

Under the Sign of Parody and the Grotesque (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, Witold Gombrowicz)

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I.

When we consider the question of what common features connect three remarkable twentieth-century Polish writers – Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, and Witold Gombrowicz – an irresistible suggestion presents itself; all three, to a greater or lesser extent and in personally specific ways, represent the parodic and grotesque trends in contemporary Polish literature, and are its most innovative and prominent implementers. Neither different birthdates nor differences that filled their biographies can negate the collectivity of these authors. Not even their professing often different philosophies, artistic attitudes, or styles, which define their individuality and originality, is enough to terminate their union. It is uncommon in history when diversity and collectivity, which brings together as much as pushes apart authors, creates such a colorful and suggestive constellation.

The defining factors of their writing came to be precisely parody and grotesque, the method of comic deformation and artistic transformation of encountered reality, language, and literature. This phenomenon has not only gained a rightful place on the map of twentieth-century Polish literature, but it has also maintained historical continuity throughout the century. It has created a viable alternative to the romantic tradition that overwhelmingly weighed upon Polish literature during the loss of the country's independence in the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries. This parodic and grotesque trend stood out compared to other movements that functioned for longer or shorter periods of time in this type of literature. Therefore, it was not eliminated by significant and vital trends such as classicism, realism, naturalism, impressionism, expressionism, or symbolism. It was impervious to subordination by subsequent waves of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, which appeared in the first half of the twentieth century (futurism, Dadaism, surrealism, or even the resilient and influential Kraków Avant-Garde movement). Parody and the grotesque – all the same, used by all three of these authors mocked and reevaluated the existing and contemporary literary heritage. They willingly made it the object of irreverent deformation, but also benefited from its resources.

They continued, in a comic and contradictory manner, to oppose certain literary trends, especially those to which their representatives proclaimed exclusivity or uniqueness, as well as their cultural heritage and awareness, worshiped in the aura of a national, inviolable, and even patriarchal sanctity. These authors demonstrated in this regard unbridled creative freedom and lack of respect for authority, routines, dogmas and accepted opinion. This also applied to languages, styles, poetics, and creative methods. Also the creators themselves participated in parodic and grotesque performances. Gombrowicz subjected romantic, moral, religious, and patriotic stereotypes to devaluation and ridicule when he parodied them in the novels *Ferdydurke*, *Transatlantic*, and *Pornography*. The object of the semi-fantastic grotesque presented in Bruno Schulz's *Sklepy cynamonowe* was, in fact, provincial, small-town Jewish patriarchy. Similarly, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, brightly hyperbolized and mocked in his novels and plays, the storyline and stylistic modernist conventions which were characterized by an excess of expression, and were considered canonical in Polish literature in the Young Poland period (1890–1918) and later.

One of the methods of absurd and grotesque deformation was an audacious – sometimes also permeated with provocation, the style of opera buffa, trivialization, mystification, and elements of scandal – transportation of images of existing reality and the represented world onto a level of degrading and disgraceful laughter. Typically they resonate with current events. In a way they undermined the surrounding reality – mostly characters, institutions, rituals, and official events – perceiving and portraying them in a denouncing, satiric perspective, in a degrading abasement, and in the distorting mirror of laughter.

It is true that not all authors of critical and literary historical studies agreed on the existence, separate creation, and innovation of the discussed parodic and grotesque trend, whose *coryphées* were the said authors. Many critics and scholars were offended and repelled by the peculiar and clownish style of the trend; also not everybody was able to notice a deeper meaning or to appreciate its invigorating and innovatory character. Most interpreters agreed in noting, however, the existence of significant and influential parodic and grotesque literary works in Polish literature, as well as a circle of writers who, in a sense, specialized in writing of this type and in time became its classics. This type of ennoblement was met by the work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939), painter, photographer, novelist, playwright, theatrical theorist, and philosopher, sometimes called Witkacy. Similar were the fates of Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), novelist, short-story writer, playwright, and memoirist, and Bruno Schulz (1892–1942), a Jewish novelist, author of excellent stories, and also a graphic designer, painter, draftsman, and literary critic. All three authors greatly exceeded with their intellectual horizons

and writing practice any formalistically perceived literariness. Each of them expanded their practise with non-literary artistic and/or philosophical interests. A hallmark of each of these writers was also the ability to engage in meta-literary reflections, undertaking the current problems of form, aesthetics, ontology, and literary epistemology.

II.

Let us at this point give the floor to Gombrowicz, who himself best illustrates the nature of that meta-reflection, forming, in this case, an integral component of the novel *Cosmos*.

"I cannot tell it . . . this story . . . because I am telling it *ex post*. The arrow, for example. . . . That arrow, for example. . . . That arrow, then, at supper, was by no means more important than Leon's chess pieces, the newspaper, or the tea – everything, on the same level, everything – making up the given moment, a kind of cord, a buzzing swarm. But today, *ex post*, I know that the arrow was the most important, so as I tell, I move it to the front, out of the mass of undifferentiated facts I pull the configuration of the past. But how to tell not *ex post*? So does that mean that nothing can ever be really expressed, given in its anonymous appearing, no one will ever be able to give the nonsense of the moment as it is born, how it is that, born of chaos, we can never encounter it, we barely glance and already under our glance order is born . . . and shape. . . . It doesn't matter. So be it"¹.

