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The Undoing of Culture. Witkacy's Tragedy of the End of the West

Abstract

The article *Undoing Culture: Witkacy's Tragedy of the End of the West* looks at Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's historiographical conception of the condition of Western culture in the first half of the 20th century. The reading of the Polish artist's literary works – dramas, novels as well as his philosophical and aesthetic treatises and journalistic writings – runs parallel to the reading of works by contemporary thinkers, economists, political scientists and sociologists. This juxtaposition makes Witkacy's observations, diagnoses and visions more relevant. They thus become an important tool for understanding the phenomena occurring in the world around us. They are also extremely helpful in studying modernity as such. One of them is the concept of the undoing of culture that is repeatedly considered by the characters in Witkiewicz's works. As a caricatured embodiment of totalitarian ideas, it is an important point of reference for reflecting on the events of the past century, the effects of which are still being felt today. Witkacy took a keen interest in the condition of the West as a civilizational formation. He was convinced of its decline. The undoing of culture is supposed to delay it, while being one of the signs

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of the impending and ultimate catastrophe. It will be a strange tragedy. For as a result of it, people will achieve the happiness they have dreamed of since the dawn of time. They will, however, cease to be human. And this is what Witkiewicz feared most.

Keywords

modernity, culture, West, liberalism, capitalism

Born in 1885 in Warsaw, writer, painter, and philosopher Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz is one of the most important artists of the 20th century, not only in Poland. His work is universal, and touches on problems relevant to all of Western culture in the period of modernity. Originating from local, Central and Eastern European experience, it diagnoses the condition of Latin civilization in general at a time of rapid transformations – political, ideological, and social – which it underwent in the first half of the 20th century. Their consequences are still being felt today. That is why it is worthwhile to read Witkacy (this was the pseudonym that Stanisław Ignacy used) attentively even now, at the beginning of the third millennium.

In this article, we will look at an idea that often comes up in the conversations and discussions of the characters in Witkiewicz's dramas and novels, namely the "undoing of culture." We will begin the analysis of this concept with *The Shoemakers* (1927–1934), Witkacy's last surviving play. The first character in the work to speak on the matter is the prosecutor Robert Scurvy. "Either the whole earth will transform itself voluntarily into a single elitist self-governing mass, which is almost improbable without a final catastrophe – and one that must be avoided at all costs – or culture must be undone," (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 320) he announces, and just when it seems he is going to continue his thought, he abruptly drops it. "I have unbelievable chaos in my head," (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 320), he confesses, and his monologue becomes filled with less relevant remarks that contribute little to what came before. Things are different with other characters. They are more concrete. "Undoing culture without losing spiritual heights – this is our *idée*."

(Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 346), says the most important of the titular shoemakers, Sajetan Tempe. A little later, however, one of his aides, the Second Apprentice, declares that as part of the undoing of culture, some of the machines will be destroyed and the inventors will face death by torture (Witkiewicz, 2004).

These are the rough outlines of some program. It places a levelling emphasis on something that we would instinctively, without strictly defining terms, ascribe to the achievements of civilization rather than culture. After all, the former is closely correlated with the values transmitted by the latter. This was proven, for example, by Max Weber, who analyzed the relationship between, as he put it, "capitalist ethics" and "the inner-worldly asceticism of Protestantism." "Only ascetic Protestantism," we read in *Economy and Society*, "put an end to the search for salvation outside the world, only it created the religious motives for seeking salvation precisely in an inner-worldly occupation" (Weber, 2002, p. 480). There are no, there cannot be, factories without churches, the low without the high, the mundane without the sublime, the corporeal without the spiritual, the transient without the eternal, the profane without the sacred. Without these encounters, sometimes occurring in fierce conflict, our world does not exist.

However, they must be subsumed under a specific system. Certainly not a republican one, because Witkacy saw this one as a catalyst dynamizing the crisis of the West, accelerating its collapse. To better understand the artist's views on this issue, let's cite the reflections of contemporary French philosopher Chantal Delsol (2018) on the "welfare state," which grows, in his words, out of the "ideology of happiness." This political construct assumes that "the only important questions" a person should answer "concern where to vacation and where to buy home appliances" (Delsol, 2018, pp. 134–135). Consequently, the questions that are most important from an existential point of view are pushed aside. They can be phrased as Witkacy did:

why am I this very existence and not another? in this place of infinite space and in this moment of infinite time? in this group of beings, on this very planet? why do I exist at all, I might not exist at all; why is there anything at all?... how could I not have existed at all before my beginning? (Witkiewicz, 2002, p. 12).

