

Paweł Polit

## Philosophical Marginalia by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz<sup>1</sup>

Philosophical marginalia are the lesser known form of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's creative activities. They embrace the notes and drawings that the artist and writer made in the 1930s in the margins of the philosophical books he read. Witkacy's marginal notes constitute often humorous comments on the texts he studied and are intertwined with notes of a personal nature; the drawings he added on the edges of pages, frequently acting as illustrations, suggest motifs known widely from his paintings.

Witkacy's philosophical annotations have been preserved on the pages of over thirty books that are currently in the collection of the Library of the Institute of Philosophy of Warsaw University. They constitute unusually valuable documentation of Witkacy's intellectual explorations and passions just before World War II, in the period when he no longer focused upon the painterly practice congruent with the principles of the theory of Pure Form, but concentrated upon developing the principles of his philosophical system.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a fragment of an essay: Paweł Polit: *Fragment, rama, seria. O wizualnych aspektach marginaliów filozoficznych Witkacego*, [in:] *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Marginalia filozoficzne*, exhibition catalogue, ed. P. Polit, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warszawa 2004.

It is not possible to treat Witkacy's marginalia merely as a side effect of his encounters with the text he read; quite on the contrary, they seem to express in an intriguing way the sense of his creative attitude. As Jadwiga Witkiewiczowa, the artist's wife, commented upon the experience of reading in Witkacy's intellectual biography:

He devoted himself to reading with passion. I could not figure out how he did manage to read that much while being engaged in that many activities, such as writing, making portraits, while living that intensely as he did. He employed a certain system which seemingly stood in opposition to any system one could employ in daily life. He strove not to waste any moment in his life; in the pockets of his coat he used to have some book of an appropriate format – at the final stage this was the volume of writings by Leibniz – which he read when riding by tram or by bus. He even visited the toilet with some book – this was called the “toilet reading” in his vocabulary – and that book remained there in the pocket of his pyjamas or dressing gown until he finished reading it.

Most of the reading he did was philosophy. He knew languages: English, French, German and Russian. His library – not especially numerous – embraced primarily philosophical books. Most of them were lost in Warsaw in 1939, with the exception of a number of books which survived in Zakopane. I sold these books to the Philosophical Seminary of the University of Warsaw; they contain a large number of annotations, even short humorous verses, which could be of great value for the explorer's of my husband's output. Stasio's way of reading was not a common reading – this was already the critique of a given work itself.<sup>2</sup>

The adversaries of Witkacy's polemical remarks inscribed in the books' margins were the leading figures of Polish philosophy of the interwar period: Roman Ingarden, Maria Kokoszyńska, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Joachim Metallmann, Alfred Tarski. The list also includes foreign philosophers, such as Emil Boirac, Ludwig Busse, Arthur Stanley Eddington, Bertrand Russell or Alfred North Whitehead (the latter's ideas were commented upon by Witkiewicz on the margins of Joachim Metallmann's dissertation). The list of Witkacy's readings in philosophy, however, are not limited to these names only. There are records of his exploration of writings of Edmund Husserl, the initiator of phenomenological movement; he also devoted extensive texts to theories of the philosophers of language – Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap and other logical positivists of the Vienna Circle – the texts which later became incorporated in one of Witkacy's major philosophical works – *The Psycho-Physical Problem (Zagadnienie psychofizyczne)*.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Witkiewiczowa: *Wspomnienia o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu*, [in:] *Spotkanie z Witkacym. Materiały z sesji poświęconej twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, Jelenia Góra 1979, p. 100.

In his polemical statements – marginal annotations and, subsequently, expanded critical texts – Witkiewicz accuses most of the authors of introducing serious distortions into philosophical subject matter: of suppressing or serious misconstruing ontological questions. The theories they proposed disguise, according to him, in this way or the other, the fundamental problem of psycho-physical dualism: the functioning of a living entity – the Particular Existence – on the crossing of two orders: the temporal one and the spatial one. These authors also conceal the related type of dualism, the one which manifests itself on the existential plane: the gap between the Particular Existence and the rest of the world – and neutralize the resulting experience of one's own exceptionality and solitude: the "metaphysical feeling" of astonishment with the inexplicable fact of one's own existence and the strangeness of the surrounding world.

