

ON SOJOURNS, LANGUAGES AND TRANSLATION
IN *TRANS-ATLANTYK* BY W. GOMBROWICZ AND
NOSTROMO BY J. CONRAD

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The homeland? Why, every eminent
person because of that very eminence
was a foreigner even at home?
(GOMBROWICZ, *Diary*, L. 48)

Ricardo Piglia states in “La novela polaca”¹ that “[p]ara escapar a veces es preciso cambiar de lengua” (PIGLIA 2000: 75). The title of this intervention is by far provocative since Piglia does not directly address the Polish novelistic tradition but engages, instead, with underscoring the relationship between Argentinian literature and the figure of Witold Gombrowicz. The Argentinian critic does so in an act of reading and a critical manoeuvre which, according to Kobylecka-Piwonska, consists in “batallar por la reorganización del canon literario argentino” (KOBYLECKA-PIWONSKA 2012: 2). Piglia, thus, challengingly labels Gombrowicz, “el más grande escritor argentino”.

Witold Gombrowicz arrives in Argentina in 1939 and physically leaves the country for Europe in 1963; however, as Roberto Bolaño holds “allí se quedó” (BOLAÑO 2004: 292). On August 31, 1939 the Nazis invaded Poland and in Buenos Aires Gombrowicz boarded the transatlantic liner alongside his fellow Poles. *The Chobry*² (The Brave) was to take them back to Europe but at the last minute -shortly before the ship cast off- he darted down the

¹ Originally an intervention at Universidad Nacional del Litoral in 1986. It was then reprinted in the journal *Espacios de crítica y producción* under the title “¿Existe la novela argentina? De Borges a Gombrowicz” 6 [1987]: 13-15.

² *Boleslaw Chobry*, named after the first king of Poland in the eleventh century. (BARANCZAK 1994: L. 37)



gangplank, clutching his two suitcases. The description the narrator in *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953) gives us may aptly befit him, the writer. This character-narrator, also called Gombrowicz, didn't want to reveal the truth about his desire to remain, neither to his friend Czeslaw nor to any other of his “Kinsmen”. The stakes were high; the peril was that he might “be burnt alive at the stake, pulled apart by horses or tongs, deprived of good fame and credit” (GOMBROWICZ 1994: L. 404). So, secretly when the ship is about to push off, Gombrowicz, the character-narrator in the novel, descends the gangway together with the man who carried his suitcases after him and begins his quitting, “Thus I quit. And I am not looking back. Quitting I am, and know naught of what now may be behind me.” (Ib.: L. 416)

Gombrowicz is expected to rush home to defend the Polish Republic against the enemy, yet he indulges in an onslaught of curses, “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 you St. Freak, [...] (Ib.: L. 416).

In Stanislaw Baranczak's words, Gombrowicz is “expected to function as part of a whole, as a representative of something larger than himself: his nation, its indomitable spirit, and its literature's traditional role of making that spirit even more indomitable” (BARANCZAK 1994: L. 36). However, he was to dodge his “duty as a Citizen” (GOMBROWICZ 1994: L. 410) and remain in Argentina for twenty-three years. There he would collectively translate *Ferdydurke* into Spanish at the Rex cafe, write his *Diary* and that which Piglia states is “una de las mejores novelas escritas en este país”, *Trans-Atlantyk* (PIGLIA 2000: 71).

Written whole in Argentina, after Gombrowicz had lived here for a number of years and taken in and absorbed some of the particular keys traits of the culture of the country, this novel is paradoxically his most Polish creation. Gombrowicz writes in his *Diary* 1953-1956 that after fourteen years of absence in the Polish press he made his *rentrée* with an article, which answered back to a criticism of *Trans-Atlantyk*. Dismissing the charges against him,



he writes, “Cowardice! Lack of patriotism! A strange thing! *Trans-Atlantyk* is the most patriotic and most courageous thing I have ever written” (GOMBROWICZ 2012: L. 126)

One of the questions Piglia asks himself in “La novela polaca” is how Gombrowicz would have sounded if he had pretended to be Joseph Conrad, “¿Y qué hubiera pasado si Gombrowicz hubiera escrito *Transatlántico* en español? Quiero decir ¿qué hubiera pasado si Gombrowicz se hubiera hecho el Conrad?” (PIGLIA 2000: 74). The bid straightforwardly engages the vexed question of nation, language and tradition. The Polish heritage loomed big for both writers since, following the partitions of Poland at the end of the 18th century, literature was, respectively, called upon to perform many of the functions of non-existent national institutions, and provided the main bond unifying a country divided by imposed frontiers.

Joseph Conrad, or as Piglia calls him in *Respiración artificial*, “Korzeniowski, el novelista polaco que escribía en inglés” (PIGLIA 1992: 108), also addresses the unsettling question between writing and place. At the beginning of *A Personal Record* (1919), written with the intention of “mak[ing] Polish life enter English literature” (DAVIES *et al.* 1988: 138), Conrad says, “Could I begin with the sacramental words, ‘I was born on such and such a date in such a place’? The remoteness of the locality would have robbed the statement of all interest” (CONRAD 1919: 21). The underlying pathos that this opening statement reveals is that, as GoGwilt (1995) points out, books may be written in all sorts of places, but paradoxically Conrad’s books could not be written in or about Poland (GOGWILT 1995: 113).

