

## The Language of Mystery in One of Witold Gombrowicz's Stories

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A race accursed, persecuted like Israel, and finally, like Israel, under a mass opprobrium of undeserved abhorrence, taking on mass characteristics, the physiognomy of a nation; all with certain characteristic features, physical features that are often repulsive, that sometimes are beautiful, all with a woman's loving, breakable heart. (Proust 219)

**Abstract:** The article presents the analysis and interpretation (in the form of a close reading) of Witold Gombrowicz's short story: "Diary of Jakub Czarniecki" from the volume *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* from 1933 (included after the Second World War in the volume *Bakakaj* [translated into English as *Bacacay*]). The author interprets the story as narrative about life with the stigma that results from the social effects of anti-Semitism. At the same time however, he shows that the conceptualizations of "race" are often very clearly combined with the considerations about masculinity and effeminacy of the main hero. The author shows - referring to the historical works (George L. Mosse) and theoretical and literary criticism (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Alan Sinfield) that "effiminacy" combines narratives about Jewishness and male homosexuality in a complex way, which at the same time constitutes the aporia of Gombrowicz's text. Author suggests not obvious, but deeply autobiographical dimension of the story by referring to the biographical books.

**Keywords:** Witold Gombrowicz, queer, anti-semitism, masculinity, Proust,

Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969) is regarded as one of the most important Polish writers of the twentieth century and is thus firmly imbedded in the national canon. He is also one of the few Polish writers to have achieved considerable recognition and esteem

abroad. When in 1939, a month before the outbreak of World War II, he sailed off to Argentina on the ship “Chrobry”, he was unaware that he would never return to Poland, becoming in effect a refugee. He would most likely spend his whole life wondering how he managed to predict this event. The last stories of his debut volume of avant-garde stories, *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* (1933),<sup>1</sup> mention in first-person narrative his escape from Poland (and Europe) by ship to South America. These escapist tendencies that Gombrowicz exhibited, of course, did not come from nowhere. As Klementyna Suchanow demonstrates in her recent biography, *Ja, geniusz (I, Genius)* (2017), Gombrowicz was not heterosexual. This, however, was not a revelation, as rumors concerning his sexual orientation had been circulating for years, though they were never officially verified. Even without this biographical knowledge, it should be accepted today that Witold Gombrowicz is one of the most important Polish queer writers. In this article I would like to analyze how the author of *Pornography* coded his queer experience in one of the stories from his 1933 debut volume.

What should a stereotypically understood memoir contain? Secrets, of course. The second story from Witold Gombrowicz’s debut volume, which he himself associated with the first and called “clear and understandable”, is a kind of a “memoir in a memoir.” We are dealing with a *mise en abyme* composition, as in the *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* we find the “The Memoirs of Jakub Czarniecki” (this is the pre-war title). Is it possible to find a secret in this composition? From the strictly linguistic perspective, the answer is “yes”. The word “mystery” (or its derivatives) will appear in this short text nineteen times, mainly in the form of phrases: “wall of mystery”, “language of mystery”, “my secret” and “Mystery” (with a capital M).

What, then, is the returning and semantically radiant “secret”? In classic interpretations of this short story, the issue has been analyzed many times over. The text is about anti-Semitism. The first-person protagonist of the *Memoirs* was brought up in a “good” family, but with a “racial” flaw: a Polish father and a Jewish mother, that is, an impoverished Polish count and a mother from the house of Goldwasser originating from the rich Jewish bourgeoisie (Gombrowicz does not spare us the details). He, a Catholic, she, also a Catholic, though a “neophyte”. The father “abhors” his mother, and the mother hates his father. From this relationship a child is born, the main protagonist, burdened with the mystery of existence, which he struggles to unravel. In the yard he hears a rhyme, which he considers to be the key to the mystery: “One, two, three, every Jew’s a flea, all the Poles are orioles, you are it, not me” (MSC, 22). He uses the metaphor “rat” for himself, a “mottled” one at that.

This story has often been analyzed as an outstanding literary study of anti-Semitism or, more broadly, otherness. Michał Głowiński interpreted “The Memoirs of Stefan

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1 After the war, an expanded edition was published under the title *Bacacay*.