So much for Gombrowicz, so much for *Cosmos*.

Evoking the paradox "born of chaos, we can never encounter it", the writer, it seems, for greater rhetorical effect captures the problem one-sidedly and even contrary to his own literary manner. It is not so that "we barely glance, and "already under our glance order is born . . . and shape". It is not so that only the beginning – in this instance only the moment the phenomenon begins – appears to be chaos, but also everything that comes later proves to be a selected, meticulously ordered, smoothened, and somewhat coherent view of the past. The unifying gaze – nearly every *ex-post* gaze according to Gombrowicz – itself gradually becomes a part of the past, and in consequence is subject to contestation and deconstruction. Therefore someone who looks at the set "order" might think that it really is this "nonsense of the emerging moment", "a buzzing swarm", "a mass of undifferentiated facts". This order is, therefore, relative and fragile.

However, if you think about the cosmos of events in terms of time and "history", there is no guarantee that the established order will become final and immutable; that it will not transform itself someday, as romantics used to portray it, into "ruin", or even as Gombrowicz himself would put it, into a kind of chaos, admittedly, secondary and formed from the ruins of the previous order. The narrator of *Cosmos* compiles in the quoted

¹ W. Gombrowicz, *Kosmos*, Kraków 1988, p. 24.

fragment categories of order and chaos crucial for his writing, where the intrinsic relationship seems to be dialectical, double-edged, and ambiguous. The fact that the gaze is made *ex-post* does not mean that it mechanically gains an ordering character. Similarly, the observation that an ordering action occurs does not mean that it is done *ex-post*. It could be forward-looking, utopian. However it is true that the *ex-post* perspective – in this case the narrative perspective – modifies in a way the overview and image of the existing events it describes. Once it is order, at other times disorder. Proof and example was the parodic and grotesque writing of Gombrowicz, which – resulting from an intuition of a hidden, higher order, sometimes called the “Interpersonal Church” – turned numb and worn literary schemata into cosmic chaos and a grotesque parody.

The category of order remains in a close relation to the category of spectacle that is crucial for Gombrowicz, bringing to mind concepts of the French writer, artist and philosopher Guy Debord (1931–1994), author of *La Société du spectacle* (1967)². This publication may constitute a sort of frame of reference and an epistemological and interpretive key to Gombrowicz’s writing. Both authors precisely expose – each of them according to his own experience – the nature of the spectacle, its social scene, the actors, and the audience. They both reveal the mechanisms ruling it. However Debord directed his criticism of the spectacle mainly to modern, capitalist, western society, although he made reference to Nazism and Stalinism. For Gombrowicz, in turn, Polish experiences prevailed, although the author took into account the universal aspect of the phenomenon. Unlike the politically active Debord, he devoted more attention to the anthropological sense of parody and the grotesque, as well as the phenomena of eccentric comedy and scenic scandal. He aimed in his light literature and drama to provoke the liberating effect of laughter. This is what he had to say about it:

“Never has a nation needed laughter more than we today. And never has a nation so poorly understood laughter – its liberating role. But our laughter today can no longer be exuberant laughter, an automatic laughter – it must be a laugh with premeditation, cold-applied and serious humor, this must be the most serious use of laughter for our tragedy. (...) This laughter, dictated by these horrible necessities, should not only include the world of our enemies, but most of all, ourselves and in this, what is dearest to us”³.

Therefore Gombrowicz represented the individualistic and often provoking attitude of an “independent artist”, willing to swim against the current of acclaimed opinions, suspicious of mass ideologies and official doctrines.

² Guy Debord (1931–1994) was not only a philosopher, man of letters (a “mix of intellectualism, protest and hedonism”) and an activist of the Situationist International, but also a talented artist: a poet, writer and filmmaker. This, to an extent, explains his closeness to Gombrowicz in the “spectacular” perception of modernity.

³ W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1953–1956*, Kraków 1988, p. 160 (1954).

Juxtaposing with one another the smoothness of existence and the cultural, factual “form”, which manifests itself in interpersonal relations, especially in the presence of the Other, Gombrowicz uncovered the unnatural behavior of characters contacting or communicating with each other, dictated by the automatism of reaction, or calculated for show and effect. Using the tools of parody and the grotesque he illustrated in literature the tensions, clashes, and dissonances arising here. He presented the deviation of rigid, ready-made forms from content, as well as the smoothness and fickleness of experiences and interpersonal relations and situations. He traced in them elements of spectacle, theatrical prose, the artificially imposed role, acting. This also applied to literary means – linguistic, narrative, dramatic, plot – of presentation and self-presentation.

The writer showed in this way the inconsistency, more so, the jarring nature of behavior, demeanor, gesture, form, signs and terms, which are displayed by the characters he creates, in interpersonal relations and situations, and dialog. In his own way he “idealized” these relationships and situations, while he also unveiled their overtones and parodied them. He comically juxtaposed, to refer to the example above, serious, high, marked ideologically terms like “fatherland” with a created by him parallel neologism “sonland”, ridiculing the former term. Therefore, the grotesquely deformed episodes styled as spectacles consistently identified the disparity (artificiality, automatism, “form”, “trap/kisser/gob”) between the reality displayed in them and the real world. Referring then to canonized or petrified public discourses cited in higher literature – patriotic, moral, social, philosophical, scientific, aesthetic, or religious – Gombrowicz with pleasure degraded and devalued them. He exposed and compromised their prolixity, automatism, carelessness, dishonesty, clumsiness, and ineptitude. Selected stories and major novels – *Ferdynand*, *Transatlantyk*, *Pornografia*, *Cosmos* – could furnish countless examples.

