

DOI: 10.14394/eidos.jpc.2019.0042

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Witkacy and His Doppelgängers

Abstract:

The literary work of Stanisław I. Witkiewicz (Witkacy), whose world career began in the fifties of the last century, is considered today in many aspects as precursory to postmodernism. In his dramas and novels, this is manifested in the creation of characters who are internally broken up, who act like deregulated human machines and who are unable to control their own drives. These motifs are also reflected in the writer's broken identity, which is torn apart by contradictions ("knots") and which constantly doubles itself. In my article, I demonstrate to what extent this obsession with his own double is rooted in the instrumental treatment of Witkacy by his father, who wanted to see in his son a perfect artistic embodiment of himself. The whole of Witkacy's work, considered from this perspective, is a rebellion against his father, expressed in the (futile) desperate attempts to break away from being his better copy, his double.

Keywords:

double, father, identity, psychoanalysis, knot, schizoid, Maciej

The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in the emergence of new trends and theories in European literature and art, accompanied by transformations in cultural self-consciousness. In the first half of the twentieth century, these trends and theories were classified as modernist and avant-garde. They were treated as typical manifestations of modernity, with all the associated myths and illusions. But starting from the seventies of the last century, a new era called postmodernism was proclaimed. Then, paradoxically, apart from emphasizing significant differences between the modern and postmodern, cultural critics started to recognize the pioneering character of many artistic and philosophical achievements of modernism in relation

to this new era. They discovered that these achievements were marked by a sense of crisis of traditional forms of identity and norms defining the socio-cultural existence of man. A fractured subject, internally torn apart by contradictions, replaced those traditional forms. The belief in progress in history became problematic, and the sense of the relative character of all values grew. This can be seen most clearly in the recognition of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud as the precursors of postmodernism, in the rereading of Baudelaire's, Mallarmé's, Proust's and Joyce's works, in the rediscovery of paintings of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele and the entire artistic and cultural world of Vienna at the turn of the century. One of the most meaningful testimonies to this reevaluation of some authors living in the era of modernism is the book by Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*,¹ as is the way in which Gianni Vattimo reinterprets Nietzsche's philosophy.² In Polish literature and in Polish art there is, first of all, one author that should be mentioned in this context: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz.³

In the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War, he wrote the novel *622 upadki Bunga* (*The 622 Downfalls Of Bungo*).⁴ One of the main themes of the novel pertains to his own problems of identity. These problems include the multiplication of the image of himself and of the world in infinite mirror images (obsession with the double). He also expresses in the novel his already highly crystallized views on art. Later, they will lie at the basis of his Pure Form theory, inspired by cubist paintings of Picasso and others. This theory was based on the assumption that in a work of art, only the formal idea of construction counts, not the so-called "life content," as the realist and naturalist theories of art presuppose. At the same time, the author recognizes that in drama and in novels the characters should behave according to the rules of "fantastic psychology," thus breaking all social conventions and forms of rationality. Their behaviors should undermine all logic of colloquial behaviors and thus seem to be entirely senseless and absurd. That is why the strange world of these plays, that put into question the traditional conventions of drama, was shocking for contemporaries who did not know how to read them the universe of these unconventional performances and find some sense in them. It was not until the 1950s in Poland, France and the United States that critics realized the elements of absurdity and surrealism present in Witkacy's plays met such avanguardist criteria, such as Artaud's concept of theatre, and that the plays were, in a way, the precursor of such phenomena.⁵ In this article, I will demonstrate that the world of Witkacy's dramas, permeated as it is with various forms of absurdity, corresponds to the fragmented, constantly self-doubling form of the author's identity, which finds its meaningful expression in his obsession with a double.

1) Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

2) Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. John R. Snyder (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991); Gianni Vattimo, *Nietzsche: Philosophy as Cultural Criticism*, trans. Nicholas Martin (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2002.

3) The international career of his plays and novels, beginning in the fifties, contributed to the fact that in the 1970s his writings and paintings were included by UNESCO in the world cultural heritage.

4) Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *622 upadki Bunga*, ed. Anna Micińska (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1972).

