“Far, beyond the waters”

Trans-Atlantyk by Witold Gombrowicz”

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“…ja jak przez teleskop na wszystko patrząłem i wszędzie Obcość widząc, Nowość i Zagadkę, jakąś nikłością i szarością zdjęty…”

Trans-Atlantyk, 1953a: 10.

1. Komparatistik

In 1992 the German comparative literature scholar Peter Zima published a book on his field of study, which I deem pivotal in order to account for the principles underlying the reflections developed in this lecture. In his 1992 study, not only does he review what is called “Comparative literature” (from its French equivalent) but also manages to create a turning point under the new label “Komparatistik”, by which the author tries to get rid of the old models created in the 19th century which led, especially, to the notion of “influence” (now discredited) by which an investigator established a literary theme path through the centuries and literatures (for example poetic variations of the “Beatus ille” theme) or discovered the theme relationship between two authors (for instance, Poe and Baudelaire).

The new “Komparatistik”, as opposed to the traditional Comparative Literature, intends to rely on its language competence and different cultural fields not to highlight the relevance of national literatures but to play down the frontiers, bringing into the spotlight the international nature of the events. In this sense, this new version of comparatism will highlight to what extent literary events appear as an antagonistic response to previous issues which have been the focus of attention of the corresponding intellectual field. This is in itself a novelty, since traditional Comparative Literatures have always lacked the chance of a deep thought over its theme and have therefore been tinged with a cloak of “ideological ingenuity”. Little wonder that the great
theory makers of the 19th and 20th centuries which undertook the comparison of literatures fell in the utmost nationalism, notwithstanding their pretended wide range of interests (as shown by Ernst Robert Curtius; cf. Zima 1992: 35). The new trend tries to overcome these hurdles not by cancelling value judgments but by putting into practice a reflection which necessarily imposes into the researcher an awareness over ideology issues and therefore it turns into what is called in German philosophy “Kritische Theorie” (critical theory) according to the postulates of the School of Frankfurt. And even if Peter Zima in his 1992 book did not manage to look into Gender Studies, which flourished in the United States in the fight for women’s emancipation and which have later been enhanced to other centres of emancipatory search, it is evident that the studies on system-gender are an ideal field to exert that critical right which every well laid-out research deserves. Therefore, the system-gender studies and its derivations will find a special representation in the reflections that follow thanks to the possibility of understanding comparatism as a special field of Social Sciences.

It should also be kept in mind that the histories of national literatures tend to develop in a frame that persistently presupposes cutting the study object from fatefully restrictive coordinates. The new Kompattatistic, instead, would mean not only the comparison of literary fields but also a comparative sociology, a comparative politics and so on, as on the basis of this comparatism lays the belief in the advantage of intercultural dialogue, which is by definition also a dialogue the researcher has with himself as it will imply constant self-reflection on the part of the very same research mechanism.

2. Reaction

In the revision of key concepts which underlie these reflections there appears, in the first place, the word “reaction”. This term may have two disconcerting meanings, as those Freud discovered in the pair “heimlich-unheimlich”. In one sense, the word “reaction” is used in the political sphere to express the conservative attitudes of an individual or group and from there stems the word “reactionary”. In this sense, it would seem that the notion of “reaction” focuses on a particular situation looking backwards in time in order to revert to a previous state. Therefore, a reactionary individual wants to take action to bring things back to the past. Another meaning, however, arises when the word is used to mean “react against or to something” as a
means of bringing up a response which opens up new perspectives to future situations. In this second meaning of the word, Peter Zima uses the phrase to make it functional within the literature field but not bearing in mind, therefore, the idea of Rückwirkung (as trying to go back to a previous situation) but the ideal of Gegenwirkung (that is to say “action as a response which will bring about a change towards what is new). According to this researcher, each author takes a stand in a certain literary means facing his colleagues, reacting against something already written or expressed in their field of action so that each literary work should always be understood within this conflict as a response or “reaction” to a previous situation and not simply as a sudden inspiration of a certain writer which has nothing to do with his peers whatsoever. (Zima 1992: 51). This conception of the literary is not too far from that of the Russian formalists of the time of the avant-gardes, when they insisted that nothing peaceful happened in the core of the literary field but on the contrary, there was fight all over (борьба) and conflict between the agents of this field facing each other for their wish of supremacy.

So, due to the fact that the new Komparatistik is presented as a theory of dialogue, that fight must be seen in a different light, more as a reactive force that allows creation as every author, when trying to respond to the questions posed by their society, articulates a response that comes out of the very same tensions that social formation generates. In this sense, it can be well understood that Шостакович’s music, in the core of the Soviet culture, articulated the way it did, whereas had there been no Stalinist impositions a less overwhelming result might have been produced. This composer’s music, the way we know it, is flagrant proof of the enormous response capacity on his part and this achievement cannot do otherwise than amaze us: it successfully reaching port after a storm.