Czarniecki” (this is the post-war title) through “the dialectics of what in the situation of the individual, but also in social life, is perceived as familiar, and what creates the domain of otherness” (45). Bożena Umińska even admits that the story brings “perhaps the most interesting parable in the literature of the interwar period concerning the distribution of values in Polish-Jewish relations” (275). It can be noticed that many interpretations of the second story from Gombrowicz’s debut volume will follow this path – from the literal anti-Semitism of the interwar period to the universalization of otherness that emerges from this text. Let us quote Bożena Umińska once again: “Here are two people who are really strangers to each other (but they tried to assume the role of absent figures), a real Other was born. Other internally and universally” (279). “The Memoirs of Jakub vel Stefan Czarniecki” is a phenomenal record of this otherness.

However, when we look at the text in accordance with the rule of the “purloined letter” – i.e., literally and suspiciously – we quickly notice that Jakub’s vel Stefan’s main problem concerns the norms related to masculinity. While the text devotes a disproportionate amount of attention to this issue, analyses, on the other hand, tend to ignore it, even though norms related to masculinity are revealed at almost every stage of the protagonist’s life: during backyard school plays with friends, during unsuccessful engagements and marriages to fiancées or during war “adventures”. Indeed, in the anti-Semitic discourse, effeminacy was attributed to Jews (Mosse, *The Image of Man*), as in Otto Weinger’s well-known work, *Sex and Character*, which is why it is not surprising that this issue may also apply to Jakub vel Stefan (who has grotesquely interiorized this stereotype). However, it may just as well be said that the parodied language of anti-Semitism became the starting point and catalyst for the story of norms and non-masculinity. In fact, all these issues may structurally be connected, because, as George L. Mosse wrote in his classic work, “the dynamics of modern nationalism was built on the ideal of manliness” (*Nationalism and Sexuality* 64).

Without completely resolving this issue, one can agree that, in the most general sense, it is a story of life with a stigma, and therefore with a “wounded identity”, to use Erving Goffman’s formula. In other words, the second story from this particular diary of the period of queer maturation concerns the life of a “marked” person, cast in satirical form, which somehow denaturalizes (and sometimes renaturalizes) the categories recognized as natural. However, the stigma does not apply to sexuality and gender (at least not primarily), but to “races”.<sup>2</sup> The first-person protagonist is brought up in a “good” family, but burdened with a “flaw”. An unspoken stigma looms over the protagonist, and at the same time, life teaches him the “language of mystery”. With great sensitivity, the story analyzes all the oppressive mechanisms resulting from assigning meaning to racial and nationalistic discourses. He uses biological metaphors that grotesquely denaturalize.

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2 I put “race” in quotation marks as is customary in racial discourse analysis.

“And in general – what ought to be the coloration of a rat born of a black male and a white female? Ought it to be mottled?” (MSC, 21), the protagonist wonders. Yes, mottled, like a stain, like the dirt at Mary Douglas’, is in the eye of the beholder: “There is something about you [...] I do not know what it is – some unpleasant taste” (MSC, 27). This distaste is the product of racist and nationalistic discourses, which is literally imprinted on the protagonist’s body.

In this ironic narrative about stigmatized life, two of Gombrowicz’s motifs are especially worth noting, as they are to be found in his early work, particularly, though not exclusively, in his *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity*. The first is that the stigmatized subject recognizes Polish literature and Polish culture as institutions whose agendas are aimed against him. The second concerns the battle between men, which eventually never materialized.

In the theater of unofficial gender roles, Jakub/Stefan does badly. The “racial” stigma is connected here explicitly and systemically with gender issues. And this is the problem that moves to the foreground of the text. Our protagonist tests the limits of masculinity norms in three institutions of modern life: in school, in marriage and in the army. And everywhere he fails these tests of manhood.

He does not only fall short in this area; he also fails to affirm his masculinity through the heterosexual ritual of love. Although, there was some success at the beginning, “The next day [...] I consulted with my pals, got a grip on myself, and pinched her, upon which she narrowed her eyes and started giggling ...” (MSC, 24). In these descriptions, it is extremely interesting that Gombrowicz in his *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity* does not represent love and affection as natural affections connecting two entities, as a romantic thread or aura, but consistently as a task to be performed. And even more, as a (heterosexual) ritual, thanks to which one can achieve a coherent (hegemonic) ideal of masculinity. Or he can fail this test: “a daddy’s little pet, a mama’s boy!” (MSC, 25), hears Jakub from his beloved. Thus, he fails miserably in this game of heteronormative masculinity.

Love, however, has much in common with war, according to our protagonist. Why?

