

“I owed a great deal to them”. Some hypotheses about the paradoxes of Jewish assimilation in Gombrowicz’s works

Abstract

My aim is to contextualise and reflect on the ambivalences of Gombrowicz’s view of the interwar Polish Jews both in his satirical short story *The Brief Memoir of Jakób Czarniecki* (1933), focused on the mechanisms of the exclusion of Jews from the Polish society, as well in his later controversial declarations in *The Diary* and in *Polish Memories*. During the interwar period, assimilated Jews represented a significant part of Polish cultural life: Gombrowicz’s colleagues, reviewers, readers, friends, and his publisher were Jews. The Polish writer was linked with the assimilated creative intelligentsia by a dynamic of enchantment and disenchantment: on the one hand, he observed its typical neurosis of mimicking the Gentiles; on the other hand, he esteemed Jews’ open-mindedness and creativity, considering them as potential allies in this fight against the Polish Form. My hypothesis is that deep penetration of Jewishness into 20th-century Polish culture and society offered Gombrowicz some living models not only for Czarniecki’s story but also for his philosophy of Form.

Keywords

Witold Gombrowicz, Jews in Polish Literature, 20th-Century Polish Literature



1. A discourse around a Polish problem

In this article, my aim is to analyze the role played by Jewish assimilation both in Gombrowicz's *Krótki pamiętnik Jakóba Czarnieckiego* (The brief memoir of Jakób Czarniecki, written around 1926 and published in the collection *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewanía* [Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity [1933]], as well in his philosophy of Form. The novella's main character is a half-Jew: the product of a *mésalliance* between a decayed Polish aristocratic and a wealthy Jewish woman. In 1933 issue, his first name was Jakób (a biblical patriarch's name predominantly used in Poland by Jewish or German ethnic minorities)¹, his family name, Czarniecki, instead evoked the 17th century Hetman Stefan Czarniecki, a historical figure referred to in the national anthem *Dąbrowski's Mazurka*, and in Sienkiewicz's novel *Potop* (The Deluge, 1886). Czarniecki's full name thus formed an oxymoronic hybrid, a sign of a double personality, anticipating the topic of the plot. In the second edition, renamed *Bakakay* (1957), Gombrowicz changed the title to *Pamiętnik Stefana Czarnieckiego* (The Memoirs of Stefan Czarniecki) and the protagonist's forename to *Stefan* (the Hetman's real first name), bolstering the allusion to a martial Polish patriotism.

Grimstad (2017: 634) speculates that Gombrowicz changed the hero's name, because after WW2 the Jewish topics were no longer actual. I think it is more likely that in this way he made allusion to a common habit among assimilated Jews, who often disowned their forenames (sometimes even their surnames) in favor of very Polish ones. Polish literature testifies to this phenomenon: the principal character of the satiric comedy *Murzyn warszawski* (The Warsaw Negro, 1928) of the Polish-Jewish writer Antoni Słonimski has a patriotic first name, Konrad, and a Jewish family name (Hertman, which he changed to Hertmański): an analogous combination will appear later in Sandauer's *Urywki z pamiętników Mieczysława Rosenzweiga (parabiografia)* (Fragments from the Memoirs of Mieczysław Rosenzweig (parabiography), 1948) (Sandauer 1974: 118-142).

The onomastic dualism is confirmed in Gombrowicz's novella by the strong contrast between Czarniecki's parents: his mother possesses all the characteristics attributed to Jews by the anti-Semitic propaganda: she is ugly, mangles the Polish language, wears a wig. Although she comes from a high-bourgeois family, and despite being a bigoted Catholic, she mixes Yiddish and Polish words and calls God *Yahweh*. His father is instead a decayed, haughty member of the "perfect, noble race" (Gombrowicz 2004: 670), an anti-Semite who hates his wife and his own son's Jewish-looking physiognomy. This recalls instantly certain xenophobic obsessions with the so called "crypto-Judaism" in mixed marriages. One of the more fanatic Polish anti-Semites wrote in the later 20s:

Thanks to marriages Jews mingle their blood with Poles [...], they want to completely destroy the race [...]. This concerns above all the intelligentsia and is a battle on the front line of spirit and culture [...].

¹ Adamczyk (2008: 34) speculates a link with another Jakub, the grandson of the main character of Konopnicka's *Mendel Gdański* (Mendel of Gdańsk, 1890).

The race is the foundation of foundations: almost everything can be remedied, but the destruction of a race is an irreversible death (Pieńkowski 1929: 59)².