Witkacy may have penned these words more than a century ago, but his remarks fit remarkably seamlessly, and thus disturbingly, with the observations of Desol. Both would agree that by focusing on a “vacation spot” and “buying home appliances” instead of looking for answers to questions like “why is there anything at all?,” we lose a great deal of our human condition. According to Witkacy, we lose almost everything.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz was not familiar with the term “welfare state,” whose policies, according to Delsol, are responsible for this state of affairs. He did, however, come across the concept of democracy, whose product, let’s assume without much risk, the “welfare state” is. More often than not, Witkiewicz coupled the word “democracy” with the adjective “insipid”. And he called for its abolition. A radical abolition. “In order to stamp out the lie of democracy, one must not grieve for corpses, and who knows if the so-called Soviet executioners were not right to rage at the end to nip this abomination to the last embryo” (Witkiewicz, 1993, p. 128), he speculated in *The Only Way Out* (1931–1933), his last, unfinished novel. In *The Shoemakers*, Scurvy seems to be making similar plans. “To carry out his program of the bolshevized intelligentsia,” Princess Irina Vsevolodovna Zbereznitskaya-Podberezka explains the prosecutor’s schemes, “he must first kill any vigorous social movement. He will put everything in the drawers, but in the process, he will tear off the heads of half of you for the right measure” (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 321).

There is some demonic logic in this. Since democracy is harmful, dictatorship can be salutary. “I’ve always dreamed that Hitler, the indisputably only guy with balls in Europe besides Stalin,” confessed Witkacy in *Unwashed Souls* (1936) “will accomplish a purely social springel, i.e.... will usher in a radically socialist system, i.e. a truly democratic one, without the hypocrisies of democracy to date, a system free of both kosherism and phalansterism” (Witkiewicz, 2016, p. 228). This happened in 1936, and three years later the armies of “the two indisputably only guys with balls in Europe” invaded Poland. Upon hearing the news, on September 18, 1939, Witkacy committed suicide. Thereby he took a rather clear stance against “socialism taken to its last limits” in the form of both totalitarianisms.

He had already hinted at the terrible alternative they offered, leaving humanity, as long as it still considered oneself humanity, no choice. "Fascism or Bolshevism," thought Putrycydes Tengier to himself in his novel *Insatiability* (1930), "ganz gleich, égal, wsio rawno! – Machine or cattle" (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 108).

We can therefore spare ourselves the debate of whether Witkiewicz was a supporter of communism or Nazism, or both at the same time. He was certainly neither. It would not be amiss, however, to consider the undoing of culture in the context of these two ideologies. They were the esoteric backdrop for the agendas of political parties, which were essentially millenarian movements. Yuri Slezkine (2019), in his excellent three-volume work *The House of Power: The Story of the Russian Revolution*, calls the Communists an apocalyptic sect. According to him, the Bolshevik epiphany owes much to millenarian movements (Slezkine, 2019). Since 1934, in his view, the Soviet Union has been an "ideocratic (theocratic, hierocratic) state composed of nominal believers, controlled by a priestly hierarchy" (Slezkine, 2019, p. 635). The same is true of Nazism. It brainwashed the minds and soaked the souls of its followers, or rather adherents, in occultism. In *Occult Roots of Nazism*, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke takes a closer look at the sick fantasies it spun. He also indicates how inspiring they were to the apostates of the Thousand-Year German Reich, headed by their "messiah," Adolf Hitler.¹ Michael Hesemann, in *Hitler's Religion*, in turn, stated that National Socialism was a "mythical-religious worldview" (Hesemann, 2011, p. 16). The NSDAP's activities, with the goal of uprooting its members from the Church and society, was instead compared to a sect's modus operandi (Hesemann, 2011, p. 230).

The substitution of religious truths with political-social-economic theories, accepted with superstitious naiveté by both the so-called elite and the masses, is one of the hallmarks of modernity. Witkacy's undoing of culture is a grotesque take on this phenomenon. It triggered, and unfortunately still triggers, what Peter Sloterdijk

1 See. N. Goodrick-Clarke, *Okultystyczne źródła nazizmu. Tajemne kultury aryjskie i ich wpływ na ideologię nazistowską*, transl. J. Prokopiuk [The Occult Roots of Nazism: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany], Aletheia, Warsaw 2010, pp. 250–251.

