



Marci Shore

INTRODUCTION TO WITKACY'S LETTER TO ROMAN INGARDEN (23 October 1936)

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written for K & K

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz – known as Witkacy – was narcissistic, hedonistic, and prone to dabbling in the demonic. An avant-garde painter, playwright and novelist, Witkacy had a manic appetite for pornography, orgies, and mind-altering substances. He wrote to his wife of his erotic adventures, all the while telling her how much he loved her, how their marriage was ideal. “Husserl read for the second time is extraordinary, yet I hold against him too much dogmatism in his thesis of absolute truth and too little evidence of necessity,” Witkacy wrote to his wife in one letter.¹ “A man must have many women and a life together with one is only a form of onanism,” Witkacy wrote in another.² He was ever on the brink of madness. To his friends he indulged continually in threats of suicide. When he turned to philosophy, it was with the goal of “creating metaphysics with the absolute exclusion of God.”³

Witkacy first met Roman Ingarden, Husserl’s erstwhile student, in 1924 in Toruń, where Ingarden attended a lecture by Witkacy – who did not make a very good first impression. He read too quickly, and what he read was somewhat opaque. Moreover, he prefaced the lecture by telling the audience that he might not be able to perform very well, given that he had thus far that evening consumed too little alcohol. To Ingarden, Witkacy appeared cavalier and pretentious, “as if internally uncrystallized.”⁴

Witkacy, the artist, was also an aesthetic theorist who followed the avant-garde ethos of breaking with representation, decoupling form and content and inverting their

- 1 Witkacy to Jadwiga Witkiewiczowa, Zakopane, 11 March 1929; Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Listy do żony (1928-1931)*, ed. Anna Micińska and Janusz Degler (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2007), 86. “Husserl czytany po raz drugi jest nadzwyczajny, jednak zarzucam mu zbyt wielką dogmatyczność w jego tezie o absolutnej prawdzie i za mało dowodów konieczności.”
- 2 Witkacy to Jadwiga Witkiewiczowa, Zakopane, 27 September 1929. Witkiewicz, *Listy do żony*, 154. “Mężczyzna musi mieć wiele kobiet i że pożycie z jedną jest tylko formą onanizmu.”
- 3 16 April 1937, Zakopane. Roman Ingarden and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Korespondencja filozoficzna*, ed. Bohdan Michalski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN/Collegium Civitas Press, 2002), 62. “Właśnie chodzi mi o to, żeby stworzyć metafizykę z absolutnym wykluczeniem Boga...”
- 4 Roman Ingarden, “Wspomnienie o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu,” *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: człowiek i twórca*, ed. Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Jerzy Eugeniusz Płomiński (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1957): 169-176. “człowiekiem jakby wewnątrznie nie dokrzystalizowanym” (p. 170)

traditional hierarchy. His aesthetic program of "Pure Form" involved treating "pictures as certain constructions of shapes imbued with a life of their own, possessing a formal unity independent of the objects being depicted." Witkacy set pictures as Pure Form in opposition to pictures as "some kind of reflection or individual interpretation of the visible world."⁵ "Form as the construction of the complete work is everything," he declared, "and so called 'content' is an inessential addition."⁶

Ingarden regarded Witkacy's Pure Form as "insufficiently precise" – but no matter: with Ingarden, Poland's most important philosopher of aesthetics, Witkacy never spoke about aesthetic theory.⁷ It was only after a 1935 encounter in Zakopane that the two men grew close, and by then Witkacy had lost interest in aesthetic theory and turned to ontology. Nazism had come to power in Germany, and Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Józef Piłsudski died, and Poland's fate was uncertain. But Ingarden and Witkacy never spoke about politics. They spoke only about pure philosophy.⁸

Witkacy shared with both Husserl and Freud a desire to probe the essence of subjectivity. Witkacy's ideas were often closer to Freud's, yet it was Husserl who was Witkacy's obsession, his philosophical nemesis, the object of his graphomaniacal assaults. A disembodied Husserl appeared time and again in Witkacy's hallucinogenic Bildungsroman, *Nienasyćenie (Insatiability)*.

Written in 1927, *Insatiability* told the story of Genezip ("Zip"), who lost his virginity to a princess, faced an invasion of communist China, and ultimately encountered the pill of Murti-Bing that allowed for the transcendence of the self through the dissolution into a unity.⁹ The themes of the novel were "life's diabolical possibilities;" obscenity, madness and disgust; metaphysical horror and the demonic nature of sexuality; and the desirability of death. Witkacy wrote not only of orgies, but also of "metaphysical masturbation" – that is, philosophical solipsism and problems related to it: "the essentially non-dimensional ego" and its splitting; the inconstancy of the "I"; and the inability to come to terms with the alien ego of the other.