As Peter Zima maintains, a society is not made up by an ensemble of texts but by individuals and groups who articulate their opinions and interests in sociolects and discourses, in such a way that that mix reacts to other points of view (Zima 1992: 72). And therefore, here there are compactly enclosed not only the notions “reaction” as Gegenwirkung, but also the concepts of “ideology”, “intertextuality” “cultural constellation” and also “cultural text” and “discursive formation” or “cultural conditioning”, terms which are functional to my reflections, and which will be defined little by little as they appear in this presentation.
But let’s start by “discursive formation”. According to the representatives of
the French Post-Structuralism, it should be understood as a statement which
points out what is allowed and possible to say in a certain society. It is
manifest that the more authoritarian the social formation is, the more
censured any diversion from the imperative discursive norms shall be. To
account for that, we can also think in Louis XIV’s France in which issues of
*bien séance* and decorum were the golden rules of the literary creation as
shown by the normative work carried out by Boileau, who put his distinctive
mark to the whole period, imperatively doing away with anything which
could affect the monarch’s sensibility. The result was providing the ground
for the “neoclassic” discursive formation.

I intend, therefore, to illustrate here how Gombrowicz’s work is revalidated
as from the cultural clash the author suffers during his stay in Argentina,
where in the first place the European writer feels free from the compulsions
on the part of the Polish literary sphere between wars. In these new cultural
conditions the discursive formation ruling in Poland in the 30’s loses its
restrictive power, making it possible to say more or to say the same in a
different way, although still in Polish, to which it is being added a
neutralizing element which menaces its normative side thanks to an archaic
literary and linguistic tradition. This trick in the composition appears as a
discordant note which will give Gombrowicz’s texts a singular tone of
breach between Form and Content.

3. Cultural Text

When talking about Form in Gombrowicz’s work, one of the most relevant
aspects has to do with what is known as Romantic Sarmatism within Polish
Literature, which was a movement of recovery of a presumably unique past
in the European context. This legendary past would have let Poland show its
peculiarities, even to other Slavic countries. Although this movement was
not alien to the nationalist Polish operations, its comeback in the 20th century
appears with much more complex connotations than those around the 1800’s.
Anyway, as from the studies on invented traditions and observing what
happened in Victorian England with the Gothic tradition (which added to an
alleged medieval art peculiarity the uncertain participation in a Celtic past to
highlight the presumed idiosyncrasy of the English), the Polish Sarmatism
presents itself as a very elaborate construction and in that sense it is on equal
footing with the very same European Baroque due to its concern with the
complexity of the form. Now, what happens when a piece of work combines that touch of a complex tradition (already questioned and criticized for being too far-fetched) with an avant-garde wish? This results in the strange combination of Gombrowicz’s work, which gets its outstanding peculiarity through two contradictory layers of devices. If in the times of the Romantic Sarmatism, this movement was surrounded by interests other than literary through a nationalist ideology, the effects of such a “retro” use of sarmatism in Gombrowicz’s work stand out, in fact, due to its parodic or semi-parodic function as a semiotic construction, which could be referred to as a 2nd or 3rd grade shaping element. Nothing is what is seems in Gombrowicz’s work, which is full of allusions and therefore, of double layers of meaning. If in the case of his novels and plays there is the constant reminiscence of the Polish past, it cannot be denied that the author makes a totally avant-garde use of what we know nowadays as “intertextuality” meaning “the re-shaping of an already known discourse” to create a new “cultural text”.

My approach to this author’s work, then, departs from an axiom different to that commonly held by Polish studies on Gombrowicz because I am taking for granted that the author’s two decades in Argentina cannot be considered as a parenthesis in his creative life (a creative life which would have only been authentic in the Polish context) but rather that that exo-centric experience triggered off a special departure from the literary field of origin, which is now even more complex in the odd attempt to express in his literature a Sarmatism with the Pampas as a background.

If in the first moment of his creative process, Gombrowicz reacts against the situation of Polish Literature at the time introducing a sarcastic and cynical surrealism which undermined the pillars of the traditions of the country, in his exile in Argentina, on the other hand, he finds a “latency” period (in the sense of reclusion, hiding and waiting) which enables him to assess his belonging to the Polish culture and question it, on the basis of a growing suspicion of his role in the shaping of the literary field in Poland, once again highly moved by the events which place this country within the contradictory forces of several versions of authoritarianism.

In this new geographical context, Argentina, Gombrowicz appears as from 1939 as a strange author who cannot assimilate his new situation but one who observes what goes around him as if through a lens which increases the feeling of aloofness while magnifying the objects to unreal dimensions.
Poland is perceived as too distant, “beyond the waters” but also the Pampas are exorbitant due to its strangeness. Meanwhile, at the same time, his work starts accounting itself through a process that can be called “остранение”. Nevertheless, there is another moment in this detachment which is connected to the German formula “Verfremdung”, far more politicized than the Russian etiquette since it would unite both the formal layer and that of the context alluding to an extra-literary context which should also be considered. My contribution to the topic has to do, then, with the certainty that Gombrowicz is a poseur who fakes indifference towards the new surrounding which he pretends not to understand due to the language barrier. He perceived those new surroundings at the same time, as disproportionate in its differences, on the one hand, and on the other, similar in the likeliness with the old. Therefore, in the New there are repetitive situations which do not take up the appearance of the tragedy as it happened in the European context but which are marked, in a carnival-like manner, by the tone of the farce- as it has already been wonderfully said- the tragic repetitions can assume the farcical masque.