5) In the United States, Witkacy is known and valued primarily as a playwright and art theoretician. Since the 1960s, his plays have been regularly staged here, and his Pure Form theory in theatre has been considered, alongside Artaud's theory, the most precursor achievement in this field in the 20th century. Daniel Gerould, an American author of a book on Witkacy's writings and editor, and translator of many of his plays and novels into English, was the most eminent expert on his work there. See Daniel Gerould, *Witkiewicz Reader*, ed. and trans. Daniel Gerould (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992); Daniel Gerould, *Witkacy: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981).

1.

My starting point is that in Witkacy's artistic biography, as in the case of Bruno Schulz, the figure of his father is of key importance. However, if Schulz's father appears in the novels as a degraded patriarch preaching from the position of a pervert-masochist to an idolatrous cult of femininity, Witkacy's father, who wants to see his son as a future artist, tries to play against him the role of an "enlightened" authority that gives him full freedom to express his views on art. Yet, behind this open attitude of his father is a narcissistically colored aspiration to appropriate his son's identity and shape it in his own image and likeness:

Art will fill your mentality to the brim and the ability to feel compassionate and to people and "cowards" will fill your feelings.... If this continues with your painting, you will be a wonderful proof of my theories about art, and you will be an independent foreman yourself in the years when others are learning the alphabet on an incomprehensible school primer.⁶

The father continues, telling his son, "You will be a wonderful proof of my theories of art." Read: you will be a meaningful confirmation of the experiment I have conducted on you. You will fulfill two "demands" that I have made. Not only will you become a true artist, but also the kind of artist that I dreamed of (read: I have planned).

There is something deeply toxic in these praises. The authors who write about Witkacy's relationship with his father – Jan Błoński, Anna Micińska, Janusz Degler and others – see in Witkiewicz's letters mainly a manifestation of noble fatherly concern for his son's development as an artist. But behind this concern lies the uncompromising egoism of a father who would like to subjugate his son, to enslave him spiritually. For him, Staś counts as – just as he will say about the psychoanalytical therapy conducted by the Zakopane doctor Karol de Beaurain (as detailed below) – a guinea pig,⁷ on which he conducts an imaginative experiment, hoping that his son will fulfil his ambitious plans for the future.

If the way Schulz depicts the image of the father in his novels can be seen as a meaningful testimony to the crisis in the model of the patriarchal family (in which the figure of the father occupies a symbolically key position), then the image of the father that emerges from the letters Witkacy's father writes to his son (and from other biographical testimonies) is of a completely different kind. With Witkacy, the father takes on the attitude of a tolerant, "enlightened" authority toward his son. But behind this attitude lies a sophisticated father's strategy of subjugating his son so that he will not even notice. In addition, the father tries to seal his desire to dominate his son on a symbolic level by giving him his own name – Stanisław. As a result, the only difference between a son and a father is the former's middle name – Ignacy. But this, being the name of the grandfather, further testifies to the son's forced dependence.

However, the father's strategy towards his son breaks down when Staś enters adulthood. The boy begins to emphasize his independence in various ways. He takes up painting studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, against his father's will. He sees a chance for the creation of a Polish state, not in Piłsudski's legions, but in an alliance with Russia. Above all, he starts to differ fundamentally from his father in his views on art. At the same time, however, his behaviors and the decadent philosophy of life he proclaims reveal disturbing symptoms indicating a deep identity disorder. Stasio is emotionally unstable. He has a clear tendency to enter depressive states with obsessive suicidal thoughts. He constantly repeats the mantra that life does not make

6) Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Listy do syna*, ed. Bożena Danek-Wojnarowska and Anna Micińska (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1969), 46.

7) Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Niemyte dusze*, ed. Anna Micińska (Warsaw: PIW, 1975), 192.

sense and that the best solution, then, is to kill oneself. At times, the boy seems to find himself on the verge of true madness. He almost falls into psychosis.

Stasio's behavior must have been also influenced by the complicated situation of the marriage triangle in the Witkiewicz family. His father, while suffering from arthritis and tuberculosis, had a relationship with a young woman who became his guardian and nurse, and the two left for Lovran in Croatia. The boy in this family conflict clearly stands on his mother's side, although at the same time, under pressure from his father, he is forced to behave in accordance with social conventions towards his father's lover.

2.

