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**Abstract:**

This dissertation is a comparative study of lives and works of two émigré writers : the Polish Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) and Cuban Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979). The two met in 1946 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they developed a lifelong friendship grounded in intellectual compatibility and fueled by literary collaboration. My study focuses mainly on the body of work that the two authors produced during the twenty- three-year span of time between their initial meeting and the death of Gombrowicz. I argue that the writers shared a strong desire to renovate the world of literature in their home countries, including their host culture, Argentina. This desire in turn allowed them to develop in their writings a unique mode of cultural criticism which sought to build a bridge between the literary worlds of two geographically distant and, at least at first sight, culturally remote regions: Latin America and East-Central Europe. There are five chapters that comprise this dissertation. The introductory chapter conceptualizes the theoretical framework for analyzing Gombrowicz and Piñera's works in relation to their historical and biographical contexts. Chapter One focuses specifically on the year 1947 and the writers' collaboration on six critical texts which target the most prominent Argentine literary and intellectual figures of the time. The subsequent two chapters examine the novels *La carne de René* by Piñera and *Trans-Atlantyk* by Gombrowicz, both written in the early 1950s, when the exchange of ideas between the two writers was still at its peak. Finally, the fourth chapter presents the long censured theater plays *Los siervos* (by Piñera) and *Operetta* (by Gombrowicz). Regardless of tangible similarities in their storylines as well as conceptual underpinnings - especially, a shared concern with cultural and political nationalism, including the particular case of Peronism in Argentina - neither the two novels nor the theater pieces to my knowledge have yet been addressed in parallel. By engaging with Gombrowicz and Piñera scholarship in English, Spanish, Polish, French and German, I aim to join a body of research that recovers and contextualizes the voices that come from the margins of the Western literary history



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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera, the Argentine Experience

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Milda Žilinskaitė

Committee in charge:

Professor Jaime Concha, Chair  
Professor Amelia Glaser  
Professor Luis Martin-Cabrera  
Professor Michael Monteón  
Professor William Arctander O'Brien

2014



The Dissertation of Milda Žilinskaitė is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

## EPIGRAPH

I speak of exile not as a privilege, but as an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity.

*Edward W. Said*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### Witold Gombrowicz's Works

- DA *Diario argentino*, ed. By Witold Gombrowicz, trans. to Spanish by Sergio Pitol (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo, 2001)
- D1 *Diary. Volume 1*, ed. Jan Kott, trans. to English by LillianVallee (Evanston: North Western UP, 1988)
- D2 *Diary. Volume 2 (1957-1961)*, ed. Jan Kott, trans. to English by LillianVallee (Evanston: North Western UP, 1989)
- D3 *Diary. Volume 3 (1961-1966)*, ed. Jan Kott, trans. to English by LillianVallee (Evanston: North Western UP, 1993)
- F *Ferdydurke*, trans. to Spanish by Witold Gombrowicz et al. (Buenos Aires: Argos, 1947)
- K *Kronos*, ed. Jerzy Jarzębski et al. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2013)
- KT *A Kind of Testament*, ed. Dominique de Roux, trans. to English by Alistair Hamilton (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007)
- O *Operetta*, trans. to English by Louis Iribarne (London: Calder and Boyars, 1971)
- PA *Peregrinaciones argentinas*, trans. to Spanish by Bozena Zaboklicka and Francesco Miravittles (Madrid: Alianza, 1987)
- PM *Polish Memories*, trans. to English by Bill Johnston (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004)
- TA *Trans-Atlantyk*, trans. to English by Carolyn French and Nina Karsov (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994)

## Virgilio Piñera's Works

- CR *La carne de René*, eds. Pedro de Oraá and Antón Arrufat (Habana: Ediciones Unión, 2011)
- RF *René's Flesh*, trans. to English by Mark Schafer (Boston: Eridianos, 1989)
- S *Los siervos*, in *Órbita de Virgilio Piñera*, ed. David Leyva (Habana: Ediciones Unión, 2011) 135-181
- VT "La vida tal cual," autobiographical fragments published in *Unión* (10), April – May - June 1990, 22-35
- VV *Virgilio Piñera, de vuelta y vuelta. Correspondencia 1932-1978*, ed. Patricia Semidey Rodríguez (Habana: Ediciones Unión, 2011)

## NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND REFERENCES

In this thesis some of the quotations from Gombrowicz and Piñera's works are cited in the original Polish and Spanish. I include published translations where possible; where no reference is given, English translations are mine. Secondary sources in Polish, Spanish and French are quoted directly in my own English translation.

The titles of Gombrowicz and Piñera's works are for the most part given in the original language. I present the English translation when introducing them for the first time in parentheses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author's of this dissertation passion for literature is best illustrated by the fact that as a teenager she got hit by a car while crossing a busy street reading a novel. She also missed the bus on a number of occasions, while actually standing at the bus stop, all for being too absorbed in the world of fiction. Yet, none of these early voracious reader's experiences come anywhere close to her encounter with literature at the university level. What an experienced scholar can find in a text and see through the text goes beyond the imagination of an ordinary reader like myself. It is because of my luck to have been a student of several incredible scholars that I now use the word "Professor" not with a hierarchical obedience, but with the utmost respect and admiration.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge Professor Jaime Concha for his support throughout this long process as my advisor and chair of my committee. Thank you for having taught me how to work independently and self-sufficiently, while at the same time patiently walking me through the labyrinths of Latin American literature whenever I needed guidance. And yes, I pledge to convert to Onettism as soon as I break free from the gombrowiczian pitfall.

I am also grateful to Professor Michael Monteón from the Department of History at UCSD, who completely breaks the stereotype of the uninterested outside committee member. Thank you for your encouragement, mentorship and patience with my non-native English. My academic writing skills have improved significantly because of your corrections and comments on my multiple drafts.

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Research grants from the Literature Department, the Institute for International, Comparative and Area Studies, and the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies at UCSD, as well as from the UC-Cuba Consortium, were essential to providing me with the financial resources to carry out this project. In relation to this, thank you Kristin Carnohan and Patrick Mallon from the Literature Department, for your continuous support and prompt handling of the paperwork of my study-leave.

I would also like to thank the family-like (therefore, the first names only) Making of the Modern World team at the Eleanor Roosevelt College. Heidi and Jackie, thank you for giving me the opportunity to join your program. My experience as a teaching assistant at MMW, especially for Edmond (who gave me the most valuable present, his lecture notes of an entire quarter) and Matthew's classes, convinced me that Aristotle was right in saying that all humans, by physis, desire to learn. Mollie and Vilaya, thank you for all the chocolate bars and for the non-bureaucratic attitude to paper work. And Eberly, thank you for the wave of new energy during my last quarter in the program.

The most herzlich *paldies* Dr. Rasma Lazda from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa! Thank you for believing in my early academic work and for patiently guiding me to shape my Master Thesis, without which I would have most likely not been able to pursue the doctorate degree. Also, *kamsamnida* Dr. Yong Lee from KDI Graduate School in Seoul, South Korea. Your exemplary sense of dedication to teaching and writing has been a great inspiration for me.

I would also like to take the opportunity to express my immense gratitude to two persons who opened the doors to my future (magically, it still seems), and who are no longer among us: Matt Liddy, the almighty coach of WSU Swimming and Diving team and Dr. Barbara Fischer – whose smile is impossible to forget – from the University of Alabama. You both will always be in my heart.

Friendship to me is the most mysterious and beautiful of all human phenomena. Svieta and Gyti, jūs mano seniausiai pažįstami, artimiausi ir patikimiausi draugai. Gera žinoti, kad if my world starts falling apart one day, jūsų durys visada man atviros. Tracy – Thelma – thank you for all the international adventures! I hope we'll never lose our skills of communicating through whistling. Monica (Monikutė), ¡tu sentido del realismo es contagioso! Mil gracias por la generosidad de tu tiempo y tu paciencia con mi castellano. Tuesday – Tul'sy Bhambry – are you sure you're not blood related to Gombrowicz? I am in great debt to you for your generosity as a scholar and editor. I look forward to raising a toast to our trans-Atlantyk adventures in Berlin one day, as well as to your ability as an author of your own life, of eschewing social-cultural labels of all kinds.

I infinitely thank everyone I met at UCSD. Nadine, with your indelible smile in the most difficult life situations, you are more revolutionary in spirit than the Egyptian revolution itself. Jun, 谢谢 for being such a wonderful roommate and friend. It's quite remarkable how in the midst of me learning that Chinese cuisine is not all about soy sauce, and you learning that one can't bake Italian bread without crust, we have both grown as intellectuals and as persons. Leonora, I wish I had mastered the academic vocabulary as well as you have but I can't help it, the first words that come to mind when I think of our endless conversations is "she's just plain awesome!" Mikai, I know you already have two Lithuanian sisters, but do you mind considering me as yet another one? Cesar, the great grandson of Le Comte de Monte-Cristo, you're the bravest of all real-life musketeers. All for one and one for the equally brave-hearted Olesya! Stephen, the most talented social scientist to have walked the red carpet in Long Beach, the Vabien II deal is still on. Although I hope one day you will cancel it, for having unexpectedly found what you perhaps are slightly too careful to admit you've been looking for all this time. And Homa and Negin دو خواهر اي رادى من , you have landed in my life a year ago straight from Hafez's poem (that is, two different poems by the same Hafez) bringing along with you what I've always most expected – something unexpected.

Šeimai žodžiais padėkoti neįmanoma, nes nėra nei nuo kur pradėti nei kaip pabaigti. Mano kaime jūs visi pranašai; iš jūsų išmokau daugiau nei jūs ar aš pati kada nors galėsime pilnai suvokti. Ačiū abiem močiutėm, kad užgimdė garažą, šulinį, namą ir mus visus. Jos, kiekviena savo stiliuje, buvo ir yra mano pirmieji stiprių asmenybių pavyzdžiai. Ačiū patikimajam broliukui Lukui, kuris daug apėjęs ir daug pamatęs

priėjo pats save ir sukūrė labai gražią šeimą. Vile, kažkada paauglės dienoraštyje rašiau: „turiu suaugusių tarpe geriausią draugę“. Šie žodžiai vis dar tiesa. Per savo dvylika aukštojo išsilavinimo metų sutikau daug vienai mokslo šakai talentingų žmonių, bet labai nedaug visapusiškų genijų, todėl dabar dar labiau nei bet kada vertinu tai, kad augau šalia vienos iš jų savo namuose. Rasa, humphriuk jaunesnysis ir daugiausiai pasiekusi iš mūsų sportininke: didelis ačiū už tai, kad vis dar pasitiki humphriuku vyresniuoju. Tai tavo nuopelnas, kad mūsų kaip sesių ryšys nepaisant laiko ir atstumo toks neįprastai stiprus. Tėti, ačiū už įskiepitą meilę jūrai, skaitymą balsu, kryžiažodžių magiją. Už tavo darbštumą ir patikimumą, ir svarbiausiai, už kas kart vis dažniau pasitaikančius švelnumo protrūkius. Apsikabinkim! Mamyte... tavo pavyzdžio dėka suvokiau, jog rytų europiečių provincialumo kompleksas ne įgimta, o tik visuomenės primesta ir dėl to išaugama savybė. Ačiū už viską, ko pati to turbūt nežinodama – tiesiog būdama savimi – išmokinai apie Laisvę (žinoma, turiu omeny ne politinę), kuri kaip ir meilė kurčia... bet nekurčia!

Diego, qué lindo es seguir llamándonos por nombre, no preocuparnos por regalos navideños, dantųšepetukearnos en tándem y haber descubierto con tanta facilidad el mejor lugar del mundo... Además, poder escribir en mi castellano imperfecto, sabiendo que igual me vas a entender mejor que los que hablan mi idioma nativo. Desde el momento cuando cebando el primer mate de mi vida me dijiste “soltáte”, vos – y no Borges, a pesar de su irresistible concepto de infinidad, ni tampoco Cortázar, a pesar de su claro interés por las mujeres lituanas – sos mi escritor argentino favorito. Y ahora, después de haber sido saludados personalmente por los cóndores de Aconcagua, ya no me faltan más señales dionisiacas. Entonces, sí.



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“The Project of ‘Merciless Realism’ in Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk*.” *California Slavic Colloquium*, University of California-Berkeley, April, 2013.

“Jefes del *ferdydurkismo* sudamericano.” *Coloquio Internacional Piñera Tal Cual*, Havana, June, 2012.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera, the Argentine Experience

by

Milda Žilinskaitė

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Jaime Concha, Chair

This dissertation is a comparative study of lives and works of two émigré writers: the Polish Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) and Cuban Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979). The two met in 1946 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they developed a lifelong friendship grounded in intellectual compatibility and fueled by literary collaboration. My study focuses mainly on the body of work that the two authors produced during the twenty- three-year span of time between their initial meeting and the death of Gombrowicz. I argue that the writers shared a strong desire to renovate

the world of literature in their home countries, including their host culture, Argentina. This desire in turn allowed them to develop in their writings a unique mode of cultural criticism which sought to build a bridge between the literary worlds of two geographically distant and, at least at first sight, culturally remote regions: Latin America and East-Central Europe.

There are five chapters that comprise this dissertation. The introductory chapter conceptualizes the theoretical framework for analyzing Gombrowicz and Piñera's works in relation to their historical and biographical contexts. Chapter One focuses specifically on the year 1947 and the writers' collaboration on six critical texts which target the most prominent Argentine literary and intellectual figures of the time. The subsequent two chapters examine the novels *La carne de René* by Piñera and *Trans-Atlantyk* by Gombrowicz, both written in the early 1950s, when the exchange of ideas between the two writers was still at its peak. Finally, the fourth chapter presents the long censored theater plays *Los siervos* (by Piñera) and *Operetta* (by Gombrowicz). Regardless of tangible similarities in their storylines as well as conceptual underpinnings – especially, a shared concern with cultural and political nationalism, including the particular case of Peronism in Argentina – neither the two novels nor the theater pieces to my knowledge have yet been addressed in parallel.

By engaging with Gombrowicz and Piñera scholarship in English, Spanish, Polish, French and German, I aim to join a body of research that recovers and contextualizes the voices that come from the margins of the Western literary history.

## **Introduction. No Echo in Buenos Aires: Gombrowicz and Piñera's Exilic Voices Revisited**

There is a moment in time, a place and an event that serve as the starting point of this study. The time is the year 1946. The place is the billiard and chess salon Café Rex, adjacent to a large movie theater of the same name and located on one of the central streets of Buenos Aires, Avenida Corrientes. The salon is owned by a Polish chess master of Jewish descent, Paulino Frydman, who immigrated to Argentina a few years before, in 1939. Café Rex is not one of the typical gathering places for the local literary elites. If not for the event that is about to be described, it would most likely not be known outside of the chess community. The unlikelihood of the place, however, is a perfect match for the unconventional circumstances surrounding the event whose two protagonists are virtually unknown émigré writers. The action of the event neither involves billiards being shot nor chess pieces being moved, but instead the translation of a literary piece: Witold Gombrowicz's first novel, *Ferdydurke* (originally published in Warsaw in 1937), being translated from Polish into Spanish.

The loosely formed group of collaborators at work in Café Rex, whom Gombrowicz called his "Translation Committee," was led by the Cuban playwright, novelist and poet Virgilio Piñera. Gombrowicz had arrived in Buenos Aires at the dawn of World War II, in August of 1939, while Piñera came in February of 1946. The two writers were introduced a few weeks after the arrival of the latter, by a common friend, the editor Adolfo de Obieta, son of a towering figure of the Argentine avant-garde, Macedonio Fernandez. Piñera immediately decided to join the translation

project, and together with his intimate friend, Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu, another Cuban, soon became its most active member.

Most of the translation sessions took place in the smoky environment of Café Rex. Gombrowicz, whose Spanish skills were fairly basic because he had been learning the language on the streets of Buenos Aires and did not have the luxury of a Polish-Spanish dictionary - none had yet been published - would bring the rough draft of his own translation. The text would then be reworked with the help of his Argentine and Cuban companions. Polish scholar Klementyna Suchanow estimates that there were a total of about twenty regular participants, “not to mention the prompts by waiters or incidental customers” (“Ferdurke A.D.”<sup>1</sup>). The interaction and the overall environment were chaotic at best, with participants arguing in Spanish, Polish and French. As witnessed in some of their later testimonies, there were frequent disagreements between Cuban and Argentine speakers on how to render Gombrowicz’s peculiar literary style into Spanish. Personal preferences and regional differences often turned into accusations of linguistic incompetence. The Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato, among others, blamed the peculiarities of the translation – mainly the “Cubanisms” - for the novel’s failure to garner the attention of the country’s foremost literary and cultural journal, Victoria Ocampo’s *Sur*.<sup>1</sup> Without its endorsement, the first edition of *Ferdurke* gained very little recognition in Argentina.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sur* was founded by Ocampo in 1931 and published regularly under her sponsorship until 1970. For more information, see Chapter One.

While the reception of the novel was lukewarm at best, the translation process itself was an important success. Over the year and a half it took to complete the translation, a lifelong friendship grounded in intellectual compatibility and fueled by literary collaboration, evolved between Gombrowicz and Piñera. The exchange of ideas included arguments, agreements, disagreements and sometimes, a friendly rivalry. For years to come, they read and discussed each other's writings, wrote reviews for each other's publications, produced a few short texts in collaboration, and used the connections they had with various editors trying to get each other's works published in different countries. They met frequently while in Argentina. After Piñera's final return to Cuba (1958), followed by Gombrowicz's move to Europe (West Berlin 1963, France starting 1964), their communication continued through letters. Though noticeably sparser during the politically tense times in Cuba in the second half of the 1960s, their correspondence lasted until Gombrowicz's death.

The friendship between Gombrowicz and Piñera defines the temporal scope of my study, from their initial meeting in 1946 to the Polish writer's death in 1969, with the major focus on the Argentine years (1946-1958). In addition to engaging with selected creative texts, I look at the two writers' critical essays, correspondence, interviews, autobiographical sketches and other archival material, some of which is not yet available in English translation. The detailed examination of these sources has several objectives. The most rudimentary one is to fill a biographical gap.

Gombrowicz is today considered a cult writer both inside and outside of Poland.<sup>2</sup> He

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<sup>2</sup> The centenary of the writer's birth in 2004 was declared by the Polish Ministry of Culture as "The Year of Gombrowicz" (Bhambrly 15). It was marked by a series of cultural events, academic conferences and a significant number of new publications in Gombrowicz-studies in Poland, Argentina,

started receiving international acclaim in the 1960s and, as legend holds it, in 1968 lost the Nobel Prize for Literature to Yasunari Kawabata by only one vote (Anders 49). Piñera, on the other hand, was increasingly marginalized during the last fifteen years of his life. In the mid-1960s some of his manuscripts were confiscated by the Cuban authorities and banned from being published (for more information, see Chapter Four). The writer was accused of ideological non-conformity; however, the main reason behind this outright censorship was that he was openly homosexual during times when homophobia was pervasive and sanctioned by the state. In the 1970s, much of Piñera's work was deemed counterrevolutionary. Public interest in it did not revive until a decade after the writer's death, with the political thaw of the late 1980s-early 1990s. For the past twenty years his novels and poetry collections have been slowly but consistently republished, and his theater plays staged. Nonetheless, while there is a clear indication of him finally beginning to acquire the status he deserves in the Latin American canon, his name remains little known outside the field of Spanish American literature.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the evident differences in the dispersion of their work, there has developed an asymmetry in the studies on the two writers: Piñera is hardly mentioned

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France, Germany and United States. Recently in 2013, another series of events in Poland and Germany commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the writer's return to Europe; while in Argentina, there will be an upcoming international conference in August of 2014; "Primer Congreso Internacional Witold Gombrowicz" ("The First International Congress on Witold Gombrowicz").

<sup>3</sup> The centenary of Piñera's birth in 2012 was marked by several events in Cuba and the United States, the largest ones among which were the International Colloquium "Piñera tal cual" ("Piñera as he is"), held in Havana, and The First International Festival of Virgilio Piñera's Theatre in Miami, Florida. However, translation of much of his work into other languages is long overdue. Although the writer himself back in the 1960s made a great effort to have his work translated into English, the actual publications in this language were not launched until a decade after his death. During the recent years, translations of his selected texts have been published in French, Italian, German and Norwegian.



in Gombrowicz scholarship except as the translator of *Ferdydurke*.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the need to bring the work of the Cuban writer back into the spotlight. The focus on the Argentine years is of particular importance here, since during that time period Gombrowicz was the one who lived in precarious conditions, virtually isolated from the literary establishment, while Piñera – though far from being able to claim fame and fortune – was more financially stable and managed to establish more connections with the Argentine literary authorities as a correspondent for Cuban literary journals *Orígenes* and *Ciclón*.

In relation to the above, the second aim of this study is to address the significance of Argentina as a place of exile for intellectuals from non-Western European countries during the mid-twentieth century. There is agreement among scholars that the Argentine years had a profound influence on both Gombrowicz and Piñera. Nevertheless, Argentina itself has all too often been depicted as an exilic space rather than as an actual physical place with ongoing political, social and cultural processes. The emphasis is usually placed on the distance from the sociopolitical tensions in the two writers' homelands – or as Tomislav Longinović puts it, the “freedom from history” (45) – that Argentina offered. Such perception of Argentina in Gombrowicz and Piñera scholarship is a reflection of a general tendency in the studies of exilic literature pointed out by Agnieszka Sołtysik, Halina Filipowicz and others,

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<sup>4</sup> The few exceptions being Daniel Balderston's article “Estética de la deformación en Gombrowicz y Piñera” (1990) and Pablo Gasparini's monograph *El exilio procaz: Gombrowicz por la Argentina* (2007). Klementyna Suchanow's *Argentyńskie przygody Gombrowicza* (2005) mentions Piñera's involvement in a few projects that went beyond the translation of *Ferdydurke*, however, the main focus of her study remains Gombrowicz's relationship with the Polish émigré community in Argentina. Finally, Nancy Calomarde has a few important sections on Piñera and Gombrowicz teaming up against the dominance of the *Sur* group in Argentina in her recent book, *El diálogo oblicuo: Orígenes y Sur* (2010). To my knowledge all of these studies are yet to be translated into English.

which is to bring into the forefront the influence on the émigré writer by his or her home culture. Meanwhile, the host culture tends to be approached as the space that enables the different manifestations of this influence on the displaced individual, or in other words, the space that gives shape to the émigré condition (characterized by the simultaneous experience of joy and guilt, liberation and anxiety, desired anonymity and undesired solitude, the chance to start anew and the feeling of being unaccepted, “othered” and so on).

My discussion is more in line with the studies of Pablo Gasparini (2007) and Nancy Calomarde (2010) who bring more focus to the host culture, by looking at what the intricate, never at ease relationship Gombrowicz and Piñera had with the Argentine literary community, can tell us about the cultural intellectual milieu in Argentina during the 1940s-1950s. Contrary to other contemporaneous foreign intellectuals such as the Spanish Ortega y Gasset, German Hermann De Keyserling and North American Waldo Frank, who visited Buenos Aires between 1920s and 1940s and during their trips presented their personal evaluations of the Argentine cultural scene (their reports are discussed in Gasparini’s book), Gombrowicz and Piñera were not in a position of short-term visitors from the outside who could express their observations unreservedly and without attachment. And also, contrary to the other temporary exiles in Buenos Aires, such as the French Roger Caillois or the Romanian Vintilă Horia, Gombrowicz and Piñera found virtually no institutional support for their literary endeavors. Thus, their attitude towards Argentina was rooted in their common experience as self-imposed exiles and strangers to the local literary community.

The most noteworthy aspect of this experience was that Argentina was a very different place from what either of the two writers could have found had he landed in any of the more traditional destinations of emigration chosen by the great majority of intellectuals from East-Central Europe and the Caribbean: France, England, the United States or Canada. To explore these circumstances in greater detail, I examine the socio-political circumstances in Argentina that shaped the country's cultural scene during our two writers' time there. The most intense years of Gombrowicz and Piñera's friendship coincided with a particular moment in the Latin American history, the rise and fall of Juan Domingo Perón (president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955, and from 1973 to 1974). The context of Peronism plays an important role in my analysis of Gombrowicz and Piñera's literary texts. This is not to say that it determined the theories produced by the two writers, but it certainly provided pressures and limitations to which they responded in their writings.

Finally, the last specific objective of this study is to help the *ferdydurkian* venture and the friendship that followed it to earn their place in the field of Comparative Literature. Since the early 1990s, Comparative Literature as an academic discipline has confronted its own foundations, its ties to Eurocentrism, re-shaping itself into a more cross-cultural approach and expanding its interests to materials that it had previously sidestepped or overlooked.<sup>5</sup> An examination of Gombrowicz and Piñera's experiences and literary production in Argentina fits within this wave of re-focus. After the disintegration of the USSR, preceded by the falls of several South

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the history of Comparative Literature as an academic field, cf. Nele Bemong, Mirjam Truwant and Pieter Vermeulen's "Introduction: Europe, in Comparison" in *Re-Thinking Europe. Literature and (Trans)National Identity* (2008).

American military regimes, several studies have appeared on the similarities and differences of political instabilities and economic vicissitudes in twentieth Latin America and Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> However, as pointed out by Szlajfer (1987) and Górski (1994, 2004), there has been very little, if any, interest in a comparative study of cultural and intellectual transformations in the two regions. Literature is an active participant and reflection on such transformations. The case of a Polish writer befriending a Cuban writer prior to the Cuban Revolution and outside – or at least on the edge – of the Soviet-context, in the heart of the Southern Cone, is a unique historical coincidence. My analysis of Gombrowicz and Piñera’s texts explores what the writers saw as commonalities between the intellectual scenes of their home countries and Argentina during the mid-twentieth century, and moreover, how they took this a step further by employing the concept of *naciones menores* (“minor nations”), which refers to a more encompassing connection between Latin America and East-Central Europe; without, of course, neglecting the obvious differences between the diversified histories of the two regions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Szlajfer, ed. *Economic Nationalism in East-Central Europe and South America 1918-1939* (1990); Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. (1991); Dembicz, ed. *Diálogo interregional entre Europa Centro-Oriental y América Latina* (1997); Dembicz, ed. *Relaciones entre Europa Central y América latina en el contexto de la integración con la Unión Europea* (conference proceedings, 1998); Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience. East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (1998); May and Milton, eds. *(Un)civil societies : human rights and democratic transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (2005).

<sup>7</sup> In my discussion, I to use the terms “East-Central Europe” and “Latin America” as heuristic instruments rather than essentialist categories, keeping in consideration that the former cannot be clearly delimited from other European regions, neither geographically nor politically or linguistically, and the latter has been complicated, defined and redefined throughout the twentieth century. The advantage of using these broader concepts when discussing selected texts by Gombrowicz and Piñera is that they permit to define the intended audience, which was primarily non-Western European and non-North American readers.

The said connection is rooted in the preoccupation expressed by many of the twentieth century writers from these regions, with belonging to “inferior”, “secondary”, “immature”, “peripheral” (all of these terms were also used by Gombrowicz and Piñera) cultures. This preoccupation is inseparable from “the permanent tension” that the powerful construct called “Europe” represents to the historically marginalized cultures (Mandolessi “Cultural hierarchies” 151); a phenomenon which was most thoroughly conceptualized by Marshall Berman in his seminal study *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982). In Latin America, postcolonial critics such as the Argentine Beatriz Sarlo, Brazilian Silviano Santiago and others have found impetus in Berman’s work for developing their concept of “peripheral modernity” to tackle the socio-cultural questions of imitation, adaptation and dependency on the Western literary canon. In East-Central Europe, analogous issues have been discussed by Eduard Mühle, Piotr Sztompka, Almantas Samalavičius and other scholars who agree that historically (before, during and after the existence of the Soviet Bloc) nations of this realm have had to insist on their “Europeanness”, or in other words, on their belonging to the cradle of the Western civilization. Among Gombrowicz’s contemporaries who perceived this condition as an adversity and who wrote against it were the Polish writer Czesław Miłosz and the Czech Milan Kundera. Both are quoted to have referred to the region as “yet another Europe,” meaning the meta-space “beyond the historical, cultural, and political imaginations of Western Europeans and North Americans” (Donskis, *Loyalty, Dissent* 3).

The exilic experience of Witold Gombrowicz adds a particularly interesting case to this set of cross-cultural studies and discussions. Back in Poland, during the interim period between the two world wars, the writer was trying to make sense of the two-sided complex of cultural difference within the Polish national self-understanding. One side of it was the inferiority complex toward the West; the other side, the superiority complex toward the other Eastern European nations. In *Polish Memories* (published posthumously) Gombrowicz implies that he considered such circumstances to be uniquely Polish and that in Argentina he expected to find a completely different cultural climate. Yet, ironically, what he came across was surprisingly comparable to what he was so familiar with. The country was experiencing a period of economic prosperity brought about by the favorable international conjuncture. There was a surge in its sense of national identity. Many of the middle class intellectuals identified themselves with Western Europe, viewing their country as superior, not only economically but also racially, to its South American neighbors. And yet, the cultural inferiority complex toward Europe was just as pervasive as ever, as echoed in Jorge Luis Borges' ironic remark: "Nosotros somos los únicos verdaderos europeos, pues en Europa la gente es ante todo francesa, italiana, española..." ("We are the only true Europeans, since in Europe people are first of all French, Italian, Spanish..." qtd. in Rouquié 417).

As an émigré intellectual, someone who wrote from the margins of both Polish and Argentine cultures, Gombrowicz observed this phenomenon with a critical eye. His observations were enriched by endless discussions with Virgilio Piñera, who, as I describe in more detail in Chapter One, added Cuba to the same equation. What this

resulted in was an unusual response to the exilic condition, in the sense that in his writings Gombrowicz never expressed the desire to regain his lost homeland. He and Piñera did not dwell on their past experiences as being richer than their actual present. Neither can their literary texts be seen as a syncretic combination of Polish and Argentine or Cuban and Argentine elements. They convey no sense of striving for a harmonic plurality and there is no articulation of feeling “at home” in two cultures simultaneously. Instead, the double-intentionality that underlines Gombrowicz and Piñera’s writings from the Argentine years is to on one hand demonstrate a profound, insider’s knowledge of the two (home and host) cultures, while on the other hand, expressing the unwillingness to comfortably belong in either of them. For this reason, the works of these authors lend themselves to the theoretical approach on émigré literature which comes from the postcolonial theory, specifically Abdul R. JanMohamed’s concept of a “specular border intellectual,” defined in his 1992 essay “Worldiness-Without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual.” This concept has been already applied to Gombrowicz scholarship by Marzena Grzegorzcyk and Agnieszka Sołtysik. My discussion expands their interpretations by applying JanMohamed’s theory to Gombrowicz and Piñera in tandem.

JanMohamed defines a “specular border intellectual” as someone who does not fit in any of the traditional categories of border-crossings, of which the author lists four: the exile, the immigrant, the colonialist and the scholar (Silviano Santiago would add yet another, that of a tourist). Instead, he or she shares characteristics of several of these categories. Moreover, the definition of the “borders” themselves is not limited to

the distinction between national groups only, but also entails crossing between cultural groups, social classes, gender, sexual orientation and so on (JanMohamed 235).

Gombrowicz and Piñera both experienced multiple ‘border crossings’ in Argentina: of a national group (both), of a linguistic group (Gombrowicz) and of a socio-economic group (both). In addition, Piñera, who had been openly homosexual back in his home country, faced difficulties in adapting to the more conservative intellectual community of Buenos Aires. Gombrowicz had his earliest homosexual experiences back in Europe, but always took precaution to keep from being labeled homosexual (towards the end of his life he married a woman, Rita Labrosse-Gombrowicz). During his first seven years in Buenos Aires, he concealed the stories of his homosexual encounters in the Retiro district. It was only after meeting Piñera that he started writing about them in his *Diary*, thus crossing yet another border, disclosing to his readership what used to be a hidden matter.

The above listed circumstances reflect how in Argentina Gombrowicz and Piñera were caught between several cultures and social groups simultaneously. This, in turned, allowed them to maintain a critical stance towards the status quo socially, culturally and oftentimes politically. In their fiction and autobiographical writings, both authors constructed, to borrow JanMohamed’s expression, “analytic mirrors”, that reflect and refract the structures of host and home cultures. Moreover, they subjected these cultures to analytical scrutiny, which fits JanMohamed’s definition of “specular boarder intellectual” as someone who: “utilizes his or her interstitial cultural space as a vantage point from which to define, implicitly or explicitly, other, utopian



possibilities of group formation” (219). In other words, it is not just about reflecting the gaps, but also about filling them.

Gombrowicz and Piñera were accused by some contemporaries as well as later critics of being polemicists without an agenda; and by others, of promoting disruptive individualism. Yet, the cynicism that pervades the works of the two writers is goal oriented, and I propose that this shared goal was to reevaluate and redefine the relationship between the Latin American and/or East-Central European writer and the society in which he or she lived in. One thing that has been long taken for granted in countries such as Poland, Cuba and Argentina was the idea that: “the real intellectual is a dedicated educator, builder, and shaper of the nation, rather than public thinker or social and cultural critic” (Donskis, *Loyalty, Dissent* 7). Despite their self-promoted images of disrespectful and indifferent “anti-intellectuals”, Gombrowicz and Piñera were highly preoccupied with their *raison d’être* as modern day writers from their corresponding countries. Both agreed that too much concern for the historical and contemporary traumas of their nations posed danger to individual reason. At the same time, both were skeptical of any, individual and collective, projects of striving for a “more European” identity. Both saw themselves as social and cultural critics; and advocated dissent as an instrument of cultural progress.

This brings the discussion back to the relevance of Gombrowicz and Piñera’s intellectual and literary collaboration in Argentina to the field of Comparative Literature. As noted by Bemong, Truwant and Vermeulen: “While the study of literature in the last two decades has convincingly demonstrated how literature aids to the construction of cultural identities, it has at the same time not forgotten that

literature is also often (and perhaps even constitutively) subversive of such attempts to enlist it in the service of the articulation of a distinct identity” (Introduction 14). For Gombrowicz and for Piñera alike, writing was without a doubt an act of subversion.

The following two sections provide biographical contexts for the two writers. Even though Gombrowicz’s books have been translated and published in over thirty languages, the fascinating story of his life remains relatively little known in the English-speaking world (a comprehensive study in English on his work and legacy in Argentina has yet to be published). Piñera’s name, as implied previously, has only recently begun to gain some recognition among the non-Spanish speaking readership. The following pages outline Gombrowicz and Piñera’s intellectual developments before they met. The important biographical events of each writer’s life are situated in the context of the major political events, as well as the history of modernist and avant-garde literature in their home countries. The political and cultural climate of Argentina, along with the lives of the two writers after 1946, will be delineated in other chapters.

### **Witold Gombrowicz: “What sort of Columbus am I?”<sup>8</sup>**

Chronologically, it is appropriate to start with the biographical context of Witold Gombrowicz (August 4, 1904- July 24, 1969), since he was eight years older and arrived in Argentina nearly seven years prior to Piñera. Gombrowicz is today recognized as an author of a complex and multiple *oeuvre* consisting of five novels, three internationally staged plays, a short story collection, a three volume highly

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<sup>8</sup> Quote from D3 151.

experimentalist *Diary* (1953-1968; with an additional volume added posthumously), other series of memoirs and acute reflections on literature, philosophy and art. His work has elaborated new concepts; particularly well known is his “theory of Form” that challenged the modernist formalisms of his day.<sup>9</sup> The writer has been often called the great provocateur of Polish literature; largely because of his criticism regarding the Polish intelligentsia’s attempts to insert the name of their country into the master narrative of European civilization, and also for his polemical stance regarding the overall relationship between a writer and society. As put by his contemporary Czesław Miłosz: “Gombrowicz’s destructive talent has always been directed towards depriving the reader of his certainties and his presumed values” (*The History* 436).

Gombrowicz’s early years coincided with a tumultuous time in Polish history. He was in his teens, when in 1918 the country’s name reappeared on the map of Europe as a sovereign state for the first time after almost one hundred and fifty years of political partition under the power of Russia, Prussia and Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>10</sup> This meant that his generation of Polish intellectuals was the last one to acquire their basic education under Russian or German systems, and the first one to

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<sup>9</sup> In his writings Gombrowicz uses the concept of “Form” in a variety of different contexts, applying it to linguistic, literary, social, political, philosophical and even psychological categories. It shares certain affiliations with structuralism, although Gombrowicz always liked to point that much of his work preceded structuralism. As summarized by Bhambry: “‘Form’ is a shorthand for Gombrowicz’s concept of the social and psychological dynamics that in his view condition human behaviour, language and feeling: determined by a logic of consistency or completion, our words, actions, and emotions can never be authentic. On the social level, ‘Form’ means that human identity is shaped in response to the social environment, both on a macro level (such as social class, gender and status), and on a micro level (every interaction with another person is ruled by a certain logic from which there is no escape). On the psychological level, ‘Form’ obliges us to comply with whatever reasoning or behaviour first pressed itself upon us. And yet, Gombrowicz insists that we must resist Form as best we can, striving to assert our identity, both on the intra- and the intersubjective level, even though authenticity will always remain out of reach” (18-19).

<sup>10</sup>The final of the three partitions took place in 1795, putting an end to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which had existed as a sovereign state since 1569.

earn their university degrees in independent Poland. Gombrowicz, who was born into an upper-middle class family, during his childhood, received lessons in French from the foreign governesses hired by his parents, and from 1915 to 1922 attended the prestigious St. Stanisław Kostka School in Warsaw. His final few years at school coincided with another influential historical event: the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921), which was won, rather unexpectedly by Poland, following the decisive Battle of Warsaw (1920). The hero of the war, general Józef Klemens Piłsudski (1867-1935), would later assume political power and become the president of the country through the *coup d'état* of 1926.

In his *Polish Memories* Gombrowicz claims that it was during the early 1920s that he first realized his contempt for Polish nationalism and patriotism, both of which would become the central targets of attack in his later literary career:

I [he says] believe that that year of 1920 made me what I have remained to the present day – an individualist. And this came about because I was not able to fulfill my obligations towards the nation at a time of imminent threat to our freshly minted independence. Patriotism without a willingness to sacrifice one's life for the fatherland was for me an empty word. [But] that willingness was not in me . . . (22)

Yet despite his aversion to the War and the nationalist expansionist sentiments fueled by it, the writer admits that he did get caught up in the spirit of the public enthusiasm of the first decade of independence: “love of my era was very strong in me, and alongside it a feeling of solidarity with my generation . . . Because that age was a liberating age, an era filled with promise” (PM 33). Gombrowicz's words reflect the cultural and artistic environment in which he took his first steps as a writer. The 1920s in Poland have been often referred to as the decade of innovation in artistic expression.

General Piłsudski's regime, while highly authoritarian and nationalistic in its internal policies, entailed relatively little limitation on art and literature, which had been highly experimental since the reestablishment of independence (Goddard 9).

Early manifestations of different avant-garde movements in Poland can be dated back to Kraków's Exhibitions of the Independents in 1911, yet the real momentum was gained after WWI, with an increased number of art exhibitions, avant-garde journals and international collaborations.<sup>11</sup> The popularity of the Futurist, Cubist and Expressionist movements, however, was outgrown by the success of the *Skamander* group of modernist poets founded in 1918 by Julian Tuwim, Jan Lechoń Antoni Słonimski and several others. Immediately fashionable among Polish readers, the works of the *Skamandrites*' were experimental yet not too radical, thus assuming "the paradoxical role of the traditional wing of the avant-garde" (Shore 23). They sought inspiration in the spoken language and cultural heritage of the folklore, in this way bearing some resemblance to the nineteenth century Polish romanticism. When in the mid 1920s, after having completed his higher education in Law Studies at Warsaw University Gombrowicz started making more serious attempts at writing fiction – at that time mainly short stories – his first advisors on style as well as his first publishers were his acquaintances from the *Skamander* group. His first play *Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda* (*Iwona, Princess of Burgundia*) would appear in print as a *Skamander* publication in 1938.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on the history of avant-garde in East-Central Europe, cf. Timothy Benson and Éva Forgás' *Between Worlds: a Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes* (2002) and Benson's *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (2002).

Another evident feature of the intellectual scene of 1920s-1930s Poland was the political and cultural influence of Marxism. As observed by Marci Shore, however, there was no clear line of distinction between the left-leaning writers and other avant-garde groups: “for many young Polish literati of the 1920s, communism was cosmopolitan, avant-garde, sexy . . . The young avant-garde of the early 1920s became the radical Marxists of the late 1920s” (4). Gombrowicz did not have a good rapport with Warsaw’s leading leftist intellectuals. This might have been what cost him the opportunity to get his first novel *Ferdydurke* published by the well known Gebethner and Wolff’s publishing house. The chief editor at the time, the futurist poet and devoted Marxist Aleksander Wat, seems to have rejected the manuscript due to his personal dislike of its author (91).

The fact that by the time of the publication of his first short story collection *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania* (*Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity*, 1933) Gombrowicz was already acquainted with most of Warsaw’s intellectual figures can be used to infer the size of the literary scene of those years. As reflected in the joking remark made by Vladimir Mayakovsky - a cult figure for young Polish Marxist writers - after his visit to Poland in 1927: “Some Poles call Warsaw a small Paris. In any event, it’s a very small Paris” (qtd. in Shore 61). The institutions supporting art and literature in the newly established nation-state were few. Rivals from different groups and movements were bound by personal ties, and despite the polemics they exchanged on various issues, many often came together for collaboration. The city’s literary cafés served as important gathering places. The most prominent one among them was Café Ziemiańska, founded in 1918, which Gombrowicz started frequenting in the early

1930s (daily visits to selected literary cafés would eventually become his routine practice, with Ziemiańska, Zodiak and Ips in Warsaw; Rex, El Querandí, La Fragata in Buenos Aires; Café Zuntz in Berlin and Café de la Régance in Vence, Southern France).

