bonds, but, at the same time, it also marks the instability of the very division that is supposed be constitutive of sociality itself. See her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 1–5, 83–94.

40. Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy," 277.

41. Russo, *The Female Grotesque,* 62.

42. Dollimore, "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide," 633–34.

43. See for instance, Tadeusz Kępiński, *Witold Gombrowicz: Studium portretowe* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1988), 339–87.

Agnieszka M. Sołtysik

9

Witold Gombrowicz's Struggle with Heterosexual Form:

From a National to a Performative Self

Witold Gombrowicz's reputation as a radically innovative writer has been established largely on the basis of his stylistically experimental novels and avant-guard plays. Yet it was in his Argentine literary journal, spanning thirteen years and three volumes, that he undertook some of his most acute and comprehensive interrogations of traditional epistemological and aesthetic concepts. The *Diary* was also the work in which he felt the most personal and creative agency as a writer. Unlike his novels and plays, which Gombrowicz describes as almost writing themselves, it was only when he began to write the *Diary* that he felt that he was really "wielding [his] pen," an experience that he also describes in the following way: "It was as if I were accompanying my art all the way to the point where it dropped into another person's existence and became hostile to me" (*D* II, 181). This is an odd way to characterize the most explicitly autobiographical of his works, but paradox is Gombrowicz's preferred rhetorical gesture, often accommodating insights which are not easily figured by conventional language and conceptual forms.

Though paradox constitutes a particularly clear instance of this rhetorical move, the expository and the performative overlap in Gombrowicz's work in a variety of ways and to a degree that has often been overlooked. Thus, the *Diary* is not only the text where he develops his model of fluid and multiple subjectivity most thoroughly—it is also one of its most vital instances. Accordingly, one of

the concerns of this paper will be to map out the ways Gombrowicz theorizes and constructs identity (particularly his own) in the *Diary,* focusing on the rhetorical strategies deployed in the text as well as the explicit narratives it contains. But this is actually the pretext for another, more specific project, namely, bringing the hermeneutic concerns of what is loosely called "queer theory" to bear on the *Diary* in order to read its highly elusive and uniquely charged discourses of sexuality and gender. The imperative for this reading arises not only from the fact that sexuality and gender issues permeate Gombrowicz's *oeuvre* but also from the fact that they have long been neglected, largely due to the scarcity of responsible critical tools for dealing with gender and sexuality prior to the research yields of feminism and gender studies.

Anyone who has ever read anything about Gombrowicz knows that no discussion of his work fails to address the question of his national and cultural identity as a point of departure. During his lifetime, most of the criticism generated by his work focused contentiously on his alleged obsession with Poland and/or lack of reverence for her; and consequently much of the *Diary* discusses, defends, attacks and attempts to transcend certain constants of this debate about his Polishness and status as exile writer. From a cultural studies point of view, the problem begins with the word *exile* itself, as it tends to collapse the difference between the displaced individual and the state of loss itself, thereby overdetermining the exiled writer as a mere function of his political status.

Also problematic is the fact that exile is frequently understood to bear on artistic production in one of the following two ways: either as a space which transcends national categories and instead communes with the universal or as a metaphysical dimension of national identity (also transcending the geopolitical entity), wherein the exiled writer becomes the special guardian of the nation as it exists in the hearts and minds of its patriots. Both the universalist and nationalist prongs of this exile debate tend to assume a unified and self-transparent (essentially humanist) subject who is a coherent product of his cultural home and invested in an unproblematic way with its values, remaining a national of his home country no matter how long he remains abroad. If the exile is influenced by his host culture at all, this influence is at best figured in terms of a hybridity which attributes to the host culture the coherence and stability it assumes in the home culture.[1]

One of the most useful interventions into this tradition has emerged from postcolonial theory. Abdul R. JanMohamed has proposed the notion of the "specular border intellectual," who differs from the exile writer, nursing the wounds of his past; the immigrant, rushing to embrace the host culture; and the "syncretic border intellectual," combining elements from one or more cultures into new syncretic forms, in that s/he maintains a critical stance toward both (or all) the cultures s/he intersects.[2] JanMohamed explains: "Caught between several cultures or groups, none of which are deemed sufficiently enabling or productive, the specular border intellectual subjects the cultures to analytical scrutiny rather than combining them; s/he utilized her/his cultural interstitial space as a vantage point from which to define, implicitly or explicitly, other utopian possibilities or group formations."[3]

In other words, the specular border intellectual does not merely sit on the border and opine critically about the two cultures; this idea denies the writer any agency in the cultures as well as sealing him/her off from influence from both. Rather, specular border intellectuals are "forced to constitute themselves as the border, to coalesce around it as a point of infinite regression."[4] In short, they must invent themselves as something entirely different and concretely individual, constructing their personal, cultural, and literary identities through an endless series of self-founding performances.