Love! What bewitching, incomprehensible absurdity – pinching, squeezing, even snatching in an embrace – how much it contains! Bah! Today I know what to hold onto; I see here the **secret affinity** with war, because in war too the purpose is in fact to pinch, to squeeze, or to seize in an embrace; but at that time I was not yet one of life’s bankrupts – quite the opposite, I was full of goodwill. To love? I can say boldly that I was drawn to love because I hoped in this way to break through the **wall of the mystery**; and with enthusiasm and faith I bore all the eccentricities of this most bizarre of emotions in the hope that I would nevertheless eventually understand what it was all about. (MSC, 25)

There is an affinity between love and war, but it does not consist in the fact that, as the old English proverb says, all is fair in love and war. Then it would be based on the

similarity of authentic affect. In the diary of Jakub/Stefan, it is different. There is a “secret affinity” between love and war. According to the definition of metaphor as an abbreviated comparison, the *tertium comparationis* should be found. What would it be? “Masculinity”, of course. And masculinity understood as a spectacle, one that has been perfected within the ritual of love and war, a hegemonic masculinity (to use Cornell’s concept), which a ritual imposes. Here and there, in war and in love, one must “pinch”,<sup>3</sup> or play the role of a real man. Is this what the “secret” is? Certainly, Jakub’s/Stefan’s distance towards these heteronormative rituals is mysterious and, in any case, unusual. As if he assumed a strategic distance towards them in order to analyze the entire system thoroughly.

In the linguistic sense, this distance is built on vitriolic irony. This is particularly discernible during the time spent in the army, one of the most important modern rituals of masculinity. The distance he feels towards the role of a soldier (or rather a Polish soldier, as Jakub combines national and gender issues) is definitely too large for the protagonist to be able to perform this role naturally. This theme of problems with masculinity pervades the entire *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity*, especially in the last three novels (with the most extreme instance in the last).

At this point, however, it should be noted that Witold Gombrowicz was not particularly interested in Jewish subjects neither in his pre-war nor his post-war output. Exceptions are the short “The Memoirs of Jakub Czarniecki” and a few fragments in his *Memoirs*. Anti-Semitism was not a subject that the author of *Ferdydurke* was particularly interested in, especially in the existential or “somatic” sense (i.e., the impact of racism on the psychosomatic construction of the subject).

In contrast, the topic of masculinity and effeminacy was one that the young Gombrowicz certainly had considered and perhaps even worked through (in the sense of *durcharbeiten*). It is a topic that often returns in his work (even in *Ferdydurke* and *Trans-Atlantyc*, not to look too far). It is also recalled by those who knew Witold Gombrowicz from his youth in both books by Tadeusz Kępiński (a childhood friend) and in Joanna Siedlecka’s *Jaśnie Panicz*. The latter has more journalistic ambitions and makes use of opinions of people outside Gombrowicz’s immediate social circle, i.e. not only of fellow intellectuals, but also domestic servants. This is how Michał Romanow, Gombrowicz’s coachman, described him: “Witold, yes, not a bad looking boy, only that he is of medium height, slim, gentle on his face like a young girl. Very calm, quiet, as if unable to count to three” (Siedlecka 47) In turn, Marietta Borowiczowa, who is a member of the family, notes: “For sure, it was because of his mother’s over-bearing nature that he was silent for a long time and kept to himself. He was very shy, especially towards women; however, in relation to men, it always seemed to him that he had a gentle, girlish beauty.

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3 “To pinch” in Polish has a double meaning. It means to court a woman as well as to provoke a man to a duel.

His brothers played, danced, flirted with the maids, shone in company. He does not” (Siedlecka 60).

“Effeminacy” is a historical, anthropological, and sociological concept. In the context of modern discourses about homosexuality, it is associated with Oscar Wilde (secretly recalled in the last story under the code name “Banbury”). Masculinity/effeminacy of boys is also a battlefield. Analyzing the contemporary state of psychological and psychoanalytic discourses (rooted in Freud), Sedgwick wrote about the “war on effeminate boys” (*How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay*), mainly because many (if not most) discourses of power strengthen violence against such entities. It is hard to deny, however, that Witold Gombrowicz was probably more aware of the stigma of effeminacy than of Jewishness, which does not mean, of course, that the story must be read using an autobiographical key (which was suggested by Agnieszka Stawiarska in her book *Gombrowicz in Pre-War Poland*). The biographical context only supports the deconstructive “deviation” of the reading.