Today it is clear that Gombrowicz parodied similar utterances (although this was not his principal aim) but in 1933 his story could appear ambiguous in the context of the paranoid racist climate and the ambiguous attitude of the protagonist (Adamczyk 2008). A well-known anti-Semitic writer, Adolf Nowaczyński – who categorized Jewish-Polish mixed-race people with formulas (H2P, H2S, H2A [H= Hebrew P= Pole, S=Sarmate, A=Arian]: Domagalska 2004: 222) – interpreted *The brief memoir of Jakób Czarniecki* as a spoof of Jewish infiltration through mixed marriages³. In *Wspomnienia polskie* (Polish Memories) Gombrowicz (2001: 96-97) claimed that this article led to a certain coldness towards him on the part of the liberal-democratic weekly "Wiadomości Literackie", whose publisher and important contributors were of Jewish origin⁴. It probably also raised some suspicion in the Yiddish and Hebraic-language press that he had adopted an anti-Semitic position. On the other hand, some anti-realistic and grotesque aspects of Czarniecki's *Memoir* meant that after the war it was widely seen by critics as, above all, a variant of Gombrowicz's fight against Form. Only Sandauer (1982), Adamczyk (2008) and Grimstad (2017) have analyzed the topic of Jewish assimilation in his work⁵.

The question of marriages between Poles and Jews had already appeared in Polish literature: in 1893, Marian Gawalewicz's novel *Mechesy* (hebr. *Meches*: converted) derided the Jewish *bourgeoisie's* emulation of the Polish aristocracy, describing the failed marriage of a Polish countess with a rich Jew (they have a very Jewish-looking child, whom she is unable to love [cf. Umińska 2001: 275]). Gombrowicz also brought into the Polish world (family, school and army) the product of a mixed marriage, but his focus was different. He was interested in such marriages in order to highlight the condition of being "in-between" at the very heart of Polish society.

Czarniecki is dominated by his father's Form: the little we know of his mother and her family is deliberately viewed through Polish non-empathetic eyes. He is marked by unequivocally "worse" racial characteristics, which others take *tout court* as Jewish⁶. Thus, despite being the son of a Polish aristocrat, he interacts

² Another publicist denounced Jewish women married to Christians as especially dangerous, because "although Gombrowicz claimed they were converted, in their hearts they have remained Jews" (Nałęcz Dobrowolski 1920: 9): Polish ethno-nationalists were even against Jewish conversion to Christianity (Grott 1991: 227-228). All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

³ Gombrowicz 2001: 125. Nowaczyński's review, titled *Komso-matki*, was published in 1933 by "Gazeta Warszawska". On the Polish obsession of crypto-Judaism cf. Landau-Czajka 2006: 60; 2004: 146-175.

⁴ Actually "Wiadomości Literackie" very positively reviewed the *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* (Piwiński 1933).

⁵ It is paradoxical that Sandauer does not analyze at all *The Memoirs of Stefan Czarniecki*, focusing only on Gombrowicz's *Diary*.

⁶ Umińska (2001: 286) observes that in the first half of the 20th century, half-Jews were generally perceived as Jews.

with "Polish Form" as an outsider: he is unable to be either Polish or Jewish, and describes himself as "a rat without color" (Gombrowicz 2004: 676)⁷. Gombrowicz was interested in the "products" of Polish-Jewish *mésalliances*: in a story of the same collection, *Biesiada u hrabiny Kottubaj* (Dinner at Countess Pavahoke), there appears a baron Apfelbaum, in whom the narrator – a supporter of social and ethnic hierarchies – distinguishes an Arian component (a thin aristocratic leg) and a Semitic one (a fateful nose)...⁸

Czarniecki cannot obtain what Isaac Deutscher (2017) and Zygmunt Bauman (1988) describe (adopting the Heinrich Heine's definition) as "the entry ticket" into Gentile society. Therefore, like Gombrowicz's other main characters, he pretends to ignore his own marginalization and develops an unusual strategy. He externally shares the behavior patterns of his *milieu* ("Polish Form"), but actually "triggers crises [...], violates customary decorum and reveals [...] a crack in reality, unreality, otherness" (Margański 2001: 88; cf. Jarzębski 1982: 146).

If we consider Gombrowicz's later observations, we can see how Czarniecki's story was inspired by his close observation of his own milieu, which reacted with a deep embarrassment to explicit "markers" of Jewishness. In *Polish Memories* (written in the early 60s), half-Jews are described as "unfortunate creatures [who] were never fully accepted in the salons", although good manners dictated avoiding any mention of their origin. A scene he witnessed illuminates this phenomenon well: in Zakopane, when "a Semite woman of a certain age" noisily hailed the young daughter of a Polish count, revealing herself as her maternal aunt⁹, all her friends were paralyzed with dismay:

As if turned to stone, they continued valiantly to pretend that they knew nothing about anything, despite the cries sounding every more loudly. In this there was neither contempt nor hatred – it was merely a fearful helplessness, an inability to overcome convention, to summon up a more modern style (Gombrowicz 2001: 180).

Gombrowicz was interested in this well-established taboo, only one of many, dictated by "good manners" and also shared by assimilated Jews or half-Jews. For this reason, in his novella he shows how Jewishness, a cause for

⁷ Gombrowicz (1986:194-196) adds in his *Short explanation*: "I envisioned the phenomenon of race observed through the eyes of a fictional character, himself completely without race".

