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Contributors

Writing the Life of Another: Structure, the Individual and Agency – Reflections of a Lenin Biographer¹

Christopher Read

I Deciding to write a biography

It is as a result of a chain of unexpected circumstances that I offer these reflections. I have to make a confession. I never set out to be a biographer. I have, for a long time, been somewhat mistrustful of biography. Certainly, I have read, and enjoyed, many biographies. Even a cursory glimpse in any bookshop will show that biography is one of the most popular historical genres. Perhaps biography attracts us because it presents events somewhat as we perceive them, from the point of view of the individual, which is our own perspective on the world. Perhaps it is related to the contemporary cult of celebrity - watching chosen individuals, often of no particular, visible talent, writing the history of their own lives. Followers of celebrities often know more about them than they do about their actual neighbours. Celebrity stories can be followed in terms of apparent triumphs and tragedies that are felt more than our own lives, so (happily perhaps) lacking in such highs and lows. When the tale of the beautiful princess crashes, unscripted, into the thirteenth pillar of the Alma tunnel, she is mourned as a lost close friend. Biographies, to some extent, are a respectable form of celebrity culture. They, of course, assume the individual under discussion is important. They often exaggerate the impact they had on events, for good or evil. It is inconceivable that a biographer should say the subject is unimportant and boring. To many of us, the biographies of people who do not interest us - maybe certain exponents of sports we do not follow - are exactly that, unimportant and boring. But why do we consider other lives to be important and interesting? Clearly we have to be halfway toward them in some sense before we choose to read, say, a life of Nelson over a life of fill in the blank, how about Paris Hilton? The decision to read a particular text has many inbuilt assumptions, the decision to write one even more, the degree of commitment being so much greater. In this lecture I will only have time to reflect on a few that affected my experience of writing a life of Lenin.

Famously, Raymond Aron, the great French centre-right political and social analyst who stood against the *marxisant* intelligentsia of his country in the 50s and 60s, stated that he did not like to meet the people about whom he wrote because it might mislead him. What he seems to have meant was that by putting a relationship on a personal basis, the subject might, through sympathy or dislike, bring emotions into play that clouded rigorous

¹ An earlier version was read in a series on Russian Biography at Robinson College, Cambridge on 1 February 2007.

intellectual judgment. A person might seduce or repel the analyst of their ideas and importance. In this view, personality is independent of the, let us call it, 'historical significance' of a subject. As a scholar who set out as an historian of ideas, this outlook made some sense to me. In writing the history of a great intellectual controversy which gripped the Russian intelligentsia in 1909 and 1910 the personalities of the proponents of particular positions were, I believed, not only difficult to know, in most cases, but also misleading. The philosophical validity of an argument did not, I assumed, depend on who put it forward. And in any case, the participants in the argument did not necessarily know with whom they were debating in the print media perhaps because they were unfamiliar with the writer, perhaps because of the use of a pen name, which was quite common at that time. One responded to a published article, to a written text, as much as to a complex personality who wrote in a particular way because of some twist or turn of personal life. Of course, it is perfectly possible for people to become ideological enemies for life because one has stolen the others lover, ideas, property, prestige. But by and large, one hoped, intellectual debate, even history itself, rose above such contingencies. Indeed, the opposite point of view, that all events were, in fact, the outcome of the personal and the individual, seemed dangerously close to the largely discredited, at that time, 'great person' view of history. Giving too much weight to the individual was to subscribe to an illusion. My own instincts were not in that direction. Rather they were, and remain, closer to currently unfashionable, structuralist interpretations.

Around 1988, during the *perestroika* years one of an extraordinary series of magnificent TV documentaries about the Soviet Union and its past, present and possible future, featured a discussion with a senior official from the State Planning Commission. Sitting in his office, high up in the *Gosplan* building, he responded to the interviewer's sceptical questioning about the impossibility of planning by drawing attention to the throng on the Moscow streets below. He said words to the effect that while he had no idea what was going on in the heads of all those individuals, it was possible to make judgments about their collective behaviour. The complexity and unpredictability of the individual could, he argued, be subsumed into the simpler and more predictable behaviour of the group. Indeed, we live our daily lives around such assumptions. We maybe do not *know*, in the philosophical sense, that if we drive along certain routes at 8-30 am on most weekdays we will encounter a traffic jam, but we can and do act upon the assumption. We travel at a different time or by a different means if at all possible. Perhaps mercifully, I have no idea what is in the heads of my fellow shoppers in a supermarket at 3-00pm on Saturday afternoon but I am fairly certain there will be more of them at that time than there would be at 3-00 am the same day. By analogy, history deals more happily with collective entities than it does with individuals. That, simplistically, is why I am, by instinct, an unreconstructed structuralist. Like Raymond Aron, I think there are certain issues that can be blurred by familiarity with the person involved. There is also a repulsive underlying Nietzschean element in personal and voluntaristic interpretations which stresses the vast importance of certain great individuals - 'nations are a detour of nature for the production of great men' (and he meant men) - and consignment of the rest to 'the herd'.

So what was the chain of unexpected circumstances that worked against this conviction? What were the main assumptions that led me to write about Lenin? And having decided to do so, why did my account take the form it did?

First of all, perhaps I could be impolitely crude and materialistic for a moment. As any academic writer knows one does not, unless one belongs to the blessed handful, write history books for money. Those of us who are not bestsellers tend to think of publishers as captors of our books who keep them guarded 24/7 in vast warehouses lest a copy should escape. Be that as it may, any book is a resultant of a variety of practical forces that seldom get analyzed. I would simply like to point these out as a necessary component of the overall view which is often glossed over. The key influences, which are deeply interrelated, include: 'scholarly values'; the market; the author's career advancement, in particular the requirement to 'publish'². Fifthly, personal circumstances and situation - say family responsibilities - can also have an influence. Usually, we keep discussion of our works within the parameters of the first category, the sacred but nebulous concept of scholarship. In fact, hardly any book is a work of 'pure scholarship.' For better or worse, market or career pressures squeeze items out of authors and into public view. Relatively little attention has been paid to this crucial aspect of academic production - the pursuit of prestige and glittering prizes. One of the finest analyses is in Régis Debray's *Teachers Writers and Celebrities*³ published in 1979 in France, which depicts the French literary intelligentsia's gadarene rush to appear in all the right places, the highest aspiration being an appearance on the television literary and cultural discussion programme of the age, *Apostrophes*. Sadly, today, such is the evolution of the media since then, that leading figures are as likely to appear on *Celebrity Big Brother* as *Newsnight Review*. Germaine Greer, for one has been involved with both. I don't propose to analyse these phenomena much further here but they are, as it were, every author's sordid secret. Did such and such a piece secure - better bank balance, tenure, promotion, prize, chair, etc.? I like to tell myself that I have not so much as crossed the road to fulfil RAE requirements but in fact find myself picking up unexpected openings for articles not to mention delightful tasks like the one in which I am currently engaged, which will boost my or my department's 'esteem ratings' (yes there are such things!). As far as 'my' Lenin is concerned, it was taken up, initially, as a suggestion from a publisher with a series - Routledge Historical Biographies - to complete. My work on it was delayed while I finished a book for another series - European History in Perspective edited by Jeremy Black and published by Palgrave - to which I contributed an overview of the rise and decline of the Soviet system though, in this case, I had chosen the subject matter.⁴ In both cases the

² In the United Kingdom, this has taken the form of a national RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) For those happily not subject to it, it is best described as a vast steamhammer of government inspection which, to the best of my knowledge, for all its costs and disruption, rarely even succeeds in cracking the smallest nut.

³ Régis Debray *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France* London 1981.

⁴ Christopher Read *The Making and Breaking of the Soviet System* Basingstoke and New York 2001.

influence of the market came to bear in that these were publishers' projects that had to sell books, even in the modest quantities of academic editions.

These forces can be subtle and unrecognized, and emerge in unexpected ways. In a moment I will mention what seemed to me to be the key reasons to add another biography of Lenin to the pile but I would like to jump slightly ahead to a moment shortly after I had signed the contract. I was taking part in a day of lectures for sixth-formers on the Russian Revolution, held at the Royal Institution lecture theatre in London. During a break I was leaning on the vast and venerable lectern talking to my fellow lecturers. I asked what they were doing, Beryl Williams replied that she had just completed her one volume biography of Lenin. Robert Service said he was finishing off his one volume version of Lenin's life to stand alongside his deeply researched multi-volume account of Lenin's political life. You can imagine how I felt confessing that I had just signed a contract to produce yet another. Like buses you wait twenty years then three or four come along at once. I went back to my editor, asking if it was worth carrying on, and she said - don't worry there are sixteen Gladstones out there being prepared. At that I felt it my duty to root for Lenin.⁵

So why did I sign that contract? Three factors, above all, pulled me into it. First, I felt as though I knew Lenin very well. After all, though I had not focused exclusively on him, I had read and thought about him a great deal and come across items by him and those close to him in the archives while preparing earlier works on the intelligentsia and on cultural policy. Indeed, from my first serious interest in the history of the revolution, Lenin had been ubiquitous. Like many sixties undergraduates my first real introduction to the revolution came through reading *Ten Days that Shook the World*, in which Lenin and Trotsky loom large as presiding geniuses of revolution, and some of Lenin's major works notably *The State and Revolution*. While I had never considered myself a Leninist or belonged to any Leninist organizations, Lenin had been my constant companion along the road of intellectual discovery. Ordering these as yet random items seemed both feasible⁶ and attractive.

If the ubiquity of Lenin in my mental landscape was one aspect of my attraction to the topic, the second was an uncomfortable niggling feeling that, despite being a structuralist by instinct, it was clear to me that Lenin was important. Had he actually fallen through the ice of the Baltic, as he almost did in January 1908 as he escaped from Finland, the course of Russia's and our history would almost certainly have been very different. Had the government patrol he encountered on the way to the Smolny in the middle of the October

⁵ The three volumes emerged as Christopher Read *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life* London and New York 2005; Robert Service *Lenin: A Biography* London 2000; Beryl Williams *Lenin* London 2000

⁶ Having written the word 'feasible' I began to muse on exactly what I meant by it? Did it mean that it fitted in with my aspects of my life? It was manageable within currently available resources? It did not require lengthy overseas research taking me away from family responsibilities? Or maybe that the three year time frame fitted in with the next national Research Assessment Exercise?

1917 uprising actually arrested him the Bolsheviks might never have come to power. Indeed, certain of the ironies of Soviet history had already struck me. For all its Marxist carapace, Soviet history had emphasized two aspects which fitted poorly into its own, somewhat Kautskian, version of Marxism. Soviet development under Lenin and Stalin had shown first, for all the implicit and explicit economic determinism of their outlook, these were people for whom politics shaped economics. Secondly, they had both shown in their own careers, that, at certain times and under certain circumstances, an individual could be crucial, even decisive. This aspect was equally true of later figures, up to and including Gorbachev and even beyond into the post-Soviet era. Here was much fruit to sustain an enquiry into Lenin's life which would play with the idea of historical agency presented by the subject matter, it being for me essential to have a series of puzzles and conundrums to work out in the course of undertaking a piece of research.

My third reason was linked to the aspiration so cruelly punctured at the lectern of the Royal Society. I had the arrogant but necessary feeling that the Lenin I thought I knew was different from the Lenin portrayed by others and that, in the light of new evidence and a radically new context, it was time for a crisp, accessible, one-volume account of his life - exactly what Beryl Williams and Robert Service were already providing. Williams was writing for a series called 'Profiles in Power' which emphasized what was, in Lenin's case, the last five years of his active life and was especially good at pointing to the importance of cultural revolution - the revolution of values, of human nature - as a key component of Bolshevism rather than a sideshow to the great political-economic aims. Service was writing a massively researched account that split Lenin's personal life from the political life which was the subject of three already published volumes.⁷ From early works in which the role of Lenin was downplayed, Service had come round to seeing Lenin as responsible for many of the evils of the system. This infused his work with a degree of animosity that, while perfectly legitimate, produced an interpretation at variance with my own. There was a fourth entrant onto this crowded field. James White had produced an account that was very strong on the early years and ideas of Lenin as well as aspects of the revolution but paid less attention to character and personality.⁸ However, I was confident that these three Lenins, excellent though they were in every respect, would differ from mine. Thus, there still appeared to be a gap. Initially, I was not quite sure what kind of Lenin would emerge from drawing together my knowledge, seeking out new sources and re-reading classic sources. However, these factors had led to a decision being made and the process of turning me, for a while at least, into a biographer was underway. For the rest of this discussion I would like to turn to some of the main practical and methodological problems I encountered, then discuss questions of interpretation and originality and, finally, offer a few reflections on agency.

⁷ Robert Service *Lenin: A Political Life* (3 vols.) London 1985; 1991; 1994.

⁸ James White *Lenin: The Practice and Theory of Revolution* London 2001

II Practical and methodological problems

For any piece of writing to be successful (however that term is defined), it is necessary for the author to know her or his readership and to know in particular what that readership already knows about the subject matter. In my case, who was interested in Lenin and how much did they know about him? It is several generations now since Virginia Woolf and F.R. Leavis led the way in focusing on the fate of the 'common reader' - the ideal individual who could be known and addressed.⁹ In the age of common readers, certain sets of values were sufficiently diffused through society for them to be addressed. In our contemporary Tower of Babel it is much harder to speak from a platform of shared values. Expert reading increasingly, so Leavis argued, becomes the preserve of an elite. Except that, in a way, the Cold War had perpetuated a 'common reader' of works about Lenin, revolution etc. In fact, there were two 'common readers' - Lenin's supporters on one hand and his detractors on the other, who shared more ground than originally met the eye. For both sides Lenin was a central figure, as hero for some as devil for the others. His control over the party was assumed, by one side for good, by the other side for evil. The party bestrode the revolution, to legitimize it for the Soviet successors, to explain the calamity in simple terms for detractors and so on. However, post-1991 that common readership had disappeared. Lenin was no longer a great icon of current political battles. Even in Russia, survey after survey has shown a rapidly declining recognition on the part of schoolchildren of who Lenin was. Recently I had the good fortune to be in Florence, a city for long governed by Communists. I went to one of the Feltrinelli bookshops, a company once in the forefront of sixties radicalism and the new left. I could not find a single work about Lenin. There were biographies of Khrushchev, two of them in fact, and even, just to rub it in, one about Brezhnev. There were, of course shelves on Stalin and his 'hangmen' and a lively interest in Guevara and Castro etc - but Lenin was obliterated. This was as vivid an illustration as I could have hoped for of a new problem - defining one's readership and, even more, having great difficulty in knowing where to pitch the story. In the end my working assumption owed a great deal to my experience teaching undergraduates and giving frequent lectures to seventeen and eighteen year old school students. One had to assume some knowledge on the part of the readership. In the end, I had in mind a readership stretching from the intelligent person who knew little but wanted to know a lot more, to the jaded specialists who had, they would assume, think they had heard it all before. Obviously, the danger is of falling between the two extremes. There is also one other community of readers one is less likely to encounter in other areas and that is the much-diminished but madly devoted band of cult followers still determined to keep the faith, to refute the bourgeois prejudices of we armchair academics.

⁹ Virginia Woolf *The Common Reader* London 1919 and F.R. Leavis *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* Cambridge 1930; *For Continuity* London 1933 and *Culture and the Environment* London 1933 (with Denys Thompson)

Clearly, considerations of readership link to many of the other problems we have been looking at, especially, 'originality'. This particular feature of academic writing is usually measured up against the broad spectrum of works on a particular topic from the earliest writings still in circulation to the very latest additions. In the case of Lenin this is a very wide spectrum indeed. In Soviet times his works were circulated in astronomical numbers. Works about him in the East and the West were innumerable. In other words, in approaching the pile of Leniniana one is approaching one of the biggest and most diverse piles of ... what exactly? - output, perhaps, in publishing history. How could one make a new impression? Paranoid Lenins abounded almost as frequently as heroic ones. We had cruel dictatorial Lenins by the dozen, kindly, avuncular ones by the score. Oddly we had an 'unknown Lenin', though closer observation made it uncertain as to whom the Lenin portrayed was supposed to be unknown, since much of the content was all too familiar.¹⁰ More recently we have had an almost 900 page *Lenin Rediscovered*.¹¹ We have Lenin as lover of Inessa Armand, Lenin as lifelong virgin. One Lenin we haven't had was suggested to me by a colleague - why not an impotent Lenin? Unable to engage in sexual activity, so the theme might have gone, Lenin sublimated his sex drive and his frustration into his towering political energy and rage. A very attractive theory and a surefire hit, maybe even extracts in the Sunday papers, but with one difficulty. To be picky there was not a shred of evidence to support it, if there is anyone left to whom such a minor drawback is still important.

Before turning to how these issues were resolved there are two final problems to which I would like to draw your attention. One is sources, a problem for all historians, not just biographers, but one which has a special resonance for biographers given the second and last problem which is the intractability of the subject matter. In writing a biography you have a self-defined topic. The subject was born, lived and died within tightly defined parameters. Biography raises generic questions - what were the childhood influences; was the upbringing conventional/traumatic; where do we find signs of special characteristics in the subject; are there particular twists and turns in that person's fate and or achievements which need to be at least elucidated if not explained. Different subjects will, automatically raise different expectations. Obviously, in the case of Lenin it is how did he come to have the massive influence he wielded? How did he come to govern the world's largest country in terms of landmass? A host of other questions revolve around them - what was his character actually like? How was he regarded at the time? Was he cruel and ruthless, a fanatic? How did he see his own role in events, in history? In this way, a biography sets its own agenda. It almost always demands its own chronology. Radically breaking up a life into themes rather than periods is rare and not always successful. Having said that, how does one periodise? In Lenin's case a ready-made structure falls to hand for most biographers - background and childhood (1870-90); early years of public life (1890s); splitting the party (1900-04); the first revolution and its failure (1905-1912); The coming of war and revolution (1913- April 1917); revolution (April 1917-Dec 1917); civil war (1918-21); NEP and the final years (1921-1924).

¹⁰ Richard Pipes *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archives* New Haven and London 1988.

¹¹ Lars Lih *Lenin Rediscovered* Leiden, Boston 2006

I was perfectly happy to work within this framework that began with the personal, moved into the public life and fell back into the personal once more. If the subject matter defines itself in this way, that is all well and good, but it leads on to other problems - the sources for each of these periods are very unequal and of varying value. On childhood there is very little. In his public life Lenin was such a strong and combative character that eyewitness sources vary wildly in assessing the same event. After 1917 Lenin retreats into a party cocoon penetrated only by a few journalists and political visitors from outside. However, the intractability makes it difficult to leave gaps. In a monograph, if there are no sources in an area one can usually, with a greater or lesser degree of cunning, divert attention away from such elisions. However, missing out chunks of a life cannot be so easily patched over. If the subject disappears at the age of fifteen and reemerges aged 25, even the most inattentive reader is likely to notice. Pre-modernists are accustomed to subjects coming into focus and falling out of sight again but a modern, especially twentieth century biography, demands rooting around in all areas. In the case of Lenin, however, one had two, possibly three, trump cards when it came to sources. First there are the memoirs of his lifelong companion and wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya.¹² Like Krupskaya herself, the memoirs are often dismissed but both of these judgments are wrong. For me, one of the revelations of this project was Krupskaya. She became a much more interesting person in her own right, standing for, in my view, a softer bolshevism that Lenin himself would have benefited from. The famous anecdote about their first meeting, included in the memoirs, illustrated the differences very well.

The occasion was a Shrovetide political gathering disguised as a pancake party. 'I remember one moment particularly well ... Someone was saying that what was very important was to work for the Committee for Illiteracy. Vladimir Ilyich laughed, and somehow his laughter sounded quite laconic. I never heard him laugh that way on any subsequent occasion. "Well" he said, "If anyone wants to save the fatherland in the Committee for Illiteracy, we won't hinder them."¹³

This was possibly not one of the great chat-up lines of all time but illustrative of a Krupskaya, keen to change the lives of real people in the real world, and a Lenin, dismissing the particular in favour of the cataclysmic megatransformation of revolution. Until her death in 1939 Krupskaya remained warmly humanistic and close to the men and women workers whose lives she sought to improve through the provision of education. Like any memoirs, Krupskaya's have to be treated with care and have to be interpreted but, considering who she was, about whom she was writing and the time, 1920s and 1930s, of composition, compilation and publication we have a marvellous account that seldom aggrandizes Lenin. He is presented at a human, not iconic level and his mistakes are not always glossed over.