The problem Witkacy has with his own identity is expressed in his distancing from (or rather rejection of) two names given to him by his parents (in fact, mainly under the influence of his father). On a symbolic level, this identity is marked by three names: Stanisław, Ignacy and Witkiewicz; as noted above, only the second name, "Ignacy," inherited from his grandfather, differs from his father, Stanisław Witkiewicz. This only strengthens the boy's dependence on his father. Yet, the main source of Witkacy's identity problems is not the fact that he received these two names from his father, but his father's attitude towards him, which has a clear instrumental and appropriating character. As we could see clearly in the above quoted fragment, the father, looking at the son in the future as a great artist, tries to vicariously create through Witkacy what he himself, for various objective reasons (illness, financial problems), could not achieve. In other words, the old Witkiewicz sees his son as an ideal copy of himself, and reduces his son to his double.

No wonder that the adult boy starts to treat the names given to him by his father as alien to himself. They seal the father's domination over him. They do not serve to confirm any self-contained subjectivity; that is, his given names do not help him realize who he really is as a subject. Therefore, in the boy's eyes, they become persecuting doubles of himself, with whom he does not identify. At the same time, though, he does not have enough strength to free himself from them. Precisely speaking, he cannot free himself from the pressure of his father, the force behind the names. He feels as if he were in a cage where his father locked him up. No wonder the boy treats these names as the symbolic seal of his dependence on his father. As a result of this insuperable felt dependence, he falls into a state of extreme depression and apathy.

Concerned by his son's emotional instability, the father directs him to Karol de Beaurain, a popular psychiatrist living in Zakopane at that time. At the time, de Beaurain was fascinated with the theories of Freud and Jung, and he practiced a psychoanalytic model of therapy. The treatment lasts more than a year (between 1912 and 1913), during which time the boy undergoes a "practical course of psychoanalysis," a modality centered on the interpretation of his dreams. Privy to the situation in the Witkiewicz family, de Beaurain formulates a hypothesis: The reason for Staś's psychological disturbances is the "embryo complex." This hypothesis seems to be the doctor's own idea, because in the psychoanalytical literature of the period this term does not appear. In this way, however, he apparently wants to draw the young patient's attention to the fact that he has not yet been able to become mentally and existentially independent from his parents. Although Stasio is critical of this diagnosis, it is interesting to note that he starts to distance himself from his own names given to him by his parents. He begins to treat them as dead doubles, horrible masks of himself, as he writes in his letters to Helena Czerwijowska, a woman with whom he is deeply emotionally connected: (1) "Tomorrow I celebrate the name day of my deceased double, the late Stanislaus. May his memory be extinguished forever as early as the following year, Ignacy Witkiewicz."⁸

8) Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Listy*, Vol 1, ed. Tomasz Pawlak (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2013), letter of May 7th, 1912.

(2) “The iron mask will cover the childish face of the old Ignasio. Maciej will be born. The most monstrous of the whole Company, worse than Tymbeusz, Breiter, Bronia, Chwistek, Solski and Władzio B.”⁹

As can be seen from this second fragment, the mask of the two deceased doubles – Stanisław and Ignacy – is to be replaced by the living double: Maciej. The question is, of course, why this third double is called *Maciej*. It seems that this is due to the fact that Maciej’s name day falls on Staś’s birthday, February 24. So this name was not given to Stasio arbitrarily by others, but by fate itself – or, to be more precise, it results from the established Christian calendar order of names. Therefore, only Maciej, a double bearing that name, will be able to save him from going mad:

And this is the first time I have been on the verge of madness. I had a conference with Boren, but it seems too late.... I am terribly ill and maybe I will never be healthy again. I feel clearly insane and I am not able to do so.... I will be left with a pile of drawings. But if I endure it, I will really be the third one – Maciej of my own power.¹⁰

The advantage of Maciej over the two dead doubles, Stanisław and Ignacy, consists in the fact that he is “out of his own power.” He was born by himself, in a way, so he is not dependent on anyone. Yet, Maicej is at the same time the “most monstrous” of all Stasio doubles, allied with the monstrosity of life as such. That is why Stasio’s attitude towards Maciej – the double – is characterized by deep ambivalence. On the one hand, Stasio is fascinated by his own authentic double whose name has not been imposed on him and appropriated by his father. On the other hand, Maciej, being born by himself, is situated outside any law and tradition. He is a goal onto himself; he is not bound by anything. However, this is also the most monstrous thing about Maciej: being the cause of oneself, being one’s own father. Together with Maciej, therefore, the two previous doubles joined the third one, of quite a different kind. As if “by his own power,” he seems to embody in his own eyes the longed-for independence from his father. The problem is, however, that this Maciej is also a double, and so, like the names Stanisław and Ignacy, he is a stranger to Stasio. Maciej seems to be his imaginative projection born on the basis of his own dreams of power, and not a name with which he could permanently identify.