This model of intellectual identity is an invaluable aid in understanding Gombrowicz's resistance to recuperation by both the universalist and nationalist agendas of exile criticism. Struggling not to be overdetermined by Poland, Gombrowicz always insisted on the concretely individual nature of his creativity. For example, defending himself against claims that he was obsessed by Poland in *Trans-Atlantyk,* he explains in the *Diary* that it was a story "in which, among other things, Poland appears. But Poland is not the subject; the subject, as always, is I, I alone, these are my adventures, not Poland's. Except that I happen to be a Pole" (*D* II, 19–20).

Since Gombrowicz thought that all such collective identities dwarf and infantalize the self, the defense of the subject as an individual against the totalizing tendencies of collective identities can be seen as one of his principal political and artistic tasks. He discusses this question in linguistic rather than psychological terms and diagnoses the problem of nationalism as beginning with the

tendency to think and speak in the first-person plural rather than the singular. Having to operate from within this obvious fiction results in both creative and intellectual impairment: "this foggy, abstract and arbitrary 'we,' therefore deprives them [Argentineans] of their concreteness, that is, their sanguineness; it ruins their directness, almost knocks them off their feet and puts them in a haze" (*D* II, 129). He insists instead on the need to think and write as individuals; in effect, he would like everyone to assume the responsibility of inventing him/herself as a unique and critical subject.

What this requires is the understanding and acknowledgment of the power of what he calls Forms, which are the ideas, identities, behaviors, and discourses (based on and including nationality, culture, class, gender, occupation, age, etc.) available to the subject, by which the self is circumscribed and through which it constructs and expresses an identity. Although this process is ineluctable, Gombrowicz nevertheless insists on the need to resist complacency in accepting these Forms: "try to set yourself against form, to shake free of it . . . Mistrust your opinions. Mistrust your beliefs, and defend yourself against your feelings" (*F,* 85). Paradoxically, Gombrowicz proposes that the subject distance itself from precisely the cognitive functions, that is, conscious intellectual positions and affective allegiances, by which the subject has been defined as a subject (unique, autonomous, rational, and responsible) in Western modernity.

In short, Gombrowicz denies the possibility of unmediated subjectivity, and the way he proposes one should acknowledge this mediation is again linguistic. This time, the grammatical shift is from a personal to an impersonal verb construction, a more circumspect style which foregrounds the role of language in creating the illusion of a coherent and self-transparent subject: "instead of shouting and bellowing: I believe this, I feel that, I am this, I stand for that, we shall say more humbly: In me there is a belief, a feeling, a thought, I am the vehicle for such-and-such an action, production, or whatever it may be" (*F,* 86). There is also an important critique of traditional notions of agency in this injunction; but the point is not to deny the subject agency so much as to sensitize the subject to its historical, cultural, and ideological embeddedness.

Although Gombrowicz has been called a determinist, and his ideas may appear at times to merely instantiate the determinist

cliché that we are products of society and its norms, this is far from the case. On the contrary, Gombrowicz insists on the need to recognize that the subject must constantly grow, change, shift positions, and struggle to resist Forms that tend to limit or stabilize its identity into some illusion of organically complete personhood. In other words, the process of self-invention and self-performance is constant, involving a high degree of self-consciousness and critical thought (a project clearly more indebted to, if anything, humanism than to determinist principles).

Another easily overlooked aspect of social identity for Gombrowicz is that this process of externally contingent "formation" occurs even on the most concrete and specific interpersonal level, that is, a single interlocutor is enough to influence and (de)form us. Gombrowicz calls this process the "Interhuman" and it amounts to a dramaturgical model of social behavior and identity that is best understood through a reading of sociologist Erving Goffman's work. For example, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman describes in dramaturgical terms how people perform themselves, acting out their personalities, social roles, gender, class, profession, and every other temporary or "permanent" aspect of their identity for others, who function as audiences and for whom they adapt their performance according to the rules or conventions governing the situation.

Much of this behavior is not necessarily conscious, and the degree to which the actor regards his behavior as "inauthentic" depends on many factors. For example, when a young middle-class American girl plays "dumb" for the benefit of her boyfriend, Goffman points out that we are quick to see the contrivance of her behavior (which, by the way, is not really considered deceitful as much as adaptive), but, he argues, "like herself and her boyfriend, we accept as an unperformed fact that this performer IS a young American middle-class girl. But surely here we neglect the greater part of the performance."[5] Though the girl herself may remain unconscious of the degree to which her identity is socially constructed, she is nevertheless the product of a lifetime of training (sometimes subtle and sometimes quite coercive) in behavior appropriate to her gender, class, country, region, and age, among other things. It is crucial to keep in mind that this model does not posit a "real self" underneath the performances which would then exist merely as masks. While

not denying the validity of other factors—internal or external—determining behavior, Goffman's theory served as a much needed corrective to the tendency to see human psychology exclusively in terms of deep-seated drives and unconscious forces which needed to be "uncovered." Such "depth" models, including psychoanalysis, tend to define normality in terms of existing gender and cultural norms, thereby producing enormous varieties of pathologies to diagnose and treat.