Let us return, however, to the story and the main metaphor. During the conversation with his father, the protagonist experiences a realization concerning his identity: “And in general – what ought to be the coloration of a rat born of a black male and a white female? Ought it to be mottled? Or was it also possible, when the opposing hues were of exact equal strength, that such a union would produce a rat without hue, without color ...” (MSC, 21). Why is it a rat? Why does the protagonist use this metaphor to describe his identity? On the one hand, this is obvious and is suggested by the text itself: the rat is greatly associated with experimental crossbreeding and eugenics. At the same time, however, “a rat [...] is a dirty animal, feeding on excrement, living in sewers” (Freud 60). It is not without reason that I am quoting Sigmund Freud’s “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” or the famous case of the Rat Man, in a somewhat over-stigmatized language (or less stigmatized: a man whose neurosis was to be associated with a certain fantasy regarding rats).

As Jan Błoński rightly noted, “The early stories especially [...] are to this day the most difficult to interpret as proof of Gombrowicz’s peculiarities” (6) and, as Sedgwick wrote, paranoia is anticipatory (*Paranoid Reading* 130). Let us leave the psychoanalytic approach and remain with the uncontroversial thesis that “The Memoirs of Stefan Czarniecki” concerns a life with a racial stigma, with which the protagonist combines issues of (non-)masculinity, or perhaps hides one under the other. Or in other words, uses the language of anti-Semitism to express subjective oppression in a more intersectional manner. And in this sense, it is worth considering this story as an important chapter in the diary of queer maturation, all the more so as it resembles not only the relationship between anti-Semitic conceptualizations of “race” and “masculinity”, not only the structural importance of homophobia in the conceptualization of male identity, but the problematic (at the turn of the century) status of homosexuality.

Tadeusz Kępiński, in a monograph about Witold Gombrowicz, his childhood friend, states like a positivist scientist studying insects: "He was not a purebred homosexual" (60). What does he mean by "purebred"? Of course, Kępiński is making an analogy to race, which is a kind of essentially impassable boundary, while implying that he was not a "real" homosexual, because he did not belong to this distinct race. This is more than a metaphor because it unambiguously refers to Michel Foucault's thesis from the *History of Sexuality*, where he claims that in the second half of the nineteenth century, thanks to medical and juristic discourses, sexual "speciation" took place, that is, the construction of human sexual species, especially homosexual (or in other nomenclature: pederasty). The paradox of this conceptualization, as Sedgwick pointed out, is that one can be recognized as homosexual before engaging in any sexual activity based on anatomical and psychological premises. This new human species, when mature, does not look very attractive.

In this context (which probably can be considered, in the language of deconstructionists, as light decontextualisation), we shall read a passage about the meeting of the father and son from the beginning of the story:

In the meantime I was growing up. Sometimes my father would take me on his knee and, at length, anxiously inspect my countenance. "The nose so far is mine," I would hear him whisper. "Thank the Lord! But here in the eyes and the ears ... the poor child!" – and his noble features would fill with pain. "He's going to suffer terribly when he grows to awareness; I wouldn't be surprised if at that point something happens within him along the lines of an inner massacre." – What awareness was he speaking of, and what massacre? (PC, 21)

The anti-Semitic dimension of this scene is very clear. On the basis of external features (the shape of the nose), the father looks for internal "racial" flaws in his son. The stigma is supposed to be visible on the body. Jakub/Stefan will become aware of its existence only when he is a bit more mature, and then it will become an "internal pogrom". An internal pogrom, or – when we unravel the meaning of this "powerful" metaphor – the self-hatred.

Although the anti-Semitic language is clear here, it should be remembered that in later confrontations with life, especially with the three institutions of modern life (school, marriage, army), the external sign of this internal defect is not so much (or not always) the "shape of the nose" as effeminacy. Let us quote a description of Jakub's meeting with a potential fiancée:

"I desire you!" – I would say to my beloved. She would fob me off with generalizations. "You're nothing but a nothing, Mr. Czarniecki!" she would say enigmatically, staring into my countenance. – A daddy's little pet, a mama's boy! I shuddered: a mama's boy? What did she mean by that? Could she have guessed ... because I myself had already guessed to some extent. I had understood that if

my father was well-bred to the marrow of his bones – my mother also well-bred, but in a difference sense, in the Semitic sense. (MSC, 25)

The protagonist has already become aware of his otherness. The external signs are quite easily read by his beloved as a mark of an internal defect, and yet she is not bothered by the nose (whose shape probably has the most extreme anti-Semitic connotations), and not his ears and eyes, but by his effeminacy. The scene is all the more expressive that it is analogous to the one in which the protagonist talks to his father. He also looked for defects on Jacob's body. However, the interior/exterior dialectic can be deceptive: by looking at someone "in the face", you can, in accordance with cultural connotations, see someone's mind. Only then, the fiancée would have noticed Jacob's inner "effeminacy".