The spectacles arranged in Gombrowicz’s stories, novels and plays, visualized “in myself and from myself” – without any unnecessary, moralizing comment from the author – that everyday reality happens to be in its becoming and functioning extremely perverted, thoroughly grotesque, although seemingly, at first glance, it clings to order, symmetry, regularity. Thus, in the eyes of the Polish writer the grotesque and parody were not all the result of a unitary, arbitrary, and subjective view of reality. On the contrary. They merely displayed the infinite, constantly self-renewing, immanent randomness, deformity, incoherence, and jarring nature of existence – they reflect its nature and its properties. Gombrowicz’s works, on the other hand, comically revealed, mocked, and questioned the orders with which science, religion, ideologies, politics, art etc. tried to canonize and immortalize things: the laws of nature, logos, cosmos, providence, social order, etiquette, the progressive course of history, efficient structures, and reliable philosophical and political systems.

These works, thus, depicted an artistic vision of the world which quoted, imitated, expressed, and visualized in literature the apparent truth and logic of reality, and at the same time he undermined them, mimicked, shattered, in a word, he ridiculed them and turned them inside out. Such perverse nature was seen, for example, in the story "Crime with Premeditation". Thus, Gombrowicz emphasized the inauthenticity, irrational nature, fragility, and unreliability of the world and the functioning orders that it constituted.

Grotesque and parody in this environment depicted a mimicking and mocking version of human nature and of being "a man among men". The human substance did not entirely fill out the desired, normative essence ("form"). It did not comply with the shape of the form. The hallmark and the truth of this nature was according to Gombrowicz "that which is between people". This forced individuals to come out of themselves, to manifest themselves, to show themselves, to take on the performance, according to the current scene, and for the gathered audience. The individual *I* was merely a result of what arose from interpersonal relations and tensions. An individual, personal, and subjective *I* was, therefore, formed only when it dramatically realized the need for others, its dependence upon them, and the meaning it had to them. Parody and the grotesque, in turn, allowed a resistance that through distance and laughter released one from rigid, used interpersonal ties, dependencies, imposed situations, artificial roles, shapes, and costumes. They destroyed the orders and forms which bound and leveled interpersonal reality.

And so Gombrowicz's grotesque and parody made us aware of the duality of existence, which suggested that "it is, what it is" and that it remains equal to itself, identical, independent, and sovereign. Meanwhile "in the depth" and "in its true essence", it was at the same time something different from what it desired to be publicly acknowledged as. For it was torn. It was not enough for itself. To exist, to be itself, it needed a stage and an audience. It needed a spectacle. It could prosper and feel like itself, perceiving and absorbing its reflections and reactions to its existence in other beings.

The aim of the Gombrowicz spectacle then was an opposing, critical evaluation of forms and ways in which reality functioned, a reality which is self-insufficient and which emerges only in the presence of a different reality. The paradox was that it is impossible – even just due to inalienable egotism – to dive in to this different reality, but simultaneously in no way is it possible to relinquish it. Debord claimed: the participant of a spectacle is crazy and tragic; Gombrowicz however retorted: a man, a member of the Interpersonal Church, is indisputably comical. Even his tragedy (death!) provokes laughter. When due to the spectacle "the feeling of reality is weakened", Gombrowicz asserted in his *Diary*, "everything becomes automatized"⁴. The spectacle triggers

⁴ Idem, *Dziennik 1953–1956*, op. cit., s. 255.

this automatization; it shows its spontaneous process. It brings out its inherent energy as well as the inertia that contrasts with authenticity. Grotesque and parody hyperbolized this natural tendency. They brought out, as previously noted by Bergson in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, the artificiality and comedy of inertia. Thanks to comedy and the possibility of laughter, they had a liberating effect. They restored us to ourselves. They gave a sense of flexibility and relativity of what is going on in ourselves and in our interpersonal, natural, and tangible environment.

III.

Let us turn to the writings of Bruno Schulz, his stories, critical essays and letters, rich in innovative reinterpretations and suggestions. Significant elements of his concept of literature were included by him in an essay titled "Mityzacja rzeczywistości". He wrote in it: "We commonly believe the word to be a shadow of reality, its reflection. The reverse would be more accurate: reality is the shadow of the word"⁵.

The word, for Schulz, was in the first instance the carrier of sense, which, as he explained, is "the element that lifts humanity into the process of reality" and is an "absolute value", impossible to derive from any other elements. Both the word and its sense were to have an exceptional application in literature. It could not be, for obvious reasons, the mimetic reproduction of reality. Neither was its creation under influence of poetic needs and imagination. Instead Schulz demanded that literature (poetry) were to be a "mythologization of reality", a "regeneration of the original myths", that it took part in the process of "building the myth of the world", because, as he more broadly explained, "the myth lies in the elements, and we cannot go beyond the myth"⁶.

