

Witkacy – Schulz – Gombrowicz

Translated by Tomasz Wiśniewski

The way in which the works of three eminent Polish writers – Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), Bruno Schulz, and Witold Gombrowicz – reached the canon of European and world literature was neither short nor easy. What is more, their prominence in the circles of Polish literary and artistic elite was not immediately, or easily, recognized as unquestionable.

Because of the outbreak of World War II, and, then, the decision of the Congress of Polish Writers, held in Szczecin in January 1949, to pursue the doctrine of socialist realism in art, the reception of the works of Witkacy in Poland (including the theater) was almost completely blocked as one not conforming to the new doctrine, or even as challenging what was seen as the new political mission of literature. This is why, even though Witkacy wrote most of his mature prose, drama, and philosophy in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, the prominence of his work was fully appreciated only more than twenty years after his death, after the first publication of his collected plays, edited by Konstanty Puzyna, and released in 1962.

During his lifetime, the legend of Witkacy was less related to his oeuvre than to his personality, and to a large extent it was shaped by gossip and antagonistic critics. Thus, Witkacy was regarded as an eccentric degenerate, drug addict, and alcoholic. The following excerpt from the *Preface* to his novel *Insatiability* (1930) well illustrates some of the implications of this image and its consequences:

“To poke around an author is, by the way, inappropriate, inquisitive, ungentlemanly (...) Unfortunately, I live, and I still write. (...) Later, with such criticism and gossip around, I am confronted with statements like these: a lady after modelling for a portrait says: ‘I have been so afraid of you – I thought: how possibly I will manage to deal for an hour with such a horrible (!) creature as you – and you are quite normal and you behave well’. Mothers are afraid of having portraits of their daughters painted by my company, even adult men sit uncomfortably with faces ‘to the camera’, as if they expected that instead of sketching them, I will unexpectedly extract their teeth, or pierce out their eyes with a pencil”¹.

1 S.I. Witkiewicz, *Przedmowa* [in:] S.I. Witkiewicz, *Nienasycenie*, Kraków 2004, pp. 8–9.

The reception of Witkiewicz's work abroad was delayed even further. Whereas Gombrowicz did not identify himself with the ideas of Witkacy and discussed them in a rather critical way, he was capable of appreciating these ideas and claimed that, in Polish literature during the years 1918–1939, Witkacy was one of the two authors (along with Józef Witlin) who, "shaped to be exceptional", were doomed to be of international importance. Worldwide recognition of Witkiewicz was grounded not only in the growing interest of a genuine readership and lovers of art, but also – this needs to be stressed now – in the increased prominence of research on intersemiotic relations between painting and literature².

Gombrowicz claimed that Witkiewicz – spoiled and penetrating, inspired by his cynical attitudes – was crazy enough to get out of so-called Polish "normality" to an immense universality. At the same time, he was intelligent and self-aware enough to restore frenzy to the normal and to link it back with reality³.

The delay in the European and global resonance of work by Witkacy resulted, additionally, from other factors than those mentioned by Gombrowicz. Aside from reasons of personality, one needs to take into account the unfavorable historical circumstances (mentioned above), and the fact that Witkacy's work was in many aspects experimental⁴. This, certainly, did not encourage a group of readers that expected the easy reception of a literary text. In the present issue of *Tekstualia*, the process of gradual recognition of the importance of Witkiewicz's oeuvre by European and global readers is discussed by Janusz Degler⁵.

In turn, Bruno Schulz, who was both an enlightened man and a shy introvert, managed to release in his lifetime two volumes of short stories (*The Street of Crocodiles*

² The role of the visual arts in Witkacy's oeuvre and their relations with his literary legacy, are discussed in this volume by Anna Żakiewicz in "Witkacy: First of All, a Painter – Searching for an Individual Style". Dr. Żakiewicz is the author of a monograph entitled *Witkacy*, where she publishes more and less known works of the author. Additionally, Żakiewicz co-organized an extensive exhibition of Witkacy in the National Museum in Warsaw and organized exhibitions of his work in Barcelona and St. Petersburg.

³ W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1953–1956*, Kraków 1997, p. 255. According to Gombrowicz, the global reception of Witkacy's work was not possible in his lifetime for the following reasons: "Like Przybyszewski, Witkacy was spoiled by his own demonic power so that he could not intermingle the abnormal with the normal, and for this reason he was given to his eccentricity (...). But the failure of Witkacy was achieved in a more intelligent way: the demonic element became a toy, and as a tragic puppet was dying throughout his life, as Jarry did, with a toothpick in his mouth, with his theories, pure form, dramas, portraits, with 'guts', and 'bulge', and with macabre pornographic collections". Ibidem, p. 256.