¹² Nadezhda Krupskaya *Memories of Lenin* London 1970

¹³ Krupskaya (1970) p.16

Rivals, especially the Martov's, are described warmly and also in a non-polemical, human way, something Lenin himself could not do. Lenin's admiration of early populist revolutionaries and criticism of the younger generation who were dismissive of their heroic forebears are brought out. The emotional and family elements of his life, his frequent holidays, and his bouts of illness are slotted into the picture. She even gently mocks him for his political obsession which, on one famous occasion, distracted him so much that he walked into the back of a tram. Compared to some of the hostile memoirs from defeated rivals - which often try to portray a prematurely aged, totalitarian Lenin even in the 1890s - Krupskaya paints a multi-coloured portrait of a complex and fallible individual. She also displays, without making an issue of it, how crucial family was to Lenin and to many other revolutionaries. It was once fashionable to think that revolutionaries were outcasts from society who had failed to make warm human relationships with others. For example, Vladimir Nahirny, writing in 1962, stated that:

In a very real sense, then, the first Russian *intelligents* attached themselves intensely to abstract ideas and let themselves be devoured by convictions because they were unable to establish enduring personal attachments ... There can be no doubt, thus, that love of collectivities and attachment to ideas served the *intelligents* as a substitute for love and attachment to individual persons.¹⁴

These characteristics, he concluded, made Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov prototypes of the totalitarian personality.¹⁵ In the Ulyanov family, nothing was further from the truth. His sisters and brother and the in-laws all joined in the family business of revolution, no doubt in their case, mindful of their absent brother, the saintly and heroic Sasha, executed by the government in 1887 following his involvement in a bomb plot to assassinate Alexander III. In fact, the role of family in the lives of revolutionaries is attracting increasing scholarly attention.¹⁶ Be that as it may, the Ulyanovs as a whole faced the revolutionary task together. Only their mother stood at a distance but it was her pension, derived from being the widow of a man who had acquired hereditary nobility, which sustained Lenin and his household through their frequent financial crises.

The second great, and obvious but much underutilised source, is Lenin's own writings. Fifty-five published volumes of collected works, supplemented by many volumes of later findings, provide a wealth of material. While the central canon of Lenin's great works, *What is to be Done?*, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* and *State and Revolution* plus the frequently mentioned but scarcely read *Development of Capitalism in Russia* are well known, they

¹⁴ Vladimir Nahirny 'The Russian Intelligentsia: From Men of Ideas to Men of Convictions', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 4, no. 4 (July 1962) p.433.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.435

¹⁶ For example, in the works of Katy Turton such as *Forgotten Lives: The Role of Lenin's Sisters in the Revolution* Basingstoke and New York 2006

do not always say what they have been assumed to say. Recently, there has been renewed interest in *What is to be Done?* Lars Lih has shown, at perhaps inordinate length what Neil Harding pointed out twenty years ago, that it was not initially seen as a heretical work laying out a blueprint for a new type of party.¹⁷ For me, these leading works have often been read in a way that misses their key, Russian-related point and have been seen as a kind of universal Do-It-Yourself guide to Bolshevik type revolution. Sadly, the Bolsheviks themselves read them that way by 1921 when the 21 Conditions for Admission to Comintern (some dozen or so of which, in exemplary Leninist fashion, called for splitting existing socialist parties) were produced. However, a mass of journalism (Lenin, in later life not inaccurately described himself as revolutionary journalist on his party card) enable us to get a much richer view of Lenin's attitude to revolutionary violence, class alliances, democracy, imperialism and many of the key issues of his thought and actions. In many cases it was almost unreadable texts like *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, and second rank texts like *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Present Revolution*, *The April Theses*, *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government* and *Better Fewer but Better* which, in conjunction with shorter pieces and letters, were the most revealing. While Lenin is sometimes presented as secretive and Machiavellian, his writings show him to be duplicitous to a degree but also very frank and even naïve in his expectations of individuals and of events. They also show that, in addition to his frequently mentioned inclination towards breaking off relations with opponents, he was also able to engage in reconciliation. Both splits and alliances were guided by his vision of political necessity, not personal feeling which he did his best to suppress, as in the famous Gorky anecdote about music, notably Beethoven, making him want to pat people on the head when it was necessary to beat them.¹⁸

Read together, these two sets of sources provide massive material for evaluating Lenin's life. It should also be mentioned that there are several chronologies of his life. One, less reliable, published alongside the collected works and a magnificent one-volume work by G and H Weber, relieved me of much of the tedious task of working out Lenin's frequent movements.¹⁹ All of this was available before the emergence of the not-quite-trump card of archival 'revelations'. Why 'not-quite'? We have learned a great deal from former Soviet archives in the last fifteen years or so. Much of it has, if anything, reduced some of the horrific aspects of the regime. The extreme astronomical totals for victims of Stalin bandied about in the Cold War, bad though they are in reality, can no longer be sustained. However, for the early years the main impact has been to allow much wider, provincial areas to be brought into the equation, emphasizing that what happened in 1917 was an explosion of popular discontent beyond anyone's control. For the life of Lenin it was not to be expected that massive amounts of interpretation-changing material would emerge because we already had so much available. In a way, the belief of some that the Bolsheviks engaged under Lenin

¹⁷ Neil Harding *Lenin's Political Thought* (2 vols.) London 1977 and 1981. See vol. 1 chapter 7 'The Reaffirmation of Orthodoxy'.

¹⁸ Maxim Gorky 'Vladimir Lenin' *Russkii sovremennik* no 1 1924 p.234

¹⁹ G and H Weber *Lenin: Life and Works* London and Basingstoke 1980.

and Stalin in a kind of intellectual double-book-keeping - one version for public consumption, one for private - has been shown to be exaggerated. To a far greater degree, at least as far as Lenin is concerned, what you see, in the classic sources, is what you get. Perhaps the most significant new material resulting from the most exhaustive archival research, and Robert Service has done more of this than anyone else, has related to Lenin's medical records. While one can connect frequent illnesses with moments of stress, it also seems likely that Lenin was aware from consultations in Switzerland that he probably shared his father's tendency towards sclerosis, leading to strokes and brain hemorrhage which brought about his death at the age of 54, the same age at which Lenin himself died. As Service argues, this made Lenin a man in a hurry in later life, one who knew he might not have much time.²⁰

III The Final Picture

This section responds to two related questions - what kind of Lenin finally emerged from my efforts and why should anyone pay the slightest attention to it in view of all the others?

The emerging, 'historical' Lenin seems to me to be composed of numerous parts, some more original, some more unexpected, than others. First we can set aside theories of a maladjusted or extraordinary childhood. In these Freudian times it is always tempting to portray the child as father of the man, in Wordsworth's phrase. Attempts to show Lenin as mini-tyrant from the cot have no substance. The evidence suggests he lived an ordinary life. It hardly seems likely that his later, supposedly monstrous, temperament was revealed, as Figs for one tries to persuade us, by the fact that as a boy 'he often lied and cheated at games.'²¹ Well, that's most of us then isn't it? We might surmise that the fate of Alexander in 1887 had a galvanising effect on the young Lenin but the evidence is not decisive. It is speculation at best. The roots of radicalization in the Ulyanov family go deeper. After all, Alexander's fate does not explain why *he* was a radical. Rather, the younger Ulyanovs, who had been brought up through the morality of the father, a small deeds liberal who worked within the system to improve peasant education, took a step further as the autocracy continued to rumble along blindly down the path of reaction. Incidentally, I was never able to identify a button which, when pushed, 'radicalized' Lenin. For me, Lenin was 'constructed' from the young Ulyanov but it was a complex and multi-layered process, not a Hollywood moment of revelation.

This links to the second point. Lenin, and arguably most other Russian revolutionaries, started out as a populist, someone who believed, in a loose and unstructured way, that it was the duty of the privileged to ensure justice and well being for the less fortunate. While Lenin added a colossal superstructure of Marxist ideology, at crucial times the underlying populist broke through. Most strikingly, in the heat of the October revolution

²⁰ Service (2000) pp.158-60.

²¹ Orlando Figs *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* London 1996 p.144.

he penned an appeal (which was not in fact used but is revealing nonetheless) for the revolution to be conducted by the armed people, by the masses, without a specific reference to the working class, the touchstone of Marxist revolutionary theory.

Having moved from populism to Marxism in the 1890s, when did he move from orthodoxy to heresy? *What is to be Done?* is often seen as his clarion call to a new beginning based on a party of a new type and a new kind of party discipline. As Neil Harding showed twenty years ago (and Lars Lih more recently in a lengthy 40 page article in the journal *Kritika*, which was just the warm up for his near-900 page book to back it up) that the pamphlet was initially greeted by party elders as a statement of orthodoxy.²² Only when Lenin, through his actions at the Second Party Congress in London, upset them all did they re-read the pamphlet as heretical. Lars Lih's labours have shown exactly how *What is to be Done?* was deemed by Soviet and anti-Soviet historians to be the *locus classicus* of an argument it did not actually contain. For Lih to claim a *Lenin Rediscovered* was to ignore Harding's much more succinct account not to mention other biographers like White, Williams, Service and Read who had read Harding. It does, however, remain a central pivot of unraveling the 'real' Lenin.

One cannot do justice in a brief lecture to this complex issue. Let me point out one or two waypoints to help us through. Most importantly, the so-called 'split' in the party in 1903 was far from being as clear-cut as was once thought. It did not open a chasm that was never bridged. In addition, the closer one looks the harder it is to define what issues were behind the 'split'. So what was going on? Though not a total separation the split was a serious division, but one which neither side, until, arguably 1914 when it became about something else, or even into 1917, was prepared to push to a final conclusion. Both sides preferred to try to 'win' the party to itself rather than split it into two. Remember it was only in 1918 that the Bolsheviks took their own name (The Communist Party) and adopted their own party programme. The reason for the reluctance was obvious. The Social Democrats were outgunned by the Socialist Revolutionaries and even by the Kadets. To split would weaken both factions. Instead they should be seen as factions circling round within the same party – something not unfamiliar from today's British politics. The argument was conducted in terms of squabbles within the same political family. A dizzying stream of alliances, compromises, reunifications came and went. Astonishingly, at one point in 1906 Lenin declared his group to be disbanded and talked of the 'former Bolshevik faction.'²³ The rank and file were relatively untouched, but among leaders the dance was taken seriously. Some have read it as Machiavellianism on Lenin's part, as a long-lasting piece of deceptive vaudeville. However, Machiavellianism implies subtlety. Lenin was rarely subtle. His

²² Lars Lih 'How a Founding Document was Found, or One Hundred Years of Lenin's *What is to be Done?*' in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* vol.5 no.1 Winter 2004 pp.55-80.

²³ For a fuller account of the tortuous path of Lenin's ideas on the party at this time see Christopher Read 'Lenin and the 1905 revolution' in Jonathan D. Smele and Anthony Heywood (eds) *The Russian Revolution of 1905: Centenary Perspectives* London 2005 pp.218-40

initiatives tended to be crude and obvious. Lenin's weapon was the bludgeon, not the stiletto. Looking at the issues also shows a sorry tale of historiographical confusion. The neat split of Bolsheviks, determined to press on with revolution, and indecisive Mensheviks who wanted to sit back and await the evolution of capitalism, does not hold up. The group that wanted to await the evolution of capitalism was actually a small group of admirers of Bernstein. They were known as the Economists because they wanted to eschew political struggle – the first principle of Bolsheviks *and* Mensheviks, not to mention Socialist Revolutionaries and Kadets, all of which parties had a constituent assembly as their first goal – and turn instead to economic struggle. This made them, rather than the Mensheviks, the butt of Lenin's derisory comments in *What is to be Done?* about 'trade unionism' as a weakening of the workers' revolutionary resolve. Even if one looks at principles of party organization, another great red herring of the debate, Lenin was calling essentially for a party in the form of German Social Democracy with a disciplined centre comparable to that of all large political parties. In Russian conditions, and only then, he said, did conspiratorial ways have to be adopted. A broad organisation of the type his opponents wanted would make the party accessible to the workers, but the cost, Lenin argued was too high. It would make the revolutionaries accessible to the police.²⁴ What he was essentially calling for was a maturing of the party, for the abandonment of the circle (*kruzhok*) mentality, the party as intellectual discussion club, which had hitherto dominated it. Again, the principles were adopted and there was no official dispute about party organization after 1906, nor could one distinguish anything special about the way Bolsheviks and Mensheviks comported themselves up to October. They were, in their day-to-day practices, little different from other political groups.

We have also touched on another often-overlooked feature of Lenin's career. His major works are often seen as universally applicable formulae, not least by his followers. However, one needs to take into account that each of Lenin's works is primarily addressed to the struggle in Russia. *What is to be Done?* specifies its applicability to Russia but even those less likely looking candidates are equally close to Russian conditions. *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) establishes that, since capitalism is now rooted in Russia, populist dreams of avoiding the capitalist stage (ironically shared by Marx as White has pointed out²⁵) were no longer of any value. The Russian subtext of *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, the work most often seen and used as a theory of imperialism in general, was that, since capitalism was a seamless, global system it could be challenged anywhere, not least where it was weak. In this way, Lenin solved the dilemma of the Russian Marxist – how could one promote an advanced, working-class revolution overthrowing an exhausted capitalism in a country like Russia. Capitalism had barely begun to take hold and the workers were, as Lenin frequently acknowledged, 'backward' compared to their western counterparts and unready to lead a socialist revolution. Their role might be to light the flame but only the international working class could actually torch capitalism. *State and Revolution* addressed similar concerns. By oversimplifying the revolution, comparing it, in effect, to changing the management of

²⁴ Vladimir Lenin *What is to be Done?* in *Selected Works* vol. 1 Moscow 1963 p.196.

²⁵ White (2001) pp.44-5.

the German Post Office, he was able to nurture the illusion, in which he was perhaps a sincere believer, that the revolution need not be totally disruptive.

This leads to a further point. Did Lenin think long term? Was he a great planner and leader, as his cold war stereotypes suggested, or was he a great improviser? In the heat of the seizure of power he quoted Napoleon ‘*On s’engage et puis on voit.*’ – engage in battle and see what happens. In truth, Lenin seems to have acted frequently according to this principle. His first two attempts at setting up a transitional economy and society collapsed. The assumption of *The State and Revolution* and *The April Theses* and the immediate pre-October writings suggested a transfer of power could be ‘gradual, peaceful and smooth.’ When reality proved more intractable he turned to ‘iron proletarian discipline’ in May 1918, denouncing theories of peaceful transition as contrary to ‘the law of all revolutions’.²⁶ When that initiative, usually known now as war communism failed, his final plan, the New Economic Policy backed by the extension of especially rural co-ops, was proclaimed to be ‘all that is necessary to build a complete socialist society’.²⁷ That too failed in 1928 but the implementation of the next form of transition was in other hands, Lenin having died in January 1924 before NEP began to unravel. What he might have done in 1928-9 is one of the great ‘what ifs’ of modern history.

IV Agency in History

In the light of the above, let us return to the starting point – structuralism versus the great individual. Lenin’s last years and death show just how essential he was to maintaining party unity. Only he could keep the likes of Bukharin, Trotsky, Stalin, Zinoviev, Preobrazhensky and so on in the same tent. With Lenin failing to act decisively to solve the differences before he died (a perhaps impossible task anyway), each group wrapped the banner of Lenin around itself, none more closely than Stalin and his followers. The outcome of the struggle also shows that one ignores the importance of the individual at ones peril. It does not, however, mean that only great individuals count.

The extremes of the debate about the role of the individual are well-known, especially to Russianists. At one extreme liberals argue that there is nothing but individual action and individual responsibility. In the famous words of one of them – ‘There is no such thing as society.’²⁸ At the other extreme let us take Plekhanov as an example. In *The Role of the Individual in History* he argued that circumstances created the individuals needed to respond to those very circumstances. If Napoleon had not been born his historical role would have been taken over by someone else and ‘history’ would not have been very

²⁶ Vladimir Lenin *Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government in Selected Works* Moscow vol.2 1963 p.669.

²⁷ Vladimir Lenin *On Co-operation in Selected Works* vol 3 1964 p.758-9.

²⁸ Margaret Thatcher Interview 23 September 1987, as quoted in by Douglas Keay, *Woman’s Own* 31 October 1987, pp. 8–10

different.²⁹ This notion penetrated deeply into the Russian revolutionary movement and, for example, is reflected in Trotsky's lordly refusal to play politics in order to outwit his rivals. After all, it was 'history' that would decide the outcome, not packing committees and manipulating party conferences. Of course, the fact that Stalin was a master of such practices does not mean Trotsky was wrong. It is an interesting aside that both Trotsky and Lenin believed history acted above and beyond the individual but neither of them was prepared to admit that their own situation was determined 'historically'. For Lenin, the bureaucratic and other deviations from the pure revolutionary model were not the result of systemic faults but aberrations caused by spiteful enemies. Trotsky was not defeated because his ideas no longer played in the Communist Party or in wider Russian society or even within the global left but because those entities had been polluted by his opponents. As already noted it is also ironic that, of all twentieth-century histories, that of Russia, supposedly based on an economic-determinist movement, shows the fact that, under certain circumstances, individuals can be of the utmost importance.

So, where does the individual fit in? In a sense, both extremes are right, but in different spheres. As we have already noted, individual action is important in the everyday sphere, the sphere in which we live. But it is naive to transfer this directly to the broad, social sphere. Rather we can turn to, and I say this very rarely, the postmodernists for some guidance here. One of their key inspirations was the linguistic work of de Saussure, one aspect of which – though not exclusive or completely original to him – was the notion that no individual or group of individuals consciously invents, or can control the development of, language. Many contribute to it as an anonymous and collective enterprise. Every phoneme, phrase and expression was initially invented, perhaps by one person perhaps near-simultaneously by a number of people. But, the postmodernists remind us, conscious intervention to control the development of language is doomed to failure. A favourite example is the persistent effort of the Académie Française to protect the purity of the French language and, in particular combat *franglais*. However, many postmodernists make an erroneous inference from their own insight. They argue that interference in history in general is equally ineffective. We will come to why this is wrong in a moment. First, we can perhaps note a similarity between this model of the history of language and the Marxist model which also absorbs the specific and the spontaneous into the great, apparently highly but not completely determined, structural wheel of economic contradictions, class formation and class struggle. Marx was not, however, a determinist and we might also note in passing

²⁹ George Plekhanov *The Role of the Individual in History* 1898. He writes, for example, that: 'What [Napoleon] did in the Italian and other campaigns other generals would have done. Probably they would not have displayed the same talent as he did, and would not have achieved such brilliant victories; nevertheless the French Republic would have emerged victorious from the wars it waged at that time, because its soldiers were incomparably the best in Europe. As for the 18th of Brumaire and its influence on the internal life of France, here, too, *in essence*, the general course and outcome of events would probably have been the same as they were under Napoleon.'

that Lenin added agency to this model in the inter-related forms of the party and the nurturing of class-consciousness. These models tend to suggest that agency, unlike the extreme liberal view, is a broad, collective, spontaneous and impersonal process almost bypassing the individual. However, the extreme liberal view is correct in pointing out the obvious – namely that all societies are made up of individuals and only of individuals. They – or rather, we, individual human beings – are the only contributors to these great processes but not necessarily consciously, effectively, rationally or successfully. So how do we do it? Where does the individual fit?

In my view agency in history is rather like a parallelogram of forces, or rather a resultant of a vast number of interacting forces. Like physical forces acting on an inert mass, all of us as individuals inescapably contribute, but as individuals we pull in a multitude of often-conflicting directions. Historical change is the resultant of these forces. ‘Organizers’, like the French Academy, try to pull these forces into shape. They try to discipline individuals to pull together in order to prevail. Other individuals may affect the situation by doing nothing or taking the opposite action. Either way they obstruct the plans of the organizers. However, the inference drawn by many postmodernists, such as Jean-François Lyotard, that all interventions are rendered impotent does not follow. Many of these ‘organizers’ have considerable success – from the great religions and political movements to more humble agents of civil society – NGOs, schools, clubs, even academic subject associations. They can achieve certain objectives, they inevitably contribute to the course of history and, under certain, usually fleeting conditions, and they can have moments of influence, moments of power. We should not draw the conservative conclusions of many postmodernists that intervention is totally ineffective and useless (though nor should we believe, with utopians perhaps, that complete success is possible). What we should conclude, however, is that individuals are the only contributors to historical change, but they, even Lenin, are rarely its controllers.

Supplementing the autobiography of Princess Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova: the Russian Diaries of Martha and Katherine Wilmot

Angela Byrne

I

Princess Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova (1743–1810) was one of the most remarkable women of her time. Among her numerous achievements is her distinction as the first European woman to hold public office, as director of St Petersburg Academy of Arts and Sciences and president of the Russian Academy. She was a close friend of Catherine II, and at the age of nineteen participated in the coup of June 1762. Dashkova's life has been said to have been more representative of a man's than a woman's;¹ as well as her public achievements she ably resolved the finances of her late husband's estate, managed her son's education with determination (in Russia and abroad), ran two estates with military precision and corresponded with the greatest thinkers of the age. Her domestic and stately obligations were punctuated by lengthy periods of foreign travel and residence. However, her exile under Pavel and the bad press she received by association with Catherine II were a cloud over her later years; her self-representation attempted to counteract this. As well as composing a textual record (her *Memoirs*), she regularly regaled all in her company with tales of the court and its personalities, emphasizing her past glories and proximity to power.