(2013, p. 190) called “immanent zealotry.” What makes this zealotry different from religious zealotry is that it knows no mercy, it does not know how to be merciful. The extremism inherent in it has determined the shape and course of our epoch, which has been beguiled and led astray – and is still being beguiled and led astray, which must not be forgotten – by chiliastic dreams of the introduction of, as Étienne Gilson (2020, p. 288) put it, “the State of God on earth.”

The undoing of culture mocks these dreams, in an effort to dispel the aura of false sanctity surrounding them. There is undoubtedly subversion in this, there is humor, but there is also something more: a warning. Unlike the millenarian originals, which inspire perverse hopes and fanatical enthusiasm, the undoing of culture produces an “immanent fervor” out of a gnawing despair. It filled Witkiewicz, and with him his characters, with a vision of a future so near now that it is disturbingly present, at best the future of tomorrow. The insipidly democratized, more and more yesterday’s modernity evoked in them distaste, irritation, disgust, but only what was to come was, in their minds, the most terrible nightmare. All the more terrible because it was longingly awaited by humanity.

Here we come across perhaps the greatest ambivalence in Witkacy’s historiosophical thought. Being a full-blooded catastrophist, he was simultaneously an equally full-blooded utopian. He believed in the advent of an earthly paradise. Indeed, he was certain of its coming. This was pointed out by Małgorzata Szpakowska, who wrote that in the works of Witkacy

there is also a clear utopian aspect in the traditional sense of the word. A nightmare is depicted in the foreground and with much ingenuity but somewhere far beyond the nightmare one can see the shores of Happy Island. True, Witkiewicz... declared that he did not want to live on it; at the same time, however,... he insisted that he considered his own views and preferences to be anachronistic (Szpakowska, 1976, p. 198).

And he considered them as such, because he was convinced that only unperturbed by existential doubts or the need to search for the meaning of his existence, man will finally reach a state of permanent, absolute eudaimonia, which he had longed for from the beginning.

He will be happy. With the happiness of an animal, admittedly, but he will not feel the slightest discomfort because of it. On the contrary.

A very Witkacian, yet scientific description of such a comfortably organized world – explained to the last conundrum, perfectly ordered and smoothly and efficiently managed – was made by American sociologist and political scientist James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution*. It is worth citing this work here if only because the researcher worked on it in 1940, that is, shortly after Witkiewicz's death. The analysis and conclusions it contains, therefore, refer to processes that Stanisław Ignacy was able to observe and which he described in his novels, dramas, essays and philosophical writings. It is not only for this reason that Burnham's insights should be given some more attention. For not only do they provide an interesting context for the theses and predictions of the author of *The Shoemakers*, but they also reveal a great deal about the mechanisms that shape the reality in which we have come to live: The order growing, as Witkiewicz believed, from the loss, or rather the voluntary relinquishment by our civilization of the ability to experience metaphysical thrills, which had been building the greatness of Western culture for centuries, and now, in modernity, were crumbling with it into banality, blandness, Gleichschaltung, and boredom.

This disintegration is taking place in the heat of violent change. Burnham (1958) pointed out that the political systems like Stalinism, Nazism and the American New Deal are hallmarks of this change. These programs, despite the not inconsiderable differences between them, have one thing in common; namely, they represent a stage in the transformation of capitalism into a managerial community (Burnham, 1958, p. 261). It develops where the economic structure... is based on state ownership of the major tools of production (Burnham, 1958, p. 93). It is managers who are in charge of them in tandem with bureaucrats. From this technocratic union emerges a world where instead of "individuality" the emphasis is on "the state," "private entrepreneurship" is replaced by "socialism" or 'collectivism," while freedom and "free initiative" give way to "planning" (Burnham, 1958, p. 204). The human being turns into a human resource. And his/her only task is to meet ever-growing demands for productivity. The community can be run – managers believe, according

to Burnham – more or less in the same way as one runs... a mass production factory (Burnham, 1958, p. 206). And this will be done according to the most efficient plan, with the maximum use of the world's resources and the most appropriate division of labor (Burnham, 1958, p. 188). It is interesting that Witkacy anticipated, as it were, such an order in *Farewell to Autumn* (1925). He described it as “a mechanism that will be no different from a hive or anthill” (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 116).