In contrast, Goffman's theory lends itself well to social analysis that aims to denaturalize (in order to delegitimize) the status quo, and it is not surprising, therefore, that his model has been appropriated most recently by Judith Butler, who describes gender as "the impression of a real and coherent sex" created through a series of "sustained social performances" compelled by "social sanction and taboo."[6] Playing on the double sense of the word *performance,* she argues that instead of being understood as a role being acted out, gender must be understood as an "act" which constructs the "reality" of gender entirely through its performance, as in a performative speech act.[7] Although Goffman and Butler agree that performance is an inevitable and intrinsic fact of social life, Butler regards this process of social interpellation with more alarm than does Goffman.

Although self-performance and mutual (de)formation can assume a tragicomic complexion in Gombrowicz's fictions, his general attitude toward this process has more affinity to Butler's position than to Goffman's, and for largely the same reasons. For Butler, the problem is that subjects are forced to perform roles that perpetuate the illusion of complementary gender within a misogynist and heterosexist cultural economy, with particularly destructive results for women. Similarly, Gombrowicz is concerned about the constraining and controlling aspect of social Forms, and he is especially conscious of the psychic violence produced by traditional sex roles. In fact, one of the arguments of this essay will be that a resistance to the dominant heterosexist regime fuels a tremendous amount of Gombrowicz's thinking, beginning with his critique of Form and extending into many other topics.

One should note that Gombrowicz does not dismiss the experiential reality of social identities. Although one must "struggle with the mug" (his facetious term for the social persona or face presented to

others), it is impossible to divest one's self entirely of artifice—"for behind it he has no face—here one can only demand that he be conscious of his artificiality and confess it" (*D* II, 4). This is an interesting imperative, since it exacts a confession of a lack of authenticity and sincerity, and posits this lack as universal, that is, the secret in everyone's closet. By taking a category of experience which has been paradigmatic of the way homosexuality is understood in our culture, that is, masquerade and artifice, and making it axiomatic of modern subjectivity, Gombrowicz undermines the facile logic of "natural" versus "unnatural" identities/behaviors that sustains all homophobic discourses. This is only one way in which what I call a "queer problematic" informs virtually all aspects of Gombrowicz's thinking and work.

Although "queer theory" is really not precise or developed enough yet to constitute a specific methodology within literary criticism, nor should it necessarily strive to be, it is an approach based on certain insights and assumptions and goals. One of these goals is to better understand the textual inscription and production of sexualities, especially since homosexuality exists in a curious and paradoxical relationship to textuality. On the one hand, as everyone knows, homosexuality is often excluded from official discourse and representation; it has long been the "love that dare not speak its name." On the other hand, homosexuality, by virtue of the fact that it exists as an "excess" to the dominant heterosexual economy, necessarily becomes textual; being forced to exist as an excess of signification, a double meaning or instability in the sexual signifier, homosexuality is the figure of textuality par excellence.[8]

Most importantly, homosexuality has been forced to inhabit other issues or problematics, in a relationship analogous to the rhetorical figure called catachresis.[9] Catachresis is defined as "the improper use of a word or phrase," even "an abuse of language," and has always been considered the most scandalous of tropes. Yet, sometimes a word simply must be borrowed—stolen, really—by a thing which has no other name, such as the "leg" of a table, or the "face" of a mountain. Homosexuality, sometimes known as a range of acts, other times regarded as an inflection (or a corruption) of identity, but always linguistically and conceptually disenfranchised from cultural legitimacy, has often resorted to such thefts. One of the tasks of queer theory is to identify and map this discursive terrain, this

booty. Unfortunately, most of our critical terminology figures criticism itself as "discovery" or "revelation," which assumes a paradigm of hermeneutic activity analogous to the homophobic logic of the "closet," as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.[10] In other words, a queer reading does not propose to "out" a queer content of an otherwise straight discourse in order to prove that a "really" queer meaning has been illegitimately masquerading as something innocent and "normal." This would be tantamount to immediate recuperation by a homophobic logic, not to mention a kind of literary voyeurism. Instead, what queer theory does is permit the gender and sexuality-inflected meaning of a text to be read at all, not displacing so much as supplementing other readings.

I should also say that I use the word *queer* in accordance to the distinction between "gay studies," which grew out of the identity politics of the 1970s and assumed a shared and coherent category of identity for gays and lesbians, and "queer theory," which emerged from poststructuralist insights and defines queerness as an ontologically unstable, desire-affirming subject-position rather than a clear and fixed "identity." Though the emergence of the latter would probably not have been possible without the groundbreaking work of the former discipline, the superiority of the latter lies in its greater versatility and subtlety with regard to the semiotically overcharged field of gender identity, its construction, performance, and subversion.