This gigantism in its spectrum of possibilities in Argentina is not to be underestimated and it is noticed by our author in a way that can be labelled in between semi-conscious and somnambulist. Gombrowicz arrives in Buenos Aires having no clue whatsoever of what that city means; full of his Eurocentrism and obviously, his first reaction has to do with a great bewilderment due to ignorance. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Buenos Aires is not a lost spot in the world. This city belongs to a restricted group of cities in the world interested in being culturally assimilated by the European thought and it is there where the most exquisite and sophisticated cultural roads meet. Thanks to its versatility- due to a massive immigration from all over the world-, Buenos Aires is the city that opens up to foreign countries more easily in South America: there is German opera of the same quality as that in Bayreuth, there are at the same time Italian theatre and opera casts directly imported from Italy, there are newspapers published in a variety of foreign languages. Buenos Aires is an acknowledged Mecca in different fields and to cite an example of international recognition, we can mention that in 1907 the operetta by Franz Lehar “Die lustige Witwe” (premiered in Vienna two years before) was played simultaneously in five theatres.
To Gombrowicz, this cultural clash with the New World is highly intriguing because at the same time it allows awareness of his own otherness. In the axis of this feeling there springs the discovery of the behaviour of his fellow countrymen abroad. As the French-Argentinean writer Copi, who settled in Paris comes across the strange customs of the Argentinean community in France and ends up considering those groups as a sect of strange birds deserving the disapproving title *L’Internationale argentine* (1988) in one of his novels, Gombrowicz predisposes himself to observe with a satirical eye the behaviour of the Poles in Argentina, who enjoying a privileged situation in the adopted culture either by the prestige of their positions in the State or other reasons end up being a group worth the Reign of *Ubu Roi* by the playwright Alfred Jarry, with whom our author has quite a lot in common. This “*Internationale polonaise*” is, in fact, an upside-down world which becomes related, then, to a branch of international literature. With an effect of exaggeration and detachment the capital city of Argentina appears crowded with Polish residents, as if they were 90% of the population. Exaggeration becomes, then the constructive principle of the avant-gardes, which in Gombrowicz’s work keeps being predominant.

4. “Far, Beyond the waters”

Two important extremes in Gombrowicz’s work provide an autobiographical dimension, which leads every protagonist on his fiction to a crossroads: literary life or private life. Literary life appears as a problematic road which opposes a private life marked by a controversial sexuality. The literary and the sexual appear, precisely, in his novel written in Argentina in the early 50’s which was called *Trans-Atlantyk*. I would like to highlight the prefix TRANS out of this title, since it means especially “what is beyond” and here, in my opinion, there is a key to the reading of Gombrowicz’s work. The writer has found ostracism in Argentina and, at the same time, has discovered the possibilities of leading another life, a double life, that of “an aristocrat on exile” or something of the sort. “Trans” means in this context the new outlook of he who has been freed from what once tied him. In the above mentioned novel, there are two events that illustrate this opposition and which are linked. I am referring to two duels - which end up being parodies of challenges to manly bravery: the verbal duel with the Argentinean national bard- which would be the metaphor for the creative activity- and the fake duel on the part of Gonzalo with the Polish military man for his son’s
honour. Both duels support my idea that this novel deals with two linked
issues: literary autonomy, on the one hand and sexual autonomy on the other.
The first duel, with the defeat of the character “Gombrowicz” -between
inverted commas- ends up in the odd situation in which the fictional Polish
writer is escorted out of the room by the most wretched character: “Gonzalo,
the faggot”, which eventually leads to the second moment of the battle, the
second duel.

Let’s focus on the first duel as an event in the literary field. In this passage
from the exquisite salon to the dodgy neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires, in
this trans position from the spirit matter to those of the flesh, “Gom” lets
“Gon” lead him- and will not be too farfetched to spot here an
autobiographical note of Witold Gombrowicz, who making use of auto-
fiction as a literary stratagem, allows himself to describe the sexual
monstrosity in the character Other, who in no other than his Double, the way
Proust rejoiced depicting the Baron of Charlus and putting through this
screen the sexuality of the protagonist “Marcel” under the indirect light of
refraction.

It is important to point out that in order to refer to the character Gonzalo, the
narrator uses in Argentinean Spanish the most despicable word possible
“Puto” [faggot]. The fact that in midst of the Polish language there appears
such an obscene word means looking down on the character. Now, the same
word lessens its bitterness as we get to know the dilemma the protagonist
“Gombrowicz” is faced with: the patriarchal and patriotic duties of his fellow
countrymen or the road of dissidence offered by the character representing
Argentina; and here there comes up the theme of the New World in conflict
with the authoritarian rules imparted by parents and the motherland. The
irony of Gombrowicz’s text finally places the character of Gonzalo as the
spokesperson of an idea (already sustained in Ferdydurke), when this utterly
queer individual becomes the standard bearer of the rebellion of the young
against the old. This way, the plot makes us correlate men’s devotion for
male bodies (that is to say sexual inversion) with the rebellion against Parents
and the (Polish) Motherland under the new label synczyzna in such a way
that sexual dissent turns into THE DISSENT, as if Gombrowicz was coming
ahead of time to Herbert Marcuse’s key text One-Dimensional Man (1964).
Although the idea of brotherhood of the young against the old had already
appeared in *Ferdydurke*, the novelty in *Trans-Atlantyk* is that it is now, more transparently, part of the idea of sexual inversion.