Coping with the problem of psycho-physical dualism, Witkiewicz opposes any kind of minimizing of the essential, in his opinion, philosophical subject matter. His polemical discussions could be qualified as a kind of psycho-analysis of the philosophical language; in his marginalia and the related critical texts, Witkiewicz enters into a "conversation" with the authors he read with an aim to reveal the artificial character and the falsehood of their concepts and to reach the level of repressed concepts and statements which are grounded – as it is suggested by the title of his most important philosophical work – in the very notion of Existence.<sup>3</sup>

The method of "unmasking" the philosophical concepts employed by Witkiewicz has been described by Bohdan Michalski in his book *Polemiki filozoficzne Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*. In Michalski's view, Witkiewicz used to prove that each theory which makes attempts at eliminating the psycho-physical dualism and rejecting the notion of the self is constrained, "in the last instance, to admit, in a disguised manner [...] the substitutes of all fundamental concepts which it aimed to erase from our view of the world."<sup>4</sup> These concepts return, according to Witkiewicz, in the guise of "masked concepts" which are competitive to "true, i.e. necessary, concepts, which necessarily refer to each existence – concepts which would grasp the psycho-physical duality of Existence."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Pojęcia i twierdzenia implikowane przez pojęcie Istnienia*, Warszawa 1935.

<sup>4</sup> B. Michalski: *Polemiki filozoficzne Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza*, Warszawa 1979, p. 120.

<sup>5</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz, *Stosunek wzajemny nauki i filozofii*, [in:] idem: *Pisma filozoficzne i estetyczne*, Vol. III, Warszawa 1977, p. 87; quoted after B. Michalski, op. cit., p. 119.

Witkiewicz reproaches the representatives of philosophy of language (such as Carnap, Kotarbiński, Tarski, Wittgenstein) for improperly reducing the problematics of ontology in their research concerning the foundations of logic and the principles of construction of linguistic expressions. He ascribes the philosophers, who take as their point of departure the results of particular sciences, the tendency to cultivate what he called 'pseudophilosophical monism' by means of introducing notions which obliterate the fundamental, in his opinion, difference between the objective and subjective spheres. He also suspects the thinkers of the phenomenological circle (Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, Jan Leszczyński) of hypostasizing certain abstract notions and abandoning the realistic attitude by admitting the concept of pure consciousness as the founding centre for the contents of an experiencing subject.

Philosophical annotations inscribed by Witkiewicz on the texts' margins frequently served as the point of departure for his criticism of a given author's ideas in an extended polemical text. During the process of reading, he usually creates a preliminary scheme of argumentation, which he would eventually develop and complete in the full length polemical text; he sketches out his own ideas, drafts the arrangement of questions to be addressed. The activity of annotating provides him also with an occasion to make an inventory of philosophical notions and problems, carefully inscribed in some books, together with the index of relevant pages, on the empty pages neighbouring the title page, or on the inside back of the book's cover. It seems, though, that Witkacy's philosophical marginalia, in addition to performance of their role as an auxiliary function, before they serve as a preliminary plan for philosophical argumentation, constitute a sphere of a purely disinterested game, related to the domain of an aesthetic experience. Within this border-line zone, situated somewhere between the activity of reading and an attempt to construct a complex structure of concepts in the form of an extended philosophical text, the schemes of polemical discussions, drawn on an enormous number of pages, degenerate into form, to become grotesque or fantastical creatures then visible to comment upon philosophical problems, or indeed remain indifferent to them.