⁸ Kijowski (1984: 430) remarks that other Gombrowicz's characters are Jews: the first of them is Zantman, the narrator of *Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury* (The events of the brigantine Banbury), a victim of the mysterious game of the officers and their crew (but his last name's anagram, *Tanzman*, could be connected also with the dancer of the *Lawyer Kraykowski's Dancer* [Warkocki 2016: 106]); the second is Fryderyk from *Pornografia*, where, according to Dauszka (2016: 220), Gombrowicz got face-to-face "weakened Polishness with ghostly Jewishness". A similar interpretation inspired the film adaptation of the novel by J.J. Kolski (2003), where Fryderyk was transformed into a Jewish fugitive who lost his daughter in the ghetto. I would add also a character from *Kosmos* (Cosmos), Fuks, whom Januszkiewicz (2009: 116) interprets as a "traditional hermeneut, believing in the transparency of meaning".

⁹ The girl was Maria Krystyna Skarbek, her mother was a descendent of wealthy Jewish banking family. During WW2 Skarbek was a British agent, risking her life several times: cf. Mulley 2012.

shame, can also be hypocritically ignored: the term *Jew* is carefully replaced with euphemisms, with the exception of the anti-Semitic nursery rhyme sung by schoolchildren.

At the time when the novella was written and published, racial tensions were forcing many Jews in Poland to confront "Polish Form". Czarniecki displays characteristics attributed to many assimilated Jews: a bent for an unnatural and neurotic theatricality, an excess of zeal in every performance, a tendency to subtle provocation. The way he is described could be read as a grotesque re-interpretation of the considerable mimetic ability, which was common among European-assimilated Jews. A similar attitude marks the Jewish characters encountered in the canonic reading of the European intelligentsia, Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Swann, Bloch, Rachel: they all express a theatrical anxiety to be liked and welcomed, and constantly promote themselves (cf. Piperno 2000: 87). The overzealous half-Jew Czarniecki differs from them by turning his feeling of dissimilarity and weakness into a conscious weapon. Like the homosexual dancer in another Gombrowicz story, *Tancerz mecenas Kraykowskiego* (Lawyer Kraykowski's Dancer), he does not openly contest the social hierarchies that reject him but reacts with a destabilizing observance of non-written social rules and with an ambiguous provocation directed against the supposed superiority of non-Jews.

The deep Jewish penetration of 20th century Polish culture and society offered Gombrowicz several models. In *Polish Memories* he affirmed that he "had never engaged in anti-Semitism" and that from his earliest youth he had been attracted by Jewish "otherness", something "extravagant, that eluded control" (Gombrowicz 2001: 125 and 178). At the same time, he declared that when he was writing about Czarniecki he had not been concerned about "racial issues in the everyday sense of the word" (Gombrowicz 2001: 125). What interested him most were Jewish strategies for obtaining admission to Polish society. His shocking declaration that Jews felt themselves "to be a caricature, an eccentric joke of the Creator" (Gombrowicz 2001: 178) probably derives from his penchant for the grotesque: it also reflects what he sees as assimilated Jews' difficulty of loving themselves, their unrequited love for Polishness and their emulation of Poles.

Despite the aggressive growth of anti-Semitism in interwar Poland, Polish progressive writers, as opposed to Yiddish or Hebrew writers, described this phenomenon only marginally. While Maria Konopnicka (*Mendel of Gdańsk*) and Gabriela Zapolska (*The anti-Semite*, 1897-98) at the end of 19th century openly censured anti-Semitism, a few years later liberal Poles seemed little interested in confronting anti-Semitic prejudices.

The reasons for this silence are complex. They include the influence of the paternalistic "good manners" of the Polish intelligentsia, its self-declared ambiguous philosemitism or allosemitism (i. e. admiring Jews in an ambiguous and distancing way)¹⁰ and a general underestimation of the effects of anti-Semitism. Even well-known assimilated Jewish writers – such as Julian Tuwim,

¹⁰ The term allosemitism was invented by A. Sandauer (1982: *passim*), who recognized in Gombrowicz an ambiguous *allosemite*: later was embraced also by Bauman (1998: 143-156).

who was simultaneously attacked by the Polish Right-wing and by Zionist and Orthodox Jews – minimized this problem¹¹. As Błoński remarked, assimilated Jewish authors preferred to avoid in their work too explicit references to the "Jewish experience", making it "less visible or deleting it carefully [...] in order to prove their "affinity with Polishness" (Błoński 1994: 67).

As a result, their heroes' sense of rejection in attempting to be admitted to Polish society was never explicit. Some writers made cryptic allusions that were more easily understood by their numerous Jewish readers. We can see this allusive strategy in the first works of Adolf Rudnicki (*Szczury* [The rats], *Niekochana* [Unloved]), a writer coming from a Hasidic family, with whom Gombrowicz came into close contact¹². There were, of course, some exceptions, especially in the sphere of entertainment, where assimilated Jews felt free to represent this embarrassing matter in a grotesque and satirical manner.

In my view, with all its grotesque deformation, Czarniecki's *Memoir* is the only literary text written by a Pole in the first half of the 20th century, entirely focused on the mechanisms by which Jews were excluded from Polish society and narrated from the point of view of those excluded. However, it should be added that Gombrowicz's self-identification stemmed not so much from Czarniecki's ethnic origin (all kinds of Form, including every Jewish one, appeared to him as oppressive and grotesque), but rather from his condition as an outsider and his revolt against the tyranny of the *gęby* (mugs).