What Stanislaw Baranczak calls “geographic unorthodoxy” to qualify the publication and circulation of Gombrowicz’s novel *Trans-Atlantyk*³ thus aptly fits the circulation of Conrad’s litera-

³ Began in 1948, “the first Polish-language edition of this Argentinian novel by a Polish writer” appeared in 1953, sixteen years after *Ferdydurke*. As the critic Stanislaw Baranczak adds “as if to make its own geographic unorthodoxy even more perplexing- it appeared in Paris” (GOMBROWICZ L. 19).

ture as well. As to this geographical becoming Piglia says in “La lengua de los desposeídos” (2008):

Los libros recorren grandes distancias. Hay una cuestión geográfica en la circulación de la literatura, una cuestión de mapas y de fronteras, de ciertas rutas que lleva tiempo recorrer. Y quizá algo de la calidad de los textos tiene que ver con esa lentitud para llegar a destino. (PIGLIA 2008: par. 18)

Lurking behind this “geographical unorthodoxy”, is the cundrum of language, nation and exile, which, unfailingly, haunted both Gombrowicz and Conrad.

One left Poland in 1874, the other in 1939. Conrad was to return three times, in 1890 and 1893 to visit his uncle Tadeuz Bobrowski, and in 1914 just at the outbreak of World War I; Gombrowicz never to return: Poland would always dog them, though.

To Piglia, Joseph Conrad is “un polaco, que como todos sabemos, cambió de lengua y ayudó a definir el inglés literario moderno” (PIGLIA 2000: 74). It can be surmised from the above that the act of changing languages pointed out by Piglia in connection with Conrad is to be understood, however, neither as abandonment nor replacement.

The question of the language in which Poles should write raised controversy about the advantages which writing in a language other than Polish posited for exiled Polish. On 26 March 1899 this dispute is triggered by an article published in *Kraj* under the title “The Emigration of Talent”. Wincenty Lutoslawski, taking his cue from Conrad and holding his ground against those who attack writers for giving in to economic gains or neglecting national duties, defends the emigration of talent as a way of dodging the paralysis in which they would find themselves due to the impossibility of practising their art in Poland. The impact that this article provoked immediately triggered hostile reactions, the most conspicuous one being Eliza Orzeszkowa’s. She replies to Lutoslawski and fans the flames of the controversy when accusing Conrad of betraying his Polishness. The charge she brought against him was of squeezing “the lifeblood from the



nation in order to pass it on to the Anglo-Saxons.... just because they pay better” (NADJER 2006: 188).

In 1908 an Irish journalist called Robert Lynd on writing the review for *A Set of Six*,⁴ labelled Conrad, who by that time had been naturalized for twenty years, a man “without either country or language” whose works “translated from the Polish would have been a more precious possession on English shelves than the works of Joseph Conrad in the original English” (SHERRY 2005: 157). Lynd is, undoubtedly, wide off the mark in his judgement. In a letter to Edward Garnett written on 21 August 1908, Conrad complains with bitterness:

But there is a fellow in the *D[ai]ly News* who calls me- God only knows on what provocation- a man without country and language. It is like abusing a tongue-tied man. For what can one say? The statement is simple and brutal; and any answer would involve too many feelings of one’s inner life, stir too much secret bitterness and complex loyalty. (DAVIES *et al.* 1990: 108)

In connection with the change of languages affected by Conrad, from Polish to English, one ought to regard this act as the powerful effect one language produces on the other. If, as Benjamin holds in, “[o]ur translations even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise” because “they want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English”⁵ (BENJAMIN 2002: 261, 262), then, the value of Conrad is that he has turned English into Polish, or rather, has “intoxicated” it. On commenting critically on young Polish writers in England and their writing, whose “Englishness stifles, inhibits their Polishness” and whose Polishness does not allow their Englishness to be grafted onto them”, Gombrowicz singles out Conrad’s case as an example of how to break the bottleneck they are in. As to this linguistic and patriotic plight he observes that “[i]t would come easier to them if they wrote in English, like Conrad,

⁵ Benjamin quotes Rudolf Pannwitz.

(...), then their deepest Polish exoticism would intoxicate them” (GOMBROWICZ 2012: L. 506).

The unorthodox geographic itinerary referred to above in connection with *Trans-Atlantyka* also marks out Conrad’s largest canvas, *Nostromo*. Like *Trans-Atlantyka*, *Nostromo* is beyond doubt the great text of the exiled language. Novelty and foreignness are the touchstone of this work, which Conrad published in 1904. This foreignness comes from the sources Conrad drew on but also, undoubtedly, from that feeling of “complex loyalty” which always dogged him.