In his memoirs, the writer sarcastically comments on the unwritten rules of hierarchy at Ziemiańska, that is, the grouping between the young aspiring intellectuals and the more acknowledged figures such as the *Skamandrites* or some of the Marxist writers. Gombrowicz then boasts of his success at going against the current and establishing his own conversation table:

. . . my table was frequently visited by a sizable crowd of fans . . . it happened to be the antithesis of the accepted norm in Ziemiańska. I was not a great lover of poetry; I was neither excessively progressive, nor modern; I was not a typical intellectual, nor a nationalist, nor a Catholic, nor a communist, not a right winger; I didn't worship science, or art, or Marx. (PM 111)

This humorous remark might sound like an empty self-panegyric. It does, however, point to the two principles Gombrowicz would hold on to through the rest of his life: a stubborn refusal to join any of the established intellectual circles and an attempt to build his own group of younger followers.

During the Ziemiańska years Gombrowicz's work was getting published slowly but consistently. The breakthrough came with *Ferdydurke* (1937). The novel was proclaimed a masterpiece by several modernist critics. Among others, Bruno Schulz, a well-known writer and painter of Jewish descent (and one of the very few avant-garde artists from the older generation whom Gombrowicz admired), praised it as a "fundamental discovery at last; the conquest of a new realm of intellectual

phenomena . . . [a book that] bursts from an abundance of ideas, overflows with creative and destructive energy.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, *Ferdydurke* was attacked by the right-wing critics. This was not just the matter of literary conservatism, but rather a reflection of the rising political tensions in the country after Piłsudski’s death (1935), with an increasing dismissal of experimental art brought about by the worsening economy, growth of militarism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, all accelerated by external pressures from Western Europe. The year following the publication of the novel, Gombrowicz traveled to Austria and Italy. In his memoirs he describes the sociopolitical tensions observed in those countries, as he reached the former at the moment of the Anschluss and the latter during the peak of fascism.

After his return to Poland, Gombrowicz procured an offer to participate in the inauguration trip of the Polish cruise ship *Bolesław Chrobry* on its new transatlantic route between Gdynia and Buenos Aires.<sup>13</sup> Along with two other Polish writers, Czesław Straszewicz and Bohdan Pawłowicz, Gombrowicz was expected to take part in a series of events organized there by the Polish embassy. Upon disembarking in the Argentine capital on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1939, the three were interviewed by the daily newspaper *La Nación*. The Argentine journalist quotes their prediction that the war in Europe was not going to break out until at least a year later (Rita Gombrowicz, *en*

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<sup>12</sup> In *Letters and drawings of Bruno Schulz*. 158 -163. Witold befriended the two iconic figures of Polish avant-garde, Bruno Schulz and Stanisław Ignacy Wickiewicz back in 1934.

<sup>13</sup> The existing accounts on how Gombrowicz managed to get this invitation are contradictory. It is possible, although not certain, that the person who organized a free ticket was the employee of the Ministry of Industry, Jerzy Giedroyc (who would later found the Polish émigré journal *Kultura* in Paris and become Gombrowicz’s most influential editor in Polish). There is also no account that would indicate Gombrowicz was planning to leave Poland permanently at this point. Gombrowicz’s close friend in Warsaw time, Tadeusz Kępiński, claims that the writer was first hesitant about accepting the invitation for the transatlantic journey. For more details, see Bhambray 139 and 183-148.



*Argentina* 15). The prediction was wrong. Ten days after *Chrobry's* arrival to its destination, Nazi Germany invaded Poland.

This is how Gombrowicz's twenty four year long story in Argentina began. The writer himself wove a legendary narrative regarding his decision to stay behind, after the captain's announcement of *Chrobry's* immediate return to Europe. In the *Diary* (preceded by the fictional description of the same event in the novel *Trans-Atlantyck*), Gombrowicz claims that he made up his mind spontaneously, the very last minute of the send-off at the harbor in Buenos Aires. This story is supported by the memoirs of the secretary of the Polish Embassy in Argentina at the time, Jeremi Stępowski, who recalls Gombrowicz running down the exit stairs with luggage in his hands after the whistle of the ship had already sounded (Rita Gombrowicz, *en Argentina* 21).

The only factual difference is that the date provided in Stępowski's account is actually a few days prior to the outbreak of the War. As further demonstrated by Suchanow, it is clear that Gombrowicz's decision to stay in Argentina was made before the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, for when the War started, *Chrobry* was already in Pernabuco, Brazil (*Argentyńskie przygody* 249-251). So embarking on a self-imposed exile might not have been as spontaneous as Gombrowicz made it seem – or at least, it was not due to the German invasion of Poland, but far more likely to the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August – though certainly, the writer could have not foreseen it would last for over two decades.

Gombrowicz's first six years in Buenos Aires are a rather undocumented period. As summarized by Ewa Ziarek, it was a time: “of extreme destitution and

intense liberation, of historical tragedy and personal rejuvenation, of loneliness and new friendships . . . [and of] sexual experimentation” (Introduction 8). The modest financial support granted to Gombrowicz by the Polish embassy lasted less than a year. After that, the writer was forced to live off menial clerical jobs and small subsidies by friends, mostly other Polish émigrés. He stayed in third class hotels and cheap guesthouses, one of which he is known to have abandoned in secret for not being able to pay the rent. Nevertheless, these were also the times of a thrilling bohemian life. “Never have I been so much of a poet,” wrote Gombrowicz years later, “as then, in those hot streets [of Buenos Aires] packed with people, completely lost” (KT 86).

In the meantime, the historical tragedy in Poland touched his family and some of his closest friends directly. The earlier quoted Bruno Schulz was killed in the Drohobycz ghetto in 1942. Another intimate friend from the older avant-garde generation, painter and writer Stanisław Witkiewicz had committed a suicide back in September of 1939, after hearing the news about the Soviet invasion. Gombrowicz’s brother and nephew were deported to Auschwitz due to their involvement in the Warsaw uprising of 1944. His mother and sister were forced to seek refuge in the country side. Gombrowicz’s references to these events in his autobiographical writings are sparse; when they do appear, they are accompanied with irony and even bitter sarcasm, revealing the internal conflicts of an émigré life. One of the most illustrative *Diary* accounts regarding this inner tension starts with the author’s remark: “My understanding with Latin America . . . seemed to me spoiled by nothing,” which a few paragraphs later is followed with a sudden outburst of emotion: “Nevertheless, one

day, having looked carefully in the mirror, I saw something new on my face: a subtle net of wrinkles, appearing on my forehead and under my eyes and in the corners of my mouth, just as under the influence of chemicals a seemingly innocent letter reveals its ominous contents. My accursed face! My face betrayed me, betrayal, betrayal!” (D1 136-137). Accounts by Gombrowicz’s Argentine friends (among the earliest intellectual acquaintances there were the writers Arturo Capdevila, Manuel Gálvez, Carlos Mastronardi and Roger Pla, painter Antonio Bernie and theater director Leonidas Barletta) testify that it was too difficult for him to talk about the situation back in Poland.<sup>14</sup>

Last but not least, the sexual experimentation in Ziarek’s quote refers to Gombrowicz’s homosexual experiences with lower class Argentine boys in the Retiro district. He drew upon these experiences when writing the novel *Trans-Atlantyk*, and also wrote about them later in the *Diary*. It is very likely that the close friendship with Piñera and Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu, who were both openly gay, influenced Gombrowicz’s choice of including the Retiro adventures in his autobiographical publications.

Gombrowicz’s literary production during the first six years in Buenos Aires has often been regarded as non-existent. However, the writer had not altogether distanced himself from the cultural scene. Between 1940 and 1944 he wrote essays on art and literature for the journals *Criterio*, *Viva cien años* (under the pennames

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<sup>14</sup> Pla, for example, recounts that whenever Gombrowicz was asked about the War, he tended to limit himself to making sardonic remarks, such as: “Los Nazis . . . entraron por un parte de Polonia, los rusos por la otra. Han convertido a mi país en un sándwich. Los nazis se han quedado con dos vacas, los rusos con otras dos” (“The Nazis . . . have entered Poland from one side, while the Russians from the other. They turned my country into a sandwich. The Nazis took two cows, and the Russians the other two;” in Rita Gombrowicz, *en Argentina* 47).

Mariano Lenogiry and Alejandro Jorge) and the literary supplement of *La Nación*, edited by the well known Eduardo Mallea. Gombrowicz also published a short story in *El Hogar* and succeeded in getting a translation of a chapter from *Ferdydurke* titled “Filifor forrado de niño” (“Filifor Honeycombed with Childishness”) to appear in *Papeles de Buenos Aires*. Moreover, in 2000, twelve previously unlisted essays from the 1940s were discovered by Suchanow in the archives of the magazine *Aquí Está*. They were written by Gombrowicz in French under the penname Alexandro Ianca, and translated to Spanish by his friend Roger Pla. These essays, still only available in Spanish, have been generally disregarded for their “low” literary value. As I have already suggested elsewhere, their role in the overall body of Gombrowicz’s work should be reconsidered, for they are a connecting link between the Polish Ziemiańska and Argentine Rex years.<sup>15</sup>

In short, Gombrowicz left Poland as an already relatively acclaimed writer of his generation. When after six years of exile he decided to embark upon the Spanish translation of *Ferdydurke*, he knew he was starting anew in the sense of having to take the book from one group of readers to an entire world of others; nevertheless, he was by no means a beginner in literature. Moreover, he saw himself as a cosmopolitan *homme de lettres*, for he arrived to Argentina after already having spent a year in Paris (1928), having visited Vienna, Rome (1939) and other Western European metropolises. Last but not least, not being involved with any academic or cultural institution not only offered Gombrowicz distance from the establishment but provided him with the freedom to invent his own Argentina (at the same time as he was

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<sup>15</sup> Zilinskaite, “El polaco quilombero” (2013).

reinventing his own Poland which, having sustained the catastrophe of war and occupation, had become for the writer an imagined homeland). In light of all these previous experiences, his initial acquaintance with Buenos Aires and its literary world was very different from that of Virgilio Piñera's, to whom this discussion turns next.

### **Virgilio Piñera and the “Dreadful Nothingness”**

No bien tuve la edad exigida para que el pensamiento se traduzca en algo más que soltar la baba y agitar los bracitos, me enteré de tres cosas lo bastante sucias como para no poderme lavar jamás de las mismas. No podía saber a tan corta edad que el saldo arrojado por esas tres gorgonas: miseria, homosexualismo y arte, era la pavorosa nada.  
Piñera, “Vida tal cual”

[By the time I had acquired the age when thought was no longer merely a translation of drooling and agitating one's arms, I became aware of three things which were dirty enough so that I would never be able to cleanse myself of them. I could have not known at that age that the consequence of these three Gorgons – misery, homosexuality, and art – was a dreadful nothingness.]

As described previously, in the last years of his life as well as during the decade following his death, Virgilio Domingo Piñera Llera's (August 4, 1912 – October 18, 1979) work was systematically censored in his home country. It was not until the political thaw of the late 1980s that some of his writings started reappearing in anthologies of Cuban literature. Today his impact on the literary world of the country is compared to that of José Lezama Lima and Alejo Carpentier (Santana 206). Piñera was a poet, playwright, novelist, short-story writer, critic and translator. Internationally, he is probably best known for his theater plays (the earliest ones have

been described by some as absurdist avant la lettre<sup>16</sup>) and the novels *La carne de René* (*René's Flesh*), *Pequeñas maniobras* (*Small Maneuvers*) and *Presiones y diamantes* (*Pressures and Diamonds*).

Piñera was born, coincidentally, on the same day (different years) as Gombrowicz but to a family of a very different economic status. During his childhood his parents were stricken by financial hardship and several times forced to move from one city to another. The young Virgilio did not have the luxury of traveling abroad. The first greater move that enabled him to expand his intellectual horizons was from Camagüey, Cuba's third largest city where he spent most of his adolescent years, to the capital Havana (in 1937).

The Cuba of Piñera's youth is often referred to as the Platt Republic (1902-1933), after the Platt Amendment, which allowed for the ongoing hegemonic involvement of the U.S. in Cuban affairs. As a result of this, the country was stricken by a series of economic disasters. The cultural and intellectual life was monitored by the government authorities, especially during the dictatorial rule of Gerardo Machado (1925-1933).

Among many incidents of censorship that occurred during Machado's regime, there was one that had a particular resonance in Virgilio Piñera's early formation and career. It was the case of the bimonthly avant-garde journal *Revista de Avance* (1927-1930) that had replaced the previous *Cuba contemporánea* (1913-1927). Though short lived, *Avance* is still considered of vital importance for the history of Latin American

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<sup>16</sup> Curiously, Gombrowicz has also been called one of the precursors to the Theater of Absurd (see Bhambray 15 and ft.33). However, while Piñera expressed a great interest in the Theater of Absurd and even propagated its spread in Cuba, Gombrowicz categorically resisted such associations and instead asserted the originality of his work.

avant-garde publications. It published essays on literature, art and music written by local and foreign contributors. It was also rich in socio-political commentary. Several of the Cuban intellectuals who worked for *Avance* were associated with the group of young people who back in 1923 had staged an act of a public protest – known as “Protesta de los trece” (“protest of the thirteen”) – which denounced the government of president Alfredo Zayas. Through the pages of *Avance*, these writers continued condemning political corruption and disorder, for which they became subject to the increasingly abusive censorship of Machado’s government. The novelist Alejo Carpentier and critic and essayist Jorge Mañach, along with several others, were imprisoned for having published their criticism of the government’s actions. By the year 1930 the journal was doomed to complete censorship, and so the editors decided on ending its publication altogether. Ironically, it was also the same year that the young Virgilio – who at the time admired Mañach as an author and intellectual – was twice arrested suspected of conspiracy against the regime for being involved in a student political group (Anderson, *Everything* 20).

It was in the second half of the 1930s, after Machado had fled the country (to be eventually replaced by another political strongman Fulgencio Batista), that Piñera took his first steps in literature. In 1935, he became a director of a youth organization in Camagüey that organized a series of cultural events. These included poetry evenings and various theatrical exchanges, one of which – a visit of Havana theater group *La Cueva* – seems to have served as impetus for Piñera’s first attempt at writing

for the theater.<sup>17</sup> His greater interest at the time, however, was in poetry. His first significant success in this field was the publication of one of his poems in a sixty-three author anthology *La poesía cubana en 1936 (Cuban Poetry in 1936)*, edited by a visiting Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez.

Given his family's financial difficulties, Piñera was granted free enrollment in the School of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Havana in 1937. He attended lectures at the university until the year 1941 but did not receive a diploma due to a conflict with some of his professors, followed by a categorical refusal to participate in the defense of his own thesis. Despite the academic controversies and continuous economic hardship, the university years were a stimulating period. Piñera's autobiographical sketches describe his search for new friendships, exploration of homosexual relationships and the pursuit of intellectual growth. In the early years of his studies, Piñera met José Lezama Lima (1910-1976), who was to become one of the most influential figures in Cuban literature. The friendship between the two, as Anderson puts it, "would quickly turn into one of the most polemical and legendary relationships in the history of Cuban letters" (*Everything* 24). It vacillated frequently between collaboration and rivalry, homage and disrespect. For instance, from 1939 to 1941, Piñera was one of the most active collaborators of Lezama's literary journal *Espuela de Plata*. However, the collaboration came to an abrupt end and the journal found its demise after a heated argument between Piñera and Lezama regarding the latter's unfavorable choice of a co-editor. In just a few months Piñera went from

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<sup>17</sup> The play was titled *Clamor en Penal (Clamor in the Prison)*. Its first act was published in a Havana-journal *Baraguá* and received positive reviews. However, Piñera kept it among his papers and it seems that he never attempted to get it staged (Anderson, *Everything* 21).



listing of Lezama as the heir of all of his literary papers in case of a premature death (an early will quoted in “Dossier Piñera”) to sending the latter a quarrelsome letter on having lost faith in their friendship.

In order to set himself apart from Lezama’s editorial endeavors, in 1942 Piñera founded his own journal *Poeta: Cuaderno Trimestral de la Poesía* (*Poet: Trimestral Poetry Notebook*). Due to lack of funds he only managed to publish two short issues. Their editorials target Lezama as an editor and also Havana’s intellectual scene as whole. This was not just about personal bickering but more about Piñera’s desire to establish a reputation as a provocateur writer. To quote his own words: “soy un escritor irrespetuoso. Pero me siento muy bien con mi falta de respeto” (“I am a disrespectful writer. But I feel great about my lack of respect”; qtd. in “Dossier Virgilio Piñera”). Moreover, *Poeta* was the first of Piñera’s many attempts to construct his own audience. Similarly to Gombrowicz in his insistence on establishing his own conversation table at Café Ziemiańska, Piñera sought to break away from the avant-garde tradition in which he had his roots. His critical essays in *Poeta* claimed that Cuban literature was too formalistic, abstract and stagnant, and called for new modes of artistic expression. This offended more than a few of his contemporaries. For example, the earlier mentioned Jorge Mañach, whom Piñera had asked for financial support for *Poeta*, agreed on writing out a check but warned the younger writer that his polemics were on the edge of negligence and irresponsibility. The letter that accompanied the check ended in a patronizing note advising Piñera to not forget who his forerunners were: “[Eso] lo trajimos nosotros, no lo olviden” (“We have brought it about [referring to the modernist experimentation in literature], don’t you forget it”;

qtd. in Anderson, *Everything* 29). Piñera returned the check in the following week, with a letter that attacked Mañach's generation for having fallen into conformism (Ibid.).

Towards the mid 1940s, it was becoming clear that Piñera's literary ambitions would fit neither within the tradition of the Cuban avant-garde, nor within the younger group of writers that would eventually form the famous *origenistas* circle centered on Lezama Lima. In 1943, Piñera published the seminal poem *La isla en peso* (trans. by Anderson as *The Island Fully Burdened* and by Weiss as *The Whole Island*) which broke away from the ornate, hyperbolic, allusive style of the Lezamian neo-baroque he had adhered to back in his first collection of poems *Las Furias* (*The Furies*, 1941). *La isla* was written in an assertive and deliberately vulgar tone, as if to express the author's sudden aversion to excessive aestheticism in poetry. More importantly, however, it exposed the many problems faced by Cubans at the time, including racism, poverty and homophobia, personal and social misery. The poem was met with harsh criticism, especially by one of the leading *origenistas* Cintio Vitier, who refused to include it in an important 1948 anthology *Diez poetas cubanos* (*Ten Cuban poets*). Vitier accused it of being anti-Cuban and anti-patriotic (his argument coincidentally resembles some of the Polish critics' attacks on Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*). Today *La isla* is regarded as Piñera's most emblematic poem. Its opening line – “La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes” (The cursed circumstance of being surrounded by water) – has retrospectively been used as a metaphor for the writer being constricted from leaving the island during the last few years of his life (among other instances, in his Centenary Conference in 2012).

Back when the poem was actually written, in the pre-Revolution years, Piñera's feeling of entrapment was evoked by a combination of unfavorable external circumstances. The socio-cultural environment of the country was complicated if not paradoxical. On the one hand, the 1940s can be regarded as a momentous decade for Cuban literature. García Chichester and Kanzepolsky, among others, argue that there was an ongoing cultural project on a national level. In poetry, there were important publications by Lezama, Vitier, Nicolás Guillén and Emilio Ballagas (Piñera's close friend back from Camagüey), while Alejo Carpentier, Arístides Fernández and Félix Pita Rodríguez were experimenting with new forms of prose fiction (García Chichester, "Formulation" 233). The best known literary journal from this time period, Lezama's *Orígenes* – which ran from 1944 to 1956 – quickly earned a place among the Spanish-speaking publications in Latin America.

These cultural developments coincided with certain changes in political context. The rise to power of the Cuban Revolutionary Party-Auténtico (PRC-A) brought about a brief period of freedom of expression. Its two leading figures: Ramón Grau San Martín (president of the country in 1944-48) and Carlos Prío Socarrás (president from 1948 to 1952) pledged to increase the literacy rate, civil liberties and freedom from censorship. However, the extent to which their electoral promises worked in actuality was very minimal, and for the large part only made things worse. Between 1944 and 1952 the government spent one-quarter of the national budget on education, yet the illiteracy rate remained at over twenty three percent (Ameringer 35). Freedom from censorship was eclipsed by widespread corruption, gang-related violence and open hostility towards those intellectuals who sympathized with

communist ideas. As remarked by José “Pepe” Rodríguez Feo – the sponsor of *Orígenes* and later the owner and editor of *Ciclón* literary journal – the mid 1940s were marked by: “the crisis of our [Cuban] civic institutions, the political and administrative corruption, the public indifference to culture, and the scarce official support of the government” (qtd. in Ameringer 58). His words are further illustrated by the fact that *Orígenes*, despite its international acknowledgment, never made profit on the local level, for only few issues were actually sold in the country’s bookstores (Martínez 501).

These sociopolitical circumstances, in addition to personal economic need, fostered Piñera’s skepticism about making his living as a writer in Cuba. The feeling of being incompatible with the *Orígenes* group was another reason for looking for an opportunity of moving abroad. Needless to say, Piñera’s choice of leaving the country was not unusual for the time period. What was different about his case, however, was that he did not show any interest in going to the preferable destination of Cubans, the United States (while his older brother would seek exile there). Instead, he turned to one of his former university professors for help in applying for a year-long research grant from the National Committee of Culture in Argentina. He received the grant in 1946. He would end up extending his stay in Argentina up to almost twelve years by finding a job at the Cuban Consulate in Buenos Aires.

Piñera arrived to Buenos Aires on the day Juan Domingo Perón was first elected as the president of Argentina: February 24, 1946. This arrival marked the beginning of a very different phase in life when compared to that of Witold Gombrowicz. Unlike the Polish author who was raised in a relatively wealthy family

and fell to the edge of poverty after having left his country, Piñera for the first time in his life experienced financial stability. The city of Buenos Aires, with its booming post War economy and – in comparison to Havana – well running machine of cultural production, left a great impression on him. His letters to his family from 1946-1947 describe the excitement of being able to eat well and cheap, while his correspondences with Lezama and other Cuban friends boast of the way the literary world is organized in Buenos Aires, with writers being respected for their occupation and getting paid for their publications. It was not until after Piñera had become close friends with Gombrowicz that he started making more fault-finding sarcastic observations regarding the Argentine capital and its cultural landscape.

Unlike the Polish writer, Piñera did not have the disadvantage of having to learn a new language. Moreover, upon his arrival, he already had an important pre-established contact in Buenos Aires. Back in 1942 he started exchanging letters with the Argentine editor Adolfo de Obieta. In 1944 Obieta got one of Piñera's poems published in *Papeles de Buenos Aires*. It was also through Obieta that the Cuban writer got to meet Macedonio Fernández, Jorge Luis Borges, Eduardo Mallea and, of course, Witold Gombrowicz. Finally, the most significant difference between the two writers' situations was that whereas Gombrowicz had no foreseeable option of ever returning to his home country, Piñera could and did make multiple trips back to Cuba. In his autobiographical account the author points out that his stay in Argentina could be divided into three different periods: 1946-1947, 1950-1954 and 1955-1958 (VT 31) but there were also a number of shorter visits to Cuba outside of these periods). His

final return to Cuba took place in September of 1958, a few months before the historic events of the January Revolution (Anderson, *Everything* 45-46).

### **The Failure of *Ferdydurke* and Experiencing the Cultural Margins of Argentina**

According to Virgilio Piñera, Witold Gombrowicz's opening line on meeting him at the Café Rex back in the austral summer of 1946 was: "Así que viene usted de la lejana Cuba... Todo muy tropical allá, ¿no es cierto? ¡Caramba, cuantas palmeras!" ("So you come from far-away Cuba... Everything is tropical there, right? ¡Good heavens, the palm trees!"; Rita Gombrowicz, *en Argentina* 84). As described by Piñera in his distinctive sarcasm, their initial dialogue resembled an encounter of two dogs, who, after some time of walking in circles and smelling each other's rears, recognized each other as zealous defenders of the same cause, and for this reason quickly sealed an eternal friendship.

Piñera and Gombrowicz had similar aesthetic preferences, especially when it came to fondness of sarcasm, impropriety and tartness of language. The target and intensity of their mockery differ in individual texts. Their critical essays, interviews and autobiographical accounts often include remarks that sound banal and "immature"; a comment on the palm trees in Cuba, for example, is not something one would expect to hear from a forty-one-year old *homme de lettres*. Such games, however, were a part of Gombrowicz and Piñera's self-created images as anti-aesthetes and anti-intellectuals, who situated themselves apart from the dominant pro-aesthetic literary circles in their home countries and in Argentina. This was not just

about contradicting others for the sake of doing so, or in other words, not just about “[being] more inclined to rock the boat than to encourage harmony” (Anderson, *Everything* 31). Behind the sarcasm, what the writers were denouncing was the pretension to cultural maturity they perceived in the literary worlds of the three countries they had lived. They proclaimed themselves to be the defenders of “immaturity” or “secondarity”, that is, of the historical inferiority of their nations. Readers who are familiar with Gombrowicz’s work know that “immaturity” is one of his key philosophical concepts. His ideas regarding the “immaturity” of Polish and Argentine cultures as the internal others of the West, and even more so, his anti-Hegelian twist on how to use this otherness as a creative potential, take up a significant part of his *Diary*. Piñera agreed, if not in every detail, with the core of Gombrowicz’s philosophy. His above quoted allegory of two dogs, used to describe his relationship with the Polish writer, ends in the words that the common cause the two fiercely defended was no other than the same *inmadurez cultural*.

While the shared ideas developed over the years of friendship, back in 1946 there was a more practical reason for working together. Both Gombrowicz and Piñera found themselves in a similar situation of having to make their names in an Argentine literary community that was not easily entered, especially by unknown foreign writers. The *Ferdydurke* venture seemed like a good opportunity for establishing new contacts. The colorful process of translation and publication has been explored in detail by Suchanow (2002) and Gasparini (2007). Both scholars emphasize the point that has been overlooked in the past: that there was a meticulous effort by Gombrowicz and Piñera to promote the book in Buenos Aires. From April to October of 1947, the

Polish writer kept a *Ferdydurke Calendar* in which, among other things, he recorded comments on the novel by his Latin American acquaintances, to the extent of including the percentage estimation of their “liking”, “disliking” of it or hesitation (Suchanow, “*Ferdydurke A.D.*” 3). Whenever possible he read and modified the reviews of the book before they were submitted for publication. Suchanow estimates that approximately fifteen critiques appeared within the year following the publication, and most of them were positive (Ibid 4). Virgilio Piñera was also fully involved with the process of promotion. He fervently talked about the novel in the letters to his sister Luisa, Lezama Lima other people back in Cuba. He published his own appraisal in the Argentine periodical *Realidad*, got Adolfo de Obieta’s critique to appear in *Orígenes*, and helped Gombrowicz to organize a promotional radio talk in Buenos Aires in June of 1947.

However, despite the collective effort, *Ferdydurke* did not bring about the desired breakthrough into the Argentine literary world. Suchanow suggests that part of the explanation for the limited sales can be attributed to the general decrease in the Argentine book market in the mid 1940s, but also that a more imperative reason was the reluctance of the readership towards publications by foreign writers from the countries “of little interest.” As Manuel Gálvez, one of the few acknowledged Argentine writers who met Gombrowicz’s novel with great enthusiasm, noted in his letter to the latter: “If you were a Yankee, *Ferdydurke* would sell out fast and it would be reprinted. But you are unlucky enough . . . not to be a Yankee” (qtd. in Suchanow, “*Ferdydurke A.D.*” 10). Gombrowicz found no institutional support in Argentina. Even though immigrant communities from Poland and other Eastern European



countries in Buenos Aires were considerably large – some, like the Polish one, had their own periodicals and cultural centers – no university or college there at the time had a department of Slavic languages and literatures, and if any interest was shown by individual editors (such as Borges), it was generally limited to Russian literature.

In relation to the general lack of interest, another major setback was the silence of Borges and of Victoria Ocampo's *Sur*.<sup>18</sup> The journal did not publish an excerpt of *Ferdydurke* submitted to them by Gombrowicz and Piñera. It is not entirely clear whether the reason behind this was the “bad quality” of the translation, as the secretary of the editorial board Raimundo Lina had claimed, or the fact that in the package with the excerpt of the novel Gombrowicz had included an additional text titled “Contra los poetas” (“Against Poets”; discussed in Chapter One) which openly attacked the cultural and aesthetic principles of *Sur*. The latter explanation finds support in an interview given by the sister of the journal's owner, Silvina Ocampo, years later. Her remarks regarding *Sur*'s disregard for *Ferdydurke* back in 1947 imply that the upper-class Argentines were uncomfortable with Gombrowicz's attitude towards their circles: “El libro no nos gustó. Lo descubrimos más tarde . . . [Gombrowicz] no nos entendió y no lo entendimos.” (“We did not like the book. We discovered it later . . . [Gombrowicz] did not understand us and we did not understand him”; Rita Gombrowicz, *en Argentina* 63). Whichever the reasons, Gombrowicz's work was ignored by the *Sur* group all the way until the late 1960s, after it had started gaining more and more recognition in Western Europe.

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<sup>18</sup> Borges actually did publish a positive review of the novel written by the member of the “*Ferdydurke* translation committee” Carlos Colderoni in the *Anales de Buenos Aires* (issue no. 15-16, May-June 1947, pp. 70-72). However, Borges himself never expressed any interest in *Ferdydurke* or in any other of Gombrowicz's writings.

Meanwhile, the writer himself continued to relentlessly criticize Ocampo's group in his *Diary*. Piñera supported his friend's side, not only because of the shared philosophical stance and for his passion for *Ferdydurke*, but also due to the fact that his own first novel published in Argentina, *La carne de René*, was completely unnoticed by *Sur*. However, his relationship with the group would change in the second half of the 1950s after he had become an official correspondent for the Cuban literary journal *Ciclón* (owned and edited by Rodríguez Feo; in circulation from 1955 to 1957). In order to avoid trouble with his Argentine collaborators, he decided on not publishing the excerpts of Gombrowicz's *Diary* that contained some internal gossip about Victoria Ocampo. Not surprisingly, this caused a temporary rift in their friendship (described in more detail in the Postscript).

In their autobiographical accounts both Gombrowicz and Piñera take pride in their reputation as tireless polemicists and "bad-mannered" intellectuals. Back in their home countries, they chose to situate themselves on the margins of the cultural arena. They were able to resist subscribing to the dominating literary movements and still be published. The reason behind this was that each played the role of an outsider without truly being one: after all, Gombrowicz was a regular at *Ziemiańska* and other gathering places of Warsaw's intelligentsia, known and accepted there despite his eccentricities, and Piñera did belong to the generation of *origenistas*, even if consciously keeping a distance. In Argentina, the situation was different, confirmed by the inopportune reception of *Ferdydurke*. The local literary community was not easily entered by unknown foreign authors. The two started off as outsiders and would remain so for years to come.

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The following four Chapters examine Gombrowicz and Piñera's works from the Argentine time period in relation to their literary and historical contexts.

Scholarship that has informed the course of my study can be divided into two main strands: the historical-biographical sources and the theoretical literature on modernity (as well as modernity-resistance) and nation-building. For an in-depth understanding of Gombrowicz and Piñera's lives and works in relation to the political and cultural history of Poland, Cuba and Argentina, I rely on my own archival research as well as on the studies by Jaroslaw Anders, Thomas Anderson, Antón Arrufat, Nancy Calomarde, Pablo Gasparini, Michael Goddard, Rita Gombrowicz, Michael Monteón, Luis Alberto Romero, Marci Shore, Timothy Snyder, Klementyna Suchanow, Ewa Ziarek and others. When looking at Gombrowicz and Piñera's hypothesis on the literary developments in their nations, I model my analyses after the scholarship of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gelner, Gregory Jusdanis, Lucille Kerr, Alain Rouquie and others whose works offer innovative arguments about the building of national culture, especially in the historically peripheral regions. Finally, I consider it crucial to address Gombrowicz and Piñera's texts not from the monological perspective of Polish, Cuban or Argentine literary studies, but rather by juxtaposing the works of contemporary Eastern European and Latin American scholars. I thus employ the theoretical writings of Argentine critics such as Ricardo Piglia and Beatriz Sarlo next to those of Polish scholars Eugeniusz Górski and Piotr Sztompka, Cuban Severo Sarduy, and also Brazilian Silviano Santiago, Uruguayan Ángel Rama and Lithuanian Leonidas

Donskis. In this attempt, I hope to create a more polyphonic approach to literature – particularly émigré literature – from these regions.

Chapter One, “The *Ferdydurkian* battle of 1947,” discusses the early attempts by Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera to gain entrance to the literary world of their temporary homeland, Argentina. It examines six short texts written in Spanish by the two authors individually and in collaboration, which wage a literary battle against the prominent intellectual circles in Buenos Aires; mainly, though not only, Victoria Ocampo’s *Sur*. I am particularly interested in looking at how by choosing Argentina as the common battle ground, Gombrowicz and Piñera reevaluated and redefined their relationships as émigré authors to the cultural climates back in their home countries, Poland and Cuba. The two key concepts explored in my discussion are: *naciones menores* (“minor nations”) and cultural *banalization*. Both have to do with Gombrowicz and Piñera’s search for an alternative solution to the cultural inferiority complex in their historically marginalized nations.

In Chapters Two and Three, I discuss Gombrowicz’s novel *Trans-Atlantyk* and Piñera’s novel *La carne de René*; both written and the latter also first published, in Argentina. I approach these books as fictional embodiments of the shared system of ideas established during the earlier *Ferdydurkian* battle. Exceptionally parodic, deliberately subversive and highly controversial texts, today regarded by many critics as self-reflexive masterpieces of the two authors, these novels were largely ignored in Spanish and English speaking worlds during the lifetimes of both Gombrowicz and Piñera. Chapter Two focuses on the aesthetic substance and intricacies of the two novels, situating them in the context of Spanish American Neo-Baroque literature. In

the case of *Trans-Atlantyk*, I propose that the novel exalts certain characteristics of the twentieth century Spanish American fiction which, to my knowledge, are yet to be explored in Gombrowicz scholarship. Chapter Three addresses how the narratives in *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* highlight the limits of nation building projects in Poland, Cuba and, particularly, the Peronist Argentina. The term *banalization* takes on a whole different level of meaning here, as the two novels are clearly subversive of the forced construction of national identities through literature.

In the fourth and final chapter, “A Revolution Against The Revolution(s) in *Los Siervos* and *Operetta*,” I turn to two dramaturgical works of Gombrowicz and Piñera. Though both writers are probably internationally best known for their theater plays, *Operetta* (by Gombrowicz) and especially *Los Siervos* (by Piñera) have just begun to garner critical recognition. The latter piece was censored in Cuba until the year 2000, and it is until this day one of Piñera’s most ignored publications. In my discussion, I argue that the two plays are an excellent approach to a cultural history that challenges official narratives, as both target the hierarchical use and abuse of power, political absolutism and insistence on maintaining false utopias. I also discuss how these texts illustrate the ideological differences between the two authors, which were becoming increasingly pronounced in the context of political turbulences of the mid 1950s in Argentina and in the pre-Revolutionary Cuba. The Chapter is followed by a Postscript: a brief biographical description on the two writers’ last years in Argentina, and on the course their friendship took after Piñera’s ultimate return to Cuba in 1958, and Gombrowicz’s move to Western Europe in 1963.

With all of the above considerations in mind, I hope to join the field of scholarship that recovers and contextualizes the voices that come from the margins of the Western literary history. More importantly, I expect my discussion to go beyond the traditional “center” versus “periphery” dualism, by demonstrating how a particular mode of cultural criticism can emerge in one historically marginalized region from the process of collaboration by the outside observers from other historically peripheral areas.

## Chapter 1. The *Ferdydurkian* Battle of 1947

Vamos, Piñera, llegó el momento...  
Empieza la batalla del ferdydurkismo  
en Sudamérica.  
Gombrowicz, qtd. in Piñera, “Por él mismo”

[Let's go Piñera, the moment has come...  
The battle of ferdydurkism in South America has begun.]

Among Witold Gombrowicz's readers, 1947 is generally known as the year the writer completed and published the first Spanish edition of *Ferdydurke*. The work is surrounded by controversy in Latin American literature. This involves the colorful story of its translation, promotion and even the fruitless reception in Argentina, issues that have drawn more attention – both from the author himself during his lifetime (in his *Diary*, interviews and correspondence) and from the later literary critics – than the other literary activities he undertook in this time period. What is often mentioned only in passing or completely left aside is Gombrowicz's literary and intellectual collaboration with Virgilio Piñera that took place during the year 1947, outside the translation sessions of *Ferdydurke*. Six short texts were born out of this collaboration: two critical essays by Piñera, one public lecture by Gombrowicz, a radio interview between the two writers, and last but not least, two manifesto-style pamphlets, written under a shared pseudonym and meant to launch a symbolic literary battle against the Argentine *Sur* group.

The facts that all of these texts were presented in Spanish – including Gombrowicz's lecture – and to the Spanish speaking audiences, and that no other joint literary projects were carried out by Gombrowicz and Piñera in their later careers,

underline the importance of this year. Yet there are also several additional reasons why it is important to set 1947 apart from the broader time period of the late 1940s-early 1950s. As noted in the Introduction Chapter, in Gombrowicz's scholarship, Piñera's name virtually never gets mentioned in any other context than the one related to the translation of *Ferdydurke*. More has been published on Gombrowicz's relationship with Jorge Luis Borges, though the two barely knew each other (they met once or twice in early 1940s through a mutual friend, poet Carlos Mastronardi, but a serious dialogue never took place: according to Gombrowicz, this was due to Borges' intolerance of his insufficient Spanish skills, though it is well known that both were fluent in French). In fact, it was Piñera who was a closer friend of the Argentine writer and reported the news about Borges' circle to his Polish friend. This asymmetry finds its explanation in the fact that Borges' work has been well known among Eastern European readers and scholars, while the majority of Piñera's works are yet to be translated into Polish and other Balto-Slavic languages. Moreover, Borges as a literary adversary is one of the themes that Gombrowicz himself keeps returning to in his *Diary*, always describing the Argentine writer with a sense of rivalry and admiration. Meanwhile, Gombrowicz's autobiographical references to Piñera strike a different tone: they tend to sound didactic and even paternalist. Gombrowicz describes his Cuban friend as a writer of a great talent and of a passionate, rebellious, and polemic personality, but at the same time he makes no reservations in pointing out to the latter's mistakes and gives him advice, thus assuming the position of a more experienced figure. His corrective gesture can be deduced from the following comments: "Even the best minds here [referring to Piñera] fall victim to attacks of



American naïveté . . . Virgilio, I said, don't be a child" (D1 70); or, "Piñera [is] often too conscious of defeat to be able to fight" (D2 131).

Gombrowicz was eight years older and upon Piñera's arrival to Buenos Aires had already lived seven years there. However, it should not be overlooked that he was the one who sought for assistance from his Cuban friend, not only in linguistic but also in organizational and financial matters (as evidenced by the correspondences between the two and the testimonies of Rodríguez Tomeu and Alejandro Rússovich). He was an exile from a country devastated by the war, an unknown foreign writer without sufficient language skills and without a regular income. Thus, the question that remains open is whether the words Gombrowicz uses to describe Piñera – calling him, more than once, a "sickened and desperate . . . tragic soul" (DA 56-57) – are the words he did not wish to say about himself. Taking into account that Gombrowicz had always put a great effort in auto-characterizing himself as a loner and individualist, it is likely that he used the exaggeratedly didactic tone towards Piñera in his published texts in order to downgrade the influence their friendship might have had on his own intellectual development.

A different, more personal tone is used in Gombrowicz's letters to Piñera. The most moving illustration of the Polish writer's appreciation of his Cuban friend comes from the former's inscription of a copy of *Ferdydurke* dedicated to the latter on the 25<sup>th</sup> or 26<sup>th</sup> of April, 1947, after having picked up the first few printed copies of *Ferdydurke* from the publishing house Argos. Written in a characteristically gombrowiczian style where sincere gratitude is covered up with humor and literary bravado, the inscription states:

Virgilio, en este momento solemne declaro: tú me has descubierto en la Argentina. Tú me has tratado sin mezquindad ni recelos, con amistad fraterna. A tu inteligencia e intransigencia se debe este nacimiento de *Ferdydurke*. Te otorgo, pues, la dignidad de Jefe del Ferdydurkismo Sudamericano y ordeno que todos los ferdydurkistas te veneren como a mí mismo. ¡Sonó la hora! ¡Al combate! – Witoldo. (VT 33)

[Virgilio, at this solemn moment I declare: you have discovered me in Argentina. You have been treating me without meanness or mistrust, with fraternal friendship. This birth of [the Spanish edition of] *Ferdydurke* is due to your intelligence and perseverance. I award you, thus, the rank of the Chief of South American Ferdydurkism, and I command that all ferdydurkistas venerate you as they venerate me. The time has come! To combat! – Witold]

A closer look at the textual sources from the year 1947 shows that the period of the most intense intellectual and literary collaboration between Gombrowicz and Piñera did not end after the translation of *Ferdydurke* was finished, and also, that it is an overstatement to assume that Gombrowicz was the leading figure behind the shared projects, and that Piñera somehow learned more from Gombrowicz than Gombrowicz from Piñera. The chronology of the publication dates of the two authors' texts from 1947 and a comparison of the ideas presented in these texts to the more profoundly developed theories regarding literature and the role of a writer as a voice of his nation – for which the two writers became separately known within and beyond the borders of their home countries during the 1950s-1960s – reveal that the personal and professional impact was mutual.

The collaboration between the two writers resulted in what I believe to be a shared well of ideas from which later in their careers each selected, modified and made use of different things. Together, the six texts expose a simultaneously outward- and inward- looking obsession with the negotiation of the realities of the surrounding

world through literature (the term *la realidad* is repeated in these texts nearly ten times). It is outward-looking because during this year Gombrowicz and Piñera were largely focusing their attention on the *porteño* (referring to the city of Buenos Aires) literary and artistic community to which neither of the two belonged. At the same time, it is inward-looking because the two authors' preoccupation with the faithfulness of literature to the concrete human experience were shaped by their experiences as émigré writers, and by their concerns with the role their works would eventually play in relation to literature that was being produced during the same time period back in their home countries.