In this way *synczyzna* turns into the confession of an open secret about the writer’s devotion for youth and immaturity and... for sexual inversion. Nevertheless, it should be added, that this emblematic novel written during Gombrowicz’s stay in Argentina ends in carnival laughter, which takes us to the idea of mere play. This final curtain, wisely drawn, seems to mean that what was read before should not be taken seriously and that the novel’s loves and hates are only artistic amusement. We will go back later on to this ending full of derision. Meanwhile, through sarcasm and Sarmatism, the writer has professed his faith. This confession has been made in the text disguised as licentious aristocratic morals, thanks to the use of the Double, Gonzalo, as a literary device. He is first introduced as hideous and foolish and then unexpectedly turns into the philosopher the text needs until he takes up the new role of a central character of this new *philosophie dans le boudoir* (which the novel *Trans-Atlantyk* also is). The autofictional “Gombrowicz”, in the meantime, in his capacity as witness narrator signals a seriously political and sexual twist in a text which secretly declares there exists a word of “transgression”, since for better or for worse its author is now “daleko za wodą”. Thus, Gonzalo and “Gombrowicz” finally leave together: “…bo przecie zemną chodził i razem Chodziemy” (Gombrowicz 1953a: 48). Now, the protagonist feels that due to the fact that this sexually ambiguous individual has been the only one who stood by him in hardship, he will no longer be able to abandon him. Being defeated by the Argentinean bard will mean to “Gombrowicz” (the resolution that) there is no way out for the protagonist in this country already taken by a genius. All he has left is the call for a different life far away, beyond the waters of the ocean hand in hand with Gonzalo, “the Faggot”.

5. Faction vs. Ostracism

The first defeat in Argentine soil has been a verbal duel with the national bard (“Borges”) but it shouldn’t be forgotten that the narrator’s irony permeates through it. Due to this device, the text seems to point out it is not what is being said which is important but how it is taken in by the society to whom that discourse is addressed. Here it is also illustrated the grief Witold
Gombrowicz, the real person, is stricken with when feeling abandoned by his peers.

What is left now is homosexual wandering and the Retiro area, close to the port, will be the new paradise. The encounter with queer Gonzalo in the great halls of the Argentine bourgeoisie marks the development of the plot of this avant-garde novel since the auto-fictional protagonist “Gombrowicz” will be involved, perhaps unintentionally, in the second semiotic layer of the book: the doubt on the stability of sexual identities and the resulting “becoming a woman” of the co-protagonist. Gonzalo drags the narrator, already literally humiliated to new humiliations, which have to do with what we nowadays call “dissident sexualities” which in the text appears in the beginning ironically vilified as a monstrous side. Thus, this new travelling companion to “Gombrowicz”, when turning into his Siamese twin, will not only disclose for him a new side of the city and of his own desires but also will make him question that which he formerly called “unnatural”. In the passage in which the former Polish military man Tomasz defends his son’s Ignac’s honour from Gonzalo’s homosexual advances by challenging him to a duel, auto-fictional “Gombrowicz” firstly stands out for his new companion, explaining the queer do not have honour and therefore cannot defend it in a duel for honour. This passage has an extraordinary ironic richness as a parallel to the previous passage of the verbal duel with the Argentine bard in the bourgeois hall: “Gombrowicz”, the writer, exiled in the edge of the world makes a doubtful presentation of each of the starting points, which could be read as follows:

Is Borges really the universal genius his peers have turned him into?

The veiled critic to the High class underlying this dilemma casts doubt in the possible answer.

Is dissident sexuality really monstrous or it turns so as a consequence of a prejudiced outlook on it?

In the pivotal moment of Trans-Atlantyk, when the auto-fictional “Gombrowicz” discovers, due to the Polish ambassador’s behavior that Poland is lost and it no longer exists as Homeland, his urgent desire is to look for beauty in the children (since parents have been defeated) and therefore, fueled by a burning desire, he expresses an anguished “Syn, Syn, do Syna, do Synal!” (1953 a: 80). As a result, the narrator decides to go in search for the
stunning Polish ephebos Ignac in the middle of the night. He finds him asleep and naked in his bed, as if depicting everything male beauty can offer him, which he comes to discover precisely now in Buenos Aires. This incident repeats again in a similar way several times to reinforce the idea that it is a highly important moment. I, therefore, believe that the repeated attempts at searching for naked Adonis must be interpreted as the earliest confession on the part of the author, despite what he has been hiding in his two-faced life in Buenos Aires. This would be the most interesting level of extra-literary elements which should not be left out in a global assessment of Gombrowicz’s work.