The point of a "queer" reading of Gombrowicz is twofold: first, it throws into relief his engagement with the problematics of gender identity and sexual desire, and second, it accommodates the fluid and performative aspects of his thinking on subjectivity, which is especially important for reading a text as complex and nuanced as the *Diary*. One of the principal advantages of queer criticism over a gay studies approach is the ability to avoid both the need to fix the subject within a binary hetero/homosexual field and to even establish what the subject biographically did and with whom. After all, Gombrowicz explicitly denies in the *Diary* that he was "a homosexual" (though he "confesses" to a few "sporadic incidents" in adolescence). But he does admit that his attraction to the men of the Retiro area of Buenos Aires might have been symptomatic of certain "tendencies" and then actually credits these tendencies with giving him a stabilizing weight of "reality" against which he describes an affair with a woman as making him feel like a "fraud" (*D* I, 132–38). The

difference between his relations with young men and that with a female lover consists in the fact that the latter requires from him only that he be a "man," while the former demand something much more important and personal: his youth and attractiveness. The alienation he feels from the type of manhood exacted by a woman—a stereotypical, sexually dominating, egotistical, and inherently violent manhood—is paradigmatic of the alienation he postulates as necessary from all other kinds of social forms. It is also significant that he regards his youth as the most unaffected and fundamental part of himself, where he can be "simply a living being, nothing else" (*D* I, 138). The language in which he figures this youthfulness borders on the language of authenticity but avoids making a full commitment to its essentialist implications.

It is worth noting that the rhetorical category of an authentic inner self does not play any significant role in the *Diary* except at these highly anxious moments when Gombrowicz deals with his thoughts on sexuality and gender. In any case, a literary journal is a genre that necessarily raises the question of authenticity and veracity, since it consists of an odd coupling of personal and aesthetic agendas. Furthermore, as a fusion of creative and critical work it often completely collapses the distinction between the two. The subject, or "I," of the literary journal is a particularly curious phenomenon: neither the "real" author assumed (however naively or erroneously) in autobiographies nor a truly fictional character. Nevertheless, the question of "authentic" identity often occupies the foreground of the writer's attempts to invent, define, and "express" himself.

Given that Gombrowicz held complex and self-conscious theories about identity and expression, it is not surprising that his attitude toward "authenticity" in writing the journal is a good deal more complicated than merely trying to stabilize and authorize his narrative voice. In fact, his strategy could be described as just the reverse: his use of different tones, personae, and narrator positions serve to constantly undermine and parody the conventions of literary authority and narrator identity. His attitude toward the reader is both seductive and aggressive, intimate and insincere, persuasive and exaggerated, encouraging and shocking. He occasionally strikes arrogant, deliberately provocative poses just to nettle the reader, and his attitude toward truth and fiction is playful, irreverent, and deeply indebted to Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde.[11] However, whenever he

explicitly addresses his homosexuality/sociality, his authorial voice loses most of its assertiveness and poise, and his writing assumes instead an urgent and earnest loquaciousness, thickly layered density, and, above all, a striking evasiveness.

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin a gender-inflected reading of Gombrowicz is with his remarks about women, since he has often been accused of misogyny in his representation of and comments about women. Actually, his attitude is not unlike that of the Anglo-American male modernists, who defined themselves and their work against what they saw as a hypocritical, sentimental, stultifying, and, above all, feminized miasma of mass culture.[12] Similarly, Gombrowicz sees himself as struggling against the hypocritical and sentimental "Literary Aunts" who control literary criticism and whom he sees as the prudish guardians of a high culture he would like to both artistically deflate and elevate.[13]

Gombrowicz differs most from other male modernists in his ability to self-consciously acknowledge his hostility toward women and explain it on a theoretical level with a critique of gender socialization. In brief, they represent to him not only culture its most judgmental and inflexible form but artifice in its most stifling aspect, that is, of "deforming" youthful energy and sexuality. But Gombrowicz makes a crucial distinction between women as actual people and femininity as a social Form, and it is to this latter that he objects. In effect, it is the mutual definition and formation of male and female social identity within the context of what Adrienne Rich called "compulsory heterosexuality" that Gombrowicz wants to attack.[14] In a passage that anticipates contemporary feminist theory, Gombrowicz describes the way in which gender is constructed and reified within a binary system of heterosexual complementarity. Masculinity is produced "mechanically" as a function of the drama of seduction and the passive and active roles it imposes on the players. What begins as a performance, the acting out of social conventions, quickly acquires a momentum and the players lose all sense of "reality" and perspective. He describes his own task as an intervention with the goal of "unburdening" Man as well as Woman. He sees himself as the uninvited guest at the ball of mutual gender validation, the outsider who wants to "ruin the game" and "liberate Man from the yoke of his masculinity" (*D* I, 118–19). His goal, he says, is to expose the game for what it is, that is, a "show" performed for others.

It is in the light of both the modernist and socially critical dimensions of Gombrowicz's work that we should read his perception that it is mostly women readers against whom he must defend himself and his work, especially in the *Diary*. For example, he writes: "Once again a certain woman (because it is always a woman, but this one is a woman-enemy who does battle with me) accuses me of egotism." And he quotes from her letter: "To me, sir, you are not eccentric, but egocentric. This is simply a stage in your development (*vide* Byron, Wilde, Gide). Some pass from this to the next phase which may be even more extreme but others don't go anywhere at all and remain fixed in their egos. This is a tragedy but a private one. It enters neither the Pantheon nor history" (qtd. in *D* I, 113). Gombrowicz's response is framed in typically modernist terms: accusing her of aesthetic and intellectual naiveté, he defends himself against her apparent attack on his autonomy as a writer by insisting upon his freedom to choose to write about whatever he pleases, including the private, the trivial, and personally significant.