If Gombrowicz merely criticized Jews or half-Jews for their lack of courage or authenticity, he would not be telling us anything new. Instead, in his character he creatively elaborated the central aspects of the neurosis linked with assimilation. On the one hand Jakób-Stefan ignores his own "guilt", on the other hand he eludes his status of unclassifiable identity, adhering to Polish Form in an absurd and sadomasochistic game (cf. Jarzębski 1982: 145). Let us compare his attitude with postwar Gombrowicz's declarations about Jews:

The Jews are a tragic nation that over the course of centuries of banishment and oppression has been subject to many distortions. It is no surprise, then, that the form of a Jew, his manner and his way of speaking, sometimes has a flavor of the grotesque. The ghetto Jews with their beards and gabardines, the ecstatic poets from the artists' cafes, the millionaires of the stock exchange: Almost all of them were in one way or another grotesque, almost implausible as a phenomenon. And as Jews are intelligent, they sense it – they sense it but are unable to free themselves from this bad form. And it is because of this that they often feel themselves to be a caricature, an eccentric joke of the Creator (Gombrowicz 2001: 178).

¹¹ See Tomassucci 2018.

¹² In 1933, in the article *Postawa nowych autorów. Choromański, Gombrowicz, Rudnicki* (The new authors' attitudes. Choromański, Gombrowicz, Rudnicki) Gombrowicz praised Rudnicki as a young, talented literary "phenomenon" (Gombrowicz 1995: 133-137); after the war he recollected him also in Gombrowicz 2001: 97-101.

From this point of view, Jews and half-Jews belong to the sphere of contamination and caricature. Centuries-long persecutions and isolation created a condition of collective inauthenticity and histrionic deformation: from this derives the "tension in the Jewish relation to form; the fact that a Jew is never fully himself in the way that a peasant or a squire is himself, thoroughly comfortable in a form he has inherited". Gombrowicz hoped that the Jews' presence in Poland would stimulate Poles to connect themselves with the problem of Form, "the most difficult problem in the world": later he realized that Jews were not able "to free themselves from their bad form" (Gombrowicz 2001: 178-179). These observations will be complemented by later declarations in his *Diary* (1954), where Gombrowicz refers to Jewish self-hatred:

One could say [...] that even the average Jew is sentenced to greatness, only because is a Jew. He is sentenced to a suicidal and desperate battle with his own form because he does not like himself (like Michael Ange) (Gombrowicz 1988: 81).

Although Gombrowicz was referring to all categories of Jewry, it is clear that here (as, by analogy, over 20 years earlier in the novella about Stefan Czarniecki) he is discussing assimilated Jews, condemned not to have their own Form: it is not excluded that in this oscillation between "genius" and "humiliation" (cf. Sandauer 1982: 8) he revisited J.P. Sartre, who argued in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946): "inauthenticity is to deny it [one's condition as a Jew (G.T.)] or to attempt to escape from it" (Sartre 1976: 65). Nevertheless, Gombrowicz had another concept of authenticity: in his opinion assimilated Jews who want to escape from their Jewish Form, but do not receive the permit needed to enter into the Gentiles' world, had an advantage. Their awareness of the condition of "being in-between" transformed them into potential fighters against fossilized Polish Form, bringing to light some hidden mechanisms with destructive effect.

Like his author, Czarniecki too has a "secret goal": struggling with Form, in order that people could comprehend "its tyranny and fight against its violence" (Gombrowicz 2001: 179). As Jarzębski (1982: 143) observed, he "fights the same battles the author has fought in his life [...], he faces an alien stereotype that threatens him: in fact, while everyone is adhering to this stereotype, he is unable to establish any contact with it". We must not forget that autobiographical *Polish Memories* begin with a reference to Czarniecki's declaration at the *incipit* of his novella: "I was born and raised in a most respectable home" (Gombrowicz 2001: 3; cf. Gombrowicz 2004: 670). As a young adult, Gombrowicz felt that he possessed something of Jewish "decadence and intellect" and a common, "spiritual bond" with Jews. He even wondered whether "a drop of their blood" did not flow in his own veins (Gombrowicz 2001: 182). To try to explain the writer's peculiar fascination for Jews, one might paraphrase what he wrote about Proust's attitude towards "his counts" in *À la recherche*: "If Proust got more out of his counts, it was because he could move among them and feel at ease among them" (Gombrowicz 1988: 207). If Gombrowicz felt at ease among assimilated Jews, it was because he glimpsed in them a part of himself and drew inspiration from

their behaviour¹³. On the other hand, he observed wealthy bourgeois Jews or half-Jews, marked by intense snobbery who concealed "unpleasant and amusing things" under their "sophistication" and "elegance": accordingly, they provided him "with wonderful entertainment" (Gombrowicz 2001: 178). Considering that Jewish condition caused ambivalence, Gombrowicz highlighted the oxymoronic characteristics he perceived in Jews: they were "brilliant", "diseased", "humbled," "creative", "abnormal" (Gombrowicz 1988: 181, cf. Gombrowicz 2001: 178), had an "intellectual vigor" and a "spiritual unrest, critical and rational character", but at the same time were "rich in foibles and amusing idiosyncrasies".