However, effeminacy and the clear dialectic of the interior and exterior have their additional connotations at the turn of the century. First, the concept of "the third sex", one of the early conceptualization of homosexuals, which Magnus Hirschfeld believed in, was based on the dialectics of the interior and exterior. The first sex is male, the "second sex" is female, and the "third sex", which Hirschfeld believed should have the same rights as the first two, is a "sexually transitory" emancipatory homosexual model from the beginning of the twentieth century (though it went through many homophobic versions). It is based on an inversion: *anima muliebris in corpore viril inclusa*, a female soul enclosed in a male body (and vice versa) (Sedgwick, "Epistemology" 87). On the other hand, Oscar Wilde should be mentioned here, as he focused on the cultural meanings of "effeminacy". According to Alan Sinfield, the infamous Wilde trials combined sign and meaning (effeminacy with homosexuality). Earlier, effeminacy was not regarded as a clear sign of homosexuality; it could have connoted aristocracy or generalized eccentricity or even asexuality. It was the Wilde trials that brought these two issues together for good. Effeminacy, a term "as misogynist as it is full of power" (Sinfield vii), has become an external sign of an internal "disorder". Sinfield reminds us that Wilde was somehow *post factum* prosecuted under this suspicion and the key piece of evidence was a photograph of someone in wig and jewelry thought to be Oscar Wilde, though upon closer scrutiny it is clearly a photo of an actress performing in Wilde's *Salome* (Sinfield 6). Effeminacy became one of the most important attributes of homosexuality in the twentieth century. In this sense, the title "Wilde's century" would mean the twentieth century, not the nineteenth century. It is worth adding that Sinfield strongly emphasizes the constructivist model of his theories and uses the word *queer* both in how it was used at the end of the nineteenth century and at the end of the twentieth.

In the narrative, effeminacy, according to anti-Semitic discourse, refers to the Jewish "essence", but it does not (always in its entirety) have to. Is there any intended ambiguity here? Some "mystery" that keeps reappearing in the text? Deviation towards the unspeakable?

Undoubtedly, effeminacy is a kind of common denominator when conceptualizing Jewishness and homosexuality at the start of the twentieth century. Perhaps, however, we should slightly modify this issue and ask whether an analogy between a Jew and a homosexual was present in the European culture of that time? Such a question should elicit the answer that it not only existed but was a central analogy and sometimes a secret metaphor. It should be remembered that Hans Mayer in his classic work *Outsiders* recognizes these two identities (next to a woman) as the basic figures of otherness constructed in (Western) European culture and it is not difficult to find analogies between them. However, the most obvious and influential writer to combine the figure of a Jew and a homosexual in the early twentieth century literary modernism is, of course, Marcel Proust.

The *locus classicus* is to be found in the first part of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the fourth volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. It must be remembered, however, that large portions had already been written much earlier as part of the monumental and unfinished literary essay *Against Sainte-Beuve* (1909) entitled *Accursed Race*, which went against reading literature through a biographical lens. No longer young and still in mourning after his mother's death, Proust will abandon his essay and take up writing his opus magnum. But it is there, in *Against Sainte-Beuve*, which serves as a testament of defeat, that, according to the author of the introduction to the Polish translation, we find:

A cursory, homophobic and anti-Semitic phrase that extends uninterrupted for four and a half pages in *Accursed Race*, which builds an analogy between homosexuals and Jews that is at the same time full of painful truth, which in both cases was felt directly. George D. Painter in his biography of Proust writes that this is "the longest sentence he ever wrote, as if he did not dare to interrupt it for fear that once having disappeared, it would fall silent for good." (Dwulit 15-16)

Sedgwick, who has repeatedly returned to Proust, and whose last, unfinished book is entitled *Weather in Proust*, warned that reading these fragments (which will come back in *Sodom and Gomorrah*) as "internalized homophobia" completely misreads Proust.