It was just such stories that enthralled Martha Wilmot (1775–1873) while she lived with Dashkova on her rural estate, Troitskoe, about 100km west of Moscow. Encouraged, perhaps even inspired, by her young Anglo-Irish friend and companion, Dashkova wrote and completed her *Memoirs* five years before her death. Martha Wilmot and her sister Katherine (1773–1824) translated the memoirs from French into English while living with Dashkova; Katherine then brought a copy to Ireland in 1807. It is from this copy that Martha Wilmot (Bradford) had the *Memoirs* published in 1840, thirty years after the princess's death – she had been forced to burn her own copy when she departed Russia in 1808, in fear of it being seized by hostile customs officers who suspected her of spying. This paper is concerned with three main questions: Dashkova's motivations for writing her autobiography; the potential of the Wilmot papers to fill in any blanks in her story and self-representation; and the reception of the published memoir.

¹ Alexander Woronzoff-Dashkoff, "Dashkova, Ekaterina Romanovna," in Marina Ledovsky, Charlotte Rosenthal and Mary Zirin, eds., *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* (Westport, CT, 1994), 142.

II

Personal memoirs (as we recognize them today) only emerged in Russia in the mid-eighteenth century, somewhat later than in Western Europe.² Conditions for the development of the genre were different in Russia than in the West, largely due to differing educational and publishing traditions. Furthermore, most eighteenth-century Russian memoirs were never intended for publication but were composed solely for the benefit of relatives and friends, partly due to the lack of what Beth Holmgren calls a ‘socially condoned practice of publishing memoirs.’³ It was considered so distastefully egotistical to publish one’s own story that social convention effectively prohibited all but the composition of manuscripts intended solely for private circulation. Post-1812, an increasing awareness of national history (a history which had been dominated by personal relationships) along with the celebration and recording of the lives of national heroes, contributed to an increase in the writing of autobiography and public acceptance of memoirs as published matter.⁴ This acceptance came only slowly, however, so that self-censoring continued into the nineteenth century. Together with state censorship (particularly under Nicholas I, 1825–55), this led a small number of individuals to amass collections of manuscript copies of unpublished memoirs,⁵ not only for their literary value but also for their record of Russian history.

Additional difficulties faced female autobiographers, their number already limited by lower educational standards for women. They were also restricted by modesty, it being considered inappropriate for a woman to bear her life and soul in such a public manner, making herself ‘the heroine of her own story’. Apart from Dashkova’s, only three other women’s autobiographies are known from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – one is the memoir of Catherine II, which remained unpublished until 1859. Wilmot was only given charge of Dashkova’s manuscript memoirs on the condition that they would not be published until after her death; despite this, of the four female autobiographies composed during the period, Dashkova’s was the first to be published. The potential for controversy in the *Memoirs* was such that three years after Dashkova’s death her brother, Count Simon Vorontsov, entered into a somewhat hostile correspondence with Wilmot, demanding that she wait another thirty years to publish them.⁶ While he died in 1832, Wilmot still did not

² Discussion will be confined here to the Russian autobiographical tradition; for the Irish tradition, see for example Liam Harte, ed., *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* (Houndmills, 2007); Elizabeth Grubgeld, *Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender, and the Forms of Narrative* (Syracuse, 2004).

³ Beth Holmgren, ed., *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature* (Evanston, 2003), xvii.

⁴ Barbara Walker, “On reading Soviet memoirs: a history of the ‘contemporaries’ genre as an institution of Russian intelligentsia culture from the 1790s to the 1970s,” *Russian Review* 59, no. 3 (2000): 331–2.

⁵ Holmgren, *The Russian memoir*, xvii.

⁶ Royal Irish Academy (hereafter RIA), MS 12M18 (Wilmot papers), Count Vorontsov to Martha Bradford (née Wilmot), 26 Jan. 1813.

publish the much-anticipated memoir until eight years later, her editorial introduction containing references to a ‘near relative’ of the Princess having had ‘feelings unfavourable’ to their publication, despite another brother of Dashkova’s having already approved the first volume.⁷

Just what inspired Dashkova to compose her memoirs? The ageing princess’s concerns were complex and multifaceted, but Wilmot does take much of the credit, recording in her diary on 10 February 1804 that ‘The Princess has begun to write her life. Her motive for so doing is friendship to me, as she says she will give me the manuscript and liberty to publish it.’⁸ Indeed, some scholars have questioned the extent to which Dashkova tailored her *Memoirs* to ‘suit the manners and morals of her immediate reader’, Martha Wilmot.⁹ Wilmot later publicly reinforced her role in the provenance of the *Memoirs*, writing in the introduction that Dashkova ‘appeared to me a being of so superior an order, that I listened earnestly to every word she uttered which threw any light on her early life, and longed to hear more of it in detail. I thought also she owed it to herself, and to those who loved her, to let her character be known.’¹⁰ Indeed, Dashkova claimed to have never wanted to write her life until that point, referring to Wilmot as ‘my young friend for whose sake I have overcome my repugnance at the idea of writing these memoirs.’¹¹ Having come to consider Wilmot as a daughter, dedicating the *Memoirs* to her and crediting her with their creation can be considered an expression of the eighteenth-century Russian tradition of family autobiography. Giving Wilmot the rights to the manuscript was also a gift, giving Wilmot an opportunity to publish – a path into public life.

Further to these personal motives, Marcus Levitt reminds us that Dashkova’s *Memoirs* ‘were written when her celebrity was in almost total eclipse’, ‘as an attempt to rescue

⁷ Martha Bradford (née Wilmot), ed., trans., *Memoirs of the Princess Dashkawa, Lady of Honour to Catherine II, Empress of All the Russias, Written by Herself, Comprising Letters of the Empress, and Other Correspondence* (2 vols, London, 1840), vol. i, xxviii–xxix. It has not been possible here to examine Martha Wilmot’s own modesty, which may have been another cause of delay in publication of the *Memoirs*; her own conduct was thus also made public in the text. For example, Maria Edgeworth was shocked by Wilmot and Dashkova’s calm reactions to meeting ‘the murderer’ of Peter III, Grigori Orlov – see Helen Zimmern, ed., *Maria Edgeworth* (Charleston, SC, 2009), 204–05.

⁸ H.M. Hyde and Edith Stewart, eds., *The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot: Being an Account by two Irish Ladies of their Adventures in Russia as Guests of the Celebrated Princess Dashkawa, Containing Vivid Descriptions of Contemporary Court Life and Society, and Lively Anecdotes of Many Interesting Historical Characters 1803–1808* (1934; reprint, New York, 1971), 79.

⁹ T.W. Clyman and Judith Vowles, eds., *Russia Through Women’s Eyes: Autobiographies from Tsarist Russia* (Yale, 1999), 18.

¹⁰ Bradford, ed., *Memoirs of the Princess Dashkawa*, vol. i, xxi.

¹¹ Kyril Fitzlyon, ed., trans., *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova: Russia in the Time of Catherine the Great* (1958; reprint, Durham, NC, 1995), 146.

her public image from oblivion or worse, misrepresentation.¹² Levitt finds the memoirs ‘a triple defence’ of Catherine II, Russian Enlightenment culture, and Dashkova’s own historical role, arguing that the very title – originally *Mon histoire* – ‘suggests the merging of an individual and historical narrative.’¹³ Indeed, Dashkova’s earlier proximity to Catherine II had tarnished her own reputation, so vindicating the former empress both served her own interest and testified to former friendship. Nineteenth-century Russian autobiographers have been considered ‘moral spokespersons’ in the face of repression and censorship;¹⁴ while the *Memoirs* do portray Dashkova’s exile in terms of her ‘innocence and virtue’ pitted against tyranny,¹⁵ this idea must be treated carefully. The *Memoirs* have been filtered through the lenses of Martha and Katherine Wilmot’s translation and Martha Wilmot’s editing of the manuscript – not to mention its publication in various editions originating from slightly different manuscript copies.¹⁶

In attempting to ‘rescue her public image from oblivion or misrepresentation’,¹⁷ the *Memoir* emphasises Dashkova’s personal relationships with noteworthy figures of the European Enlightenment and her role in the Russian state and public life under Catherine II. The simultaneous attempt to represent a model wife and mother creates conflict in the text. Dashkova’s desire to express herself as a ‘public’ woman unchained by gender roles in her youth was compromised by an equal desire in her later years to express the private/personal sacrifices she had made as a wife and particularly as a mother. Personal information, particularly in regard to her later life, is absent from the *Memoir*, possibly as a result of this inner conflict between two forces which both remained unfulfilled – her friendship with Catherine II became strained¹⁸ and she lost her intellectual, public positions; privately, she became estranged from her own son and daughter. Her later years were passed in contrast to

¹² Marcus C. Levitt, “Virtue must advertise: self-presentation in Princess Dashkova’s memoirs,” in S.A. Prince, ed., *The Princess and the Patriot: Ekaterina Dashkova, Benjamin Franklin, and the Age of Enlightenment* (Pennsylvania, 2006), 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

¹⁴ Clyman and Vowles, eds., *Russia Through Women’s Eyes*, 7.

¹⁵ Levitt, “Virtue must advertise,” 41.

¹⁶ Including Martha Bradford (née Wilmot), ed., trans., *Memoirs of the Princess Dashkawa, Lady of Honour to Catherine II, Empress of All the Russias, Written by Herself, Comprising Letters of the Empress, and Other Correspondence* (2 vols, London, 1840); “Mémoires de la Princesse Dashkawa,” in P.I. Bartenev, ed., *Arkhiv Kniazia Vorontsova* xxi (Moscow, 1881); Kyril Fitzlyon, ed., trans., *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova: Russia in the Time of Catherine the Great* (1958; reprint, Durham, NC, 1995); Alexander Woronzoff-Dashkoff, Catherine Le Gouis and Catherine Woronzoff-Dashkoff, eds., *Mon histoire: mémoires d’une femme de lettres russe à l’époque des Lumières* (Paris, 1999).

¹⁷ Levitt, “Virtue must advertise,” 40.

¹⁸ The two women became distant after Catherine II’s accession, but the wedge seems to have been finally driven when Dashkova approved the publication of Kniazhnin’s play *Vadim of Novgorod* in 1793, which Catherine II considered antimonarchical and revolutionary.

her youth, the public roles she had formerly enjoyed confined to the past. These later years are inadequately accounted for in the *Memoirs*. Indeed, Wilmot felt that the princess had skimmed over her later life in the *Memoirs*, stating in the preface that she ‘got tired, and hurried off the work’.¹⁹ This is not surprising given the complete reversal of fortune she suffered, as well as the family problems tormenting her later years. Personal information is, however, to be found in Martha and Katherine Wilmot’s diaries and letters, recording over five years of the Princess’s whims and fancies, sickness and health, beliefs and regrets. Indeed, the Wilmot papers portray a Dashkova effectively living in exile, burdened by the weighty regrets of an eventful life, yet in command of her own world, that is, the world of her estate and serfs – and, it might be said, the world of Martha Wilmot, who found herself a ‘prisoner’ of the Princess’s friendship, unable to leave Russia for fear of hurting her ‘Russian mother’. It is perhaps in this portrayal that the balance is most effectively struck between Dashkova’s public and private roles, as she managed her estate and composed her *Memoirs* while finding personal fulfillment in her relationship with Wilmot.

III

The Wilmots’ Russian travel accounts are a valuable source in piecing together Dashkova’s final years, spent in retirement on her rural estate. The original collection is held in the library of the Royal Irish Academy, but two editions have been published.²⁰ They are layers of biography and autobiography; they are in essence travel autobiographies, while their record of Princess Dashkova’s later life comprises an unpolished biography of an influential and often misunderstood figure of great importance. They record all aspects of Dashkova’s later life, from her personal life to her annual public appearance in Moscow society each winter. The Princess’s personality, the books she read, her favourite pursuits, her diet, illnesses, daily routine, personal relationships, opinions, religious beliefs and practices and, most strikingly, the nature of her relationship with the Wilmots (particularly Martha) are all recorded, painting a detailed and multifaceted picture. Indeed, it has been suggested that Wilmot’s motivation for keeping such a detailed diary was to record for posterity the life of the woman she called her ‘Russian mother’.²¹

Dashkova’s *Memoirs* are detailed in relation to her early life, but the level of detail diminishes as the narrative progresses, depriving the reader of essential information about her personal relationships. The force of these relationships may have been influenced by the loss of her mother at an early age and the death of her first son as an infant. These losses were doubtless causes and products of her tendency to form excessive attachments, while

¹⁹ Bradford, ed., “Introduction,” in *Memoirs of the Princess Dashkova*, xix.

²⁰ *Russian Journals*; Elizabeth Mavor, ed., *The Grand Tours of Katherine Wilmot* (London, 1988). Where possible, references in this article point to the published *Russian Journals* rather than the manuscript diaries.

²¹ Edith Stewart, ed., “Introduction,” in *Russian Journals*, xx.

this very tendency was the chief cause of the tumultuous nature of her relationship with her two surviving children. While ever loyal to the princess, Wilmot was not blind to this defect of character, confiding domestic problems to her diary. She was once moved to record that ‘The cares, the affection, the tenderness, the friendship of Princess Daschkaw are really and truly boundless. I don’t know how to express it. ‘Tis almost what she feels for her own children with the idea of my being far from home superadded. It occupies more than half her life and literally animates every action’,²² but concluded a few weeks later that ‘the love which the Princess has for her son, is the cause of such misery to both, that tis dreadful, her jealousy of his attention, all she exacts from him ... etc’.²³ Wilmot came to feel the force of this ‘jealousy’ herself, as a ‘prisoner of friendship’ prevented from returning home by Dashkova.²⁴ The subject of Wilmot’s return to Ireland after almost six years in Russia was a source of pain and anguish barely permitted mention in the palace. The completion of the *Memoirs* while Wilmot was still resident at Troitskoe means the terrible loneliness endured by Dashkova in her final two years, without her cherished companion, are only expressed through Wilmot’s editorial decision to include as appendices to the *Memoirs* the final letters she received from Dashkova before her death. Indeed, one reviewer deemed those letters the only worthwhile content of the two volumes.²⁵ While the *Memoirs* were completed in Dashkova’s sixty-third year their completion can still be considered premature, as pivotal events in Dashkova’s private life occurred after their completion in 1805, including her son’s death in 1807.

The difficulties Dashkova experienced in her relationships with her son and daughter cannot be described as having been laid bare in the *Memoirs*, but they do account for the beginning of her problems with her son – his secret marriage to an unsuitable woman of questionable parentage.²⁶ It was only after his death that Dashkova reconciled herself to her son’s choice of wife and invited the young widow to live with her. Around the same time as Pavel Dashkov’s secret marriage, Dashkova’s daughter Anastasiia extended a visit to medicinal baths in Aachen to travel around Central and Eastern Europe without permission, infuriating her mother and ‘uselessly squandering’ her money.²⁷ This was, according to her own admission, one of the darkest and most trying periods of her life. The Wilmot diaries provide much detail on the subject of Dashkova’s children and the progressive deterioration in her relationships with them, a subject of much pain in her later life not apparent in the *Memoirs*. In fact, her daughter, Anastasia Shcherbinina is never mentioned again in the *Memoirs* after the close of the chapter on their exile from 1796–1801. The Wilmot diaries, however, reveal the extent of the enmity between mother and daughter, described as ‘the

²² *Russian Journals*, 79–80.

²³ RIA, MS 12L18 (Wilmot papers), Journal of Martha Wilmot, 1803–05, 43–4.

²⁴ *Russian Journals*, 336.

²⁵ The reviewer considered the *Memoirs* ‘stale, flat and unprofitable’ in contrast to Wilmot’s ‘lively’ letters. *The Psyche, a Magazine of Belles Lettres*, May 1840.

²⁶ Fitzlyon, ed., *Memoirs*, 229–31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 232–3.

utmost bound of disunion'.²⁸ Fearing she would be disinherited in their favour, Shcherbinina at first befriended the Wilmots, before tarnishing their names in Moscow high society. She even went so far as to create a scene during her brother's funeral in 1807, verbally attacking Wilmot in the church. This action only resulted in bringing about the disinheritance she had so feared.²⁹ While Wilmot's diaries describe all of these events, and more, in detail, dependence on Dashkova's *Memoirs* alone would give a very different impression of a life ended in tranquillity, if isolation, on the rural estate that she loved.

Another personal relationship of central importance in Dashkova's life was that which she had enjoyed with Catherine II in her youth. While she attempted to preserve the former empress's glorious memory, some observers were not deceived and reported the negative effect of Catherine II's memory on Dashkova. In 1792, the travel writer John Parkinson found that Dashkova's 'conversation evidently savoured of disaffection to the Empress',³⁰ but by 1796, however, she appeared 'consistently laudatory, basking in Catherine's reflected glory'.³¹ Dashkova's relationship with Catherine II cannot be understated; it was of almost equal importance to her marriage. Katherine Wilmot found that it was necessary to read a little on Russian history in order to benefit from Dashkova's conversation, which referred constantly to 'public things and characters in Russia since the time of Catherine'. She joked that the princess 'wanders so naturally back to the court and study and toilet and boudoir of Catherine that I am beginning to fancy I recollect the habits of life and conversation and that I was a party concerned in the revolution' and noted that Dashkova's rural palace was filled with portraits of the former empress.³² The Wilmot collection contains a poem by Dashkova in Catherine II's honour and Martha Wilmot described how Dashkova celebrated the anniversary of her accession as 'the most brilliant moment of Princess Daschkaw's life'.³³ However, Katherine Wilmot saw through this, describing the physical and emotional pain felt by Dashkova upon any discussion of Catherine II as lending 'a powerful sort of agitated animation to [Dashkova's] countenance'.³⁴

The conflict between public and private spheres of Dashkova's life is reflected in the complexity of her character. Despite having been told negative things about Dashkova in St Petersburg, Wilmot's first impression was that the princess held her in 'the kindest affection'. At the time, she tactfully recorded in her diary that Dashkova's appearance was 'milder than

²⁸ *Russian Journals*, 274.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 281. Shcherbinina (1791–1830) brought up her brother's children after his death. She became impoverished and supported herself by teaching, and was almost destitute upon her death. Her feelings about her mother's *Memoirs* are unknown.

³⁰ Quoted in Simon Dixon, "The posthumous reputation of Catherine II in Russia 1797–1837," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 77, no. 4 (1999): 649.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 649.

³² *Russian Journals*, 201.

³³ *Ibid.*, 359.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

I had expected from what I had heard at St Petersburg'.³⁵ However, in 1813, she recalled that Dashkova had been represented to her

as a cruel and vindictive person, violent in temper, and destructive of the happiness of every creature who was unfortunate enough to approach her. I was told that she lived in a castle situated in a dreary solitude, far removed from the society of any civilized beings, where she was all-powerful, and so devoid of principle that she would invariably break open and read the letters which came to me, and those I sent to my friends, taking care to suppress any that might be displeasing to her.³⁶

As her closest companion, Wilmot gradually came to appreciate the complexity of Dashkova's character and disposition; indeed, the familial nature of their relationship may have facilitated Wilmot's acceptance of the older lady's often difficult nature. However Katherine Wilmot's first impression of Dashkova lies in contrast to Martha's. Upon their first meeting, Dashkova reassured Katherine that her 'passport' to her friendship was her sister, and promptly bestowed upon her several kisses. Katherine was not bewitched by Dashkova's open affection in the way Martha was, and confided in a letter to her sister-in-law that she 'inwardly wished that one's friendship was not to be collared like a vagabond in that manner whether one was in the humour for it or not.'³⁷ However, Dashkova soon impressed Katherine with her intelligence, industry, and many achievements. As time passed, she came to appreciate the complexity of the princess's personality and wondered, 'what a task it would be to attempt to draw the character of the Princess Dashkova! Such are her peculiarities and inextricable varieties that the result would only appear like a wisp of human contradictions.'³⁸ She concluded that

you will always conceive her a piece of perfection when you take my experience of her, just as you would suppose Europe a paradise if you never lived out of Italy and judged of the rest accordingly. But she has many climates to her mind ... as many Etnas of destructive fire and as many wild wastes of blighted cultivation as exists in any quarter of the globe! For my part I think she would be most in her element at the helm of the state or generalissimo of the army, or Farmer General of the Empire.³⁹

Together, the Wilmots describe the multifaceted nature of the character of a woman once in a position of public importance, finding the older woman still capable of continuing the

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

³⁶ Ibid., 45.

³⁷ Ibid., 195.

³⁸ Ibid., 211.

³⁹ Ibid., 211.

achievements of her youth while simultaneously acting the role of ‘Russian mother’ to both, overseeing their studies of Russian, Italian, history and music with affection.

But, how does the Dashkova of the Wilmot papers compare to her idea of her own character? In a letter to a friend, Dashkova responds to that which others had said of her, refuting allegations of obstinacy, vanity, ambition, violence, impetuosity, covetousness, and avarice.⁴⁰ She lays the blame for such accusations at the feet of those who wished to harm the memory of Catherine II and those who did not know her own motives. The very concept of such a letter may seem ridiculous, addressed to a dear friend and its sole purpose the defence of one’s own character. Yet such were Dashkova’s exacting standards, applied to both herself and others. The Wilmot papers record a number of instances of the terror she inspired in some, particularly younger relatives. One amusing incident involved Dashkova’s young niece, who foolishly dressed herself in an abundance of borrowed jewellery for one dinner party, only to spend the evening fearfully hiding from Dashkova, who she knew would send her home in disgrace for behaving like a coquette.⁴¹ Dashkova consistently portrayed herself as a simple person who cared only for truth and fidelity. While honesty and fidelity are characteristics attested to by the Wilmots, her character certainly does not appear simple in the Wilmot papers.