This identity drama, the constant oscillation between “fatherly” names, “Stanisław” and “Ignacy” on the one hand, and his own name (“Maciej”) on the other, is at the root of Witkacy’s relation to himself and his entire artistic work. This is eloquently reflected in the two types of male heroes who appear in his dramas and novels.

The first of them are his doubles as “embryos”: immature, clumsy in life and incapable of real creativity. They are entangled in narcissistic images of themselves from which they cannot break free, or they are enslaved spiritually by the dominating figure of the mother (the Leon from *Mother*, Istvan from the *Sonata of Belzebub*, Karmazyniello from the *Metaphysics of the Two-Headed Calf*).

The second type are strong, ruthless characters born “out of their own power” and, therefore, they are remaining beyond the realm of good and evil. They are horrible male monsters who have no sense of morality and, therefore, in their behavior towards others they are capable of the greatest crimes (Maciej Korbowa, Maciej Wścieklica, Guybal Wahazar, Korbowski, Mikulini, etc.).

Yet, these two types of heroes are, in their own ways, crippled and mentally deformed. The first are lifeless losers and artistic graffomaniacs who are instruments in the hands of others. The latter, on the other hand, are inflated with their own power and always fail in the end.

9) Ibid., letter of January 27th, 1913.

10) Ibid., letter of February 1913.

3.

Rebelling against the narcissistic projections of his father, who would like to see in him an improved copy of himself, Witkacy, a future “great artist,” is, nevertheless unable to oppose those projections with a sufficiently strong sense of self. As a result, he cannot find in the symbolic order of names a permanent confirmation of his own identity, nor can he find self-confidence. Instead, he oscillates between the two aforementioned types of spectres of himself. In their extreme otherness, they both represent equally degraded and repulsive forms of his identity. Those debased forms of identity correspond to his attempted escape through various ridiculous poses and masks in everyday life. In this way, he wants to avoid confrontation with his own subjectivity un-mediated by the mirror of paternal projections and doubles appearing in their place. Under the surface of this mirror, only nothingness and terrible, paralyzing loneliness reside.

He puts on the masks of the parodist and embraces the proverbial soft underbelly of all the ridiculous poses he takes in his life. Therefore, even if these poses and masks have a “therapeutic” effect, neutralizing to some extent the horror of existence, it is a momentary effect. Soon it will be necessary to put new masks on old ones, which (like those that came before) are only artificial prototypes of his own identity. They are his own doubles, and they multiply infinitely.

If, as his friend, Jan Leszczyński writes of Witkacy that the mask of irony and self-irony “was at the same time something completely natural for him: it was an expression of general criticism, which his own person could not be exempted from,”¹¹ it did not protect against the experience of senselessness of life and of existential emptiness: “When the mask sometimes fell down, a man appeared for a moment, terribly lonely, gloomy, broken inwardly, shaken by powerful passions, thrown by a wind of metaphysical feelings not known to the average man, a wonderful, creative and thoroughly tragic man.”¹²

Such an image of Witkacy without a mask is reflected in his photograph entitled *Autoportret wielokrotny* (*Multiple Self-Portrait*). It comes from 1916 when he was a cadet of the elite Pavlovski regiment in St. Petersburg and trained as an officer in the tsarist army. In this photograph, we see him in a military uniform, turned back to us, confronted with the gazes of four of his reflections/doubles in two mirrors set in front of him at a certain angle. What draws attention here is his double placed to him *en face* slightly to the right, so that he is confronted directly with his gaze. This type of confrontation, which we experience while standing directly in front of a mirror, always has something incredible and potentially extremely dangerous in it. For the one who looks at us from the surface of the mirror never wants to give way. We will



Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Multiple Self-Portrait*

11) Jan Leszczyński, *Filozof metafizycznego niepokoju*, in *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz – Człowiek i twórca*, edited by Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Jerzy Eugeniusz Płomieński (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1957), 93.