Therefore, reality, for Schulz, has taken on the figure of myth. But not in the least did the author intend to give it a finite and closed form, to transform the reality of his native Drohobycz and its surroundings into an unequivocal, distinct "story", the sense of which would be obvious and easily assimilable by the reader. Myth relied, according to him, not on a ready-made and ritualized form, previously acknowledged by official culture, but on a process full of tension and contradiction of "mythologization of reality", related to naming the myth's deepest meanings.

The postulate of mythologization, therefore, included, besides a positive function, a polemical intention. It reflected Schulz's skepticism, so clearly proclaimed in an essay on the topic of *Ferdynand* by Gombrowicz, regarding the depictions of people, places, and events imposed by official culture, of looking at the world with a rational approach,

⁵ All quotes from texts by Schulz come from the edition published by Biblioteka Narodowa, Seria I, nr 264: B. Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, ed. J. Jarzębski, Wrocław 1989. Ibidem, p. 368.

⁶ Ibidem, , p. 367.

in accordance with the laws of common sense. For that reason, the reality of Drohobycz and its surroundings in his authorship could not be expressed in a realistic “guidebook” way, in the form of generic images. Instead, it had to appear on the pages of his works in an indirect manner, often deeply concealed and grotesquely transformed. The mythologization of reality was, thus, limited to process it into a kind of purposeful substance. Drohobycz and its surroundings, the fundamental, chronotopic purposeful substance in Schulz’s works, turned in this way into the building matter of the “myth of the world” created by him, considered to be “a probe thrust into the nameless”⁷.

Mythologization of reality was by no means a vague term for Schulz. The construction of the myth happened under strict rules. Differently than in practical and commonsensical thinking, mythologization meant “the blending of elements”, their literary synthesis. It consisted of the “enacting” of the “monism of substance” perceived by the author. In the literary process of mythicization of reality, the boundaries defining “the soul” and “substance”, “culture” and “nature”, “great art” and the prose of reality, become less distinct.

Schulz was thereby moving away from a realistically motivated hierarchy of values and ways of scaling phenomena, issues, and events. He questioned their division into what is “important”, “worthy of interest and the trouble”, and what is “insignificant”. He opposed their separation, their being assigned to separate, isolated spheres of existence which did not communicate with each other. In the mythologized reality of his works, oppositions of good and evil, imposed by normative codes of ethics and religion, did not apply. Ethnic, historical, religious, political, or cultural segregation were not present. Instead a combination of the genius of space and the galaxy of meanings available to the literary imagination of Schulz was in motion. The narrator in *Republika Marzeń* stated:

“The spirit of nature was in fact a great storyteller. In an unstoppable river flowed a verbiage of plots and stories, romance and epic. The whole great atmosphere was full of cramming storylines”⁸.

Let us notice: the spirit of nature – and not, as might be expected, the Hegelian spirit of history – was the sought-after narrator of Schulz’s myth of reality. This spirit, however, arranged the plot by the laws of sense and not according to the laws of nature.

Another rule of mythologization seemed as significant as the above. According to Schulz, reality was not something stable, immovable; it did not have predetermined, unsurmountable boundaries. It eluded any literally understood administrative-political and geographical categories. You could say that it was stereometric and mobile, endowed with the ability of contraction and expansion, modulation of shape according to what became a nodal point in the work and the focus of the narrative.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 445.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 329.

It included the topic of the “city” marked by a mythical-biblical aura, which of course was most often Drohobycz, but could also give rise to associations and feelings similar to those generated by Jerusalem and Babylon, symbolic, archetypal cities. It incorporated the city interior – the market, its neighboring streets, the peripheries, important buildings, residential buildings, alleys, interiors of houses, courtyards – and also the spaces adjacent, the areas of summer tours and imaginary escapades “beyond the resort, into God’s land owned by no one, into the disputable and neutral borderland, where the reaches of countries became lost, and the winds’ rose spins aimlessly under a high and piled up sky”⁹. But within this chronotope there were included also the sky, the seasons, diurnal cycles (night – morning – midday – evening), climate and atmospheric phenomena (heat – gale). The unit of this chronotope for Schulz would be the living room, where, among other things, the dramatic metamorphosis of the father of one of the main characters of his works took place. It would also tend to be a particular room in “this very house” recognized by the narrator or the protagonist settled in the “only city in the world”, thoroughly known by him¹⁰, which is in the parochial Drohobycz, on the main square, number twelve at the end of Samborska street.

Mythologization, therefore, alluded to a reality supremely rich and internally diverse, but essentially devoid of distinctive contours, sharp boundaries, and realistic substantiality. Like the blooming vegetative environment in the area of Drohobycz described by Schulz, it had at its disposal resources of inner energy, which created, for particular time-spaces, the ability to change, to move boundaries, and to modify the shapes enclosed within them. Schulz’s mythical world renounced thereby any essential ontologies, focused on the pursuit of an unchanging “essence of things” and tracking down “eternal beings”. Instead of a similar ontology he postulated – and in some way executed in literary terms – a monistic, heraclitean ontology of process and relativism¹¹, soaked in a contemporary (for Schulz) vitalism.

The presented reality is subjected in this matter to regulations and rules, which he specifies in a well-known letter to Witkacy. He wrote in it that it is “in a state of inevitable fermentation, germination, latent life”¹². “There are no inanimate, hard, restricted

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 325.