This leads into a discussion of the importance and sovereignty of the "I" and the inevitable centrality of Gombrowicz in his own journal, with the interesting move of calling himself his favorite "hero" or character in his writing, as if to stress his distance from his narrative voice. This gesture allows him to insist on the personal nature of the *Diary,* as distinguished from a critical review or fictional story, while simultaneously suggesting that the "I" of the *Diary* is possibly no more accountable to autobiographical fact than any other fictional character. The effect is to create as much ambiguity and instability around the pronoun "I" as possible, without ever renouncing its ability to signify autobiographical truth.

But the most interesting thing about this letter is the fact that he does not explicitly address its obvious import. By comparing Gombrowicz to three of the most famous gay writers, the letter writer has "found him out," as it were.[15] The fact that she accuses him of self-absorption, narcissism, and an excess of personal self-revelation is precisely the problematic that Eve Sedgwick calls the "double-bind" of the homosexual, who is caught between social pressure to both disclose and conceal the "difference" of their desire. Any revelation which might not seem unusual if the speaker is heterosexual can be received as unwelcome and "excessive" (or narcissistic, even exhibitionist) if the speaker is gay. Another dimension of the double-

bind is that the standard heterosexist discourse of homosexuality creates a possibility that a subject may not be "aware" of his/her own sexuality and, therefore, will not be in control over that "knowledge." Perhaps Gombrowicz edited the letter for inclusion in the *Diary,* but it is significant that neither the letter writer nor Gombrowicz ever addresses the issue by name. Homosexuality is tactfully or shamefully allowed to remain at the margins of signification, as an anxious force field of unacknowledged meaning exceeding the purported issue of authorial egotism.

Nevertheless, this letter marks the beginning of a series of chapters which address homosexuality either explicitly or again indirectly "through" another issue. The question of Gombrowicz's desire and identity keeps erupting in the next section and leads to an articulation of his attitude toward his entire project as a writer and thinker. He ostensibly begins the 1955 section with the intention of reviewing the period of his arrival in Argentina. This was a difficult period, since he felt isolated and anonymous both personally and as a writer. Though he knew that he should try to establish friendly contacts with Argentine literati, he found it difficult to get along with other writers and intellectuals, partly because of what he saw as their pretentiousness and inferiority complex vis à vis European belles lettres, and partly because of his indecision about how to present himself, that is, who to be with them (and for them).

What eventually happened was that he immersed himself in the gay subculture of the Buenos Aires area called the Retiro. Just as the nocturnal Retiro life seduced him away from the stuffy literary circles of his new city, in the *Diary,* digressions on issues related to the Retiro displace and overpower his attempts to describe that era in any other terms than those related to homosexuality. Moreover, these passages contain unprecedented apologies for subjecting his readers to his "confessions." And he explains that he mentions his sexual adventures only in order to "delineate the limits" of his experience, in order to reassure readers that he's not "really" gay. Yet, the "limits" he describes are not the furthest points from his "real" and central self but the place where he habitually, if furtively, resided. He confesses that he could not leave this "dangerous periphery" that obsessed him, but he also could not reveal it to anyone, not even his closest literary friend, and not even as "merely" the source of his inspiration (*D* I, 133).

After a passage in which he attempts to convince his readers and himself that the charm of the Retiro lies in the fact that young men are "life incarnate," he pauses and promises to "put an end to these confessions." But he cannot, since, as he admits, nothing in him has been "resolved" since those days at the Retiro. He simply was drawn away from that life by pressing concerns with what he calls his "other homeland," Poland, and had to suspend the questions that had been raised in those early days (*D* I, 144). Here is another border that casts an intriguing new light on the very concept of cultural identity. The fact that Gombrowicz felt a mutually opposing pull from the Retiro, which represented a certain sexual and gender territory, on the one hand, and Poland, which represented a certain national and social problematic, on the other hand, is symptomatic of the way that national identities are themselves gendered. The degree to which national identity (or allegiance) imposes a gendered worldview has been only recently interrogated by feminist and postcolonial critics. It would be useful to examine Gombrowicz's struggle with his Polishness not only in terms of his American or exilic context but also in terms of his critique of gender. To put it crudely, there is no viable subject-position in Polish culture for a gay male (or lesbian, for that matter). This is not to imply that Argentina or America offered an acceptable cultural space for homosexuality either. Nevertheless, Gombrowicz was able to find a social niche there which enabled him to construct an identity that he could not have in the older and more traditional context of Poland, and this is why he refers to the Retiro as "another, painful homeland . . . from which I would not know how to tear myself away today" (*D* I, 146).