IV

One historian wrote in 1935 that Dashkova’s *Memoirs* had been ‘long out of print and forgotten’.⁴² Happily, since then, the *Memoirs* have undergone a new lease of life, reprinted and subjected to increasing study. With the development of women’s history in recent decades the memoirs of women like Dashkova have attracted new interest and many of those long out-of-print are once more available. English-language scholarship on eighteenth and nineteenth century Russia has also advanced in recent years, sparking interest in women’s history in the period. A number of ‘Dashkova scholars’ continue to research and debate aspects of her life and career, and other scholars of Enlightenment Russia and Russian autobiography rarely fail to refer to her in their works. The Wilmot diaries themselves formerly attracted less attention than they merit, but with the rise of interest in Dashkova comes an attendant interest in the Wilmots, particularly Martha, as the princess’s closest companion in her later years and the person responsible for the existence of the *Memoirs*.

Simon Dixon notes that ‘Dashkova’s memoirs were doubtless made the more enticing by Bantysh-Kamenskii’s declaration, in his *Dictionary of Famous People* in 1836, that they were “unpublishable in our time”’.⁴³ Autobiography was still then a genre in its infancy in Russia – it was only from the 1850s that autobiographies came to be published on any

⁴⁰ Bradford, ed., *Memoirs of the Princess Dashkova*, vol ii, 148–56.

⁴¹ *Russian Journals*, 353.

⁴² H.M. Hyde, *The Empress Catherine and Princess Dashkova* (London, 1935), vii.

⁴³ Dixon, “The posthumous reputation of Catherine II in Russia 1797–1837,” 656.

large scale in Russia, and Nicholas I's censor's office was keeping watch for possible insubordinate works. The publication of the *Memoirs* was, however, much-anticipated, and from 1810 Wilmot's friends and acquaintances, particularly those who had known the princess, pressed her to publish them. They finally appeared in 1840 and were widely reviewed. One reviewer deduced that Dashkova 'must have been a good mistress over the two hundred servants that surrounded her ... a kindly landlady over the tenantry', and considered the *Memoirs* 'well worthy of perusal both for their personal and national sketches.'⁴⁴ The Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth was moved to congratulate Wilmot personally. She wrote that the *Memoirs*

give evidence of a noble-minded courageous person of strong affections, great abilities, truth and unaffected originality and in all she relates and all that others wrote and say of her this character is proved to be just – her whole conduct towards you was so kind well-bred and generous and she was so enthusiastic in friendship that I do not wonder you became so strongly attached to her. [...] Her character alone would have been sufficient to make the book very interesting [...] such indisputable evidence and bearing eternally and naturally the stamp of truth make the work of historic value and besides its popularity must ensure its lasting as a notice *pour l'histoire*. We are very glad that justice has at last been done to that noble Princess Daschkaw's memory – she has been sadly misunderstood [...] Her great and disinterested attachment to the Empress is evident – and her own good morals and unbending principles.⁴⁵

Indeed, this was just the effect Dashkova seems to have desired.

⁴⁴ *The Monthly Review*, May–Aug. 1840.

⁴⁵ British Museum, Add. MS 41295 and microfilm, National Library of Ireland, p1284, 121–6, Maria Edgeworth to Martha Bradford (née Wilmot), 27 July 1840. The degree to which Edgeworth was familiar with Russian history is unclear, but another letter hints that she had some understanding; see Zimmern, ed., *Maria Edgeworth*, 204–05.

Gombrowicz's "Rio Paraná Diary": Origins of Artistic Creativity

Tul'si Kamila Bhambry

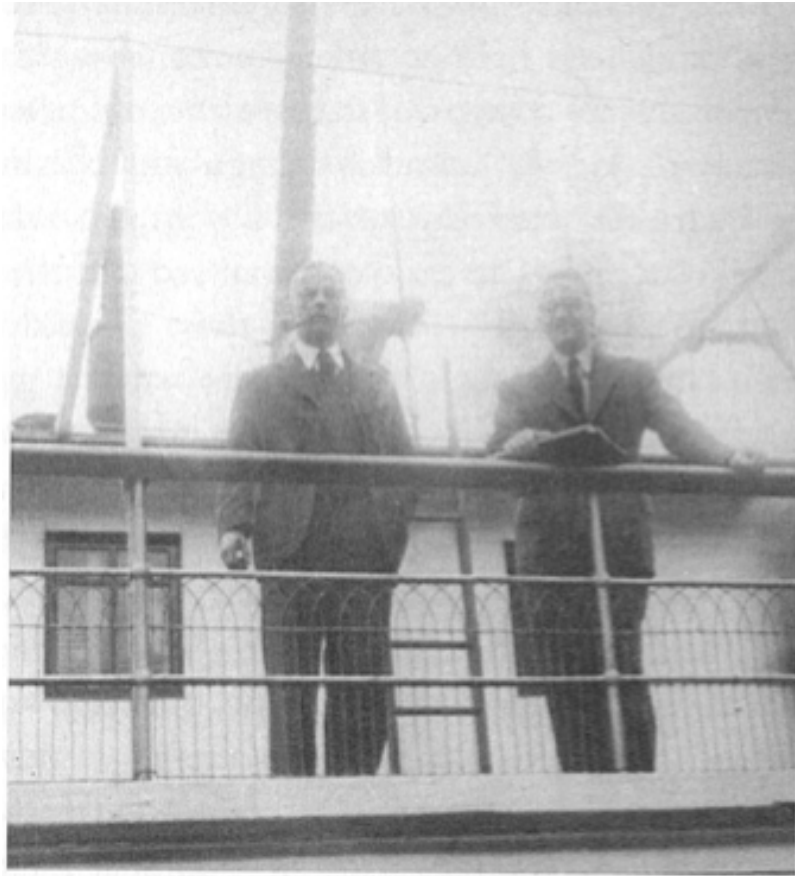
I

Since the outbreak of World War II, Witold Gombrowicz's works were mostly banned in Poland, and he himself lived in Argentina, Germany and France. During these years the medium through which he could best reach his dispersed readership was his literary journal, which was published in monthly instalments in the Polish exile journal *Kultura* between 1953 and 1969, and appeared in book form as the three-volume *Dziennik (Diary)* some years later.¹ In this diary Gombrowicz frequently discusses his own literary works and reflects on his experience of being a writer. The difficult political and material circumstances he finds himself in represent one important aspect of this experience, but I am more interested in Gombrowicz's representation of the philosophical and psychological implications of being a creative artist. This is, I believe, where his stylistic and rhetoric strategies are most innovative and thought provoking.²

¹ The *Kultura* fragments, considerably edited by Gombrowicz, were collected in volumes that appeared in 1957, 1962, and 1966 with the Parisian Instytut Literacki. In 1971 they were republished with some textual variations. A Polish edition appeared in 1986 as part of Gombrowicz's *Dziela* (VII-IX) by Wydawnictwo Literackie in Cracow, though only after seventeen politically sensitive lines were removed. *Dziennik 1967-1969 (Dziela X)* followed in 1992. I use the following references to the *Diary*: D1, = *Dziennik 1953-1956*; D2, = *Dziennik 1957-1961*; D3, = *Dziennik 1961-1966*. All were edited by Jan Błoński (Cracow, 1986). The English translations provided in this paper refer to: Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 3 vols, ed. Jan Kott, trans. from Polish by Lillian Vallee, (Evanston, IL, 1988, 1989, 1993). I abbreviate these three volumes as follows: DI, = *Diary Volume I*; DI,I = *Diary Volume II*; DI,II = *Diary Volume III*.

² I agree with Agnieszka Sołtysik that in his Argentinian *Diary* Gombrowicz '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.' Agnieszka Sołtysik, "Witold Gombrowicz's Struggle with Heterosexual Form: From a National to a Performative Self," in Płonowska-Ziarek, ed., *Gombrowicz's Grimaces* (Albany, 1998) 245-66, esp. 245). My argument focuses on how one short fragment of the *Diary* condenses larger themes, some of which coincide with those analysed by Sołtysik. I will return to her excellent study below.

Gombrowicz's "Rio Paraná Diary"



Witold Gombrowicz i Alejandro Rússovich, na pokładzie statku na Rio Paraná, 1955r. In: Klementyna Suchanow. *Argentynskie przygody Gombrowicza*. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005, p. 119. From Alejandro Rússovich's collection.

The present discussion of Gombrowicz's *Diary* centres on a close reading of a journal written in late 1955³ during a trip up the Rio Paraná in Argentina. In only six pages, this "Rio Paraná Diary" brings together some of the key themes of the *Diary*, and offers inspiring perspectives on Gombrowicz's oeuvre. Among the critics who have tackled this text, to my knowledge only Michał Paweł Markowski has suggested the possibility of a reading in terms of the traumatic experience of literary composition: "oczywiście przychodzą na myśl

³ See letter (no. 92; 28 December 1955) from Gombrowicz to his editor Giedroyc in Andrzej Kowalczyk, ed., *Jerzy Giedroyc, Witold Gombrowicz Listy 1950-1969*, Archiwum Kultury 9 (Warsaw, 2006), 142. Hereafter abbreviated as *Listy J.G.-W.G.*

metafory kosmiczne [...] związując tekst i pisarskie doświadczenie.”⁴ While I agree with Markowski’s intuition, I believe there is more to say about what Gombrowicz was trying to do in this text. My contention is that even though it contains not one explicit mention of “reading” or “writing,” several motifs of the Rio Paraná section – travel, boredom, dreaming, the homoerotic gaze – relate to writing and creativity, and that the text as a whole can be seen as Gombrowicz’s most complex, pithy, and imaginative statement about inspiration. My interpretation is informed by two strategies. On the one hand, I discuss the journal’s meaning and significance by re-creating its context: I refer to the typescript (which I was able to view at the *Kultura* archives in Maisons-Laffitte), to passages in the *Diary* that link to it thematically, to Gombrowicz’s literary works, and to his published correspondence. On the other hand, my work builds on a highly subjective attempt to follow suggestions, echoes, and associations; I try to tease out what the repetitions in this text leave unsaid, what is hidden in the silences and paradoxes. I identify its subtextual themes, and examine them alongside Gombrowicz’s more explicit statements. In this introduction I would like to explain in more detail how both the text in question, and Gombrowicz’s stated intentions warrant this type of experimental reading strategy.

The Rio Paraná journal was published as part of the 1956 *Diary*. While the separate title and italic typeface make it stand out visually, it also differs from the surrounding entries in terms of style: the language is fragmented, elliptical, repetitive, paradoxical, very dense, but also dreamy and intensely suggestive. It is deliberately and overtly cryptic: the narrator provocatively claims that “*najdoskonalszy detektyw nie znalazłby żadnej poszlaki, nic do czego można by się przyczepić.*”⁵ In this text perhaps more than anywhere else, reading is about following hidden trails and decrypting secret meanings. Furthermore, my search for the journal’s subtextual content is validated by the fact that Gombrowicz refuses the conventions of a confessional diary and overtly fictionalizes his journal.⁶ While he engages the reader by bluffing and double bluffing, and points out the falsity of his own seemingly genuine statements, he still demands to be taken seriously:

⁴ Michał Paweł Markowski, *Czarny nurt: Gombrowicz, świat, literatura* (Kraków, 2004), 77. [“of course, cosmic metaphors come to mind [...] connecting the text and the writerly experience” (my translation)].

⁵ D1, 317 [“*the best detective in the world would find no clue, nothing to latch onto*” (D1, 201)].

⁶ The first entries of the *Diary* define the premises on which it is written: “Chciałbym w tym dzienniczku jawnie przystąpić do konstruowania sobie talentu [...] Dlaczego – jawnie? Gdyż pragnę, ujawniając siebie, przestać być dla was zbyt łatwą zagadką. Wprowadzając was za kulisy mojej istoty, zmuszam siebie do wycofania się w jeszcze dalszą głąb” (D1, 58). [“In this little diary I would like to set out to openly construct a talent for myself [...]. Why openly? Because I desire to reveal myself, to stop being too easy a riddle for you to solve. By taking you to the backstage of my being, I force myself to retreat to an even more remote depth” (D1, 35)].

Gombrowicz's "Rio Paraná Diary"

Gdybym miał w tej chwili udzielić moim współ-twórcom, to jest moim czytelnikom (bo czytać to nie mniej twórcze, niż pisać) jakiejś najważniejszej rady, powiedziałbym: nie ułatwajcie sobie zadania tym, że “on to tak dla paradoksu,” albo “z przekory,” albo “żeby się drażnić.” [...] Spróbujcie mi uwierzyć, a zobaczycie, jak te moje dziwactwa i gierki zaczną się wam łączyć w całość organiczną i zdolną do życia. We mnie sztuczność jest tym co ułatwia szczerść, żart wiedzie do powagi, przekora do prawdy. Spróbujcie ująć mnie najgłębiej. Słowo honoru, ja temu sprostam!⁷

As a self-conscious “co-creator,” I commit myself, in my exploration of the travel journal as a self-reflexive text, to “grasp [Gombrowicz] as profoundly as possible” and to match his word of honour. While my first strategy highlights and systematises his straightforward, conscious motives, the second, more experimental strand of my interpretation is perhaps surprisingly consistent with his programmatic statements about his travel writings. In his preface to a Spanish translation of his diary, for instance, he warns his readers:

Nie znajdziecie tutaj opisu Argentyny. Może nawet nie rozpoznacie jej krajobrazów; krajobraz jest tutaj pewnym “stanem ducha.” Wbrew pozorom ten dziennik istnieje na prawach wiersza.⁸

If the *Diary* functions more like a “poem” than like a realistic account of Gombrowicz’s life, then the experimental “Rio Paraná Diary” certainly demands a reading that is extremely attentive to allusions and stylistic peculiarities. Elsewhere, moreover, he writes:

Cóż byście powiedzieli, gdybym, przebywając w Buenos Aires, przysyłał wam korespondencje na przykład z Pekinu? Powiedzielibyście, że to nabieranie

⁷ *D3*, 220-1 [“If I were to give my co-creators, that is, my readers (because reading is no less creative than writing) some really important advice, it would be this: do not simplify your task by saying ‘he is doing this to be paradoxical’ or ‘to go against the grain’ or ‘to irritate.’ [...] Try to believe me and you will see how all my oddities and games begin to join in an organic whole capable of living. In me, artificiality is what enables me to be honest, jokes lead to seriousness, obstreperousness to truth. Try to grasp me as profoundly as possible. I give you my word, I am up to it!” (*DI,II* 174)].

⁸ Witold Gombrowicz, *Dzieła XIV: Publicystyka, wywiady, teksty różne 1963-1969*, ed. by Jan Błoński and Jerzy Jarzębski (Cracow, 1997), 38. [“You won’t find here a portrait of Argentina. Perhaps you won’t even recognize her landscapes; here, the landscape is a certain ‘state of mind’. Despite appearances this diary exists on the same rights as a poem.” (Trans. from Spanish by Ireneusz Kania; my trans. from Polish.)].

gości. Więc – najmocniej przepraszam – mieszkam w sobie i tylko stąd, z siebie, mogę do was się odzywać.⁹

Gombrowicz achieves a twofold effect by discouraging literal readings of his travel writings. While he grants legitimacy to “free” and “creative” interpretations, he also pre-empts accusations regarding his betrayal of the “autobiographical pact.”¹⁰ In terms of biographical authenticity there would indeed be plenty of details to quibble about. For instance, Gombrowicz’s friend Mariano Betelú revealed that in 1958, Gombrowicz had faked some of the travel reports he was commissioned to write for Radio Free Europe (RFE). Unable to think of anything new, he ended up giving another account of his journey up the Rio Paraná, though in a different style and for a different audience. This time, however, he used geography textbooks to extend the trip, imaginatively, all the way to the Iguazu falls, even though he had never actually made it that far upstream.¹¹ To what extent precisely Gombrowicz’s autobiographical writings are factual or spurious is difficult to ascertain; researchers such as Klementyna Suchanow are still hunting for traces of his life in Argentina. As far as my argument is concerned, however, the details of Gombrowicz’s real-life whereabouts are of limited importance. I work on the assumption that his imagination, as well as his taste for mischief and deception, is key to his autobiographical works. Moreover, I suggest that his deviousness invites us to investigate the “space of composition”¹² as the place from where he was *really* writing. This spatial metaphor turns in on itself when we talk about Gombrowicz’s travel writing, which, more than any other genre, is for him an

⁹ The quotation is taken from Witold Gombrowicz, “Fragmenty z dziennika,” in *Dzieła XIII: Publicystyka, wywiady, teksty różne 1939-1963* (Cracow, 1996), 23. [“What would you say if, staying in Buenos Aires, I were sending you correspondence from Beijing, for example? You’d say that this is monkey business. So – my sincere apologies – I live within myself and it is only from here, from within myself, that I can address you.”]. This fragment was written in November/December 1956, and was intended for publication in *Kultura*, but it was omitted by what Gombrowicz called a “mistake” on his editor’s part. See “Nota Wydawcy” (p. 491), as well as the animated correspondence between Gombrowicz and Giedroyc from March/April 1957 in *Listy J.G.-W.G.*, 142.

¹⁰ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975).

¹¹ Mario Betelú, “Lokator,” in *Tango Gombrowicz*, ed. by Rajmund Kalicki (Cracow, 1984): 205-08, esp. 207. Piotr Millati confirms Betelú’s statement; in his paper “Tropiki Gombrowicza,” given at the conference “Gombrowicz dzieckiem podszyty” on 10 May 2009 in Cracow, he points to discrepancies between Gombrowicz’s description of the landscape and its actual appearance, as well as to a letter from Gombrowicz to his brother, written on 14 May 1957, and mentioning that a planned trip to Iguazu was cancelled. See *Witold Gombrowicz: Listy do rodziny*, ed. by Janusz Margański (Cracow, 2004), 100.

¹² This expression is borrowed from Timothy Clark’s attempt to systematize Western accounts of inspiration: *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester, 1997).

opportunity to describe an imaginative journey into the self, a quest for the sources not so much of a river, as for those of literary creativity.

II

Headed by a separate title and printed in italics, the "Rio Paraná Diary" appears to exist as an independent entity within the *Diary*. However, a close reading shows that it is neither detached from its context, nor inserted at random, but that it functions within a network of fragments about reading and writing, and shares common themes with the surrounding passages. The entries that precede it are written on the *estancia* of Gombrowicz's friend Jankowski in La Cabania. Most of them deal with philosophical and political questions, but the last entry before the Paraná section, allegedly written on the train back to Buenos Aires, announces the themes of the following section. The narrator – let us call him Gombrowicz – laconically describes his leave-taking from the eucalyptus alley near the *estancia*:

Geografia.
Gdzie jestem?¹³

He feels surrounded by disparate objects: "drzewa, listek, grudka, patyk, kora,"¹⁴ but he cannot tell his position in relation to China or Alaska, north or south; indeed, he feels as if the earth had collapsed under his feet, as if he were walking "już nie drogą, tylko w kosmosie."¹⁵ The passage takes an unexpected ending:

Wszystkie sprzeczności dają sobie we mnie *rendez-vous* – spokój i szal, trzeźwość i pijaństwo, prawda i błaga, wielkość i małość – ale czuję że znów na szyi kładzie mi się dłoń żelazna, która powoli, tak, bardzo nieznacznie... ale się zaciska.¹⁶

¹³ *D1*, 311 ["Geography. Where am I?" (*DI*, 197)].

¹⁴ *D1*, 312 ["tree, leaf, clod, stick, bark" (*DI*, 197)].

¹⁵ *D1*, 312 ["not on the road anymore but in the cosmos" (*DI*, 198)]. There is a striking resemblance between this passage and Gombrowicz's novel *Kosmos* (1965); see, for instance, the enumeration of objects that opens the first chapter: "ziemia, koleiny, gruda, błyski ze szklistych kamyczków, [...] domki, płoty, pola, lasy" (*Kosmos*, ed. by Jan Błoński (Cracow, 1986), 5). ["ruts, clods of dirt, glassy pebbles flashing, [...] cottages, fences, fields, woods" (*Cosmos*, trans. by Danuta Borhardt (New Haven, CT, 2005), 1)].

¹⁶ *D1*, 312 ["All contradictions hold their rendezvous in me: calmness and fury, sobriety and intoxication, truth and claptrap, greatness and smallness – but again I feel an iron hand touching my throat, which slowly, yes, very imperceptibly... but it tightens" (*DI*, 198, translation modified to render the peculiar choice of words, syntax, and punctuation)].