12) *Ibid.*

never win against him in the eyesight fight. For the more stubbornly we look at him, he will always reciprocate with the exact same stare. When, however, forgetting what is threatening us, we lose ourselves in this confrontation, it can lead to the brink of madness. Or even to death – as happened in the case of Narcissus.

The only possibility for the subject/Witkacy to free himself from this self-destructive rivalry with his first double looking straight at him is to direct his own gaze to the second double. This is because the latter is only the object of his gaze, and it looks in the direction of the third double sitting opposite him. The problem is, however, that this relation between the second and third double is a copy of the initial relation described above. At the same time, though, there is a significant difference between these two relations. In the first one, the subject/Witkacy was on the “this” side of the mirror, in the realm of what is real. Now, the exchange of gazes takes place only on the plane of the mirror between its two mirror-like doubles, which in equal measure have the status of imaginary fiction.

This repetition on the broken plane of mirrors of that initial situation is significant. Witkacy, escaping from the look of the first double in the mirror mask of the second double, meets this “own” suspicious look in this mask again. Only this time it is directed at him from the side of his own third double that appears in the second mirror, which – as far as his position is concerned – is a mirror copy of the first double. The third double directs an identical “direct” look at the second double, which the first double directed at Witkacy in the first sequence.

So, if between the second and third double there is a rivalry or conflict of gazes, then, unlike in the previous case, it takes place only on the surface of mirrors. It is a battle between two mirror-like doubles of Witkacy, both alienated from him in equal measure. It resembles a battle of doubles/shadows that takes place in a Chinese theatre. At the same time, because all his doubles appearing on the plane of mirrors are his identity forms, with which he identifies, he experiences a conflict between their intersecting gazes. He is hopelessly entangled in this conflict. We are dealing here with a real “knot” of gazes, from which there is no escape.

There is no escape because in this kind of conflict – a battle of mirror masks – there is no solution. It is not played out according to the principle of narcissism: “It’s either me or him” (Jacques Lacan), but according to the principle of dissociationism: “Both he and I.” In the latter case, the connection “and” does not mean the harmonious co-existence of the two selves, but refers to the sense of splitting into two or more self-doubles existing side by side. This conflict is not defined by the logic of the struggle for death and life, in which the goal is to exclude the rival completely. It is determined by the logic of dissociation – that is, the painful experience of disintegration into radically different embodiments of the self, which exist on equal planes. That is why Witkacy constantly oscillates between them, changing his position toward himself and others. Each time this change is felt by him as something very painful, “with intensities reaching the strength of normal abdominal pain.”¹³ The identification with one’s own double can only be temporary and superficial, having the status of a mirror appearance. Immediately after it, there is a return to the other pole, in which everything will be repeated in the same way. This is the drama of the subject entangled in this conflict, which Witkacy, referring to Kretschmer’s typology, calls a schizoid:

What is also important for the psyche of the schizoid is the fact that these types are fundamentally divided ... – for there is no question of a psychic person being double in the strict sense: opposites fit into one person at the same time – this is the most interesting thing.... Brought to the last consequences this state gives two psyches within one personality, not knowing as if nothing about each other.¹⁴

13) Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Pożegnanie jesieni* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1998), 112.

14) Witkiewicz, *Niemyte dusze*, 203.

A schizoid is, in other words, a split subject, one who is unable to control his “doubles.” Therefore, he often behaves in an incoherent, contradictory way, as if there were several personalities in him at once. This is how the heroes of Witkacy’s dramas and novels often behave, showing their completely new faces unexpectedly during the course of the action’s development.

One such hero is Bałandaszek in the drama *Oni (They)*, who first breaks up with his lover Spika to bind himself to a married woman, a black woman he desires unconsciously because of the color of her skin. After Spika’s death, he breaks up with the woman he had desired and belatedly confesses his love to his now-deceased lover. In a similarly unexpected way, Tumor Mózgowicz, in *Tumor Mózgowicz*, changes his attitude toward children and his wife as the drama unfolds, eventually breaking all ties with them. In an equally unexpected way, women can also change their attitude toward men within Witkacy’s universe, first assuring them of their love, then showing them immeasurable contempt, and then returning to the attitude of loving adoration (as with Iza in her relationship with Tumor Mózgowicz). Showcasing an equally divided personality structure, Atanazy, in the novel *Pożegnanie jesieni (Farewell to Autumn)*,¹⁵ is torn between his fiancée Zosia and her lover Hela Bertz – likewise, Zypcio in *Nienasylenie (Insatiability)* also epitomizes this sort of character type.¹⁶