The above passage about Poland immediately leads into a discussion of masculinity in general. He says that the Retiro gave him two tasks: firstly, to elevate the Boy, and by extension, the human body to its properly divine level; and secondly, a prerequisite for the first task, to rid himself of masculinity, and the fear of his femininity. This was a task of the first order, since it had to be done in order for him to be able to speak or write. The explanation that follows is truly radical in the scope of its critique of masculinity as a social construct. He describes masculinity as something that men "[fabricate] among themselves, goading each other into it, mutually forcing themselves to it in a panick-stricken fear of the woman in themselves" (*D* I, 145). This masculinity—which is acted out as a brutal,

aggressive excess—robbed a man not only of his perspective, but "of all intuition in dealing with the world: where he needed to be flexible, he inflicted himself, pushing and flaying noisily with his whole being. Everything became excessive: heroism, severity, might, virtue. Whole nations threw themselves like bulls onto the sword of the torreador in paroxysms, in the mad fear that the audience might attribute something of the *Ewig-Weibliche* to them" (*D* I, 145).

Gombrowicz then writes that he would like to find for himself "a different position for myself—beyond man and woman—which would nevertheless not have anything to do with a 'third sex'—an asexual and purely human position (*D* I, 145). However, the point of finding such a space, in which he could be a human being before being a man, is not just to be a better or more neutral person. What is so significant about Gombrowicz's struggle with gender and sexuality is that he sees these issues as fundamental to his task and efficacy as a writer. What escaping masculinity would entail is the ability to say much about many "inexpressible things." But the problem is not merely of freedom of expression or shame; it is the ability to discursively figure the world in a different and more "accurate" way than permitted within the discursive system delimited by heterosexual binarism, and he diagnoses an urgent need to find a language for what he calls the most mystified and clouded topic of all (i.e., gender and sexuality, especially homosexual attraction). It is something about which one can't speak, let alone write, and about which "no one desires to be or can be objective" (*D* I, 142). It represented for him the very frontier of discursive terrain, and his task as a writer would be to map the border and the territory beyond.

Moreover, the social control surrounding homosexuality cannot be characterized simply as repression. As Foucault suggests, hegemonic social power produces as well as represses discourse. Thus, one consequence of the heterosexual paradigm is that everything that falls outside of it must be seen as a pathology. In fact, Gombrowicz himself often ends up "admitting" that homosexuality is a deviation and an "illness." There is even a passage in which he falls into such contortions of shame and self-consciousness that he calls his attraction to homosexual circles a "descent into baseness and depravity." Yet, even when he allows heterosexuality to be "healthy," he demands of his audience, "Don't you feel that here even your health becomes hysterical? You are inhibited, gagged unconfessed" (*D* I, 146). In this way, he subverts the most paradigmatic and per-

nicious effect of the closet (by which I mean the homosexual's double bind regarding sexual information) by transferring the onus of silence and concealment onto the heterosexual. This move is not a simple inversion. Instead, it points to a gap in heterosexual Form that is not so much a secret as an unmapped frontier, to continue the figure used earlier. Heterosexual Form passes itself off as stable and self-evident and complete, but Gombrowicz diagnoses it as a site of masquerade, restriction, and insincerity.

It is essential not to underestimate the degree to which a related critique of social norms and definitions informs every aspect of Gombrowicz's artistic work. This is the border between the private and the public, a border that Gombrowicz navigates and reinvents at every step. For example, he defends the *Diary* against a reader who complains that he preaches and critiques too much by asking, "What is a diary if not this especially: private writing done for one's own private use?" (*D* I, 149). Yet, several pages away he justifies his long discourse on the Retiro by saying, "it is important for a man speaking publicly—a man of letters—to lead his reader beyond the facade of form, into the boiling cauldron of his private history" (*D* I, 144). These two quotes diverge not on the point of subject matter, but on the role of the author and his relationship to his reader. This is a role that Gombrowicz addresses specifically at the end of the long Retiro section, where he claims that his strategy as a writer has been to assume roles and postures and that "everything is dependent—why should I conceal this?—on the effect it has." In other words, he tells his readers that it is they who partly determine what he says and how he says it, thereby making them as responsible for his indiscretions as for his obfuscations.

The problematic of the closet is equally pertinent to any stylistic analysis of his writing. For example, he describes the prose of the *Diary* as a "concession" when he recounts the ultimate postponement of his project (to transcend his gender and say all the things that he could not say as a "man"). Conversely, he describes his rhetorically most exceptional novel, *Trans-Atlantyk,* as his final effort to tackle the issue. The correlation between the gender project and his inventiveness as an avant-guard writer is explicit and profound. Although he alludes at one point to an almost organic connection between his "grotesque" writing style and his "incapacity" to love and his "grotesque" interior life, this correlation is much more difficult to explain than to note. For this reason, I prefer to figure

the issue strictly in terms of rhetorical strategies. Thus, in *Trans-Atlantyk,* written in an antiquated oral style based on former Polish manorhouse culture (the *gawęda*), the final effect is both a Brechtian distancing and the most compelling intimacy. Evidence of the latter effect is the startling number of critics who take this outlandish and hallucinatory novel as autobiographically true, conflating the narrator with Gombrowicz himself and completely overlooking how much of what the caricatured gay character, the *puto,* says could be ascribed to Gombrowicz himself. In fact, these two characters, the narrator and the *puto,* are best understood as two voices within Gombrowicz's polyphonic debate with himself over this vexing but unavoidable issue.