Naming these contradictions Gombrowicz admonishes readers, as so often, to be on their guard when things seem straightforward in his texts, to suspect facetiousness behind what is presented as truth and to expect sobriety behind apparently mad writing.¹⁷ The latter part of this quotation, however, concerns not the reader but the writer. Does the iron grip on his throat constrict his breathing? Does it block his vocal chords? This passage can be linked to Gombrowicz's worries from the opening of the section written on the *estancia*: "Boże! A jeśli straciłem "talent" I już w ogóle nigdy nic... nic, przynajmniej na poziomie poprzednich moich rzeczy?"¹⁸ The pressure on his throat increases slowly, almost imperceptibly. Can he shake it off before it silences him completely? The La Cabania section sets the scene for the "Rio Paraná Diary" as one of anguish and disorientation. Standing on the eucalyptus alley on the *estancia*, Gombrowicz feels as if suspended in space, with no landmark by which to tell his absolute position. A similar confusion pervades his journey up the Rio Paraná, as the following discussion of the travel journal will show.

Having embarked on the moored ship, Gombrowicz the narrator watches other ships move in the port. Then, suddenly he feels that "*wszystko zaczęło się usuwać, jak osadzone na osi, w lewo, i Buenos Aires usunęło się.*"¹⁹ Thus he misconstrues the relations of stability and movement between himself and his surroundings, and remains unaware that his ship has already left shore. "Płyniemy"²⁰ comes as a realisation after the fact, and throws Gombrowicz off balance. How carefully the effect of disorientation and directionlessness is developed can be seen from the typescript, which contains some details about the ship's progress and destination that are not to be found in the printed *Diary*: "Płynęliśmy z szybkością może 7 wezłów"²¹ is reduced to "Płynęliśmy," and the sentence "Płyniemy, a za nami Rosario, płyniemy Parana, która tworzy tutaj cały system rzeczny na szerokość kilkudziesięciu

¹⁷ The first sections of the *Diary* define the premises on which it is written. See for instance: "Chciałbym w tym dzienniczku jawnie przystąpić do konstruowania sobie talentu [...] Dlaczego – jawnie? Gdyż pragnę, ujawniając siebie, przestać być dla was zbyt łatwą zagadką. Wprowadzając was za kulisy mojej istoty, zmuszam siebie do wycofania się w jeszcze dalszą głąb" (*DI*, 58). ["In this little diary I would like to set out to openly construct a talent for myself [...]. Why openly? Because I desire to reveal myself, to stop being too easy a riddle for you to solve. By taking you to the backstage of my being, I force myself to retreat to an even more remote depth" (*DI*, 35)].

¹⁸ *DI*, 298 ["My God! And what if I have lost my "talent" and will never..., nothing, at least on the level of my former works?" (*DI*, 189, translation modified)].

¹⁹ *DI*, 312 ["everything began to move, as if on an axle, to my left, and Buenos Aires moved" (*DI*, 198)].

²⁰ *DI*, 312 ["We sail" (*DI*, 198)].

²¹ T, 3 ["We sailed with a speed of some 7 knots."]. I refer to Gombrowicz's numbering of the eleven typescript pages of this diary fragment, i.e. Section N.12, Chapter XX. *Kultura* archives, Maisons-Laffitte, France. Gombrowicz's typewriter did not allow him to use Polish diacritics. My transcription leaves out the diacritics where he missed to add them manually.

kilometrów”²² is erased entirely. Even vague hints at a direction are eliminated: “Płyniemy ku czemuś – ku jakiemuś rozwiązaniu”²³ becomes an aposiopetic “Płyniemy ku... zmierzamy do...”²⁴. Of course, these progressive modifications make the text more suggestive, and invite the reader to participate in the creative act. But the carefully placed gaps also strengthen Gombrowicz's emphasis on the ship's movement as an aimless drifting, and imply, crucially, that even though the journey has a destination (say, the town of Corrientes), it feels to the narrator as if he were passively borne along towards an unknown place. Similarly, I propose, the process of writing does have a goal (the finished book), but what it will be like the writer cannot know. Gombrowicz's consciousness cannot control the movement of creativity; writing, like sailing, is about letting oneself be swept along. Three lines below on the typescript, the narrator tries to express how his fellow travellers' faces, conversations, and movements appear to him congealed “w nieublaganem doprowadzaniu czegoś do ostatecznego końca.”²⁵ First the word “ostatecznego” [ultimate] is manually erased, and then the entire paragraph is crossed out and re-typed. The printed *Diary*, which corresponds to this re-typed version, is free from references to any aim at all, and the narrator associates the apparent lack of direction in the ship's movement and in the passengers' chit-chat: “*twarze, rozmowy, ruchy są naładowane... [...] Zastygłe w nieublaganym doprowadzaniu czegoś do...*”²⁶

At the beginning of the journey, while Gombrowicz is forced to reconsider his assumptions about his own centeredness, he also begins to feel that the ship is taking control of his body. During his first night on board he describes how his lack of knowledge about the ship appears to be mysteriously linked to a lack of knowledge and control of himself:

*Pojąłem że nie wiem, co się dzieje ze statkiem i to było jakbym nie wiedział, co się dzieje ze mną.*²⁷

The fact that the words “*ze mną*” [to me] are a manually added afterthought (T 3) bespeaks Gombrowicz's particular attention to the journey's effect on the narrator's subjectivity. From now on, the narrator will carefully observe the ship's movement, even though he appears bored out of his wits. In the entries on the following pages references to sailing occur in almost every paragraph (“*płyniemy*” appears about 40 times in the text, as if to emphasize the monotony of the journey); the self-evident becomes remarkable, and the ship's inexorable progress turns into an obsession:

²² T, 3 [“We sail, and behind us Rosario, we sail on the Paraná, which forms here an entire system of rivers, of a breadth of tens of kilometres.”].

²³ T, 7 [“We sail toward something toward some solution.”].

²⁴ D1, 317 [“We sail on toward... we head for...” (DI, 201)].

²⁵ T, 7 [“in the pitiless leading of something to its ultimate end.”].

²⁶ D1, 317 [“in a pitiless leading of something to...” (DI, 201)].

²⁷ D1, 313 [“I understood that I didn't know what was happening to the ship and it was as if I didn't know what was happening to me.” (DI, 198)].

*wskutek wszechobejmującej nocy płynięcie nasze stało się, wraz z deszczem, jedyną najwyzszą idea, zenitem wszechrzeczy.*²⁸

On the second day the sailing begins to have an aura of mystery, and the journey up the river is associated with ascension into heaven. First, the horizon appears like “*brama wiodąca w zaświaty*,”²⁹ then the expanse of the water seems “*w niebo wstępujący*,”³⁰ and finally the archipelagos in the river “*dostały wniebowzięcia*.”³¹ As Gombrowicz is generally reserved on matters of personal spirituality, this passage is not likely a meditation on the beyond. Rather, I would suggest that the metaphysical realm opening up ahead promises an attainment of the light of inspiration – the bliss of creation.

To conclude this entry, Gombrowicz quotes his laconic dialogue with a priest:

Płyniemy – rzekłem. Odrzekł:

*Płyniemy.*³²

“Płyniemy” is repeated, like an incantation, both in the dialogue and within the narration, creating an intense expectation of meaning, even though the word hardly communicates anything.³³ Certainly, the recurring “*płyniemy, płyniemy*” creates a soothing, almost hypnotic

²⁸ *DI*, 313 [“*as a result of the all-encompassing night, our sailing became, along with the rain, the only, the highest idea, the zenith of all things.*” (*DI*, 199)]. Vallee’s translation retains the solemn connotations of the prefix “wszech-” (equivalent to “omni-” in English), but it loses the performative quality of the Polish, where the narrator’s obsession is also conveyed by the striking repetition of “wszech-”].

²⁹ *DI*, 313-14 [“*a gate leading to worlds beyond*” (*DI*, 199)].

³⁰ *DI*, 314 [“*it was entering the sky*” (*DI*, 199)]. In Polish, “niebo” means both sky and heaven; the latter would be more appropriate here, as “sky” disrupts the consistency of the theme of ascension.

³¹ *DI*, 314 [“*ascended*” (*DI*, 199)]. Here again, I would suggest a stronger emphasis on the religious motif that marks Gombrowicz’s text: “*ascended to heaven.*”

³² *DI*, 314 [“*We sail, I said. Yes, [the priest] replied, we sail.*” (*DI*, 199)].

³³ Most critics who have written about the “Rio Paraná Diary” comment on what they perceive as a *lack* of meaning in the repetition of “*płyniemy*” and in the text as a whole. The scope of this paper does not allow me to discuss the reception history of this diary fragment, but see” Czermińska, Małgorzata. “Do kawiarni i za ocean: paradoksy Gombrowiczowskiej filozofii podróży.” In *Gombrowicz*, edited by Bernadetta Żynis, 131-48. Słupsk: Pomorska Akademia Pedagogiczna w Słupsku, 2006; Jeleński, Konstanty. “Bohaterskie Niebohaterstwo Gombrowicza.” In *Gombrowicz filozof*, edited by Francesco M. Cataluccio and Jerzy Illg, 155-167. Cracow: Znak, 1991. Kurczaba, Alex. *Gombrowicz and Frisch: Aspects of the Literary Diary*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1980; Mandolessi, Silvana. “Travelling is being and seeing?: National identity and visual strategies in Witold Gombrowicz and Jose Ortega y Gasset.” In *Witold Gombrowicz*, edited by Arent van Nieukerken, 453-

rhythm, but there is more to say about it. The anthropologist Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah argues that *magical* languages violate the primary function of language, i.e. communication, and that they can be exclusive to the point of needing to be interpreted by specialized practitioners.³⁴ In this sense, the fact that Gombrowicz's interlocutor is a *priest* also suggests that this exchange functions above the level of the profane. A magical usage of "płyniemy" would have a specific function for the narrator, namely to counter his anxiety about not being able to control the ship's movement: in as far as he believes in the magical power of words to influence reality, it is the spell "płyniemy" that makes the ship move, and he is in control of it. But in terms of Gombrowicz's quest for inspiration the incantation performs a double function. While the repetition retrospectively controls a movement that is already happening, the more significant aspect of the autosuggestive "płyniemy" is that it brings about a certain state of mind, an active passivity, a controlled abandonment. "Płyniemy," which as a paradoxical "aimless drifting towards a goal" mirrors the movement of writing, is the spell that allows writing to flow by suggesting that it has been flowing all the while.³⁵

The association of sailing with a metaphysical, even esoteric experience is soon made more explicit. In an entry entitled "Nazajutrz rano"³⁶ – after two nights on the ship Gombrowicz seems to have lost track of the days of the week and stops using them as headings for the separate entries – the river landscape appears increasingly mysterious, as "dzw[on]e, tajn[e] rozgałęz[en]ia [...] wiodły w niewiadomy ukos."³⁷ The landscape ceases to be

68 (= RL, 62-64 (2007)); Markowski, Michał Paweł. *Czarny nurt: Gombrowicz, świat, literatura*. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004; Pawłowski, Janusz. "Gombrowicz i lęk: uwagi o "Diariuszu Rio Parana". *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 4 (1977), 151-64.

³⁴ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words," *Man*, 3 (1968), 175-208, esp. 178-9.

³⁵ In his essay "Le regard d'Orphée" Maurice Blanchot discusses inspiration in strikingly similar terms: "l'on n'écrit que si l'on atteint cet instant vers lequel l'on ne peut toutefois se porter que dans l'espace ouvert par le mouvement d'écrire. Pour écrire, il faut déjà écrire. Dans cette contrariété se situent aussi l'essence de l'écriture, la difficulté de l'expérience et le saut de l'inspiration." Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Paris, 1955), 232. *L'espace littéraire* was published almost simultaneously with Gombrowicz's "Rio Paraná Diary," but I found no information about the two writer's acquaintance with each other's works. Another intertextual correspondence concerning the tension between activity and passivity in writing was suggested to me by Włodzimierz Bolecki: Gombrowicz almost certainly intended the recurring "płyniemy" in the travel diary as a tongue-in-cheek reference to Adam Mickiewicz's poem "Nad wodą wielką i czystką" (1839-1840) from the cycle "Liryki lozańskie." In this poem, which ends on "Mnie [trzeba] płynąć, płynąć i płynąć –" ["I [must] sail, sail, and sail –] Mickiewicz reflects on the poet's capacity to *control* his representation of the world, while he is, nevertheless, *destined* to keep "sailing." See *Liryki lozańskie Adama Mickiewicza*, ed. by Marian Stala (Cracow, 1998), 31.

³⁶ *D1*, 315 ["The next morning" (*DI*, 200)].

³⁷ *D1*, 315 ["strange secret branchings [...] led into an unknown incline." (*DI*, 200)].

merely a view, and becomes something by which the narrator can reach a higher state of being. He is quite precise about how the chain of lakes ahead of the boat announces his elevation: “*wpłynęliśmy w zespół siedmiu lustrzanych jezior, będących siedmioma przęsłami mistycznych uniesień, każde na innej wysokości a wszystkie zawieszone w podniebnych rejonach.*”³⁸ Just as the mysticism of Gombrowicz’s experience reaches its peak (and almost topples over into bathos or parody), the sublime effect vanishes: “*wszystko to opadło i osiadło w rzekę.*”³⁹ The entry ends on “*plyniemy, płyniemy...*” which now seems almost mechanical, and forced into a clumsily constructed sentence – it is as if Gombrowicz was exhausted after the preceding description of a sublime sunrise and the wondrous effects of the reflection of the morning light on the water. Another entry from the evening of the same day records Gombrowicz’s delight at the surrounding flora and fauna, and the unsettling triviality of some female passengers’ conversation. This triviality brings with it the expectation of some sort of breakthrough, and it is at odds with the constancy of the sailing.

Having established an atmosphere of tension, the narrator now moves on to what I see as the critical moment of the Paraná fragment: “*W nocy coś się zdarzyło – albo, ściślej wyrażając się, coś pękło – lub może coś przełamało się...*”⁴⁰ He struggles to describe this mysterious event: in the evening he fell asleep, but soon he awoke with an urgent feeling that something was happening, something beyond him that he could not control. In a state of near panic he ran out on deck, where he witnessed an unexplained sort of escalation:

*I naraż [...] coś przełamało się i pękła pieczęć milczenia, a krzyk... krzyk jednorazowy, rozgłośny... rozległ się... Krzyk, którego nie było! Wiedziałem z całą pewnością, że nikt nie krzyknął, a jednocześnie wiedziałem że krzyk był...*⁴¹

There is an undeniable urgency about this mute cry, this human voice that cannot be heard. The narrator’s experience seems traumatic, and affects his sense of self: how can the “I” reconcile sensory experience of an event with knowledge of its unreality? The oxymoron suggests his struggle to articulate an ineffable experience. Although he never explains what has happened really, I suggest that the monotony of life on board has turned the writer’s gaze inward, into the “space of composition,” intensifying his gaze until his subjectivity is brought to a crisis. The result of this crisis, “*the shout that was not,*” embodies the trauma of inspiration.

³⁸ D1, 315 [“*we sailed into a group of seven mirrored lakes, being the seven spokes of mystical raptures, each at a different height but all suspended in the subcelestial regions.*” (DI, 200)].

³⁹ D1, 315 [“*all of this fell away and settled in the river*” (DI, 200)].

⁴⁰ D1, 316 [“*At night something happened – or, to put it more precisely, something cracked open – or maybe something broke through...*” (DI, 200, translation modified)].

⁴¹ D1, 316 [“*And suddenly [...] something broke through and the seal of speechlessness cracked open and a shout... a shout, unique, resounding... rang out... A shout that was not! I knew with absolute certainty that no one had shouted, and at the same time, I knew that the shout had been...*” (DI, 201, translation modified)].

Although it is auditory rather than visual, the overwhelming and involuntary nature of Gombrowicz's experience of the "shout" at first evokes a "traditional visionary revelation" – an inspired vision that he would have to interpret and communicate. His role would then resemble that of a prophet, an oracle, or an inspired artist. However, rather than being unmediated and absolute, the "shout" is suspended between existence and non-existence. What is more, the fact that *hearing* rather than *seeing* is at the heart of the experience emphasizes its disempowering nature, as Western ocularcentric discourses privilege visual perception in the processes of cognition, and, especially in the twentieth century, associate seeing rather than hearing with knowing and power.⁴² To read this "shout" as a "call of the muse," therefore, would be to overlook the unresolved tensions between inside and outside, between control and abandonment, which make this text so entirely original.

These tensions intensify after Gombrowicz hears "the shout that was not." He dismisses first the "krzyk," and then also his own fright, as "niebyłe,"⁴³ and goes back to his cabin. The statement "uznałem przerażenie moje za niebyłe"⁴⁴ relies on an impossible negation of the narrator's own emotional response to a stimulus that, rightly or wrongly, he did perceive as real. The "krzyk, którego nie było" [the shout that was not] and "przerażenie [...] niebyłe" [the nonexistent fright] both imply an internal conflict. The paradox of sensing something that is not there, or having an emotion that one can then declare not to have felt, is comparable to the experience of creativity: there is something equally impossible – and equally destabilising – about the possibility of creating something out of nothing, of expressing sensations and emotions that one might never have experienced. And yet, it happens. This is why I see this passage as Gombrowicz's most determined attempt to describe the impossible phenomenon of inspiration – inspiration as the mute shout that inspires an inexplicable fear. This "shout" is a thing of such gravity that it collapses and becomes inaudible. Suspended between existence and non-existence, like a black hole in the text, it attracts and absorbs thought from an event horizon that stretches all the way through Gombrowicz's oeuvre.⁴⁵

The typescript suggests that the "Rio Paraná Diary" was of key importance to Gombrowicz himself. Minute details receive attention; manual changes and re-writings are strikingly more numerous than on drafts of surrounding passages. The word "shout," for

⁴² See Silvana Madolessi's comparison of visual strategies in Argentinian travel writing, "Travelling is being and seeing?: National identity and visual strategies in Witold Gombrowicz and Jose Ortega y Gasset," in *Witold Gombrowicz*, ed. by Arent van Nieuwerkerken (= RL, 62-64 (2007)): 453-68, 459. See also, Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993).

⁴³ D1, 316 ["non-existing" (DI, 201)]. The translation misses the echoing between "nie było" [was not] and "niebyłe" [non-existing], thus attenuating the theme of "internal conflict" that marks this passage.

⁴⁴ D1, 316 ["I recognized my fright as nonexistent." (DI, 201)].

⁴⁵ The oxymoron "krzyk, którego nie było" also parallels Blanchot's paradoxical formulation in the essay "L'inspiration, le manque d'inspiration": "cette inspiration [...] est manque d'inspiration, force créatrice et aridité intimement confondues" (*L'espace littéraire*, 233).

instance, is not allowed to appear in any context other than “*the shout that was not*”: a remark about “krzyk filuternych, fioletowych fircyków”⁴⁶ is manually changed to “*barce [...] fircyków*.”⁴⁷ Also, adjectives that qualify the “*shout*” are carefully selected: “krzyk okropny”⁴⁸ becomes “*krzyk jednorazowy, rozgłośny*.”⁴⁹ Finally, a passage concerned with the problem of speech(lessness) is given the required poignancy through an unexpected reference to the “*shout*”: thus, the idiom “*cisza przed burzą*”⁵⁰ is changed into “*cisza przed krzykiem*.”⁵¹

After this “*krzyk*” episode, the narrator awakens to the ship’s effortless progress upstream, and to his own incomprehension of the previous night’s events. Just before the detailed account of the shout discussed above, he writes out his paradoxical reflections:

*Właściwie nie wiem co się stało, a nawet, prawdę powiedziawszy, nic się nie stało – ale to właśnie, że “nic się nie stało” jest ważniejsze i bodaj okropniejszą niż gdyby stało się coś.*⁵²

The account of the previous night’s incidence is followed by another paradox, “*Cóż się więc stało? W tym cały sekret że nie stało się nic. I nadal nic się nie dzieje*.”⁵³ The question “*What [...] had happened?*” mirrors the reader’s puzzlement about what is really going on in this text. Gombrowicz characteristically teases the reader: “*najdoskonalszy detektyw nie znalazłby żadnej poszlaki, nic do czego można by się przyczepić*.”⁵⁴ This “*detective*” denotes the reader of the *Diary* more than Gombrowicz’s own alter ego, the narrator, who now focuses on the food, conversations, and pastimes on board.

But the banality of life on the steamer soon puts an end to the narrator’s playful nonchalance. Although he knows that there is no reason to be uneasy – everything is just as it should be – something unnameable looms out of his boredom: “*jesteśmy zupełnie bezbronni... wobec tego czegoś co zagraża...*”⁵⁵ Everything appears normal, but the narrator is conscious of a rising tension and anticipates some sort of eruption: “*póki pod ciśnieniem już*

⁴⁶ T, 6 [“the shout[ing] of playful violet madmen”].

⁴⁷ D1, 316 [“the frolicking [...] of madmen” (DI, 200, translation modified)].

⁴⁸ T, 6 [“a terrible shout”].

⁴⁹ D1, 316 [“a shout, unique, resounding...” (my transl; cf. Vallee’s version: DI, 201)].

⁵⁰ T, 7 [“calm before a storm”].

⁵¹ D1, 317 [“calm before a shout” (DI, 201, translation modified)].

⁵² D1, 316 [“Actually, I don’t know what happened and really, to tell the truth, nothing happened – but the very fact that “nothing happened” is more important and probably more horrid than if something had happened.” (DI, 201, translation modified)].