We find ourselves, then, in an area of juxtaposition of two facets which Gombrowicz often places together. However, in Trans-Atlantyk what is at stake, besides the current situation in 1939 in Europe and in Argentina, is an anti-regulated vision of cultural habits. As in no other text, in this novel there is a philosophical disarmament of the social pillars which support the ideological differences that surround the masculine and feminine field. The studies on system-gender maintain that there has been created a tacit and never well-reasoned surplus value for the masculine pole. And this real asymmetry, which ideology-wise means to be based in a symmetry created by God, is precisely what “gender studies” come to question. It is important to make clear now that it is not my intention to approach Gombrowicz’s work based on a traditional biographism. Nevertheless, at the same time, I find it necessary to approach these texts taking into account the discursive conditions of the society Gombrowicz left and those of that new society he was received by apart from the peculiar personal awareness the author went through. Only thus might we shed new light into a piece of work that is generally analyzed under a formal and Polish perspective, not perceiving how these cultural texts intertwine.

Let’s move on to analyze a key point in Gombrowicz’s work. I mean the author’s autonomy to create his own work. As it is well known, there is a writer meant to be taken as a paradigmatic example in this debate. I refer to the Roman-Empire-time’s poet Virgil. We know that Virgil, who had done the panegyric for Augustus in the Aeneid, had the intention of destroying those manuscripts in the last moments of his life. In fact, the Austrian author Hermann Broch addressed the subject and he started writing about literary autonomy based on Virgil’s biography at the time Hitler took over Europe,
thus striking an apocalyptic tone to the role of art, even more to that of autonomous art. His novel is called *Der Tod des Vergil* and, in my opinion, it is one of the most significant fictional modern texts on the autonomy of art. In a highly poetic way, in this novel, we see the dilemma the acclaimed Roman poet faces having lavishly praised Augustus in his capital epic work on the foundation of Rome. There appears, at the same time, the interest on the part of the Emperor that that work should be preserved and be an artistic basis to his project, which ultimately occurs, as it seems, despite Virgil’s doubts. His sudden death saves the manuscript from destruction and Hermann Broch cannot but side with the international community and be grateful that things turned up to this way for the sake of posterity. The issue of autonomy in art continues being, in Broch’s novel, an inconclusive debate perhaps because it is in itself unsolvable.

Gombrowicz, states auto-fictionally in *Trans-Atlantyk* how he shuns official honours and how vehemently he refuses to heap praise on the Polish homeland’s writers as imposed by tradition. The Argentine soil serves perfectly as a shield to his rebellious attitude. So, all of a sudden immersed in a different literary field, he immediately perceives that things are not so different in a new artistic means. There is in the great Argentine bourgeois salon, the Arts First Lady (surely in allusion to Victoria Ocampo) and the National Bard (alluding to Borges) who would not allow any breach of the rules. This submissive position any novice must prove becomes even worse since this foreign writer does not come from the so-called cultural acme countries but simply from the unknown and defeated Poland. In this sense, the die is cast for Gombrowicz as from 1939, since under these conditions he will not be able to draw audience neither in the New nor the Old World. The great enigma of Gombrowicz’s unknown stay in Argentina was, then, his election of wanting to preserve his aesthetic autonomy, as Virgil in Augustus’ time. Gombrowicz in Argentina chose ostracism. There are the auto-fictional statements which seem to give us the best clues for this enigma. In a 1988 study called *Le Pli*, the author, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, argues that in the mid-20th century Argentine literary field, two figures were essential and opposing to that social structure: Borges and Gombrowicz and that opposition would have been possible thanks to the fact that the former would have shaped Cosmos and the latter, Chaos (Deleuze 1988: 111). Deleuze hits the target, in many senses, when putting on equal footing two great names of world literature that have run into each other
many times in Argentine soil. However, these opposites created by Deleuze are somewhat simple, since it should be asked which “cosmos” articulates Borges’ work and which “chaos” defines Gombrowicz’s. It might be necessary to add something not mentioned by the French philosopher: the fact that, unaware, both writers bravely fought for their peculiar autonomy and they managed to impose themselves in the literary world thanks to their perseverance. And this would be a point in common which, to a certain extent, makes the idea of a decisive opposition fall apart. Both of them were avant-garde, to a certain point, although their corresponding views of what avant-guard was ended up being different. Now, as it is known, when Borges introduces the cosmologic order in his short stories, it is entirely different from the “cosmos” one would expect from Deleuze’s formula. Let’s take, for example, “La biblioteca de Babel” (“The library of Babel”) (1941), in which an imaginary library is introduced where all the possible books in the world would be stored but only a few would convey meaning. As I see it, we have come face to face with the ridiculing of a sense of Order. Chaos arises at “The library of Babel” by a blind belief in a principle which ends up in its opposite. On the other hand, Gombrowicz imagined in his last Argentine years the plot of his novel “Cosmos” (published in 1964), the order of which is so mysterious and intriguing that the reader ends up wondering whether, as is the case in “the library of Babel” by Borges, there is a trace of irony in its title. Gombrowicz’s 1964 novel (drafted still during his stay in Argentina) has some similarities with the stories in “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan” (The Garden of Forking Paths) (1941) and “La muerte y la brújula” (Death and the Compass) (1944) by Borges. Both short stories by Borges build a secret and doubtful order in an alien territory through which enigmatic characters go about according to, it seems, a preconceived plan. In this sense, they might have a resemblance with the novel Cosmos by Gombrowicz. In these Borgean texts as in Cosmos the enigma that needs to be codified in a narrow geographical surrounding becomes “unheimlich” due to everyday nature which seems to come out of an extremely well-known scenario. In these texts, both of Borges’ and Gombrowicz’s, order and disorder mix infinitely to leave in the reader the feeling that a remote demiurje has pulled the strings of the plot. Cosmos and chaos do not seem to be such opposites in these authors.