### **Textual Sources**

The following section introduces the six texts composed by the two writers in 1947. Three of these are essays on cultural criticism: “Nota sobre literatura argentina de hoy” (“A Note on the Argentine Literature Today”) and “El País del Arte” (“The Country of Art”) by Virgilio Piñera, and “Contra los poetas” (“Against the Poets”) by Witold Gombrowicz. The other three texts, produced by Gombrowicz and Piñera in collaboration, include a radio interview between the two authors and two manifesto-style pamphlets *Aurora: Revista de la Resistencia* (*Aurora: Review of Resistance*) and *Victrola: Revista de la Insistencia* (*Victrola: Review of Insistence*). Out of the six texts, “Contra los poetas” is the only one that has been translated into English.

Piñera's “Nota” was published in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, a monthly literary review which belonged to the National Library in Buenos Aires and was

directed by Borges (its publication ran from 1946 to 1948), in February of 1947.<sup>19</sup> As it will be addressed in more detail later, with its highly varied contents and non-elitist selection policies that stimulated new talents, Borges' magazine was in many ways a contrast to Victoria Ocampo's *Sur*. The very decision to publish Piñera's article in *Los Anales* demonstrates the unorthodox character of Borges as an editor, for the Cuban writer in his openly judgmental assessment of the Argentine literature uses the latter as one of his main targets of criticism, attacking him for bookishness, linguistic complexity and ornamentation. He also proposes that Borges' case can serve as an accurate illustration of the major weakness of not only Argentine, but also, on a broader scale, Latin American letters.

At about the same time when Piñera's "Nota" was submitted for publication, Gombrowicz completed the first draft of his controversial lecture "Contra los poetas." We know about this version from a letter the Polish writer sent to Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 1947, in which he notes that he mailed an excerpt of *Ferdydurke* to the *Sur* magazine, and also mentions another article prepared to be sent to *Sur*, titled at that time, "Nota contra los poetas" ("A Note Against the Poets").<sup>20</sup> The essay was meant to serve as an intellectual and cultural provocation. However, it was outright rejected by the *Sur* editorial. Moreover, to concur with

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<sup>19</sup> It remains unclear how Borges got hold of the text. Piñera's autobiographical account claims that Borges offered to publish the essay after hearing the Cuban writer reading it on the Radio del Estado radio station in Buenos Aires. However, it is also possible that Piñera sent "Nota" to the Argentine writer at his own decision, at the same time as he was submitting it to Lezama's *Orígenes*. The essay was published in the Cuban and Argentine journals simultaneously.

<sup>20</sup> At this time Gombrowicz was away from Buenos Aires, staying at his friends' in Salsipuedes, in the province of Córdoba. Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu had just come back to the capital city after a short vacation trip to Bariloche.

Gasparini, its polemics might have closed all possibilities for the dissemination of any of Gombrowicz's writings in Victoria Ocampo's circle.

The text was presented to the Argentine public months after it was written, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, with its title shortened. It was read by Gombrowicz himself, in his broken Spanish, in front of an audience of about forty persons at a small bookstore called Fray Mocho.<sup>21</sup> Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu selected excerpts of poems in Spanish to illustrate Gombrowicz's argument (Suchanow, "Ferdydurke A.D." 7). Suchanow suggests that the presentation of this article in a form of a public lecture was Gombrowicz's way to avenge against *Sur*, especially against their silence regarding *Ferdydurke*. I doubt this was really the case. Back in the 1940s, in order to be heard, one had to organize a conference at one of the better known public sites such as El Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores (School of Advanced Studies), where Borges had been delivering his lectures or El Centro de Amigos del Arte (Friends of the Arts Center), a meeting place preferred by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. Meanwhile, "Contra los poetas" was heard by a few and soon forgotten. Its only publication in the Spanish speaking world during Gombrowicz's lifetime appeared in the Cuban *Ciclón* in 1955, not surprisingly due to the efforts of this magazine's most influential collaborator, Virgilio Piñera. The version of this lecture that the non-Spanish speaking readers are familiar with today is the one included at the end of the first volume of Gombrowicz's *Diary*. However, this text is noticeably

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<sup>21</sup>There were three lectures given at Fray Mocho by Gombrowicz: on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of August, and on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September. Suchanow points out that they had an important financial objective, since the audience made monetary contributions to the speaker. After the last lecture, which was attended by 15 persons, Gombrowicz decided he would not continue with this venture.

different from the 1947 original, as it is based on a modified and extended draft sent by Gombrowicz to the Polish émigré journal *Kultura* in 1951.<sup>22</sup>

Gombrowicz's attack against those contemporary poets who have become enslaved by the "pure poetry" and who, due to their preference of style over content, are no longer capable of a true self-expression bears an obvious resemblance to Piñera's criticism in "Nota" regarding Latin American writers' entanglement in the questions of form and ornamentation. The contemporaneity of Gombrowicz and Piñera's essays is largely ignored in Gombrowicz scholarship, which is one of the reasons why "Contra los poetas" has often been interpreted as an isolated monologue of a lonely émigré, instead of it being approached as a more integrated criticism born out of a direct dialogue between him and Piñera. More points of convergence between the two writers' aesthetic and social concerns appear in the third critical essay from 1947, which was written by Piñera some time shortly after Gombrowicz's lecture at the Fray Mocho, and published in the Cuban *Orígenes* in the Winter issue of 1947 under the title "El País del Arte." In this text, Piñera turns his attention to cultural elitism, false standards of evaluation and the erroneous, symbolic capitalization of the words Art, Beauty, Sacrifice, Rigor and Seriousness. Piñera draws a direct connection between his sarcastic attack on art and artists, and Gombrowicz's ridicule of poetry and poets by quoting the Polish writer in his essay.

While separately "Nota", "Contra los poetas" and "El País del Arte" each focus on a specific form of cultural expression (and it may even appear puzzling as to why a

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<sup>22</sup> Several new editions of the Spanish original have been published since Gombrowicz's centenary in 2004. The discussion in this Chapter is based on the original typescript in Spanish preserved by Nicolás Espino, and now available at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript library at Yale.

playwright and poet Piñera would choose the world of painters as his object of criticism, while a dramatist and novelist Gombrowicz would center his attention on poetry), when placed next to each other, the three texts appear to be concerned with the same complex socio-aesthetic issue of how the certain preconceived artistic and stylistic forms, along with the prevalent mystification of Literature, Poetry and Art, can be mistakenly taken as the signs of maturity, seriousness and erudition.

In addition to the three essays presented above, which, although infused with each other's voices, were published by Piñera and Gombrowicz separately under their individual names, my discussion includes two other projects that the writers produced in 1947 in tandem. The first one is a staged interview between themselves that two read on the El Mundo radio station in Buenos Aires on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June. The text of the conversation was preserved by Piñera and appeared as a part of a biographical account "Gombrowicz por él mismo" ("Gombrowicz in his own words") in 1968. Up until this day, virtually no attention has been paid to this interview, as it has been regarded as a self-serving advertisement meant to promote the publication of *Ferdydurke*. I would like to reconsider the significance of this text in the broader context of Gombrowicz and Piñera's literary conceptions, for in this dialogue of less than two pages, the two writers introduce some of their key arguments about the literary worlds in Argentina, Poland and Cuba, which they then elaborated later in their careers. It is also in the course of this interview that Piñera proclaimed that his and Gombrowicz's literary works strove for the same end goal.

The second project carried out by the two authors in direct collaboration revolves around the literary pamphlets *Aurora* and *Victrola*. One hundred copies of

each were printed and distributed to the Argentine literary community by Gombrowicz and Piñera in late September or early October. These texts repeat most of the ideas presented in the authors' critical essays from that year; however, their style and form stand out, as a "hyper-literary game" to use an epithet suggested by the Argentine scholar Nancy Calomarde (*El diálogo* 198). *Aurora* (whose title resembles the emblematic titles of resistance publications in the occupied Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the late nineteenth-early twentieth century) is written from the standpoint of a pseudo-Resistance Committee against the cultural dominance of the *Sur* group in Argentina; while *Victrola* (a word play with Victoria Ocampo's given name) engages in a satirical defense of Victoria Ocampo and her circle. The two pamphlets are modeled on the Dadaist and Futurist manifestos from the early twentieth century. The authors' choice to recycle this type of writing, which by the late 1940s had already been forgotten in much of Western Europe, is a curious one and will be elaborated later in my discussion.

Since neither of the pamphlets is signed, it is commonly assumed that that *Aurora* was composed by Gombrowicz while *Victrola* by Piñera (only *Aurora* is included in the posthumous collection of Gombrowicz's work, *Varia*). This assumption has been drawn from the much later testimonies of Rodríguez Tomeu and Alejandro Russovich. In 2010 Calomarde expressed her concern about such separation of the authorships. Her research points out the obvious similarities between the format, typography and design of the two pamphlets (*El diálogo* 196-199). Based on the characteristic elements of style that can be observed in other individual works by Gombrowicz and Piñera, I support Calomarde's observations.



I have already argued elsewhere that the discussion about the authorship should be based on separate passages within each pamphlet, and not on the two pamphlets as individual texts.<sup>23</sup> For example, several passages of *Victrola* seem to be more in accordance with Gombrowicz's style of argumentation, as illustrated by its critique of poetry and the use of France and England as paradigms of the Western culture. Meanwhile, the eight pseudo-advertisements in *Aurora* on selling, buying and trading dogs, which disrupt the flow of discussion and distract the reader's attention, resemble Piñera's style of "absurdismo cubano" (Cuban absurdism) common in his later theater plays. In addition, certain passages which are overloaded with words in capital letters, exclamation and question marks resemble an emotional outcry in the introductory paragraphs of his subsequent "El País del Arte." Last but not least, in a letter to Lezama Lima dated November 17, 1947, Piñera mentions "dos revistas: ataques a *Sur* y su grupo, a los poetas, a los *connoisseurs*, a los muy cultos" ("two little magazines: attacks of *Sur* and its group, of poets, of *connoisseurs*, of the highly educated"). He uses the plural "we" to add: "[e]stamos dando la batalla" ("we are fighting the battle"; VV86). All of the above points to the close collaboration between him and Gombrowicz in writing *Aurora* and *Victrola* and supports the argument that both pamphlets should be included in both writers' bibliographies.

*Aurora* and *Victrola* provide the same house number: "Junín 1381, 1<sup>st</sup> B" as the editorial address. This was the actual residence of Carlos Coldaroli: another Cuban émigré in Argentina, a member of *Ferdydurke* translation committee and the person who got a promising review of the novel published in *Los Anales*. In an interview

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<sup>23</sup> Zilinskaite, "Jefes del *Ferdydurkismo* Sudamericano."

years later Coldaroli insisted that his home address was used without his knowledge and that the authors of the pamphlets expected his mailbox to be flocked with angry correspondences. The anticipated literary scandal, however, did not occur. Borges' reaction to the pamphlets might have included one of his characteristic *carambas*, and Victoria Ocampo most likely never read them (Pérez 48). This case demonstrates that the common assertion that through their publications Gombrowicz and Piñera condemned themselves to be seen by their Argentine contemporaries as arrogant, snobbish and self-serving works only to a certain extent. Anderson, among others, has proposed that: “had [Gombrowicz and Piñera] toned down their criticism and shown more respect for their fellow artists, they might have in turn garnered the esteem and admiration of their colleagues” (*Everything* 60). Yet literary wars were not unusual phenomena in the history of Argentine letters (take for example, the heated disputes between the two competing factions of the 1920s-1930s literary scenes: the Florida and Boedo groups). Gombrowicz and Piñera's case is better explained through the general lack of interest in their – internationally unknown émigrés' – work by the Argentine readership. Their polemics did not find resonance for the same reasons that *Ferdynurke* was unable to break into the local literary scene.

Despite the failure to garner public attention, the six short texts from the 1947 mark the threshold of the two writers' careers. The collaborative experience prepared the ground for tackling a fundamentally socio-political issue of cultural inferiority. By deliberately including in their texts the criticism of different types of creative expression (that is, not only prose writing, but also poetry and art), Gombrowicz and Piñera approach the term “inferiority” as an inherited historical problem that

penetrates every facet of cultural production in Argentina, Poland and Cuba. The systematic practice of provocation unifies their texts, permitting them to be read as a premeditated invitation to a literary battle against the cultural inferiority complex.

**Argentina as the Common Battleground: “nosotros, las *naciones menores*”**

Y permitidme deciros que desde la perspectiva de la Europa central y oriental  
la realidad argentina se ve de distinta manera.

Gombrowicz, *Diario argentino*

[And allow me to tell you that from an East-Central European perspective,  
the Argentine reality appears in a different manner.]

. . . aquí nos encontramos – Polonia, la Argentina y Cuba –  
unidos por la misma necesidad de espíritu.

Piñera, “Por él mismo”

[. . . here we meet – Poland,  
Argentina and Cuba – united by the same necessity of spirit.]

In 1951 Jorge Luis Borges delivered his famous lecture at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores titled “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (“The Argentine writer and the tradition”).<sup>24</sup> In the opening lines of the speech, Borges expressed his authorial concerns about the relationship between a writer and the nation, by making a skeptical remark regarding the validity of the very question of how an Argentine writer should write in order to be considered an Argentine writer. He then discussed and rejected three common arguments about the Argentine literary tradition. The first one of them, searching for its roots in the nineteenth century poetry of gauchos – with the 1872 epic poem *Martín Fierro* by José Hernández as the epitomical text of the era – Borges

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<sup>24</sup> The transcript of the lecture was first published in the literary review of the same institution in 1953; then in *Sur* in 1955. It was also included in the second edition of Borges’ collection *Discusión* (1957), and since then, appeared in all later editions of his *Obras completas* (*Complete Works*). There is a common misunderstanding that the text was written in 1932. For more on this topic, see Balderstone’s “Detalles circunstanciales: sobre dos borradores de ‘El escritor argentino y la tradición’.”

discredited as nationalist and exclusivist, pointing out that Argentine nationalism was just another expression of the cult of nationalism imported from Europe (Gombrowicz would later say exactly the same in his *Diary*: “the [Argentine] desire for originality is also an imitation of Europe” D2 196). The other one – approaching Argentine literature as the continuation of Spanish literary tradition – Borges discarded as historically inaccurate, pointing out that since the wars of independence Argentina had attempted to define itself as distinct from Spain, directing its gaze instead towards French and English cultures. Finally, he demonstrated the flaws of the third argument, that Argentine writers should break with the past and part themselves from the European tradition, acknowledging that they were on their own, and that they could no longer “jugar a ser europeos” (“play Europeans”; 272).

According to Borges, the authenticity of a written work cannot be defined by its capacity to meet the demands of a nationalist vocabulary, whether it be related to imitating an already existing European tradition or, on the obverse side of the same coin, isolating oneself from it. He therefore proposed that the universal existential concerns found in European philosophy and literatures were just as Argentine as the topics on gauchos and tango. Argentines, same as other South American nations, have the right to the inheritance of the Western European culture, which – this is Borges’ key point – they can approach from an advantageous perspective of an outside observer: “podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas” (“we can handle all European themes, using them without superstitions, with a irreverence that could, and already has produced promising results”; 273).

Borges' discussion serves as a useful platform for addressing Gombrowicz and Piñera's texts from 1947 which all point out to the same two impulses that were and would continue being at the center of debate among the Argentine cultural elite: nationalist discourse and the (Western) European cultural legacy. However, differently from Borges, Gombrowicz and Piñera's main focus is on the latter. This difference finds its explanation in external circumstances. Borges' lecture was written at the apogee of Peronism, when important modifications to cultural and educational institutions were being imposed by the government. The year 1951 was the peak moment of the state's penetration of society: schools, public press and public debates were infiltrated by Perón's supporters (Balderstone, "Detalles" par. 15). Borges had always been a firm anti-Peronist who suffered the disfavor of the government since the day one, and so the text of his lecture is indelibly marked with the anti-Peronist undertones. For Gombrowicz and Piñera, the effects of Peronist nationalism would also become more of an issue in the 1950s. Meanwhile, the texts from 1947 are more concerned with the relationship of Argentine (as well as Polish and Cuban) literature with the Western European cultures.

Similarly to Borges, neither Gombrowicz nor Piñera – both well versed in history of European philosophy and literature – pretended to rid their work of the Western European influences. In "Nota," for example, Piñera uses a classical Western myth to talk about Latin American art's dependence on the West. Nonetheless, a significant difference between his discourse, shared with Gombrowicz, and that of Borges is that the former two's idea of writing "without superstitions" or with "irreverence" was far more radical. Their six short texts call for a skeptical attitude

towards the Western European literary trends and value systems; the attitude they claimed Borges lacked. Their voices are more aggressive and impatient, eager to crack open the imported cultural convections and expose their subjectivity.

To understand Gombrowicz and Piñera's intransigence on this issue, it is important to consider their intellectual context in the late 1940s. The two came into contact with the Buenos Aires' literary community during the heyday of Victoria Ocampo's *Sur*. Published regularly between 1931 and 1970, it was the most vocal Argentine literary and cultural journal for several generations (though competing literary reviews were many, they were mostly short-lived). The founding of the journal was largely inspired by two foreign intellectuals who, unlike Gombrowicz and Piñera, were hosted in Buenos Aires by Ocampo, José Ortega y Gasset and Waldo Frank. The most significant reference points from the history of Argentina, at least in the early stages of the journal's formation, were the life and work of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), and the tradition of oligarchic liberalism geared on European cultural practices (King 8). This pro-European aestheticism brought about various internal and external conflicts. Borges, among others, had his own disagreements with Ocampo's editorial choices; nonetheless, he always remained one of the main contributors to her journal.

Gombrowicz and Piñera overtly scorn *Sur* in the pamphlets *Aurora* and *Victrola*, and also allude to the group in their preceding individual essays. As noted by Anderson, Gasparini, Suchanow and others, there was definitely a personal dimension to their bitter criticism: it was after the joint promotion of *Ferdydurke* had crashed into the dead silence of *Sur*, that the two writers turned their non-canonical voices into

counter-canonical voices, denouncing the group and Victoria Ocampo individually as elitist, snobbish and prone to cultural provincialism.<sup>25</sup> However, their texts do not attack Ocampo and her publication as an isolated case, but rather as a symptom of a broader problem: the subordination of the porteño cultural scene to European tradition. In the final passage of *Aurora*, the authors point out that instead of commencing their literary war with an attack on the *Sur* circle, they could have just as well started with Leónidas Barletta and his Teatro del Pueblo (People's Theater), which in many ways represented an opposing ideology to the one embraced by Victoria Ocampo.<sup>26</sup> The pamphlet ends with a hint that its reader should: “tratar de reconstruir el esqueleto de nuestro perro a base de este hueso que te regalamos” (“try reconstructing the skeleton of our dog, from the bone that we offered”).

Gombrowicz had been obsessed with the European imagery of Buenos Aires since his initial encounter with the city. For him, *Sur* represented the contradictory, if not hypocritical, character of the Argentine capital's intellectual elite, who on the one hand, saw themselves as European (not just as someone striving to be Europeanized but rather as a people who had carried Europe to America); yet on the other hand were wary of the new arrivals such as himself. After all, he was disregarded as a “wrong

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<sup>25</sup>Their highly provocative statements about Ocampo should not be mistaken for a misogynistic gesture. After all, the publication of *Ferdydurke* was also financed by a wealthy Argentine woman, patron of visual arts, music and literature, Cecilia de Benedit de Debenedetti, whom Gombrowicz humorously but deferentially called “la condesa” (“the countess”).

<sup>26</sup>Barletta was a theater director and an active member of the Argentine Communist Party. In 1930 he found the Teatro del Pueblo. Historian Lorena Verzero argues that Barletta's political-cultural activism was directed more towards the left-leaning intelligentsia than the working classes (see “Leónidas Barletta y el Teatro del Pueblo”). According to the scholar, Barletta's work was oriented more toward the theoretical appeal of the Russian communism than toward the local Argentine actualities; which would explain why Gombrowicz and Piñera would put him into the same equation with Ocampo's *Sur*. It is also important to note that Barletta was a good friend of Gombrowicz, and it was in Teatro del Pueblo that the Polish writer had given one his first public talks in Spanish back in August of 1940, on a topic that scandalized the Polish minority in Buenos Aires.

type” of a European: for being an Eastern European and moreover, for being someone who mingled with lower class immigrants, who spoke and wrote in “contaminated” street language. In the early 1940s, for example, one of Gombrowicz’s first public talks on European literature in Spanish, which he gave at the house of the painter Antonio Berni, was reproached by Argentine participants of the gathering (among them, incidentally, was the future president of the country, Arturo Frondizi) as: “mediocre . . . [and] of ingenuous reasoning” (Gómez, “Barletta” 1).

Gombrowicz’s earliest publications in various porteño magazines respond to this experience by demonstrating the author’s profound knowledge of the European cultural history and current trends, and more so, by inserting comments that imply his familiarity with the newest European developments which have not even reached the Argentine coasts. The best example of this is his 1944 article on new trends in European art, published in the Catholic journal *Criterio* under the nickname Mariano Lenogiry. The essay starts with a short but biting remark on how a new philosophical take on the role of literature in the modern society, which at the very moment is being discussed in the war-stricken Europe, has not yet reached “this side of the Atlantic”, where the understanding of Europe is still rooted in reading Proust or Valery (“Las nuevas corrientes” 109). Three other essays from the same year, published in the Sunday’s cultural section of *La Nación* – “Nosotros y el estilo” (“We and Style”), “El arte y el aburrimiento” (“Art and Boredom”) and “Nuestro rostro y el rostro de la Gioconda” (“Our Face and the Face of Gioconda”) – reveal an attempt to surprise the



Argentine reader with polemic remarks about European, especially French, art and literature.<sup>27</sup>

Piñera, as already addressed in the Introduction Chapter, initially saw Buenos Aires and its “vida intelectual organizada, con política intelectual y editoriales y etcetera” (“organized intellectual life, with its own politics, editorials, etc.”; VV 82) as an escape from the provincial Havana. Yet after having spent a year there, highlighted by the *Ferdynurke* translation venture, the writer joined Gombrowicz in his criticism. Piñera’s first essay published in Argentina and about Argentine literature reflects none of the admiration of Buenos Aires evidenced in his letters to family and friends from his early months there. Instead, he calls it “a city without previous mystics,” meaning, a city without historically significant literary tradition (“Nota” 52). Also, like Gombrowicz, Piñera never interpreted the difficulties he faced when attempting to enter the literary community of Buenos Aires as a sign that the actual achievements of Argentine writers were superior to his own or to those of his writer friends’ in Cuba. “Y no digo que hayan descubierto potosíes de cultural superiores a los nuestros ni que sean más geniales. No, esto no” (“And I am not saying [that the Argentines] have discovered Potosies with cultural treasures that are superior or more brilliant than ours. No, not this”; VV 82), he wrote in a letter to Lezama Lima in early 1947.

Gombrowicz and Piñera’s shared argument is that the greatest weakness of the porteño literary scene was its failure to develop a more sovereign relation to Western Europe. Of course, they were neither the first nor the last ones to claim this. What is

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<sup>27</sup> I have already argued elsewhere that a similar pattern can also be distinguished in the twelve oft-disregarded essays Gombrowicz wrote in the early 1940s for the porteño magazine *Aquí está*. See Zilinskaite “El Polaco quilombero.”

peculiar about their case, however, is their keenness on finding the solution to this problem, despite the fact that neither belonged to the Argentine literary world. I propose that the reason for this lies in their perception of Argentina as a common battle ground for what back in 1947 they named *la batalla ferdydurkista* – *the ferdydurkian battle* – the literary struggle against the cultural inferiority complex in historically marginalized Latin America and East-Central Europe. Being an atypical exilic space Argentina enabled the two writers to come to terms with their own cultural backgrounds, fostering a critical rather than nostalgic perspective toward the past.

For Gombrowicz, his lack of involvement with the academic and cultural institutions in Buenos Aires not only offered distance from the local literary establishment but also provided him with the freedom to invent his own Argentina, at the same time as he was reinventing his own Poland. As a result, both countries emerge in his autobiographical writings as places that nourish paradox. He sees them as “very European,” observing that the presence of Europe is felt there more strongly than in the Western Europe itself, yet at the same time mocks them for being “cattle nations” with “no appreciation of literature” (KT 91). Historically, this was not inaccurate: Argentina had in the past described itself as “a ranch” for Britain and Europe, while Poland’s intellectual scene, though concentrated in Warsaw, was rooted in the traditions of the rural gentry. This peculiar association allowed Gombrowicz, as Bradley Epps puts it: to “assimilate Argentina to Poland,” concluding that neither fit

“comfortably into Europe or America; neither [was] self-confidently ‘superior’”  
(175).<sup>28</sup>

Piñera, after he had become a close friend and literary partner of Gombrowicz, added Cuba to the same equation, proclaiming that all three countries were: “unidos por la misma necesidad de espíritu” (“united by the same necessity of spirit”; “Por él mismo” 256). In reality, the socio-political situations lacked basis of comparison. Poland was economically and demographically destroyed. Argentina enjoyed the post-WWII prosperity, with the Peronism still about to gain its full momentum. Cuba, though economically it had also benefited from the war in Europe, was plagued by political corruption and violence. Thus, it was not the historical or political parallels, but rather the abstract sense of resemblance between certain cultural circumstances that Piñera was referring to by employing the expression “the same necessity of spirit.” To him, same as to Gombrowicz, the literary developments of the mid-twentieth century in Argentina, Cuba and Poland were essentially all marked by the symptoms of the same illnesses: the lack of authentic literary tradition and the complex of inferiority in their relation to Western European cultures.

Nowhere does this association between the literary worlds of the three geographically remote from one another countries manifest itself more clearly than in the Radio el Mundo interview, in which Piñera talks about the possibility of a cultural alliance between Argentina, Poland and Cuba that would entail striving for “independencia, la soberanía espiritual, frente a las culturas mayores que nos

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<sup>28</sup> The term “superior” in this case refers to cultural autonomy from the West. A different concept of “superiority” in comparison to other countries – since Argentina did tend to present itself as more advanced than its Latin American, and Poland than its Eastern European neighbors – is a subject for a separate discussion.

convierten en eternos alumnos” (“independence, [and] spiritual sovereignty from the greater cultures that make us into eternal pupils”) and Gombrowicz declares that: “Nosotros, *las naciones menores* debemos dejar la tutela de París y tratar de *comprendernos directamente*” (“We, *the minor nations*, should quit the tutelage of Paris and try to *understand ourselves directly* [my emphases]”; “Por él mismo” 254-255).

These quotes, especially the latter, embody two key arguments shared by Gombrowicz and Piñera. The first one has to do with the Hegelian understanding of inferiority. In “Nota,” Piñera refers to Hegel’s Appendix in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, in which Latin America, *The New World*, is described as a young continent, rich in natural resources but “immature” and lacking cultural history: “America has always shown itself physically and spiritually impotent . . . culturally inferior nations” (Hegel 163). Piñera writes: “la frase de Hegel – América es un continente sin historia – sigue en pie. No sería exagerado decir que pasa América todavía por la fase de ‘existir’ y que, por tanto, desconoce la etapa posterior del ‘ser’” (“Hegel’s expression – [South] America being a continent without history – still stands. It would not be exaggeration to say that [South] America is still going through the phase of ‘existing’, and is thus not yet familiar with the posterior phrase of ‘being’”; “Nota” 53). Gombrowicz, at least to a certain extent, agreed with the Hegelian sentence. The term “inferiority” with its multiple synonyms – “secondarity”, “provinciality” and also “unpolished-”, “immature-”, “bruised-” cultures is crucial in his later writings, especially the *Diary*. In the above quoted line from Radio el Mundo interview, his definition of “inferiority” is captured in the expression *naciones*

*menores*. The comparative Spanish adjective *menor* is a sign of age, but also, at the same time can take on a meaning of being smaller or lesser in quantity and/or in quality. Taking into account that the plural form *menores* is used by Gombrowicz to describe Argentina, Poland and Cuba, it becomes clear that the *smaller* or *lesser* in this case does not indicate the quantity (the size of a country or its population), but instead the quality of being of a lesser importance. Especially when placed next to the mention of the culturally more mature, older nations, the meaning of the word *menores* starts shifting back and forth between “young” and “minor”, “immature”, “inferior”.

To Gombrowicz and Piñera, those of their contemporaries who attempted to willfully evade the fact that Argentina, Poland and Cuba were *naciones menores*, and that their literary worlds are on the margins of Western culture, condemned themselves to being provincial. Meanwhile, embracing the historical inferiority could take off the pressure of producing a “canon-worthy” literature and can eventually lead to a successful conversion of what was regarded as inferior conditions into a creative potential. It is important to note that this does not mean the superiority of the Western Center is left unquestioned. On the contrary, as I will illustrate later with examples from *Aurora* and *Victrola*, Gombrowicz and Piñera were highly critical of the colonialist cultural categories such as “center” and “periphery”. Even more provocative than their embracing of the idea of *naciones menores* as their cultural identity, are the epithets the two writers used for the contemporary literary and cultural authorities from Western Europe, calling them “outdated,” “old” and “un-fresh”.

This leads to the second and more original argument that can be inferred from the double meaning of the phrase *comprendernos directamente* used by Gombrowicz

in the Radio el Mundo interview. The expression leaves it uncertain of whether the Polish writer meant that the *naciones menores* such as Poland, Argentina and Cuba should direct their attention to understanding and evaluating their own individual situations directly or, instead, to understanding each other directly, as *comprendernos* could be translated simultaneously into “understand ourselves” and “understand among ourselves.” Given that the original purpose of this interview was meant to promote the newest edition of *Ferdydurke* among the Argentine readers, and that just a few lines above the addressed quote we see Gombrowicz’s complaint that any third class Western European writer would have a higher chance to achieve fame in South America than even the most preeminent Eastern European author, it is more than likely that the phrase *comprendernos directamente* does call for a closer cultural interaction between South America and East-Central Europe. This interpretation is further supported by a humorous reference made in *Aurora* to “la política Intercontinental” (the Intercontinental Politics) of a joint struggle for the cultural sovereignty from the Western European dominance.

The inclusive pronoun *nosotros*, “we”, used in the Radio el Mundo interview and in *Aurora*, suggests the sense of resemblance, if not a direct connection, between the homeland and the place of exile, which is rarely found in exilic literature. While expressions of diffidence and detachment from the host culture (considered by many critics as the main markers of exilic condition) are also frequently encountered in Gombrowicz and Piñera’s writings, I propose that the six texts from the year 1947 are different, for there we witness the two authors writing against the Argentine literary elites, while at the same time embracing the abstract vision of Argentina itself as “one

of us.” By situating Argentina in the same position of cultural inferiority as Poland and Cuba, or in other words, by convincing themselves that “the spiritual necessities” of the three nations were mutually translatable, Gombrowicz and Piñera were able to turn their place of exile into a common battleground. They then used this space to test their shared visions and to reevaluate cultural and literary developments in the three countries from a new, broader, comparative perspective.

### **Literary *Tantalism***

Es cosa rara hasta qué punto el pueblo no se parece  
a su Literatura . . . esto significa que algo anda mal en esa cultura.  
Gombrowicz and Piñera, *Aurora*

[It is odd to what extent the [Argentine] Literature  
does not represent its people . . .  
It means that something is going wrong in this culture.]

In late January of 1947, Gombrowicz sent a letter to Virgilio Piñera and Humberto Tomeu asking them to lend him fifty pesos – “porque ya no tengo ni para los cigarillos” (“because I don’t have enough even for cigarettes”; qtd. in Piñera, “Por él mismo” 246) – and also if they could edit and make three copies of his essay “Nota contra los poetas.” This was months before the Polish writer knew he would be presenting this text to public at Fray Mocho bookstore. After the presentation date was set, it was again his Cuban friends who helped with the last minute corrections and preparation. Gombrowicz had already experienced the pain of a failed presentation on several occasions in Buenos Aires, and it was important for him to make himself understood to the Spanish-speaking audience. The transcript of his original speech of

August 28, 1947 includes the opening lines that are omitted from the modified version of the text published in the first volume of the *Diary*:

Sería más razonable de mi parte no meterme en temas drásticos porque me encuentro en desventaja. Mi castellano es un niño de pocos años que apenas sabe hablar. No puedo hacer frases potentes ni ágiles, ni distinguidas, ni finas, pero ¿quién sabe si esta dieta obligatoria no resultará buena para la salud? A veces me gustaría mandar a todos los escritores del mundo a extranjero, fuera de su propio idioma y fuera de todo ornamento y filigranas verbales, para comprobar qué quedará de ellos entonces. (“Contra” 1)

[It would be more reasonable for me to not get involved in far-reaching arguments, for I am in a disadvantageous position. My Spanish is [like] a child few years of age who barely knows how to talk. I am incapable of making powerful, sharp, distinguishable, fine phrases, nevertheless, who knows if this obligatory linguistic diet will not have a positive effect on my health? Sometimes I wished to send all writers abroad, away from their native countries and languages, away from all the ornamentation and intricate play with words, to test what they are really made off.]

The primary sense Gombrowicz’s words convey is awkwardness and frustration of not being able to express himself fluently in Spanish. However, already in the second part of this paragraph, it becomes clear that Gombrowicz is not being apologetic about his linguistic weaknesses, but instead is standing his ground, holding onto his personal philosophy on writing, questioning his audience: what is the heart, the essence, of a literary text? What defines “good literature”? And, also, as he will ask later in his presentation: what would happen to the modernist literature, if it were stripped off the linguistic complexity, obscurity and symbolism? Claiming that “linguistic diet” – the émigré experience – is healthy for a writer, as it forces that person away from the established forms and conventions. To Gombrowicz, above and beyond all the aesthetic intricacies, the most important task for literature is to reflect on one’s own



subjectivity, on the “I”. This is the main message of “Contra los poetas” and it is also the core of a shared philosophy between its author and his friend Virgilio Piñera.

The latter claimed that the lack of self-expression in literature was the first thing he observed about his contemporary Argentine writers: “Hombres como Borges, Mallea, Macedonio Fernández, Martínez Estrada, Girondo, los dos Romero, Bioy Casares, Fatonno, Devoto, Sábato y muchos más pueden ofrecerse sin duda alguna como típicos casos de *homme de lettres*. Sin embargo, de tantas excelencias todos ellos padecían de un mal común: ninguno lograba expresar realmente su propio ser” (“Men like Borges . . . and many others can be presented as typical cases of *homme de lettres*. However, with so many elite qualities, they all suffer from one shared defect: none has succeeded at really expressing himself”; VT 34). Self-expression here does not refer to autobiographical narrative, but to “the positioning of the subject within the text”; in other words, it is related to the writer as “addresser and utterer, to [his] points of view, attitudes, and emotional impregnation of the text” (Johansen 229). As Gombrowicz puts it, self-expression is what defines literature as a form of art:

We [writers] are the word that claims: this hurts me, this intrigues me. I like this, I hate this, I desire this, I don’t want this . . . We do not become real in the realms of concepts, but in the realm of people. We are and we must remain persons, our role depends on the fact that the living, human word not stop sounding in a world that is becoming more and more abstract. (D1 86)

The same sense of subjectivity of self-expression (instead of the counterfeit objectivity of convection) is what he calls for in “Contra los poetas” when he announces: “hay que parar por un momento la producción cultural para ver si lo que producimos tiene todavía alguna vinculación con nosotros” (“We need to stop the cultural production

for a moment, in order to see whether what we produce still has any connection with us”; 3).

Piñera’s “Nota” tackles the question of self-expression and the Latin American writer, using as his examples three major Argentine literary figures: Macedonio Fernández, Oliverio Girondo and Borges. Piñera calls them all *tantalic*, after a doomed Greek mythological figure Tantalus, one of the many sons of Zeus, encountered by Odysseus during his journey down to Hades (the Book Eleven of *The Odyssey*): “Si quisiéramos definir por el medio de una imagen o metáfora lo más representativo de la literatura argentina de hoy, diríamos que es tantálica. Sus escritores son tantálicos ellos mismos y segregan esa sustancia – lógicamente nueva – que se llama tantalismo” (“If we wanted to define by way of an image or metaphor the most representative aspect of Argentine Literature of today we would say that it is tantalic, that its authors themselves are tantalic and that they secrete that substance – logically new – called tantalism”; qtd. in Anderson, *Everything* 52). The noun *tantalism* which in English is defined as the teasing or tormenting with the sight of something yearned for yet out of reach (the major Spanish language dictionary *Real Academia Española* does not include an equivalent term), comes from the punishment of Tantalus. In the myth, he was condemned to sit in a pool of water surrounded by branches of grapes, yet forced to eternally suffer from severe thirst and hunger, for whenever he attempted to bend down for the water it would recede, and whenever he tried to pluck a fruit, the branches of the tree would rise out of his reach.

Piñera borrowed the idea of *tantalism* from Macedonio Fernández’s earlier essay “Tantalia” (1930), in which the Argentine writer and philosopher had confessed

that: “Mi consigna interior, mi tantalismo, era buscar las exquisitas condiciones máximas de sufrimiento sin tocar a la vida, procurando al contrario la vida más plena, la sensibilidad más viva y excitada para el padecer” (“My inner slogan, my tantalism, was to search for the exquisite utmost conditions of suffering without touching the real life, procuring instead a type of life that was fuller, more lively and exciting to endure”; qtd. in “Nota” 54). In “Nota”, Piñera interprets Macedonio quote as a call for a substitution of the real human experience by a simulated one, constructed using literary solutions. He denounces it as an exceedingly formulaic process that lacks a more profound exploration and representation of the human experience (Estenoz, “Tántalo” 60). To Piñera, the same as to Gombrowicz, literature was an instrument to negotiate with the historical and social reality one lived in; and according to the two, Argentine, Cuban and Polish writers’ realities were realities of *naciones menores*. *Tantalism*, on the other hand, was a form of escape, a symptom of living in the culture hampered by the inferiority complex and yet either unwilling to recognize itself as such or unwilling to deal with it.

Starting with the fourth paragraph of the essay, Piñera applies the term *tantalism* to Spanish American literature in general. This is a particularly interesting move. On a personal level, it reveals the writer’s growing interest in a possibility of a cultural nexus between the Southern Cone and the Caribbean, contrasting sharply to his earlier “La isla en peso” which entails no sense of connection between Cuba and other Latin American countries, conveying instead the feelings of isolation and claustrophobic desperation. Moreover, it runs counter to the dominating currents within the Argentine literary scene, which in the late 1940s was mostly producing

either Europe-oriented literature or a political literature that was domestic, but preoccupied mainly with the middle- and upper-sectors' feeling of being increasingly marginalized under Peronist administration (classic examples are Julio Cortázar's short stories "Casa tomada" and "Omnibus"<sup>29</sup>).

Using Macedonio's quote, Piñera proposes that the main problem with *tantalism* is that the sufferings induced by the *tantalic* torture are sweet; he deliberately uses the phrase "el dulce tormento" ("the sweet torment") when he first introduces the myth. They provide Latin American writers with an excuse to avoid dealing with their immediate reality, which generates what Piñera calls "la segunda naturaleza" ("the second nature"): a belief that in contrast to the metaphysical world of purely artistic creation, the real world is frightening in its dullness, uninteresting and not worthy of literary exploration. "El mundo que los rodea, por su propia informidad y riqueza, los asusta, les parece contradictoriamente pobre, sin llamadas ni respuestas," complains the autor ("The world that surrounds them with all its formlessness and richness, scares them and it appears to them contradictorily poor, providing neither callings nor responses"; "Nota" 52). Moreover, as Piñera emphasizes later in the essay, the means of escaping the reality of *naciones menores* is usually through inserting oneself in the realities already described by others, in other words, through imitating the ideas of known European writers, and thus eventually repeating: "desesperaciones leídas, tragedias leídas, con asesinatos leídos" ("the [already] read desperations, read tragedies with read assassinations"; "Nota" 53).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For more details, see Monteón 133, as well as Podalski 1-5 and ft. p.239.

<sup>30</sup> The idea of the "second nature" reappears in a more humorous context in the pamphlet *Victrola*, where a pseudo-announcement by an anonymous reader declares: "Pongo en conocimiento del público

The eternal repetition of the same fruitless action is, of course, what the mythological Tantalus was condemned to endure in Hades.

Reading Gombrowicz's "Contra los poetas" in parallel to Piñera's "Nota" discloses a virtually identical argument. The Polish author uses the world of poetry as his example to express his disapproval of what he calls an "aristocrático hermeticismo" ("aristocratic hermeticism"), a concept whose meaning is analogous to Piñera's "la segunda naturaleza." It implies retreating into the world of purely technical literary solutions: searching for the perfect verse, resorting to bookishness, ornamentation, imitation and so on. Echoing Piñera's complaint about an overly mechanical approach of Latin American writers to the process of writing, Gombrowicz claims that his literary antagonists, in this case poets, are so preoccupied with the certain preconceived norms of form and style that they have "become the slaves of their own instrument," of the literary expression. Instead of expressing themselves, their personal experiences and anxieties through writing, they express perfectly polished but fruitless verses: "ellos se vuelven esclavos de su instrumento porque esa forma es tan rígida y precisa, sagrada y consagrada que deja de ser un medio de expresión; y podemos definir al poeta profesional como un ser que no se puede expresar a sí mismo porque tiene que expresar los versos" ("they become slaves of their instrument because this form is so rigid and precise, sacred and established, that it has ceased being a way of expression; and so we can define a professional poet

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que yo no soy yo. Yo, hace ya bastante tiempo que dejé de ser yo para ser Marcel Proust . . . Si alguno de mis enemigos se empeñase en afirmar que yo soy yo, no le den crédito alguno, pues ya saben ustedes quién soy yo" ("I am publically announcing that I am no longer me. I stopped being me quite some time ago, in order to be Marcel Proust . . . If any of my enemies attempt to claim that I am me, do not pay attention to them, for now you know who I [really] am").

as a being who cannot express himself because he has to express the verses”; “Contra” 3).