As Piglia holds, Conrad became part of the English canon. Yet, even though Conrad learnt a new language and became a master of that language, his Polishness, as the letters to Edward Garnett attest, always lurked behind. In October 1907, thirty years after landing in England, he complains to his mentor:

You remember always that I am a Slav (it’s your *idée fixe*) but you seem to forget that I’m a Pole. You forget that we have been used to go to battle without illusions... We have been ‘going in’ these last hundred years repeatedly, to be knocked on the head only! (DAVIES *et al.*, 1988: 492)

Nostromo takes place in a heterotopic space in Latin America, where paradoxically there is no Polish language. Yet, Poland is ever-present. It is present in “that land full of intrigues and revolutions” where neglecting the instinct of self-preservation Conrad ventures forth (CONRAD 1995: xil). To that land Conrad claims in the “Author’s Note” he would go for a brief sojourn back, following the supreme illusion of love embodied in Antonia Avellanos. Antonia, that “uncompromising Puritan of patriotism” (Ib.: xlvi, xlvi), who exists in Sulaco had been modelled on Conrad’s first love back in Poland. The drive that makes him set out on the distant and toilsome journey which the writing of the novel involved cannot, however, be disentangled from the act of “going away for good, going very far away” (Ib.: xlvi) from Poland and his refusal to feed on the “sweet and decorous meal” (CONRAD 1919: 79) of patriotism.



Fully aware of the constraints in the communities imagined by his compatriots, Conrad will perform that “standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations” (Ib.: 227) which, even as late as 1904 launches him into the writing of *Nostramo*. Thus, long before Gombrowicz, Conrad jumps out of the “uncharted land” of the construction of the nation, patriotism and the scramble over material interests.

Due to the nature of their language, both novels continue to posit strenuous challenges to translators: one in an English in which the Spanish language features prominently and from which Polish is symptomatically absent; the other in Polish, shaped in the *gaweda* form of medieval narrative, but intoxicated with Argentina and its language.

Trans-Atlantyk is, according to Piglia, “casi intraducible” (PIGLIA 2000: 74) and the polyglossia of *Nostramo* vexes translators whose intent is to render the novel, for example into Spanish (WILLSON 2006). However, if as Benjamin holds “all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages”, translators faced with these two novels have to grapple with a further crux, which is the foreignness of both the Polish language in *Trans-Atlantyk* and the English language in *Nostramo*. The language in both novels resounds like an exiled language, full of foreignness, brimming with and surpassing the loyalties and betrayals of the “Pro Patria” (CONRAD 1919: 79; 1995: 158). It is this foreignness that places them in spaces of liminality,⁶ which transcend literary traditions defined by constraining national boundaries.

Piglia’s statement that Gombrowicz is the best Argentinian writer in the XX century is, assuredly, an ironic exaggeration meant to test Argentinian nationalism; yet, it is not totally ine-

⁶ George Gasyna (2011) refers to this quality of an “essential liminality” (Ib.: 6) in the *oeuvre* of both writers. In his study Gasyna underscores the relevance of “the policies of negotiation between the different spaces of the polis” (Ib.:7) to an understanding of their trajectory “as exilic authors and as prominent cultural figures” (Ib.). However, it is surprising that Gasyna does not acknowledge the contribution of Argentinian critics and scholars to the development of the study of Gombrowicz’ production. At no point in his study does he make reference to Ricardo Piglia, Juan José Saer, etc. Cf. Ewa Kobylecka-Piwonska (2012).



xact.⁷ As to Conrad, even though he became part of the English canon, his foreignness was still present in August 1924 when Virginia Woolf wrote his obituary. Despite his 30 years’ residence in England, she referred to Conrad as “our guest” (Woolf 1984: 223).

Whether in the source language or in translation, the arresting power of Conrad and Gombrowicz, one in *Nostramo*, the other in *Trans-Atlantyck*, lies in the fact that they have the power to interpellate us in languages which resound with reverberations of a nearby alterity and a familiar foreignness.

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⁷ Saer (1997): “Ricardo Piglia dice de él –hace poco se lo reprocharon en un diario–: el mejor escritor argentino del siglo XX es Witold Gombrowicz. Esa afirmación es sin duda una exageración irónica, destinada a poner a prueba el nacionalismo argentino, pero no es totalmente inexacta.” (SAER 2014: 19).



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ABSTRACT:

This article addresses the questions of language, nation and literary tradition in *Nostramo* by Joseph Conrad and *Trans-Atlanyk* by Witold Gombrowicz. We intend to trace the unorthodox itineraries the two novels posit and their implications for national canons and translation.

Keywords: Conrad, Gombrowicz, Canon, Nation, Translation

RESUMEN:

SOBRE ESTANCIAS, LENGUAS Y TRADUCCIÓN EN *TRANS-ATLANTYK* DE W. GOMBROWICZ Y *NOSTROMO* DE J. CONRAD

Este artículo se orienta al estudio del lenguaje, la nación y la tradición literaria en *Nostramo* de J. Conrad y *Trans-Atlanyk* de W. Gombrowicz. Nuestra intención es seguir el itinerario no ortodoxo que ambas novelas plantean y sus implicaciones para los cánones nacionales y la traducción.

Palabras clave: Conrad, Gombrowicz, Canon, Nación, Traducción