Witkacy's characters try to oppose him. Or at least – since an effective defense against him is not possible – to delay the moment when he gets into top gear. Let's take a look at two such “brakes”: Leon Węgorzewski from the play *Mother* (1924) and Athanasius Bazakbal, the main character from the novel *Farewell to Autumn*. The young men ponder how to protect themselves and others from the impending catastrophe of the lot of insects that have nothing but their work. The two, though separately, come to similar conclusions. It is necessary to start by creating the right “atmosphere.” Węgorzewski calls it “social,” while Bazakbal calls it “collective.”² As such, it needs large-scale actions. Their goal will be to spread awareness of the impending threat. The information campaign must be carried out on a large scale. A huge scale. Leon speaks of no fewer than of “a billion people,” Athanasius refers to “every, absolutely each and every person.”³ This seems unrealistic, but the young men do not bother with such details in their heads that are red-hot with the passion of the messianic idea. They will realize it by “consuming the organization that has already been conquered”⁴ (Bazakbal), because “this is what we have the organization of the collective for, so as not to give in and kill in it what is harmful to the individual” (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 188) (Węgorzewski). If these ideas were successfully put into practice, there would be a chance

2 See S.I. Witkiewicz, *Mother*, [in:] S.I. Witkiewicz, *Collected Works*. [Vol 7:] *Dramaty III*, op. cit., p. 189. Cf. S.I. Witkiewicz, *Farewell...*, op.cit., p. 417.

3 See S.I. Witkiewicz, *Mother*, op. cit. p. 188; cf. S.I. Witkiewicz, *Farewell...*, op. cit. p. 416.

4 S.I. Witkiewicz, *Farewell...*, op. cit. p. 415.

for the emergence of "new types of people"⁵ (*Farewell to Autumn*), "individuals of a new type"⁶ (*Mother*).

These are bold plans. They involve a rebirth of the human race, a *creatio* from the current humanoid *nihilo*, who is degenerating in an insipid democratic way, of a human being worthy of the name. The undoing of culture will help to achieve this goal. This is what Athanasius contemplates, coming down from the mountains to reveal his truth to the last people.⁷ Yes, this Witkacian Zaratustra or, if you prefer, Moses, is high on cocaine and booze. Sure, he has his wife Zosia Osłabędzka whom he drove to suicide (and their unborn son, Melchior) on his conscience. True, he indulged in the most licentious debauchery with his mistress Hela Bertz, he destroyed people in partnership with her, he headed for perdition at break-neck speed, but hard luck. "A prophet today can be a pig – it's sad, but it's a fact" (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 190), says Leon, a mother-sucking vampire, a spy, a kept man of a suspicious millionaire and last but not least a pimp for his own wife. "Am I not perhaps," wonders Bazakbal, in a way also for Węgorzewski, "a completely ordinary, small, common, sad pig, 'un cochon triste'?" (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 13).

Yes, they are utterly ordinary, small, common pigs. The harm they do does not originate in their condemnable power of arch-monsters, but rather in their palpable weakness, shallowness, spiritual unfulfillment and flawed character. "I am like some cartridge of a high grade brand of explosiveness, lying quietly in the meadow. But so far there is no cannon and there is no one to fire me" (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 192), whines Leon. The novel's narrator writes the following about Athanasius: "Like a cannonball fired from the mysterious abyss of being, he kept rushing to crash and shatter at the end of his life, with the same senselessness with which everything else was also rushing toward its end" (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 15). These wet percussion caps from the family of eternal misfires, despite their awareness of their tinny nature, have the audacity to aspire to the role of saviors of humanity. To become them, they must artificially

5 S.I. Witkiewicz, *Farewell...*, op. cit. p. 418.

6 S.I. Witkiewicz, *Mother*, op. cit. p. 189.

7 S.I. Witkiewicz, *Farewell...*, op. cit. p. 417.

trigger their explosion. "In the end, someone had to sacrifice himself in order to do what I did just as Judas had to sacrifice himself in order to betray Christ" (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 186), Leon lights his fuse with the flint of biblical comparison. "Now humanity needs a new type of prophet," we hear in turn from Athanasius, "but one different from those socialists of the nineteenth century. Programmatic degeneracy needs to be metaphysicalized a little for the sake of charm, to demonstrate its transcendental necessity. No known religion will help here as something completely new must be invented" (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 155).