However, there is a paramount point in the opposition Borges- Gombrowicz which deserves special attention: the Argentine writer belongs to a
constellation of writers in which he feels at ease, as Patricia Wilson’s book *La Constelación del Sur* (the Southern Constellation) attests. There is the magazine *Sur*, directed since 1931 for more than 40 years by Victoria Ocampo (who is alluded at in *Trans-Atlantyk*, as I see it, as the Lady of Argentine Literature). Within this magazine, unique in the history of literature for its influence and the number of years it was published, there is the small faction intimately linked to Borges and especially made up by two friend writers, with whom he is in close contact and to whom he comments on the outline of his works: Adolfo Bioy Casares (his dolphin and successor) and Silvina Ocampo. In the same magazine, also collaborates the French emigrate Roger Caillois, who on his return to Europe would introduce Borges’ work in Europe, the same decade in which Gombrowicz is canonized in Paris. It is worth noting that this constellation of the great bourgeois of the Pampas (made up by Borges, Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo, Victoria Ocampo’s sister) opposes the more conservative trends in the Argentine literary arena, at least from the 1930’s to the 1950’s, being, on the contrary, highly attracted by most of the European Avant-gardes, who are devoted many pages of *Sur*.

Compared to Borges’ situation in the two decades of *Sur* magazine, Gombrowicz’s is utterly different. His fight for maintaining his literary autonomy has been fairly cruel and the result in Poland as well as in Argentina has been making enemies in every sector. His vanguardism is understood neither in his homeland nor in his adopted land and he has also lost all sort of relationship with any kind of Polish literary constellation. He does not get any attention by any faction, except for those daily friends who support him with whom he shares chess games at the hall on the first floor of the *Café Rex*, on Corrientes Street in Buenos Aires. They are the ones who come up with the odd idea of translating *Ferdydurke* into a sort of Argentine Esperanto. This group, however, lacks cohesion and therefore it is of no interest for a literary field description.

Later on, when settling in France, at the end of his life, Gombrowicz cannot but feel nostalgia for his years of exile in Argentina, when he was poor and unknown, and regard them as the happiest time of his life, before gaining his fame of the late years through his European success. To sum up, in Argentina, Gombrowicz had enjoyed the pleasure of being a dissident thanks to the anonymity given by the lack of literary belonging. In that now distant
Argentina there appears for this mature Gombrowicz, the image of Paradise Lost. What has the writer lost there, when he had not even entered the Argentine literary field as a figure to be considered? I believe some of the answers are in his books.

6. From both sides of the Atlantic

Sarcasm, irony, exaggeration and the constant fight for literary self-autonomy ultimately brought Gombrowicz international fame, which eventually reached Poland. At this point, it is my belief that in order to understand the crosswords this singular world literature creation was at, it is necessary to approach it in a way that transcends the limit of each of the national literatures, since they have fallen into the trap of ignoring their own limits. Thus, the view I have come to share has to do with the idea of the need to engage the histories of national literatures in a dialogue with each other. Gombrowicz is the best example of the importance of this dialogue.

I am interested now, therefore, in taking as paradigmatic examples of the criticism on Gombrowicz’s work on the one hand the epilogue to the novel Trans-Atlantyk by Stefan Chwin and, on the other, two studies by Argentine researchers. The Polish critic, as all his Polish colleagues, goes deep into the study of the formal issues of the piece of work in question. Chwin lucidly points out the ardent individualism which characterises the writer as well as the unmasking of psychological complexes such as “the Polish complex” or “provincial or Polish Nation suburb’s complex” which may lead to a nationalistic patriotism (Chwin 1996:133). Chwin also insists on the anti-romantic nature of Trans-Atlantyk, as a fierce battle against the founding stereotypes of Mickiewicz’s work. And naturally, this dispute with the Polish literary tradition makes him consider Sarmatism (or its caricature) as a refined elaboration ruled by the author’s great irony artifice. On the other hand, according to Chwin, the novel pays tribute to the existentialism in vogue in the years of the Second World War, in which there was the maxim of twisting absolute essences and stressing the existential character of the phenomena. Sticking to these philosophical principles, thinking of an immutable “Polish soul” till the end of time is, naturally, preposterous and Gombrowicz’s text would toy with this. This critic also emphasises the fact that the character Gonzalo represents the narrator’s double (Chwin 1996:147); and from that fact, he observes to what extend there are symmetrical binomials in the novel (“the idyllic” vs. “the macabre”, “children” vs.
“parents” etc.) Of course, also Chwin notes the importance to Gombrowicz’s “desertion”, which would have given him the strong chance of taking distance from its country of origin and so act in consequence. Lastly, Stefan Chwin, without avoiding the analysis of sexuality in this novel, attributes theme issues related to Gonzalo’s preferences as an allusion to the Polish panic to homosexuality as well as to the veiled homoerotic situations in the Polish military schools. Chwin allows himself to relate Gonzalo’s personality with a real well-known Polish individual, who had already served as a model for his eccentricity in Sinkiewicz’s work. Nevertheless, the linguistic scandal that means that the word that defines Gonzalo (as Puto) is the only one in Spanish in the whole original text does not astonish this Polish critic. This way, Chwin looking through having Polish blinkers on, does not perceive there is a detail on the part of the author that calls one’s attention, as if he was saying “Warning!: this has to do with me in my new place of residence and not with Poland!” Little wonder, neither could Chwin perceive the ringing declaration of principles which means putting pen to paper Gonzalo’s attraction (and that of his Double) for the young sailors from the port of Buenos Aires and the sinful area of Retiro. In a more literary context, Chwin was not able to perceive either the importance in the novel of the sarcastic description of the Argentine Literary Salon, where Borges and the great lady Victoria Ocampo reigned; twice as important a fact since not only does it reveal Gombrowicz’s awareness of what was going on in Buenos Aires in the artistic field in the 40’s but also it influences his later decision to take shelter in his individualism instead of trying to abide by the pre-established rules (it is well known that Borges vilified surrealism).