Despite its numerous clues to the *Sur* group, Gombrowicz did not provide specific names in his lecture, which later made it easier to adapt it to the Polish audience. Piñera, on the other hand, applied the paradigm underlined in his essay to discuss the works of three specific writers, spending the most time on the case of Borges. The Cuban writer’s use of Borges as the example par excellence of Latin American *tantalism* precedes what Gombrowicz will argue about the Argentine writer in his *Diary*. The two believed that Borges’ work lacked negotiation with the surrounding reality and the expression of his own personal contradictions as a writer who lived in that reality. In “Nota,” Piñera proclaims: “Borges está más preocupado (o puede sólo preocuparse) por la experiencia libresca, por la altura y la entelequia del tema, que por la necesidad real de manifestar sus propias contradicciones” (“Borges is more preoccupied (or is only able to be preoccupied) with the bookishness, loftiness and entelechy of the topic, than with the necessity to manifest his own contradictions”; 55). To Piñera, Borges’ case illustrates a general trend among contemporary Latin American writers who tend to search for technical solutions to the process of writing, constructing literature from sophisticated words, instead of allowing it to emerge from experience. Borges is portrayed by Piñera as an excessively cultivated, “Parisian-style” man of letters, while the Cuban writer himself preferred to cultivate an image of “un tipo grotesco y callejero” (“a grotesque man of the street”; Espinosa 122).

Gombrowicz, years later, famously proclaimed that: “Borges and I are at opposite poles. He is deeply rooted in literature, I in life” (KT89). One of the best

known scenes from his later novel *Trans-Atlantyk* is the literary duel between the Polish protagonist of the book and his antagonist-double, the Greatest Argentine man of letters, introduced under the epithet “Gran maestro” (“The Great Maestro”; in Spanish in the original). Most critics agree this character is as a fictional representation of Borges.<sup>31</sup> The character of the Argentine writer is incapable of genuine self-expression. His only knowledge is the knowledge he has gained from books. He always carries a stack of manuscripts he uses for his endless quotations under his arm and in his pockets: “Looking into his books, notes, mislaying them, Wallowing, weltering in them, with rare quotations he sprinkled his thought . . . And so whimsically coddling himself in Paper and Thought, all the more intelligently intelligent he was, and that intelligence of his, multiplied by itself and a-straddled on itself, was becoming so Intelligent that Jesus Maria!” (TA32). Unable to fight against the avalanche of elaborated quotes, the protagonist reacts to the verbal confrontation with the Argentine character by desperately attempting to turn back to the immediate reality around him. He resorts to the only thing that still connects him to his self-expression as an individual, to his subjectivity, through a purely physical action of walking. Almost two pages are dedicated to describe this frenetic walking, first back and forth across a famous Banquet hall where this scene of the novel is taking place, then down the stairs, and finally into the streets of Buenos Aires, where he finally escapes the *tantallic* curse and the main plot line of the novel unrolls.

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<sup>31</sup> To my knowledge, Ricardo Piglia is the only scholar to have suggested an alternative interpretation that the “Gran maestro” parodies writer and longtime editor of the literary supplement of *La Nación*, Eduardo Mallea (1903-1982).

Gombrowicz started composing *Trans-Atlantyk* a year after Piñera's "Nota" was published. Although the Polish writer had met Borges in person back in the early 1940s, they did not engage in a more sophisticated conversation. It also took him some time to be able to read Borges' works in original. Piñera's actual contact with the Argentine writer was thus indispensable to the Polish writer's formulation of his argument that Borges "most gladly cultivates literature about literature, a writing about books – and if sometimes he surrenders himself to pure imagination, it leads him far from life, into a sphere of convoluted metaphysics, the ordering of beautiful rebuses, a scholastics made up of metaphors" (D2 131).

In the late 1960s Gombrowicz modified his opinion about Borges to say the latter was more "imprisoned by his aestheticism" in the early stages of his career (KT90). This actually coincided with Borges' own defense of vitality and substance – background and content – in his literature. Since then, it has been demonstrated that many of Borges' stories are not limited to metaphysical perplexities, but also contain very specific references to the Argentine and Latin American context (Estenoz, qtd. in Dolz). Back in the 1947, however, it seems that Borges was interested in the Piñera's theory on *tantalism*. He not only published "Nota" in his journal, but also, in the same issue, inserted his short story "Los inmortales" ("The immortals"), which as Piñera aptly observed in his later autobiography, was the Argentine's indirect response to Piñera's article: "al mismo tiempo me hizo saber que aceptaba lo del tantalismo en lo que a él se refería, y por último, a manera de confirmación y soberanía insertaba en dicho mismo número de *Anales*, y junto a mi Nota, uno de sus relatos más tantálicos – 'Los Inmortales'" (at the same time [Borges] let me know that he accepted all that



about tantalism as far as his own case was concerned, and lastly, as a means of confirmation and sovereignty he inserted in the same number of *Anales*, next to my article, one of his most tantalic stories – ‘The Immortals’” quoted in Anderson, *Everything* 53).

To recap, the term *tantalism*, as used in this Chapter, means the fixation on the perfection of technical solutions in literature: form, style and wars of quotes, all of which postpones dealing with the immediate reality of one’s own subjectivity. This tendency is inseparable from the ongoing practice of borrowing and replicating of Western European literary and philosophical trends. Gombrowicz and Piñera were well aware that the cultural imitation in Argentina, Cuba and Poland was bound to certain historical imperatives, which were different in each country, but all essentially linked to the enduring pressure (external and internal) that the idea of “Europe” had become for these nations. The two writers thus sought to present their own, alternative solution to the cultural inferiority complex.

### ***Banalizadores of Culture***

Basic English  
First Conjugation  
Present (1947)

I am Joyce/ You are Proust/ He is Elliot  
We are Valéry/ You are Kafka/ They are Rilke  
But, please, who is he in this country? (a tremulous voice): Nobody!

Who is thy Lord, my son?/ Actually my Lord is Sartre  
To be... Picasso, Hegel, Stravinsky, K...  
Or not to be... NOTHING, NIGHT, NIGHTMARE

Piñera and Gombrowicz, *Victrola*

Juan José Saer once pointed out that various past writers to whom the word “Europe” connoted oppressive and exploiting realm, expressed their concern in different ways: “with a disdainful silence (Beckett), insult (Baudelaire), escape (Rimbaud), madness (Nietzsche), confinement (Proust or Kafka), suicide (Pavese or Celan)” (qtd. in Mandolessi 152). Silvana Mandolessi adds Gombrowicz to this list of writers, interpreting his exile in Argentina as a necessary withdrawal from Europe. The scholar proposes that Gombrowicz’s way of overcoming the adversity that Europe represented to him as a Polish writer was by distancing himself from it (152). I, in contrast, have been arguing that the case of Argentina – with its self-image as the most Europeanized South American country – challenges the conventional understanding of exilic distance. The tension that Western Europe represented to Gombrowicz in Buenos Aires was likely even stronger than back in his home country. The philosophical stance that he together with Piñera considered most appropriate was to embrace this tension rather than distancing themselves from it.

By incorporating the concept of *naciones menores* into their literary identity, Gombrowicz and Piñera redefined their relationship to the canonical Western European culture. Their six short texts from 1947 reveal a nonconformist and belligerent attitude towards the “European stature” as a norm for Latin American and Eastern European arts and literatures. Their solution to the cultural inferiority complex can be defined as a method of demystification. In the following, I call it a “*banalization* method,” after the title of a novel that Virgilio Piñera was working on during 1947, and which has been left aside from my discussion of the primary textual sources because it is an unedited and never-published work. We know about its

manuscript from the announcement of its supposed publication in the Cuban newspaper *El Mundo* (February 1948), and from Piñera's personal correspondence with Gombrowicz in the summer of 1947, during the latter's temporary sojourn away from Buenos Aires. According to these sources, the novel was supposed to be titled *El Banalizador* (*The Banalizer*) and its plot revolved around the story of:

... un escritor cubano que trabaja con intensidad, que va haciendo su obra tesoneramente, contra viento y marea, que después de transitar por la cultura, no quiere traicionar la vida y busca un equilibrio que desde su óptica de viajero en retorno, mira a la patria y la ve como apoyada en el absurdo, a horcajadas del disparate. (qtd. in Espinosa 145)

[... a Cuban writer who works intensely, tenaciously and against all odds to produce his work; who after passing through the culture, does not want to betray the life and searches for an equilibrium, [and] who looks at his fatherland from the point of view of a returning traveler, and sees it as based on the absurd, straddling the ridiculous.]

The novel was supposed to incorporate the themes tackled by Piñera and Gombrowicz in their other texts from 1947. "Traicionar la vida" in the above quote alludes to the *tantalistic* betrayal of the expression of concrete human experience in modern art. The word "equilibrium" refers to Gombrowicz's thesis in "Contra los poetas" that the more effort a writer puts into composing a modern, complex literary work, the more he or she should strive for the balance between the intricacies of style and the real-life experiences. More interestingly, however, in *El Banalizador* Piñera sought to take a further step, by turning to the issue which does not distinctively appear in the texts from 1947, but which will become of utmost importance in Gombrowicz's novel *Trans-Atlantyk*. It is the issue of the ever-problematic relationship between an émigré intellectual and his homeland.

While *El Banalizador* remains unpublished and its original manuscript inaccessible; the idea embodied in the very name of the novel serves as a suitable stepping stone for the discussion of Piñera and Gombrowicz's suggested solution to the cultural inferiority complex. To *banalize* something means to trivialize it, demystify it and make it look less important and more prosaic. In regard to imported European cultural ideas and models, it means maneuvering them not only "without superstition" – as Borges would say – but mocking them, cracking them and exposing their subjectivity. According to Gombrowicz and Piñera, the work of a Latin American or Eastern European writer should not be motivated by the desire to prove himself or herself worthy within the Western literary canon, but instead by the desire to write outside of it and against it (ergo, depressurizing the historical and personal tensions as a marginalized member of the Western civilization).

The injunction to *banalize* is the key to the understanding of "Contra los poetas" and "El País del Arte": the two texts in which Gombrowicz and Piñera target the arbitrariness of the unwritten conception of what Literature and Art of a "European level" are supposed to be like. When read together, the two essays reveal the authors' shared intention to problematize one of the most important aspects of human culture: convention. Otherwise, if Gombrowicz's attack on poetry is set apart and read literally, as done by Edgardo Russo in his meticulous defense of poetry in the "Poesía y vida : consideraciones sobre el panfleto de Gombrowicz 'Contra los Poetas'" ("Poetry and Life: Considerations about Gombrowicz's pamphlet 'Contra los Poetas'" 1986), the critical interpretation does not get past the initial indignation and irritation provoked by his essay. Gasparini aptly points out that more significant than the

deliberately arrogant postulations about poetry that offend Russo, is Gombrowicz's introduction of term "humanism" (108). The Polish author uses this term in his own way, to denote the relationship between a poet and poetry, a writer and literature, an artist and art. According to Gombrowicz, there are two types of "humanism": "religious" and "laic." The "religious": "coloca al hombre de rodillas ante la obra cultural de la humanidad" ("throws a man on his knees in front of a work of art produced by humanity"; "Contra" 3). In contrast, the "laic" type strips the capitalized term "Art" of its importance, exposing its adherence to convention. Already in *Ferdydurke* Gombrowicz had used the voice of one of the characters – the infamous schoolteacher Pimko – to express his own belief that any reverence to the canonical Western works of art and literature (a pedagogical approach widely practiced in Polish secondary schools at the time), especially if it is done out of duty and not personal conviction, poses a risk of breeding mediocrity. In "Contra los Poetas" Gombrowicz develops this idea further by proposing that the only way to avoid cultural mediocrity is to place more emphasis on the type of "humanism" which regains the sovereignty of a writer or a poet from "el Dios del Arte" ("the God of Art"), enabling a more genuine self-expression (3).

In "El País del Arte", Piñera likewise focuses his attention on the conventional understanding of art. The word "Art" is first introduced by the author with the capital "A", then later in the essay, to emphasize the sarcasm, continued with the lower case "a". Piñera argues that instead of being appreciated for what it really encompasses, art lives alimeted by the name "Art" alone. The continuous standardization of the types of artistic expression has led modernists and their audiences to lose their

hermeneutical sovereignty. On the third page of his essay, Piñera quotes Gombrowicz to support this argument: “¿Es que alguien puede – como dice Gombrowicz – conmove sin conmove y decir que comprende sin comprender?” (“Can anyone – as Gombrowicz says – be moved [by art] without being moved and say [he] understands without understanding?” “El País” 36). Piñera continues his discussion by juxtaposing art and religion (he would use the same juxtaposition as a significant narrative device in the novel *La Carne de René*). Religion, he insists, requires adoration, and adoration is always blind, abysmal and passive. He, who adores a prefixed conception, whether it is God or Art, loses his sovereignty. Therefore, a true artist should not adore, as the *raison d’être* of art “es ser lo menos adorable” (“is to be the least adorable”; *Ibid*); not in the sense of delightfulness or sweetness, but in a sense of the worthiness of being admired. With this quote Piñera’s argument connects directly to Gombrowicz’s theory on the “laic” type of humanism and returns to the call for *banalization*.

Piñera’s complaint that in the Country of Art, it is not the artist who produces art but the arbitrary concept “Art” that produces him, carries a subtle political undertone. It is a way to criticize the cultural politics promoted by Lezama’s *Orígenes* and Ocampo’s *Sur*. In both magazines much attention was paid to the international literary currents. Piñera interpreted this as aristocratic creolism and false-elitism, and reacted against it in his essay.

Out of the texts from 1947, it is in their joint project, the pamphlets *Aurora* and *Victrola*, that Piñera and Gombrowicz are most outspoken about their anti-cultural-

establishment stance. The opening passage of *Aurora* sums up the arguments presented in “Nota,” “Contra los peotas” and “El País” by urging the reader:

*¿Te inspiraba siempre el mayor respeto la Poesía, el Arte, la Literatura, la Filología, la Ideología, Europa, la Ciudad Luz, la Erudición y todas demás mayúsculas? Puedes, para cambiar un poco, olvidarte de las mayúsculas y empezar a hablar con minúsculas. Con tanto respeto nunca llegarás a ser creador de tu cultura y siempre tendrás que adaptarte a moldes ajenos [Italicized in the original].*

*[Have you always felt the greatest respect for Poetry, Art, Literature, Philology, Ideology, Europe, The City of Light, Erudition and all the other words written in capital letters? For a change, forget about the capitalization and start talking in the lowercase. For with so much respect you will never become the creator of your culture and will always have to adapt to foreign molds.]*

The insistency of “talking in lowercase letters” here is a synonym to the term *banalize*.

*Banalization* is the underlining theme of the two pamphlets, and it is manifested most

obviously in the aesthetic aspect of these publications. Unlike the three individual

essays discussed above, *Aurora* and *Victrola* were not intended as essayistic prose.

Instead, they recycle the style and language of Dadaist and Futurist manifestos from

the early twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> This was clearly Gombrowicz and Piñera’s response to

*Sur*’s self-image as a representative of modernity and cultural progress in South

America. On the one hand, what they criticized was the selective standards of the

journal’s editorial board, which they saw as an imposturous way of keeping the

Argentine literature “up to date” with European literary trends. Hence, the parodic

reuse of those aesthetic elements that technically no longer fit within the current

Parisian or Londonese models. On the other hand, the manifesto-like pamphlets can

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<sup>32</sup> For specific examples of Dadaist and Futurist manifestos from East-Central Europe, see *Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes* (2002).

also be seen as an implicit commentary on the lack of a more outspoken, bolder avant-garde heritage in Argentine letters. As described by John King, in comparison to not only Western European and Slavic avant-gardes but also to their Brazilian neighbors, avant-garde literary scene in Argentina was: “modest, essentially conservative affair . . . because of the ideological limitations of its protagonists, [and] also because of the intellectual climate of the society” (23). The heart of the movement, the avant-garde magazine *Martín Fierro*, despite its broad reaching popularity circulated for less than three years (from 1924 to 1927). One of its main contributors was Oliverio Girondo, the poet chosen by Piñera as his second example of Latin American *tantalism* in “Nota.”

Looking from this perspective, the discourse of *banalization* in *Aurora* and *Victrola* finds more resonance in the context of Brazilian critical theory of *antropófagia*, or “cultural cannibalism,” from the 1920s-1930s. Both discourses stand out for their outright rejection of any adoration of “superior” or “more mature” cultures. Both rely on aggressive type of writing as a method of attack. Finally, both can be seen as reactions to the modernization process (in Latin America and, in the case of the latter, also in East-Central Europe) and as a struggle to resolve the ongoing tensions between the local and the “European” influences on literary production. In a way similar to which Oswald de Andrade’s definition of *antropófagia* reevaluates and re-signifies the conventional eurocentric definition of cannibalism as “a sign of animality, bestiality and a mark of no culture” (Galiñanes), Gombrowicz and Piñera’s concept of *banalization* reevaluates and re-signifies the Hegelian perception of the cultural “immaturity” of the *naciones menores*.



A noticeable difference between *antropofagia* and *banalization*, however, lies in the fact that the aesthetics of the latter has more in common with the late modernism. It is, in a way, “lighter”; focusing more on the subversive yet constructive than on the destructive power of literature. Moreover, the self-proclaimed *banalizers* Gombrowicz and Piñera demonstratively distanced themselves from nationalist ideas, which were not uncommon in the Brazilian avant-garde. Last but not least, in the works of *antropófagos*, the masters of canonical European literature were metaphorically “eaten” and “digested”, and it was through this process that an emergence of new, authentic literary production was expected to occur. Gombrowicz and Piñera’s texts from 1947 strive to convince the Argentine reader that the Old Europe has aged, literally and excessively, so much that it is not even worth it to “taste” its culture. In *Aurora* the great European man of letters are depicted as old bodies: “físicos... ya no tan frescos” (“not very fresh physiques”). The narrators argue that there is no point in having the “aged Western Europeans” to lecture the public of *naciones menores*, whose primary source of creativity lies in its youth and spontaneity. Their argument bears a certain resemblance to Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918), with its hypothesis on the “winter time” – the downfall – of the modern Western civilization. This text enjoyed a great popularity in Latin America during the first half of the twentieth century, though it is not known whether Gombrowicz and/or Piñera had personally read it.

The motif that recurrently appears in the texts of *Aurora* and *Victrola* is a derision and trivialization of the importance of cultural events promoted in Buenos Aires by Victoria Ocampo and the *Sur*. Their salon- and intellectual gatherings-

oriented culture is contrasted by Gombrowicz and Piñera's proclamation that their "Resistance Committee" has resorted to working in "el sótano" (the basement, the cellar), a place below the places occupied by *Sur* and its supporters.<sup>33</sup> More than once, the narrators of *Aurora* repeat that they stand against cultural norms and values that are propagated in the "upper floors," i.e. in the realm of elite intellectual circles and their institutionalized approach to literature. To illustrate this, page three of *Aurora* includes two "telegrams" from pseudo-readers (written, of course, by the authors themselves). The first one states: "Me adhiero con entusiasmo pero en el subsuelo porque en planta baja soy neouniversalista, en el primer piso Nominalista y en el Segundo Kirkegardista punto Jean Paul Sartre de medida para caballeros" ("I adhere [to the Resistance movement] with enthusiasm, but only in the basement because I am a neo-universalist on the ground floor, Nominalist on the first floor, and a Kierkegardist with a slight hint of Jean Paul Sartre, with the measures adapted specially for the gentlemen, on the second floor"). The second one adds, on the same note: "Adhesión incondicional en sótano porque en planta baja Salón Compra Venta en primero Pizzería Intelectual de Lujo y en segundo Salón Cosmético-Poética..."

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<sup>33</sup> The metaphorical cellar in *Aurora* could also be interpreted as a precursor to the recurrent motif of the subsoil, the underground space, traced in Latin American literature of the second half of the twentieth century by Alberto Moreiras in *Tercer Espacio, Literatura y Duelo en América Latina* (1999). According to Moreiras - who takes as his examples Miguel Angel Asturias' novel *Hombres de maíz* (1949), Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949), Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963), Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967) and Carlos Fuentes' *La campaña* (1990) - the image of an underground space in Latin American literary tradition differs from the classical image of the platonic cave, in that it is not perceived as a place of deception, but rather as a place of resistance and redemption (135). Among other examples, Moreiras also discusses the symbolical descent to the underground space in Virgilio Piñera's 1963 novel *Pequeñas maniobras*. "Ya sabemos que mi personalidad está en el subsuelo" ("We already know that my personality is in the subsoil") are the precise words used by Sebastián, the protagonist of the novel (*Pequeñas maniobras* 86). This declaration is grounded not as much in the abhorrence of things on the surface, as in the hope of encountering a more neutral space for reflection and recuperation.

(“Inconditional adherence in the basement because the ground floor [is occupied] by the Purchase and Sale Salon, the first floor by the Deluxe Intellectual Pizzeria and the second by the Cosmetic-Poetic Salon...”).

It is important to consider that Gombrowicz and Piñera do not attack *Sur* for cultural conservatism: they were well aware that Ocampo’s circle also questioned many of the elements of tradition and promoted the modern. What they target is *Sur*’s necessity to look up to Western Europe for the validation of what is modern. Hence, their mock of the cultural events organized by *Sur* with invited Western European intellectual figures as the protagonists. For example, the recent visit of two members of the *Académie française*, André Maurois and Georges Duhamel to the Argentine capital is described by the narrators of *Aurora* as forced, banal, ineffectual and even absurd. The French intellectuals are parodied in the pamphlet as old, “un-fresh” bodies, uninteresting to their audience, and only useful for *Sur*’s practical purpose of promoting Argentine writers in Europe, since Maurois mentions to have read and enjoyed one short story by Borges. The narrators of *Aurora* add that the Argentine media’s sudden perception of Buenos Aires as a flourishing cultural capital owes to the visit of the two French writers and not to the actual achievements from within its own literary community.

The bitter diatribes of the fictional opponents in *Aurora* and *Victrola* (as already mentioned, the narrator in the latter is a pseudo-defender of *Sur*) reveal a two-sided irony, where the *Sur* group is portrayed as an oppressor of the ingenious potential of a younger generation of Argentine writers; yet *Sur* and its supporters themselves are depicted as victims of a historical condition of the cultural inferiority

complex, dating to the age of colonies. In *Aurora* Victoria Ocampo is mocked for her submission to all things French. The narrators suggest that such behavior is rooted in her religious-like faith in an abstract, ambiguous definition of “good literature”. This belief is, of course, inseparable from her upbringing in an upper-class household. In *Victrola*, the narrator repeats this idea by praising *Sur* owner’s modesty regarding her own sphere of influence. Here she is “applauded” for her willingness to sacrifice her own existence for the good of the intellectually superior Western European beneficiaries: “Feliz y contenta de no existir. Que existan ellos” (“[Ocampo is] happy and content to not exist, so that they could exist”).

In the same pamphlet, in a passage titled “Defensa Francesa” (“French Defense”), the narrator announces that he will not permit the authors of *Aurora* to purge the youth of Argentina away from the Western European cultural models. In a breaking voice (short, incomplete, syntactically incorrect sentences), he proclaims that there is only one way to produce culture in Argentina, and that is, by following the set of hierarchies established in the (colonial) past:

Estremecido y estremeciendo. Así se hace la cultura. Y AURORA, irreverente, dice Que los alumnos le rindieron homenaje al viejo cuerpo del Maestro. ¿Qué quería AURORA? ¿Qué el alumno ante el Maestro no se inclinara? AURORA persigue imposibles. El Maestro arriba y el alumno debajo. Continente y contenido . . . Para matar – ¡Pum, pum! A AURORA. ¡Pum, pum! Y AURORA, muerta en su sótano. Donde enseña a los jóvenes a no desaparecer ante el Coronel, ante Valéry, ante nadie. AURORA, pidiendo, por favor, más soberanía frente a Europa. Pero los jóvenes adorando más y más a los viejos maestros que vendrán todos los años a conmovierlos. A enseñarlos. A guiarlos. ¡Pum, pum!

[The one who shudders and the one who makes the others shudder. This is how culture is made. And the irreverent AURORA says That the students rendered their homage to the old body of the Teacher. What did AURORA want? For the student not to bow to the Teacher?

AURORA pursues the impossible. The Teacher on the top, and the student beneath. The one contains and the other is contained . . . To kill– bang bang! – AURORA. Bang bang! AURORA dead in its basement. This is where the youth are taught not to disappear in front of Colonel, of Valery, of anybody. AURORA, asking, please, more sovereignty facing Europe. But the youth more and more adore the old teachers who will come every year to [emotionally] move them. To teach them. To guide them. Bang bang!]

The phrase “to not disappear” in the above quote does not refer to the destruction of Western European cultural models, but rather to their subversion. Thus, it can be read in the context of Uruguayan scholar Ángel Rama’s theorization of the concept of *transculturation* in his 1984 study *La ciudad letrada*. “To not disappear” signalizes the dynamic process of selection described by Rama, which includes the re-signification of imported cultural elements and the search for a transformative self-recognition through literature. This mode of selection does not imply harmonic synthesis of the foreign and the local. Instead, the Western European models are employed as a useful context, but without adoration, always maintaining a certain level of skepticism. Throughout this Chapter, I have argued that this is exactly what *ferdydurkian battle* of 1947 was about: Gombrowicz and Piñera’s struggle to assign the European legacy a more auxiliary role, and to redirect the Argentine audience’s focus to the use of literature as a tool for dealing with the realities of the *naciones menores*. It is for this reason that in *Aurora* the authors insist over and over again that: “Él que quiere conseguir la soberanía espiritual frente las personas y culturas mayores debe comprender *primero*: que los mayores también son inmaduros aunque en distinto plano; *segundo*: que nos conviene apoyarnos firmemente sobre *nuestra propia realidad*” (“He who desires to achieve the spiritual sovereignty from the superior,

“older persons and cultures needs to understand *first of all* that they are also immature, just in their own way, and *second of all* that we should rely firmly *on our own reality* [italicized in the original]).

In short, the purpose of this Chapter was to demonstrate that the six short pieces of writing from 1947 serve as testimony to one of the most unusual and intriguing intellectual encounters that occurred in Buenos Aires during the mid twentieth century. When read in relation to each other, these texts support the following arguments. First, that Argentina as an atypical exilic place enabled Gombrowicz and Piñera to establish the term *las naciones menores*, where the adjective “menores” signifies the quality of inferiority. Second, that Gombrowicz and Piñera accepted the historical inevitability of inferiority as a sign of their artistic identity, thus turning it into an enabling creative space. This space permits, if not enforces, a hermeneutic flexibility, and destabilizes – by the means of *banalization* – the preestablished cultural conventions. The same arguments hold for the discussion of the two authors’ first novels written in Argentina: Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk* and Piñera’s *La carne de René*. The similarities between their plots, and the shared overarching theme: the relationship between an émigré and his fatherland (expressed through the father-son metaphor) are not coincidental. The following two Chapters present these novels as the product of the *ferdydurkian battle* of 1947.

## Chapter 2. The Continuation of the *Ferdydurkian Battle* in the Novels *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La Carne de René*

In December of 1947 Witold Gombrowicz took a job as a secretary at the Polish Bank in Buenos Aires. In his personal correspondences and later autobiographical texts the writer frequently complained about the dullness and monotony of the work. Nonetheless, this position brought him, for the first time after almost eight years of living in exile, a steady income. Moreover, being a sinecure, it allowed him to do his own writing while at work. In the year that followed, Gombrowicz composed a few short stories, and with the help of a young Argentine philosophy student, Alejandro Rússovich, translated into Spanish the theater play *Ślub* (*El Casamiento*; in English *The Marriage*).<sup>34</sup> In early 1949, Gombrowicz started working on his second and arguably most experimental novel *Trans-Atlantyk*, which he later claimed he drafted almost entirely during working hours at the bank. Two years later, the novel started appearing chapter by chapter in the Polish émigré literary magazine in Paris, *Kultura*, edited by the writer's friend back from Poland Jerzy Giedroyc. It was published in its complete version in 1953 by the editorial house directed by Giedroyc, who eventually issued the Polish publications in France of all of Gombrowicz's subsequent novels.

Virgilio Piñera made his first return to Cuba in January of 1948. Within days of the arrival, he gave an interview to Havana's periodical *El Mundo*, in which he declared that the country's political, economic and cultural climates were entangled in

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<sup>34</sup> Rússovich was Gombrowicz's neighbor in Calle Venezuela apartment building to which the writer had moved back in 1945; he later became one of the four Argentine "disciples" of the Polish writer, who all took part in Alberto Fischerman's 1986 film *Gombrowicz, o la seducción. Representado por sus discípulos* (*Gombrowicz, or the Seduction. Represented by his Disciples*).

the absurd (Anderson, *Everything* 61). Possibly in response to this allegation, his theater play *Electra Garrigó*, which debuted later the same year, was received very poorly by the Cuban intellectual community. Piñera, for his part, confronted the hostile reviewers with a provocative essay, “¡Ojo con el crítico...!” (“Beware of the Critic...!”), published in theater journal *Prometeo* in November of that year. The polemics that followed the publication of this article, with the local critics’ association ARTYC (La Asociación de Redactores Teatrales y Cinematógrafos) urging Piñera to issue an official apology, and the writer refusing to back down on his statements, resulted in a long-term conflict which hindered the staging of several of his plays in Havana. Despite this, during the year and a half that followed, Piñera wrote two other theater pieces. For a while he also continued working on the novel *El Banalizador*, started during the *ferdydurkian* year back in Argentina. However, at some point he decided to take the unpublished manuscript apart. He turned some of the drafted chapters into short stories. The rest of the text appears to have served as inspiration for the novel *La carne de René* (*René’s Flesh*), started, according to Arrufat’s account, in 1949, and published three years later by the Siglo Veinte editorial house in Buenos Aires. Piñera himself returned to the Argentine capital in April of 1950.

The unfulfilled desire of stirring up the Argentine literary world with the *ferdydurkian* battle calls back in 1947 persists in the fictive spaces of *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René*. As can be inferred from the two authors’ later autobiographical writings, both saw their novels as daring and scandalous ventures, inappropriate for the moment, inaccessible and/or too offensive to contemporary readership. For



example, in *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz calls *Trans-Atlantyk* his most risky literary endeavor:

*Trans-Atlantyk* was such a folly, from every point of view! To think that I wrote something like that, just when I was isolated on the American continent, without a penny, deserted by God and men! In my position, it was important to write something quickly which could be translated and published in foreign languages. Or, if I wanted to write something for the Poles, something which didn't injure their national pride. And I dared – the very height of irresponsibility! – to fabricate a novel which was inaccessible to foreigners because of its linguistic difficulties and which was a deliberate provocation of Polish émigrés, the only readership on which I could rely! (KT 116)

Piñera created a corresponding atmosphere of the provocateur around his novel, claiming that he saw no likelihood for *La carne de René* to succeed in the contemporary Argentine book market, nor anywhere else in Latin America, and moreover – same as Gombrowicz – discarding the prospect of translation into a foreign language as unrealistic. His description of personal experiences while writing the novel, preserved in a three-page unedited document, brings out an image of a lonesome, misunderstood polemicist:

I'm tired, sick, disgusted. I have written this novel with pieces of my own flesh: entire days, months, in short, two years hard at work, lacking the most elemental things, almost submerges in the deleterious indifference of my compatriots, dragging myself to Buenos Aires . . . playing the fool among fools, the imbecile among imbeciles . . . I roar with laughter at the idea of the success of *Rene's Flesh*. Translated into a foreign language? I continue to laugh convulsively. (Qtd. in Anderson, *Everything* 155)

The use of dramatic language to depict the two novels as if doom-laden from the very beginning goes along with Gombrowicz and Piñera's distancing of themselves from the dominant Argentine (as well as Cuban and Polish émigré) literary circles back in 1946-1947. The desire to set their texts against the alleged inauthenticity and elitism

of other Spanish American literary constellations (*Sur*, *Orígenes*, to some extent also Borgesean) is a part of the *ferdydurkian* agenda which includes searching for both new forms of writing and a new audience. More precisely, a reformed audience, for notwithstanding the fact that four of the six texts from 1947 addressed in the previous Chapter appeal to the younger generation of readers, they were all delivered to the same groups of contemporary intellectuals which Gombrowicz and Piñera attacked. From this surges the image of the two writers struggling to have their voices heard among their contemporaries but only on their own terms; that is, not giving up the self-imposed images of being the voices from the margins and new visionaries of their generation. The core of such stance was to maintain a critical attitude towards all three cultures their works intersected, which strengthened the desire to portray their first novels written after 1947 as rebellious texts, doomed to being misunderstood and undervalued.

Both Gombrowicz and Piñera were actually right in predicting the poor reception of their novels. *Trans-Atlantyk* was not perceived by the Polish émigré readership as a novelty, but instead, ironically, as an anachronistic publication (for the reasons discussed later in this Chapter). Moreover, except for the positive introductory review in *Kultura* by a respected Polish émigré writer Józef Wittling, the initial critical response was “near unanimous in its outrage” (Gasyna 144). Gombrowicz’s take on the concept of Polishness in *Trans-Atlantyk* (addressed in Chapter Three) was so strong that during the writer’s lifetime the novel was denounced time and again in Polish émigré circles as the “memoirs of a traitor” (Godzich 356). The text did not become officially available in the People’s Republic of Poland until after October of

1956. The stylistic idiosyncrasies delayed its translation into other languages, and so internationally, it remained one of the least known of Gombrowicz's books for decades. Piñera's *La carne de René* received even less attention from his contemporaries. As noted by Arrufat, when the book came out in Buenos Aires in 1952, it was also generally perceived as antiquated: "[the novel was] an anachronism: its structure appeared to be too ordered" (Introduction 12). Thomas Anderson's research shows that only two official reviews of *La carne de René* appeared in press during Piñera's lifetime. The second Spanish edition of the novel, revised by the author, was only published after his death (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1985). The first revised Cuban edition of the novel did not appear until 1995, thoroughly edited by Arrufat (Havana: Unión).

*Trans-Atlantyk* initiates a new development in Gombrowicz's fiction writing: the naming of the protagonist and the first person narrator after himself, as it would also be the case with the subsequent novels *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*. The retrospective narrative unfolds as a complicated web in which invented characters and story lines are intertwined with manifold autobiographical flashbacks; hence, it has been categorized by several critics as an *autofiction*, after Serge Doubrovsky's concept coined in 1977. The background events that set the stage for the novel's central conflict are nearly identical to what Gombrowicz describes in his *Diary*. Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz recounts his arrival to Argentina on the transatlantic ship *Chrobry* on the eve of the World War II, followed by his decision to not return to the Old Continent. Despite his desire to stay away from all things Polish, already within his the first few days in Buenos Aires the protagonist-narrator gets entangled in

unwanted relationships with several émigré compatriots: his far relative Cieciszowski, an eccentric businessmen trio (Baron, Pyckal and Ciumkała), and the minister of the Polish Legation in Buenos Aires, the Envoy Kosiubidzki.

During a lavish banquet organized by the minister in his attempt to subdue culture to his political ambitions, Gombrowicz-the-protagonist runs into the central Argentine character in the novel: the eccentric homosexual millionaire, Gonzalo, or *el puto*.<sup>35</sup> This is when the irresolvable dilemma arises. Gonzalo is in love with a handsome Polish teenager, Ignacy, whose father, former Polish military commander Tomasz Kobrzycki, is about to send the boy off to fight the War in Europe. All of a sudden, Gombrowicz-the-protagonist finds himself in a position where he has to decide whether he should support Tomasz's plan of risking his son's life in the name of the nation, or, on the contrary, give Ignacy into the hands of Gonzalo: an action that would save the boy's life but would involve the possibility of homosexual seduction. A series of events that occur between Gombrowicz, Gonzalo, Tomasz, the Envoy and other characters from this moment on, all fit within the framework of two major conceptual marks of the novel embodied in the terms: *Patria* (in Polish original, *Ojczyzna*, the "Fatherland") and *Filistria* (in Polish original *Synczyzna*, the "Land of the Son"). Until the very last pages of the novel, these two metaphorical spaces – two possibilities for the future – are depicted by the narrator as incompatible. The final scene of the novel does not provide any definite solution, only an invitation to explore multiple possibilities of interpretation.

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<sup>35</sup> A pejorative term meaning "a male prostitute", "a faggot." In Spanish in the novel.

In a similar hermeneutically facetious manner, Virgilio Piñera's *La carne de René* begins. The word "carne" in the title and throughout the novel has a double meaning, referring to both "meat" (as in dead, edible animal parts) and "flesh" (live human body). As noted by several critics, *La carne de René* displays all characteristics of a *Bildungsroman*. Nevertheless, it is a parodied, subverted version of this genre. In the opening scene, the third-person omnipotent narrator depicts a grotesque image of an animated crowd of people waiting in line at a butcher store. It is a special afternoon with an open sale of meat, which up until this moment has been rationed by the state.<sup>36</sup> The only person in line appalled rather than excited by the sight and smell of coagulated blood is the protagonist, twenty years old René, forced to stand in line by his father Ramón. René's pale face is spotted in the crowd by a wealthy widow, Dalia de Pérez. She is the center of the second story line, a counter-character to Ramón. While the latter idealizes brutalized flesh and physical violence, Dalia worships the human body as an object of eroticism and pleasure. The young René is sickened by the synchronic obsession with all-things-carnal of one as well as of the other.

In the second and third chapters of the novel, Ramón reveals his long hidden secrets to his son. Their family belongs to the mysterious *Causa (The Cause)*: a cult dedicated to the human flesh and suffering, which René neither fully understands nor supports, yet he is destined to become the future leader of it. In order to make René more accustomed to the ideology of the *Causa*, Ramón sends him to *Escuela del Dolor (School of Pain)*, led by the headmaster Mr. Mármolo, whose mission is to

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<sup>36</sup> An allusion to Piñera's 1944 short story "La Carne," in which the government's prohibition of meat consumption leads to the public craze of self-anthropophagy.

teach the boys to submit their bodies to physical torture. Body, not the soul, is considered here to be the driving force of human existence and culture. René breaks the school orders of suffering in silence with his shriek during the pretentious official initiation ceremony. He is thus sent home. A few months later, his parents are assassinated by the enemies of the *Causa*. This initially seems to appear as a sign of liberation for René. However, he soon finds out that in the society he lives in, the ideological fervor of the *Causa* is omnipresent. He feels cornered and submits to the cult from which he was so desperately trying to escape.

During the last few decades, *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* have been revisited by literary scholars, and essentially both have acquired the status of a text before its time. Both novels are excellent examples of an approach to history that challenges official narratives. They provide relevant and important insights on the issues of cultural and political displacement, national affiliations and sexual identity. Among Piñera scholars, Arrufat, Austin, Cámara and several others, have suggested that *La carne de René* pioneered some of the postmodernist tendencies in Latin American literature. Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* has been likewise linked to the postmodernist polysemy of meaning by Goddard, Kuharski, Ziarek and others. While in agreement with these scholars that the two novels are by no means outdated texts and can be read in dialogue with contemporary literary theories, I suggest that there remain historical and biographical influences that shaped Gombrowicz and Piñera's understanding of the role of aesthetics in the modern subject's experience, which have not yet been explored, and which can raise some extra-textual questions about situating these novels in relation to both their intellectual context and to the present.

Back when *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* were written, the exchange of ideas between the two authors was still at its peak. It is more than likely that Gombrowicz read excerpts of Piñera's manuscript in its various stages.<sup>37</sup> The Cuban writer, for his part, could not have read the original manuscript of *Trans-Atlantyk*, since it was in Polish; however, there is evidence that he was well familiar with Gombrowicz's ideas and moreover, played along with them. In *La carne de René*, there is a Polish immigrant character, Mr. Powlavski, who leads the protagonist René to the house of a homosexual millionaire, though not exactly a man but an unearthly mutant, *Bola de Carne (The Meatball)*, which is a creative allusion to the "infringement" Gombrowicz-the-protagonist engages in by bringing Ignacy to the house of Gonzalo in *Trans-Atlantyk*.

Regardless of tangible connections and similarities, the two novels to my knowledge have not yet been addressed in parallel.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, several recent studies have instead linked *La carne de René* to Gombrowicz's first novel. Quiroga, for example, calls *La carne de René* "a tropical version of *Ferdydurke*" (*Tropics of Desire* 106) while Gasparini, likewise suggests that Piñera's protagonist is a literary double of the protagonist in *Ferdydurke*. Such correlations, even if insightful in many respects,

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<sup>37</sup> Back in 1947, Gombrowicz had sent an encouraging letter to Piñera regarding a specific chapter of *Banalizador*, which the latter seems to have modified and reused in *La carne de René*. Gombrowicz commented on the published novel of his friend in his later autobiographical *Diario argentino*, and it is also reasonable to suppose that he was the person who wrote the unsigned review of *La carne de René* which appeared in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación* in October of 1952.

<sup>38</sup> One of the principal reasons is the lack of accessibility of one of the texts among corresponding audiences. *La carne de René* has yet to appear in Polish or any other Slavic language. Its first English edition was published in 1995 (trans. Mark Schafer, New York: Marsilio). Meanwhile, the existing Spanish translation of *Trans-Atlantyk* (trans. Kazimierz Piekarec and Sergio Pitol, Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1971; republished by Editorial Anagrama, 1986 and Seix Barral, 2003) does not fully reflect Gombrowicz's linguistic innovations.

strengthen the asymmetric image of Gombrowicz as the leading figure in the intellectual relationship between the two writers. While Piñera was, without a doubt inspired by *Ferdydurke*, it should not be overlooked that his unfinished novel *El Banalizador* (1946-1949) aimed at the issue which is not present in *Ferdydurke* but becomes central in Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* (the question on the ever-problematic relationship between an émigré intellectual and his homeland; I address it in Chapter Three). My analysis seeks to produce a new angle of interpretation by reading *La carne de René* in parallel to *Trans-Atlantyk*, written concurrently, instead of placing Piñera's novel in the context of *Ferdydurke*, written years prior in Poland and revived through translation.

In the following discussion, I approach *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* as the products of the *ferdydurkian battle* of 1947. The present Chapter in particular examines the aesthetic strategies adopted by the two authors for self-expression. The main focus here is on the thematisation of language in the two novels. To better explore the ways in which the émigré sense of displacement, emptiness and disillusionment in the two texts is covered by the grotesque, parodic constructions and elaborate transgressions, I compare *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* to certain tendencies in Spanish American Neo-Baroque fiction. Both novels are concerned with fundamentally serious issues; and it is precisely the clash between the gravity of these issues and the deliberate un-seriousness of the language that provokes the *banalization* effect striven for by the two authors.