⁴ The experimental character of Witkiewicz's work may be observed in its attitude towards both literary and philosophical traditions. I discuss this issue in the article "Literature philosophied. Witkacy – Gombrowicz – Schulz", which is published in the present volume, and – in a broader context – in my book *W stronę perspektywizmu. Problematyka cielesności w prozie Brunona Schulza i Witolda Gombrowicza* (Gdańsk 2010), which is based on my PhD dissertation.

⁵ Janusz Degler (Univeristy of Wrocław) is a leading Polish scholar in theatre studies and theory. As a specialist in studies on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Professor Degler has edited the twenty-three-volume *Collected Works* by Witkacy.

and *The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*), which were a record of his innovative approach to the problem of myth⁶. Besides, he managed to publish several critical essays. Before his tragic death in the Jewish ghetto in Drohobycz, Schulz was not recognized as an artist as widely as he deserved. Yet, through the patronage of established writers, whom he knew, mainly, by correspondence, Schulz succeeded in being recognized by Polish literary circles⁷. Zofia Nałkowska helped him tremendously, as did Witkacy who, as a critic of literature and art, publicly stressed the prominence of Schulz and sketchily, if accurately, recognized the profoundness of his work⁸.

The situation was that in the late 1930s, Schulz was appreciated by the greatest contemporary Polish writers. Yet, similarly to Witkacy and Gombrowicz, he was mercilessly treated by major criticism of that time⁹, and, therefore, dreamed of readers from other countries. In an attempt to realize this ambition, Schulz travelled, in late July and early August 1938, to Paris (via Italy, so as to get around Nazi Germany). For Schulz the journey was burdened with great, if vain, artistic and literary expectations. What is more, being hugely indecisive, till the very last moment before his journey, Schulz hesitated whether to visit Paris at all. The hesitation was rooted not only in his fear of the unknown but also in quite prosaic factors of a financial and existential nature. Schulz urgently needed a new bed, and he knew that the journey to France would prevent him from this purchase. Finally, the writer – aware of the original character of his prose – decided to go to Paris and did not get a new bed till the end of his life¹⁰.

There were several other occasions when Schulz attempted to make his work accessible to readers from other countries. He hoped that translations of *The Street of Crocodiles* would be published in Italy and Austria. It was the influential Joseph Roth,

⁶ In this volume, the problem is discussed by Marek Tomaszewski in his article: *Bruno Schulz, His Myths and Mythemes*. Professor Tomaszewski works at INALCO CREE (Le Centre de Recherche Europes Eurasie). He is the author and editor of several books, including *Od Chaosu do Kosmosu. Szkice o literaturze polskiej i francuskiej XX wieku*, and *Witold Gombrowicz, entre l'Europe et l'Amérique* (Lille 2007).

⁷ See: Bruno Schulz, *Księga listów*, collected and edited by J. Ficowski, Gdańsk 2002. The book includes Schulz's correspondence with Nałkowska and Witkacy, but also with other poets and/or writers, such as: Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Julian Tuwim, Tadeusz Breza, Debora Vogel and others. There are also letters to Mieczysław Grydzewski (editor of *Wiadomości Literackich*, Zenon Waśniowski (co-founder and publisher of *Kamena*, and the Lvov-based *Sygnaty*).

⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Twórczość literacka Brunona Schulza", *Pion* 1935, no. 34–35. Available on-line at: <http://brunoschulz.dybook.pl/czytelnia/69-tworczosc-literacka-brunona-schulza.html?showall=&limitstart> [date of access: 30 Sep 2013]; S.I. Witkiewicz, "Wywiad z Brunonem Schulzem" [in: B. Schulz, *Opowiadania, wybór esejów i listów*, ed. J. Jarzębski, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1998, pp. 469–473.

⁹ See, for example: I. Fik, "Literatura choromaniaków" [in:] *Tygodnik Artystów* 1935, no 15, pp. 1–2; reprinted [in:] *Wybór pism krytycznych*, ed. A. Chruszczyński, Warszawa 1961, pp. 126–135. S. Napierski, K. Wyka, "Dwugłos o Schulzu" [in:] *Ateneum* 1939, no 1 (7), pp 153–163; reprinted [in:] K. Wyka, "Dwugłos o Schulzu" [in:] *Stara szuflada i inne szkice z lat 1932–1939*, ed. M. Urbanowski, Kraków 2000. Kazimierz Wyka changed his attitude towards the legacy of Schulz after World War II.