⁵³ D1, 317 [“What, therefore, had happened? The whole secret is that nothing happened. And nothing continues to happen.” (DI, 201, translation modified)].

⁵⁴ D1, 317 [“the best detective in the world would find no clue, nothing to latch onto.” (DI, 201)].

⁵⁵ D1, 317 [“we are completely vulnerable... in the face of that which threatens...” (DI, 201)].

niezmożonym nie pęknie struna, struna, struna! ...".⁵⁶ This "struna" [line] could refer to one of the taut ropes on the ship, but I suggest that it also connotes the chord of a harp (Gombrowicz refers to "struny harfy" [the strings of a harp] in his description of a strikingly similar event in his sketches for Radio Free Europe, which I will discuss below); it can also be associated with the chord of an Orphean lyre, and the mythological origins of music and literature,⁵⁷ or even with the chords of a human voice [struny głosowe] harking back to the narrator's fear of a grip tightening around his throat in the passage preceding the travel journal. The sentence quoted above clearly echoes the description of the "shout," which also happened as the result of a *pęknięcie*: "*pękła pieczęć milczenia*."⁵⁸ This is why, paradoxically, it seems that the snapping of this chord would *release* a sound, rather than *muting* an instrument or human voice. It is as if all these unspeakable things that pervade the Paraná diary were to break out suddenly and find expression. In the typescript the echo with the "*krzyk*" episode is clearer still, as there is no "struna" in the first draft, but another "pieczęć" [seal]: "*póki [...] nie pęknie pieczęć jaka mamy na ustach!*"⁵⁹ This time, however, the threat of a snapping of the chords does not build up to some event that would release the growing tension. On the evening of the same day, Gombrowicz's conversation with his chess partner seems to him like "*cisza przed krzykiem*,"⁶⁰ and his inability to tackle his worries drives him close to despair:

*Nieobliczalne napięcie czai się w najdrobniejszym poruszeniu. Płyniemy. Ale ten szal, ta rozpacz, to przerażenie są niedosiężne, gdyż nie ma ich – i, ponieważ ich nie ma, są, są w sposób niemożliwy do odparcia. Płyniemy.*⁶¹

The paradoxical statement "*ponieważ ich nie ma, są*" [because they are not, they are] also harks back to the "shout," which was, like Gombrowicz's fright, and now his horror and despair, suspended between existence and non-existence. This emphasis on contradiction and impossibility implies that no other logic could convey his intuitions. Here, the narrator maintains that the horror and despair are inaccessible because they do not exist, but then, their non-existence is a sort of existence. Therefore, I would add, they might be accessible, after all. This question of accessibility, of what can be grasped and expressed, is crucial here, if the "Rio Paraná Diary" is indeed an attempt to get as close as possible to the ineffable. The quotation above continues the logic: the horror and despair exist (in their non-existence)

⁵⁶ D1, 317 ["as long as the line, the line, the line does not snap under the unceasing pressure?" (DI, 201)].

⁵⁷ Gombrowicz's journey echoes – or re-writes – the myth of Orpheus' descent into the underworld: "*ciemność [statku] wdrązała się w ciemność, ale te dwie ciemności nie łączyły się z sobą*" (D1, 313). In this context, the "*krzyk*" could be Eurydice's mute call to Orpheus.

⁵⁸ D1, 316 ["the seal of speechlessness cracked open" (DI, 201, translation modified)].

⁵⁹ T, 7 ["the seal that we have on our lips won't break!"].

⁶⁰ D1, 317 ["calm before a shout" (DI, 201, translation modified)].

⁶¹ D1, 317 ["An unpredictable tension crouches in the smallest movement. We sail on. Yet this madness, this despair, this horror are inaccessible because they don't exist and because they are not, they are, they are in a way that is impossible to refute. We sail on." (DI, 201, translation modified)].

as an impossibility of resistance. They impose themselves, inexorably; they must be expressed. “*Płynięmy*” – it has already happened. The boat is always already moving, the text is always already being written.⁶²

Perhaps the images and thoughts inspired by the journey on the Rio Paraná lingered with Gombrowicz long after he had finished writing the travel journal for the *Diary*, or perhaps he started writing about it once more simply because he felt the pressure of a deadline. At any rate, in 1958, he described the same journey as part of his autobiographical talks for Radio Free Europe. These RFE sketches and the “Rio Paraná Diary” can be read independently, but they also complement one another. Compared to the journal, these sketches are entertaining, less enigmatic, and more realistic; they even give a taste of authenticity and candour.⁶³ For instance, Gombrowicz explains that his earlier travel account in the *Diary* “jest na wpół fantastyczny,”⁶⁴ and one gets the impression that these radio sketches would fill in the factual gaps that the diary fragment leaves open. The narrator mentions that he booked a single cabin on the comfortable steamer “Guarani,”⁶⁵ and gives a colloquial but detailed account of the four-day journey of some 900 km from Buenos Aires through the Argentine savannah and the subtropical forests of the Upper Paraná to the Iguazu falls. There follows a riveting description of the majestic waterfalls, which, as I mentioned above, Gombrowicz had never seen at all. This factual “lie” serves as a reminder that his apparently candid writings are not to be trusted naively, but within the framework of this study it is less relevant than the fact that these sketches are, like the travel diary, haunted by a sense of a grave, ineffable mystery. Gombrowicz not only undermines the concept of purely factual writing by smuggling fiction into autobiography, but he also undermines the *possibility* of purely factual writing. The following passage is a performance of language hitting against the limits of what can be expressed:

⁶² In “L’inspiration, le manque d’inspiration” Blanchot draws attention to this chiasmic logic of inspiration pervading the literature of his times: “l’artiste [...] cherche [...] à faire de l’œuvre une voie vers l’inspiration, ce qui preserve la pureté de l’inspiration, et non pas de l’inspiration une voie vers l’œuvre.” (*L’espace littéraire*, 246).

⁶³ While Gombrowicz’s *Dziennik* (*Diary*) was published in the exile journal *Kultura* in Paris, and was not readily available in the Polish People’s Republic, the radio sketches were commissioned to be broadcast to a wider audience in Poland. This helps explain the repetition of the subject matter, as well as the shift towards a simple, oral register. The sketches were posthumously published in the collections *Wspomnienia Polskie* (*Polish Memories*) and *Wędrówki po Argentynie* (*Argentinean Peregrinations*, 1st ed.: Paris, 1977. I quote from the Wydawnictwo Literackie edition of 1996, and use the abbreviated form *WA*, to refer to *Wędrówki po Argentynie*).

⁶⁴ *WA*, 238 [“is semi-fantastic” (My translation)].

⁶⁵ *WA*, 235. This could be the ship on which he was photographed with Alejandro Rússovich in 1955). See Appendix 2.

Gombrowicz's "Rio Paraná Diary"

Ogarnia przede wszystkim głębokie zdziwienie, że ten ogrom wód się nie zmniejsza, że, przeciwnie, coraz ogromniejszy ten zalew, ten rozlew, o brzegach uciekających gdzieś na 10 kilometrów... [...] Trudno o coś bardziej "egzystencjalnego," ściślej związanego z samą esencją życia jak ta żegluga tajemnicza, i dlatego to tak przykuwające.⁶⁶

In the course of an upstream journey the river should gradually narrow down, not broaden. But the Rio Paraná does not keep to boundaries; it overflows and confusingly expands in all directions. Gombrowicz's loss of orientation in this radio sketch echoes the "Rio Paraná Diary," and connects, once again, loss of direction with something as unexplained as "esencja życia" [the very essence of life]. At this point the radio sketches take up the meditations inspired by the trip in the *Diary*, and the narrator begins to describe the incident that presumably gave rise to the enigmatic "*the shout that was not*" in the journal. The ship is stuck in the shallow bed of the Rio Paraná; black clouds gather, and the narrator has a sense of a calm before a storm. Then the wind hits the wall of trees on the shore:

Naprzód doszedł nas huk nieokreślony puszczony, coś jak rejwach, popłoch, trzaskanie a po chwili buchnął szum, jęk, wycie, ściana zielona na brzegu wykonała dworski pokłon, drzewa wystrzeliły liśćmi, gałęziami, począł się wokół nas jak gdyby ogólny *krzyk*, a statek jął drżeć i wibrować w wirze, który, zdawało się, wcale się nie ruszał, był jak ręka targająca struny harfy. [...]

Wtem coś szarpnęło nami i zakołysało. Statek odzyskał wolność!⁶⁷

In this passage the style veers away from a straightforward portrayal of a spectacular natural phenomenon, and the "*krzyk*" as well as the "*struna*" of the *Diary* are heard again. The

⁶⁶ *WA*, 239-40 ["Above all, one is taken by a deep astonishment that this mass of water is not growing smaller, that, on the contrary, it is ever more vast, this inundation, this overflow, with its embankments are receding somewhere, at 10 kilometres... [...] It would be difficult to find anything more "existential," more tightly bound to the very essence of life than that mysterious sailing, and this is why it is so captivating." (My translation)].

⁶⁷ *WA*, 242-3 ["First the indefinable thunder of the jungle reached us, something like an uproar, turmoil, whacking, and a moment later the roar burst forth, the wailing, howling, the green wall on the bank performed a courtly bow, the trees fired their leaves, their branches, into the air, around us something like a general *shout* arose, and the ship began to tremble and to vibrate in the whirl, which, it seemed, didn't move at all, it was like a hand tearing at the strings of a harp. [...] All of a sudden, something gave us a jerk and made us swing. The ship regained its freedom!" (My translation)].

language becomes increasingly figurative and contrived.⁶⁸ Then, after a visit to the waterfalls, the narrator suggests that the dramatic nature of the landscape enhances this slipping away into fictionality: “trudno by mi było powiedzieć o ile bliskość tak potężnego zjawiska nie zarażała nam wyobraźni.”⁶⁹ Ironically, this particular sketch about the waterfalls is entirely fictional. So in fact, the Iguazu did not set in motion Gombrowicz’s imagination, but it was the cataract of his imagination that made him write about a waterfall that would inspire his creative powers! To stay with Gombrowicz’s own image of an “infecting” of the imagination, I would suggest that in this case his imagination infected itself, with the help of a few old geography books.⁷⁰ Just like the “*shout that was not*,” which is neither internal nor external, or maybe both, inspiration originates in the vortex where “inside” and “outside,” “self” and “other” cease to have a separate status.

III

Exploring the nature of literary composition in the “Rio Paraná Diary,” Gombrowicz undermines the separateness of “self” and “other” in two ways. Leaning on Helen Sword’s investigation of a gendered poetics of inspiration I will discuss how Gombrowicz destabilizes gender identity through a discovery of his “inner female self” – i.e. through a discovery of the self as a traditionally understood “other.” My subsequent analysis of the Rio

⁶⁸ This brings to mind Alex Kurczaba’s observation that in Gombrowicz “there is at work the [...] fundamental awareness that everything couched in words tends to become fictive; that, in other words, language inevitably effects fiction” (*Gombrowicz and Frisch: Aspects of the Literary Diary* (Bonn, 1980), 4).

⁶⁹ *WA*, 245 [“I would find it difficult to tell if the proximity to such a mighty phenomenon didn’t infect our imagination.” (My translation)].

⁷⁰ Another book that might have inspired Gombrowicz’s descriptions of the enigmatic “*krzyk*” is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which also depicts a writer, Marlow, travelling on a steam ship up a river in the tropics. One morning, the fog is “more blinding than the night” on the river Congo, and suddenly, “a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air.” To Marlow it seems that “the mist itself had screamed,” and as the cry fades away, he finds himself “listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence.” He concludes that “the danger, if any [...] was from our proximity to a great human passion let loose.” (London, 1994, 56-61).

Aniela Kowalska discusses parallels between Gombrowicz and Conrad, but does not mention the “Rio Paraná Diary”: *Conrad i Gombrowicz w walce o swoją wybitność* (Warsaw, 1986). However, Knut Grimstad points out the sexual ambivalence that links *Heart of Darkness* and Gombrowicz’s early short story, “Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury.” (“Co zdarzyło się na brygu Banbury? Gombrowicz, erotyka i prowokacja kultury,” *Teksty drugie*, 75 (2002): 57-69, esp. 62, n. 18). The parallels between these two texts would be worth discussing in a separate study.

Paraná section as a crypto-queer text will show that Gombrowicz's struggle to name the unspeakable revolves around the ineffability of homoerotic desire.

The suspension of traditional masculinity takes the form of a double subversion of the separateness of "self" and "other." The narrator not only discovers his "inner female self" (his inner "other"), but this self-feminization manifests itself in an image of gestation, i.e. the growth of an "other" within the "self": "*Ale płyniemy i bez przerwy rośnie w nas... co?... Co?... Co?... Płyniemy.*"⁷¹ Here, Gombrowicz alludes to a common trope in discourses about artistic creation – one that has been described from a feminist perspective as the "timeless and [...] oppressive metaphorical equation between literary creativity and childbirth."⁷² Helen Sword explores how the destabilisation of gender categories functions in male writers' accounts of inspiration. An "inspired" writer must relinquish his or her own authority in order to receive the power of speech from outside – from the divine, the muse, or, for the modernists, from the Other. Coded as "feminine," such an openness or passivity led many male writers to imagine their creativity as an act of embracing their "inner female self." Sword suggests that "even when spoken by a man, prophetic discourse raises the specter of a feminized, 'hysterical' male."⁷³ In as far as Gombrowicz's feverish behaviour and writing transgresses traditional gender roles, his momentary self-feminization causes him anguish; he is disturbed by the uncertain identity of the thing that grows within him, and even feels as if trapped within a tightening circle: "*zacieśnia się krąg widzenia – my w nim.*"⁷⁴ This image of a reduced horizon, of being forced to close in on himself, is somehow bound with a search for language. On the next day he writes:

*my zaś płyniemy, zagłębiając się coraz bardziej w... docierając do... Na nic nie zdadzą się słowa, bo, gdy to mówię, płyniemy!*⁷⁵

There is an intimation of a descent into the depths of the self, towards this unnameable core that seems to harbour the power of creativity. But language is inadequate when it comes to naming either the ship's destination or that "something" growing within the narrator. Gombrowicz's circle of vision tightens, and he sinks deep into himself, and yet he cannot get at this core – not with words. The ship sails and sails, independently of his will. Two days later, an unbearable pressure builds up within him:

⁷¹ D1, 318 ["we sail on and in us grows without respite . . . what? . . . what? . . . We sail on." (DI, 201)].

⁷² See Nina Auerbach's review of Gilbert & Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* [*Victorian Studies*, 23 (1980): 505-6, esp. 506].

⁷³ Helen Sword, *Engendering Inspiration: Visionary Strategies in Rilke, Lawrence and H.D* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 1-7.

⁷⁴ D1, 318 ["our field of vision begins to narrow and we in it" (DI, 201)].

⁷⁵ D1, 318 ["we sail on, sinking deeper, ever deeper into . . . reaching. . . . Words are no help because while I am saying this, we sail on!" (DI, 202, translation modified)].

Zupełna bezsilność wobec patosu, niezdolność dobrania się do tej potęgi, która dzieje się w nas ciągłym nateżaniem się i napinaniem. Zwykłość nasza, najzwyklejsza, wybucha nam jak bomba, jak grom – ale poza nami. Wybuch jest nieosiągalny dla nas, zaklętych w zwykłości.⁷⁶

The tension between the monotony of sailing and the expectation of a breakthrough mounts up again within the narrator, and finally leads to some sort of release. These libidinal dynamics are associated with a struggle with language, as the eruption is shrouded in mystery and paradox: even though it originates in the self, it happens outside the narrator and remains inaccessible. Perhaps it takes place in the vortex where “inside” and “outside,” “self” and “other” intermingle (and this could be the locus of the “space of composition”). The explosion arises from the “*potęg[a], która dzieje się w nas*” [*this power, which happens in us*], and it is nothing but “*zwykłość [...] najzwyklejsza*” [*most common commonness*]. And yet, paradoxically, the narrator cannot access it because he remains trapped “*w zwykłości*” [*cursed in commonness*] i.e. in the very thing that characterises the tension as well as its release. This passage shows the narrator’s frustrated efforts to express his self, to break the spell that holds him captive within ordinary language. His struggle to break out of what is already coded in language points to the preoccupation with the ineffability of homoerotic desire that characterises much of Gombrowicz’s writings. In the “Rio Paraná Diary,” the undercurrent of frustrated homoeroticism is expressed in looks and unspoken words between the narrator and two other passengers.⁷⁷ As one of them makes a banal remark about the weather, Gombrowicz cannot help thinking that it must conceal another layer of meaning:

znów zadźwięczało mi to jakby nie to... jakby właściwie on coś innego, tak, coś innego chciał... i takie samo odniosłem wrażenie gdy, przy śniadaniu, lekarz z Asunción [...] opowiadał o tamtejszych kobietach. Mówił. Ale mówił po to właśnie (ta myśl mnie prześladowa) żeby nie powiedzieć... tak, żeby nie powiedzieć tego co naprawdę miał do powiedzenia. Spojrzałem na niego, ale nic.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ DI, 318 [*The complete helplessness in the face of pathos, the incapacity to get at this power, which happens in us with a constant straining and tightening. This most common commonness of ours explodes like a bomb, like a thunderbolt, but beyond us. The explosion is unattainable for us, cursed in commonness.*] (DI, 202, translation modified)].

⁷⁷ A ship also forms the frame for masculine homoeroticism in the short story “Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury,” though in the “Rio Paraná Diary” it is less explicit and less fantastical than in the earlier text. However, Knut Grimstad suggests about the short story that “sam bryg w końcu staje się metaforą seksualnego ‘stawania się’.” (“Co zdarzyło się,” 69).

⁷⁸ DI, 315 [*yet it didn’t sound right, as if he had wanted to say something else, yes, something else... I had the same impression when, at breakfast, a doctor from Asunción [...] talked about the local women. He talked. But he talked precisely so as not to say anything (this thought haunts me), in such a way as not to say what he really had to say. I looked at him but nothing.*] (DI, 200, translation modified)].

What is it that the man wants from the narrator, or, rather, that the narrator fancies he might want from him? The suspicion haunts him; it is for him so real, so present that in the typescript he even addresses it with "o, natrętna myśli!"⁷⁹ And yet, it is never named. There is something exasperatingly unconvincing about the doctor's macho talk ("[he] talked about the local women"), while the married couples and newly-weds on the ship enhance its oppressive atmosphere of compulsory heterosexuality. If we read the silences in this text as particularly significant, it appears that the "*cisza przed krzykiem*"⁸⁰ discussed above anticipates a release of the tension in the narrator's consciousness between what is said and what is left unsaid in terms of desire. Gombrowicz had already presented a similar tension between the said and the unsaid, and its relation to homosexual signification, in the 1930s. Gudrun Langer explains the short story "Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury" in these terms:

Einerseits wird durch das Verschweigen im Text jene repressive Sprachkonditionierung imitiert, der auch der Autor mit seinem Werk unterliegt. Andererseits besitzen die Aposiopesen und Ellipsen eine deiktische Funktion; das Nicht-gesagte erregt Aufmerksamkeit. (297)⁸¹

The tension between the said and the unsaid in terms of homoerotic desire mirrors the paradox of "*the shout that was not*" – the ineffability of inspiration. In Gombrowicz's writings these two fundamental "unspeakable" concerns both demand to be heard, but rather than competing for attention, they signify each other. Agnieszka Sołtysik examines the overlapping of these two themes in her discussion of Gombrowicz's project to "liberate Man from the yoke of his masculinity."⁸² In her view, Gombrowicz unmasks the discourse of masculinity as a social construct not only to "be a better or more neutral person," but also because for him, the problematics of gender are 'fundamental to his task and efficacy as a writer.' Sołtysik explains further:

What escaping masculinity would entail is the ability to say much more about "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). (257-8)

⁷⁹ T, 5 ["oh, obsessive thought!"].

⁸⁰ *D1*, 317 ["silence before a shout" (*D1*, 201)].

⁸¹ Gudrun Langer, "Witold Gombrowicz's Erzählung "Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury" als homoerotischer Maskentext," *Zeitschrift für Slavistik*, 42 (1997): 290-9.

⁸² Sołtysik, 'Witold Gombrowicz's Struggle...', 254. Sołtysik quotes from *D1*, 187.

Knut Grimstad analyses Gombrowicz's short story "Zdarzenia na brygu Banbury" to similar avail: "akt wypowiedzi został zrytualizowany jako sposób wyrażenia gestów erotycznych. Faktycznie, język jest erotyczny, lecz poprzez *akt* mowy, nie zaś jej tematykę."⁸³ Grimstad concludes that the question of homosexuality in Gombrowicz ought to be considered afresh as something more than a metaphor for chaotic immaturity or scandalmongering with the aim to provoke. As a new angle from which to approach Gombrowicz's self-representations he suggests Gombrowicz's struggle to voice that which is unvoiced.

