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Identity Traps in Witkacy's Dramas

I am not a minister, factory director, social agitator, nor a general. I am a man with no profession and with no future. I am not even an artist.

Edgar Wałpor in *The Water Hen*

I'll teach you the genuine technique of imaginary life - penetrate your nothingness to the very bottom, be convinced that you are a born fool, an idiot, and a duffer [...] and then create, in the ideal vacuum that nucleus of gravitational field which, expanding, will sustain, without support, the enormous edifice of your new 'self'.

Master in *Janulka, Daughter of Fizdejko*

It would not be difficult to demonstrate that at the cross-roads of the above two statements is the problem of identity. This is typical for so many characters from Witkacy's plays. That is: the need or compulsion to self-create together with the awareness of the inevitability of defeat. The consistent consideration of the issue of mutability of the subject is generally recognised to be a legacy not only of Polish Modernism, but Modernism in general. This style of thought was characterized by the ardent defence of the individual paralleled with a fear that the individual would dissolve in the nameless mass. This style in literature brought new artistic and deeper psychological

descriptions of the processes of “self” disintegration. Meanwhile, it seems that what is so characteristic of the modernist experience of identity crisis has perhaps an equally valid connection with the situation of the subject and its depiction in contemporary life.

The difficulties and problems which Witkacy’s characters encounter with the issue of their own existence seem to chime in, not only with the fairly common conviction of our time that the individual is relatively free to experiment not only with his or her own sense of identity but also with the concept of individual self. This is very much akin to the approach which functions within the Social Sciences. It, therefore, seems evident that it is possible to see a definite commonality between Witkacy and contemporary discourse on the question of identity.

On the one hand, Witkacy approaches the characters in his plays with active, creative formation of themselves; some of these get entangled in it, others enjoy a delusive sense of freedom. Alternatively, he outlines the dramatic conflict between their individualistic aspirations and the extant pressure of the society and culture in which they exist. Techniques, which have their origins in the Social Sciences, permit us to take a different perspective on the relationship between the process-driven nature of identity, i.e. self-creation of the “I” through game and mystification and the conviction that borders are delineated by cultural pressure and social discipline. The drama of in-authenticity of Witkacy’s characters locates them in the sphere of such contemporary constructs of conceptualizing the “I.” It is argued that this indeed is the case with both Lacan’s psychoanalysis as well as Foucault’s thought, while negating the strength of subjective causative influence; they do not restrict themselves to revealing the pressure of institutionalized forms of life, and show such influence already at the micro level.

Contemporary approaches to the notion of the subject have been significantly influenced by the ideas of Jacques Lacan. This applies in particular to those which derive from his discovery of the fundamental role played by the mirror in developing the identity of the child. That is, according to him, the subject obtains a feeling of distinct character by means of visual identification with its own reflection in the mirror. This is at complete variance to the approach propounded by both Descartes and Husserl whereby the subject obtains a sense of distinct character from within.¹ Thus, according to this thesis, the image reflected in the mirror is something external in relation to the subject, something alien in relation to it; this leads to an erroneous

¹ J. Lacan: *Phase of the Mirror*, [in:] idem: *Ecrits. The first complete edition in English*, trans. by B. Fink, H. Fink, R. Grigg, W.W. Norton & Co, New York 2006.

recognition and consciousness of oneself. Thereby, identity as such is believed to be derived from a fallacious inspection, a false suggestion concerning the "I," which remains with us till the end of our life, as an ideal ego. Lacan's concept of the mirror phase provides a paradigm of the way, in which something that remains outside, something else – in this case a mirror – attaches an imaginative shape to the self. A double, as a reflection may also be such a projection, the impersonation of the hidden part of personality. Therefore, the primary experience of erroneous recognition, which occurs as a result of reflection, constitutes the basis of all further experiences on the plane of relationships with other people, including those within the immediate family and above all those relationships which are intimate. The individual becomes locked into the world of appearances.