¹⁰ See. J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny 2002, pp. 75–83. It is well known that Schulz was reluctant to leave Drohobycz and hardly ever went abroad. Except for the above mentioned Paris visit, he travelled to Stockholm for three days by ship in 1936.

the author of such novels as: *Hotel Savoy*, *Job*, *The Radetzky March*, and *The Crypt of the Capuchins*, who promised to help Schulz to make the publication possible in Austria, but he died before realizing the plan¹¹. There is also the case of a short-story written by Schulz in German, titled "Heimkehr", which was sent along with *The Exposé on "Cinnamon Shops"* to Thomas Mann. Schulz asked Mann to read the piece and for advice but he never received a response, and the letter itself is now missing¹².

Polish and international recognition of the artistic legacy of Schulz was delayed – in a way parallel to that of Witkacy – as a result of the outbreak of World War II and, later, because of the doctrine of socialist realism that was to constrain Polish literature between 1949 and 1956. The first manifestations of recognition emerged through the efforts of Jerzy Ficowski. In what he called a "loving critique", Ficowski devoted his life to uncovering biographical nuances, and to introducing Schulz's texts into the canon of Polish and world literature. The French translation of the volume *The Street of Crocodiles* (*Sklepy cynamonowe*) was a significant opportunity for stimulating reception of the legacy of Schulz abroad. In 1961, Witold Gombrowicz commented on this publication in a thought-provoking way:

"Bruno.

I have long known about this edition prepared with such painstaking effort, yet when I finally saw the book, I winced. What will happen now? Will it be a 'dud' or a universal success? Its ties to Kafka may smooth the way or, just as easily, obstruct it. If they say, here is one more relation, he is lost. If, on the other hand, they spot his particular luminosity, the light pulsating from his like from a phosphorizing insect, then he will glide into the imagination cultivated by Kafka and his kin. ...But right now in July it is impossible to say, and certainly not easy to predict the fate of this uncommon work in Paris"¹³.

As it turned out, the further dynamism of the reception of Schulz's work exceeded Gombrowicz's wildest dreams. His legacy inspired outstanding theatre artists and filmmakers from Poland and abroad, ranging from Tadeusz Kantor (*The Dead Class*), Piotr Tomaszuk – the founder of the Wierszalin Theatre Association, and the present Director of the Wierszalin Theatre – (*Treatise on Mannequins*), through the London-based Theatre de Complicite (*The Street of Crocodiles*), Petr Boháč (*The 13 Month / Requiem for Bruno Schulz*), to Wojciech Jerzy Has (*The Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*) and the Quay brothers' *The Street of Crocodiles*¹⁴. Authors referring to the legacy of Schulz

¹¹ See: *Ibidem*, pp. 162–163.

¹² For a more detailed discussion on Schulz's attempts to translate *Sklepy cynamonowe* see: J. Jarzębski, *Wstęp* [in:] B. Schulz, *Opowiadania, wybór esejów i listów*, ed. J. Jarzębski, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1998, s. XVI–XVII.

¹³ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary Volume Three*, Illinois 1933, p. 3.

¹⁴ For more articles on Schulz and a scrupulous enumeration of bibliographical sources, consult the following Internet sources: <http://www.brunoschulz.org/> and <http://www.brunoschulz.eu>

in the contemporary and most recent literature are so numerous that it is impossible to enumerate them here.¹⁵ Schulz's prose has inspired painters, musicians, writers, and playwrights. The latter may be well illustrated by Agneta Pleijel, in a play entitled *Schulz Goes Kafka*, and Alain van Crugten, the author of *Bruno, or the Great Heresy*¹⁶. Among the company of writers who have been inspired by Schulz, one should mention the names of novelists such as: Cynthia Ozick (*The Messiah of Stockholm*), David Grossman (*See Under: Love*), Roberto Bolaño (*Distant Star*), Nicole Krauss (*The History of Love*), China Miéville (*The City & The City*), and Jonathan Safran Foer (*Tree of Codes*). There is also an important case of Amir Gutfreund, the author of the following short stories: "The Shoreline Mansions: The first story", "Trieste," and "If Bruno Schulz Sat Here".

There arises the question if it is possible to compare Witkacy and Schulz to Gombrowicz, especially the way in which their work reached the literary canon. The reception of Gombrowicz in Poland was doomed to a similar fate as was the case with Witkacy and Schulz. Much belated, it was at one point stimulated by the publications appearing in the Parisian *Kultura*, subsequent volumes printed in the series called *Biblioteka "Kultura"* (*The Library of "Culture"*) and samizdat publications¹⁷. It should be, however, remembered that distribution of such literature in Poland was rather limited. Another reason for his moderate popularity in Poland till the mid-1980s was Gombrowicz's decision not to issue his texts in his native country before the uncensored version of his *Diary (Dziennik)* was published.