### Understanding Gombrowicz's "Merciless Realism": the Case of *Trans-Atlantyk*

Only the merciless realism could rescue us from the morass  
of our 'legend'. I believe in the purifying power of reality.  
Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*

The six short texts from 1947, addressed in the previous chapter, reveal the shared obsession of the self-proclaimed chiefs of South American *ferdydurkism* with the term *la realidad* ("the reality"). The same word resurfaces time and again in Gombrowicz's *Diary* from the 1950-1960s, and is also echoed in the writer's own appraisal of the novel *Trans-Atlantyk*, which he called the project of "merciless realism." It is thus rather ironic that one of the major criticisms the novel received in the Polish émigré press expressed a diametrically opposite opinion: it was claimed to be anachronistic, detached from and irrelevant to the Polish realities of the time. Czesław Miłosz was one of the first among Gombrowicz's compatriot writers to explain the reasons behind such criticism in a personal letter to the latter, in which he explained that the setting of the novel in the year 1939 did not suit the urgent needs of the Polish readership, far more concerned with the tragic post-WWII fate of their nation: "you sometimes act as if that entire horrifyingly effective liquidation there in Poland had not happened, as if Poland had been swept away by a lunar catastrophe and you come along with your revulsion to an immature, provincial Poland from before 1939" (D1 15). Miłosz referred to Gombrowicz as a Polish Don Quijote, as someone who lent his life "to windmills and sheep" (Ibid), avoiding to face the actual problems of his homeland. Gombrowicz was clearly concerned with Miłosz's criticism, for he included the said letter in one of his published *Diary* entrees. He then countered Miłosz's words with the comment that *Quijote* is the only valuable piece of

writing from its time period that has survived until our days. According to Gombrowicz, not unlike Cervantes' work, his novel was intended to be timeless, if not in its content, than at least in its function: "even though *Trans-Atlantyk* uses pre-1939 Poland, it is aiming at all Polish presents and futures" (D1 16).

Gombrowicz's commentary on Miłosz's criticism of *Trans-Atlantyk* in the *Diary* at first appears somewhat abrupt since it is placed right in the middle of the section where the author discusses the latter's recent publication, *Captive Mind* (1953). However, this move does serve its purpose. In Gombrowicz's multipage critical monologue on Miłosz's book we see a characteristically gombrowiczian attempt to approach the text at hand in a way that goes against the known interpretations by other critics; in this case by breaking away from the predominant perception of the *Captive Mind* as a kind of an anti-communist manifesto. The following quote summarizes Gombrowicz's argument on Miłosz's text:

I [Witold Gombrowicz] would say that in his book, Miłosz is fighting on two fronts: the point is not only to condemn the East in the name of Western culture, but also to impose one's own distinct experience and one's own new knowledge of the world – derived from over there – on the West. This almost personal duel between a modern Polish writer and the West, where the stakes are an exhibition of one's own value, power, distinctness, is far more interesting to me than Miłosz's analysis of Communist issues, which, even though it is exceptionally penetrating, cannot introduce elements that are entirely new . . . I think about it almost nonstop when I am alone and I have to say that Miłosz the defender of Western civilization interests me far less than Miłosz the opponent and rival of the West. (D1 13-14)

Gombrowicz's reading of the *Captive Mind* can provide a new interpretive meaning to his own vision of the *Trans-Atlantyk* as a "mercilessly realistic" novel. The above quote allows us to discern what Gombrowicz considered to be the Polish reality of the

time. He and Miłosz were contemporaries, affected by the tragedy of their country, yet located on the different sides of the same historical occurrence. Miłosz in the immediate post-War years had a prominent role within the Communist Poland, serving as a cultural attaché in Paris. After a series of personal disappointments, he ended up defecting from the PRL in 1951. Hence, the ceaseless concern with the intellectual appeal of Stalinism in his book, and the focus on the inner conflicts of a writer who had lived and worked under the Soviet regime. Gombrowicz, though he was not uninformed about the historical situation, had not personally experienced the life in PRL. He was living in Argentina; the intellectual acquaintances with whom he interacted most frequently at this time were Argentines and Cubans who resided in Buenos Aires. It is even probable that he was reading and commenting on the *Captive Mind* along with Virgilio Piñera, since the latter was the first among Cuban intellectuals to publish a review on Miłosz's book in the Cuban journal *Ciclón*, soon after Gombrowicz had included it in his *Diary* (more on this, in Chapter Four).

All this led to Gombrowicz approaching Miłosz's work from a perspective from which it could be expected to be approached by a South American intellectual, concerned with breaking away from the Western European colonialist cultural imperatives. It is even to a certain extent an anthropophagic reading, as Gombrowicz in his discussion strives to "purify" Miłosz's text of any elements that imply the necessity of pleasing the Western and/or Westernized readership. Miłosz must stop trying, argues Gombrowicz: "[to] adjust his wildness to the demands of Western delicacy," and instead start focusing more on a possibility of creating a new aesthetic order rooted in the "brutalized culture" of the Polish nation (D1 13).

Gombrowicz's literary monologue on *The Captive Mind* and especially, the insertion of Miłosz's letter on *Trans-Atlantyk* in the middle of this discussion, illustrates that Gombrowicz sought to materialize in his own novel precisely the same thing he was searching for in Miłosz's book: a kind of writing that emerges from the margins of the Western more than the Soviet literary context, that seeks for a more sovereign relation with the established canon of European literature, that disrupts the Western modernism, and last but not least, aims to destabilize the image of Poland as a apprentice of the West (victimized by the East). To Gombrowicz, the Western cultural influence on the development of Polish literature was a deeper rooted problem than the Stalinist censorship. This was a highly provocative idea for its times, if we consider that in the societies of East-Central Europe during the mid-twentieth century, the idea of their inherent "Europeanness" played a crucial role in consolidating collective memories and pushing against the Soviet oppression.

The major idiosyncrasy of *Trans-Atlantyk* is that while written entirely in Polish, and with its story rooted in the historical tragedy of Poland, the novel exalts, nevertheless, certain characteristics of the twentieth century Latin American fiction. It cultivates the desire to disrupt the Western conventions of literature, by resorting to the type of narrative that "is not tied to forms that live and die," and in which "the concerns of fiction writing are not only formal, but in many ways cultural and political" (Kerr 1-3). This, of course, is not an attempt to categorize *Trans-Atlantyk* as a Latin American novel, but rather to engage in a type of reading that situates it in relation to Gombrowicz's intellectual milieu back in Argentina. For this reason, the following pages address Gombrowicz's text as a continuation of the *ferdydurkian*

*battle* of 1947: a work that belongs neither to Poland nor to Argentina, but instead to an unfixed realm of the literature of *naciones menores*.

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Reading *Trans-Atlantyk* as a fictional embodiment of Gombrowicz's preoccupation with the conflict of identities and certain linguistic schizophrenia, which he with Piñera claimed they had witnessed in the literary developments in their home countries as well as in Argentina, reveals the difficulty of putting the *ferdydurkian* theories into practice. On the one hand, to paraphrase Gombrowicz's own words from "Contra los poetas", his writing aimed at freeing literature from "being enslaved to the instrument" – that is, the verbal expression – with a hope that lesser focus on form and established aesthetic norms would eventually draw literature closer to life. On the other hand, however, the tone of urgency, set already within the opening line of the book – "I feel a need to relate here for my Family, kin and friends of mine the beginning of these my adventures" (TA3) – proves that the desire to relate one's experiences to others is inseparable from using language. From the first to the last sentence of *Trans-Atlantyk* the reader's attention is drawn to the author's struggle of being bound to a language and yet trying to work against it. Thus, the experimentation with language, almost ironically, becomes of a paramount importance in Gombrowicz's first exile novel, as it turns out to be the most active agent in the creation of meaning, equaling, if not surpassing, the importance of the plot.

In *Trans-Atlantyk* Gombrowicz creates a distinctive literary language, difficult to understand even for the native Polish speakers. It includes new idiomatic inventions

in Polish and un-translated expressions in Spanish. The most stylistically remarkable feature, however, is the author's use of a particular historic Polish story-telling genre: a type of provincial gentry's oral tale which was popular within the Polish-Lithuanian Baroque in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, called *gawęda* (Polish pronunciation: [ga'venda]). *Gawęda* displays characteristics of travel literature, epic poetry and folk tale. It was mainly targeted to an audience of listeners, and even when some of the stories were written down, they retained many of the oral genre rhetorical landmarks: a highly idiomatic, colloquial and oftentimes vulgar (to use Piñera's term from the previous Chapter, anti-*tantallic*) vocabulary, vividness, certain speed and rhythm, repetition or trivial details, familiar and distinguishably intimate tone (Baranczak xvii).<sup>39</sup>

Historical context is crucial in understanding what makes *gawęda* such peculiar choice for a novel.<sup>40</sup> The culture of Baroque arrived to East-Central Europe during the times when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, devastated by internal political vacillations and foreign interventions, had entered a protracted cultural decline. From its very beginning in the early seventeenth century, the Baroque era in literature and art in the Commonwealth was split into two poles. The first one, the Westernized model, manifested mostly in poetry and drama, flourished at the royal and aristocratic courts. The second one – the so-called Sarmatian model (Sarmatians

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<sup>39</sup> In this respect, it is comparable to *skaz* narrative in Russian literature studied by Mikhail Bakhtin. For more on similarities and differences between *skaz* and *gawęda*, see George Gasyna's *Polish, Hybrid and Otherwise* 156-157.

<sup>40</sup> The sources that informed the above description of the historical context include: introduction to the English edition of *Trans-Atlantyk* by Baranczak (1994), *The History of Polish Literature* by Miłosz (1983), *God's Playground: The Origins to 1795 v. I. A History of Poland* by Davis (1982) and "The vicissitudes of Poland" in *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* by Bideleux and Jeffries (1998).

were legendarily believed to be ancestors of the Poles) – was popularized among the provincial Polish and Lithuanian noblemen, the landowning class called *szlachta* ([ˈʂlaxta]). Many of them acquired some degree of literacy through Jesuit schools; however, much of the literature (typically prose) produced by the *szlachta* did not go past the copying of high Catholic Baroque manuscripts, which were then infused with a blend of Macaronic Latin, Ottoman oriental and Polish folk elements. Hence, the development of the stylistically idiosyncratic *gawęda*, that Miłosz describes as “sometimes graceful but often hair-raising in its combination of the most disparate and contradictory elements” (*The History* 119).

With the arrival of Enlightenment in the mid eighteenth century, *gawęda* was excluded from the realm of canonical literature. It was discredited as provincial and devoid of originality, or, to use the *ferdydurkian* term from the previous Chapter, as a *banal* copy of the Western European Baroque. Later in Polish Romanticism of the nineteenth century, there were some attempts to revive the Sarmatian culture as a source of authentic folk expression (among others, Adam Mickiewicz and Henryk Sienkiewicz looked for inspiration for their works in it). Yet these attempts displayed interest in the highly idealized early stage of Sarmatian agrarian culture.

Gombrowicz’s unexpected revival of *gawęda* in the late 1940s was a completely different case.<sup>41</sup> His idea was to rediscover the historic Sarmatian Baroque as it was,

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<sup>41</sup> By that time, *gawęda* had become virtually obsolete. In the People’s Republic of Poland, the late 1940’s – early 1950’s were the years of forced implementation of Socialist Realism, while much of Polish literature produced in exile dwelled on nationalist sentimentalism. In Latin America, besides Gombrowicz, there were three other writers who are now included in the canon of Polish literature: Teodor Parnicki (in Mexico, known for his historical novels), Czesław Straszewicz (a journalist and a fiction writer who was on the same voyage to Argentina with Gombrowicz, then later settled in Uruguay) and Andrzej Bobkowski (an essayist; fought in France during the War, then moved to

with all its provincialism and eclecticism, thus not only going beyond but also openly parodying the idolization with which the Romantics had endowed it (in fact, in his later years Gombrowicz actually referred to Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (1834) as the book he was writing against when composing *Trans-Atlantyck*). In other words, *Trans-Atlantyck* is a novel that finds its impetus in the alleged *banality* of the Sarmatian Baroque, and its "inferior", "immature" and thus intrinsically counter-canonical language.

Ewa Ziarek is one of the first scholars to have drawn the English-speaking readership's attention to the use *gawęda* in *Trans-Atlantyck* as a challenge to Western literary modernism, which Gombrowicz's generation of East-Central European writers was born into, but by which they were never fully accepted or acknowledged. Ziarek's argument is that by turning to the marginalized genre of the Sarmatian Baroque instead of the other historical model of the Polish courtly Baroque, Gombrowicz distanced himself from the type of language that could imply a more tangible connection between Polish literary culture and the prevailing Western European artistic and philosophical currents: "[the] self-professed Eastern-European provincialism allows Gombrowicz to expose the cultural levels of 'undervalue' or, what Artur Sandauer calls 'the degraded reality.' Instead of being one step ahead of his time, Gombrowicz recycles what is forgotten or left behind by the modern culture obsessed with the value of contemporaneity" (Ziarek, "The Scar" 223). While agreeing with Ziarek on her take on Gombrowicz's re-creation of *gawęda* as a

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Guatemala). In the context of their work, Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyck* stands out as the only text that shows interest in *gawęda*.



challenge to the Western avant-garde literature, I would like to point out that the rebellious character of *Trans-Atlantyck* cannot be attributed to the Sarmatian Baroque as an East-Central European cultural formation alone. Starting with the spread of Enlightenment, and in many European countries all the way until the twentieth century, the seventeenth-century Baroque art and literature were commonly disregarded by historians and art critics as grotesque, vulgar, excessively exuberant and essentially associated with the “degeneration or decline of the classical and harmonious ideal epitomized by the Renaissance era” (Ndalians 11). Thus, it is not a case particular to Poland and its Sarmatian Baroque. I therefore propose that the most gripping effect provoked by the language of *Trans-Atlantyck* lies not within the revival of a familiar but long discredited literary form, but rather within the intentional use of its stylistic idiosyncrasies in order to provoke a type of excessive intertextuality that deliberately contradicts itself: a move that the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy identifies as one of the distinguishable marks of the Neo-Baroque current in Spanish American literature.

The Neo-Baroque movement has been profusely explored in the Latin American literary and cultural criticism during the last few decades. Gombrowicz’s relation to this literary current is a virtually unexplored field in Eastern European studies, and it deserves separate discussion, which is beyond the framework of this dissertation. In the context of the writer’s intellectual milieu, the most important primary texts from Spanish American Neo-Baroque are those that revived and employed certain elements of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baroque imagination as a sort of counter or alternative modernity discourse. If we read *Trans-Atlantyck* in relation to the writings of Gombrowicz’s Spanish American

contemporaries such as Borges or Cubans Alejo Carpentier, Lezama Lima and, of course, Virgilio Piñera, we can detect the shared pattern of recycling (or better yet, reinventing) the classical Baroque themes and emblems in such a way that exposes the untrustworthiness of the conventional Western concepts of “regularity”, “rationality” and “truth”. In their writings, the inclination towards dissonance and heterogeneity is felt significantly stronger than in the seventeenth century Baroque literature. In addition, it has a more political, more goal-oriented character: what the works of these otherwise very distinctive writers have in common is that they all intercept a number of modern Western aesthetic and philosophical systems, but then deliberately disorient them, displacing them of their logic. Language, of course is of a paramount importance in this process.

Approaching Gombrowicz’s novel from this perspective, allows us to observe in it what Santiago calls the “Pierre Menard’s” paradigm (after the title of Borges’ short story) in the twentieth century Latin American literature, which is: “a rejection of the ‘spontaneous’ and an acceptance of writing as a lucid and conscious duty ” (36). Despite its highly parodic character, *Trans-Atlantyk* is a thoroughly structured and profusely intellectual novel. The vivid language of *gawęda* with its non-professional sound serves as an operative dis-locator. The apparent “lack of artistic discipline” is deceptive (Nieukerken 510). It gives the text qualities of simplicity, playfulness and impulsiveness; an effect Gombrowicz claimed he had always aimed for in his fiction. However, the feeling of “non-intellectuality” and “lightness” of the language of *Trans-Atlantyk* is deceptive, for it is not born out of a spontaneous act of creation, but rather out of a quiet desperation rooted in a personal and national tragedy. Two decades later,

in *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz would refer to his writing of the *Trans-Atlantyk* as “a burst of laughter at a funeral . . . at the darkest hour of our history, when we would have done better to sing a Requiem mass” (KT 114). A “burst of laughter at a funeral” is never caused by joy but is rather generated by the desire to interrupt the accepted and expected flow of events; by the means of employing “transgression as a form of expression” (Santiago 37).

This furthers my argument that Gombrowicz’s use of *gawęda* goes beyond the rediscovery of the seventeenth century Baroque language for its qualities of abstraction and rebellious aesthetic expression. The inherently critical character of *Trans-Atlantyk* is primarily not of an aesthetic but of a cultural-political nature. In other words, it is not as much about the intention of upsetting the Western literary avant-garde and its obsession with all things modern, as it is about dismantling the very concepts of the “unity” and “purity” of Europe. Sarmatian Baroque as a ‘failed’ *banal* copy of a Western European original, and with its aura of crudeness and triviality pardonable only in oral genres and/or parodies, creates a metonymy of a cultural warp: a Neo-Baroque space from which the marginalization of literature from *naciones menores* within the Western canon can be contested.

An illustrative example of how subtly this space is used in the novel comes from a short dialogue between Gombrowicz-the-protagonist and Gonzalo in the scene where the latter suggests to set the teenager Ignacy against his father:

[Gonzalo] Tell me: do you know acknowledge Progress? Are we to step in place? . . . Eternally then is Pan Father to hold a young son under his paternal lash? Give some slack to the Young One, let him out free rein, let him frisk!

Speak I: You madman! For progress I am too, but you call a Deviation progress! (TA56)

In the context of the scene in which the conversation takes place, it first appears that by “deviation” the protagonist is referring to Gonzalo’s homosexual aspiration of seducing Ignacy. A few lines down, however, the reader finds out that going against the father in fact means going against the idea of Father as law – the embodiment of regularity and rationality – inscribed in the conventional definition of the Fatherland, the Patria (I discuss this point in more detail in the following Chapter). Later in the novel, the protagonist’s inner monologue shows him becoming fond of the idea of “deviation” as a form or rebellion against the established hierarchical order of things. Going a little bit deeper, the figure of Ignacy as an immature innocent teenager prone to victimization can be read as a fictional representation of Gombrowicz and Piñera’s earlier portrayal of Argentina, Poland and Cuba as “young”, “immature”, “marginalized” nations. In which case, the idea of Ignacy going astray from the established patriarchic norms can be read as an anti-Hegelian call of rebelling against the Western European cultural domination over the *naciones menores*.

To return to historical allusions in *Trans-Atlantyk*, the hermeneutically facetious play of introducing the idea of deviation in an already “deviated” language – the language of *gawęda* – invokes a similar effect to that of the infamous practice of *liberum veto* back in the seventeenth century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the peak time for Sarmatian Baroque. As a political device, *liberum veto* was a vote of protest that could be cast by any member of the *Sejm* (the assembly), and which had the power of trivializing and even nullifying any decision of the entire Diet. Many

historians have argued that eventually this system led to anarchy and chaos, impeding the Commonwealth's capacity of protecting its territories against the external powers. *Liberum veto*, along with the whole Sarmatian ethos, found its end in the late eighteenth century, after three political partitions of the Commonwealth imposed by external powers – Russia, Prussia, and Austria – took place. Coincidentally or not, Gombrowicz revived *gawęda* to recount the events of the year in which the history seemed to be repeating itself: when the fate of Poland and the further development of its literary culture was decided once again by external powers (Molotow-Ribentrop pact of 1939).

Gombrowicz uses literature as a form of a protest, an allegory of *liberum veto*. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, he refuses to reveal whether the patricide or filicide (Ignacy killing his father or vice versa) will take place, instead cutting the story in the middle of a scene in which everyone is dancing and laughing uncontrollably, with the final sentence ending in onomatopoeia: “And so from Laughter into Laughter, they with laughter Boom, with laughter bam, boom, boom, bam Boom!” (TA 121). The sense of rebellion against a “rational” and “mature” resolution of a narrative conflict also resurfaces in the final scenes of Gombrowicz's subsequent novels *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*. In *Pornografia*, an act of homicide by a couple of teenagers is followed by their unblemished smiles and the reader is unexpectedly left with a sense of lightness and relief. *Cosmos* ends with one of the characters' carefree masturbation and laugh in front of the others. Last, but not least, in the semi-autobiographical *Diary*, Gombrowicz recounts the “dream story” of him scaring away a crowd of Parisian

intellectuals by taking off his pants in public in a very “non-Western European” manner (D3 97).

Of course, a literary text as *liberum veto* just like the historical *liberum veto* is incapable of changing the course of the history of a nation. Yet, the very capacity of creating the conditions for dissonance, and the deviation from the established course of events is powerful in its own way. Gombrowicz has often argued that the best way of fighting the historical tragedies of any nation is by empowering the individual subject “I”: “in the face of the world, humanity, the nation, one is powerless, this exceeds one’s powers – but one can, in spite of everything, show them a thing or two with one’s own life, here [in literature] power returns to man, although in somewhat limited dimension” (D2 131). Gombrowicz’s response to Miłosz’s criticism of *Trans-Atlantyka* published in the *Diary* comes to mind again here: Gombrowicz does not agree with Miłosz’s portrayal of him as Don Quijote who has lent his life to “to windmills and sheep”; rather, he sees himself as a modern day Polish Cervantes composing the twentieth century Neo-Baroque version of *Quijote* during the time when his nation’s cultural practices and values are on the brink of either collapse or regeneration. Such is Gombrowicz’s “merciless realism.”

### **The Anti-Tantallic Baroque in *La Carne de René***

At the 2012 International Colloquium in Havana “Piñera Tal Cual” (“Piñera as he is”), on the occasion of the writer’s centenary, a significant number of presented papers underscored the inevitable juxtaposition of Piñera’s writings to those of

Lezama Lima: a lifelong friend and literary antipode, whose centenary celebrations had taken place two years earlier. Julio Ortega, in his seminal talk on the poetics of the two writers, defined the core of this ongoing discussion by identifying two sides of the Spanish American Neo-Baroque: that “of the light,” and that “of the dark,” or in other words, the “shadow side.” Lezama’s poetry is complicated, the stimulation of the reader’s imagination is rooted in the difficulty of understanding the text; nonetheless, it is not dark. Piñera’s poetic language – especially after the turning point of “La isla en peso” – appears to be more vernacular, that is, less difficult to access and comprehend. Nevertheless, it abides in the “shadow side” of the Cuban Neo-Baroque. Much of his poetry as well as prose fiction can be described as a dark, degraded and melancholic comedy which strives to take its reader to the limits of grotesque and absurd.

The same intrinsic darkness is what also marks the major difference between Piñera’s *La carne de René* and Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk*. The latter, though written and with its plot set during one of the most tragic periods of Polish history, is not a dark novel. The protagonist-narrator gradually loses control over his decisions and is thrown from one degrading situation to another. It appears inevitable that the dilemma of having to either succumb to the needs of his victimized nation or forever distance himself from them will culminate in a tragedy of patricide, filicide or both. Yet, the tragedy never takes place. Instead, the final scene of the novel leaves the reader with an unexpected sense of relief and even an anticipation of a possibility of some alternative solution, thus falling within JanMohamed’s definition of the émigré literature as: “a vantage point from which [one can] define, implicitly or explicitly,

other, utopian possibilities of group formation” (219). In *La carne de René*, on the contrary, the reader is tempted to expect the salvation of the protagonist throughout, but not at the end of the novel. The murdering of René’s oppressive father does actually take place in the second half of the novel, giving rise to the hope that René will eventually find the desired individual freedom from the collective destiny of his people. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, there is no hint of the metaphorical self-empowering *liberum veto* that would be comparable to the final pages of *Trans-Atlantyk*. The last scene of Piñera’s novel describes René’s eventual submission to the Cult of the Flesh, from which he was desperately trying to escape throughout the whole story.

Years later, in his *Diary* entry quoted above, on the capacity of literature to empower the individual, Gombrowicz criticized Piñera for engaging in “powerless” artistic expression that “pays homage to the Great Absurd, which smashes him [Piñera],” as if the latter’s post 1947 fiction had taken an undesired anti-ferdydurkian turn (D2 131). This comment undermines the affinity between *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René*, which my discussion aims to revive. The driving forces that underpin the narrative development in the two novels are virtually identical: both authors use writing as a form of rebellion against established norms and conventions, and both rely on the deceptively unsophisticated, undisciplined, caricatural, coded language. Like *gawęda*-based *Trans-Atlantyk*, Piñera’s novel proceeds in a simple linear fashion, assuming the qualities of playfulness, humorousness and impulsiveness; and in the same way, this impression of spontaneity is actually carefully premeditated. Piñera’s rhetorical strategy encloses in itself – as if to torture the reader – both Brechtian



distancing (for example, we are warned in advance that Ramón will be murdered) and gripping sympathy towards the protagonist, nourishing the novel's semiotics in such way that gives it an impression of a lack of stable meaning and interpretative openness.

As observed by Madeline Cámara, *La carne de René* seduces yet – unlike the final action of the protagonist – never gives in to the reader. The continuous teasing, theatrical playfulness and atmosphere of absurd, towards which the text is eventually leading, are not just Piñera's reaction against the voluptuousness of Lezama's (I would add, also Borges') writings, but rather an attempt to create a degraded, fragmentary form of Neo-Baroque that prohibits any lack of closure on the interpretative level (Cámara 217-224). On a similar note, Elisabeth Austin approaches the narrative strategies in *La carne de René* through the Derridean sense of linguistic and non-serious play, claiming that Piñera's novel makes it impossible for the reader to satisfy his interpretive desire: “[the novel's] constant movement keeps it perched over a void of meaninglessness, of unending possibilities and multiplicities that threaten to reveal the rootlessness of language in its negotiated relationship with ‘reality’” (60). In the context of Argentine scholarship on Piñera, Calomarde draws a similar conclusion that Piñera's prose provides the reader with no concrete theology on “truth” and “reality.” Its systematic break with verisimilitude and the dramatic tension between humor and horror are interpreted by the scholar as a response to the absurdity of the modern existence; to a tragedy that has no particular discourse and is beyond the reach of any literature (“Un barroco” 97-98).

In respect to the hermeneutical resistance of *La carne de René* as a text produced by a “specular border intellectual,” I share the above reflections on it being refractory to categorization. Same as in Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk*, throughout Piñera’s novel, the reader has the sensation of being thrown into a complicated world of heterogeneity and anachronism, or, to borrow the term used by Gasparini a “borderline reality” (215), where the representational meaning is suspended and where the privilege is given to the Baroque fluidity of the matter. The ambiguity of language in *La carne de René* (described in more detail below) problematizes the relationship between fiction and reality, enabling the text to escape any centralization, and even more so, any attempt of a nationalistic canonization. It is neither a Cuban nor an Argentine novel.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, I disagree with Austin’s argument that *La carne de René* falls outside of any historical and geographical situation. Though the places the protagonist René is taken or sent to by other characters are not identified by geographical names, they do not lack continuity. The order of geographical approximations of René’s moves is identified unambiguously: from the butcher store to his parents’ house, to Dalia’s house, to the city, to school with train, back to the city, to the cemetery, to work, to the headquarters of the *Causa*, etc. In addition, the mental space of the narrative is clearly divided into two (it does not display the postmodernist fragmentation and ontological uncertainty). The protagonist is trapped

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<sup>42</sup> Until this day there remains a certain tension in which the narrative of Virgilio Piñera is inscribed in the canons of Cuban and Argentine literature. In the context of *barroquismo cubano*, it is evident that his work does not occupy the same space as that of Carpentier nor as that of Lezama Lima. In context of Argentine literary developments of the time, as demonstrated by Calomarde in her analysis of José Bianco’s well known prologue to the first Argentine edition of Piñera’s *Cuentos Fríos* (1956), there seems to have been an attempt of fitting Piñera’s writing within “Borges’ constellation.” Instead of accepting Piñera’s self-representation of him being a literary antipode to Borges, Bianco negotiates with Piñera’s writings within the Borgesean approach to Baroque subjectivization and ornamentation. Calomarde sees this as an act of legitimization and canonization (“Un barroco” 83-86).

between the two major pulling forces as the only possible alternatives: the *Causa* (the space of the father, Father-as-law and Father as the symbol of the victimized nation; analogous to *Ojczyzna* in *Trans-Atlantyk*) and the exilic space (represented by Dalia, supporter of the son, but only for her own pleasure-seeking purposes; similar to Gonzalo's idea of *Filistria* in *Trans-Atlantyk*). All of the above supports my suggestion that the action of *La carne de René* not just anywhere, but within the *ferdydurkian* framework of the *naciones menores*.

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As with *Trans-Atlantyk*, I approach *La carne de René* as the author's attempt to put the theoretical criticism of the late 1940s, described in the previous Chapter, into practice. I consider that in Piñera's case, the most tangible aim was to produce a work of fiction that would break away from *tantalism* which he had scrutinized in "La nota sobre literatura" back in 1947. The analogy that Piñera makes between the ancient Greek myth and the contemporary Latin American literary scene in his essay includes the claim that the *tantalic* suffering is actually sweet ("dulce tormento"; "Nota" 52). According to the author, just like Tantalus, who after years of suffering began associating himself with his chains and eventually accepted them as an inseparable part of his natural existence, Latin American writers have grown accustomed to the convenience of imported, pre-established Western European cultural conventions. This resulted in adherence to form and lack of substance in their works. One comment that Piñera made about both Borges and Lezama as representatives of literary *tantalism* in their countries, was that they were both masters of "la buena retórica, la

ornamentación, el arabesco, el intelectualismo” (“good rhetoric, ornamentation, the arabesque, the intellectualism”); qtd. in “Dossier Piñera”), but that their writings lacked substance and self-expression.<sup>43</sup>

In his attempt to disrupt the *tantallic* discourse, Piñera turned – similarly to Gombrowicz – to the Neo-Baroque-style transgression as a form of expression. However, unlike his Polish friend, he did not look back at an already existing historical genre, focusing instead on the contemporary everyday vernacular. As if in response to the *Sur* editorial’s criticism of Cubisms and unsophisticated Spanish in *Ferdydurke* (as already mentioned, poor translation was listed by Ernesto Sabato and others as the principal reason behind the novel’s lack of success in Argentina), in his own first Argentine novel Piñera insisted on creating an impression of un-literary, “blasphemous” language. He had already begun experimenting with colloquial expressions in *Electra Garrigo*, today considered as a pioneering work in the post-vanguard Cuban dramaturgy but in the 1940s rejected by Cuban critics for its embrace of vulgarity, absurdity and irreverence. In *La carne de René*, the same experimenting with linguistic dissonance is brought to the forefront of the narration. It includes strong sexual jargon: for example, Ramón in the conversation with his son uses the expression “clavar,” which means “to nail,” but also – in street language – “to fuck” (Anderson, *Everything* 162). Another example is the narrator’s reference to René’s “red, swollen nose” as a metaphor for erect penis (Ibid 174). In addition to the repetitive use of Cuban vulgar discourse, there are a number of Latin, French and

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<sup>43</sup> As already mentioned in Chapter Two, the more recent research on Borges and Lezama’s work has revealed that such substance is present in their writings, and that they did not distance themselves from the Latin American realities as thought by some of their contemporaries, including Piñera.

English phrases; often misspelled or hispanicized: “*juke boke*,” “the *carne-leader*,” “unos cuantos *cocktails*,” and so on. This “impure” Spanish, rooted in the language of immigrants like Gombrowicz, or of lower class Argentines – Piñera’s homosexual encounters in Retiro district in Buenos Aires – and also in the street Spanglish spoken by many Cubans who grew up in the Platt and pre-Revolution period, attracted Piñera for its capacity to challenge the Latin American literature’s dependency on the standards set by the Western canon.

In another essay back from 1947, “El país del arte,” Piñera called for the liberation of Latin American literature from the imported traditional Western concepts of Art, Beauty, Sacrifice, Rigor and Seriousness. In *La carne de René*, these five concepts are mocked and stripped of their importance in practically the same order as they were listed in the essay. The classical painting of Saint Sebastian, with his body pierced with arrows, is modified by Ramón to resemble his son’s face, with a provocative masochistic expression of pleasure on it. In The School of Suffering, the sculptures of the crucified Christ in students’ dormitories are likewise redone by the school masters in order to serve the purpose of convincing the boys to harm their own bodies. The conventional notion of beauty, established by classical painting and literature is flipped around by the followers of the *Causa*, to whom the beauty lies in distortion, in disproportional, brutalized, spasmodic bodies.

With its motto “Sufrir en silencio” (“Suffer in silence”), the School of Suffering is an overt parody of traditional pedagogical doctrines and methods (it is worthy to recall here that the author withdrew from the University of Havana, after the professors on his Thesis committee refused to accept his relentless criticism of the

nineteenth century Cuban Romantic writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda). There, the traditional Christian concepts of redemptive suffering, sacrifice and pious seriousness are debased and supplanted by Sadean inversion, in which vice triumphs over conventional morality. For example, the legend of the Greek courtesan Lena is turned into a carnal parody by René's school master, who claims that had the ancient heroine the chance of going through their system of education, she would have known much better how to handle her tragic fate. Lena, involved in a conspiracy against the tyrant Hiparco in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., was tortured by Hippias (the brother of Hiparco) to confess the names of other conspirators, and instead of giving them out, she bit off and spit out her greatest enemy – her own tongue. René's school master interprets Lena's action as a defeat and sign of weakness. According to the School of Suffering ideology, she was not rigorous enough in her suffering, for a true hero would continue enduring the pain until the complete physical failure of the whole body (CR 63-64). He is recounting the legend while having his students to sit in electric chairs.

This multifaceted criticism of established norms all occurs in the signifying space of Baroque dissonance, which resists the coherence of the aesthetic form of a literary text, and therefore enables the novel's narrator to break conventional, natural and cultural, boundaries. In addition to the already mentioned use of seemingly indiscreet and deliberately disorienting language, Piñera's narrative employs a more tangible thematic element: the human body. Piñera's obsession with the body, as well as with literary and artistic portrayal of it during this time period, has been of a great interest to critics. Antón Arrufat recalls that Piñera initially wanted to put a photo of his nude body on the cover of the novel. After this idea was rejected by his Argentine

publisher, the writer suggested a radiographic picture of his body; however, that did not go through either. In explaining Piñera's obsession with the body, several critics have read *La carne de René* as a response to other works of literature. Arrufat, for example, argues that the novel represents Piñera's take on Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* ("Poco de Piñera" 61); while Anderson suggests a close connection to Marquis de Sade's writings, which Piñera highly valued and was preparing for a Spanish translation at the time.

In continuation of my reading of *La carne de René* in the context of Piñera's experiences as an émigré writer in Argentina, I would like to propose that, among other purposes, the centralization of the body of René has to do with the *ferdydurkian* idea of *banalization* (in this case, body-lization). In the novel, the protagonist's body serves as a *banalizing* element. The young René's personality, conditioned by the exterior circumstances, is weak and incapable of rebellion. He does not show a steady conscious effort in resisting the violent sadistic situations he gets thrown into. His body, however, does. Every time other characters attempt to subdue René's body to suffering by piercing it, biting it, electrifying it; or to forced pleasure, by kissing it, licking it, and so on, it tenses up and manages to resist. It is the body itself that behaves in a way which is unexpected and does not go along with the social conventions accepted and promoted by René's father, school teachers, Dalia and others. Its instinctively escapist reaction to the pressure of the external forces puts, far more effectively than words or conscious actions, into question the conduct of the others and makes the caricature of their grandiose ideas.

On the narrative level, the body eventually becomes the only legitimate dialogic partner to representation. Again, the way in which the language in *La carne de René* is used to serve the material body and always stays exceptionally close to the rough physical existence of the object, distances the novel from the *tantallic* metaphysical ideals of Art, Beauty, Sacrifice, Rigor, Seriousness. In this sense, Piñera's turn to the body is an anti-Hegelian move, analogous to the concept of "deviation" employed by Gombrowicz in *Trans-Atlantyk*. Beyond the long lasting resistance of René's body to the supposedly pedagogical (though in reality distorted and grotesque) endeavors of the other characters, lays the subversion of the Hegelian colonialist idea of Western European cultural achievements as the products of "mind" and "soul" in contrast to Latin American culture being traditionally perceived as the product of the physicality, immaturity, i.e. the "body", the "flesh". Whereas Gombrowicz, in order to frustrate the self-congratulatory triumphalism of Western modernity, turns to Eastern European provincialism (the Sarmatian Baroque); Piñera turns to the "flesh" of the *naciones menores* in order to *banalize* the idea of Western Europe as the "soul" of the modern civilization.

That Piñera was eager to produce a polemic and "deviational" work of fiction is further proven by a biographical note. Shortly after the publication of *La carne de René*, the writer made a rare public appearance in Buenos Aires, in a conference organized by Jorge Luis Borges. The paper Piñera presented, later published in *Ciclón* under the title "Cuba y literatura," proposed that Latin American literature needed to: "take for its material something diametrically opposed to old Europe" (93). If we consider the allegory of a literary text as a body, as a physical (written) manifestation



of knowledge, the *La carne de René* becomes a symbol of Piñera's resistance to produce a "canon-worthy" text that would fit within the pro-European *Sur* or *Orígenes* constellations.

The current Chapter sought to present *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* in the light of the preceding intellectual collaboration between Gombrowicz and Piñera as well as in the broader context of Spanish American Neo-Baroque, with the particular focus on the aesthetic agitation and, in many ways, an epistemic rebellion in the two novels. In the following Chapter, I continue exploring the *ferdydurkian* vision of a writer as a *banalizer* of cultural conventions. There, however, the discussion turns to an examination of a more socio-political aspect of the plots of these novels, as they both challenge the primacy of national affiliations in the political ideologies of Poland, Cuba, Argentina and other *naciones menores*.

### Chapter 3. *Banalizing the Nation*

Sail, sail, you Compatriots, to your People! Sail to that holy Nation of yours haply  
Cursed! Sail to that St. Monster Dark, dying for ages yet unable to die! Sail to your St.  
Freak, cursed by all Nature, ever being born and still Unborn!  
Gombrowicz, *Trans-Atlantyk*.

Literature can both enforce and subvert the construction of cultural identities. It can be enlisted in the service of established norms and conceptions or, on the contrary, be used as a tool to penetrate them and dissect them. In their first novels written after the *ferdydurkian battle* of 1947, Gombrowicz and Piñera decidedly took the path of skepticism and subversion. As émigrés, both writers were concerned with the pressure they claimed they felt due to the widespread expectation in *naciones menores* that literature be loyal to the nation-state, that it should preserve collective memories, heal historical traumas, in other words, support the building of the collective self of a national community. As mentioned in my previous discussion, Piñera originally expressed his discontent with this pressure in the unfinished novel *El Banalizador*, parts of which he later incorporated in the subsequent *La carne de René*. Gombrowicz in *Trans-Atlantyk* took the question of the preeminence of national identity in Polish literature as the main target of his literary attack.<sup>44</sup>

While the protagonists in the two novels are very different – in *Trans-Atlantyk*, it is the autofictional first person narrator Witold Gombrowicz and in *La carne de René*, the adolescent René whose story is recounted by an omniscient narrator – there is, nevertheless, a discernible similarity between the most important secondary characters. By focusing the following discussion on these characters, I present

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<sup>44</sup> For the brief summary of the plots, revisit Chapter Two.

different angle of interpretation on a well-known, especially for Gombrowicz's readers, subject of the national question in literature. I address it from the perspective of the previously defined *ferdydurkian* vision of a writer as a *banalizer* of cultural conventions.

In each of the novels, there are three secondary characters that form an important narrative triangle: the Father figure, the figure of the Representative of a national (in *Trans-Atlantyk*) or highly nationalized (in *La carne de René*) institution, and, last but not least, an adversarial to the former two, the figure of the Foreigner. The Father character, Tomasz Kobrzycki in Gombrowicz's novel and Ramón in Piñera's, is an émigré who strives to inflict his son (Ignacy and René) with a duty of sacrificing his life for the sake of their nation. In both novels, the nation-state of which the Father is a perfect servant is "imagined", meaning, intangible and impossible to be physically reached (the World War II Poland, which only existed in name but no longer on the actual map of Europe, and the undisclosed far-away country of Ramón's forefathers). In both stories, the Father's side is supported by the character I refer to as the Representative of the Institution. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, it is the director of the Polish Legation in Buenos Aires, Envoy Kosiubidzki. In Piñera's novel, it is the head of the School of Suffering, principal Mármolo. There is a deliberate ambiguity in the Father-Representative relationship, since in both cases the latter is depicted as flawed and oriented towards his personal political goals which are, nevertheless, inseparably conflated with the national cultural values embodied in the Father-figure.

Finally, the third side of the shared narrative triangle – and perhaps the most curious resemblance between the two novels – is the counterpart to the Father and the

Representative: the Foreigner. In both cases, not only does this character not belong to the same patria as the others, but also he (a millionaire Gonzalo in *Trans-Atlantyk*) or she (a wealthy widow Dalia in *La carne de René*) seeks to snatch the young son from the hands of the Father. The Foreigner is seen by the other characters as anti-national and anti-heroic, for he/she embodies the qualities that are, at least at first sight, completely opposite to those incorporated in the Father figure and supported by the Representative.

While it is tempting to assume that the Father and the Representative characters epitomize the push and pull of the home country culture (Poland and Cuba, respectively), and the Foreigner figure is a symbolic representation of the freedom encountered in the exilic space of the host culture (Argentina), such division would imply an oversimplification of the narrative dynamics of the two novels. The following discussion argues that the interaction between these characters exposes the nation-building project as a universal phenomenon, in the sense that it was happening, though on significantly different scales, in all three cultures that the narratives of *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* are intercepting.<sup>45</sup> In their own lives, Gombrowicz and Piñera had witnessed the capacity of nationalism to attach itself to different political ideologies: conservatism, authoritarianism, liberalism and socialism. Their novels, accordingly, neither take nationalism for granted nor reduce it to the collective political identity alone. Rather, as already pointed out by several scholars,

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<sup>45</sup> In Poland at the time, nationalism was largely related to the resistance against the forced Soviet internationalism. In Cuba nationalism also had to do with the anti-internationalism but against the US interference, and it was not as marked during the time period *La carne de René* was written (the patriotic demand would raise significantly during the 1959 Revolution). Finally, in Argentina, the nationalist Peronist discourse was greatly influenced by the euphoric situation of the economic growth and the conflictive relationship between the state and the oligarchy.

they anticipate (by over thirty years) Benedict Anderson's delineation of a nation as *imagined* community, depicting the phenomena of nationalism not as something that forms a part of social reality, but more so, to borrow Donskis' phrase, as something that "*makes* social reality" (*Identity* 1).