In Witkacy's dramas, games with identity or indeed for identity are often connected with the structure of the doppelgänger. In this scenario, family relations play a fundamental role. The double, along with the shadow or reflection in the mirror has for centuries enabled the objectivization of the multidimensional internal space. This has permitted the possibility of what is split and not in harmony in the individual to establish separate *personae*. Parents and the family, for Witkacy, appear to be the centre of relations of a social character, which to an immense degree determine the identity of an individual. It is the authority of this kind that the individual is usually not able to set him or herself free. As Erich Fromm recollects, "Family is a psychological agency of society;"² it is a medium through the intervention of which society imposes the mark of its structure upon a child, thus also upon a grown-up. In both instances the presence of the other turns out to be of essential significance: "an other through the relation with whom an update of the identity of the 'I' takes place."³ Michel Foucault suggests in his study, *Words and Things*, that the contemporary subject, which appeared in the 19th century and distinct from the classical subject of the philosophy of Descartes and Kant, searched for its truth not in the thought, but in the subconscious and in the other. Indeed, the reference made to the surrounding persons, whom are in turn, as pointed out by Charles Taylor and Anthony Elliott, of crucial importance for the process of self-identification. That is how the subject perceives itself and therefore it is apparent for individual self-

² E. Fromm: *Kryzys psychoanalizy. Szkice o Freudzie, Marksie i psychologii społecznej* (*The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*), Polish translation by W. Brydak, Rebis, Poznań 2000, p. 159.

³ R. D. Laing: *"Ja" i inni* (*The Self and Others*), Polish translation by B. Mizia, Rebis, Poznań 1997, p. 92-93.

-narrative.⁴ Although Witkacy's characters are not capable of establishing genuine relationships, it is doubtless, that only in contact with the other, with some micro-community, can they make their desires come true, the desires to reach some ultimate, "metaphysical" limits of being. This metaphysical dimension of identity attains much more significance in Witkacy's world than in the concepts of authors quoted above, perhaps with the exception of Taylor. Thus, the sense of man's unity with himself, in moments of deepest feelings or sensations, is manifested at the same time as a feeling of being at one with the totality of being.

The threat to a given individual is, however, not just about the necessity of yielding to the pressures of the external world, but also about those pressures being internalized. The perception of self, according to Lacan, attains its structure by means of projecting the external images. This may undermine the possibility of the subject controlling it and obtaining full autonomy, whereas the emphasis is on the opposite trend of segmentation, cracking, and cleaving, which Lacan refers to by the collective notion of fragmentation. Therefore, the family as understood by Witkacy – apart from the closed groups of sects, which appear in some of his plays – is a model space, where the complementary nature of human relationships manifests itself, so according to this thesis, the "I" is filled or supplemented by others. At the same time, however, nowhere more than in the disciplining world of family does the half-conscious internalization of more than individual norms and rules, principles of collective life occur. A similar mechanism of internalization may also be manifested by means of the double figure. The double, as Otto Rank was to observe at the beginning of the 20th century, reveals the complex relations between the individual and its "I."⁵

The aim of Witkacy, the devotee of the idea of Pure Form in art, is thus to demonstrate the process of leveling the Particular Entity, the process undermining culture at its very foundations in such a way as to separate the family drama from naturalist ideology and aesthetics. In *The Water Hen*, the personality of Edgar is both co-originated and at the same time differentiated by the configurations of the remaining male characters. Here the old Wałpor represents the social order and the power of the oppressive cultural

⁴ C. Taylor: *Źródła podmiotowości: narodziny tożsamości nowoczesnej (Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity)*, Polish translation by M. Gruszczyński et al., ed. by T. Gadacz, introduction A. Bielik-Robson, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2001; A. Elliott: *Koncepcje „ja” (Concepts of the Self)*, Polish translation by S. Królak, Sic!, Warszawa 2007.

⁵ O. Rank: *Don Juan et le Double. Études psychoanalytique*, translated [from German] by S. Lautman, Payot, Paris 1973. The first version of Otton Rank's book about the double came into being in 1914.

mechanisms. This is in the name of whose rules he wants to make Edgar an artist. He is the 'other,' the one who attempts to impose upon the "I" the unwanted identity, albeit that not only because of him Edgar remains under the rule of the system of the false "I," which makes him feel like "a dummy, a puppet." Tadzio and Ryszard de Korbowa-Korbowski, already performing definite doppelganger roles, personify the contradictory sides of the hero's personality and consciousness. In Korbowski, everything that is alien, rejected, abominable, and at the same time contaminated with the stigma of unwanted kinship is focused. Edgar, as Alicja's husband, with matchmaking enforced by the father to strengthen trade interests, does not differ much from his rival, who is Alicja's kept man. In a deeper sense, the hated intruder continuously demonstrates the not-too-distant, yet really probable and gloomy perspective: who Edgar could have become or would have to become in the future. On the contrary, the adoptive son Tadzio, who initially seems to be a kind of superconsciousness of the main character, as he so openly expresses the metaphysical issues, which the latter superseded. Applying the psychoanalytic encoding, one could perhaps assert that Tadzio represents the – dwarfish or perhaps latent, superseded – inner self; manifesting itself at a higher level than the protagonist himself could manifest, the self-observing self, the transcendental self. The "I," which strives to maintain its identity and freedom by not being incarnated, thereby avoids capture, thus escapes the trap of being seized. Such an "I," which in principle desires to be a pure subject, deprived of objective existence, thus also of all, and therefore able to avoid the commitments and obligations enforced by other people or indeed any community.