2. Observing assimilated Jews

In the 30s Jews were the first to value Gombrowicz's literary work and became his intellectual friends: in his writings we can find references to the writers Bruno Schulz, Józef Wittlin, Antoni Słonimski (who all promoted *Ferdydurke*), Adolf Rudnicki, Bela Gelbhardtowa (known also as Izabela Czajka-Stahowicz), to the painter Gizella Ważyk and the literary critics Artur Sandauer, Jan Kott and Emil Breiter¹⁴. His Jewish acquaintances were much more numerous: at his coffee table sat both the younger, future writers Gustaw Herling Grudziński (who also reviewed *Ferdydurke*)¹⁵ as well as Kazimierz Brandys. In *Polish Memories*, Gombrowicz underlined with emphasis:

in the Ziemiańska I became known as "the King of the Jews," since it was enough for me to sit down at a table, to be surrounded by hordes of Semites; at the time they were my most gracious listeners" (Gombrowicz 2001: 178).

Assimilated Jews represented a significant part of Polish interwar cultural life, either as authors, or as audience: many other Gombrowicz's colleagues, reviewers, readers, and even his publisher (the prestigious Rój from Warsaw) were Jews. Karol Irzykowski observed that it was "dreadful to think what it would happen if one day Jews proclaim a boycott of Polish literature" (Irzykowski 2001: 254)¹⁶. Jews attended the legendary Warsaw literary cafés, *Ziemiańska*, *IPS* and

¹³ I am aware that the (pseudo)autobiographical aspect of *The Memoirs of Stefan Czarniecki* is part of a theatrical game of masks, as noted by Franczak (2007). This acknowledgment however does not rule out the role of observation (and deformation) of sociopsychological phenomena in the creation of Gombrowicz's literary alter-egos.

¹⁴ They all three reviewed *Ferdydurke*: cf. Gombrowicz 1989: 139, with an amusing anecdote about Breiter and Kott.

¹⁵ Herling's review of *Ferdydurke* took the third place in Gombrowicz's private "ranking" after L. Fryde and A. Sandauer (Herling-Grudziński 1998: 376).

¹⁶ Similarly Słonimski (1935: 216): "People offend Jews, but when Jews don't go to the opera house, the opera house will be closed, when Jews don't buy a book, nobody will buy it". Błoński (1994: 69) speculates that around 50% of subscribers of "Wiadomości Literackie" were assimilated Jews; cf. Landau-Czajka 2006: 18.

Zodiak, which played a fundamental role in Polish interwar culture: among them there were the prominent poets Bolesław Leśmian, as well as Tuwim and Słonimski and the young poetess Zuzanna Ginczanka.

A more problematic aspect of the Jewish presence at the *Ziemiańska* was pointed out by the Yiddish writer Efraim Kaganowski:

[here] the avant-garde of Polish-Jewish culture congregates. Writers, poets, artists come here: a very specific “Brady-bunch” which at every opportunity complains of the presence of Jewish swarm. However, they are not sure of their Polishness: suddenly they realize that they are in fact in the company of Jews. This is why they feel so good here, at home (Kaganowski 1958: 174).

Mythical Polish coffeehouses were a privileged social observation point: Słonimski emphasized with disdain that you could also find here a different set of Jewish customers, a non-intellectual social stratum who came from the neighboring Jewish district, a sign of the Polish culture's appeal to the prewar Jewish middle class:

One Sunday I entered the coffeehouse in Piłsudski Square [IPS], where artistic spheres normally crowd together. It was difficult to plough through, it was impossible to find a free table. The coffeehouse was filled to the brim with a boisterous Jewish clientele. After all, Sunday is not a Jewish holiday: yet precisely on that day these people flocked together into a literary-artistic café? Were they snobs who wanted to see [...] Parandowski talking to Tuwim? No, they were mainly shop owners from Nalewki [a Jewish district's street, G.T.], Poles of this social stratum don't go to IPS. This is the closest non-Jewish café to the Jewish district – hence its success. In this apparently trivial picture, there is a lot of the central truth about Jews: their penchant for fraudulence, a life beyond their means, the most convenient customs [...] and for refusing less convenient forms. All this applies mainly to the Jewish bourgeoisie: to the boisterous, pretentious, unproductive class of brokers and traders (Słonimski 2004: 2).

Gombrowicz was not interested in the sociopolitical, economic, and religious aspects of the presence of over three million Jews in Poland. Fashionable cafes were a fundamental observation point for him, but his view of the Jewish question remained limited to the social spheres with which he was in touch. He was comfortable mixing with members of the assimilated creative intelligentsia: in his opinion these witty and provocative emulators of Polish Form, suspended “in the empty space between a tradition which they had already left and a mode of life which [...] denied them the right of entry” (Bauman 1993: 159), were able to show the inauthenticity of the Poles and easily understood his theories about Form.