Significantly, the status of Gombrowicz abroad was prominent already during his lifetime. Among the factors which contributed to his international position, one should mention, first of all, the polemical passion of the author, who regularly wrote, for example in his *Diaries*, on the most pressing, transnational – spiritual and intellectual – contemporary issues. Second, Gombrowicz was quite determined to express his self-aware artistic distinctiveness in a "struggle for fame" conducted by literary means outside Poland, after leaving the native country just before the outbreak of World War II. Third, Gombrowicz's fame owed a lot to a number of supporters who stimulated popularization of his literary output¹⁸. Fourth, his work had strong roots not only in the traditions of Polish¹⁹,

¹⁵ I discuss this problem in: *Schulzowskie relacje transtekstualne i kontekstowe w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku*.

¹⁶ A. Pleijel, *Schulz Goes Kafka*, *Dialog* 2011, no 7–8; A. van Crugten, *Bruno, czyli wielka herezja*, *Dialog* 2011, no 7–8.

¹⁷ Underground publications of Gombrowicz's work are listed at: <http://www.gombrowicz.net/Wydanie-pozaczenczur-1976-1989.html>

¹⁸ In *Diaries*, Gombrowicz expresses his gratitude towards: Konstanty Jeleński (according to Gombrowicz, it was Jeleński who made translations of all his texts possible), Alicja de Barcza, and the German translator Walter Tiel. See: W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1961–1969*, op. cit., p. 18. Needless to say, the list of those who supported the legacy of Gombrowicz was much longer after his death.

¹⁹ The problem is discussed by Tomasz Mackiewicz in the article "Romantic Dialectics: Schulz, Gombrowicz, Witkacy" (in the present volume), and in a more general way in his book *Sokrates Norwida. Kontekst – recepcja – kontynuacja*, Warszawa 2009.

but also European and world literatures (he employed conventions originating in both popular²⁰, and highly artistic, literature), passing them down through the filters of parody and grotesque. Fifth, global reception was stimulated – as was the case with Witkacy and Schulz – by Gombrowicz’s inclination to an experimental mode of writing, which was intriguing for the refined tastes of sophisticated literary circles²¹. Finally, numerous translations of his works made it possible for Gombrowicz to be internationally recognized²², and to be perceived, already in the 1960s, as a world-famous writer. Gombrowicz was fortunate enough to attract the attention of eminent theater directors, such as, for instance, Jorge Lavelli, Alf Sjöberg, Ingmar Bergman, and, in Poland, Jerzy Jarocki and Jerzy Grzegorzewski²³. His texts were also adapted for opera in Vienna, Stuttgart, Paris, Reims, and Wuppertal. As was recently indicated by Rita Gombrowicz, the members of the Swedish Academy assured her that her husband was to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1969. Because he died earlier that year, Rita Gombrowicz claimed, the prize was awarded to Samuel Beckett.

Since the late 1940s, Polish literary scholars have closely interlinked the names of Witkiewicz, Schulz, and Gombrowicz²⁴. At present, it is impossible to estimate the reaction of Witkacy and Schulz to such a comparison. But in the case of Witold Gombrowicz the situation differs as he commented on this issue explicitly in his *Diary*. Although he strongly objected to an understanding whereby his and Schulz’s writing was seen as rooted in the work of Witkiewicz, Gombrowicz sketched analogies between the three authors, and simultaneously emphasized individual features of each of them. He wrote:

“But we were, nonetheless, a trinity and a fairly characteristic one. Witkiewicz: intentional affirmation of the madness of ‘pure form’ through vengeance as well as the fulfilment of his tragic

²⁰ Agnieszka Wnuk analyses an example of such a formal experiment in “Playing with Form: Possessed by Witold Gombrowicz.” Dr Wnuk is a specialist in literary genealogy, Polish literary romanticism, and comparative studies.

²¹ The inclination of the discussed authors to experimental writing is seen, for example, in the ways in which they created literary characters. The process is discussed by Kinga Siatkowska-Callebat in “Characters in the prose works of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz and Witold Gombrowicz”. Dr Siatkowska-Callebat works for the Centre interdisciplinaire de recherches centre-européennes (CIRCE), which is part of Centre de recherches sur les cultures et littératures d’Europe centrale, orientale et balkanique, Université de Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV). She co-translated Gombrowicz’s *Opętani* into French (with Héléne Włodarczyk i Albert Mailles) and Karol Irzykowski’s *Patuby – La Chabraque. Les rêves de Maria Dunin* (with Patrick Rozborski).