This readable system of doppelganger structures, the 'unity in multiplicity' captured in theatrical form, breaks down, however, in act III of the drama. The mature Tadeusz rivals his 'father' for the favour of *Water Hen*; he tries to walk in the footsteps of Korbowski, while in the end, as the former, joins the rebellious crowds in the streets. Here then, the 'extraordinary child' and, typical for Witkacy, the 'common new man' who were initially the incarnations of contradictory elements of the protagonist's personality, in the finale of the play become alike. They do this, following Edgar's suicide, such that they manifest in an emblematic way that we are led to see the inevitable absorption of an individual by the future mechanized society.

In another domestic drama, *The Metaphysics of a Two-headed Calf*, Witkacy takes the same approach, but this is more literal than the mainly symbolic perspective taken in *The Water Hen*. He methodically reveals the process of the modeling of the identity of an individual, which concludes with the individual 'fitting into' the social framework. The criticism of competing,

seemingly different systems of upbringing and therefore the criticism of society and culture, takes place here by means of a parody of domestic drama. Here we see the perfect knitting together of the question of ambiguous paternity, confused family connections and indeed erotic complications. The issue of unresolved biological paternity is an even more marked demonstration of the disappearance of paternity than the pedagogic activities of Wałpor. That is: the disappearance of the figure of 'patriarchal' father, or to use the terminology of Lacan: the symbolic father. For Witkacy, one of the most significant symptoms of the fall of the old social order is, undoubtedly, the collapse of the father's authority, as well as that of various institutions which support such authority; in short, the collapse of the social "super-ego."⁶ Despite the shaking of both prestige of parents and the institution of the family, Karmazyniello, a protagonist in *Metaphysics...*, is ruthlessly entangled in the family-society, and utterly subordinated to it. As noted by Hermann Lang when commenting upon Lacan's thought: "parents do not constitute the ultimate instances determining the life of a subject, but are mediated and mediating elements of a certain order, which determines their entire existence."⁷ The network of complicated connections between characters, as well as the grotesquely accumulated complications of the plot, even more emphatically draws out this particular determinism. Children are compelled to repeat the fate of their parents as well as their faults and indeed their crimes too. Family relations, as well as erotic ones, the basis of social organization appear in consequence the irreducible factor which makes it more difficult or even renders impossible the process of self-identification of an individual, and that process – in the light of incidents of this play – will be neither guaranteed nor simplified by any system of upbringing.

Confirmation of this may be seen in the attempt, made by Karmazyniello, to rear children in his own chosen way. This ended in a defeat and paradoxically, underlined the impossibility of disentangling from family and social dependencies. What should self-socialization be like? Should this be an apparent source of grandeur? Witkacy does not even try to show such utopian notions beforehand. In his anthropology, man is not capable of creating himself in absolute isolation from others; an individual cannot become separat-

⁶ Cf. P. Dybel: *Anty-Edyp po polsku. Transformacje Freudowskiej hipotezy kompleksu Edypa w piśmarstwie Witkacego*, [in:] *Wokół Freuda i Lacana. Interpretacje psychoanalityczne*, ed. by L. Magnone, A. Mach, Difin, Warszawa 2009.

⁷ H. Lang: *Język i nieświadomość. Podstawy teorii psychoanalitycznej Jacques'a Lacana (Sprache und das Unbewußte)*, Polish translation P. Piszczatowski, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2005, p. 257.

ed from the community or group, with which she or he is linked by birth or in other ways and cannot function with complete independence. Instead of the possibilities of self-dependent development of identity narrative, what is left is some kind of speeded up education – the awareness of utter submission to social rules, the desire to kill the father, then finally and most importantly, the experience of existential *ennui*. Such experiences, in particular the latter seem to be obstacles, difficult to overcome, for the formulation of – as counter-proposal against somebody else's – one's own projection of the self. It therefore follows that the identity of an individual seems to be something internally torn apart, ontologically unsure, due to constraints and lack of possibilities of individual, free development, both within and outside the system.