Another strategy of mediated self-revelation in the *Diary* is the use of the third person, which appears almost always in connection to issues related to the gay problematic. The first time this happens is early in the first volume, when he attempts to recount an episode from the period of his arrival in Buenos Aires, and he feels so altered from the person he was then that he feels he can only narrate his past behavior and feelings in the third person. Later in the second volume, he explains the adoption of this strategy in typically Wildean terms:[16] the third person pronoun "was, in his [Gombrowicz's own] opinion, an important discovery, intensifying the immeasurably cold artificiality of his admissions, which also allowed for greater honesty and passion . . . In addition, this division into voices was justified by the very structure of style and firmly grounded in reality. But beyond this—what wealth to be able to speak about oneself in the first and third persons simultaneously! For he who speaks of himself with 'I' must, of necessity, lie a lot and leave much unsaid—while he who speaks of himself with 'he' and tries to describe himself from the outside will also be wielding only a partial truth" (*D* II, 126). This passage throws a very curious and destabilizing light on the first-person narrator, who appears throughout the rest of the *Diary,* unabashedly implying that he can (even "must") lie, but without replacing him with any reliable substitute, since a third-person narrator sounds even less "authentically" autobiographical than the first. The reader is obliged to read critically, suspiciously, and actively, regardless of what form the narrator temporarily adopts.

Earlier in this passage Gombrowicz describes the problem of his "I" becoming inflated with the increasingly frequent appearance of

his name in international journals. He debates what pose to adopt toward this growing fame and proposes Thomas Mann as the most admirable candidate for emulation, since he had been able "to link, better than anyone else, greatness to illness, genius to decadence, superiority to degradation, distinction to shame." He feels that he could even surpass Mann dialectically to create a new sort of greatness on an even higher level of consciousness and the reason he could do this was because he had "a new honesty at his disposal, and even a new shamelessness—resulting from his slogans that pronounced an eternal breach between man and his form" (*D* II, 122–23). He suggests describing his own "coming into prominence . . . as if it weren't about him, as if this triumph were merely the imposition of a new and not very comfortable 'form'—'made for him,' and even warping him." In fact, this is exactly what the passage is doing, so that in fact Gombrowicz simultaneously proposes and exposes the attitude that he also acts out at that moment.

The passage continues with the admission of some sort of resistance or block to writing about himself so much, a resistance which he does not quite understand. All he can say is that "something very personal, lyrical, intimate, stood in the way, something connected with—watch out!—youth and something almost as shameful as love" (*D* II, 125). This passage circles around this unknown or unspoken material in an elliptical and allusive way both thematically, invoking Freud and love and religion, and stylistically, freely employing ellipses, breaks, and interrogations, before finally ending with the enigmatic, "what was it that had remained unsaid?" Although Gombrowicz is speaking about fame and literary reputation, the discussion is always permeated with questions of public and private knowledge that always finally arrive back at the core problematic of homosexuality and the questions he implicitly associated with it. For example, later in the passage, he decides that "he who in the sphere of collective life succumbed to being elevated always had to be below . . . and it is here that greatness, distinction, dignity, and mastery became insufficient, immature . . . secretly affiliated with everything young . . . Mastery therefore was eternal tawdriness!" The itinerary of this discussion of literary fame, arriving at youth and immaturity via Proust and disease, can be followed on a strictly literal level, but it makes much more sense when read with an awareness of the substrata that link these heterogeneous topics in Gombrowicz's mind.

The third person appears also another time in the second volume, in which it is used unambiguously to distance the narrator from an explicitly sexual revelation, and that is when he travels to Santiago and succumbs *"to a wave of belated eroticism, the same as before, years ago"* (*D* II, 101). The most extraordinary thing about this passage is that after explaining his sexual fixations there in the usual way, as I discussed above, in terms of a project *"of* linking *old age to youth, so that a generation that was nearing its end could, in its twilight, draw new substance from youth, and experience the beginning once again . . . ,"* he then admits that this is merely a rationalization, even a boldfaced lie! In fact, he claims that the lie is not really a lie because of *"its naive and disarming obviousness,"* thereby virtually warning the reader that failing to see through the smoke screen of rationalization constitutes a willful misreading of the text. In other words, he gives the reader a singularly unequivocal mandate to read the Youth/Age problematic not in a literal and transparent way, but as a "code" for his queerness.