²² The following website enumerates – in five languages (Polish, English, French, Spanish and German) – translations of Gombrowicz’s work: <http://www.gombrowicz.net/-rubrique210-.html>

²³ For a list of productions of Gombrowicz’s drama, and theatre adaptations of his other texts, see: <http://www.gombrowicz.net/-Inscenizacje-teatralne-i-adaptacje-.html>

²⁴ Analogies between Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Schulz discussed in Polish scholarship are indicated by Włodzimierz Bolecki in “Three Modernists: Witkacy – Schulz – Gombrowicz (Similarities and Differences)”. Professor Bolecki works for *Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk* (Institute of Literary Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences). He specialises in historical poetics, theory, and the history of Polish literature. Professor Bolecki has published numerous books, including: *Poetycki model prozy w dwudziestolecu międzywojennym: Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz i inni. Studium z poetyki historycznej*, Kraków 1996.

destiny, the distraught madman. Schulz: self-destruction in form, the drowned madman. I: burning desire to use form to get at my "I" and reality, the madman in revolt"²⁵.

In the present special issue of *Tekstualia*, all articles do their best to testify to the original achievements of each of the three writers in question, and at the same time to indicate the sources of their inspiration and essential planes for reference. The aim is to facilitate an understanding of their ambitious artistic projects. By publishing this volume, we are making an attempt at pursuing the best scholarly tradition of compiling artistic legacies of Witkiewicz, Schulz, and Gombrowicz. Confrontation of these three types of oeuvre is based on the belief that the legacy of these authors is not merely a part of Polish and European Modernism, but substantially enriches all literature of that time. In this volume of *Tekstualia* the process is investigated in (in various approaches) by Włodzimierz Bolecki, Tomasz Bocheński²⁶, Jerzy Jarzębski²⁷, and Michał Paweł Markowski²⁸. In addition, Ewa Paczoska²⁹ situates the literary achievements of the three Modernist writers in the context of the artistic endeavors of Polish writers in the second half of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century.

The above mentioned objectives are reflected in the composition of the volume. The articles are grouped in three parts which are titled as follows:

- In the sphere of Modernism;
- In the sphere of reception, revisions, and inspirations;
- In the sphere of formal experiments.

The scholarship presented in these groups contains studies of a literary, interdisciplinary, or intersemiotic character. The authors deal with the issues of the reception of Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz, as well as their international parallels and transnational

²⁵ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary, Volume Three*, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁶ See: T. Bocheński, *Dissidents of Modernism: Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz*. Professor Bocheński specializes in literary studies, particularly the work of Witkacy. His books include: *Sztuka i mistyfikacja. Powieści Witkacego*, Łódź 1994, *Czarny humor w twórczości Witkacego, Gombrowicza, Schulza. Lata trzydzieste*, Kraków 2005, and *Witkacy i reszta świata*, Łódź 2010.

²⁷ See: J. Jarzębski, "Three Versions of Modernity: Witkacy, Schulz, Gombrowicz". Professor Jarzębski, of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, is a well-known expert in studies on the legacy of Gombrowicz, Schulz and Stanisław Lem. He has studied the history of Polish literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and is a literary critic.

²⁸ See: M.P. Markowski, "'Worse and worse boredom': Gombrowicz, Schulz and Witkacy on the Intensity of Modern Life". Professor Markowski is the head of The Department of International Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. He also works at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Professor Markowski has published several books on literary theory, philosophy, and individual authors, for example: *Czarny nurt. Gombrowicz, świat, literatura*, Kraków 2004, *Polska literatura nowoczesna. Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy* Kraków 2008, *Powszechna rozwiązłość. Schulz, egzystencja literatura*, Kraków 2012.

²⁹ See: E. Paczoska, "A Genealogy of Modernity: Schulz, Witkacy, and Gombrowicz, and the Ventures of Polish Writers of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century and the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries". Professor Paczoska is the head of Institute of Polish Literature in the Department of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw. She published the following books: *Krytyka literacka pozytywistów*, Warszawa 1988, *Lalka czyli rozpad świata*, 1995 and Warszawa 2009, *Dojrzewanie, dojrzałość, niedojrzałość. Od Bolesława Prusa do Olgi Tokarczuk*, Warszawa 2004, *Prawdziwy koniec XIX wieku. Śladami nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2010.

impact. We hope that the emphasis laid on the issues that were decisive for preparing the volume, and the presentation of the outcome of research conducted by scholars representing various generations of Polish literary studies, will not only consolidate the international reputation of the discussed writers, but will also further the development of international studies (including comparative ones) dedicated to their work.

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