In Act III the resurrection of the parents killed earlier has a particularly cruel meaning. A situation such as this brings the illusion of self-development to a definite end and at the same time we see the motif of family and social pedagogy somehow summarized. These parents not only do not consider renouncing their rights, guaranteed authoritatively by the organization of society, but with a redoubled strength take up the task of socializing, which will be even more efficient, as the Mother (Matka) rules out any bonds of feeling, any subject bonds, to replace them with a relation that is purely functional, that is the privilege of wielding power. The victory of the upbringing programme of the Mother (Matka) and Mikulini leads to the restoration of the shaken order, while it, in fact, leads to a catastrophe. "You evil phantoms of abominable people. [...] You are not here at all," repeats Karmazyniello, oblivious of the fact that the rules of existence of humankind cannot be impaired. Parents, as envoys of the community, are the guardians of the order compulsory in the Western world; parent-ghosts are a representation of such a type of dependency, which cannot be removed from the consciousness by any power, whatsoever. The reflection of social and parental pressure is internalized by the individual. This is a strong indication of the effect of the power of such systems, as argued by Michel Foucault, which causes man to imprison himself at the level of the self and subjectivity. This threat is brought about by regularly enforced or mechanical, pretended internalization of values, principles, social attitudes, against which an individual cannot defend her or himself, as is the case of *The Water Hen* or in *The Mother*. In *Metaphysics...*, the threat, personified in the ghosts of parents, stands for the past, which turns into inevitable future.

In his work, Foucault demonstrates the complex interdependencies, such as the issue of finding, shaping, and transforming one's person is always considered in the context of social ruling and reigning. The concept of self,

which emerges from Foucault's thought, is linked directly with the process of *subjugation* – by various ways – in which identity is constructed by social forces and subdued by them. Whereas in his later work, in which he set out to develop such a theory of identity, which would transgress normalizing activities, he developed the idea of 'self techniques,' that however did not imply the invalidation of control mechanisms, but rather the interest in their functioning 'in hiding.' Such an approach on the one hand enabled him to provide characteristics of various ways of creative constitution of identity by individuals. Conversely this enabled him to recognize manifestations of power, such as those which limit or attenuate the various forms of self-expression.

Internalized authority, such as that which is not connected with overt compulsion, yet with apparent space for choice and freedom, makes itself known in Witkacy's experiments of the subject with her or his own identity. It is the more dangerous than those experiments which are about 'metaphysical' goals, which as we know is the one thing of the highest order in Witkacy's writing. Furthermore, of particular significance here is the experience of oneself as the other, which is manifested in a doppelganger relation. In *The Water Hen*, besides the antithetic pair Tadzio – Korbowski, the split personality of Edgar is co-developed by yet another relationship – that with his late friend. Young Wałpor has learnt about the death of Edgar Nevermore soon after the symbolic introduction – the shooting of Water Hen and the "birth" of Tadzio, after which he pronounced the following: "something strange happened. I am on the verge of another life. As if beyond the grave..."⁸ Still, Nevermore "lives" on – he lives in the consciousness of Edgar. The futile struggle against the influence of the Prince and his aspiration to live the life of the artist consumed ten years. The 'Other,' as the second "self" becomes autonomous and thus evokes the feeling that his situation has lost balance. As in the classical literary formulations of Poe, Stevenson, or Dostoevsky, the doppelganger gains control of the self and subordinates it, while every contact with 'him' (the double) entails falling into constraint. Despite his declared disinclination for 'creation in life,' Wałpor failed to overcome the past enough to take up work towards building an independent identity, in the same way as he was unable to free himself from the dictate of his father's social directives. It is Nevermore, or in fact his un-obliterated image, that seems to write an inner scenario, with which Edgar does not identify fully; however, neither is he able to cope with it. The friend from old days

⁸ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Kurka Wodna*, [in:] idem, *Dramaty II*, ed. by J. Degler, PIW, Warszawa 1998, p. 289–290.

becomes his rival, the one who had the freedom of self-determination – thus being an antithesis of Edgar's own nothingness – that is why he is recognized as internal enemy, admired and despised at the same time.

