both health problems and the confining definition of himself as a famous writer, the oppressive Form he always wanted to avoid.

Whereas travel to the South (both in European and intercontinental context) meant to him a spirally open, hermeneutic laboratory of self with an abundance of potentialities,<sup>119</sup> the return to Europe and North enclosed him again within a circle of his own existence and historical absurd. As Klementyna Suchanow noted, while

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 600. "The journey was taken twice: once on the map, and the second time within me." Ibid., p. 660.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 591.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 627, 633.

<sup>118</sup> Michał Okłot in his article also alluded to this distinction by mentioning two parallel but opposite trajectories in *Kronos*: a descending line of ageing which expresses bodily decomposition and another ascending one of "vertical transcendence" which reflects Gombrowicz's increasing fame as a writer (there are numerous notes in *Kronos* regarding translations and publications of his works). Michael Okłot: Gombrowicz's *Kronos*, p. 108–111, 119–120, 123–124.

<sup>119</sup> Jerzy Jarzębski associated Gombrowicz's exile in Argentina with "plasticity of the 'self' and a sense of creative potency." Jerzy Jarzębski: *Gombrowicz*, p. 71.

the southbound travel in France (from Paris to Perpignan in Eastern Pyrenees) in the interwar period provoked in Gombrowicz a thought of becoming a writer, his later northbound journey from Latin America to Europe was the return of an acclaimed writer. Thus, the North-South axis was equivalent to a shift from self in becoming to the self already made.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, as Janusz Margański suggests, the movement within the vertical coordinates also meant a shift of accents from history and succession of events identified with the North to space and *longue durée* perspective associated with the South. In the southern countries such as France and Argentina Gombrowicz was more interested in “existential duration” and commenced to orientate his life “in spatial categories: topographic and geographic,” reading its sense not from a calendar but from a map.<sup>121</sup> Gombrowicz, who once declared that all his writings must always follow the path of his existence and not be dictated by a historical moment chose the escapist attitude towards historical unfolding in Europe. In this sense his double displacement: spatial in Argentina and the temporal one in the diaristic practice was facilitated by a desertion from geopolitics. Therefore, his life-writing can be viewed as an attempt to distance oneself from the geopolitical Cold War horizontal East-West axis and redefine the self in alignment with the geopolitic North-South vectors.

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120 Klementyna Suchanow: *Ja, geniusz*, vol. 2, p. 268.

121 Janusz Margański: *Geografia pragnień*, p. 69.

