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Articles

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Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (known under the pseudonym Witkacy)—painter, dramatist, novelist, theoretician of art, philosopher, critic, photographer, and journalist—was born on 24th February, 1885 in Warsaw as the son of the eminent critic and painter Stanisław Witkiewicz and Maria *née* Pietrkiewicz, a teacher of music. In 1890 the Witkiewiczes settled down in Zakopane (a resort at the foot of the Tatra mountains). The artistic and intellectual atmosphere of their house, in which the most distinguished Polish artists were frequent guests, made constant contact with art possible and fostered the development of very early manifested young Witkiewicz's literary talent and also of his gifts for painting and music. Already as a boy about eight, under the influence of reading of Shakespeare and Maeterlinck, he wrote several short dramatic works, at the age of 17 he made his *début* as a painter on an exhibition in Zakopane, the following year he prepared his first philosophical treatise entitled *Marzenia improduktywa* (*Unproductive Daydreams*). The development of Witkiewicz's interests was, in fact, spontaneous. His father—an adherent of the theory that all educational systems destroy individuality—tried not to interfere in shaping of his son's predilections (though he skilfully fanned them) and was against sending the boy to school, permitting only private lessons. Young Witkiewicz was tutored by such outstanding scientists as Władysław Folkierski (mathematics) and Mieczysław Limanowski (geography). In June 1903, having passed all required exams, Witkiewicz received in Lwów his diploma of secondary education.

Between the years 1904—1908 Witkiewicz travelled abroad (Austria, Italy, France) and came to know modern European painting. The

acquaintance with Gauguin's and then Picasso's works was of particular importance. In 1905 Witkiewicz undertook studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. After a year he left the Academy under his father's pressure and started private lessons with Władysław Ślewiński, a friend of Gauguin's and an outstanding painter. In 1908 Witkiewicz again enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts (he attended Józef Mehoffer's workshops), but after dropping the studies in April, 1910 he never came back to the Academy. He met Irena Solska, an actress related to the circles of the Cracow Bohemia of those days. Their acquaintance turned into a stormy, dramatic love-affair lasting till 1912. It became the basis of Witkiewicz's first novel entitled *622 upadki Bunga, czyli Demoniczna kobieta* (*The 622 Downfalls of Bungo, or The Demonic Woman*), written between 1910–1911 (it was not published till 1972). In 1911 Witkiewicz surveyed the famous exhibition of cubists in Paris, visited Ślewiński in Doëlan in Bretagne (he painted there a series of landscapes from the sea-side) and went to London invited there by his friend Bronisław Malinowski, who was preparing himself in England for his anthropological studies and research, which were to bring him world-wide fame. In the meantime Witkiewicz regularly visited his father, who had been staying in the health-resort of Lovrano (Trieste) since 1908. They carried on a frequent interchange of letters, in which the father tried to direct his son's life laying down some definite ethical, intellectual and artistic requirements (the father's letters were published in 1968). In August, 1913 a collective exhibition of Witkiewicz's 82 paintings and drawings was held in Cracow.

On 21st of February, 1914 Witkiewicz's fiancée, Jadwiga Jancewska committed suicide in the Tatra mountains. Deeply shaken by this tragic fact, Witkiewicz decided to take part, as a drawer and photographer, in a scientific expedition to New Guinea organized by Bronisław Malinowski. At the beginning of June, 1914 they set out from London, and reached Australia in the end of July having stopped in Ceylon. Memories of this voyage recurred throughout Witkiewicz's work. Impressions from his fortnight's stay in Ceylon were described in the series of articles, *Z podróży do tropików* (*From my Voyage to the Tropics*). Witkiewicz also set some of his plays in South-East Asia and used oriental and Indian motifs in his artistic compositions.

Upon learning about the outbreak of the war, having quarrelled with Malinowski, Witkacy decided to return to Europe. In the end of October, 1914 he came deeply depressed to St. Petersburg, where he had some close relatives. He enrolled in the Military College feeling that his duty was to take part in the war against Germany and hoping that later on he would be able to join Polish troops, which were going to be organized. In March, 1915 he graduated from the College as a Second Lieutenant and owing to his uncle's influence he joined the famous Pavlovian Leib-gard manned by sons of aristocratic families. He participated in combats on the front and was wounded in the great battle of Stochod. He was decorated with the order of Saint Anne. Later he served in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where he participated in the artistic life of Polish emigrants. During the revolution of February, 1917 soldiers chose Witkiewicz to the fourth unit of their battalion to manifest their appreciation of his humanitarian attitude towards his subordinates. After the October Revolution Witkiewicz had to hide to avoid death.