I believe, therefore, that this controversial trend in Poland on Sarmatism and the unmasking of Polish institutions in Gombrowicz’s work ruled out for a long time such a topic as system-gender issues, which has become nowadays more important for the social science, has been rapidly growing in the last two decades, was born in the heat of the disputes for female emancipation but which transcends this field to go on to discuss all ideologically saturated notions on sexuality in general. The novel Trans-Atlantyk from 1953 also talks about sexual TRANSgression and there it is included dealing with the issue of identity instability. This can no longer be swept under the rug, not even in Poland since there have appeared Polish studies on the question of dissident sexuality in Gombrowicz’s work on the same level of importance that his parodies have for the literary tradition of his country.
It is also interesting to remember that when Gombrowicz made the preface to his novel in the 1957 edition, defended himself from the attacks he had received on the part of the Polish critics, explaining that that piece of work was the result of the peculiarities of his EXISTENCE, which had made him turn it into a grotesque and surrealist text which should be understood as a literary fantasy. As for the Polish critic’s resistance to accept Gombrowicz’s cultural sarcasm, we can cite as a parallel example the aversion that has developed in Austria against the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhardt, one of the most fervent detractors of his own country’s culture. As opposed to Gombrowicz’s case, Bernhardt did not have the chance to embark on a hazardous journey on the intrepid ship “Chrobry” and so live the other, intrepid, life which was awaiting the Polish writer on the other side of the Atlantic. Let’s focus on this fact which has modified Gombrowicz’s own existence and also his work: detachment from Poland. Here it is necessary to highlight that there was an autobiographical unmasking process in Gombrowicz’s work which goes from the writing of Ferdydurke, then Trans-Atlantyk to conclude in the ruthless Kronos. This process has nothing to do with the polish cultural tradition, since it is an inner discovery sprung from the author’s remarkable individualism. Where did this process take place? Surely not in Poland. This inner discovery on the part of the author Gombrowicz does not owe much to the Polish Nation. This process, in any case, came as a REACTION to a whole life story, the most important part of which, for better or for worse, happened in Argentina. This way, the most traditional Polish critics, focused on the analysis of Sarmatism in Gombrowicz’s work, were blind to see the pioneering camp this author presents when in the pistol- without- bullets duel in Trans-Atlantyk the effeminate Gonzalo appears wielding his huge Mexican sombrero wearing an outfit worthy of a carnival-like set of the Follies-Bergère (1953 a: 82). This same interpretative blindness prevents these kinds of critics from discovering that the whole Sarmatism in Gombrowicz’s novel, which would imply worrying to give the text an epic and virile meaning, falls apart due to the camp elements in the text. These destabilizing elements come, in fact, to put at risk the very same cultural pillars dominated by a masculinist conception of values. What’s worth pointing out now it is not Sarmatism in the text but its connotation; that is to say, what other data does Sarmatism reveals in Trans-Atlantyk? And that connotation of Sarmatian virility is what this novel questions together with the patriarchal and patriotic tradition. This
is why in this Gonzalo’s Pampas mansion not only the Polish feudal customs of intrusion to neighboring fields are cited but also a wonderful Argentine version of the castle in “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” is staged, with its camp feathers and queer hybridization. So, the ranch-farm in the Pampas is an instance of dislocation of sexual binomials and, as an example, we can cite the passage of the arrival of the Polish guests, when the former military man Tomasz is assigned a room to sleep in which is feminized and baroque full of bibelots. It is in the camp moment when the text destroys the Sarmatism level in order to undermine the centrality of the phallic perspective, as a warning to the Polish father and to the reader. But let’s see what happens among the critics on the other side of the ocean. In the last years, there appeared two complete studies by young argentine critics on Gombrowicz’s work, a result of the interest this author stirs up in my country. None of the young Argentine critics is moved in the least by Gombrowicz the iconoclast. Neither Pablo Gasparini nor Silvana Mandolessi is shocked by the heresies against the Polish culture saint tradition on Gombrowicz’s part. Argentinean critics take no interest in this situation. Gasparini’s study, on the one hand, makes frantic efforts to place the polish writer in the Argentine literary pantheon, coming up with the idea that Gombrowicz created for himself “a lesser homeland” in the world which hosted him. (Gasparini 2007: 70 y ss.). Mandolessi, on the other hand, devotes to shrewdly analyze aristocratism in Gombrowicz as from the binomial “disgust” versus “good taste”, pointing out that the most Polish of his works (Trans-Atlantyk) was written in Argentina. Besides, for this researcher, the opposition between Borges and Gombrowicz is not so conclusive. In this study, all in all, the most important point regarding the opposition between the two writers would be given by the way Mandolessi defines the principle of “hybridization” for the Polish author and a clear-cut disjunction device in the Argentine’s work. (Mandolessi 2012: 200).