In *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René*, the authors use the fictional characters to express their shared preoccupation with the role that literature as a form of art should play in the process of forging national communities. Their aims are to underline the interpretive nature of the nation-building project, to expose the eclectic and self-contradictory character of the nationalist lexicon, thus assigning less importance to the collective self; and most importantly, to bring the concern with the individual into the center of the picture. The following analysis demonstrates how the novels achieve this without replacing the idea of a national collective with that of shifting and changing, fragmentary individual subjects.<sup>46</sup> Neither do they transcend national categories by moving into a more universal and metaphysical dimension (the two authors' criticism of Borges comes to mind here). Instead, Gombrowicz and Piñera position themselves as "specular border intellectuals," or in their own *ferdydurkian* terms – as *banalizers* – who are looking at the very fabric of the nation from the edge of it, as their émigré status literally enables them to do so. From this perspective they reflect upon the idea of the national collective not as a site of harmonic synthesis, but as a totality of contradictions.

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<sup>46</sup> In this sense, I disagree with the critics who categorize these novels as forerunners of postmodernism.

### **Institutionalizing the Moral Imagination: the Father and the Representative**

The years 1949-1951, during which *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* were being written, were paradoxical times in Argentina. The reform of the country's Constitution in 1949 not only approved the presidential reelection, but also assured that: "the Peronist Doctrine was converted into the National Doctrine, enshrined in those terms by the 1949 Constitution which included an article equating the state with the 'organized community'" (Romero 110). The Peronist attempts to organize all sectors of society, on one hand seemed to propagate a sense of democratization, by guaranteeing certain political rights to social sectors that had been historically neglected (e.g. women suffrage). On the other hand, however, the state was embarking on the road of authoritarianism, for it systematically weakened the chances of autonomous participation, whether of a political or societal nature, striving to: "penetrate and 'Peronize' all facets of civil society . . . The masses had to be molded, inculcated within the 'doctrine'" (Romero 111). The propaganda effort, manifested especially through the state-organized mobilizations and rallies, both redefined the concept of citizenship and absorbed the already existing framework of nationalist thought, with a great symbolism behind various acts of nationalization.

It is around this time period that we start seeing in Gombrowicz's writings an increasing preoccupation with the "collective individualities", embodied in his overt abhorrence towards the personal pronoun "we". In his autobiographical sketches and critical essays, the author recurrently argued that the overwhelming presence of an autodidactic "we" and the lack of "I" in the Argentine literature resulted too often in tiresome nationalistic prose (as it is well known, he also applied the exact same

criticism to contemporary Polish literature). In *Trans-Atlantyk*, the deconstruction of the collective nationalist “we” as a cultural artifact of modernity occurs through the development of the Father and the Representative characters. Although no direct references to Argentine politics are made in either this or Piñera’s novel, it is not difficult to discern certain resemblances to the Peronist type of “personalist, almost mystical *caudillismo*” (Daniel 34) in Tomasz and Ramón’s figures. The two represent the macho values of violent dominance. Their attempts to have total control of their sons’ lives echo a whole range of socio-cultural oppositions: domination versus autonomy, subservience versus rebelliousness, tradition versus novelty, assertive masculinity versus soft masculinity and so on.

Moreover, the state-sponsored cult of Perón’s personal power is reflected in the parodied relationship between the characters of Tomasz and the Envoy in *Trans-Atlantyk*, and Ramón and Mármolo in *La carne de René*. In both novels these relationships are defined as being rooted in the idea of a society as a state-controlled community rather than a collection of individuals. As it will be illustrated with specific examples from each novel later in this Chapter, the Envoy and Mármolo – both greatly anti-intellectual and to certain extent populist – hold themselves responsible for mobilizing support for collective aims and purposes, which is reminiscent of the Peronism’s early political appeal, described by Daniel as “eschew[ing] the need for a peculiarly enlightened political elite and reflect[ing] and inculcat[ing] a profound anti-intellectualism” (22).

In *Trans-Atlantyk*, through the type of exaggeration characteristic to oral genres, the Father and the Envoy characters are presented to the reader as poles apart.

Yet they are actually indispensable to one another, for they fit within the same framework: the construction of the nation, the fatherland, the Patria. Tomasz is believed by the narrator to be a living embodiment of the pure value, morality, honesty, simplicity and masculine bravery (hence setting the standard of heteronormativity as a rule for a true citizen): “This man, exceeding worthy, Decent was, of Dry features, well-proportioned, grizzly head, fair eye, grey and very Bushy . . . such Mannerliness and Sensibleness in all things, Honourableness, confronted with apparent exceeding purity, righteousness in all Affairs, designs” (TA 48-49). For Tomasz, his main duty as a father is to teach his son Ignacy to defend the same national values he has always adhered to. Reproducing the continuity, following the certain imagined historical linear temporal progression, is his one and only objective, and the only way of reaching it is by turning his son in what he himself was back in his younger days – a loyal soldier of his nation.

Initially, Gombrowicz-the-protagonist perceives Tomasz’s behavior as heroic and leans to support and protect him and his son from the Argentine Gonzalo and his homosexual intentions. However, as the story unfolds, Tomasz’s image starts inexorably shifting from that of a potential victim to that of a potential victimizer. Every time when the protagonist goes to Tomasz with advice that could make things better (for example, begging him to leave Buenos Aires with no further delay), they only get worse. Instead of distancing himself and Ignacy away from Gonzalo, Tomasz stubbornly insists on settling the matters in a “manly” way. First he requests an old-fashion duel (recall that the story takes place in 1939) with Gonzalo. Then, after the duel turns into a farce and nobody dies, he starts envisioning killing his own son in



order not to dishonor his family's name for being associated with the homosexual foreigner. In the final scene of the novel, the narrator describes Tomasz wandering around with a knife in his hand, looking like a madman. This image intensifies the negative side of his earlier intents of sending Ignacy off to fight for his erased-from-the-map country, revealing that the symbolic collective values, independently of the form they take in different situations, are far more important to him than his son's life. Tomasz's character thus can be summarized as rooted in the blind faith in what Benedict Anderson refers to as: "a deep cross-class horizontal fraternity, which makes it possible to explain the vast human sacrifices made on behalf of the nation, symbolized by the ghostly national imaginings at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior" (qtd. in Smith 75).

If set aside on its own, the figure of Tomasz puts into doubt the merit of blindly adhering to the national values of the underdog nation in the WWII scene, Poland. However, it alone does not bring forward the constructed character of the moral imagination of the nation. This is where the importance of the figure of the Representative, the Envoy Feliks Kosiubidzki comes in. At the outset, the Envoy – also interchangeably referred to by the narrator as the Minister, His Excellency and Chancellor – appears to be the exact opposite of Tomasz. Everything about his looks, facial expressions and bodily gestures is vague, slippery and slimy: "Lean-Plumpy, somewhat fatty, he had a nose likewise Lean-Plumpy, an eye vague, fingers Slim-Plumpy and belike a Leg Slim and plumpy or fat . . ." (TA 12). His personality matches his appearance: he is exceptionally sneaky, always varying his plans according to the situation. Perhaps for this reason – being depicted as an obvious,

stereotypical caricature of a corrupt aggrandized politician – the Envoy figure has received very little attention from the critics. Nevertheless, it is through his character more than any other in the novel that the reader witnesses the power of institutionalized synthesization of national symbols.

If the figure of the Father can be interpreted as a personified collective consciousness used in nationalist discourses, then the Envoy plays a key role in exposing the process in which this consciousness is constructed or fabricated. His own self-identity is conflated with the very institution he represents: “I’m the Envoy, I the Government, here the Legation, I’m the Minister, I the country, I’m the Envoy, the Minister, I the Government, Legation, Country...” (TA 72). The way in which he exploits other characters, including Tomasz, in order to advance what he claims to be the urgent needs of the war-stricken Poland, is a process that clearly echoes the way nationalism employs different elements of culture – myths, symbols, customs – in order to further the convention that there is such a thing as an authentic collective self, or in other words, to assure the primacy of a national affiliation. Every action the Envoy undertakes, every event he organizes, is defined by the same ambition of representing such-and-such attribute of the supposedly Polish national character: heroic, ingenious, genial, productive, originative and so on. His complete disregard for individuals is concomitant to his eager attempt to link the state and culture by the means of subjugating the literary, intellectual and popular culture to institutionalization.

There are three scenes in the novel which illustrate this. First, there is the Banquet scene (discussed in more detail in Chapter One), in which the Envoy attempts

to link literature to the state by forcing the protagonist to present himself as a genius writer, a representative of the “thriving” literary world of the Polish nation (whereas the latter would much rather prefer to advocate cultural individualism). The second one is the duel scene between Tomasz and Gonzalo, during which the Envoy links the past traditions of the Polish gentry and the Polish folkloric ideal of manliness to the state. He organizes a farce hunt show – since there are no hairs to hunt in the city of Buenos Aires – and makes a spectacle out of the occasion with the political goal to demonstrate his compatriots as well as the Argentine guests that: “not only with Geniuses, Thinkers, and extraordinary Authors is our Nation glorious, surpassing Glorious, but also with Heroes . . . let people over here see how a Pole can stand up!” (TA 64). The third case of linking the folk tradition to state occurs in the final scene of the novel. There the Envoy brings a big party of people to Gonzalo’s villa under the excuse of the ancient Polish custom of *Kulig*: a sleigh ride party organized among the *szlachta* class, and dating back to the times of Sarmatian culture.

In all three occasions, there is a complete failure of achieving any authenticity, any public manifestation of “Polishness”. The protagonist writer runs away from his own Banquet. The duel scene ends in chaos: the Envoy’s hunting dogs attack Ignacy, who gets saved by Gonzalo, the most anti-Polish character of all (foreigner of a mixed blood and homosexual). Last but not least, in the *Kulig* scene, the traditional Polish dances are overtaken by rhythmical, more South American than Eastern-European sounds of drumming: “Other dancers there still tried to dance, to complement, as this is a Kulig, a Kulig, Mazurka, Maruzka, but not a chance! No more a Kulig, just Boombam, Bommbam...” (TA 120). The three consecutive failures prove that Polish

national culture as such cannot be reproduced by its émigrés. Having sustained the catastrophe of war and occupation Poland in the novel – and to Gombrowicz-the-author, also in reality – becomes an imagined homeland.

The protagonist narrator, personally involved in all three scenes, observes the Envoy's failures. He describes his reaction to the absurdity of these situations as a feeling of emptiness. The word "empty" is first used after Tomasz-Gonzalo's duel scene, and then is repeated with an increasing frequency throughout the second half of the novel: "in the emptiness of that track of mine and in that Field of Mine, yet Empty Empty, as if 'twere naught . . . and we ride rather smartly, albeit Empty Hollow . . . I respond, but 'twas Empty, Empty..." (TA79). Within the word "emptiness" is the banal truth that no institutionalization and preservation of the intrinsically Polish cultural values is possible, since the very existence of these values is questionable. Carried in the imagination of expatriates, there is only a synthetic memory of them, deviated due to the failed attempts to recreate any kind of Polish authenticity through events that enforce patriotism. A biographical moment that corresponds to this observation: in 1955 the local Polish community's journal in Buenos Aires *Głos Polski* published Gombrowicz's essay on *Trans-Atlantyk*, in which the writer frowned at his émigré compatriots: "if you behave like a flock of dull actors only attached to their past, then no inauguration ceremonies, no flag waving and no patriotic meetings is of any help, for no one will even notice your existence" ("Hocus opus" 389).

I have argued above that through the Father-Representative narrative lines Gombrowicz's novel defines in its own way the idea of the nation as an imagined community. I have also insisted that though both of these characters are Poles and

concerned, to the point of extreme, only with all things Polish, their behavior and their role in the story cannot be fully explained without also looking at the Argentine context in which *Trans-Atlantyk* was written. The sentimental identity between Juan Perón as the father-like leader of the nation and his audiences is reminiscent in the narrator's glorification of Tomasz in the first half of the novel. The eclecticism of the Envoy's actions, which all sum up to a single goal of fashioning the nationalist discourse in such a way that it encompasses every element of the society, can also be interpreted as a derisive take on the highly eclectic Peronist push towards the "with us or against us" type of state politics (Romero 93). Setting the details on the formation of these two characters aside, however, their most significant role in the novel is to expose the ever-thorny relationship between nationalism (with its many faces) and literature. Gombrowicz-the-protagonist finds himself incapable of escaping the nationalist pressures, as subtly but compellingly implied through his recurrent action, a supposedly acknowledged and respected writer, mechanically falling on his knees every time he has to face Tomasz and/or the Envoy.

The novel as a whole, on the other hand, does succeed in escaping from the established nationalist expectations of the Polish émigré literature. By infusing Tomasz and the Envoy's characters with the elements borrowed from the Argentine sociopolitical realities, and by presenting them in a farce tragicomedy type of setting, Gombrowicz *banalizes* nationalist discourse – Polish, Argentine or anywhere – contesting it as a game of inertia, a cultural artifact of modernity. The novel's harsh treatment of the central characters that represent the building blocks of the nation-state: the Father/military pride, the Envoy/political institution and the protagonist

Writer/ intelligentsia, exposes the constructed nature of the symbolic values that constitute imagined community.

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Whereas in *Trans-Atlantyk*, Gombrowicz-the-character falls on his knees without being physically pushed, in Virgilio Piñera's novel, the protagonist René is forced down on his knees by other adult characters. Not only he, but all adolescent boys in the story are subjected to this demeaning action; and not only are they required to drop down on their knees, but on all four. At the School of Suffering, treated literarily as dogs, the students are forced to wear muzzles until they learn how to "suffer in silence." Whereas Witold Gombrowicz uses the novel genre to express his complaint that the nationalist literature: "strives to lure the individual, subordinate him to the masses, submit him to patriotism, citizenship, faith, and service . . . and, therefore, it does not inspire trust" (D1 83), Piñera takes up the themes of subordination and of the forceful pedagogy to an extreme, divulging them in his novel with an even greater dose of grotesque and absurdity than it is done in *Trans-Atlantyk*.

*La carne de René* also has the prominent Father figure, Ramón. Similarly to Tomasz in Gombrowicz's novel, Ramón's character vacillates throughout the story from a victim to an aggressive victimizer. The latter image is even more pronounced here, despite the fact that Ramón gets assassinated in the second half of the novel. The image of a victim is set within the first line of the second chapter of the novel, with Ramón asking his wife Alicia, René's mother, to cure his wound: "Tienes que curarme la llaga." In original Spanish, the question sounds more dramatic as in the English

translation, since the word “llaga” can mean both “wound” and “stigmata.” However, the reader soon finds out that Ramón is not only proud of his past injuries but that his attitude towards the human body is completely authoritarian and militaristic. He insists on showing his wound-covered arms, legs and chest to his son René, forcing him to touch it and with this, the narrative resorts to the same vision of the linear progression of history we saw in Tomasz’s desire to turn his son into the soldier he once was (a significant difference, which could be considered for future discussion, is that in Piñera’s novel the Father-son relationship is charged with homosexual tensions, while in Gombrowicz’s, the Father character represents the heterosexual norm). Ramón tells René of his own father, who on the day of his death carried on his body the indelible signs of more than two hundred wounds. It is unquestionable that René must follow the family tradition.

In chapter three, Ramón discloses to René the reasons for his wounds. The surface of the story resembles a real historical event of rebellion and resistance to oppressive state authority. It is told in the first person plural pronoun “we”, a collective nationalist “we”, scorned by the author. The reader learns that René’s grandfather was a leader of a group of rebels who revolted against the dictator of their country and were therefore exiled. Since his death, Ramón has been continuously fleeing, persecuted for the values instilled in him by his father. About half way into this seemingly realistic story, however, the narrative suddenly takes a twist and starts moving in the direction of a characteristically Piñerian absurd, surpassing – to borrow Thomas Anderson’s quote – “the limits of comedy and farce” (*Everything* 178). *La Causa* – the name of the movement for which Ramón and his supporters are fighting –

turns out to be about the fight for the open consumption of chocolate. Ramón recounts that for centuries, drinking or eating chocolate was prohibited in his native country. It was battled for as a human right, and allowed for some time, but then prohibited again by the political authorities. In the course of these events René's grandfather established the group of reactionaries, *chocolatófilos*. Until this day, the members of this group, most in exile, are persecuted by the spies from their country, whom they themselves simultaneously attempt to persecute, and so it is a vicious circle of endlessly chasing and being chased. As illustrated by Ramón's words: "I am chief of those who are pursued, who pursue those who pursue us" (RF 24).

The most important narrative technique in the chapter on *La Causa* is the play with the semblance of a real historical occurrence. Just like in Gombrowicz's novel, the dramatized parts create an impression of historical verisimilitude, which then, however, is immediately shattered. On one hand, there is a detailed description in *La carne de René* of diplomatic negotiations involving the Minister of War, of assassins, of symbolism behind the revolutionary moves (e.g. wearing special uniforms) and of genocide.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the validity of these solemn narrative moments is constantly impinged upon by Ramón's insistence on all the effort and suffering being in the name of chocolate. Building on Austin's argument that at this juncture of the novel it becomes clear that *La Causa* in itself is a construct which reveals the artificial nature of the "real" (56), I would add that what the reader is witnessing is a parodied reflection of the nationalist process of constructing certain collective, emotionally

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<sup>47</sup> Among other things, Ramón recounts the deportations of "many thousands . . . to the frozen regions of the country," echoing – perhaps not coincidentally – the Soviet deportations in Eastern Europe in the 1940s of whom Piñera likely could have heard from his Polish friend.



charged symbols. This, in turn, allows us to approach *La carne de René* in the same light as *Trans-Atlantyk*: the two novels dissect the concept of the nation in the two novels as a cultural artifact of modernity in which the central role is played by certain sets of myths, memories, symbols, norms and traditions.

The dialogue between Ramón and his son on their antecedence culminates in the latter asking his father why their family never eats or drinks chocolate, and in the answer that it would be too primitive and too simplistic, for, in Ramón's words: "What we're defending is *the cause* of Chocolate," RF 28; my emphasis). In other words, Ramón's fight is all about the intangible ideal in itself. To recall, Gombrowicz in *Trans-Atlantyk* insinuates a moral paradox of sacrificing one's life for the nation by questioning to what extent the very idea of the nation is the product of – to borrow Gregory Jusdanis' words – "fabrication, invention and construction" (xv). Piñera's novel stretches this paradox further by suggesting that any symbolic construct could work as the ideological basis, as long as it is charged emotionally and placed in the center of the collective imagination. The narrative's turn from historical, WWII-resembling events to the talk about chocolate anticipates Benedict Anderson's argument on the "importance of invention in the process of nation formation by shifting the weight from historical acts to imaginative visions of national communities" (Grzegorzczuk, "Formed Lives," 138).

Starting with the fifth chapter of Piñera's novel, the narrative makes an important shift from Ramón's aspirations as an individual to the collective action. Similarly to *Trans-Atlantyk*, this is achieved through a character that is directly connected to an institution. In Gombrowicz's novel, it is the diplomatic body, the

Polish Legation in Buenos Aires. In *La carne de René*, it is an educational institution, an all-boy school headed by the principle Mármolo. The School of Suffering is clearly of a vertical hierarchy, military-like structure. The description of René's time there takes up a third of the plot extending to four chapters and includes a number of secondary characters, all male. Although the connection between the School of Suffering and *La Causa* is not explicitly stated, it can be inferred through Mármolo's insistence to prepare René for his future role as a "carne-leader" (CR 93).

During their first encounter, Mármolo offers René a drink and addresses him as an equal, giving the first impression of a relaxed, casual, secret-free person; an opposite of Ramón. However, soon it becomes clear that this is only a part of the game. The principle is an autocratic figure with a single goal in mind: to mold the young boys into subservient masses. In order to achieve this goal, his institution employs all kinds of different "pedagogical" techniques: from extreme physical hedonism to the "hands on" classes on torture, and from the completely distorting take on the classical Roman and Aztec mythologies to equally subversive preaching of the Catholic dogma. Here again, one can draw a parallel between Mármolo and the Envoy in *Trans-Atlantyk* (especially, in the three scenes linking the culture to the state, discussed earlier), in the sense that both figures are highly eclectic in their ideas and actions. More so than gombrowiczian sarcasm, however, Piñera's literary diatribe is on the edge of crossing into the realm of the grotesque and absurd. The narrator declares that Mármolo's school "mixed culture with torture" (RF 80) and that the former is only used for the purpose of fabricating a non-intellectualizing crowd of bodies, as emphasized in the audio recording René is forced to listen to. The recording

plays over and over again the only sentence: “No, René, don’t think; don’t ever think; just want, want, want,” RF 86).

The actual verb “to fabricate” (“fabricar”) is the key word in the school chapters: fabricating silence, fabricating subservience, breaking down the adolescent individuals into a docile mass of adults. The pivotal point of the process of fabrication is the use of the mutant doubles of the boys. The reader has already learnt of a double of René back at Ramón’s home office: a pseudo-portrait of Saint Sebastian with René’s face painted onto the martyred body of the Catholic saint. This scene gains more weight when it is echoed later, in the School of Suffering, where René discovers a crucifix with the face of Christ being replaced by his own face with a masochistic smile on it:

Before his eyes was a perfect reproduction of René himself in the moment of crucifixion. It drew its inspiration from the crucifixion of Christ but the sculptor had made a most important modification: in place of Christ’s face, full of pathos and anguish, René’s face, sculpted in plaster, was held high rather than slumped against his chest and his mouth displayed the laughter of a contented man . . . Suddenly he [René] remembered the theory of repetition. This school also employed the mechanisms of repetition! (RF 57)

In the next few pages René finds out that every student in the school has a double of the same kind as his. The motif of a double, being one of the most emblematic elements of the novel, has received multiple interpretations among Piñera critics: from psychological analyses, such as Abreu’s suggestion that “the doubles dramatize René’s confrontations with himself as well as incarnations of (his and other people’s) desires” to biographically-oriented readings from the queer studies perspectives; for example, García Chichester approaching the motif of a double through the lens of Eve

Sedwick's concept of "male homosexual panic" (summarized in Austin 58-59). One of the most recent interpretations, by Austin, rebuts the previous and proposes that René's doubles in fact do not signal a concrete meaning: "[t]he doubles and their manifold interpretations perforate the novel with emblems of polysemy and multiplicity, constantly reminding the reader of the irreducibility of these signs" (54).

Insightful as it may be, however, the shift towards a more postmodernist reading of the novel leaves aside the author's connection to the sociopolitical context of the place where the text was materialized, Argentina. As mentioned previously, Piñera dismissed the draft of *El Banalizador* and started working on *La carne de René* during his first brief return to Havana, when his connection to Argentina was at its very peak, as demonstrated by correspondences with his porteño acquaintances, his 1948 public lecture titled "Dos años en Buenos Aires" (Two Years in Buenos Aires), a series of radio talks in Havana about "Panorama Intelectual de la Argentina" (The Intellectual Panorama of Argentina), and last but not least, his return to Buenos Aires in the early 1950. Reading the motif of a double within the general framework of this Chapter, that is, in relation to the Argentine embarkation on the Peronist ideological narrative of the collective self and in parallel with Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk*, I propose that each of René's doubles signifies the attempt of ensuring the linear temporal progression which a national narrative as a collective narrative is expected to follow.

For the most part, René's doubles are synthetic artifacts: the distorted painting at Ramón's office, the crucifix sculpture at school, a rubber mannequin at the widow

Dalia's house.<sup>48</sup> Though manufactured and owned by different characters, these doubles underline the role of art – and, of the most urgent concern for the chiefs of the *ferdydurkian battle*, the role of literature as a form of art – in the process of constructing the collective narrative. As such, Piñera's obsession with the motif of a double in his novel, can be explained through Benedict Anderson's observation on the importance of fiction writing, novels in particular, in creating “that remarkable confidence in community in anonymity which is the hallmark of the modern nations” (36).

On his first day at the School of Suffering, René finds out that the sculpture of the double in a student's room gets marked with a red paint each time the real boy gets wounded. The marking of the doubles as the “learning progress” goes on, signalizes the process of duplication and enforcement of the collective identities by employing literature and art as dependent variables. Nevertheless, there is a possibility to stray from the confines of the situation. René, out of his fear for pain, inverts the order of duplication by insisting on marking his own body with a red pencil and damaging the artificial double instead. This action, which shocks the school attendant, is only the beginning. René's presence at school constantly interrupts the process of fabrication because he refuses to embrace the physical torture. Mármolo and other school officials complain of René's body “hardening up” and not being “loose or soft enough”, which implies, among other things, the difficulty of maneuvering and manipulating it.<sup>49</sup> Thus

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<sup>48</sup> Even when in the second half of the novel René meets two actual persons whose jobs are to serve as doubles of his father and of himself, we find out that they are also turned into artifacts – live robots – by a series of plastic surgeries that completely erase their identity as individual human beings.

<sup>49</sup> This is best illustrated in the chapter of the novel describing the events of the night before the freshman initiation. Despaired due to René's physical resistance, the school preacher Cochón (the

even by its passive resistance René possesses a certain autonomy in influencing the actions of the institution.

Within this idea lies the most noteworthy discursive similarity between *La carne de René* and *Trans-Altantyk*: in both novels, the legitimacy of an imagined community is intercepted in such a way that all what apparently had functioned before ceases to function and turns into farce when the protagonist is involved. In other words, the collective imagination works only as long as there is no one to suspend its validity. Hence the role of a writer – especially, the “specular border intellectual” who stands on the margins of the system – is to agitate it and to seek, through literature, for alternative perspectives and possibilities.

### **The Limits of Exilic Freedom: the Foreigner**

There are two points regarding the intellectual environment in Argentina during the second half of the 1940s – one economic, the other cultural – which we know both Gombrowicz and Piñera observed and agreed upon. The first one has to do with the advantageous international conjuncture in which the Peronist state emerged. Following the end of the WWII, the country had no foreign debt, and has been described by historians as “flushed in cash” due to reserves of foreign exchange

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Swine) and Mármolo try to get the protagonist’s body to “soften” by licking it. In addition to doing it themselves, Mármolo summons fifty boys from the third year class, all of whom end up licking René’s body. Now, it is literarily the crowd of already “fabricated”, subdued to the official discourse young men trying force René into becoming one of them. However, this does not produce the effect expected by Mármolo, and so he adds an additional element: orders some gin. Instead of helping, this plans also ends up in a total disaster: the boys get drunk and it all turns into a chaotic, visually intense scene of everybody vomiting, urinating on themselves and on each other and passing out. At the end of the scene we find out that the failure does not lie in the fact that the licking party has turned into a sadomasochistic orgy, but rather in the fact that René’s body did not give in. Moreover, it had a contagious effect on the other participants: at the dawn their bodies, including that of Mármolo himself, also begin “hardening up.”

accumulated during the war (Monteón 139). This is reflected upon by Gombrowicz and Piñera in their various writings through constant references to the stark contrast between “la vida fácil,” “la vida ligera” (“easy life,” “worry-free life”; expressions used by Gombrowicz) in Argentina and the struggling economies of their home countries. In his correspondence with Lezama Lima, Piñera wrote that Argentine intellectuals were accustomed to being paid for their work, and complained about the financial obstacles when obtaining essays by Argentine authors for the Cuban *Orígenes* (VV 76-86). Gombrowicz, despite his precarious personal economic situation, insisted that in Argentina one generally could afford “dar menos importancia al dinero que en Europa” (“give less importance to money than back in Europe”; PA 31). He was, however, highly cynical regarding the Peronist government’s consolidation of power through the politics of redistribution. As it will be addressed in more detail in the following Chapter, during the surge of political turbulences in the mid-1950s, Gombrowicz expressed his criticism that the accumulated reserves of Argentina were spent with little foresight. “[E]n las calles de Buenos Aires algo se había acabado,” wrote the Polish author, “Se le había acabado la *facilidad*” (“In the streets of Buenos Aires something had changed . . . It was the end of the *ease*” PA 15).

The second point, presented back in Chapter One, is Gombrowicz and Piñera’s inscription of Argentina into their formula of *naciones menores*, thus placing their host culture’s intellectual environment into the same equation as the ones in their home countries, despite the obvious economic, political and even cultural differences. The following discussion completes the triangle of corresponding characters by focusing on the way in which both of the above mentioned points manifest in the two novels

through the figure of the subversive wealthy seducer, the Foreigner: Gonzalo in *Trans-Atlantyk* and Dalia in *La carne de René*. Gonzalo and Dalia draw the reader's attention early in the novels, as they are introduced prior to the actual figures of the boys and their fathers. The only way to explain the undeniable similarities between the two Foreigner characters is through the lens of what was historically happening in Argentina. If Gombrowicz or Piñera's émigré experiences had come from a different country, one without the advantageous economic status Argentina had at the time, the characters of the wealthy seducers would not exist, or at the very least, would be very different.

Gonzalo and Dalia are described by the corresponding narrators as immensely wealthy and knowledgeable of how to use their wealth in order to please the public: extravagant dinners at Gonzalo's villa, musical evenings at Dalia's house, and so on. Both act in a highly populist manner and present themselves to other characters as a sort of educators, insisting that they know the best future path for the welfare of the innocent adolescent boys: Ignacy in Gombrowicz's novel and René in Piñera's. The most significant and curious point of comparison, however, is that through their shared obsession with bodily pleasures, Gonzalo and Dalia's characters invert the traditional gender roles. Moreover, in doing so, they expose certain universal characteristics of a nationalist discourse such as the worship of heroism and assertive masculinity, and in case of *Trans-Atlantyk* – as already argued by Ewa Ziarek – also of the promotion of heterosexuality as the norm for citizenship.



Gonzalo is a feminized male, the only openly homosexual figure in the novel.<sup>50</sup> He is presented to the reader by the same means of pastiche and exaggeration as the other characters. Gombrowicz-the-protagonist does not feel any friendliness or sympathy towards Gonzalo; on the contrary he is ashamed of being associated with the latter's company. Gonzalo's physical appearance is described as deviated from the prevailing norms of masculine beauty: he has outstandingly red lips, dresses too flashy, sometimes with feminine attire, etc. Whenever Gonzalo is in the same scene as the macho par excellence, Tomasz, he is depicted as a *maricon*, in the sense of the Spanish word that is used to stigmatize homosexuality as cowardice: “[Gonzalo] changes himself into Woman and in Her, in that woman, escape, protection from Tomasz's wrath he finds! For now not a Man! Now a Woman!” (TA 51) or, “But what Sir is he? Not sir but Madam! . . . A-going hers was Gonzala, furtively skirting by the bushes” (TA 69), or “Out of fear then he enfeebled into Woman and when Woman, he is afraid no more!” (TA 55).

Yet, it is precisely through the exaggeratedly negative, homophobic (and simultaneously, as illustrated by the above quotes, also misogynist) description of

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<sup>50</sup> As I implied in the previous Chapters, Gombrowicz's friendship with Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu must have had influence on the Polish writer's openness in bringing homosexuality to the forefront of narration in *Trans-Atlantyk*. In Cuba, during Ramón Grau's presidency (1944-1948), there was no censorship of homosexual writers. Many of the collaborators of *Orígenes* were homosexual. Piñera upon his arrival to Buenos Aires continued being open about his homosexuality, as evidenced, among other biographical examples, by homophobic slurs of the Argentine writer Bioy Casares regarding the Cuban writer and his male partners. That Gombrowicz openly talked with Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu about his homosexual adventures in Retiro district, is claimed by a Cuban writer Reinaldo Arrenas, one of Piñera's disciples from the younger generation. Arrenas' autobiography *Before Night Falls*, though discredited by many Polish critics for lack of factual support and exaggeration, should not be ignored as a source of information, for it does illustrate that Gombrowicz did not start writing about homosexuality out of nowhere, but with an encouragement from his Cuban friends. Also, in the case of *Trans-Atlantyk* in particular, I agree with the Cuban scholar José Quiroga's suggestion that Gombrowicz's idea of homosexually liberating Filistria and heterosexually restrictive Patria was influenced by Piñera, whose fiction is virtually always coded “on two conflictive levels: homosexuality and politics” (*Tropics of Desire* 103).

Gonzalo that the narrator-Gombrowicz reveals to the reader what he himself is seemingly unable to see – and this is the mastery of Witold Gombrowicz as a writer – that there is a homophobic logic that underlines the idea of the organic national collective. The first time Gombrowicz-the-protagonist and Gonzalo see Tomasz and Ignacy, the Argentine character assumes that Tomasz is just another *puto* who had paid the boy for sexual favors. This misunderstanding is clarified on the same page and is never referred to again. However, its echo can be detected in the central dilemma of the novel, for the two options at hand – Ignacy being sent to fight the war back in Europe or being saved by Gonzalo only to become his lover – are juxtaposed by the narrator in such manner that none appears significantly more appealing than the other. The most provocative aspect of the entire novel lies precisely in this move: putting the action that is traditionally viewed as noble, righteous and heroic on the exact same level as the action that is traditionally viewed as shameful, perverted and unaccepted.

As pointed out by Ziarek, it is through the character of Gonzalo that Gombrowicz's novel challenges the historical exclusion of "the erotic significations of marginality" from the narrative of the nation ("The Scar" 215). Thus, it is not Gonzalo as a character, but rather the way that the protagonist and other characters react to him, that should be given most attention to by the reader. One of the best examples of this is the duel scene between Tomasz and Gonzalo. The Argentine arrives to the duel place overdressed, all in glitter, and the narrator spends a whole paragraph describing, in an overtly anti-homosexual tone, what a sharp contrast the former is from the modesty and "true manliness" embodied by Tomasz. However, the detailed

description of Gonzalo is actually there to expose the performative character of behaving like a “true” Polish male citizen. Upon Gonzalo’s arrival, the witnesses of the event, three other Polish secondary characters, mount their stallions – specifically stallions and not mares – out of the fear of being taken for gay: “Yet not for the purpose of Exercising did they come on Stallions but perchance being witnesses for a Cow [Gonzalo, feminized male], they did tremble lest they be taken for Cows, Mares” (TA 67). Cultivating patriotic character and national pride in exile is depicted as inseparable from being paranoiac against sexual “deviations” because they do not fit the national form; they do not go with the imagined narrative.

Several critics have suggested that Gonzalo’s figure represents Gombrowicz’s coming to terms with his own homosexuality.<sup>51</sup> For instance, Hanjo Berressem, in his Lacanian reading of *Trans-Atlantyck*, calls Gonzalo the manifestation of the author’s “depraved and formerly repressed alter ego” (102). The homosexual self-acceptance – or, to use Bradley Epps’ term, the acceptance of sexual “in-betweenness” (since Gombrowicz himself sought and I would add, successfully managed, to eschew classification as either straight or gay) – is inseparable from the exotic exilic space, which Argentina was to the Polish writer. The distance and anonymity it offered enabled the creation of the character that deviates from the heterosexual and, simultaneously, the Polish national norm. The wealthy Foreigner is the only figure in the novel which offers the concrete chance to break away from the Father and the Institution.

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<sup>51</sup> For more on the questions of sexuality and gender roles in Gombrowicz’s writing, cf. studies by Berressem, Epps, Soltynsk, Kuharski and Ziarek. The latter’s analysis of Gombrowicz’s *Diary* through the lenses of the Queer Theory is also applicable to my reading of *Trans-Atlantyck*.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the exile – through Gonzalo – represents the ultimate liberation. Even though in the novel Gombrowicz-the-protagonist essentially admits that he prefers the notion of *filistria* promoted by the Argentine millionaire over that of the *patria* promoted by Tomasz and the Envoy, he continues distrusting Gonzalo's the methods of "saving" Ignacy. Towards the second half of the story, it becomes evident that those methods are analogous to the ones used by the Polish nationalist characters. If Tomasz seeks to turn his son into a soldier who would earn his honor by mechanically reproducing the actions of other soldiers who had been honored as martyrs before him, Gonzalo likewise employs the same strategy of teaching by imitation. He orders a servant of Ignacy's age to spend a lot of time with the latter, expecting the two boys to bond and become so compatible in their every move that if the servant boy, commanded by Gonzalo, approached Tomasz with a knife, Ignacy would automatically do the same. Then the stabbing of his own father would take place without any previous contemplation, merely by the means of imitation.

In Piñera's novel, the resemblance between the methods of subjugation – sexual, political or both – used by the Father and Representative figures and the Foreigner are even more apparent than in *Trans-Atlantyk*. To start off, it is important to point out the crucial conceptual difference between the two novels: for Piñera, homosexual self-acceptance is not as much of a question as it is for Gombrowicz (in this way, my comparative reading of *La carne de René* differs from the oft-quoted interpretation by García Chichester, that René's final surrender to the homosocial world of the *Causa* marks the coming out of the closet and the triumph over the "male

homosexual panic”). Piñera openly admitted his homosexuality in his autobiographical writings and was also outspoken about the social marginalization of homosexuality in his critical essays (e.g. “Tres elegidos” (1945), “Emilio Ballagas en persona” (1955) and other texts). Yet the concern with his homosexuality in his fiction is not as urgent. More importance is given to the use of fiction to contest the different kinds of social oppression: class, race, gender and homosexuality included, but not of an exclusive interest. As Quiroga notes: “Piñera decided to live his *life* openly as a homosexual while his *texts* only marginally dealt with homosexuality . . . [he] was going to refuse the space of the closet” (*Tropics of Desire* 118).

In *La carne de René*, Ramón and Mármolo’s interaction with René are marked with homosexual – more precisely, homo-sadistic – tensions. The Foreigner to the *Causa*, Dalia, is the inversion of their image: she possesses the heterosexual desire they lack, and she is also the advocate of pleasure versus pain. It is not as much about defining the homo- versus hetero- paradigm, as it is about parodic inversion of gender roles. As much as Gonzalo in *Trans-Atlantyk* is a feminized male, Dalia is depicted by the narrator of *La carne de René* as a masculinized female. Her purely physical interest in René is unambiguous, and she has no reservations about demonstrating it, both in private and in public: “[t]he inversion of traditional gender roles is underscored through Dalia’s exhibition of stereotypically masculine emotions – exaggerated insensitivity, aggressiveness, obsession with sexual conquest . . . She is the seducer, the manipulator, the reflexive conqueror” (Anderson, *Everything* 189-190). The unrestricted expression of hedonic desires by Dalia, same as in Gonzalo’s case, is enabled both by her wealth and by her very foreignness. Her land, the foreign land for

René's family, seems to facilitate the deviation from the self-generated norms that defy change.

In the novel, René goes to Dalia's house two times in search of consolation: first after the perturbing discussion with his father, then later, after witnessing a coldblooded murder on the street. However, well into the story, the reader finds out that the alternative for the adolescent boy's future suggested by the Foreigner figure in reality involves using the exact same methods of manipulation and repetition as employed by the Father and the Representative. About half way through the story, the reader finds out that just like the former two, Dalia also possesses a manufactured double of René. Just when the boy starts thinking her house might provide a refuge from his sadomasochist father and the School of Suffering, he discovers floating in her bathtub a rubber mannequin with his exact own face. Whereas Ramón is called by the narrator as "Angel Exterminador" (Exterminating Angel), Dalia becomes his inverted double the moment she is referred to as "Angel Erotizador" (Eroticizing Angel) (CR 105). Both images frighten René in the same manner, despite the fact that trusting the latter would protect his body from the physical pain.

It is with Dalia that René is insinuated to have the first sexual encounter. She manages to reach her aim in causing René an erection, but the seduction scene is actually left open ended; next thing the reader is told is that René is woken up by a telephone ring. Again, this encounter does not create any excitement or pleasure on René's part, only the feeling of disturbance and forceful submission. Even more so, he soon learns that Dalia, just like his father, is involved in murders of other people, including her own friends. It is because she – exactly like Ramón – is only interested

in the carnal existence of René's body per se and not in the boy as an individual. The protagonist's final encounter with Dalia and her proxy Sr. Powlaski in the last pages of the novel confirms that all the secondary characters of the novel are engaged in the same absurd battle for flesh, even if they approach it from different perspectives.

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After assigning the signification to the characters of Gonzalo and Tomasz, Dalia and Ramón, as the two sides of the same coin, it becomes clear that in both *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* the exilic space is perceived as only ostensibly liberating. This is where the concept of *naciones menores* comes into play again, since despite the significant differences in external circumstances, the modus operandi of the collectivist nationalist discourse, as depicted in the two novels, applies to the host culture as much as to the home culture. This is not to conclude that Gombrowicz and Piñera essentially perceived Polish, Cuban and Argentine cultural and political nationalisms as the same. Instead what their novels bring about is the concern with nationalism as a universal phenomenon. The triangle of secondary characters drawn above reveals the constant tension in Gombrowicz and Piñera's narratives, which is rooted in the authors' concern with the relationship of their work to their distant home nations as well as to the national space encountered in the land of exile, Argentina.

This tension in the two novels essentially becomes a process of dual mutilation caused by the hold the nations attempt to have over their literatures. On the one hand, the imaginary values of the nation as a collective self, intensified by its own institutional pressures, mutilate literature by stripping it of the sense of individuality,

forcing it to become a part of the collective “we”. On the other hand, vice versa, literature – émigré in particular – has the capacity of mutilating, by the means of subversion, the concept of the nation as an inherent attribute of humanity. Instead of supporting the idea of the inalienable authenticity of a national community, Gombrowicz and Piñera’s novels destabilize its building blocks, thus *banalizing* its shared memories, myths, symbols and norms. The plots of the two novels create an impression that everything which apparently had ran smoothly before, ceases to function and is turned into farce as soon as the story – the national story – gets written down, that is, is turned into literature. As I argued in the introduction of this Chapter, the final aim of this process of *ferdydurkian banalization* of the nation is to bring to the forefront the idea of a nation not as a harmonic synthesis of collective memories but rather as a totality of contradictions.