Witkacy’s similar construction of the personalities of the heroes of his dramas and novels as characters tormented by contradictory desires and feelings of “schizoids” is in line with the basic principle of the “fantastic psychology,” which is supposed to determine the behavior of these protagonists. Therefore, the “knot” of relations between the doubles appearing in the *Portret wielokrotny (Multiple Self-Portrait)* can serve as a starting point for the recognition of the complicated relationships between the characters in these dramas and novels. It is worth noting that in these works the characters themselves are often doubled, coming to life unexpectedly after their death and returning in their new ghostly incarnations. Then they become the doubles of the doubles of themselves. This is possible because everything takes place here – as in *Self-Portrait* – on the plane of a mirror, in a fictional world of a dream that does not know death. Therefore, instead of the “final” death of the characters, we are dealing here with their permanent doubling in the mirrors of the writer’s imagination, which engenders such self-repetition.

4.

Yet, there is another important dimension of Witkacy’s identity drama. The aforementioned de Beaurain, who conducted Stasio’s psychoanalytical therapy in 1912/1913, apparently suggested to Staś that he should start using the pseudonym “Witkacy” so as to emphasize some identification with his father. “Witkacy” is a pseudonym in which fragments of Staś’s surname and middle name were combined in an ingenious way, creating one unique “significant.” The meaning of this pseudonym was that it “confirmed” the self-contained identity of Staś as an artist. Being a contamination of a fragment of his father’s surname (Witk-) and his own middle name (-acy), it confirmed Stasio in his “Individual Existence.” It probably had a positive impact on the stabilization of his sense of identity since it created a free space for him to accentuate his own individuality. Significantly, although he himself was skeptical about the effects of de Beaurain’s therapy, it clearly allowed him to get out of depression. The fact that he was able to draw and paint after a long break due to a state of deep apathy supports that conclusion.

He first signed with the pseudonym “Witkacy” on 17 April 1913, in a letter to Czerwiowska – shortly after the therapy with de Beaurain was finished. This signature, however, appears only once at that time. He

15) Witkiewicz, *Pożegnanie jesieni*.

16) Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Nienasylenie* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1992).

began using the pseudonym on a regular basis only after World War I, signing some of his oil paintings in the Pure Form convention. However, it should be noted that in this later period he does not use the pseudonym exclusively. As Stefan Okołowicz notes in his *Introduction* to the album of photographs by Witkacy, *Przeciw Nicości (Against Nothingness)*:

Following Witkiewicz's correspondence from the 1920s and 1930s, one can notice periods of breakdown and aversion to life, and therefore after successive "transformations," annotations such as "Witkacy died" and a signature in the form of a new pseudonym. Dozens of invented pseudonyms referred directly to the content of the letter, the relationship between the sender and the addressee, the temporary mood or were – most often – a joke. It is worth quoting those one-time nicknames or temporary "incarnations – doubles," which, invented on the spot, bear witness to the author's sense of humor and word-forming inventiveness, and are comparable to the "mines" of Witkacy's doubles in the series of his photographs.¹⁷

This peculiar behavior of the writer corresponds with his use of a different name (or use of different names) in his letters to friends and when signing paintings and drawings. It also proves that he did not treat the pseudonym "Witkacy" as the main or the only "significant" one. It was not the only one with which he permanently identified. This pseudonym initiated a whole series of other derivative pseudonyms. Reviewing his letters and captions under portraits and drawings, we can prepare an entire catalogue of dozens of such pseudonyms that certify the writer's ingenuity in this area: Vitkacy, Witkacjusz, Vitkatz, Witkotek, Won Witkacy, Vitkasse, Ritter von Vytkevitsch and so on. It seems as if Witkacy's next "living" double multiplied in thousands of mirrors to infinity. It is as if the writer was not satisfied with just one name – a pseudonym, with which he could identify himself permanently – but each time, after performing another work, he had to come up with a completely new name for himself, only to later replace it with another. In other words, it is as if he had to confirm his identity with a new name constantly, because it comes into existence in constant doubling, in pursuit of itself. He proves unable to be permanently attached to any one of them.