¹¹ The following interpretation of Schulz goes against that proposed by Władysław Panas in his article “Zstąpienie w esencjonalność. O kształtach słowa w prozie Brunona Schulza” [in:] *Studia o prozie Brunona Schulza*, Katowice 1976, pp. 75–89. Prus ascribes to Schulz a “metaphysicality” and “attempts to get to the essence of being”, which corresponds to Panas’s general thesis that Schulz’s prose is “homophonic” (in Bakhtinian terms) (p. 89, 76, 78). The thesis concerning the homophonic quality of Schulz’s work is, to my mind, completely false, since it ignores the key position and role in Schulz’s prose of the polyphonic word and its manifestations such as irony, parody, and the grotesque.

¹² B. Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, op. cit., p. 444.

objects”, he stated. “Everything diffuses beyond its borders, lasts only for a while in a particular shape, only to leave it at the first opportunity”¹³. This view had far-reaching philosophical and literary implications. In Schulz’s mythical world, everything became just by its existence a “magical thing”, burdened with the shapes it had gathered. It amazed by its infinity of potential, often contradictory or irrational transformation. This applied also to space-time, capable of extracting from itself – “giving birth” as Schulz would say – a variety of different, although related, possible space-times.

Mythologies usually refer to mass illusions and religious sanctions – it is also from this that they acquire strength and longevity. Meanwhile this was the complete opposite in Schulz’s case.

“Mann shows how at the bottom of all human events, if culled from the husks of time and multiplicity, prehistoric schemata, “stories” appear, in which these events are formed in large replications. For Mann, these were Biblical stories, age-old myths of Babylon and Egypt. I was trying on a more modest scale to find my own private mythology, my “stories”, my own mythical origin”¹⁴.

In Schulz’s works, we are dealing with a bold, innovative subjectification of mythology. So not without reason would the collection of short stories *Sklepy cynamonowe* be called by him an “autobiographical novel” and his own “spiritual genealogy”. This proved – as long as we consider Schulz’s self-interpretation to be accurate and reliable – that a mythologized reality for him was also an intimate, subjective reality, experienced by him in his own fate.

Undoubtedly the status of this mythology differed from what is normally considered “myth” and “mythicality”. It did not coincide with those ideas of myth, perpetuated by Mircea Eliade or Claude Lévi-Strauss. For Schulz, “mythologization” was equivalent to a parabolic, grotesque, and humorous construction of one’s fate through saturation of individual characters, places, and events with vague meanings. The writer was aware that in his contemporary literary culture an autobiography understood descriptively, factographically as “the honest truth” had become impossible. It was replaced by the Nietzschean “myth”, in other words, a subjective interpretation, consisting of the inclusion of an unconsolidated fate into the great cultural paradigms.

Their evocation in Schulz’s works consisted of drawing resemblances of the actions of the father or the vicissitudes of the narrator to the biblical patriarch Jacob’s and his son Joseph’s adventures. Mythologization acquired here the form of a kind of stylization, alongside of which usually appeared an accompaniment, a subtext of parody, or even vivid grotesque. Other mythologizing aspects, such as the ones that appear in “Spring”

¹³ B. Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, op. cit., p. 444.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 478.

or “The Old-Age Pensioner”, had a similar nature, although the stylistic patterns originated from other sources. Yet another feature of mythologization was, in turn, attributing to the characters and events features and functions that would transgress the probability of life (which was illustrated by the variety of fantastic metamorphoses of the father and the narrator).

Subjectification of mythology, however, allowed Schulz to saturate his stories with autobiographic aspects emanating mostly from his childhood circles (father, mother, clerks, maids uncles, cousins, aunts, neighborhood milieu, school, etc.). A part of this circle was also the antiquated chronotope of Drohobych that was linked to the narrator and protagonist. It is understandable, however, that those particulars and details changed their nature in the face of the general structures of fate and the world entrenched in cultural and literary traditions. They were subject to transformation; they became covered with an aura of fiction. On one hand, this allowed the author to universalize his own experiences; on the other, it permitted him to modify and substantiate the general structures of fate and the world. It enabled an interesting, para-mythological literary discourse, a blend of fairy-tale aura and childhood memories, the intellectualization of this discourse, its transformation into a narrative-storyline counterpart of a philosophical and worldview discourse.

We must admit, however, that Schulz had a special reason to combine his writing with mythology. He revealed this way its suspension between mimesis and creationism, documentary record and fiction, “privacy” and structures of tradition, cognitive aspirations and emotional discharge. He exposed the duality of deep semantic relations, the dual rooting in the personality and biography of the author, and the “objective” message of tradition, which enveloped elements of iconic, literary, philosophical, or even religious culture, and absorbed those linguistic and mental elements typical of the Galician Polish-Jewish-German *mélange* (along with Ukrainian, Hungarian, and Romanian borderlands).

The “mythology” of this writing brought to attention the existence within it – despite the polyphony, variety and variability appropriate to itself – of invariant focus points and repeatable structures capable of self-reproduction and expansion. “Every fragment of reality is alive because”, as Schulz noted, “it has a part in a universal meaning”¹⁵. Contrary to folk myths, the “universal meaning” in his stories was a preset, sought after, and desired element, and not something ready, stagnant, and congealed. They were also saturated with emotional expression, humor, the grotesque, and self-parody. This was also the basis for the difference between folk mythology and Schulz’s

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 365.