The nexus of values he identifies with Youth, all of which are derived from sexual desire and specifically homosexual desire, serve as an indispensable vantage point from which he launches his critiques and interventions in culture and art. This is not merely a source of "inspiration," although he explicitly uses that word when describing the passions aroused by the Retiro evenings. It is really another culture, whose values he uses to deflate and qualify the values of "straight" European high culture: "It was enough for me to bind myself emotionally to Retiro for one second for the language of culture to begin to sound false and empty" (*D* I, 144). But he cannot abandon himself completely to the pursuit of pleasure and youth, and "had to impose the semblance of reasoning onto that which was my passion in reality and this led me into the fathomless constructs, which were really a matter of indifference to me . . . but isn't this the way thought is born: as an indifferent surrogate of blind strivings, needs, passions, for which we are unable to establish the right to exist among people" (*D* I, 133).

Like the specular border intellectual mentioned earlier, Gombrowicz expresses dissatisfaction with and mistrust of both the heterosexual norm, and the culturally available homosexual opposite (more or less a function of the former) prompts him to keep constructing the border that he occupies. I have tried to suggest that this project functions paradigmatically for every critique and strategy of the *Diary*. He is inventing himself as a border subject, as a writer, as a Polish-European-American-Argentinean, and as countless other things. Between the meaning he gives himself and the meaning imposed on him by others "arises a third meaning, which delineates me" (*D* I, 146). This third meaning is precisely what needs to be cultivated in the gap between every subject and the Forms imposed on him/her. But it is no accident that the primary and most charged faultline lies along the sexual polarity, since it is this "difference," according to feminist theory, that precedes and naturalizes all other differences and hierarchies in patriarchal systems of meaning.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge what might appear as a contradiction between the argument that human subjectivity has no depth and essential nature on the one hand, and the claim that queer desires erupt irrepressibly, like weeds in concrete, around and in spite of the available cultural forms. This is a weakness inherent in constructivist theories. I can only suggest that although sexuality is produced, defined, judged, and channeled by social systems, as Foucault has demonstrated, it must also always either exceed or fall short (or both) of social categories and meanings. Without resorting to essentialist claims about instinct and nature, we should nevertheless be wary of believing that any theory will wholly account for and contain human sexuality, or any other human activity or faculty, for that matter. On the other hand, sexuality has been elided from critical discourse far too often, much to the latter's impoverishment. One thing Gombrowicz makes clear is that no philosophy or theory can afford to ignore the body. Throughout his work, he insists on the body and its physical existence as a carnivalesque anchor against the tendency of the intellect to drift off into severe, joyless, and pompous irrelevance.

Notes

1. John H. Spalek and Robert F. Bell, *Exile: The Writer's Experience,* University of North Carolina Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures 99 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1982).

2. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, "Wordliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual,"

Edward Said: A Critical Reader, ed. Michael Sprinkler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 96–120.

3. JanMohamed, "Worldliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home," 97.

4. JanMohamed, "Wordliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home," 97.

5. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 75.

6. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Performance Theory,* ed. Sue Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), 271.

7. J. Hillis Miller uses this term in this sense when he states that any critical or artistic act can be considered a "performative political act" because the "work, whether of art, popular culture, or criticism, changes the society into which it enters, makes it, in however minute a way, begin again." In *Impressions* (London: Reaktion, 1992), 56. Yet, this appropriation of the term *perfomative* needs to be re-examined and employed with circumspection, since even the way that Austin uses the term attributes more power to the linguistic utterance than it necessarily possesses, given how much a perfomative speech act actually depends on non-linguistic factors for its "success" or efficacy.

8. This notion is based on Lee Edelman's discussion in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

9. For my purpose, what matters is that catachresis describes the way in which something which does not have a name of its own occupies a word that "properly" belongs to something else, e.g., the "leg" of a chair. Paul de Man argues that catachresis is paradigmatic of the way language functions in general, in "The Epistemology of Metaphor" *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 13–30.

10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

11. Particularly Wilde's *Decay of Lying.*

12. See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), for a variation of this proposition.

13. The fact that Anglo-American modernists saw popular culture as their enemy, while Gombrowicz directs his resentment and attacks against high literary culture is a function of which field of cultural production claimed the most power during this epoque. Since it was the market that ruled artistic production and distribution in the West, modernists like Pound and Eliot railed against the commercialization of art. In Poland, however, the postromantic hegemony of high culture (especially of a nationalistic and tendentious nature) was never seriously challenged by any other artistic or cultural activity. The important point is that both Gombrowicz and the Anglo-American modernists felt they needed to "save" art from the sentimental, feminine forces that were unmanning it, whether from above or below, by injecting a brutal new honesty, virility, and a razor-sharp precision into it.

14. Having made this claim, I wish to acknowledge that Gombrowicz's misogyny is neither justifiable nor entirely acountable through my reading of it.

15. Moreover, all these writers have been widely known to be gay long before it became fashionable—in the 1970s—to retroactively "discover" the suppressed homosexuality of important writers, e.g. Shakespeare, Herman Melville, Tennesee Williams, etc.

16. An excellent discussion of Wilde's theory of subjectivity and the politics of social identity can be found in Jonathan Dollimore's "Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader,* ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993).