It must be stressed, however, one more time, that the act of destabilization does not imply an eventual destruction: neither of the two novels goes so far as to discard the concept of nation as falsity or delusion altogether. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, a crucial moment that illustrates this is a short scene very early in the novel, in which the protagonist notices a small insect on a street in Buenos Aires, and suddenly realizes: “I can see that this Insect in this Place and Time, at this very moment on that Shore, on that side of the Ocean, is likewise climbing and climbing, climbing and climbing. . .” (TA 10). This instant of consciousness, of some intrinsic, sincere and unexplainable preoccupation with his homeland, and also the immediate connection between it and the exilic space, occurs before the protagonist has met the Envoy, Tomasz and Gonzalo. Perhaps it is already in this very moment that one should foresee the open-



ended final scene of the novel: the massive outburst of laughter that has a liberating vibe about it and that creates: “a vantage point from which [we can] define, implicitly or explicitly, other, utopian possibilities of group formation” (JanMohamed 219).

Meaning: the group formation that would not reproduce the xenophobic, homophobic, anti-individualist logic.

Gombrowicz’s final twist is also where the major difference between *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* lies, since in the ending scene of Piñera’s novel there is no allusion to an empowering laughter. On the contrary, the fact that René eventually surrenders himself to the *Causa*, lends the story a sense of melancholy and darkness. Inconsolability and importunateness surface as the two distinctive marks of the novel: the same two marks that were at the heart of the very first piece of Piñera’s prose writing published in Argentina. It was a one paragraph story called “En el insomnio” (“In the Insomnia”), chosen by Borges for his *Anales* back in October of 1946. In this anecdote, the protagonist, exhausted from the inability to obtain sleep, ends up shooting himself with a revolver, only to find out that the dreadful wakefulness is a condition that is stronger than death itself: “El hombre está muerto pero no ha podido quedarse dormido. El insomnio es una cosa muy persistente” (“The man is dead, yet he has not been able to fall asleep. Insomnia is a very persistent thing”; 18).

Persistence of an undesirable condition is also the reason behind the dark ending of *La carne de René*. It is the engine that keeps the *Causa* running, as it is also at the heart of any imagined collective self.

Despite these very different endings, the two texts remain in agreement that the self-founding performance of a writer from any of the *naciones menores* always

happens in relation to the national collective. For Gombrowicz and Piñera alike, one can and should scrutinize the nation as a cultural formation, though it does not have to lead to its rejection. Nationality in the two novels is approached more like what Juan José Saer refers to as a type of label – among many other political, social, intellectual labels (“Perspectiva” 109). What Gombrowicz and Piñera were striving for in their first Argentine novels was to not allow this particular label to hamper their liberty as “specular border intellectuals” from replanting their creative strategies or from shifting the primacy of relationship onto a different label.

### **Continuing Preoccupations with the National Form Post *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René***

Gombrowicz and Piñera’s struggle with the national form in literature did not end with the publications of *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René*, and actually intensified in the two writers later careers. Throughout their lives, the two continued arguing that nationality is oppressive if and when it is imposed in its populist form. Soon after the appearance of *Trans-Atlantyk* in 1953, Gombrowicz published two critical essays, one in *Kultura* in France (1953), the other in the Argentine Polish émigré journal *Głos Polski* (1955), defending the ideas raised in his novel. In the first one, titled “Sienkiewicz”, after the Polish Nobel Prize winner, a popular historical writer, Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916), Gombrowicz argues that the more painful, weak and threatened the existence of a nation is, the more pressure there is on its literature to become indisputably loyal and to praise the victimized nation’s beauty and supposed past glories. “[L]ook, don’t persecute me, love me!” is the most eye-

catching sarcastic remark about Poland in this article (D1 223). The exact same idea is echoed in Gombrowicz's second essay, "Hoc opus, hic labor est...", where he declares that émigré intellectuals from East-Central Europe have the right to question and be critics – rather than only defenders - of their suffering nations:

. . . for I am disgusted by that insipid patriotic soup . . . The national pride has nothing to do with the primitive type of preoccupation with one's homeland in which it is treated as if it were an old lady on the train who had caught the cold and now has to be covered in blankets. Indeed, we should talk about the nation daringly, even brutally. It is not going to flip upside down from a rough word. (388)

Throughout the 1950s-1960s, Gombrowicz continued settling accounts with his own Polishness in the *Diary* and other semi-autobiographical writings. His openly and frequently avowed desire to "liberate Poles from Poland" is until today one of the best known phrases among both his fans and his critics.

The national question in East-Central Europe during the Cold War was a particularly sensitive topic, difficult to theorize. On the one hand, the political and cultural nationalist movements in this region were often "aggressively defensive, exclusionist, victimized, and constantly searching for internal and external enemies" (Donskis, *Identity* 33). Gombrowicz points out to these exact characteristics in both of the above mentioned essays and in *Trans-Atlantyck*. On the other hand, however, nationalism played an important role in resisting the forced Soviet internationalism. Keeping this in consideration, it is easier to understand why during the 1950s Gombrowicz was charged by some of his critics with being "a communist agent determined to besmirch the reputation of Poles everywhere" (Gasyna 146). In the following Chapter, I demonstrate to what extent this mistake is ironic and how the

writer actually distanced himself from the historical Communism just as much as he distanced himself from the nationalist discourses.

Piñera's relationship to his Cubaness is no less complicated and controversial than Gombrowicz's relationship to Polishness. The development of the concept of *cubanidad* since the War of Independence in Cuba (1895-1898) deserves separate discussion, which is beyond the framework of this dissertation. In the context of the discussion in this Chapter, it is important to mention Piñera's conflict with the *Orígenes* group over the idea of *cubanidad*. He accused the group of embracing a metaphysical and teleological ethos, and of the absence of a coherent vision of the country's realities, all of which he saw as an escapist discourse (he was not alone in this criticism). For their part, some of the *origenistas*, in particular Piñera's lifetime literary adversary, his first and most adamant critic in Havana, Cintio Vitier, claimed that on the contrary, it was Piñera's writing that lacked moral substance and expression of *cubanidad*. Dating back to the publication of "La isla en peso," Vitier had argued that Piñera's literary language, with its vulgar and colloquial way of expression, was a deviation if not a fall from the Cuban national spirit represented by the legacy of its historical heroes such as José Martí. To him, the cultivation of high modernist aestheticism and the "semi-mystical understanding of *cubanidad*" was crucial in resisting the intense corruption that dominated the country's political scene (Weiss 2).

After *La carne de René* failed to garner any critical attention from *Orígenes*, Piñera continued arguing that Cuba's literary scene lacked the capacity of defining itself in terms of its difference, clinging instead to imported European models. In 1955

in *Ciclón*, he published an essay “Cuba y la literatura” (“Cuba and Literature”), in which he rejected the connection between Cuba as a country, as a nation, and its literary production.<sup>52</sup> According to Piñera, the literary culture, while it obviously existed “*in* Cuba,” was not “*of* Cuba” (García Chichester, “Formulation” 232). He insisted:

I deny that such thing as a Cuban literature exists, since day by day I suffer this terrible civil death of a writer who does not have a true literature to back him up . . . I deny that it exists because it is incapable of demonstrating to me whether I am a sad madman or a magnificent writer. I deny that it exists because it does not energize me or give me protection in my vocation; I deny that it exists because I do not see anywhere this golden network that writers form who preceded us in their solid glory, the voices of universal recognition, the true literary life with its paradises and infernos. (“Cuba” 89)

This full of *ferdydurkian* undertones essay was a blow to *Orígenes* group, which after having been the most influential actor in shaping the country’s literary scene for over a decade had just entered its phase of demise (the last number of the magazine came out in 1956). Similarly to Gombrowicz’s complaint in “Sienkiewicz” that despite being “a second-rate Homer, a first-rate Dumas” (D1 223) Sienkiewicz succeeded in penetrating the Polish literary culture to the point that his style would be mimicked for years to come, Piñera in “Cuba y literatura” establishes the concept of *Arthurity*, which targets what he saw as his compatriot writers’, especially *origenistas*, inclination towards mimicking and repeating – to the point of banality – any form of literary production that has shown even the most modest signs of success. The “‘Arthurity’ imperils our literature,” argues Piñera in his essay, “[S]uch and such a

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<sup>52</sup> Its first version was originally delivered as a public lecture in Buenos Aires, at a conference on Cuban literature organized by Borges in the early 1950s, then modified and read again at another event at the Havana Lyceum in 1955, the same year as it appeared in *Ciclón*.

book is the same as such and such, and so on for the tens of similar works produced in the course of years. There is a formula: this formula is repeated *ad eternum* and is aggravating in that it is not the result of an ingenious crucible” (“Cuba” 94).

Gombrowicz’s insistence that the pattern of imitation and repetition occurs in the *naciones menores* due to the unending nationalist desire that “[one’s] nation appeal to other nations” (D1 227) could also be a perfect fit as a concluding remark for Piñera’s article.

As it will be discussed in the following Chapter, Piñera’s relationship to the Cuban literary scene changed after his final return from Argentina in 1958, especially following the post-Revolution surge in patriotic demand; while Gombrowicz, though he succeeded in finally getting some of his work published in Poland in 1957, remained resistant to inclusion of his work in any circumscribed Polishness. In closing the discussion on *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René*, written during the late 1940s-early 1950s, I would like to point out one more time to the problematic relationship between fiction and reality in these novels. It is embedded in both the ambiguity of their language, addressed in the previous Chapter, and in the resemblance between their secondary characters, the depictions of which *banalize* the building blocks of the nation. This enables *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* escape any centralization, and even more so, any attempt of a nationalistic canonization. Last but not least, it is within the very difficulty of categorizing either of these novels as Polish, Cuban or Argentine (or anti-Polish, anti-Cuban or anti-Argentine, depending on the hermeneutical approach) that the interpretive nature of the nation-building project

through literature and art resurfaces. There could not be a more *ferdydurkian* way of demanding the reader's attention.

#### Chapter 4. A Revolution Against The Revolution(s) in *Los Siervos* and *Operetta*

As I have already once told you, it would a great mistake on my part,  
if I started to talk politics.  
Gombrowicz, letter to Jerzy Giedroyc<sup>53</sup>

The good writer is at least as useful for the Revolution  
as the soldier, worker, or peasant.  
Piñera, “La inundación”<sup>54</sup>

The 1950s were a tumultuous decade in Argentina. Perón’s second term as the country’s president began in 1952 with serious domestic economic problems. A severe winter drought added to the already significant trade deficit. The reserves accumulated during the prosperous post-WWII era were being depleted, and the development of industry had increased the dependency on imports. The same year, Eva Perón, whose name was inseparable from the state’s outreach programs for the disadvantaged social sectors, passed away. The divisions between Peronists and anti-Peronists intensified. In 1953, anti-Peronists activists exploded two bombs at one of the workers’ mass rallies. Their act was followed by government-supported violent retaliation. By the winter of 1955, the situation deteriorated. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, an attempted coup in Plaza de Mayo during another rally of the president’s supporters resulted in deaths of more than three hundred fifty people.

The central square of the city, Plaza de Mayo, was crucial to social and political transformations of the country, as it was the principal site for the mass demonstrations by both Peronist and anti-Peronist groups (Podalsky 29). Since 1945, Witold Gombrowicz had been renting an apartment located less than six blocks away

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<sup>53</sup> Qtd. in Fuchs, 387. My translation from German.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted and translated by Anderson, *Everything* 88.



from the Plaza, and a few minutes' walk from the city's port. The writer avoided discussing the immediate political events in his autobiographical writings. After the June coup attempt in 1955, for example, he only wrote down: "16 Rewolucja" ("16 Revolution"; K182). Regarding Perón's last public discourse before he fled the country, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, he noted: "Mowa Peróna" ("Perón's speech"; K185). Gombrowicz's Argentine friends, however, claim he was more preoccupied about the situation than expressed in his writings. Juan Carlos Gómez remembers the Polish writer temporarily moving out of his apartment due to the fear of the military's attack on the oil refineries in the port ("Política"). Gómez also recalls Gombrowicz's sarcastic remark about "the wind of freedom blowing all around" made in regards to the fact that his quitting of the job at Banco Polaco in June of 1955 coincided with the downfall of Perón's presidency (Ibid).

Virgilio Piñera happened to be back in Cuba during the June events; ironically, however, in his letters to his friends abroad he provided a more explicit commentary on the events in Buenos Aires than Gombrowicz. In a letter to Carlos Coldaroli (at that time in the United States), Piñera described the June events as terrible, with human victims "falling [at the Plaza de Mayo] like flies." He also expressed the personal remorse for being away from the city, adding that he felt personally affected by the situation as if he himself were an Argentine (VV 122). After going back to Buenos Aires a few months later, Piñera sent a letter to José Rodríguez Feo, commenting on the chaotic political situation, military interventions and rumors of the civil war (VV 127).

Despite the unstable external circumstances regarding the daily life in Buenos Aires, for both Gombrowicz and Piñera, the second half of the 1950s was the time of intense focus on their literary careers. For the latter, this third long-term stay in Buenos Aires would turn out to be his last and the most productive. Back in October of 1954, in Havana, Piñera met the editor Rodríguez Feo, who had recently withdrawn his funding of Lezama's *Orígenes* and decided to launch his own literary journal, *Ciclón*. The two quickly sealed a collaboration deal. For Piñera, this was a long-awaited venue to express his dissent from Lezama's group, while Rodríguez Feo saw a potential in Piñera's connections in Argentina (Anderson, *Everything* 68). For the next two years, Piñera was an active contributor and correspondent for *Ciclón*, which drew him closer than ever before to the established Argentine literary circles. Among the Argentine writers whose texts appeared in *Ciclón* due to Piñera's effort were Borges, Sábato, Cortázar, Mastronardi, Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo and José Bianco. The latter, who functioned as the director of *Sur*'s editorial board at the time, aided Piñera in getting some of his own texts submitted to the Argentine journal. Moreover, he helped Piñera's short story collection *Cuentos fríos* (*Cold Tales*) to be published in Buenos Aires in 1956, and it was also Bianco who years later wrote a lengthy introduction to an augmented edition of this collection, re-titled as *El que vino a salvarme* (*The One Who Came to Save Me*).

*Cuentos fríos* received more attention in Argentina than *La carne de René*. Borges commented on it on several occasions (Leyva 364). Gombrowicz wrote a review for it in the important porteño journal *El Hogar*. That the close friendship between him and the Cuban writer continued well into the mid-1950s is illustrated in

the latter's letter to Rodríguez Tomeu dated September 1956, in which the first positive remark Piñera makes after a long list of complaints regarding his daily life in Buenos Aires is: "Veo con frecuencia a Gombrowicz, es un alivio" ("I frequently see Gombrowicz, it's a relief"; VV 173).

Besides composing short stories, Piñera continued working on a new novel *Pequeñas maniobras* (*Small Maneuvers*) and on his theater plays. The one act play discussed in this Chapter – *Los siervos* (*The Serfs*) – was published in the sixth issue of *Ciclón* in November of 1955. Until this day it is one of the writer's most ignored publications. The play was not staged until the year 2000.<sup>55</sup> Very little is known about the writing and redaction of *Los siervos*, as Piñera barely mentions it in his autobiographical accounts and letters, and he did not include it in his post-Revolution *Teatro completo* (*Complete Theater*) collection. Moreover, in March of 1960, he publically discredited the play as a mistake, for the reasons addressed later in this Chapter, in a fictional dialogue with Jean-Paul Sarte that he wrote for *Lunes de Revolución*, the highly popular literary supplement of the post-Revolutionary Cuban periodical *Revolución*.

Whereas for Piñera the second half of the 1950s was the era of establishing connections between Cuban and Argentine literary scenes as well as of striving for his own work to be published in these two countries, Gombrowicz focused his attention

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<sup>55</sup> The initial plans of Juan Guerra staging the play in Havana in 1957 were cancelled for unexplained reasons. In 1996, the Cuban theater group El Público attempted to revive the play; however their plans were interrupted by the government authorities. The first successful staging of *Los siervos* took place in 2000, directed by Raúl Martín. The same performance was repeated in Havana and at the Miami International Theater Festival in 2012.

on sending his texts to France and other Western European countries.<sup>56</sup> Since the publication of *Trans-Atlantyk*, the critical reception of Gombrowicz's texts among different audiences had been decidedly mixed. On one hand, the writer continued – and would continue for years to come – provoking hostile reactions from the Polish émigré communities in France, England and Argentina, with accusations of him being egocentric, disrespectful and anti-patriotic. On the other hand, however, his theater piece *Ślub (The Marriage)*, published along with *Trans-Atlantyk* in France in 1953, received a praise from several established Polish literary critics and from two well-known international figures, Albert Camus and Martin Buber. The same year, a promising review and translated excerpts of *Ferdydurke* appeared in a French journal *Preuves*. These small signs of success encouraged Gombrowicz to quit his job at the bank and to concentrate fully on writing. To make the ends meet, he gave private philosophy classes. He continued sending the fragments of his *Diary* to the Polish émigré journal in Paris, *Kultura*, and also recorded some of them for the US-financed Radio Free Europe (Jerzy Giedroyc, the editor of *Kultura*, helped to obtain a small stipend for this project). He worked intensively on the translations of his short stories into different languages, and in 1955 began composing the novel *Pornografia*.

Amidst the different literary endeavors Gombrowicz was engaged with during the 1950s, there was a set of sketches that he would later turn into his third and last theater play *Operetta (Operetka* in Polish original). The play would not be finished until 1966, after Gombrowicz's move to Vence, Southern France. He wrote the early

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<sup>56</sup> Three of Piñera's short stories were also published in France, in the literary journal *Les Temps Modernes* directed by Jean-Paul Sartre (1957). However, it was not until the 1960s that the Cuban writer started preoccupying himself more with further translations and publications of his work abroad.

two drafts of this play between 1950 and 1951 and 1958-1960. Significantly different from the final version, the manuscripts of these drafts were edited and published posthumously by the writer's friend, a Polish poet and literary critic Konstantyn Jeleński under the title *History (An Operetta)*.<sup>57</sup> My discussion is based on the final version of the play edited by Gombrowicz himself, with a few relevant references to *History*.

This Chapter addresses the parallels and divergences between the texts *Los siervos* and *Operetta*. The analysis of these two plays differs from the discussion on *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René* in Chapters 2 and 3 in the way that it does not engage in a detailed comparative look at the plot arcs or stylistic elements. Instead, I present Piñera's play in the light of his friendship with Gombrowicz, at the same time, using Gombrowicz's play to explore the ideological differences between the two writers, which were becoming more pronounced in the context of political turbulences in Argentina and would eventually be apparent in Piñera's ardent support of the Cuban Revolution versus Gombrowicz's distancing himself as a writer from the world of politics.

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The plot of *Los siervos*, at least at first reading, stands out as completely different from the themes and questions Piñera was preoccupied with in his other

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<sup>57</sup> Published in 1975. Whereas the plot of *Operetta* unrolls in a hypothetical space, *History* was supposed to take place in the pre-WWI Poland; with the action occurring in the drawing room of Gombrowicz's family home, in Café Ziemiańska, and other places from the author's past. These initial manuscripts also include numerous direct autobiographical references, which are all removed from the final version of the play.

fiction writings during the early and mid-1950s. The play is a hyperbolic parody of the institutionalized Communism. Its story takes place in a hypothetical world and time where the global Communist Revolution has eradicated capitalism. The opening scene delves right into a conflicting situation, as the heated conversation between the three ruling members of The Party: Orloff (prime minister), Kirianin (head of the military forces) and Fiodor (secretary of the Party) reveals that the official philosopher of The Party, Nikita Smirnov, has decided to declare himself a serf. The audience learns that Nikita – who used to be an active supporter of The Party – has just published an announcement of his servitude, *servilismo* (or *nikitismo*), in *Pravda* (the historic Soviet Communist political newspaper), declaring he is in search of a lord who would treat him like the lowest of the lowest. The entire conflict of the play revolves around Nikita's declaration which exposes the contradictory character of the regime that boasts to have created a completely egalitarian society. As the plot unrolls, it becomes clear that the equality among all promoted by the Party is superficial, while in reality, there remain and always will be those who exploit and those who are exploited. In the final scene Nikita is condemned to execution by decapitation for his prophesying that the master-serf relationship is the eternal relationship of human society. At the same instance, The Party leaders receive the news of twenty five thousand new followers of *servilismo*, which gives validity to Nikita's theory – an overt parody of Hegelian master and slave dialectics – that servitude always ends in rebellion, rebellion always ends in the execution of the rebels, which in turn leads to retribution. Hence, the death of the serf is followed by the death of the lord and the former serfs become the new lords: a never ending cycle. His exact words – “Es el eterno retorno” (“It is the eternal

return,” LS 170 and 180) – end the play, as they are repeated by Orloff after Nikita has been taken to be decapitated (181).

Gombrowicz’s *Operetta* is a three-act musical play, set, comparably to Piñera’s piece, in a hypothetical world and time: Himalay Castle (with no further reference suggesting connection to the actual Himalaya); the first part of the action taking place before WWI, and with the dénouement occurring in an ahistorical temporal space, some time after both world wars. There are two parallel storylines. One revolves around the son of Prince Himalay, Count Charmant’s attempt to seduce a lower class girl Albertine. To find a pretext by which he could be introduced to her, the Count hires a pickpocket to steal something from her, so that he could then rescue and return the stolen object. While Albertine is asleep on a bench, the pickpocket reaches for her locket. In her sleep she feels his hand and mistakes it for a lover’s embrace. After that she begins to desire nudity, which contrasts Count Charmant’s attempts to woo her with expensive clothes.

The second storyline, which takes place in the same setting and at the same time, is the focus of my discussion. It has a very different subject: a Marxist-Communist revolution. Prince Himalay, with the help of the greatest fashion designer from Paris, Master Fior (allusion to Christian Dior) is organizing a grand masquerade at his castle. One of the guests of the party, brought there under a fictitious name as Count Hufnagel by the character of a Marxist Professor, is an undercover revolutionary agent eager to stir up a social upheaval among the Prince’s lackeys. The cataclysm takes place during the course of the masquerade, resulting in general panic, destruction and Revolution. The third act of the play is set in the ruins of the Himalay

Castle. The survivors are being chased by Hufnagel who is not finished prosecuting all of his bourgeois enemies. In the final scene, two gravediggers walk in on the stage carrying a coffin. It turns out that they have been hired by Count Charmant and his former competitor for Albertine's love, Firulet. The two had set out to search for the body of the girl, whom they believe to have been kidnapped, raped and murdered. This scene inspires both the former bourgeois members and the leaders of the Revolution to symbolically bury their pasts and their past beliefs in the coffin. The moment they open its lid, Albertine – who is alive, well, and naked – rises up out of it and proclaims the triumph of youth and nudity. Her reappearance brings euphoria. The play ends in singing and dancing.

*Operetta* is the only of Gombrowicz's plays to include a storyline with a communist protagonist in its plot. Its early manuscript, the *History*, lists Stalin as one of the main characters in Act Three (the others being Gombrowicz, Piłsudski and Hitler), but the draft is unfinished, and so it is difficult to judge whether the Hufnagel and his Revolution in *Operetta* are parodied fictional takes on the Russian Revolution of 1917, on the Stalinist Communism, or on both. The fact remains that except for *Operetta* Gombrowicz avoided writing about Communism – both as an ideology and as a practice of the Soviet government – in his fiction. Not only that, but he also actively sought to undercut any Marxist readings of his work (a known case is his furious response to a French Marxist philosopher Lucien Goldman's interpretation of *Ślub* as an allegory of the class struggle). Gombrowicz did, however, comment on Communism in his *Diary*. In 1953, as already addressed in Chapter Two, he spent many pages discussing Miłosz's *Captive Mind*. In 1954, he wrote an extensive



commentary – diary entries on the topic adding up to three consecutive weeks – on the French writer Dionys Mascolo’s book *Le communism, révolution et communication ou la dialectique des valeurs et des besoins* (1953). He continued making shorter entries on communism in and outside of Poland in 1955 and onwards.

In his much later non-fiction books *A Kind of Testament* (1968) and *A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes* (1971) Gombrowicz explains his choice of not allowing his fiction to stray “onto the ground of political ideology” (KT 162) as a part of his personal rebellion against Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of “committed” literature.<sup>58</sup> Aside from this explanation, however, there was also a more practical side to Gombrowicz’s choice. The writer knew the likelihood of getting his work published in the People’s Republic of Poland was very low, and had he produced a text that parodied the values promoted by the Soviet Communist Party – it would have become unattainable. Yet he continued hoping for his books to (re)appear in his home country, which explains his not publishing *Operetta* all the way until the mid 1960s, after he had already gained wider recognition in Western Europe. His expectations regarding his other works of fiction were actually fulfilled in 1957. *Ferdynand, Ivonna, Trans-Atlantyk, Ślub* and *Bacacay* (an expanded version of the earlier *Memoirs from a Time to Immaturity*) were published in Poland that year, following the period of political

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<sup>58</sup> Sartre addresses his idea of “committed” literature in his seminal 1947 essay “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?” (“What is Literature?”), where he targets poetry as a form of artistic expression for its inability to “commit,” that is, to serve a moral or political action. He also explains why he considers prose writing to be different. Sartre’s conclusive argument is that literature should be restored to its full social function. Gombrowicz, on the other hand, especially in his later career, argued that idea of “committed” literature implied the sense of collectivity which had already been pressuring, if not suffocating, too many writers from historically peripheral nations. To him, the call for commitment was the weakest point in Sartre’s existentialist philosophy (see Gombrowicz’s discussion on Sartre in *A Guide to Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes*).

liberalization and de-Stalinization know as Gomułka thaw (after the First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party at the time, Władysław Gomułka). In contrast, the *Diary* would not see a publication in Poland until the second half of the 1980s, and even then, in a highly censored version.

Piñera, on the other hand, had the public space to publish a text parodying Communism in 1955, under the anti-communist Batista regime in Cuba. The timing was convenient. *Los siervos* appeared in *Ciclón* four months after Batista's government had released Fidel Castro from imprisonment; and Piñera's text could have been seen as a useful anti-Communist publicity, despite the fact that the author never declared himself to be an anti-Communist and, on the contrary, later enthusiastically welcomed the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. As mentioned previously, in March of 1960 Piñera denounced *Los siervos* in a fictional interview with Sartre (who in fact visited Cuba in February of that same year and attended the performance of Piñera's most acclaimed play *Electra Garrigo*). In his explanation, Piñera insisted that his mistake was writing about the Soviet context, which he had not experienced in person but only in theory, and that the Cuban situation was different, making him realize the importance of being a politically committed writer:

SARTRE: . . . ¿Cómo justificaría a su pieza *Los Siervos*?

PIÑERA: Comenzaré por desacreditarla, y con ello no haré sino seguir a aquéllos, que con harta razón, la desacreditaron . . . el ejemplo de la Revolución rusa seguía siendo para mí un ejemplo teórico. Fue preciso que la Revolución se diera en Cuba para que yo la comprendiese. Por supuesto, esta falla no abona nada a favor mío. Cuando los estudiantes dicen que la mayoría de los intelectuales no nos comprometimos, tengo que bajar la cabeza; cuando los comunistas ponen a *Los Siervos* en la picota, la bajo igualmente. ("Diálogo imaginario" 180-181)

[SARTRE: . . . How would you justify your [theater] piece *Los siervos*?

PIÑERA: I will start by discrediting it and by doing so I will be in line with those who had already discredited it for a good reason . . . [back when the play was written] the example of the Russian Revolution continued being a theoretical one to me. It was necessary for the Revolution to take place in Cuba for me to understand it. Of course, this flaw does not work in my favor. When students say that the majority of intellectuals do not commit, I have to lower my head; when communists reveal the defects of *Los siervos*, I lower it just the same.]

Since the establishment of the Cuban Marxist critic group *Nuestro Tiempo* (*Our Times*) back in 1951, Piñera had been continuously attacked for his predilection towards avant-garde and his lack of interest in promoting a more socially involved theater (Díaz 68). Discrediting *Los siervos* and thus demonstrating his commitment to the Revolution, was a necessary move if he wanted to continue staging his other plays. Nevertheless, his reference to the Russian Revolution in the above quote is somewhat misleading, for it reduces the meaning of the play to its mockery of the institutionalized Soviet Communism. Because of this, several later theater reviews, especially, after the play was performed in Havana and Miami in 2012, presented *Los siervos* as a farce of Soviet Union in its heyday; as Russian Communist Revolution gone to extreme.

In the context of the mid 1950s, as I will argue here, the interpretation of the play cannot be limited to its attack on the historical USSR. Like Albertine's nudity in the final scene of Gombrowicz's *Operetta*, which exposes the false divide among other "overly clothed" characters (from both the ruling class and the revolutionaries), Piñera's *nikitism* challenges many different ideologies of the modern era, and not just one in particular. Both Gombrowicz and Piñera's plays target not just the Soviet Communist but any type of hierarchical use and abuse of power, political absolutism

and insistence on maintaining false utopias. Moreover, there is a shared underlining preoccupation with the individual's struggle for self-expression in the midst of political insurgencies and chaos.

### **Piñera's Nikita as Gombrowicz: Freeing the Captive Mind**

Studies on Piñera's relationship to communism have been so far limited to the Cuban context. The coincidental resemblance between the fate of the protagonist in *Los siervos* and Piñera's life in post-Revolutionary Cuba makes it tempting to read Nikita as an extension of the author, and the play as a whole as a metaphorical prediction of the future. However, *Los siervos* was published in 1955, and it is evident that Piñera had formed certain views about communism prior to the momentous events of 1958, during his time in Argentina. These views were certainly influenced by his friendship with Witold Gombrowicz. In the mid 1950s, when Piñera started working for *Ciclón*, Gombrowicz put him into contact with Czesław Miłosz. We know this from Piñera's letter to Rodríguez Feo in which he enthusiastically announces the news of Miłosz having personally agreed to publish some of his short essays in Cuba (VV 162). Moreover, when Miłosz's *Captive Mind* was published in Spanish by the Puerto Rican editorial La Torre in 1956, Piñera rushed to be among the first to write its review. It is very likely that he was already familiar with the earlier French editions of the book (1953 and 1954), of which Gombrowicz was an avid reader, and that *Los siervos* was inspired by it.

In Chapter Two, I described Gombrowicz's obsession with *Captive Mind*, and his attempt to approach the book from a different angle. A similar effort can be noted

in Piñera's review published in *Ciclón* in July of 1956. His discussion of the text focuses on its emotional connection to the reader. Piñera starts by bringing up a terrifying depiction of human suffering from Dante's "Inferno" and then introduces Miłosz's book as evidence for his own claim that: "here, on this Earth, there are worse things than in hell described by Dante" ("El pensamiento" 271). Piñera then continues his discussion, placing emphasis not as much on the Polish author's challenge to the Soviet system, but on the similarities that can be observed in the various forms of terror and dictatorship of the twentieth century.

That the Cuban writer remained dedicated to the *ferdydurkian* concern with the *naciones menores* is illustrated by the fact that he extensively cites a passage from Miłosz's book on the Red Army and Nazi German forces colliding in Warsaw. Piñera's point here is to stress on the gruesomeness of the unwritten agreement between the two great opposing military powers in devouring the smaller weaker country. Moreover, after this discussion, in the last paragraph of the essay, he comments on the relevance of Miłosz's book for the South American readers. For obvious reasons, he avoids making any references to Cuba and Batista, but instead brings up the case of the recent bloody coup orchestrated by the U.S. (1954) in Guatemala, addressed in the same issue of *Ciclón* by the Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias. Piñera ends his review of Miłosz's book with a statement: "Without a doubt, East and West are in agreement on one essential point: despite all the discrepancies and terrible antagonisms, East and West march hand in hand when it comes to the concept of death" ("El pensamiento" 274).

The Leninist slogan “Who is not with us, is against us,” which Piñera quotes in his essay, is also at the core of *Los siervos*. The state as God-like figure (*el Creador*; the Creator) is a trope of authoritarian power. Nikita exposes it by constantly falling on his knees in front of the other three characters: Orloff, Kirianin and Fiodor (note resemblance to Gombrowicz-the-character’s falling on his knees in front of the Envoy and Tomasz in *Trans-Atlantyk*). They repeatedly attempt to put him back on his feet, to prove the total equality among all subjects that the system has supposedly achieved, until finally, in the third and the last scene of the play, Orloff admits that what The Party meant all along was: “Nuestra igualdad. No hay otra. Todo aquél que no acepte la desigualdad de nuestra igualdad será pasado por las armas” (“Our equality. There is no other. Those who do not accept the inequality of our equality will shot”; S175). This echoes Nikita’s earlier claim that the system does not run on its ideological premises but on the military control over the population: “nos parecemos al Creador que duerme con un ojo abierto... y el fusil al hombro. Al menor asomo de rebelión: ¡pin, pan, pum!” (“We resemble the Creator who sleeps with one eye open... and with a gun on his shoulder. The minor sign of rebellion and: bing, bang, boom!” S145). Here Piñera is drawing on his knowledge of the Soviet Union from his Polish acquaintances, but also mixing it with his own experiences with Latin American military regimes. He was writing the play while the coup was taking place in the politically polarized Argentina, and while Cuba was under Batista’s regime, of which he could only speak in his personal correspondences, and indirectly.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For example, in September of 1953, upon one of his brief returns to Cuba, Piñera wrote a letter to Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu which describes his first impression of the political and cultural climate in Havana as: “ASCO . . . ni por nada viviría aquí” (“DISGUSTING . . . I would not live here for

*Los siervos* goes further than deriding and denouncing the top-down hierarchies and dictatorships: it also criticizes the ideological legitimization of one-sided indoctrination of the masses. The Soviet Communism is used as example, but the interpretation of the play cannot be limited to it alone. Centralized control through control of the (working-class) masses was also one of the tenets of Peronism, which intensified during Perón's second term. Laura Podalsky in her description of the mass urban demonstrations in Buenos Aires during the 1940s-1950s notes how the city's leading anti-Peronist intellectuals, such as Borges, Bioy Casares and Cortázar all penned short stories criticizing the "'invasion' of Buenos Aires by the uncultured masses" (39). Piñera's play, even though the author himself remained an outsider of the Argentine literary community, also fits within this body of work, with its major concern being the political indoctrination which the masses accept and internalize, and which disempowers the individual. The two phrases that appear throughout the play are: "leer sin leer" ("to read without reading") versus "leer leyendo" ("to read reading"). The first one is what The Party leaders expect out of the politically manipulated masses. When Nikita first publishes his manifesto of *servilismo*, it remains unnoticed among the general population because: "Las masas han leído el manifiesto sin leerlo" ("The masses read the manifesto without reading it"; S137).

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anything"; VV 94-95). Five years later, in another letter to Tomeu, and this time from the Southern Cone, Piñera contemplates "la violencia que vivimos en Cuba" ("the violence in which we live in Cuba") and the "cataratas de sangre" ("waterfalls of blood") spilled there (VV 186). In a letter to Rodríguez Feo from 1958, after his final return to Havana, Piñera describes the cultural degradation of the city he perceived during the final months of Batista's stay in power (VV 202-203).

In his review of the *Captive Mind*, Piñera commends Miłosz for his analysis of the metaphorical death of an individual that comes as a result of a change in identity imposed by the dominant ideology (“El pensamiento” 273). Piñera’s concern is also with those political ideologies that subordinate the individual to the collective. In the play this idea is embodied through the use of Gombrowiczian term “form.” In the interrogation scene, The Party leaders attempt to trick Nikita into substituting his philosophical analysis of reality with their political dogma. They do this, precisely by posing a number of questions on form. Orloff twice inquires Nikita whether he agrees with the statement that: “since the happiness of the majority has been happily achieved [because the Communist Party has triumphed globally], there can be no other greater happiness than the happiness enjoyed by the majority.” Both times Nikita agrees that the statement is “of a perfect, unobjectionable form” (S144 and S151). Fiodor, then, suggests to Nikita as an intellectual from now on to preoccupy himself with the questions of form only, because the substantive issues – “cuestiones de fondo” – have been already resolved by the Party (this might be Piñera’s allusion to Miłosz’s complaint about the politically enforced superficiality of writers’ congresses in the Communist Poland). Nikita’s response to this comment evokes a belligerent dialogue on The Party’s past and present, which reveals that the Communist Revolution was nothing more than a fall back to yet another, inflexible and predictable form. As I demonstrate later, this is also the case with Gombrowicz’s *Operetta* in which: “revolution – an apparent rebellion against inflexible form – relapses into its own formal rigidity” (Anders 43).



At the end of the interrogation Nikita drops the questions of form and declares himself a serf: “Siervo soy, señor . . . Nada de cuestiones formales, señor. Solo sé que soy un siervo, humildísimo siervo de cualquier amo” (“I am a serf ser . . . this is not an issue of form, sir. I just know that I am a serf, the most humble serf of any master”); S147-148). For him, it is no longer the matter of discussion but of action. Nikita’s declaration of his servitude poses an immediate threat to the established system which has supposedly surmounted class inequality. When asked by Orloff whether he is not content with the happiness of the masses, Nikita responds: “Prefiero la felicidad personal de ser el humildísimo siervo” (“I prefer the personal happiness of being the most humble serf”; S148).

Nikita’s answer is a characteristically Gombrowiczian answer. Back in 1953, in his discussion of *Captive Mind*, Gombrowicz postulated that: “Communism is something that subordinates man to a human collectivity, from which one should complete that the best way to fight Communism is to strengthen the individual against the masses” (D18). He was attacked by the Polish émigré press for this and similar statements, as anti-patriotic and egotistical. Ironically, Nikita’s character in *Los siervos* provides a more accurate interpretation of Gombrowicz’s opposition to collectivism. Nikita embodies the experience of those East-Central European writers, who like Gombrowicz, struggled between their intellectual attraction to Communism and their disillusionment with its historical course of development. To them, Communist dialectics – “that hard, surgical tool so capable at dissecting, unmasking, and demystifying the “fetishes” and the contradictions of the old world” (Anders 46) – lost its legitimacy after it was imposed in their countries by an external, occupying

force. Gombrowicz himself, in one of his *Diary* entries from 1954 says: “One should realize that for people like myself, it is far more difficult to resist Communism because they are joined to it in their thinking to the degree that Communist thought is almost like one of their own thoughts that, somewhere along the line, becomes distorted and suddenly become alien and hostile” (D1 84).

One of the common occurrences in the play is Nikita’s begging of other characters to give him “una patada en el trasero” (“a kick in the behind”). Cuban critic Duanel Díaz has interpreted it as Piñera’s representation of the masochistic humiliation as the only remaining way for an individual to rebel against the oppressive system (“Vigencia”). I would like to suggest a different reading, connecting Nikita’s insistence in the play back to Piñera and Gombrowicz’s discourse of *banalization* developed through their collaborative work in 1947, discussed in my previous Chapters. The noun “trasero” (rear, behind, butt) appears in the play over sixty times. It has a comical connotation, as it tends to undermine, to trivialize the efforts of all other characters. Orloff, Fiodor and Kirianin’s grandiose solutions for ridding of *servilism* all fail the exact moment Nikita turns around showing his behind and asking for it to be kicked. When the three attempt to lecture Nikita on the great past sacrifices of the Party, he responds by referring to his new loyalty to “la sociedad de los traseros” (“the society of behinds”; S150). When they send the spy Stepachenko to Nikita, to play the role of a master in a search of a serf, the latter puts so many conditions as to how and when exactly he should receive the kicks, it becomes clear he would be in control of his master’s actions and not vice versa. Thus, Nikita’s act is neither an act of a quiet desperation nor of a masochistic intention, for at the end, it

does not humiliate or bring any pain (nor pleasure) to him but instead it humiliates the other characters by ridiculing – or *banalizing* – their beliefs and preset conventions.

In the context of Piñera's other theater works, Nikita is an unusually active character and – to emphasize the irony of the title of the play – a rare master of his own actions. In the first scene, he is described by the Party leaders as the most fervent supporter of the Revolution who has written forty volumes on the questions of social equality. His unexpected turnaround causes a revolution within the Revolution: a contradiction in the system that claims to have solved all contradictions. On the day of his execution, in the last scene of the play, twenty five thousand of former communist comrades declare their servitude, and Orloff is forced to admit that “El nikitismo está en marcha” (“Nikitism is under way”; S180). This is not necessarily a happy ending. As can be implied from the closing line of the play – “It is the eternal return” – the struggle for power between conflicting forces is a never ending cycle. Nevertheless, Nikita as the character who represents the intellectual, triumphs, if only for a moment. Instead of partaking in the practice of *Ketman* (the superficial act of paying lip service to authority, described by Miłosz in the third chapter of *Captive Mind*), he asserts his identity, at least on the ideological level. He does not become “socially apt”. He has the power of intervention. Last but not least, he resists the form.

### ***Operetta and Falling into the Trap of the Form***

I proposed above that Gombrowicz's philosophy on Communism, along with Miłosz's insights of an insider of the Soviet system, served as an inspiration for the character of Nikita in Piñera's play. However, the Cuban writer's vision of a

nonconformist leftist intellectual was influenced by subjective and contingent factors, which were different than those faced by Gombrowicz himself when he resumed the writing of *Operetta* a decade after *Los siervos* was published. The evolution of the character of a Marxist intellectual in the Polish writer's play thus follows a very different trajectory.

Whereas Piñera's play mocks the political system but empowers the intellectual, Gombrowicz's play derides the intellectual for having had faith in the system to begin with. The character of the Marxist Professor in *Operetta* passionately supports the Communist Revolution: "There is no God. There's only a situation. I'm in a situation. I must choose. I choose revolution. I feel better now. The revolution!" (O68). Yet, he is a type of intellectual whose knowledge is embedded in the books but lacks practical foresight, in other words, a sharply exaggerated version of the Great Maestro character in *Trans-Atlantyk*. Whereas in the novel, the greatest Argentine man of letters constantly regurgitates quotes from canonical books, in the play, the Professor throws up literally, often on other characters. He has a chronic vomiting problem to the point that he cannot hold an uninterrupted conversation. The few times he attempts to say something other than the word "puke" – which throughout the play he repeats over thirty times – other characters finish his sentences for him, which leaves the impression of his ideas being distorted, manipulated or simply ignored.