Klementyna Suchanow remarked that Gombrowicz's fascination with assimilated Jews derived also from their open-mindedness and “global intellectualism”:

What impressed him was that they [...] saw the world from a different perspective. [...]. For the first time he met such open-mindedness to the world. On one hand the aristocracy had it (but he was not interested in joining it), on the other hand, there was the Jewish path of international and global intellectualism (Suchanow 2017; cf. Hertz 1988: 271-275).

Gombrowicz never explicitly acknowledged this kind of debt to the Jews. He preferred to show the "splendid game" played in common with them at his café table, by taking the role of a Polish aristocrat treating with haughtiness his "own" traditional Jews:

through this game we overcame this burning problem better than could have been achieved with pedantic declarations of equality and other such "progressive" arguments (Gombrowicz 2001: 182).

A paradoxical catharsis: in a radically changed world, threatening and perilous, on the verge of WW2, a Polish writer and his Jewish friends, together played out the roles of their ancestors, as if time had stood still. Gombrowicz explained this mechanism with an anecdote from his rural aristocratic milieu, recalling one of his cousins, "gifted with a sense of humor not infrequently found amongst the gentry", who was able to turn "the traditional attitude [...] towards the Jews into something grotesque". He conversed:

with his Israelite not on the verandah, but from a second-floor balcony, so that he could yell down at the merchant standing in front of the house: "What are you trying to tell me, Moishe?!" I imagine that many people would see this as a typical manifestation of the gentry's pompousness; but I think that my cousin, in turning himself into a proud master and the merchant into a poor 'Moishe', was making a rather profound joke – for he was mocking himself as much as the Jew [...] (Gombrowicz 2001: 177).

In Gombrowicz's mind, this sardonic replica of old-fashioned manners was better than an open fight against racial prejudice and discrimination (which he fit into the more general characteristic of human relations)¹⁷. He expected to find in the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia an ally in provoking the "childish [...] and religious world that is Poland" so as to put Poles in direct "confrontation with the universe" and in this way to undermine Polish Form as Czarniecki did.

¹⁷ It should be added that also his postwar declarations about Jews, alternating appreciation and discredit (Gombrowicz even admits using the term *Parch*, eng. *kike*, an offensive term for Jew [Gombrowicz 1988: 80-81]), belong to a comparable game. This also applies to his declarations of atavistic superiority over Bruno Schulz: "He wanted annihilation. I wanted realization. He was born to be a slave. I was born to be a master. He wanted denigration. I wanted to be 'above' and 'superior to.' He was of the Jewish race. I was from a family of Polish gentry" (Gombrowicz 1993: 6).

After the war Gombrowicz mentioned his “Jewish” novella only in passing – he now asserted the inability of Polish Jews to fight coherently against Form and reinvigorate Polish culture. Although they “played such a remarkable and characteristic role in the development of Poland” (Gombrowicz 1988: 178), unfortunately, they had failed to use their “venom” against the “intellectually soft and spiritually timid” Polish people (satirically described as “lyrical scribblers of poetry, folklorists, pianists, actors” [Gombrowicz 2001: 177-178; Gombrowicz 1988: 178]). This ambiguous statement refers not only to a diagnosis of inauthenticity and non-acceptance: Gombrowicz seems to be blaming Jews for not having reacted like Czarniecki, against Poles’ claimed superior Form which actually is dubious and infantile. Nevertheless, he also acknowledged that he “owed a great deal to them” (Gombrowicz 1988: 81; Gombrowicz 1973: 46)¹⁸. It is worth investigating what he meant by that.

3. Allusions? Influences? Crypto-polemics?

Knut Andras Grimstad has observed that Czarniecki’s final announcement (“I wander around the world, sailing across that abyss of inexplicable idiosyncrasies”, Gombrowicz 2004: 681) appears to be a satirical allusion to the very popular poem by Tuwim, *Żydek* (The little Jew), in which a Jewish poet and a poor *meschugene* are identified with wandering homeless Jews (“And we will both go on our way / A path sad and crazed / And we will never find peace or rest / Singing Jews, lost Jews”). Although in the *Diary* Gombrowicz expressed a negative judgement of Tuwim’s poetry, his mockery of Jews is akin to Tuwim’s *szmonces* (Matywiecki 2007: 305-306; cf. Grimstad 2017: 641), while the author of *Bal w operze* (Bal at the Opera) had much more punch. In his cabaret works, Tuwim comically represented the topic of the Jewish-Polish half-breed: in *The Little Goy* a betrayed orthodox Jewish husband sings a lullaby to a little child born from an affair between his wife and a Polish artist. Since the newborn has inherited Polish features, he concluded: “Mummy’s name is Cypkin, and you are a Sarmatian, sy *git!* [be good!]” (Tuwim 1999: 171).