One can see in it a kind of play consisting of constant parodying of oneself. It resembles the playing with numerous comic faces and poses immortalized by Witkacy in a series of photographs. But – as Okołowicz points out – the need to invent a new name for himself resulted also from the earlier period of breakdown and depression, during which time the writer experienced a symbolic death. As before, he survived the death of Stanisław and Ignacy. Then his new name-signifier was to allow him to reaffirm himself on a symbolic level and thus preserve the continuity of his own identity. It was the only way not to fall apart and go mad.

Witkacy's incessant inventing of new names-signifiers for himself signals the impossibility of permanent "self-confirmation" on the basis of one name. This "self-confirmation" must be regularly repeated in relation to one's new, often parodistically deformed name. It is preceded by the writer's conviction that he "died" in his present form. The equivalent of this process in dramas is the frequent motif of the "resurrection" of the dead heroes, who return here like sleepy ghosts, not knowing that in a sense they are long gone.

These characters are the embodiments of two radically different types of doubles for the writer: the doubles of Stanisław and Ignacy as "embryos" who are losers in life and the double(s) of Maciej "out of his own power." This is similar to Witkacy's *Multiple Self-Portrait*, in which the image of the writer, who is turned backwards to the viewer, is re-doubled in two mirrors set in front of him at different angles. This unusual photography reflects Witkacy's dissociative identity structure determined by the "knots" of the intersecting gazes of his four mirror doubles. It also gives an insight into the structure of his literary world, in which the main male characters usually represent the two aforementioned types of doubles.

17) Stefan Okołowicz, "Introduction," in *Przeciw Nicości*, ed. Ewa Franczak and Stefan Okołowicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), 29.

Witkacy, creating his writing world on the principle of mirror doubling and deformation of the “real” world, has to confront his doubles every time. And this occurs with both his double-embryos (Staś, Ignacy) and his double-Maciejas “out of their own power”; he uses these doubles as masks. And there is a third type of double in his writings, a figure whom I would call the double-observer, who always crosses the field of what is seen by multiplying – like the image reflected in two mirrors facing each other – to infinity.

Therefore, it is never enough for Witkacy to have one “final” name-signifier as a metaphor for himself, to which he could be permanently fixed as a subject. He always has to create the name anew in a slightly distorted version, double it and create a metaphor for a metaphor of himself. The pressure to invent new names for himself appears after each state of depression or mental breakdown, after surviving his own death.

Witkacy’s identity is nothing permanent, nothing established once and for all. Witkacy is not really there. Witkacy is constantly splitting, disseminating in his identity: he is in a permanent liquid, dispersed state. Persecuted by his *doppelgänger*s, he must constantly regain his identity. Witkacy “as such” does not really exist.

What exists is only the name-signifier of the writer used mainly by his biographers and monograph critics in order to create the impression that they are writing about “someone,” about a “person,” a “writer” who can always be identified as one and the same “author.” However, this person or author exists only in a constant process of self-doubling. Within this process, he constantly slips away from himself, dies and is reborn in another name-signifier via his new signature written under the next painting, drawing, letter, essay or polemic he creates. Maciej, Witkacy, Witkoś, Vitkatius, Witkasiątko, Mężowitkaś, Onaniśław Spermacy Witkasiewicz and so forth.

In this constant doubling by time and again giving oneself new names, one can also see a defensive mechanism protecting the subject from falling into madness. Staś constantly “dies” in order to be reborn “out of his own power” by virtue of new names. This identity drama transforms his life into comedy and farce, thus obscuring its traumatic dimension. This dynamic is reflected in the scenes captured in numerous photographs, wherein he parodies others or himself, makes funny faces and assumes comical poses. In fact, it seems that in this way alone he is able to neutralize his insecurity and defend himself against the feeling of emptiness and the horror of existence roaming through him on the inside.

These are attempts, after which he “dies” in another depression only to start searching for another name, a face or a pose for himself. If he hoped that by identifying himself with his double Maciej “out of his own power” he would solve his identity problem, this was only an illusion. The point is that no name is really “out of its own power.” The one who gives it to himself or herself always takes it from the resources of tradition, from the existing language. That name, like the pseudonym “Witkacy,” seems to be his own idea (an idea drawn from the idea of de Beaurain) because it is not in the calendar of names. Yet somehow, in its “distorted” form, it refers to tradition.