What seems to be of significance in this 'conversation' with adversaries, is the theatrical metaphoric of 'masking' and 'unmasking' the concepts they propose – with the metaphoric recurring in Witkacy's polemical statements. When reading his philosophical marginalia, it is frequently difficult to resist the impression of witnessing the course of a philosophical discussion animated by the protagonists of one of his dramas or novels. In these 'essential conversations,' performed on the pages of books studied by Witkiewicz,

the flow of philosophical argument is interrupted time after time with the cut of Witkacy's reply; numerous invocations to the authors and remarks formulated in *ad personam* mode which emphasize the dialogical character of the text. Lines of reference, reaching far into the paragraph of the printed text, sometimes creating a dense network, bring to the mind the notion of theatrical score. Tiny drawings, interspersed with lines and verbal inscriptions, in addition to oval, wavy or angular forms enclosing concise statements, seem to endow Witkacy's marginalia with the character of stage directions, in which it would be difficult not to specify the names of the drama's protagonists; on the cover of one of the brochures – the one containing the text by Alfred Tarski – we find a whole list of fictitious characters: Oneric Picton, Belferic Montero, Kiernożjan Trichinienko, Tryndaljon Oniniwalenko, Miendorlan Purdyfietko... On the cover of the brochure containing a text by Jan Wortman we find the sketchy description of some complex narrative depicting 'common sense philosopher reaching the stage of monadism via animism' – the short annotation being, perhaps, the record of a dream, or inscribed under the influence of drugs.

All of this provokes the suspicion that the operation of 'unmasking' the concepts in his marginalia provide Witkiewicz with an opportunity to 'mask' the characters. He not only introduces real philosophers and fictitious protagonists on the stage, but also introduces his own character – not unlike the procedure he employed for the scenes he enacted for various photographic shots – engaging in the intricate disputes and inscribing his own inimitable text on the fabric of a pre-existing one. Utilizing the very method he employed in his dramas – the method consisting of super-imposing the narrative transparencies one upon the other – he endows any such text with the character of palimpsest; in his hands, the 'found' text becomes the material for creating the new one, reinterpreting the content of the former and transferring it into an altogether different, extra-philosophical dimension. Accordingly, during the course of his reading of the major work by Alfred Tarski, *Pojęcie prawdy w językach nauk dedukcyjnych* (*The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages*), the cover carries the new alternative title – *Unitas multiplex* – expressing the notion of unity in multiplicity, so fundamental to Witkacy's thinking. In another instance, the invocation placed on the title page of the same book, but later erased, evokes the mysterious figure of "God of tiny quantifiers."<sup>6</sup> The dramatic aspect of Witkacy's philosophical marginalia is emphasized by the inscription 'Splyciarze i pogłębnicy' – 'the shal-

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<sup>6</sup> This transcript has been preserved in the form of typescript made by Jadwiga Witkiewiczowa, now in the collection of Książnica Pomorska in Szczecin.

lowers and the deepeners' which written on the inside cover of a history of philosophy book by Friedrich Schwegler; this inscription tells us of the radical polarisation of attitudes commented upon by Witkiewicz – and not only the philosophical ones, it seems. So for Witkiewicz, in this way the experience of reading a philosophical text becomes the equivalent for Witkiewicz to an endeavour to reinscribe it, and the polemical discussion with a particular author is transformed by him into a dramatised, 'conversation of essence.'

## Abstract

This article develops the idea which stood behind the exhibition entitled *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz – Philosophical Margins* held at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, in 2004. This exhibition focused upon the hitherto unknown forms of Witkiewicz's creative activities: it presented the notes and drawings that the artist and writer made in the 1930s in the margins of the philosophical books he read. Witkacy's marginal notes constitute often humorous comments to the texts he studied and are intertwined with notes of a personal nature; the drawings he added at page edges suggest motifs known widely from his paintings. The purpose of the exhibition was to draw an analogy between Witkacy's artistic concepts and his philosophical thinking. The article is meant as a reflection upon the question of place and role of philosophy in his output as a whole.

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