At the same time, Sedgwick also juxtaposed Jewish and homosexual identities, as a most obvious, though very different in detail, analogy in European culture, following the intertextual lead suggested by Proust. In her groundbreaking essay "Epistemology of the Closet" (in the book of the same title), she makes a series of useful statements about the epistemological effects of coming out as a Jew and a homosexual. The starting point for the analysis is Racine's play, *Queen Esther*, which was repeatedly and on various levels alluded to by Proust in *The Prisoner*. Art, of course, is not invoked without a reason. It is tied to the "mystery" and disclosure that affects the lives of more than one person. Racine reimagined the biblical story of Queen Esther, a Jewess who had to reveal her identity to her unwitting husband, King Ahasuerus, to save her people from his desire – prompted by the cunning Mordecai – "to destroy, to kill, and to cause

to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women” (Est, 3, 13). Esther “disclosing” this personal information had the power to save her and her people. It is, thus, no wonder that this narrative would have held such great significance for Marcel Proust in *The Fugitive*.

In the context of “The Memoirs of Jakub Czarniecki” it is worth noting the clear similarities between the biography of Gombrowicz and Proust’s ideas in the *Accursed Race*, especially in reference to the fatalism of destiny, heading towards a catastrophe, but also the idea of a “female soul locked in the male body”, that is, the fatal and catastrophic in its effects “effeminacy”.

According to Jerzy Domagalski, the author of *Proust in Polish Literature until 1945*, in Poland, “the twenties are the period of reading the *Search* in its original version, and the other half of the thirties is when the novels are seen through Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński’s<sup>4</sup> achievements” (13). Domagalski points out that the nationalist press was reluctant to write about Proust and only did so in an anti-Semitic manner, referring to him as a “Jewish artist” with everything that this racist conceptualization entails. Of particular interest is Adolf Nowaczyński’s essay from 1929 (who in 1933 praised Gombrowicz’s short story about Jakub Czarniecki) entitled “To Prus, not to Proust”:

Marcel Proust was a hybrid, carrying the hereditary burden of straddling two races. Proust’s father, a well-known Parisian physician, hygienist, was a deep, charming, elegant, pure-blooded Gallic, who during his later years married a very rich Miss Weil from a well-known Semitic plutocratic family. [...] The father’s family did not count, did not exist, as the mother’s family was rich, influential [...]. The sickly Marcel, of course, had to opt for the stronger race, his mother’s race. Since childhood, Proust had been more Weil than Proust ... (84).

This fragment is astounding insofar as it constitutes an exact starting point for the second story in Gombrowicz’s *Memoirs*. Jakub Czarniecki, like Marcel Proust, is a “hybrid” (“a mottled rat”), because of the “unfortunate” combination of two “races”: noble, Aryan, though with a relatively poor father, and a mother who was a rich Jewish woman. Everything that follows develops from this fictional starting point. Is it just an accident? And does it strengthen “The Memoirs of Jakub Czarniecki” as an anti-Semitic work (which is what happened during the interwar period), that is, through a direct reading, without taking into account the convention of the grotesque? Or perhaps contradistinctively: this ghostly reference to Proust’s biography, which was surrounded by rumors, understatements and euphemisms concerning his “degeneration” (i.e., his Jewishness and homosexuality and “effeminacy”) and his “transgressive art” strengthens the ambivalence surrounding the apparent effeminacy in Gombrowicz’s story, something which Proust himself was all too painfully aware of.

4 Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński was the Polish translator of Proust’s works.

It seems that the whole charm of "The Memoirs of Stefan Czarniecki" is based on an aporia. It is impossible to entirely resolve whether, when considering Jewish effeminacy, Gombrowicz concealed – as did Proust – something extra. But this cannot be completely ruled out; hence, the necessity of basing the reading on a relentless, dynamic aporia (which Sedgwick also sees in the construction of female characters in *In Search of Lost Time*).

However, this story clearly strives to recognize its internal otherness. At the end of the story, the protagonist makes a characteristic resentimental confession, which can be summarized in the following way: "I hate you normals"<sup>5</sup> or in the original version: "This is my mystery, which for my part I impose upon the great enigma of being. I simply cannot calmly pass by a pair of happy lovers, or a mother and child, or a respectable old man" (MSC, 34). However, he is also a stranger when internalizing the stigma and asks himself: "I shuddered: a mama's boy? What did she mean by that? Could she have guessed?" That effeminacy is a sign of an internal "racial" defect? Or maybe the opposite? Or maybe in a different configuration? Whatever the case may be, the secret lies in the fact that, as we read in the last sentence of the *Memoirs from a Time of Immaturity*, in the story of men escaping on a ship full of men "the exterior is a mirror in which the inside can be observed" (Gombrowicz 193).

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5 "Normals" is of course Goffman's term.

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