There were also other assimilated writers who lampooned the Jewish mimicry of Polish noble culture, ridiculing the so-called “Hyper-Sarmatians” Jews, as a kind of grotesque sociocultural hybrids¹⁹. A personality who distinguished himself in denouncing the inauthenticity of Jews was Antoni Słonimski: in his controversial comedy *Murzyn warszawski* (The Warsaw Negro) the bookseller Konrad

¹⁸ Analogously in Gombrowicz 2001: 182: “Who supported me, who fought for me on the literary battleground if not them? Who first dared to cast his entire enthusiasm on the scales of the gathering debate of *Ferdydurke* if not my great, sorely missed friend Bruno Schulz? Who cleared a path for me in Poland both before and after the war, if not Artur Sandauer? And in emigration, who supported me more than Józef Wittlin? Always and everywhere, the Jews were the first to sense and to understand my work as a writer”.

¹⁹ Gombrowicz too had an ambivalent stance to sociocultural hybridizations: cf. his definition of the Polish interwar avant-garde: “a freak with a rabbi’s head and the bare feet of a farm boy” (Gombrowicz 1988: 161).

Hertmański idolizes all that is Polish (he forces his son to serve Mass as an altar boy and to join the army as a military volunteer), pretending to ignore the anti-Semitic persecutions surrounding him. At the end he recognized his mistakes:

All my life I forced myself to do things I disliked. I borrowed money from people who mocked me behind my back. I ate artichokes: I hate artichokes! I haven't put herrings in my mouth for ten years. [...] I was a member of *Demokracja Narodowa* [the Catholic anti-Semitic organization, G.T.], I read "Kurier Warszawski" [...]. I attended military parades. [...] Sometimes I said I don't have a wife at all, because I preferred not to show her. [...] I was almost close to wearing a *kontusz* [a typical noble old outer garment, G.T.] on the National Holiday of 3rd May! I laughed when people offended Jews. I laughed when a drunk brat pulled an old Jew by his long gray beard outside the restaurant. I laughed, although my heart was cut in two. I pretended not to understand Yiddish, I even pretended that I spoke German with a bad accent, that I didn't know what the dollar exchange rate is (Słonimski 1935b: 306-307)²⁰.

Słonimski took to extremes the *Haskalah's* warning "to be a Jew at home and a Gentile on the streets": he idolized his prestigious father's family, descendant of a prominent *Maskil* (an adherent of the *Haskalah* movement), but was in conflict with his mother, to whom he was physically similar. As was the case with Czarniecki's mother, nee Goldwasser, so Eugenia Maria Goldman Słonimska was born to a very wealthy Jewish orthodox family, spoke Yiddish in her childhood (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2012: 19) and became sanctimoniously pious when surrounded by Catholic priests. Rudnicki wrote about her: "She was terrifyingly black, terrifyingly Semitic. Such a mother in a converted family seemed a joke, a sort of Old Testament's revenge for the abandonment of the faith of fathers" (Rudnicki 1981: 80).

In his self-fashioning Słonimski took on the role of a pacifist, a cosmopolitan, an engaged intellectual, even a snobbish anglophile telling about himself: "All I have, is got from *Old England*, even my Jewish mug" (Rudnicki 1981: 16). He incessantly disapproved Jews, disagreeing with any celebration of Jewish culture so that he was largely considered an anti-Semitic Jew. This lonely fighter created in Poland a model of a Jewish cosmopolitan, which did not please almost anyone. Thus, he was violently attacked as an anti-Semite by Jews and as a cynic without a country by Polish nationalists. He reacted ironically: "I am separately anti- and separately Semite". He carefully deleted from his own biography every element of traditional Jewishness: for example, he declared that nobody in his family spoke Yiddish, with the exception of the Catholic Polish maid, who learned it from Jewish children in her childhood (Słonimski 1989: 208).

In his *Diary*, Gombrowicz remarked that while Słonimski's "poems did not captivate" him, he more esteemed his *Kroniki tygodniowe* (Weekly chronicles),

²⁰ Słonimski played with racial stereotypes, resorting to old tricks of the comedy of errors: in *Rodzina* (Family, 1933) the German anti-Semitic Hans finds out that he is son of a Jew.

regularly published from 1927 in "Wiadomości Literackie". He stated that as a columnist Słonimski "had fun, master of organizing capers, in which himself was the protagonist" and that "a generation was brought up on him, so that one does not have to be a god to have followers" (Gombrowicz 1988: 164). Stawiarska (2001: 143) argued that *Weekly chronicles* were very carefully read by Gombrowicz and had a great influence on his *Diary*: in my opinion they may also have left a mark also on his earlier works. Gombrowicz never belonged to the worshippers of Tuwim and Słonimski, gathered around "the glorious table of the Skamandrites" in Ziemiańska, but he closely observed them. Both Słonimski's "self-fashioning", as well as his obsession to be totally impartial with regard to the Jewish question could have been an inspiration for Gombrowicz, who wrote in 1936:

the less naive people [...] are not so much interested [...] in one or the other Słonimski's theatrical character, as rather in Słonimski himself, as a figure of our time, as a man who constructed a lucky fashion and achieved a social success with it (Gombrowicz 1995: 206).