5.

Here we come across another “knot.” This is marked by a conflict between Witkacy’s attempt to create a mythology of himself as a self-determining subject, Maciej – his right and goal – and the fact that in the choice of this name, the Other of language and tradition has its significant participation. It is clear the writer can never identify himself permanently with his name, because it is never entirely his own.

For similar reasons, he cannot permanently identify himself with the pseudonym (“Witkacy”). Although this pseudonym establishes and confirms his separateness from his father’s name, it is not entirely his own, since it consists of fragments of his father’s surname and his grandfather’s middle name. Thus, the act that established it was a one-off and external act, one incapable of touching on who Witkacy is as a subject. As a result,

the pseudonym “Witkacy” must be constantly replaced by other names, contingent as they are, each bound up with a particular situation.

So, the gesture of naming oneself has to be repeated in relation to the successive names, substitutes for “Maciej” and parodist modifications. They are like the grimaces in which Stasio shows his new comically twisted face: Witkaś, Vitkacy, Witkasiewicz, Witkasiński, Mahatma Witkac and so forth. It is enough to follow the sequence of his changing signatures in letters to Helena Czerwijowska and to friends and acquaintances.

As I mentioned above, unlike Bruno Schulz, who was painfully affected by the downfall of his patriarchal father figure, Witkacy’s problem is the father who tries to dominate him behind the mask of an “enlightened” authority. Witkacy’s entire writing is defined by the subcutaneous struggle against the overwhelming figure of this authoritarian father who projects his own unrealized life ambitions and plans on his son. The authors writing about Schulz point to the fact that the decline of the figure of the father in his novels corresponded to the deep changes in European Societies that began around the turn of twentieth century. Witkacy’s writing is based on a different relation to the father figure, equally characteristic of contemporary times. In this relation, the father, assuming the mask of an open, tolerant partner in discussions with his son, tries to manipulate his son’s identity for the sake of his own narcissistically colored ideas in order to compensate for his own failures in life.

Witkacy rebelled against his father’s manipulative tendencies, distancing himself by means of parody and distortion from his own identity projected on him by his father. This is evidenced by the questions he constantly asks, in which his own identity appears to him as a problem. These questions appear in his letters to Czerwijowska, to his wife and others, as well as in his journalism and philosophical treatises. The heroes of his dramas and novels also ask those questions. He himself continually asks them, which proves that his “neurotic” identity is in deep crisis. Therefore, it is evident he has a constant problem (with his “name”). He rejects the names given to him by his father (Stanisław, Ignacy) as alien to him and dead, while the name Maciej, arising “out of his own power” in opposition to the names chosen by his father, terrifies him, bringing to mind a “monstrosity.”

6.

Witkacy will never free himself from his doppelgängers. And this is true for both those “embryonic” ones, Stanisław and Ignacy, emerging on the plane of the parental mirror set before him, and for those “monstrous” ones, like Maciej, emerging from the depths of the Real. And the name-pseudonym “Witkacy,” which he called into existence with the help of de Beaurain (though it enabled him to stress his own autonomy as an artist in relation to the “Name of the Father”), would not have in his eyes the status of a name with which he could permanently identify.

This constant parody of his name-signifier, “Witkacy,” corresponds to the sequences of comic poses and faces that we see in his photographs. It is as if he reproduced himself in them as well, creating cycles of mimicking double-names. However, by taking these comical-theatrical faces and poses, he escapes from himself into a mask of himself, while placing his subjectivity in parentheses. It appears the only way – by becoming elusive to himself and others – that he could control the terror of reality that paralyzes him.

The status of such a face or pose – in which a mask, twisted with a grotesque grimace, replaces the world as it is experienced on a daily basis – can also be observed in his dramas, novels and paintings. In them, too, the “content” of this world is put into question, giving way to its parody, which becomes its only *raison d’être* and goal. It is then, as in a dream wherein the grotesque form of the mask comes to the foreground (in what seems to be a pure absurdity), so that the viewer can analyze its construction. Thus, in Witkacy’s confrontation with his grotesque doubles, in their poses and faces, in which he ironically doubles himself, his theory of Pure Form in art is born.

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