We learn from the novel *Insatiability* that it has already been developed – this is something completely new. The wise men of China already took care of it. The troops of the Middle Kingdom are standing close to the Polish border, preparing to attack. Not so much against Poland, but against the West as such. However, this is not a conquest, or at any rate not just a conquest, but a rescue mission. For it was concluded in Beijing that the "mad whirlpool (not a string) of rising culture" that has been unleashed in the West, having accelerated sufficiently, will lead to the "overcomplication of life," and this in turn will end in the "complete annihilation of mankind" (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 554). To avoid this, the races must be crossed. An Aryan-Mongolian genetic mix will "revamp humanity," at least according to the Chinese. Then "unknown possibilities" will open up.⁸ "Perhaps the undoing of culture," ponder, moreover, the theorists from behind the Great Wall, already standing at the gates of Europe, "and stopping it in its tracks will prove necessary only for a certain period of time," at which point it is crucial to "contain and channel the power of 'wild capital, the main element of acceleration'" (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 555).

When it comes to "wild capital" and its subjugation, there is something to it, insofar as one treats it not as a "major element of acceleration" but of decay. In the economic realities of the West of the beginning of the last century, and the first part of the current century, capital, and decay, too, were linked to the so-called free market. The vigorous development of the latter, as Hungarian economist Karl

8 See S.I. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, op. cit. p. 555.

Polanyi (2010, p. 91) argued, "led to changes in the organization of society itself. Somewhere along the way, society became an appendage of the economic system." Social relations, hitherto determining "economic motivations," began to be determined by those motivations themselves,⁹ "soulless" creations focused solely on generating "an automatic increase in materially conceived wealth" took the place of the former institutions that used to order collective life (Polanyi, 2010, p. 261). They were the ones that made, according to Delsol, the choice of a "vacation spot" and the question of "buying home appliances" virtually the only stimulators of the intellectual-spiritual life of the Western person of the modern era. If we wanted to use Witkacy's term for this style of thinking, the birth of which he observed with disgust and trepidation, we should choose the expression "Pyknic philosophy." It is referred to in *The Shoemakers*, and its program is summarized briefly: "to eat, read, chatter, fool around and go to sleep" (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 377). A follower of this Witkacian variant of the "ideology of happiness" that Delsol described, "has a radio, has a stylo, has a cinema, has a date, has a belly and a non-smelling, non-leaking ear, has everything you can dream of," and at the same time "is vile guano, a disgusting abomination" (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 307). And he doesn't care.

But he could care. For if he gave it more thought, he would realize that the radio, stylo, cinema, date and fooling around are not the pinnacle of what a human being can achieve and should desire. One's needs go far beyond consumption. Focused on it, we fail to notice that our freedom of choice is gradually being taken away from us. The fact that this is happening under the banners of liberalism does not make the situation any better. After all, this system has redefined the concept of freedom. It believes that freedom is not based on the virtue of self-restraint, as it used to be in ancient times and in Christianity, but the opposite: freedom is the unfettered satisfaction of one's own needs, whims and fancies. To prevent it from turning into anarchy, someone, or rather something, must control

9 See K. Polanyi, *Wielka transformacja. Polityczne i ekonomiczne źródła naszych czasów* [The Great Transformation: The political and economic origins of our time], transl. M. Zawadzka, PWN, Warsaw 2010, pp. 66, 70.

it. This function – of relieving man of his personal duty to control himself and his lusts – is what liberalism attributes only to the state. “Ironically,” states American scholar on the issue Patrick J. Deneen, “when behavior is no longer socially regulated, by such anachronisms as tradition, custom, and decent upbringing, the state must constantly expand through rampant legislation and regulatory activity. The “empire of freedom’ grows at a rapid pace hand in hand with an ever-expanding area of state control” (Deneen, 2021, p. 12).

This, I believe, is what Witkacy warned against when he prophesied the doom of the individual. Replacing a parish priest, a parent, members of the immediate, neighborhood community with an official is no liberation. It is one of the most ruthless types of oppression because it depersonalizes people into petitioners, and abstracts their real problems into codes of conduct, applications, permits, files, and signatures. Bureaucracy has no conscience, it has procedures. Faced with sprawling bureaucracy, the average citizen, so still called for the sake of appearances, is simply helpless. So, he or she is at the mercy of the administrative machine and its masters. Leading liberals believe, writes Deneen, that we must weaken the energy of the people all the time, offering to satisfy their private affairs and then protect them through the distant actions of the elected plutocracy and the bureaucrats of the liberal state (Deneen, 2021, p. 249). As you can see, the authorities enjoy the greatest freedom in liberalism. This is seemingly nothing new, and yet this is a little sad. “Democracy,” noted Colombian philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila (2009, p. 80), “builds totalitarianism with liberal tools.”