“private” mythology, mythology soaked in literature, full of subjective perceptions taken from childhood or the dark depths of the Freudian id. Schulz – in contrast to the aggressive and relentless style of Gombrowicz – also created, thanks to his extraordinary, discreetly subjective and, paradoxically, perversely de-mythologizing mythologization, a warm, intimate, almost lyrical style of parody and grotesque.

IV.

Witkacy was the oldest of the mentioned authors, as well as a very colorful figure, marked by a sense of humor and a seething imagination, but at the same time, as evidenced by his suicide in 1939, to some extent a tragic one. He was brought to life by the spirit of adventure, and a peculiar kind of adventurousness. Obliterating the boundaries between art and reality, he transported the theater, which was his passion, into life. Daily activities and events, in turn, he turned into a grotesque, often fantastic and incredible spectacle, in which he acted as playwright, designer, director, actor, and, in a sense, audience.

A lush personality meant that Witkacy was not satisfied with one means of expression. As a result he performed as an original and prolific novelist, author of numerous plays and dramas, theater renovator, an outstanding portraitist, art theorist, and notable philosopher and esthetician. Despite many talents, versatile interests and productivity, Witkacy was not recognized in his life, as in many fields he was ahead of his time and seemed incomprehensible or immature. He was appreciated only after his death, in the second half of the the twentieth century.

Among his numerous activities, writing had a prominent place. In 1919, a paper *New Forms in Painting* had appeared; then more books came out entitled *Theater* and *Esthetic Sketches*. By 1927, Witkacy had composed over thirty dramas and plays, not all of which survive today. He created ten pieces like these in 1920 alone. Alongside three novels, *Farewell to Autumn*, *Insatiability*, and *The Only Exit*, and a philosophical work, *Concepts and Statements Implied by the Idea of Existence*. Written by him during the interwar period of 1918–1939, these dramatic, theatrical works formed the core of his authorship. Many other critical, journalistic and philosophical texts – not to mention the drawings and paintings – complement this oeuvre. In comparison to Schulz and Gombrowicz, Witkacy was a most dynamic and extremely expansive author. However, he shared with them an artistic attitude and willingness to draw a fanciful and deformed, brightly grotesque image of the world.

Witkacy’s novels could be interpreted as a recollection and paraphrase of Polish modernism (Young Poland), decadence, and secession from the turn of the nineteenth

and the twentieth century. These motifs were given by Witkacy a thoroughly different tone from that which they acquired from the followers of pure art, which advocated the chiseling and perfection of form, as was postulated by the contemporary critic and poet Zenon Miriam Przesmycki, and from that of the circle of authors gathered around the magazine *Chimera*, or, in turn, from that of the followers of critic, prose writer, and playwright Stanisław Przybyszewski, who preached that art is an “absolute”, a “reflection of the absolute – the spirit”, a “metaphysical force”, infinitely higher than social and national duties. The excess of expression typical for Polish modernism in Witkacy’s works took on the qualities of buffo parody.

He was in fact far from treating his own works as a “reflection of the absolute”, and himself as an anointed, resonating “priest of art”. In fact, much closer to him than a ceremonial priestly attitude was a fantastic and casual clownish pose. Therefore in the youthful novel, unpublished during his lifetime, *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo, or The Demonic Woman* (1909–1911), we are met with a energetic, comical, and grotesque deformation of narrative style, characters, storyline, and presented reality, with a mocking attitude towards them, with a constant authorial onslaught, with unbridled fantasy, freedom, exaggeration, exorbitance, and absurd fabrications.

Unlike the realist and naturalist writers who, in accordance with the aesthetics of mimesis, usually presented actual phenomena and gave them likely and typical characteristics, Witkacy pictured in his novels and dramas unrealistic and unlikely, strange, amazing, distorted, grotesque, scandalous situations and scenes. In spite of the confessional, effusive, and exhibitionistic conventions of the period, by no means did he imply that his authorship was made up of a pronouncement of true feelings or an “honest confession” on the part of the author. On the contrary, he ostentatiously and provocatively unveiled the conventionality and literariness of his writing. He confessed, moreover, explicitly, that his occupation was “creating literature”, and not creating a faithful transcription of subjective and external reality, or the proclamation of the only correct, irrefutable truth about them.

The spirit of Witkacy’s novels, dramas and plays was, therefore, that of literary games, teasing conversations with the reader, irritation of the latter, defiant violation of his habits, attacking common sense views, ridiculing aged tastes, demolishing existing conventions. Although all this did not mean that Witkacy’s works were a shallow, problem-free form of entertainment. On the contrary. The expressionistic, grotesque, parodic form of the majority of his works offered – against the prevailing realistic, naturalistic, and modernistic patterns – both a new language of literature, different from the existing one, as well as an innovative look at the human being, life, and the world. It was a probe into the unknown, into the future.