Nevertheless, neither Gasparini nor Mandolessi know how to have a wider outlook in the matter, which is crucial in my opinion, on the declaration for sexual autonomy patent in Gombrowicz’s work (and meticulously avoided in Borges’). Mandolessi, occurs into the error of using the terms “homosexual” and “gay” as synonyms without realising that the latter implies a way out of “abomination”, a concept the researcher has cleverly analyzed.
7. Conclusions

The great stylistic elaboration shown in Trans-Atlanyt has a special shining moment when the prose turns into text with internal rhymes but if this, on the one hand, alludes to a Polish literary tradition, this device comes also, on the other hand, to enhance the crisscrossing of the four characters in the form of chiasmus and this has nothing to do with a search in the Polish aesthetic past. The names of “Gom-browicz” and Gon-zalo, with their similar beginning, as two entities that assimilate, are anaphors which arise in the reader the expectation of an analogous behaviour. This anaphoric move completes itself with another move in turn in the name endings of Ignac and Horacy (In Argentina they would be “Ignacio” and “Horacio”), a new couple whose Leitmotiv consists of imitating each other: that’s why Ignac and Horacio end up being like puppets which move at the same tempo. And this motif seems to take on a symbolic condition, due to the repetitive way in which it is presented. This so-formed quartet (two Argentine and two Poles or put it another way, two adults and two youth) is peculiarly related, since these four extremes (the two Polish making up a “Gombrow-ignac”, , on the one hand and the two Argentine with a fusion such as “Gonzalo-racio”, on the other; or in another constellation: the two older ones, on the one hand as “Gom-gon”; the two younger ones as “Ignac-acio”, design a nomad drawing which decomposes and regroups again each time differently. In this four-cornered design, what results, eventually, is a different sexual existence out of the patriarchal, Parent’s and Homeland shuttering principles, where the masculine turns to be only one element in a continuum.

In this gender-system analysis context, the famous sadist episodes of the members of the Polish colony in Argentina with its “Spur Knights” might be taken as the paranoid fear of those individuals of not being able to prove enough bravery and martyrdom capacity for a far-away and defeated Homeland. Thus, they only fall into an exaggerated and ridiculous manliness. As deserters of a Poland that suffers the disaster of war, these alleged Knights feel a panic that seems the metaphor of horror in men in the face of sexual penetration, which would turn them into social outcasts, feminizing them as “unnatural”. That’s why sadism, penetration, hybridization would be new layers of meaning which transcend the so much studied Form category in Gombrowicz’s work. I believe that these elements turn out to be significant when they are related to the idea that Gombrowicz’s
literary work is necessarily divided between two cultures, the same way as
the author’s own life was in the midst of two geographies in the process of
assuming himself as an author and as a “person to become”, tied, inevitably
to the changes of its existence.

Finally, if Sarmatian peoples invented spurs to set the horses on, and by the
way, display terrible aggressiveness to their enemies, “the Spur Knights”, as
a Polish quixotic sect in the bloody adventures in Trans-Atlantyk, come to
repeat a legendary tradition which will show a shoddy virility but virility at
last. We cannot believe it was chance that this massive group of Polish
residents in Argentina appears in its excess and sadism as the quintessence
of a masculinity that is disarmed when presented next to that other compact
group of sexual dissidents which I will call “the queer quartet”.

It is my opinion that the moment has come to consider that that other quartet
formed by Gonzalo the Fag with the auto-fictional “Gombrowicz”, on the
one hand, and “Horacy co Ignacy”, on the other, work as the other side of
the masculine parody of the “Spur Knights”. In this anti-masculinist group
we find two pairs of Doppelgänger which have put the masculine principle
at risk, when they are no longer afraid of being effeminate and when finding
themselves in that strange path of “becoming woman” or of getting rid of the
fear of feminine components in their our personality.

With the appearance of this quartet in the novel we are before an orchestrated
group behaviour, which, indirectly, shows its rebellion against nationalisms.
This male quartet, due to its sexual provocation, ends up being not only an
anti-war and anti-masculinist crusade but also anti-Sarmatian. That’s why,
we can interpret that the group I call “queer” is the one that leads all the
characters in this novel to final laughter which, as we know, make all official
culture fall apart (in this case, that of the Parents and the Motherland),
dethroning the idea of special belonging to a Nation. What is announced here
is the possibility of another kind of belonging, one which will only be
possible when Poland has been left beyond the waters.

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