Deneen, it is worth noting, would disagree with the South American thinker here. According to him, it is the other way around: it is liberalism that builds totalitarianism with democratic tools. Hence Witkacy’s fear of them.

Some consolation may be found in the freedom that the liberal order provides its subjects to pursue their desires, or, to use a less seductive phrase, to satisfy their consumer hunger. Buyers, who are consumed by it, chasing after sales, promotions, bargains and discounts, have a rather vague, if any, grasp of the rules governing the economy. For them, they are semi-magical, of the spells they know only credit and, of course, debit. Therefore, they completely

rely on the opinions of economists, stockbrokers, bankers and other priests of the free market in white collars instead of clerical collars. In this way, liberalism creates, as Deneen (2021, p. 44) puts it, a cage of economic necessity. Trapped in it, culture becomes synonymous with hedonistic titillation, emotional vulgarity and absentmindedness, where the whole is subordinated to the promotion of consumption, lust and entertainment. As a result, argues the American, superficially self-exaggerating, socially destructive behavior begins to dominate in society (Deneen, 2021, p. 78).

"The introduction of the free market," therefore, to refer again to Polanyi, "not only did not eliminate the need for control, regulation and intervention, but increased their scope enormously. Administrators had to be constantly on guard to ensure the smooth operation of the system" (Polanyi, 2010, p. 167). "In essence," Joseph E. Stiglitz adds in his introduction to the work of the Hungarian thinker, "truly free markets for labor and goods never existed" (Stiglitz, 2010, p. ix). "Wild capital" was not, then, such an untamed beast as a reading of the passage of *Insatiability* cited above would suggest. It was always a farmed, domesticated creature, let off the chain by its masters to pounce at their command and bite the throats of those they named.

This does not change the fact that, according to the Chinese of *Insatiability*, the formula has been exhausted. "The thing is as simple as the construction of our prayer mill: you don't know how to govern yourselves and you are racially exhausted," proclaims one of them, only to promptly add that for him and his fellows "politics doesn't exist... as such: it is all about scientifically organized and regulated production. We will organize your life and you will be happy" (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 599). This global reset will be done in order to maximize the efficiency of production. This is probably what "scientifically organized and regulated manufacturing" is supposed to accomplish. We are talking here, therefore, about a world similar to the one described in *The Managerial Revolution*. The undoing of culture will play an important role in its creation. Not as an end in itself, however. The representative of the Middle Kingdom quoted above sees it as "a springboard for a leap. What will be the possibilities of an economically well-off mankind," he muses like Bazakbal

and Athanasius, “even we can’t predict. Maybe it will only be made happy, and all higher forms of creativity will have to disappear – tough” (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 599).

Tough, but it’s also a bit of a shame. If the undoing of culture is a springboard, so to speak, it is a double-edged one. On the one hand – taking a better, more forward-looking view – people with heads that have been bastardized into insipid democratic heads and souls that have been transformed into fodder for “wild capital” are rising higher and higher. On the other hand – taking the worse view without any prospects for the future, facing the earth as hard as the verdict of the Spirit of History – people are still jumping on it, lower and lower. The former, the more former and the most former. The kind into which Western man metamorphosed in the declining phase of his existence, just before his final degeneration into a beehive or anthill.

An interesting list of such his decadent incarnations can be found in Witkacy’s *Janulka, Daughter of Fizdeika* (1923). It was compiled by Neo-Crusader Grand Master Gottfried Reichsgraf von und zu Berchtoldingen. He lists Matthias Korbova, Gyubal Wahazar and Hyrkan IV – characters from Witkiewicz’s earlier dramas: *Matthias Korbova and Bellatrix* (1918), *Gyubal Wahazar, or On the Passes of Nonsense* (1921) and *The Cuttlefish, or The Hyrkanian Worldview* (1922)¹⁰ – only to enumerate the errors of the dramatis personae he mentions. He justifies this on the grounds that “without mutual confessions, without complete sincerity of psychic titans that are absolutely equal to each other, there can be no real deformation of life” (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 128). The implication is, firstly, that he himself considers himself one of these titans, or at any rate considers them to be important reference points for himself. Secondly, however, we learn that “psychic titans” deal with the “deformation of life.” In turn, they deform it in order to turn Being – cast by modernity in the veneer role of a supporting character of the tertiary farce called everyday life – into the title protagonist of the tragedy of Existence they stage. Its catharsis consists, to borrow the term of Hyrcanus IV from

¹⁰ See S.I. Witkiewicz, *Janulka, daughter of Fizdejka*, [in:] S.I. Witkiewicz, *Collected Works*. [Vol. VIII:] *Dramas III*, op. cit. p. 128.