Thus, Witkacy penetrated – in a seemingly light way, without obligation, frivolous and playful – the ins-and-outs of reality. He revealed the repressed and concealed layers of the psyche and the poisonous source of conflict between people. He captured in an innovative and precursive way issues of gender and sexual impulse. He expressed fears growing in the individual, fully understood and justified (for he had seen these things for himself) by the atrocities of World War I, the Russian Revolution, modern dictatorships, the greedy exploitation of colonies, the advancing fascist and anti-Semitic atmosphere, dangerous economic crises, increasing intolerance, negative civilizational changes, like the mechanization and automation of life so criticized by him, or the depreciation of the individual as a result of the emergence of mass movements. At the same time he saturated his dramas and novels with relevant aesthetic and philosophical substance. His works were the result of strenuous, serious, and exploratory intellectual work, intentionally disguised with bravado and the appearance of dramaturgical and novelistic light-heartedness. That masquerade often aroused misunderstandings and prevented the proper reception of his writing.

Let us take Witkacy's play *The Shoemakers* as an example of his dramaturgy. The author bestowed it with a teasing subtitle, amusing at first glance, *A Theoretical Play with "Songs" in Three Acts*. The play was written between 1931 and 1934, but was not published until 1948 in Kraków. In Poland, the play was first performed in 1957 – after the collapse of the doctrine of socialist realism, but only later – decades after the author's death – did it eventually gain international success. The fate of *The Shoemakers* significantly illustrates the trials and tribulations of almost the entire oeuvre of Witkiewicz.

The drama showed a cross-sectional, partly allegorical, and fantastic picture of a society in which no faction received a dominant, ideologically and morally "right" point of view and position. All the social layers and strata – whether the proletarians, shoemakers, representatives of the "hand craft", Scurvy's "bourgeois", the aristocrat, Duchess Irina, the rural commoners, the fascist Puczymorda, or the ultra-revolutionist Puzyrkiewicz – presented partial, one-sided, inconsistent, and ambiguous truths. Each of the participants in conflicts presented arguments relevant to himself or herself; each of them was also guilty of a variety of sins and peccadilloes. Marveling at the changes taking place then, Princess Irina with aristocratic grace ascertained: "(...) ah, this relativity of social perspectives! See how this ladder of relativity is intertwined and what is odorous to one, is fragrant to the other, and vice versa"¹⁶. The drama presented the instability and fragility of the existing world, as well as the uncertainty of the fate of the individual.

¹⁶ S.I. Witkiewicz, Szewcy [in:] idem, *Dramaty*, wybór K. Puzyra, Warszawa 1985, p. 392.

Social, civilizational, economic, and revolutionary upheavals meant, in fact, that nowhere and from no one could you expect anything certain, trustworthy, and permanent.

Witkacy's play kaleidoscopically depicted in this way the changes in reality which – resembling a river's strong flow – pulled into its current everything and everyone. Their purpose, end, and result were impossible to guess. The playwright in this way skeptically challenged the ideas of this reality that impassioned contemporaries. He showed the incompleteness, artificiality, internal contradictions, and preferably the bankruptcy of propounded ideas. This concerned "work for work itself", personified by the grotesque characters of the shoemakers, egalitarian socialist and communist concepts, discriminating fascist propaganda, deviations of nationalism, dictatorship and even liberal democracy. He dramatically demonstrated the collapse of ideas announcing the possibility of easily building "a wonderful new world" and swiftly making mankind happy. Mockingly he questioned "the creation of such a mankind, that will last until the sun dies"¹⁷ (Sajetan's opinion). The world and people, as Witkacy with grotesque humor seemed pessimistically to proclaim, are not perfect, mechanical, entirely sapient, and harmonious creations. They hide within themselves powerful, evil, and destructive dark forces. They cultivate sadism, cruelty, senselessness, and chaos. *The Shoemakers*, a drama written in the era of rising fear and the imminent worldwide catastrophe of war, gave its readers and potential viewers a lot to think about. The overwhelming, grotesque, and parodic effects on stage perfectly camouflaged the grim embedded prophecy of chaos and destruction.

Witkacy's aesthetic vies constituted a separate field. Shortly after his return from Russia to Poland in 1918, which is also when Poland regained independence after 123 years of non-existence as a state, Witkacy devoted himself to artistic activities. He joined a group of painters called formists and published a paper *New Forms in Painting*, followed by subsequent works of the kind in which he declared his artistic program and formulated his theoretical position. The theory of Pure Form in art, theater, and poetry took the foreground here. It would be fitting to devote some attention to it.

Witkacy indicated that "Pure Form" is solely aesthetic ideal, which realistically does not exist and even could not exist, because, he argued, art is a part of life, and life is never crystal clear. "Even the purest art", he wrote ironically, "must be in some way dirty"¹⁸. The postulate of Pure Form in painting, theater, and literature had primarily a polemical status and expressed dissatisfaction with their current state. Oeuvres created according to the idea of Pure Form were supposed ultimately to supplant the works of realistic

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 404.

¹⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze*, ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 1995, p. 27.

and naturalistic art, which conveyed useful information and life advice for the viewer. They were also to replace literary works reflecting the mood and feelings of authors wishing to affect their readers with them. They also contradicted some contemporary avant-garde trends, to name only the scandalistic futurists. In 1922, an offended Witkacy wrote in an article "About the Effect of the Activities of our Futurists":

"Warsaw is now buried under various scraps in which the untalented epigones of Stern and Jasiński spew out putrid gases and revoltingly smelling liquids"¹⁹.