In contrast to Nikita in Piñera's play, the Professor is not only incapable of teaching the masses to overcome the power of propaganda, "to read reading"; he is incapable of taking care of himself. As a consequence, he becomes subjugated by the communist strongman, Hufnagel, who leads the revolution in a terrorist mode. The

Professor is the person who brought Hufnagel, the undercover communist revolutionary (former lackey whose real name is Joseph), into the masquerade ball of the aristocracy. After the revolution takes place, however, the former is humiliated to the lowest degree imaginable, as Hufnagel literally rides on his back as if on a horse, in front of the other characters.

Gombrowicz once said: “I am bound to the Communists by a common goal – I only disagree with them on the choice of methods” (KT164). The problem with the Professor character is that his belief in the ideals of the revolution is stronger than his instinctual mistrust of Hufnagel’s methods. In this way, Gombrowicz created a character that he believed to be an antipode to himself. The Professor is entangled in the form: in this case, the communist dialectics, which Gombrowicz saw as a trap for the critical mind:

HUFNAGEL: The revolutionary action is in progress. The first state, as I said, is to infiltrate into the very heart of the bourgeoisie. The second stage: to establish contact with the exploited class. That’s in progress . . . . The third stage of revolutionary action: to incite all the destructive elements to bring about a social upheaval. In progress . . .

PROFESSOR: Frankly, Joseph, your revolutionary action strikes me as being utterly absurd, idiotic and irresponsible. And as for you, Joseph, I consider you to be as narrow-minded as you are insane, a simpleton, an ignoramus, a semi-educated moron and a numbskull . . . . But who is it that reasons this way? Me. And who am I? I am a man thoroughly warped by class exploitation. I am a bourgeois. A class enemy. Ergo, my opinions about Joseph and about revolutionary action have to be disgorged by me along with myself, along with myself, along with myself. Puke! Puke! Puke! (O70)

The dialogue between Hufnagel and the Professor bears a resemblance to Miłosz’s reflections on the eagerness of the left-wing Polish intellectuals who considered themselves alienated from the political arena during the interwar period to “belong to

the masses” regardless of their own social backgrounds (Miłosz 8). Gombrowicz’s play bitterly criticizes this type of idealism. For example, in the second Act of the play, the Professor expresses a sincere gratitude to Hufnagel for every punch and kick in the back he receives from the latter. This could be alluding to several biographical stories from pre-WWII Poland, of writers such as Witold Wandurski (1891-1934), a passionate translator of Mayakovski, who found the temporary imprisonment for his pro-communist activities back in 1928 as a liberating experience, as a true connection to the proletariat. Wandurski wrote letters from the prison to friends in Warsaw, on how rewarding it was for him to share his intellectual knowledge with other, mostly working class, inmates: “I’ve made many valuable observations here [in prison], I’ve acquired much experience – and in general I’ve enriched my psychological capital. Presently I’m convinced that for a proletarian writer a stay in prison . . . is simply essential, practically imperative” (qtd. in Shore 52). Following his imprisonment Wandurski emigrated from Poland to Soviet Union. Five years later (and five years before Gombrowicz left for Argentina) in Moscow, he was sentenced to death as a Polish nationalist, under a fabricated confession (Shore 122). Not unlike in this respect, Marxist Professor in *Operetta* is crushed by the Revolution in the third Act of the play. His avid support thus turns out to have been a blind support. Again, the reason for this is that he is too intoxicated by the theory (the form) in itself, and in contrast to Nikita in Piñera’s play he is incapable of seeing through it. His greatest mistake is to have substituted dogma for an analysis of the reality of the revolutionary process:

HUFNAGEL: I would remind you of Paragraph 137B of our Revolutionary Theory.

PROFESSOR: 137B? Oh yes, of course. According to that paragraph my mentality is the mentality of a bourgeois, in other words, a mentality completely warped by class exploitation, so much so that everything I think and feel is perverted, sick, evil, false, erroneous . . . Oh, how I hate myself!

HUFNAGEL [several lines later]: You rotten scum . . . Console yourself, worm, we will crush you. The revolution will liquidate you. (O69-70)

It is worthy to observe that while in the final version of *Operetta* there are very few, and only indirect references to actual historical events and figures, the early manuscripts of the play written back in Argentina in the 1950s included a number of characters based on actual historical figures: from Witold Gombrowicz's family members to Polish, Russian, Soviet and German politicians, to intellectuals from Café Ziemiańska circle. In the final *Operetta*, Gombrowicz edited out all references to these figures. Since the reason for this could no longer have been related to the author's efforts of getting this play staged in the People's Republic of Poland (there were simply no chances of it happening during his lifetime), we ought to look for the explanation for this self-censorship in his last eight years of exile in South America.

During that time period, there were a number of major political occurrences in Argentina and in Poland that had a direct effect on either the writer himself or people close to him. Gombrowicz comments on these events, as usual to him, sparsely but without withholding his opinion. In his series of talks about Argentina prepared to be broadcasted on Radio Free Europe and later published as *Wędrowki po Argentynie* (*Wonderings through Argentina*), Gombrowicz describes the political and economic

situation as “catastrophic” (PA 18).<sup>60</sup> His impatience and irritation with the power struggle between the pro- and anti-Peronist forces, with short-lived administrations (the presidency of Arturo Frondizi, from 1958 to 1962, ended by a military coup) and puppet governments (José María Guido, from 1962 to 1963) is more evident in these talks than in any other of his autobiographical publications.

In the meantime, significant political events were also taking place in his home country. In the *Diary* entries that he continued submitting to *Kultura* in France, Gombrowicz expressed his preoccupation with the Polish October (1956), also known as Gomulka thaw. Despite the fact that his own books were finally getting published in Poland, he remained skeptical and pessimistic about the country gaining a wider autonomy from the Soviet Union. “The thaw,” he postulates: “Let us assume that it will lead to a certain surrogate freedom and truth . . . To a 45% freedom, to a 47% truth . . . Freedom by permission, concession to a relative freedom, what is this? Neither fish nor fowl” (D1 242).

Looking from the historical and biographical perspective, *Operetta* is an artistic expression of Gombrowicz’s reluctance towards all things political. His choice of operetta – the form of musical theater traditionally seen as a “light” genre, a popular, “lower” form of entertainment – is not coincidental. In a way it is a return to the idea carried out together with Piñera through the pamphlets *Aurora* and *Victrola*, and also in the novel *Trans-Atlantyk* (through *gawęda*) of using outmoded, unserious and “immature” forms of textual art in order to articulate the most serious criticism of

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<sup>60</sup> Also published in Spanish in the late 1980s under the title *Peregrinaciones argentinas*, these texts are yet to be translated into English.



ongoing socio-cultural and socio-political processes in the *naciones menores*. In his preceding commentary to the play Gombrowicz notes that he was fascinated with the idea of employing: “the monumental idiocy of the operetta” to express “the monumental pathos of history” (O5). This goes back to an argument made earlier in this Chapter that neither *Los siervos* nor *Operetta* can be limited to being interpreted as one-sidedly anti-leftist. As put by the Polish author, the ending scene of the play, with the naked Albertine rising out of the coffin and everybody – the former aristocracy and the revolutionaries – singing an ode to nudity and youth together, is: “the proclamation of the bankruptcy of all political ideology, of the bankruptcy of *clothing*” (KT161). It is an affirming ending for the reader/audience, as Albertine with her very youth and immaturity seems to have resisted the form, both in the sense of relation to others and in the sense of surviving the violence of the revolution (Goddard 102). Especially when placed in comparison to other characters of young people in Gombrowicz’s novels *Ferdydurke*, *Pornografia* and *Cosmos*, and plays *Ivonna* and *Ślub*, this is the first time we see an implication of freedom from the “complicity with form” (Ibid).

\* \* \*

As discussed in the earlier pages, Piñera drew considerable inspiration for his protagonist’s actions from Gombrowicz’s philosophy on communism. The Polish author himself, however, did not create a character analogous to that of Nikita, neither in *Operetta* nor in his other late-exilic works of fiction. It was in the second half of the 1950s, during the political turmoil in Argentina, that Gombrowicz and Piñera’s positions as writers and their attitudes regarding politics began to diverge. This is

more explicitly expressed in their personal choices than in their fiction; however, *Los siervos* and *Operetta* strike the reader as metaphorical illustrations of those later choices.

Gombrowicz's play stays faithful to the *ferdydurkian* definition of an artist as the person who always strives to remain on the margins of any system of social organization. To him, it was not the responsibility of writers – the creative force in the society – to fill the Promethean role of serving as moral legislators of their victimized nations (the term “moral legislators,” used by Jaroslaw Anders, comes from the East-Central European context, while in Latin American context a comparable term would be the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama's concept of *letrados*). To Gombrowicz, literature has the power to disturb, to induce collective feelings of guilt, anxiety, responsibility, to oppose or contest certain practices within the society. Nonetheless, it should not be subdued to its social function. Looking from this perspective, the character of the Marxist Professor highlights the clash between the creative and conformist (since to Gombrowicz, commitment sooner or later leads to conformism) intellectualism, thus embodying the type of relationship between a writer and the society that the Polish writer disapproved of. As summarized by Anders:

. . . [according to Gombrowicz] those who selflessly devote themselves to fight some high communal ideal are likely to change that ideal with every turn of history. On the other hand, those who chose the path of self-centered individualism, like Gombrowicz himself, often turn out to be the most consistent and solid, as artists and as men. The self, even a transforming and capricious one, is a more powerful moral anchor, claimed Gombrowicz, than any abstract system imposed on the individual by cultural [and socio-political] milieu. (29)

In his late autobiographical texts and personal correspondences, Gombrowicz increasingly refers to his distancing from political discussions as his way to preserve “my ‘private’, intimate autonomy” (KT 162). Despite such comments, it would be a mistake to describe his work or his life as apolitical. All of his books were at one point or another censored in his home country, and *Operetta* along with the *Diary* did not get published anywhere in the Eastern Block during his lifetime. In this sense only, it is actually more appropriate to describe Gombrowicz as above all a political writer. This is not to say that politics and literature necessarily share the same discursive space, but rather to emphasize the intrinsic quality of literature to absorb any woes that strike a society in which it has been produced. Wreathed in skepticism, *Operetta* resists all types of propagandist narratives Gombrowicz witnessed during his life time in Poland, Argentina and – though not in person but through the unfortunate fate of his friend – Cuba.

What is different about Piñera’s play is that while it expresses the same skepticism towards political ideologies, it also reveals the author’s hope that real changes can be made from within the system. Nikita’s character is the polemicist par excellence. Nevertheless, he does not remain on the margins. He is the philosopher, the literatus of The Party. The moment he perceives a digressive inclination towards the anti-intellectualism in the system, he assumes the task of teaching the masses how to “read reading,” which is contrary to pursuing more gombrowiczian self-centered individualism. This is illustrated by Orloff’s complaint: “Si es cierto que las masas, ebrias de felicidad, leen sin leer, no es menos cierto que Nikita pueda empeñarse en hacer que las masas lean leyendo” (“Even if it is true that the masses, intoxicated by

happiness, read without reading, it is no less true that Nikita can insist on making the masses to read reading”; S138). Nikita is so committed to this role, he is ready to sacrifice his life for it.

As hinted to previously, *Los siervos* can take on an unexpected autobiographical significance when read in the context of Piñera’s life as a writer in the post-Revolutionary Cuba. He returned to the country in September of 1958, to find it beset by economic, political and social crisis. His frustration with the situation is reflected in *Aire Frio* (*Cold Air*) written the same year; a highly autobiographical theater play which follows the plight of a six-member lower-middle class Cuban family throughout two decades (1940s-1950s). The main message of this play can be condensed to the quote by the hard working daughter character (modeled on Piñera’s sister Luisa). When the mother expresses hope that things can change, the latter replies: “They won’t. Do you envision a future where our poverty becomes opulence and our hot air becomes cold air?” (27). Yet, things did change in January of 1959 with Fidel Castro’s victorious forces march into Havana.

Virgilio Piñera not only welcomed the triumph of the Revolution, he became closely involved in the formation of the country’s post-Revolutionary cultural scene. During 1959-1961 he was an active correspondent and columnist for *Revolución* and *Lunes de Revolución*, publishing at times more than one article per week. Piñera’s time working for the periodical and its literary supplementary has been described in detail by Thomas Anderson (Chapter Three of *Everything in its Place*). Piñera’s essays in these journals vary widely in subject matter. Many of them discuss the perspectives of cultural reforms in the country: establishing publishing houses, promoting new

literary journals and improving the conditions of the capital city's theaters. As a columnist, he held on to the self-image of a tireless polemicist and a "disrespectful" writer. In his 1959 essay "Las plumas respetuosas" ("The Respectful Pens") Piñera reaffirmed his *ferdydurkian* conviction that a sharp tongue and a derisive attitude were the necessary ingredients for the cultural reform. Among the targets of his revisionist criticism were his old adversaries such as Cintio Vitier and Gastón Baquero, and also Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, Heberto Padilla and others (Anderson, *Everything* 94).

At the same time, however Piñera did not conceal his optimism about the changes in the country's cultural scene he was witnessing in person. For the first time in his life, he was getting regularly paid for writing, which made him believe that literature was finally being taken seriously in Cuba. His theater plays were selling out to relatively large audiences. He was acquiring the sense of importance he longed for. "Now I'm on favorable ground," Piñera wrote in February of 1961, "The Revolution has thoroughly accepted me. The years of life that I have before me will never again confront me with such humiliations" (qtd. in Anderson, *Everything* 96-97). Ironically, however, his expectations for the bright future were shattered the very same year.

The first misfortune came in 1961, shortly after the Bay of Pigs Invasion, during which Piñera had avidly expressed his support for Castro's government. In the weeks that followed the event, however, the government tightened its surveillance on the artistic production. The first serious case of censorship occurred with a short film directed by Orlando Jiménez Leal and Sabá Cabrera Infante, titled *P.M.* It was banned from being shown in Havana's theaters and confiscated from the filmmakers.

Following this, ninety-two artists and intellectuals signed a manifesto to be published in *Lunes*, which called for the reassurance of artistic freedom. Piñera was one of the signatories.

The government responded to the manifesto by setting up three public meetings with Havana's intellectuals: on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of June of that year. It is during the first of them that Piñera stood up to express the exact same concern about the government taking anti-intellectual measures that Nikita expresses in *Los siervos*. His question to Fidel Castro, along with the latter's reaction, later became a legendary anecdote among Piñera's friends and readers. The transcript of the conversation, whose excerpts are quoted below, was reprinted in the recent collection *Órbita de Virgilio Piñera* (La Habana, 2011).

[VIRGILIO PIÑERA]: Como Carlos Rafael<sup>61</sup> ha pedido que se diga todo, hay un miedo que podíamos calificar de virtual que corre en todos los círculos literarios de La Habana, y artísticos en general, sobre que el Gobierno va a dirigir la cultura . . .

[FIDEL CASTRO]: ¿Dónde se corre esa voz?

[VIRGILIO PIÑERA]: ¿Eh? Se dice...

[FIDEL CASTRO]: ¿Entre quiénes se corre esa voz? ¿Entre la gente que está aquí se corre esa voz? ¿Y por qué no la han dicho antes?

[VIRGILIO PIÑERA]: Compañero comandante Fidel . . . yo no digo que haya temor, sino que hay una impresión, entonces yo no creo que nos vayan a anular culturalmente, ni creo que el Gobierno tenga esa intención, pero eso se dice . . . La realidad es que por primera vez después de dos años de Revolución, por la discusión de un asunto, los escritores nos hemos enfrentado a la Revolución... ("Encuentro" 313-314)

[[VIRGILIO PIÑERA]: Since Carlos Rafael has requested us to say all; there is a concern, which we could describe as virtual, which runs through the literary and artistic circles of Havana, that the Government will direct the culture . . .

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<sup>61</sup> Referring to the moderator of the conference, the Communist politician Carlos Rafael Rodríguez.

[FIDEL CASTRO]: ¿Where is this word coming from?

[VIRGILIO PIÑERA]: ¿Eh? One says...

[FIDEL CASTRO]: ¿Among whom is this word spreading? ¿Is it among the people who are here today? ¿And why wasn't this said earlier?

[VIRGILIO PIÑERA]: Comrade commander Fidel . . . I do not say there is fear, just that there is an impression; I do not believe we will be annulated culturally, nor that the Government would have this intention, but this is what is being talked about. The reality is that for the first time after two years of the Revolution, in the light of the discussion of a certain matter [referencing to *P.M.*], we, the writers, have confronted the Revolution...]

While Fidel Castro did not provide a specific reply to Piñera's concern during the meeting of the 16<sup>th</sup>, his famous closing discourse "Palabras a los intelectuales" ("Words to the Intellectuals") at the end of the three conferences left no ambiguity that the notion of the freedom of artistic expression in the post-Revolutionary Cuba had taken a new turn. His speech alluded to the existence of the certain principles behind the cultural politics of his government, which writers and artists were expected to support. His often cited words: "dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución nada" ("within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution nothing"; "Palabras a los intelectuales") obviously preoccupied Virgilio Piñera who had always understood creative writing as an act of experimentation and subversion.

Shortly after the June conferences, Piñera went on a month's trip to Europe with Rodríguez Tomeu. After his return, the writer learned that the political-cultural tensions in Cuba had increased. *Lunes de Revolución* was shut down and many of its former contributors – especially the homosexual writers – were now facing the risk of being accused for ideological nonconformity. In October of 1961, Piñera among many others, fell victim to the government's clampdown on homosexuality. He was arrested

“for an alleged violation of revolutionary morality” (Anderson, *Everything* 105) on the morning following the infamous raid in Havana conducted by the government, known as the “Noche de las Tres Pes” (“Night of the Three Ps” refers to ridding the city of “prostitutas, proxénetas y pájaros” – prostitutes, pimps and gay men). Though he was soon released and was allowed to continue working as a translator as well as publishing his own work, he never fully recovered from this experience. State Security detained him on the same charges again in 1965. Moreover, in 1971, his work was declared counterrevolutionary and banned from further publication in Cuba, while the writer himself was denied permission to travel abroad. In 1978, a year before his death, he was again briefly imprisoned, and some of his private manuscripts were confiscated (Dopico Black 120-121).<sup>62</sup>

In 1963, an important anthology of *Teatro cubano en un acto* (*Cuban Theater of One-Act Plays*) “affirmed” that Piñera had written only two one-act plays during his career (*Falsa alarma* and *El Flaco y el Gordo*), as if *Los siervos* had never even existed (Díaz, “Vigencia”). The writer, understandably, made no public statement regarding this inaccuracy. Nor did he ever refer to *Los siervos* in any other of his texts, including personal correspondences. However, curiously, after the events of the early 1960s, Piñera’s fiction returned to being more rebellious and more anti-establishment, as if embarking once again on the road of *nikitism*. This is best illustrated by the fact that his 1967 novel *Presiones y diamantes* and the 1968 play *Dos viejos pánicos* were

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<sup>62</sup> The remainder of his work was confiscated following his death in October of 1979. His apartment was for a while sealed by the State Security (Ibid 121). The state lifted the prohibition of the publication of his works posthumously, during the political thaw of the late 1980s. A seminal study on the rehabilitation of Piñera’s name in Cuba was recently published by Dainerys Machado Vento. See “Un escritor que renació de una generación que nació de él;” parts I and II (2009). Also Omar Valiño’s “Piñera: el sí de los noventa.”



withdrawn from bookstores and libraries soon after their initial publications, and banned in Cuba during the writer's lifetime (Dopico Black 122). The explanation as to why the two books initially managed to slip by the censors is that they can be and were first interpreted as psychological literature; as abstract expressions of existential angst. However, it did not take long for the censors to observe that the name of the precious diamond in *Presiones y diamantes* (which at the end of the novel loses its value and gets flushed down the toilet), *Delphi* is an inverted *Phidel* or *Fidel*. Similarly, the seemingly absurd games of death played by Tabo and Tota, the protagonists of *Dos viejos pánicos*, include hidden references to the Cuban realities, which the author found dreadful and suffocating.

The last fifteen years of Piñera's life has been a widely debated subject among his scholars. While it is known that his name was consistently left out of Cuban anthologies, his house searched several times by police officials and some of his manuscripts confiscated; the question that remains open is to what extent the fear of harassment by the authorities forced Piñera to restrict his literary activities during the late 1960s and 1970s. The sensibility of this issue was clearly shown during the writer's Centenary Colloquium in Havana in 2012, which in contrast to the preceding Centenary of Lezama Lima (2010) had a distinctly political flavor. However, I will have to leave this point open here, since the principal focus of this study is on Piñera's years in Argentina.

## **Postscript. “Al galope, al galope, al galope...”: Revisiting the Later Years of Gombrowicz-Piñera Friendship**

Before moving to the general conclusion of my study, I would like to return one more time to the second half of the 1950s, in order to describe the temporary breach in Piñera and Gombrowicz’s friendship and the events that took place afterwards, once the former returned to his home country and the latter moved to Western Europe. This, to my knowledge has not yet been explored in greater detail in Gombrowicz or Piñera’s scholarship. The following is based on archival research, centered on the written correspondence between the two writers.

To briefly return to Piñera’s function as a correspondent for *Ciclón* in Buenos Aires, one of the first texts that the writer submitted for publication in the Cuban journal was Gombrowicz’s “Contra los poetas.” The package with Gombrowicz’s article that Piñera sent to Havana in March 1955 included a page-long commentary commending his Polish friend to the publisher Rodríguez Feo: “Su lectura te dará la medida del gran talento de este escritor, bien conocido en los medios intelectuales más exclusivos de París . . . Gombrowicz es un revolucionario...” (“The reading will give you an idea of the great talent of this writer, well known in the most exclusive intellectual circles of Paris . . . Gombrowicz is a revolutionist”). Piñera’s punch line was that Gombrowicz’s essay could serve as “buen campanazo” (“make a splash”) against the *Orígenes* group (VV 107). In a follow up letter a month later, Piñera again asserted his intentions to get more of Gombrowicz’s work published in Cuba. He expressed his discontent with the hypocrisy of some writers in Argentina who according to Piñera pretended to care about art, while in reality were only after money.

He added that the two exceptions were Borges and: “Gombrowicz, que además es amigo íntimo nuestro” (“Gombrowicz, who is moreover, our intimate friend”; VV 112).

“Contra los poetas” appeared in *Ciclón* in September of 1955. Moreover, two other texts by Gombrowicz – an essay “Carne y Cuero” (“Flesh and Skin”) and short story “El Banquete” (“The Banquet”) – were published in the journal the following year. However, at the same time, the excerpts of the Polish writer’s *Diary*, some of which had been already circulating in Europe through *Kultura*, were returned to Piñera by Rodríguez Feo for reediting. The extensive correspondence between the latter two gives a better glimpse into the circumstances behind this issue. The publisher was worried that Gombrowicz’s overt bashing of Victoria Ocampo would pose a risk of losing the vitally important contact with her group (VV 147-149). He apologized profusely for “la censura a Witoldo” (“the censoring of Witold”) but insisted that the only way he would publish the *Diary* excerpts was after having expurgated certain paragraphs that could “ofender al circulito celeste del sur” (“offend the little sky-blue circle of the south [*Sur*]”; VV 148). Piñera’s extensive response letter to Feo reveals his inner-contradictions regarding the situation. On the one hand, he agreed that publishing Gombrowicz’s text in *Ciclón* could have negative consequences, especially since it was he himself who had delivered the newest gossip about the *Sur* circle to his Polish friend. On the other hand, however, he finished his letter with a remark that: “el texto de Gombrowicz es magnífico y en general, es cierto todo cuanto dice” (“Gombrowicz’s text is magnificent and generally, all that he says in it is true”; VV 150). Convinced that the Polish writer would categorically refuse to remove the

provocative paragraphs on Ocampo, Piñera suggested to Feo postponing the publication to sometime later. At the end, however, the excerpts of Gombrowicz's *Diary* never appeared in the Cuban journal.

Gombrowicz was informed of Rodríguez Feo's final decision in early 1957. In February, he wrote an irritated letter to Piñera, accusing, in his imperfect Spanish, the latter of having given in to the public intimidation they had fought so hard against during the *ferdydurkian* battle. "Estas son consideraciones provincianas en la literatura hay que proceder con dureza y crudeza, de otro modo no se logra nada," he wrote to his friend, adding: "en general: demasiado temor. Poca libertad de espíritu. Excesivo respeto para lo qué dirá la gente" ("These considerations [not publishing the *Diary* in *Ciclón*] are provincial, in literature one has to proceed with toughness and rigor, if not, nothing can be achieved . . . in general: too much fear. Not enough freedom of spirit. Excessive respect for the opinion of other people"; VV 175). A month later, Gombrowicz sent another letter requesting Piñera to return the Spanish translations of the *Diary* excerpts, so that he could attempt getting them published somewhere else in Argentina. His infuriated tone reveals that their disagreement had turned into a more serious argument: "Hagan lo que quieran. Es lamentable que nos comprendamos tan poco . . . Lo que nos une es probablemente más superficial de lo que nos separa" ("Do what you [Piñera and Rodríguez Feo] like. It is a pity that there is so little understanding between us . . . What unites us is probably more superficial than one separates us"; VV 176).

The conflict regarding the publication matters sheds light on the different situations in which Gombrowicz and Piñera found themselves as émigré writers in the

second half of the 1950s. As mentioned at the beginning of the Chapter Four, the Polish writer continued having no significant ties to the Buenos Aires' literary community. He financed his work by publishing texts outside of Argentina and by teaching private philosophy classes, mostly to other Polish émigrés. Therefore, he had no need to withdraw his attacks on *Sur* and Ocampo. Piñera, on the other hand, found himself in a more dilemmatic situation. He seemed to have finally procured a chance to break through in Argentina.<sup>63</sup> Between 1955 and 1956, several of his short stories were actually published in *Sur*. As we know, in contrast, the journal would not include any reference to Gombrowicz's name all the way until 1968, a year before the writer's death.

The rift between Gombrowicz and Piñera proved to be temporary. The sad irony, however, is that the two resumed their communication upon Piñera's return to Cuba, not knowing they would never meet again. In January of 1959, Gombrowicz wrote to Piñera from the city of Tandil, asking for the latter to write an article on the story of the translation of *Ferdydurke* for the French journal *Cuadernos*. The letter ends with a characteristically gombrowiczian sarcastic remark: “¿Qué tal el embriagador aire de la libertad y el fervor patrio? Aprovechen para condenar a los infames y alabar al gran Jefe” (“How does the intoxicating air of freedom and patriotic fervor feel like? Take advantage of the situation to condemn the villains and praise the

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<sup>63</sup> This refers only to Piñera's involvement in the local literary scene (he was becoming a frequent guest of the porteño writers' gatherings at Silvina Ocampo's, José Bianco's, etc). Financially, his last few years in Buenos Aires were the most difficult ones, since he quit the job at the Cuban Consulate and had to support himself with short-term projects, several times having to ask for money from Rodríguez Feo and others. In his letters to friends and family back home, Piñera talks of being tired of living (again) in poverty, of having the worst time in Buenos Aires in the last twelve years, and last but not least, of being “enloquecido por volver” (“crazy about going back [to Havana]”; VV195).

great Chief"; VV 223). Piñera responded to this in a no-less *ferdydurkian* manner, first by expressing his gratitude to Gombrowicz for allowing him to “serve” as his representative from South America, and then by adding that: “La Revolución sigue su marcha triunfal. La isla está llena de barbudos y... barbudas. ¡Vivan las barbas! Aunque sé que no te gustan” (“The Revolution continues its triumphant march. The island is full of bearded men... and women. Long live the beards! Even though I know you don’t like them”).<sup>64</sup>

The two exchanged few more letters regarding Piñera’s article which appeared in *Cuadernos* in November-December issue of 1960. In 1963, after almost twenty four years in Argentina, Gombrowicz returned to Europe funded by the Artists-in-Residence scholarship from the Ford Foundation.<sup>65</sup> He spent a year in West Berlin, and then moved to France, where for three months he resided in the cultural-residential center Abbaye de Royaumont near Paris. In 1964, with his partner and wife-to-be, a French-Canadian literary scholar Rita Labrosse whom he met at Royaumont, he moved to Vence, where they would live until his death. Gombrowicz’s last two novels, *Pornography* (1960) and *Cosmos* (1965), gained international recognition. The latter one received the prestigious International Publisher’s Formentor Prize. By the mid-1960s, his plays were performed at several major

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<sup>64</sup> In Witold Gombrowicz Archive, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>65</sup> The Ford Foundation (New York) started funding the Artists-in-Residence Programme in West Berlin in 1962. Gombrowicz was among the first recipients of this scholarship, which he procured with a help of his translator, a known activist in the Polish émigré circles in Paris, Konstantin Jeleński. Other artists and writers who lived in West Berlin between 1963 and 1965 sponsored by the same scholarship were Ingeborg Bachmann, Igor Strawinsky, Emilio Vedova, Michel Butor, Jan Kotik, H.W. Henze and Iannis Xenakis. In 1966, the program changed its name to “DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Programme.” A year later, the Ford Foundation got involved in the scandal for its connections with the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

theaters in Europe (the breakthrough came with the Argentine-French director Jorge Lavelli's premiering of the *The Marriage* in Paris in January of 1964). His work was now getting translated into English, French, German, Italian, Swedish and other languages.

Gombrowicz and Piñera did not happen to meet in person during the latter's second short trip to Europe during 1964. After Piñera's return to Cuba, to never be permitted to leave the country again, it became more complicated to exchange correspondences. However, Gombrowicz stayed informed about his friend through Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu who had remained in Argentina. Several of Gombrowicz's letters to the latter from 1963-1967, that are preserved in the archives of Princeton University Library, demonstrate the Polish writer's preoccupation with his friend's plight.<sup>66</sup> Gombrowicz wrote them partially in French partially in Spanish, sometimes mixing the two languages in the same paragraph. In them he discusses publication matters, describes his life in Western Europe (with typically gombrowiczian irony, for example, describing the view from his Berlin apartment that supposedly overlooked Hitler's bunker), complains about being constantly attacked by the Polish Communist press ("depuis que je suis ici, on a publié déjà plus de 15 articles contre moi" – "since I have moved here, they have already published over 15 articles against me"), and expresses his utmost desire to one day return to Argentina, "la patria querida" ("the beloved patria"). More importantly, however, is that next to the greetings to Rodríguez Tomeu at the end of these letters, Gombrowicz added

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<sup>66</sup> Virgilio Piñera Collection; 1941-1984, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

questions about Piñera that reveal the concern for his friend, which is otherwise not expressed in his *Diary*. “J’espere que tout va bien, ecrivez, donnez des nouvelles de ce pauvre Virgile” (“I hope all is going well, give me the news about this poor Virgilio”) he wrote in 1963. Then, in 1966, in a more dramatic voice: “Sauvez le pauvre Pyniera” (“Save the poor Piñera”). And again the same year: “¿Qué tal? ¿Virgilio?” (“How are things? Virgilio?”)

Gombrowicz would be able to communicate directly with Piñera one last time in 1968. His letter is dated 1<sup>st</sup> January of that year, and Piñera’s reply to it, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February. By this time, as already mentioned, the Polish writer had achieved financial stability and a considerable amount of fame. Yet, his health was failing, with problems associated with asthma and a weakening heart. It is quite remarkable how he captures highlights from his life in Western Europe as well as his current state of mind in only one final paragraph in the letter to his friend. It is short, couched in a typically gombrowiczian sarcasm and unusually moving:

Eh bien, mon cher Virgile [in French in the original], habría que contar demasiado, no se puede, sumergir en la enfermedad y la gloria ando al galope, todos los días, sin parar, cartas, editores, traductores, agencias, teatro, televisión, radio, interviews, visitas, proposiciones, me parece que otra vez estoy en el banco aunque en el banco yo no hacía nada y estoy galopando, galopando, medicamentos, médicos, paseos, respiraciones, al galope, damas caballeros, visitas, al galope, al galope, al galope, al galope. Witoldo. (VV 243)

[Well, my dear Virgilio, there is too much to tell, it is impossible, to submerge in the illness and the fame, I am galloping, every day, without stopping, letters, editors, translators, agencies, theater, television, radio, interviews [misspelled in the original], visits, proposals, it seems to me as if I were again at the bank, although at the bank I did not do anything, and [now] I am galloping, galloping, drugs, doctors, walks, respirations, gallop, ladies, gentlemen, visits, galloping, galloping galloping, galloping. Witold]



Piñera responded to the letter with a great enthusiasm: “¡Cuánto tiempo...! Nada ha faltado para que muramos los dos sin habernos vuelto a escribir y hablar” (“It’s been a long time...! Not much more and we could have died without having written to each other or talked” VV 243). He added that reading Gombrowicz’s words rejuvenated him, and expressed his hope to visit Paris and his friend someday soon. There is a tinge of sad sarcasm in his voice, as he reflects on his friend’s success in the context of his own misfortunes:

Lo veo literalmente galopando, es ése el precio de la gloria. En cambio, como a mi todavía no me ha llegado en la gigantesca medida en que a usted, simplemente, trato, mi querido Gombrowicz, y quién sabe si llegaré sencillamente a andar al paso... (VV 244)

[I can see you literarily galloping; this is the price of fame. As for me, on the other hand, since it [the fame] has not come in such great extent as yours, I simply keep trying, my dear Gombrowicz, and who knows if I will arrive at it by walking...]

These were last two letters the writers exchanged. Gombrowicz died at his home in Vence on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July, 1969. In his last press interview for *The Drama Review* journal that same month he had made one more of his legendary comments: when asked by the interviewer Bettina Knapp what his plans for the future were, the writer answered: “The tomb” (Knapp and Gombrowicz 85).

Gombrowicz’s death left an indelible mark on Piñera. Seven years later, three years before his own death, in a letter to Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu, Piñera wrote that nothing had torn him apart as much as the deaths of Gombrowicz and Lezama Lima (VV 245-246). At the end of the road, despite all the literary rivalries,

agreements and disagreements, the two had been his closest and most influential intellectual friendships.

## **Final considerations**

The aim of this study has been to present a systematic account of the lives and works that Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera produced over the course of their friendship and professional relationship. Throughout my analysis of selected primary texts, I have focused on the biographical affinities between the two writers, within the context of historical circumstances and intellectual environment in Argentina, Poland and Cuba.

Gombrowicz and Piñera's critical prose and much of their creative work disclose a literary and philosophical concern with the debate around the relationship between writer and society. Hence, the issue of a writer's social "responsibility" – in particular, the affiliation with the national identity – runs continuously alongside other conceptual arguments in all of my chapters. Both Gombrowicz and Piñera were charged by their contemporary critics with lack of commitment to their home cultures as well as to their host culture, Argentina, and with "individualismo recalentado" ("overheated individualism"), to borrow a phrase from Saer (109). In the course of my discussion, I have emphasized that the two authors were by no means passionless observers, that their writings are permeated with the desire to have an effect on the reader – especially, the reader from the *naciones menores* – and that their shared aim was to keep distance but not necessarily to break away from all forms of collectivity.

The critical prose and the two parodic literary pamphlets from the late 1940s, addressed in my first Chapter, seek to liberate Argentine and, in general, Latin American, writers from the compulsion to imitate Western European models, which according to Gombrowicz and Piñera was rooted in the cultural inferiority complex of

occupying a peripheral place within the master narrative of the Western civilization. In relation to this, the novels *Trans-Atlantyk* and *La carne de René*, presented in Chapters Two and Three, challenge the idea of a writer as a builder and a moral legislator of the nation. Finally, the plays *Los siervos* and *Operetta* tackle the theme of the social function of literature on a different, broader scale. My discussion of these texts in Chapter Four reveals how the two writers' views began to diverge, as reflected in both their fiction and their personal choices regarding the political changes in their home countries during the second half of the 1950s.

The biographical aspect that is crucial to our understanding of the parallels between Gombrowicz and Piñera's works is the sense of a triple marginality: as outsiders of the Western literary canon, émigrés, and also outsiders of the normative heterosexuality. Yet, while marginality is the cross-cutting theme of my discussion, I have sought to avoid presenting the two writers as victims of their circumstances. Instead, I have focused on how by identifying themselves as the voices from the margins, Gombrowicz and Piñera turned their experience in Argentina into a creative potential. It is also because of the same sense of marginality that their image among their respective readerships has evolved into something of a symbol for, to use Rafael Rojas' phrase, "the epitome of intellectual disagreement."

From the aesthetic point of view, both Gombrowicz and Piñera opted for irony, dark humor, incongruity and sometimes, unadorned colloquiality, as literary devices for rebuttal and criticism. For this, some of their work, especially theater plays, have been credited as absurdist *avant la lettre*. This important point of convergence is beyond the framework of this study. It remains for future research to explore the

similarities and differences between the innovative practices of Gombrowicz and Piñera as playwrights.

Next to the continuous discussion regarding the significance of Gombrowicz and Piñera's works in the contexts of literary modernism, another open question for future discussion is the two writers' explorations and literary representations of queer sexuality. The question of homoeroticism was first brought to the forefront in Gombrowicz studies in the late 1990s, with the critical collection on his work edited by Ewa Ziarek, *Gombrowicz's Grimaces*. The interest in a Queer reading of his work has been steadily increasing since then; however, so far, only a few scholars have addressed it within the Spanish American, and specifically Argentine contexts.

Piñera's work, on the other hand, originally began to garner the international recognition through historical reevaluation of the intolerance of the Cuban Revolution toward homosexuals. Nevertheless, although his name is often cited in anthologies on Queer culture in Latin America, his connection to homosexual subculture in Argentina is a topic that to my knowledge has received virtually no critical attention. His oblique relationship to the mainstream heterosexual culture must have had an influence on his work as a correspondent for Cuban literary journals in Argentina. For example, Borges, who agreed to collaborate in *Ciclón* on several occasions, is known to have claimed that he had "reached an accord" with his homosexual acquaintances to never discuss their homosexuality (Balderstone "Fecal Dialectic" 42), while Bioy Casares is quoted to have made homophobic remarks about Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu on several occasions. Even Gombrowicz himself does not directly refer to Piñera's homosexuality in his *Diary*.

All of the above relates to one of the major sub-purposes of this dissertation, which is to present Gombrowicz and Piñera's Argentine texts not just as products of exile, but also – even more so – as products of relationships. This approach is important for the scholarship on both authors, as it adds a new dimension to their self-promoted images as solitary émigré intellectuals, without neglecting their marginal status. It also raises some broader questions regarding the numerous texts that have slipped out of the Argentine literary canon: for by uncovering the rich layers of diverse relationships of intellectuals who lived and worked in Buenos Aires during the twentieth century, we might discover that the literature produced by émigré writers is inherently a part of the Argentine literary tradition itself.

Finally, it is also through the theme of intellectual relationships that Gombrowicz and Piñera's names have resurfaced in the works of Latin American and/or Eastern European writers of the generation that followed them. It is of no coincidence, that most interest has been shown by those whose literary careers were also marked by the experience of living away from their home countries and by the self-conscious relationship to the broadly conceived Western or "European" cultural tradition. Among Gombrowicz's younger contemporaries, Julio Cortázar included a long excerpt from the 1947 edition of *Ferdydurke* in his 1963 novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), while a whole generation younger Manuel Puig, in a 1969 letter from Paris to an Argentine journal *Siete días*, spoke of the "shameful debt" to the Polish author by the Argentine readership (qtd. in Trerotola). Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño mentions Gombrowicz in several of his writings, the most notable remark being one of his "prophesies" in the 1999 novel *Amuleto* (*Amulet*) that "Witold Gombrowicz shall

enjoy great prestige in the environs of the Río de la Plata around the year 2098” (160). Gombrowicz’s name also came up in Bolaño’s conversation with Ricardo Piglia published by the Spanish newspaper *El País* in 2001. The latter can be referred to as one of the foremost contemporary Argentine *ferdydurkistas*. A central character in his 1980 novel *Respiración artificial (Artificial Respiration)*, a Polish émigré intellectual named Tardewski, is explicitly modeled on Gombrowicz’s life and personality.

In Eastern Europe, outside of Poland, Hungarian émigré writer Istvan Eörsi read Gombrowicz in German translation, and was inspired to write his 1994 polemic, *Idòm Gombroviczsal (My Time with Gombrowicz)*. One of the most recent creative takes on Gombrowicz’s theme is Rüdiger Fuchs’ 2010 *Gombroman*, in which the author draws on his reading of Gombrowicz to look at his own experience growing up in yet another periphery within Europe, East Germany.

Piñera’s work, as already mentioned, has only recently begun to garner attention from outside of his home country. In Cuba, as Carlos Velazco put it in his talk for the writer’s Centenary Colloquium in Havana back in 2012, there are traces of “literary wounds of Piñera” in the works of many contemporary writers and poets. He was a great inspiration for Cubans of a younger generation who knew him in person: Reinaldo Arenas – who dedicated to Piñera a large part of his 1992 memoir *Antes que anochezca (Before Night Falls)* – and also, Antón Arrufat, Abilio Estévez, Roberto Valero and others. Over the last few years, there has been a process of a noticeably politicized rescue of Piñera’s legacy: the eccentric writer is, somewhat ironically, becoming centric. In this process of reinserting his work back into the canon of Cuban literature, new questions arise. At the core of the current discussion, is again the

marginalization of the writer during his life time. I agree with Julio Ortega's argument, that it is important to defend Piñera's name within this marginality, but without focusing on his victimization, for it was the marginality that made him who he was, and that shaped his work as well as his audience.

Ortega's comment resembles Gombrowicz's last letter to Piñera in 1968, in which the Polish writer reminds his Cuban friend to not "endulzar" ("sweeten, soften") their relationship to "la Argentina 'culta'" (referring to the Argentine intelligentsia), insisting that at least in his case, this relationship was always tense, ironic and polemical (VV 242-243). He however, never mentions it being unbearable nor ever talks about regretting to not have returned to Europe on *Chrobry* back in 1939. This connects back to my approach to the two writers' Argentine experience, which is encapsulated in the epigraph by Edward Said that opens this dissertation. Throughout my discussion, I have argued that during their years away from their home countries, the *jefes ferdydurkistas* (*ferdydurkian chiefs*) Gombrowicz and Piñera refused to "sit on the sidelines nursing a wound," and instead, strove for "a scrupulous subjectivity," described by the specular border intellectual *par excellence*, Said, as the most appropriate stance for the exile writer.



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