The Cuttlefish..., in arousing "Hyrceanic desire" (Witkiewicz, 1998, p. 442). It is not the grotesque whim it appears to be on the surface. It refers to one of man's basic existential needs.

For "the human spirit," as Stanisław Ignacy understood it, has always "aspired in a terrible struggle with the Mystery" to develop "a system of concepts." Witkacy defined these in *New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom* (1919) as "the Absolute Truth." The search for it was once "a necessity of the human soul in its highest manifestations" and resulted in "the greatest works" of the soul. All would be well, or at least not so bad, were it not for the fact that this time irrevocably passed. This happened because "the question of a self-governing society came to the fore." And in it, "everyone: the strong and the weak, the wise and the foolish, could be happy, and the pursuit of Truth, which had no meaning in the course of making people happy, became socially worthless and even harmful" (Witkiewicz, 2002, p. 182).

"Hyrceanic desires," defined in *The Cuttlefish...* as the desire for "the absolute in life" (Witkiewicz, 1998, p. 442), can be considered a call triggered by the hunger for "Absolute Truth." "Psychic titans" practice their theater of spiritual shadows of the past among the inhabitants of a radically non-Hyrceanic world who are completely indifferent to such sensations. In a metaphysical stupor, without knowing it themselves, this pathetic excuse for a person toddles by the millions from the workplace to his or her home, stopping along the way to use mind-numbing pleasantries of the rotting remnants of Western culture. With such an audience, the enterprise of the "psychic titans" is doomed to fail. If not to get a bullet in the head.

This is a lesson sorely learned, for example, by Maciej Korbowa's companions, massacred at his behest by the "representatives of happy humanity" in the play's finale, when they could no longer escape from the enraged reality into even the wildest fantasies. Lush they are, indeed, frenetic and captivating. They wobble over their own fantasies, and eventually slip like a clown on a banana peel, over the laws that mercilessly govern the real world, and smash their dreamy heads against the gray ordinariness. Then the "psychic titans" sober up. They sober up to be sad. "Only one thought nags at me," confesses Berchtoldingen in Janulka... during one such moment of katzenjammer

clairvoyance, “that to create a situation like today’s we didn’t need as much as a state, with all the trade, industry and so on.... A small room in some third-rate hotel would have sufficed. Doesn’t the background outgrow what was supposed to appear on it?” (Witkiewicz, 2004, p. 147). Well, yes it does. But what else is left? “Recognizing the necessity of social transformation and the absolute impossibility of going back to the old days of the monstrous oppression of millions of the weak by a few of the strong, we cannot, however, turn a blind eye to what we are losing through our socialization,” wrote Witkacy in *New Forms in Painting...* “perhaps this realization,” he continued, not without gloomy hope, “will allow us... to experience our contemporary artistic work in a meaningful way, which, though it enters the realm of madness perhaps, is nevertheless the only beauty of our epoch” (Witkiewicz, 2002, pp. 164–165).

Case in point. If we are going to end up ignominiously, we are going to end up dwarfed, shallowed, progressively primitive, then at least let’s end up beautifully. That is, as beautifully as we can. Yet. Because soon it will be too late even for that.

Shortly after the provocative praise of the Bolshevik hatchetmen, *The Only Exit* provides us with a diagnosis of the current condition of the “fine arts.” As is Witkacy’s infamous custom, they have “died” “before our eyes.” Given the above, one must grow “not art = true literature” on their rotting carcass. It should give up lulling the audience with the drug of “pseudo-beautiful hypocritical specters of our reality.” Instead of programmatically cretinizing the audience with blissful visions of a banal existence devoid of any Mystery, it must show it all its “ferocity and brutality,” “this beautiful monstrosity indeed” of our, that is, people’s, existential situation which is terrible in its inscrutability. After all, it is from it that culture grew as an antidote to it. “Let all civilization retreat three-quarters, if its further progress is to go in the direction it is going now” (Witkiewicz, 1993, p. 129), that is, towards the bastardization of existence, making it a matter of the proper functioning of glands, the undisturbed course of physiological processes, the satisfaction of animal instincts, the “purchase of household appliances.”