The embattled concepts Witkacy described bluntly and in lump sum as "the roar of guts".

The ideas of Pure Form stated, that it was intended to deepen the recipient's relations with art, to enrich his experience and personality, and not to "numskull" him. Works were to influence the recipient not solely by their literary content, but primarily with form: the composition, choice and placement of components, their perfect tuning into a whole. Witkacy was by no means opposed to "content" as such. He only fought against banal and misleading content, mindlessly copied, having no influence on the mind of the reader. He wanted to eradicate accidental and sloppy constructional solutions.

The tasks of Pure Form were not confined to humanistic goals. It was to be a cure for the harsh crisis of art of the twentieth century, which Witkacy illustratively called the "insatiability of form". It manifested itself in an extremely rapid dissemination – and thus equally rapid exhaustion and depletion – of artistic means and solutions, newly invented and put into circulation. This forced the artists into the constant pursuit of further inventions, to talk up subsequent "innovations", often only superficial or apparent. This resulted in, as Witkacy vividly described it, the "spoiling and infuriation of form".

The author transferred these ideas into the theater, which was close to him. Witkacy placed theater very highly in the hierarchy of arts. He compared its role to the role myths and religious beliefs once played, which lost the ability to lively and deeply affect the individual and masses. He demanded, thus, from the theater a form "in which the modern man is capable (...) of experiencing metaphysical feelings, as the early man once did in relation to myths and beliefs"²⁰. Under the influence of the expressionists, he named such experiences "metaphysical feelings". In their dissemination, he saw the possibility of resurrecting the dilapidated theater and of enhancing its impact.

The decrepitude of similar feelings resulted, according to Witkiewicz, who himself directly encountered in revolutionary Russia the ideology of obligatory collectivism, in the progressive "socialization of man" and the absolute subordination of the individual to the general.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, s. 16.

These processes according to him painted a grim future. They announced the “end of religion”, the “suicide of philosophy”, the “downfall of art”, and the complete disappearance of individual and personal characteristics in the individual. They led to dehumanization and globalization, in a word, a blurring of the differences between individuals, as well as between societies, cultures, and civilizations. They resulted in the reign of an anonymous mass, unaccountable in their passions and reactions. The disaster of humanity seemed, in this situation, to be inevitable. Witkacy’s dramas suggestively outlined its image.

To sum up, the idea of Pure Form had, therefore, a dual nature. It constituted both the fruit of crisis, the result of an avant-garde obsession with innovation and novelty, as well as a measure that was intended to prevent psychosis. Witkacy honestly and openly made this clear. In his book *Teatr* he wrote: “Throughout the rebirth of Pure Form, however, one knows the hectic rush of exhaustion of all means”. He noted with sorrow that this rebirth was “probably the last of its death-spasm”.

The discussed idea, however, constituted an important key to understanding the plays, novels, and paintings of Witkacy. It cast much light on the principles that he was driven by, and on the goals that guided him.

The most essential of all these principles was the purposefulness of construction. It sanctified derogations from the probability of life. It permitted him to transform any verbal, theatrical, and painterly material, without regard to the established habits of the recipient. One can summarize the recipe for Pure Form thus:

“An old man is speaking with characters from a play which provides a suitable atmosphere. A glass falls from the table. Everyone falls on their knees and cries. The old man changes from a peaceful human into a raging beast and murders a small girl, who has only just appeared from the left side of the stage. Then a young man runs onto the stage and thanks the old man for this murder. Other characters dance and sing”²¹.

The course of theatrical action was to be decided not by traditional principles of causality and logic, but by the author’s fantasy and full sense of creative freedom. The sense or nonsense of life did not matter, but only the function and meaning of formally acclaimed principles. All that mattered was the ability to transport the recipient into a wonderful, strange world ruled by the laws of the grotesque, which would sometimes resemble the laws which rule our dreams. “Different is the beauty of life, and different is the beauty of art”²² – stated Witkacy. What according to him determined the latter’s beauty was indomitable parody and grotesque deformation of existing conventions, the earliest ones as well as the latest.

²¹ *Ibidem*, s. 40.

²² *Ibidem*, s. 31.

V.

By operating a modern, ambiguous dialectic of order and chaos, through the medium of mythologization suggestively associated with subjective expression and de-mythisation, using the sharp blade of Pure Form, it is Gombrowicz and the other two authors, Schulz and Witkacy, that put an innovative and modern face on literary parody and the grotesque. They revived their language, style, and forms; they dug out a deeper artistic, anthropological, and cultural meaning. They also strongly influenced contemporary and later authors, and in some sense all of twentieth century literature. It is enough to mention the names of two outstanding Polish authors, who continued the grotesque and parodic style. One of them is Tadeusz Różewicz (1921–2014), who became recognized as a poet, playwright, novelist, and screenwriter, and Sławomir Mrożek (1930–2013), who was known to the world as a playwright, author of novels and stories, a satirist, sketcher, and representative of the theater of absurd that derives from existentialism. The legacy of Witkacy – Schulz – Gombrowicz, in consequence, came to be inspiring and fruitful. It constitutes a truly innovative and reviving link for new and recent Polish literature linking it to the rest of European and global literature.



The cover of a Japanese volume of essays on Witkacy (Tokyo 1985)