There is evidence to suggest that Gombrowicz would not have disagreed with these Queer theorists. He implies a link between his experience of sexual desire and the act of writing in a *Diary* entry from 1958:

Źródło moje bije w ogrodzie, u wrót którego stoi anioł z mieczem ognistym. Nie mogę tam wejść. Nigdy się nie przedostanę. Skazany jestem na wieczyste krążenie wokół miejsca, gdzie święci się moje najprawdziwsze oczarowanie.

Nie wolno mi, bo... te źródła wstydem tryskają, jak fontanny! Ale ten nakaz wewnętrzny: zbliż się jak najbardziej do źródeł wstydu twojego! Muszę powołać do działania wszystkie rozum, świadomość, dyscyplinę, wszystkie elementy formy i stylu, całą technikę, do jakiej jestem zdolny, aby zdobyć przybliżenie do tajemniczej bramy tego ogrodu, za którą kwitnie mój wstyd.⁸⁴

This entry shares with the "Rio Paraná Diary" the motif of a quest for a source hidden in natural surroundings (Argentinian rainforest/ paradisaal garden). If the allegorical value of the source of the Rio Paraná was not made explicit, the sexual subtext of the diary entry quoted above is plain to see; the narrating persona also makes it clear that he is striving to attain the sources of the self, that these sources are shameful, and that their pursuit requires technical and stylistic mastery. It appears that the "nakaz wewnętrzny" that motivates the desire to write is due to the *ineffability* of this sexual element. And yet, the homoerotic aspect of this sexual "shame" is only implicit here (perhaps in the image of the angel standing guard with a phallic symbol).

⁸³ "Co zdarzyło się," 66 ["the speech act is ritualized as a means of expressing erotic gestures. Language is indeed erotic, but through the *act* of speech, rather than its content." (My translation)].

⁸⁴ D2, 110 ["My springs pulsate in a garden whose gate is guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. I cannot enter. I will never get through. I am condemned to an eternal circling of the place where my truest enchantment is sanctified. I am not allowed in because... these springs are gushing with shame like fountains! Yet there is the internal imperative: get as close as you can to the sources of your shame! I have to mobilize all my reason, consciousness, discipline, all the elements of form and style, all the techniques of which I am capable, in order to get closer to the mysterious gate of that garden, behind which my shame bursts into flower." (D II 87, translation modified)].

Gombrowicz's "Rio Paraná Diary"

However, the Argentinian writer Ernesto Sábato remembers, in 1979, a conversation he had with Gombrowicz in 1967: when asked about his work, and about what he was most anxious to do, Gombrowicz allegedly answered: “Ernesto, ce que je pourrais faire de plus important, et que je ne ferai jamais – il est trop tard – ce serait le récit de mon expérience poétique durant mes premières années à Buenos Aires.” Sábato continues his narration:

Son ton, sa pudeur, m’ont fait penser qu’il se référait à son expérience homosexuelle. Avec toute la force de mon admiration, je l’ai engagé à l’écrire, à laisser tout le reste pour rendre compte de cette expérience qui certainement pouvait être une des meilleures choses qu’il laisserait dans sa vie. Mais il m’écoutait avec une expression de tristesse sans cesser de faire non de la tête. J’ai compris que mes arguments ne changeraient rien à sa décision et que l’être sentimental, l’être d’une pudeur extrême qu’était Witold Gombrowicz ne dirait jamais ce qu’il y avait peut-être eu de plus mystérieux et de plus profond dans son existence.⁸⁵

Sábato’s account is so poignant because it suggests that Gombrowicz could have but did not put into words the poeticism of his Retiro adventures, that his most important message remained unsaid. Like a “*shout that was not*,” Gombrowicz’s silence on this matter is suspended on the line that divides what can be said from what cannot. This private conversation shows more plainly than the “Rio Paraná Diary” how Gombrowicz imagined the possibility of innovating literature, and the possibility of re-imagining the creative paradigm in Queer terms. Perhaps, had he lived longer, he might have broken this “*pieczęć milczenia*.” But what is more significant is the fact that his hitherto “un-readable” subtextual sources of inspiration can be unearthed, and that the travel journal *makes sense* in the context of the changing intellectual dynamics through which Queer meaning-making has become a subject of critical investigation.

IV

If the meaning, Queer or otherwise, of the travel diary depends on the intellectual atmosphere in which the text is read, or on the training, ideological values, or personal inclinations of the individual reader, then where do we draw the boundaries between the meaning consciously or unconsciously intended by Gombrowicz, and that which the reader’s conscious/unconscious intentionality creates? And, more importantly, how does Gombrowicz draw these boundaries, how does he describe the limits of his own control?

⁸⁵ Ernesto Sábato’s written testimony, Buenos Aires, 30 March 1979; trans. from the Spanish by Michel Bibard, in *Gombrowicz en Argentine: témoignages et documents 1939-1963*, ed. by Rita Gombrowicz (Montricher, 2004), 236.

On the one hand, he claims, in a letter (dated 28 December 1955) to his editor Jerzy Giedroyc:

Proszę to wydrukować w tym układzie, tzn. z podtytułami. Wygląda nieporządnie, ale wszystko jest przepatrzone i skontrolowane. To ma być pewna osobna całość, dziennik z podróży zaczynający się fantastycznie. Teraz piszę dalszy ciąg, wprowadzając dość istotne i ważne problemy.⁸⁶

But on the other hand, the text explicitly challenges the reader to search for meaning between the lines. In his extra-textual comments Gombrowicz again relinquishes control over how it will be interpreted.

In the “Rio Paraná Diary” Gombrowicz feels partly disempowered by the ship’s relentless movement, but he claims that he succeeded in trying to fall asleep. The Polish “*usiłowałem zasnąć*,”⁸⁷ with its root *siła*, hinges on a notion of effort. But sleep and dream cannot be *forced* to happen; usually we have no control over what we dream, and we cannot switch off our waking subjectivity by an effort of will. However, as impossible as it may seem, control is paramount in Gombrowicz’s representation of sleep/dream, and also in his discussion of the possibility of creative writing. In the 1954 *Diary* he gives the following advice to young writers: “Wejdź w sferę snu,”⁸⁸ he exhorts, and then explains:

Tak postępując ani się spostrzeżesz, kiedy wytworzy ci się szereg scen kluczowych, metafor, symboli [...] i uzyskasz szyfr właściwy. I wszystko zacznie ci się pod palcami zaokrąglać mocą własnej swojej logiki, sceny, postaci, pojęcia, obrazy zażądają swego dopełnienia i to, co już stworzyłeś, podyktuje ci resztę.⁸⁹

The idea that a spontaneously originating beginning would automatically give rise to the entire work corresponds to the view of authorship expounded by the narrator of Gombrowicz’s novel *Ferdydurke* (1937): in a mock-theoretical chapter, he claims that a writer

⁸⁶ *Listy J.G.-W.G.*, 209. [“Please print this in this layout, i.e. with the subtitles. It looks messy, but everything is reviewed and *controlled*. It’s supposed to be a certain separate whole, a travel journal that begins in a fantastic manner. Now I am writing the sequel, leading to quite fundamental and important problems.” (My translation)].

⁸⁷ *D1*, 316 [“I forced myself to sleep.” (My translation)].

⁸⁸ *D1*, 124 [“Enter the realm of dreams.” (*DI*, 79)].

⁸⁹ *D1*, 124-5 [“By doing this you will barely notice the moment when a whole series of key scenes, metaphors, symbols [...] create themselves and you have arrived at the appropriate code. Everything will begin to take on flesh under your fingers by the power of its own logic: scenes, characters, concepts, images will demand fruition and that which you have already created will dictate the rest to you.” (*DI*, 79)].

has absolutely no control over his emerging work, which just "happens" to him – "*napisala [mi] się książka heroiczna.*"⁹⁰ In the *Diary* passage quoted above, however, Gombrowicz emphasizes right away the necessity to establish a dialectic between the free flow of the imagination and a conscious will to structure and self-expression:

Jednakże cała rzecz w tym, abyś, poddając się w ten sposób biernie dziełu, pozwalając aby stwarzało się samo, nie przestał ani na chwilę nad nim panować. Zasada twoja w tym względzie ma być następująca: nie wiem dokąd dzieło mnie zaprowadzi ale, gdziekolwiek by mnie zaprowadziło, musi wyrażać mnie i mnie zaspakajać. [...] I wszystkie problemy, które nasuwa ci takie samorodne i na oślep stwarzające się dzieło, problemy etyczne, stylu, formy intelektu, muszą być rozwiązywane z pełnym udziałem twojej najostrzejszej świadomości oraz z maksymalnym realizmem (gdyż wszystko to jest grą kompensacji: im bardziej jesteś szalony, fantastyczny, intuicyjny, nieobliczalny, tym bardziej musisz być trzeźwy, opanowany, odpowiedzialny).⁹¹

This passage also harks back to *Ferdydurke*, in that it discusses authorship in terms of paternity. In the novel, the narrator's exaggerated tone and violent imagery ridicule the pretence of control:

Cóż tedy począć mamy z taką częścią, która się urodziła niepodobna do nas, jakby tysiąc jurnych, ognistych ogierów nawiedziło łóżko matki naszego dziecięcia – ha, jedynie chyba dla uratiowania pozorów ojcostwa musimy z całą potęgą moralną upodobnić się do naszego dzieła, gdy ono nie chce być do nas podobne.⁹²

⁹⁰ Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, ed. by Jan Błoński (Kraków, 1986), 71. ["[He] happened to write a heroic book." (*Ferdydurke*, trans. by Danuta Borchartt, (New Haven, CT, 2000), 73)].

⁹¹ *DI*, 125 ["The whole trick, though, is that while surrendering yourself passively to the work and letting it create itself, you do not, even for a moment, stop controlling it. Your rule in this matter is to be: I do not know where the work will lead me, but wherever it leads me, I have to express myself and satisfy myself. [...] All the problems that a work being born and blindly creating itself suggests to you – problems of ethics, style, form, intellect – must be solved with the full participation of your most alert consciousness and with maximum realism (as all of this is a game of compensation: the crazier, more fantastic, inventive, unpredictable, irresponsible you are, the more sober, controlled, and responsible you must be)." (*DI*, 79-80)].

⁹² *Ferdydurke*, 71. ["What are we then to do with such a part that has turned up and is not in our likeness, as if a thousand lustful, fiery stallions had visited the bed of our child's mother – and hey! If only to save some semblance of paternity we must, with all the moral power at

Thus, in *Ferdydurke*, the author is represented as a man whose (unidentified) wife is raped by uncontrollable, animalistic forces; the work born of that union is not the author's offspring – he can merely pretend to have fathered it. In the 1954 *Diary*, Gombrowicz reverts to the imagery of paternity, but as he asserts control as absolutely essential, there is a shift in the power relations within the family:

z walki pomiędzy wewnętrzną logiką dzieła, a moją osobą (gdyż nie wiadomo: czy dzieło jest tylko pretekstem abym ja się wypowiedział, czy też ja jestem tylko pretekstem dla dzieła), z tego zmagania rodzi się coś trzeciego, coś pośredniego, coś jakby nie przeze mnie napisanego, a jednak mojego – nie będącego ani czystą formą, ani bezpośrednią moją wypowiedzią, lecz deformacją zrodzoną w sferze “między”: między mną a formą, między mną a czytelnikiem, między mną a światem. Ten twór dziwny, tego bastarda, wsadzam w kopertę i posyłam wydawcy.⁹³

So now, although it might still be an illegitimate child, the work is definitely the author's offspring. And yet there is little triumph in his packing and sending off “tego bastarda.” The author feels impatience, resignation, and then relief. The patriarchal structure is not re-established: his violent encounter with the “inner logic of the work” not only eliminates the role of the mother in the family, but above all it raises the disturbing question whether the work stems from the author, or vice versa. In *Ferdydurke* the author had to put on a show of *a posteriori* resemblance to the work, but in the *Diary*, the writer's conformity with the work is not merely a question of pretence; he might actually *be* a function or derivation of the work. As a means of self-expression, therefore, writing is a doomed enterprise. Even if he does not allow the emergent work simply to dictate its own course, in the end the resigned author will be left to doubt his own identity.

As far as literary creativity is concerned, the *Diary* presents a situation wrought with paradoxes. Art depends on that which reason rejects as absurd, and it is the discovery of something that does not (yet) exist. It requires of the writer both a dream-like state of self-abandonment, and a relentless strife for control. The act of creation thwarts the author's desire for self-realization and leaves his subjectivity in crisis, thereby annihilating him as a

our disposal, try to resemble our work, [since] it would not resemble us.’ (*Ferdydurke*, trans. by Danuta Borchartt, (New Haven, CT, 2000), 72-3; translation modified)].

⁹³ *D1*, 125-6 [“out of the struggle between the inner logic of the work and my person (for it is not yet clear: is the work a mere pretext for expressing myself or am I a pretext for the work), out of this wrestling is born a third thing, something indirect, something that seems not to have been written by me, yet it is mine, something that is neither pure form nor my direct expression, but a deformation born in an intermediary sphere; between me and the world. This strange creation, this bastard, I put in an envelope and mail to a publisher.” (*DI*, 79-80)]

Gombrowicz's "Rio Paraná Diary"

confident and dependable creator. Gombrowicz's claim "*usiłowałem zasnąć*"⁹⁴ in the "Rio Paraná Diary" implies that he consciously *wszedł w sferę snu* – he entered the realm of dreams, and voluntarily put himself in the precarious position of a creative writer. He exposed and abandoned himself to "*the shout that was not*," but his surrender was fully controlled.

⁹⁴ *D1*, 316 ["I forced myself to sleep." (My translation)].

Public and Private Physical Culture: The Soviet State and the Construction of the New Person

Susan Grant

I Introduction

This paper shows that physical culture was a key player in the overall struggle to impose socialist ideals on Soviet society and was essential in helping to form the New Soviet Person. In this vast process of acculturation and modernization education, agitation and propaganda, imagery, and new practices were all key features of physical culture. The application of new cultural modes to physical culture (in the form of health, sanitation, hygiene, sport, exercise and dress) can also be interpreted as a form of discourse on Soviet politics, culture and society.

Important work has already been done by those such as Jochen Hellbeck who has examined issues regarding the construction of Soviet selfhood and subjectivity and also Jeffrey Brooks who has looked at questions of transmission, communication and reception. Their research draws particular attention to the elasticity of identity and the power balance between the state and the individual.¹ Also influential here are the studies of Stephen Kotkin, Sheila Fitzpatrick and David L. Hoffmann who have shown that identity was extremely flexible, with Kotkin's argument that people learned to "speak Bolshevik" when it suited them demonstrating the mutability of Soviet control and governance.²

I argue that physical culture was used by the state and the individual to serve both public and private interests. This is done through examining the interaction between state and individual, particularly through the medium of the press. After all, the writing of communism was to be found in the press as well as in diaries, memoirs or biographies. Through the medium of the press and other forms of propaganda the state attempted to reach into the private lives of its citizens and mould them into new Soviet people.

II Young People

One of those groups that the state sought to educate and enlighten through physical culture was young people. In its prescription for the private lives of young people physical culture

¹ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind. Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Massachusetts and London, 2006) and Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

² Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (California, 1995); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants. Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivisation* (New York and Oxford, 1994); David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis. Social Identities in Moscow, 1929-1941* (Ithaca and London, 1994).

had two main roles that can broadly be termed “regenerative” and “motivational”. The former was reactive and sought to use physical culture to nurture those already disaffected by the social effects of NEP, such as hooligans, attempting to bring them back into the socialist fray. The other, “motivational” aspect of physical culture agitprop was more proactive and directed towards inspiring and educating young enthusiasts, teaching them how to live their lives in the correct socialist way and to show others how to do this.

In both cases young people were constantly monitored and kept in check, or at least efforts were made to do so. In schools for instance it was argued that *fizkul'tura* could be used to help establish the “correct social environment” and claimed that social factors played a more influential role than biological factors in the sexual upbringing and habits of young people.³ For example, it was considered by many in medical and scientific circles that physical culture could be used to help combat masturbation – “the main scourge of the old schools”. Physical culture was endorsed to help educate these young people and to help create the correct social environment through persuading children to adopt a hygiene routine, advising them to wear hygienic clothes, exercise and perform socio-political activities in their schools and communities.⁴

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the state sought to extend its level of control and influence amongst young people, using the schools, clubs and reading-rooms as venues for socialist education, not just in terms of politics but in cultural terms also. Their correct upbringing, education and health was a key concern and in realizing such objectives the private desires and actions of young people were continually subordinated to the overarching needs of the state and the collective. By constantly subjecting young people to state propaganda and by introducing them to socialist values, for example through physical culture, it was hoped that young people would not be drawn towards any ‘counter-revolutionary’ influences but would in fact become strong, healthy and loyal party cohorts.

III Women

The private lives of women were also infiltrated by the state as the press continued to expound the nature and benefits of Soviet physical culture to one and all. Women in many cases engaged in the public discourse on physical culture, which had extended to touch on issues such as dress styles, fashion and image. Echoing its policies towards youth it was considered that genuine Soviet physical culture would not tolerate any unhygienic practices or habits. Its main concern was a clean and healthy body. Physical culture classes and exercise alone lent colour to the face and lips, eliminating the need for “artificial” colour such as lipstick.⁵ Once again the state sought to establish its mark on private life, even providing images to which individuals could aspire.

³ Gerasimov, ‘Fizkul'tura-faktor polovogo vospitaniya’, *Fizkul'tura v shkole*, 8 (1931): 12.

⁴ Gerasimov, ‘Fizkul'tura-faktor’, 13.

⁵ ‘Fizkul'turnitsy, borites' za novyi byt!’, 10.

Image was after all quite important. In 1936 chairman of the Physical Culture Committee, Ivan Kharchenko, complained that one female physical culture representative looked like a boy. Instead he wanted to see a woman before him, not in the sense, he explained, that she “should cook porridge”, but that she should possess a feminine quality and at least try to look like a woman physically.⁶ Furthermore, he added, the time had passed for women to go about “smoking cigarettes, spitting on the footpath and wearing men’s blazers and boots”.⁷ There was, he concluded, only space for highly cultured young ladies.

The creation of the New Soviet Person was evidently a hard fought terrain. So how did women respond to the model of the new socialist woman? By the start of the 1930s there was a trend to publish accounts by women, admittedly mainly urban workers, concerning their relationship to and experience of physical culture and sport. For example, Матюшева from the Lenin club, wrote about the discomfort and embarrassment experienced by women participating in physical culture and sport. Such feelings, she noted, arose primarily as a result of male reactions to sport’s attire and hygiene issues.

On the other hand many women wrote to magazines and newspapers claiming that they had been empowered by physical culture and sports. For example, Kadnova from the ‘Kauchuk’⁸ factory explained that she had been working in the factory for more than eight years and had been a part of the physical culture *krus’hok* there for about six years, on and off.⁹ She admitted that the years when she was actively involved in physical culture were her most “controlled”. It allowed her to exert more influence and control over her life. When she was not involved in physical culture, she admitted that she often felt sick, caught colds, her overall state of health deteriorated, and when at work she felt poorly and listless. When she resumed her involvement in the physical culture *krus’hok* and classes, she immediately felt better, fresh and more cheerful. This was an example of a woman who participated in state efforts to help realise the New Soviet Person but her account shows that *she* benefited from this participation and her main motivation would appear to be personal rather than a desire to join in some collective project, as the authorities would have wished.

Another success story was that of Slivina, a Soviet diving champion who recounted how she had come to succeed in the sport.¹⁰ She noted that she followed a highly regimented regime and diet, and was active in swimming, athletics and gymnastics as well as diving. Diving and water sports, she admitted, were especially complicated and difficult, and consequently required enormous commitment. One needed to attain complete mastery of one’s body and possess qualities such as decisiveness and will power. Slivina was another

⁶ GARF, f.7576, op.14, d.2, l. 10. Stenogramma soveshchaniï po uluchshennogo fizkul’turoi raboty sredi zhenshchin. 16/II/36.

⁷ GARF, f.7576, op.14, d.2, l. 10.

⁸ This was a rubber factory, “kauchuk” originating from the Indian “caoutchouc” meaning a type of rubber.

⁹ ‘Chto govoryat rabotnitsy o fizkul’ture’, *Fizkul’tura i sport*, no. 13 (1930): 4-5.

¹⁰ N. Slivina. ‘Mastera – organizatory massovoi ucheby’, *Fizkul’tura i Sport*, no. 16-17 (1931): 15.

example of the New Soviet Person in action, someone who exhibited all the signs of the persistence, will and commitment associated with physical culture.

Both of these women had answered the state's call and participated in physical culture. While the state gained healthy, fit, motivated and committed workers and athletes, the women in return received social promotion, confidence and increased control over their lives. These were, it must be remembered, press accounts, where letters were no doubt selected to promote a particular ideal or policy. Therefore the argument must be borne in mind that these and other positive accounts were designed to please and, as Stephen Kotkin notes, served a "definite purpose", for such people were being "exhibited as the standard bearers of the 'new culture'".¹¹ That said however, letters written by women to the press generally reflected a diverse response to physical culture. In the physical culture press positive accounts were accompanied by negative. Beside accounts of those empowered by physical culture were accounts of those experiencing shame, isolation and embarrassment. Articles bemoaning the still poor uptake and disinterest in physical culture countered articles on the progress and development of physical culture. It is also fair to say that positive accounts only began to appear in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when there was actually something positive to report following developments resulting from the Five Year Plan.