Perhaps, then, the idea that interests us here, encompassing ideas of politics, economics and social life, is in its essence an aesthetic

concept, an item in the repertoire of the theater of “psychic titans”? We do find out, after all, that Athanasius Bazkbal, the main character of *Farewell to Autumn*, “composed his life subconsciously like a real work of art” (never mind that right afterwards the vigilant narrator adds, “but on a small scale, unfortunately”) (Witkiewicz, 1992, p. 54). He shares this trait with many of Stanisław Ignacy's other protagonists. A significant number of them, as Jan Błoński (2003, p. 232) argued, “want to shape their lives on the model of a work of art.” Wherein, by the way, they faithfully imitated their author. Or he imitated them. “The theater of life, continually created by Witkacy, seeps into art and vice versa. It is impossible, when considering his work, to avoid the mixing of these spheres,” said Wojciech Sztaba (1985, p. 165). With that said, as Maciej Soin (2002, p. 117) noted, “the adventures of Witkacy's theater characters are related to his historiosophy and can be explained by historiosophical considerations.”

Arranging the events in which his protagonists participate into grotesque sequences of absurd sketches, among which the undoing of culture is one of the jokes that are as bitter as tears, was therefore not only a purely formal gesture on Witkiewicz's part, stemming from the poetics he adopted, but also an attempt to capture as faithfully as possible the ghastly *Zeitgeist* of the era. It had been hovering over the West since the French Revolution in the form of a seemingly innocent, light mist of faintly democratic ectoplasm. The merry spirits of liberalism, progress, affluence, universal equality, liberty and fraternity were nimbly frolicking in it. Meanwhile, quite unethetically, it morphed into a flesh-and-blood tyranny. Witkacy's despots from the ranks of the “psychic titans” are sometimes too easily dressed up in the costumes of its leaders whom we know from the history of the twentieth century. The generallisimuses and *führers* of the past century, and this century as well, who wanted, and still want, to grab the world by the face first and foremost. Witkacy's heroes, on the other hand, want, and *NEED*, to grab it by the arché. Like a drowning man by the razor. “Then, as usual, death will follow,” declares Hyrkan IV bluntly, “but coupled with that feeling that life has been lived on the heights and not in a foul social swamp, with art instead of morphine” (Witkiewicz, 1998, p. 450).

The art-morphine, most likely produced according to the recipe specified in *The Only Way Out*, i.e., “some shit specially fabricated for this purpose, products of our messed-up brains” (Witkiewicz, 1993, p. 129), anesthetizes its audience to the Mystery of Existence. The repertoire proposed by the “psychic titans” has the opposite, stimulating effect. It allows one to experience existential anxiety against the backdrop of a sense of the complete inscrutability and meaninglessness of existence, which is a human, arch-human experience. Power here is only a means, not an end. The more absolute it is, the more Hyrcanic it is, and therefore the more resilient in stimulating the lust for “the absolute in life.” It springs directly from “Absolute Truth,” that deepest longing of the human soul, its greatest inspiration and only source of nobility.

But what to do if it has dried up? Or, at best, it has become so muddled that something alive in it can only die? Every endeavor of the “psychic titans” – even back then, in Witkiewicz’s time, and in our time even more so – “is mere theatrical baloney.” To quote Ella’s mother, equating the fantastic kingdom of Hyrcanus to the ground under a mordant tinsel-tangle for social waste: “a bunch of lunatics and drunks, corrupt and degenerate, set on pretending to be a state in the old style. Shame on you! Hyrkania! Simply ‘bezobrazje’ à la manière russe” (Witkiewicz, 1998, p. 454). And at the same time a tragedy à la manière Witkacy: a tragedy of the end of the West, taking place among the witz dell’arte. The undoing of culture is the motif around which several of its lazzi are played out, until the commedia becomes finita and pity and trepidation are left behind. Both are like empty laughter. After all, there will be no one to feel them. Who knows if there is no one now? Or is it just beginning not to be? It is good to end with hope. Witkacy did not have any.

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