Thus, the author of *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* paid close attention to Słonimski's public self-portrayal: it seems probable that something of Słonimski's naive proclamation of pacifism, ethnic neutrality and rhetoric style were embodied in the Czarniecki of Gombrowicz's novella. For example, in this speech addressed to his readers: "Ah – you will exclaim – it is an unrealistic program and a foolish and unintelligible method!" (Gombrowicz 2004: 680). Słonimski's tirades were very similar: "Forgive me, but I dare say that if Jews are not worse than others, they are certainly not better. [...] If I have said a few hard words here, this does not mean that I hate Jews, but please do not think either that it is love which dictates to me these bitter words" (Słonimski 1924).

Despite his emphasized Semitic features, Czarniecki defines himself as a "rat without color": since he cannot get rid of his "rat's neutrality", he becomes a grotesque "communist" and a pacifist. In this way, Gombrowicz distanced himself from Słonimski, turning to grotesque his campaign against the Jewish inauthenticity and even parodying some aspects of his family. Let us compare the already-quoted declaration of Czarniecki ("I wander around the world, sailing across that abyss of inexplicable idiosyncrasies", Gombrowicz 2004: 681) with the final words of Słonimski's very controversial article *On the hyper-sensitivity of Jews* (1924):

Oh, if I could only feel myself a Jew! On the contrary, in my heart I belong to that small but elevated homeland of people wandering around the world, roving around every land on Earth [...]. I can declare with my hand on my hearth that I have no national feelings at all. I feel myself neither a Pole nor a Jew (Słonimski 1924).

As Kijowski (1984: 430) observed, an analogous "sense of alienation" was the "inflammatory focus of the acute self-knowledge" of many Gombrowicz's protagonists. Assimilated Jews served him as an alter-ego and a literary model for other lonely fighters against Form, especially because of their feeling of alienation from Polish society.

It is certainly not my intention to belittle Gombrowicz's originality: even in the case of the basic idea of *Ferdydurke*, remotely inspired by a Schulz story²¹, we can speak of a creative convergence rather than imitation. I would rather draw attention to the fact that the literary debt that Gombrowicz owed to interwar Polish Jewish writers should not be underestimated. For example, some analogies with Czarniecki's (apparently) naive provocation could be also found in *Pieśń wiosenna* (Spring song), a short story by the pedagogue and writer Janusz Korczak (1998: 15-19), where the anti-conventional narrator accosts people, making rhetorical appeals for love within the family and society, and destabilizes them with the declaration that he is neither "white" nor "red", but "chequered"²².

The analysis of Gombrowicz's discourse on Jews is complex, since he was very unsystematic and played very ambiguously with stereotypes. As Grimstad has remarked (2017: 635) it is very hard to separate his "positive and negative perception of Jews": terms such as exile and alienation, otherness, decadence, distortion which belong to the anti-Semitic vocabulary, always serve him as part of his fight against Form. Every observation about Gombrowicz's alleged anti-Semitism (cf. Bauman 1996: 587, Kępiński 1988: 152-155)²³ or allo-Semitism (Sandauer 1982) should be therefore analyzed in the light of his strategy of self-creation, parody and his views of the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia. Gombrowicz played with Jewish self-narration and self-hatred: his novella about Czarniecki is a "dramaturgical action" (in the sense ascribed to this term by Erving Goffman 1959), in which the hero does not try to create an independent public self-image (a new "Form" as distinct from the Polish one), but seeks to ridicule the imitator's role ascribed to him by others. In this way Czarniecki's strategy, which adopts a stereotype and at the same time fights with it²⁴, can appear as a paradoxical mental attempt to escape from the unwritten rules of Jewish assimilation²⁵.

²¹ Both texts tell of a grotesque return of an adult to a classroom: *Emeryt* (The Old-age Pensioner) was a story from *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass, 1937), *Ferdydurke* was published in the same year by the same publisher.

²² The short story was published in Korczak's well-known collection *Koszatki opatki* (Fiddle-Faddle, Warszawa 1905 and 1910): cf. Tomassucci 2014: 152-153.

²³ Kępiński, a Gombrowicz's childhood friend, aimed at demonstrating that all his statements about Jews derived purely from his anti-Semitism, without considering his "theatrical metaphor" in his *Diary*, as once at his coffee table in Ziemiańska café, when Gombrowicz acted the role of a Polish nobleman with his prejudices.

²⁴ Quoting another Goffman's statement (living with a stigma gives only two possibilities: to adopt a stereotype or to fight with him), Warkocki (2016: 101) observes that Czarniecki's strategy moves in both directions.

²⁵ Writing Czarniecki's novella, Gombrowicz was aware of the paradoxes of Jewish assimilation. I would refer to a Harvey Sacks's study analyzing the topics of assimilation from the point of view of imitative processes, in a manner very similar of Gombrowicz's point of view. There are unwritten rules that allow or not to certain categories some behaviors: if someone is "imitating", it is tantamount to saying that he is doing something that he has not no social right to do. Therefore, basing expectations of social recognition on an imitative process creates an intrinsically contradictory situation (cf. H. Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, v. 1, Blackwell, Oxford 1992, quoted by Dell'Aversano 2019: 104-108 and her related comment).

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