The characters in *Insatiability* struggled with the unbearable burden of subjectivity. The composer Putricides Tenzer, with whom the young Zip had a sexual encounter in the woods and whose kiss was revolting, "perceived more clearly than ever the awesome truth of the futility of transcending the bounds of one's own ego."¹⁰ The ego held its victim captive, yet it was simultaneously fragile – subject to synchronic splits and inconstancies across time. At one point Zip's "ego collapsed in a pile of random, disconnected, indeterminate states. The latter were 'intentional acts,' as posited by the phenomenologists: suspended in a void, impersonal."¹¹ Husserl hovered ever in the background, a foil for the omniscient narrator's rebellion. The princess to whom Zip lost his virginity said to a Jewish logician who appeared,

Ha, ha! Oh, do be serious, Mr. Benz. In one breath you mention Bergson, the biggest *blagueur* in the history of philosophy, and Husserl, a truly inspired madman whose

5 Stanisław Igancy Witkiewicz, "On 'Deformation' in Pictures," *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930*, ed. Timothy O. Beson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2002): 251-253, quotation 251.

6 See also Witkiewicz, "Aesthetic Sketches," *Between Worlds*, 261-264, quotation 264.

7 Ingarden, "Wspomnienie o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu," 170. "za mało ściśle"

8 Ingarden, "Wspomnienie o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu," 170.

9 Czesław Miłosz famously borrows from Witkacy the idea of the pill of Murti-Bing in *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage International, 1990).

10 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, trans. Louis Iribarne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 93.

11 Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, 389-390.

mistakes are worth a hundred times more than all the correct assertions of academic pseudoprudes too squeamish for introspection in psychology, even for conceding they exist as far as logical symbols are concerned.¹²

By the 1930s, Witkacy's preoccupation was with the "I." He defined his own concept of "Particular Existence" (*Istnienie Poszczególne*) against Husserl's transcendental ego. In *Insatiability*, Erasmus Kotzmolochowicz, the Quartermaster General of the Polish Army, explained that Particular Existence, unlike Husserl's transcendental ego, was an ego inextricably joined to an empirical body, a self that retained its identity over time. "Being this and no other, once and for all eternity," Kotzmolochowicz said, "is a property of Particular Existence; only *it* can refer to itself as 'I'—not 'I' as an abstraction flitting from one body to another like a butterfly from flower to flower, but something unique, joined to the body indissolubly."¹³

Witkacy explained that by "I" he meant "I" "not in the sense of 'pure consciousness,' because that is a falsification of reality by the 'phenomenological attitude,' but in the sense of the concept of an actual 'I,' that is, a spatial-temporal Particular Existence, an individual, a live creature."¹⁴ In his letters to Ingarden, Witkacy insistently rejected Husserl's "pure consciousness" (*czysta świadomość*). There could be no pure self without content (*czysta jaźń bez treści*), Witkacy protested. The body and consciousness had to be connected; the self had to be located in time and space; an "I" demanded spatiality and extension.¹⁵ Touching a table and touching one's skin were two different things; one's own body was not just an object like other objects, Witkacy wrote (expressing in essence the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* central to Edith Stein's analysis of *Einfühlung*). This living body could not be separated from consciousness.¹⁶ To Witkacy Husserl was committing a fatal error: he "constantly passes over the body and gazes at the world through eyes hanging in the air." "*Husserl,*" Witkacy wrote, "*has no body.*"¹⁷

12 Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, 193.

13 Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, 318-319.

14 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, "Stosunek wzajemny nauki i filozofii," *Pojęcia i twierdzenia implikowane przez pojęcie istnienia i inne pisma filozoficzne (1902-1932)* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2002): 120-142, quotation p. 125. "i to nie w znaczeniu 'czystej świadomości', bo ta jest sfalszowaniem rzeczywistości przez 'fenomenologiczne nastawienie', tylko w znaczeniu pojęcia 'ja'rzeczywistego, tzn. przestrzenno-czasowego Istnienia Poszczęólnego, indywiduum, czyli stworu żywego."

15 Witkacy was very close to Heidegger on some of these points, although Ingarden did not believe that Witkacy ever read Heidegger. See Ingarden, "Wspomnienie o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu," 175.

16 16 April 1937; Ingarden and Witkiewicz, *Korespondencja filozoficzna*, 64.

17 23 October 1936; Ingarden and Witkiewicz, *Korespondencja filozoficzna*, 55. "Ciągłe pomija się ciało i patrzy się przez oczy wiszące w powietrzu w świat. ... Husserl nie ma ciała."