Witkacy's stay in Russia was a turning point in his biography. Experiences connected with the war, active service and primarily with the revolution were a great shock for Witkiewicz and made him revalue his previous outlook upon the world, man and history. These experiences left their ineffacable impress upon his artistic output, in which the motifs of revolt of masses, of revolution and of coup d'état were to recur, and they also gave final shape to Witkiewicz's philosophy of history and were the main cause of his pessimism and catastrophism. In Russia Witkacy was very active as a painter, made experiments with photography, worked out the foundations of his philosophical and aesthetical system.

With the assistance of his friends Witkiewicz came back to Poland in June, 1918 and immediately took to very animated and creative activity. Within the scope of seven years he wrote over 30 plays, published 3 books, in which he formulated the principles of his theory of painting and theatre and expounded his views upon the development of culture: *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia* (*New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Resulting Therefrom*), Warszawa 1919; *Szkice estetyczne* (*Aesthetic Sketches*), Kraków 1922; *Teatr. Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy*

w teatrze (*Theatre. Introduction to the Theory of Pure Form in Theatre*), Kraków 1923. As a painter he belonged to the Formists group – he was its chief theoretician and participated in several exhibitions. The first premières of his plays (*Tumor Mózgowicz—Tumor Brainiowicz* in the Słowacki Theatre in Cracow on 30th June, 1921, and *Pragmatyści—The Pragmatists* in the Elslynor Theatre in Warsaw on 29th December, 1921) were violently attacked by critics. In response, Witkiewicz published several polemic articles. On 30th April, 1923 he married Jadwiga Unrug.

Between 1925–1926 Witkiewicz changed the main direction of his interests: he abandoned these two fields of his activity in which he tried to realize the assumptions of his theory of Pure Form. In painting he limited himself only to portraiture, but he treated it as a form of applied art and a source of income (in 1925 he established an atelier called: The S. I. Witkiewicz Portrait Painting Firm). Witkacy also gave up drama for the novel, creating nevertheless the theory that the novel cannot be a work of Pure Form. In 1927 he published the novel *Pożegnanie jesieni (Farewell to Autumn)*, and in 1930–*Nienasycenie (Insatiability)*. He organized The Formistic Theatre in Zakopane and between 1925–1926 staged there a few of his plays. He continued to participate in numerous exhibitions all over Poland (on 26th June, 1929 his biggest individual exhibition was opened up in Poznań). In May, 1930 he also had an exhibition of painting and water-colour in the Galerie Zak in Paris.

In the thirties Witkacy devoted himself almost entirely to philosophy. He published dozens of articles popularizing his own philosophical assumptions and arguing against other concepts (among others ideas of Whitehead, Carnap, Russel and Wittgenstein). In the work entitled *Pojęcia i twierdzenia implikowane przez pojęcie Istnienia (The Concepts and Principles Implied by the Concept of Existence)*, which was published in 1935, he formulated his own philosophical system called biological monadism. His artistic interests became the margin of his activity. Between 1931–1932 Witkiewicz wrote the first part of his never finished novel *Jedyne wyjście (The Only Way Out)*. In 1932 he published a book about the noxiousness of narcotics (*Nikotyna, alkohol, kokaina, peyotl, morfina, eter – Nicotine, Alcohol, Cocaine, Peyotle, Morphine, Ether*) and also

the pamphlet *O Czystej Formie (On Pure Form)*. In March, 1934 he finished writing the play *Szewcy (The Shoemakers)*. In 1936 the socio-psychological study *Niemyte dusze (Unwashed Souls)* came into being. In this study Witkacy presented his views upon Polish history and analyzed Polish national shortcomings (he did not manage to publish this work and it appeared only in 1975). In the meantime he lectured on literature, art and philosophy. In October, 1937 Witkiewicz was visited in Zakopane by the outstanding German philosopher, Hans Cornelius, with whom he had corresponded for a long time. At that time Witkacy carried out controlled experiments with narcotics examining their influence upon artistic vision. In the end of 1938 he finished his second philosophical work entitled *Zagadnienie psychofizyczne, czyli o materializmie, witalizmie i monadyzmie (Psychophysical Questions, or on Materialism, Vitalism and Monadism)*, on which he had been working for 6 years. Also in 1938 he came back to drama and wrote the play *Tak zwana ludzkość w obłądzeniu (So-called Humanity Gone Mad)*. He tried to reactivate the experimental theatre in Zakopane.

In September, 1939 Witkiewicz volunteered to the army as a reserve officer, but he did not get a mobilization order because of his age and state of health. On 4th September, 1939 he left Warsaw with other refugees and, in the company of his friend Czesława Oknińska, went to the east. In mid September they reached the village Jezioro, near Dąbrowica in Polesie. On 18th September, upon learning that the Red Army entered the eastern part of Poland, Witkiewicz committed suicide. He was buried on the local Orthodox cemetery.

Transl. by Zofia Lesińska



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(Witkacy)