IV Peasants

Besides young people and women, another prominent group in society was also targeted for particular development. Even before collectivization the private lives of peasants had been of much concern to the authorities. As regards physical culture, one is severely challenged to picture the hostile "darkened masses" doing morning exercises before heading to the fields for a day's work then coming home to clean their nails and brush their teeth. Even by the mid-1920s when there were supposed to have been at least some agitprop campaigns conducted, the situation appeared hopeless. For instance, a representative on the Supreme Council of Physical Culture, Maria Glebova, commented in 1925 that, having travelled around five provinces over the course of three months, she encountered not one peasant who practiced physical culture.¹² And even when it was apparent that organizers and agitators were often out of touch with the realities of life in the villages the state nonetheless persevered in its attempts to educate and enlighten the peasants in the new, socialist way of life.

If state efforts did occasionally succeed in drawing more peasants towards physical culture, the basic ideals of physical culture were often misunderstood or ignored. One report highlighted the failure of organizers and agitprop when it noted that "*fizkul'turniki*" often smoked during lessons.¹³ They apparently did not know any better because nobody had told

¹¹ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 190.

¹² RGASPI, f.17, op.68, d.424, ll7, 9, 23, 43, 60. Glebova in Orgburo discussions.

¹³ A.Gubarev, 'Fizkul'tura – v derevnyu?', *Fizkultura i sport*, no.13, (1928): 1.

them that this was not the correct practice for *fizkul'turniki*.¹⁴ In the same report it was observed that rural people reacted negatively to the sports gear of the urban *fizkul'turniki*, especially female participants, since they had not been “sufficiently convinced” of its advantages. Peasants were still evidently unaware of socialist principles on how to behave and if they were, were simply unwilling to accept them. In any case, they had their own views on physical culture and preferred simple games with simple objectives or entertainment with elements of social interaction.

As Larissa Lebedeva notes in her study of peasants in Penza, games were often a means of fraternizing with the opposite sex, especially for young people.¹⁵ Male peasants liked to use games as a way of impressing girls with their strength and on certain holidays village men (and boys as young as ten) gathered together to mark the festive occasion through boxing matches.¹⁶ For children, *lapta* and other games were considered a good means of strengthening children for the physical demands of peasant work that lay ahead of them.¹⁷ Strength was a matter of pride and prestige among peasants and stories of famous “strongmen” were passed down from generation to generation.¹⁸ The construction of the New Soviet Person in the villages was perhaps most challenging of all for the Soviet state and physical culture policymakers seemed resigned to let peasants continue on playing their traditional games, as long as these involved some form of healthy exercise. Hygiene and cultural concerns would have to be implemented through these and other approaches to peasant life.

Even when using more conciliatory approaches, attempts to educate peasants on their level and use methods such as dance to attract peasants towards physical culture backfired. For example, several *izbachi* (people responsible for the reading-rooms) reported that dances in fact had a negative influence and only interested younger peasants.¹⁹ One observer wrote that when dances started in the room, older people who had gone there to read walked out.²⁰ When the dancing had ended the floor was covered with cigarette-ends, phlegm, and empty *semechki* (sunflower seeds) shells.²¹ Not only had the introduction of dances created an unsightly mess and led to anti-physical culture behaviour amongst youth,

¹⁴ Gubarev, ‘Fizkul'tura – v derevnyu!’, 1.

¹⁵ Lebedeva, *Povednevnyaya zhizn'*, 118.

¹⁶ See Lebedeva, *Povednevnyaya zhizn'*, 122-23. As the provincial party commission disapprovingly observed, the winner appeared the next day with a bruised and swollen face. She also notes that this practice still continues today in certain parts of Belinskii district, 123.

¹⁷ Lebedeva, *Povednevnyaya zhizn'*, 118. Popular also amongst children were games such as ‘blind man’s buff’, ‘hide and seek’ while during Easter ‘egg and spoon’ racing was popular amongst all ages. Songs and verse were also integral features of many peasant games, see Lebedeva, 123-128.

¹⁸ Lebedeva, *Povednevnyaya zhizn'*, 123.

¹⁹ Meshcherskii ‘O tantsakh i igrakh v izbe-chital'nye’, *Izba-chital'nya*, no.7-8 (1924): 107.

²⁰ Meshcherskii, ‘O tantsakh’, *Izba-chital'nya*, 107.

²¹ Meshcherskii, ‘O tantsakh’, 107.

but it had also alienated older peasants. There was a clear disparity between image and reality and theory and practice. Rather than having propaganda inspire peasants of all ages, it more often than not transpired that peasant youth behaviour tarnished the image of physical culture in older peasants' eyes. In spite of the various propaganda and agitation campaigns it was proving extremely difficult to control the habits and actions of peasants in the private sphere.

The ubiquitous campaigns carried out at the state's behest masked serious underlying problems. Campaigns enabled officials and the press to boast about endeavours and achievements but when these campaigns ended so did the interest they were supposed to inspire. One representative from western Siberia claimed that not one *COBXO3* in the area had a red corner or physical culture corner, let alone a club. At times in winter this *COBXO3* did not have any water and it had to travel ten kilometres in order to get some and so "all physical culture efforts ended there".²²

Under the Soviet regime local officials had myriad targets to make. In the heat of collectivization they (logically) considered it more important to make agricultural targets rather than satisfy physical culture demands.²³ Collectivization was after all the priority. One *sovkhoz* director stated that "we never practice physical culture; we need to conduct the harvest campaign".²⁴ This had happened in spite of the fact that the workers there, both young and old, had showed an interest in physical culture. So even if individuals were interested in taking up the state's call to participate in physical culture and the new life, more pressing political state policies sidelined cultural issues. The welfare and development of the individual was again subordinated to the public or state interest.

State commitment, despite its constant public endorsement of rural physical culture, was at times called into question. Even by the mid-1930s sports inventory in rural areas was still drastically less than in the cities. Whereas the cities could count on receiving a massive 86 per cent of sports inventory, villages had to cope with just 14 per cent. If the authorities really wanted to help physical culture in the provinces, why did they not focus efforts on providing more equipment and material resources? Even if funding was scarce, surely a more equal distribution between urban and rural funding was necessary, especially when the villages were so under-equipped and under-served by physical culture instructors. Either

²² GARF, f.7576, op.3, d.56, l. 69. Gorbachev, 29/XI/1931.

²³ There is still much debate today over collectivisation. Much of this surrounds statistics concerning the number of those that died and the reasons for this. Robert Conquest argues that up to fourteen and half million died from collectivisation (seven million from famine) as a result of state policies, while Stephen G. Wheatcroft contends that the number was still significant but substantially lower (four to five million) as a result of a combination of state policies, demography and ecological disasters. For more on the debate see Stephen Wheatcroft, 'More light on the scale of repression and excess mortality in the Soviet Union in the 1930s', in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, eds. John Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning (Cambridge, 1993), 275-290.

²⁴ GARF, f.7576, op.3, d.56, l.72. Zagorskii.

central authorities were unaware of the extent of the difficulties experienced in implementing physical culture in the provinces (unlikely), or they simply concentrated efforts in showcasing urban efforts and achievements, hoping that such successes would, somehow, eventually filter down to the uncultured masses elsewhere. What is clear is that once again there was a huge difference between policy and action, as well between public statements and private intentions.

V Conclusion

In conclusion it becomes clear that the state used physical culture in its overall plan to modernize and acculturate the masses and that, while this was at times in the interests of and of benefit to the individual, the overarching concern was with the public and political interest. The construction of the New Soviet Person was an ongoing battle fought between the state, its various organizations and the ‘masses’ it sought to educate and influence. This battle raged in a number of spheres, including that of physical culture. Yet the extent to which the state succeeded in inspiring and shaping its citizens is a question still being answered but it seems safe to say that, at least in terms of physical culture, the construction of the new person was a slow and protracted affair that met with varying levels of success.

Through Snow and Red Fog: South Slav Soldiers in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond

John Paul Newman

The article is concerned with the way in which memories and experiences of the First World War were narrated and presented in interwar eastern and central Europe with special reference to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia). The intention is to investigate the significance of the fact that, in Yugoslavia and throughout interwar Eastern Europe, so many citizens, subjects had served on opposing sides during the war. For example, in the enlarged state of Romania after 1918, Transylvanian Hungarians and Germans had fought for the Central Powers, whilst Romanians had fought for the Allies. In Czechoslovakia, Czechs had supposedly been reluctant soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian Army but enthusiastic volunteers for the Czech Legion in Russia, whereas Sudeten Germans had been more loyal to the Habsburg war effort. Poles also, living together in the new state of Poland, had fought against each other in the armies of the Allies and the Central Powers.

Despite the complexity of wartime experiences in these states, often a simplified and nationally exclusive foundational myth drew a veil over conflicting legacies. In the Romanian case study, research has shown how an officially-sanctioned culture of victory privileged the masculine, Romanian sacrifice and excluded minority groups, women, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, etc.¹ Andrea Orzoff in her new book about the First Republic of Czechoslovakia *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia 1914-1948* (Oxford, 2009) has shown how the story of the Czech Legion in Russia became that state's foundational myth, serving as a national epic, again excluding pro-Habsburg elements, national minorities. Similar myths were associated with Polish heroes such as Josef Pilsudski and Josef Haller. In each case there is a narrative of heroic national sacrifice and resurrection. In each case the narrative is underpinned by anti-imperialism, sometimes also anti-Bolshevism. In each case, the victorious part represents the whole, the history of the 'winners' marginalizes that of the 'losers'.

In Yugoslavia, the same process of mythologization and marginalization was at work. The 'winners' of the Great War were clearly the Serbians. The Kingdom of Serbia had fought a successful war of national emancipation against the Ottoman Turks, the First Balkan War; then against their former allies Bulgaria in the Second Balkan War. In 1914 and 1915 they had successfully defended their homeland against Austro-Hungarian invasion, before making a harrowing retreat across Albania in the winter of 1915-1916, an episode that came to be called the 'Serbian Golgotha'. Finally, in 1918, the Serbian army had returned home in triumph to 'liberate' South Slavs from the Habsburgs and to 'unify' with them in Yugoslavia. This national epic of Serbian sacrifice and resurrection served as the

¹ Maria Bucur, *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth Century Romania* (Indiana, 2009).

foundational myth of Yugoslavia, and was known in the interwar kingdom as the wars of 'liberation and unification'.

Within Yugoslavia, the myth of 'liberation and unification' had a powerful emotional appeal for many Serbians, especially veterans of the Serbian army. But as has already been noted, the myth excluded those South Slavs, Croats, Slovenes, and Serbs, who had fought in the Habsburg army on the side of the Central Powers during the Great War. What is more, there was little that was truly 'Yugoslav' about the myth of 'liberation and unification'. Soldiers of the Serbian army were valorized for their wartime exploits, other South Slavs featured merely as passive imperial subjects who were 'liberated' by their brothers east of the River Sava. It was the failure of the narrative of liberation and unification to appeal to all South Slavs that led pro-Yugoslav intellectuals to search for a usable and more inclusive wartime past, one which would reflect the multi-national composition of the new state.

Their search brought them to the South Slav volunteer movement. The movement comprised men who had chosen to fight alongside the Serbian army during the First World War. Some of these men had been recruited during the war from South Slav diaspora communities, especially in the USA. The largest contingent of volunteers, however, had been South Slav Habsburg soldiers who were captured and held as POWs in Russia, before opting to fight in specially organized volunteer units subordinate to the Serbian army. The fact that Habsburg South Slavs were willing to volunteer and fight with the Serbian Army against the Central Powers was used as evidence that a pro-Yugoslav, anti-imperial sentiment existed amongst Habsburg South Slavs before and during the First World War. After 1918, supporters of Yugoslavia upheld the wartime volunteer movement as a truly supranational phenomenon. In these divisions, Habsburg Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes had demonstrated the same martial ardour and commitment to 'liberation and unification' as soldiers from the Serbian Army. In this way, the foundational myth of the kingdom acquired a Yugoslav aspect.

The reality of the wartime volunteer movement, of course, does not correspond entirely with the post-war myth. During the war, the question of volunteer units had been raised by émigré South Slavs on the Yugoslav Committee, a propaganda organization based in London and comprised of a handful of Habsburg South Slavs who had left Austria-Hungary at the beginning of the war. They sent emissaries throughout the world, but mainly to North America, to agitate for the formation of a South Slav volunteer regiment, which would fight alongside, but separate from, the Serbian Army. The wartime Prime Minister of Serbia, Nikola Pašić, was in principle supportive of the idea of volunteer soldiers, although he was less favourably disposed to their separation from the Serbian Army. Pašić wanted to maintain complete control of the military and political situation during the war, and was frequently at odds with the Yugoslav Committee over volunteer units and their relationship to the Serbian Army.²

The question of using volunteers to fight against the Central Powers became more pressing as, due to Austria-Hungary's military set backs on the Eastern Front, an ever larger

² See Đorđe Janković, *Nikola Pašić i jugoslovensko pitanje*, vol. 2 (Belgrade, 1985), pp. 76-107.

number of Habsburg South Slavs were falling into Russian captivity. The Serbian consulate in Petrograd received a number of letters from these POWs requesting to fight alongside the Serbian Army (based at Salonika from the beginning of 1916 onwards). Pašić and the Yugoslav Committee reached a compromise agreement that allowed for these POWs to form an independent volunteer unit, separate from the Serbian Army but staffed by its officers. The unit was called the 'First Serbian Volunteer Division', despite the protests of the Yugoslav Committee and a number of volunteers who had wanted to include the title 'Yugoslav'. Contrary to the post-war depiction of the volunteer unit as a South Slav melting pot, most of the requests to volunteer came from Habsburg Serbs, with a far smaller number received from Croats or Slovenes. Along with the Serbian officer corps, this meant that the First Serbian Volunteer Division was almost precisely that, a division of Serbian soldiers. Nevertheless, non-Serb volunteers were in the majority in the Division's small officer corps, comprised mainly of former Habsburg reserve officers (university students) of Croat and Slovene descent.³

So the volunteer movement was far less 'Yugoslav' than the post-war myth suggested, and like the Czech Legion, its military élan was also overstated. The biggest military engagement in which the volunteers took part was the so-called 'Battle of Dobruja' in September and October 1916. Here, about 17,000 South Slav volunteers fought alongside the Romanian army in an attack on Bulgarian and German forces. The battle was not a success and about 2,600 volunteers were killed or captured, and over 7000 wounded.⁴ In the aftermath of the battle, morale dropped amongst volunteers, especially non-Serb volunteers, and Serbian officers, responsible for maintaining discipline within the division, frequently resorted to force to keep the volunteers in line. Towards the end of 1916, three units openly revolted against 'Serbian terror' and in quelling the mutiny, Serbian soldiers shot dead thirteen Croat volunteers. The impact of these deaths led to further divisions amongst the volunteer movement, including a sizable number of 'dissidents', Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, who rejected Serbian command of the volunteers and called for the First Serbian Volunteer Division to be renamed the Yugoslav Legion, or the Yugoslav Division. The volunteers did not see action again until the very end of the war, when they were used, mainly for cosmetic purposes, to spearhead the Franco-Serbian breakthrough at Salonika and the Serbian army's liberation and unification of the South Slav lands, in September 1918.

The reality of the volunteer movement with all its fissures, its military failures, and its inter-ethnic divisions, was soon masked by the myth of a division which was united in its desire to liberate the South Slav lands from Habsburg occupation and unify them into one Yugoslav nation-state. Very soon after the end of the war, supporters of unitary Yugoslavism, which included many of the country's leading intellectuals, literary figures, and most importantly the royal palace, promoted a history of the division which glossed over the

³ See Ivo Banac, 'South Slav POWs in Revolutionary Russia', in Samuel Williamson and Petor Pastor (eds.), *War and Society in East Central Europe, Volume 5: Essays on World War One: Origins and POWs* (New York, 1983), p. 125.

⁴ Pero Slijepčević, *Naši dobrovoljaci u svetskoj ratu*, (Zagreb: 1925), p. 13.

problems it faced during the war, and instead promoted an image of Yugoslav warriors willing to sacrifice everything for the liberation and unification of the South Slav lands.

Volunteers inspired pro-Yugoslav forces throughout the country, such as the literary Gazette *The Contemporary*, organ of the Croatian Literary Society, and the respected journal *The New Europe*, published in Zagreb. The editors of these publications saw in the volunteer movement (or chose to see) proof that Habsburg South Slavs had opposed Austria-Hungary during the war, and that many of them had desired union with Serbia before 1918. For the promoters of this volunteer myth, there was no ambiguity about the Habsburg past. The path that took South Slavs out of Austria-Hungary and into Yugoslavia might not have been smooth, but its final point had been desired and sought after. Here was a chance of reconciliation with the Serbian trope of 'liberation and unification'.

Volunteers themselves were not passive in the process of their own mythologization. A number of volunteer veterans published memoirs and fictional accounts of their time in the corps, creating a small cycle of 'volunteer literature'.⁵ Certain constellations can be traced in the moral universe presented by ex-volunteers in these accounts. For example, the Bolshevik revolution was typically presented in tragic terms, as an event that unleashed violence and heartbreak onto the Russian people. This was perhaps a reflection of the hostility many felt towards the Bolshevik revolution and the danger of it spreading to Yugoslavia. In these soldiers' accounts the élan of the volunteer division in Russia was immune to the Bolshevik infection (in reality many volunteers fought for the Bolsheviks). Neither had Habsburg spies and other anti-Serbian forces infiltrated the volunteer movement (again part of the myth, maintaining discipline and morale, especially amongst non-Serbian volunteers, had in fact been problematic). The predominance of Croatian and Slovenian volunteers in the officer corps was perceived as evidence that the ideology of South Slav unification was deeply entrenched amongst the non-Serbian soldiers. And they had an almost religious faith in the demise of Austria-Hungary and the creation of a South Slav state.

This highly teleological vision, culminating in the 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs, was shared by the volunteer movement's outstanding figure in the interwar period, a Croat from Bakar named Lujó Lovrić. Lovrić was attracted to the movement for South Slav unification whilst a student in Rijeka, he had been imprisoned by Habsburg authorities at the outbreak of the war, before being released and conscripted (as a reserve officer) into the army. He deserted (in Russia) and volunteered to fight with the Serbian army, seeing action in Dobruja and receiving an injury that permanently blinded him. After the war, his responsibilities as leader of the Union of Volunteers, a veteran organization that he presided over from 1928 onwards, took him across Europe to meet with Czech

⁵ See, e.g., Slavko Diklić, *Pred olujom: roman jugoslovenskih ratnih dobrovoljaca u Rusiji* (Osijek: 1932), and *Putničke bliješke jugoslovenskog ratnog dobrovoljca: od Dobruže do Soluna preko dalekog Istoka* (Osijek: 1932); Dane Hranilović, *Iz zapiska jugoslavenskog dobrovoljaca* (Zagreb, 1922); Ante Kovač, *Impresije iz jedne epohe* (Zagreb: 1923); Lujó Lovrić, *Suzna jesen* (Zagreb, 1922), and *Kroz snijegove i magle* (Zagreb: 1923).

legionaries and French *ancien combattants*. In the 1930s, his visit to a congress of German veterans led to a meeting with Adolf Hitler. He had a number of audiences with the Serbian/Yugoslav King Alexander, and after the assassination of 1934, remained a supporter of the monarch's vision of an integral Yugoslavia (as did most former volunteers). Lovrić was determined after 1918 to devote all his energies to the (Yugoslav) national cause; his personal sacrifice was meaningful since it was related to a national sacrifice made for Yugoslavia. There were very few Croatian veterans who could reconcile their sacrifice to the Yugoslav national cause in this way. For the handful of Croatian men who had, like Lovrić, pursued the Yugoslav cause in Austria-Hungary before the war and on the battlefield thereafter, a position of privilege and perceived responsibility awaited them in Yugoslavia..

Men like Lovrić helped pro-Yugoslav circles to disassociate non-Serbs from Austria-Hungary and associate them with the Allied war effort. To this end, they glossed over the realities of wartime volunteering, such as the overwhelming predominance of Serbs in the ranks, and the apparently brutal way in which Serbian officers imposed discipline on non-Serbian volunteers. Instead, they re-imagined a volunteer corps that was broadly representative of all the South Slav nationalities, a fiction which both suited their own ideology and reconciled Serbs and non-Serbs in the interwar state. There are many parallels between the Yugoslav volunteer movement and the Czechoslovak Legionary Movement. In both cases, the image of the volunteer and the myth of volitional sacrifice for the national cause are sacred in the post-war period. In Czechoslovakia, the legion filled the gap created by the absence of a national army during the Great War. The Yugoslav case was complicated by the divided nature of the legacy of the Great War, the belief (in Serbia) in the Serbian army's 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs and the role of Croats and Slovenes in the Habsburg war effort. In this sense, a Yugoslav volunteer army was an important symbol of South Slav national integration in the post-war period.