The staging of the voluntary tortures is clearly an attempt of imitative repetition of the circumstances of Nevermore's death, as the latter – bitten by a tiger – 'suffered terribly,' yet 'died beautifully.' This is an act of impersonalization, which consists of receiving a part of the personality of the other, by imitating his behaviours, or – as Lacan would formulate it – by narcissistic identification, meant to drown the feeling of emptiness. This act turns out to be only its own parody – the awareness of being locked in the vicious circle of imitation fails to enforce change; the doppelganger makes one realize the impossibility of absorbing the subjectivity of the other. The true awakening of Edgar, which ultimately allows him to understand both imitation and self-isolation in the social game, derives from the Act III repetition of the situation from Act I. This seems to equate with arrival at the end of existence. It may no longer lead to breaking with the imitation of the imposed identity, but to breaking with life itself.

A different variant of the impact of hidden authority, of authority deeply mediated, upon a subject is presented in the doppelganger relationship of Karmazyniello and Parvis in *Metaphysics of a Two-headed Calf*. Their relationship, sealed by the bonds of blood, reminds one of a relationship of teacher and disciple, originally devoid of the stamp of oppression. Karmazyniello willingly gives up the authority over himself to Parvis, recognizing in him his spiritual father. The Prince, unlike the parents, tempts with the alluring prospect of developing 'wild power', intended to be a guarantee of the unlimited possibility of development. In a fashion which seems to echo Nietzsche's 'will to power,' he tempts with the vision of an individual man, not dependent on anybody or anything. In fact, the only thing he really has to offer is erotic initiation.⁹ The 'powerful' personality project says almost nothing about the conditions of truly individual existence, such as separateness, or the will to establish one's own place in the world. The influence of Parvis is based on the illusion of extending the 'inner space' of the disciple, as he represents what is in prospect, what has not been yet perceived, although it soon turns out he is also the one, who unveils the fearful sides of affinity. Likewise, in the Wałpor – Nevermore relationship, the doppelganger is the figure, which reveals the primary tension within the subject, i.e. the tension between the imaginary identification with the subjective self ("I") and the

⁹ Cf. L. Sokół: *Witkacy i Strindberg: dalecy i bliscy*, Wiedza o Kulturze, Wrocław 1995, p. 371–374.

inability of reaching the level of that imagination in external reality, i.e. the dissonance between what a given person is in her or his own eyes (being-for-onself) and what she or he is in the eyes of others (being-for-others).¹⁰ At the same time, in both of these cases the doppelganger structures, by showing the subject as the 'Other,' deprive it in a sense of its "uniqueness," impairing its individual (subjective) status.

Witkacy's characters are unable to evolve a fortunate narrative of identity, as for them latter represents an area of enslavement, or mystifications and experiments, as a result they lose in the fight for themselves. The problem of identity is, at the same time, founded on a profound paradox. An authentic and autonomous existence is something extremely desirable, yet at the same time the characters, those characters which undertake such a search, are perhaps aware of nothing else more than of knowing that the state of unity with oneself may never be attainable for them. The writer's diagnosis remains very close to contemporary ways of recognizing the subject's situation, which question the subject's autonomy, while formulating the subject's vicissitudes as a much more complex phenomenon than just the determination of an individual by social structures. We are of course aware that in contemporary discussions about identity, the issue is not only how to analyse the impact of institutionalized systems, and the influence of processes at the macro level, but rather how to reveal ways in which the power of community and cultural compulsion work at the micro-level. So, we are more concerned with not so much a collection of rules, imposed by specific groups, but a force that functions with the mediation of language, behaviour patterns, and the order of interpersonal interactions. Witkacy consistently described the fall of the individual in consequence of mass phenomena behind which there are anonymous social forces. Yet, he also presented the equally distressing threat at the level of individual consciousness – play, illusions of self-creation, strategies of subordination, and private zones of coercion.

Abstract

That 'crisis of identity' is one of the central problems addressed by the dramas of Witkacy is primarily linked in the mind of critics to the tradition of modernism. In this contribution I would like to suggest a change of viewpoint, and to present this problem rather from the

¹⁰ R. D. Laing: *Podzielone „ja”*. Egzystencjalistyczne studium zdrowia i choroby psychicznej (*The Divided Self: an Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*), Polish translation by M. Karpiński, Rebis, Poznań 1995, p. 44–45.

point of view of contemporary discourse concerning identity. The problems that Witkacy's characters have with their own existence are in accord, not only with today's quite common conviction that individuals can experiment with their own sense of identity with relative freedom but also with the concepts of the individual ego, derived from the realms of the Social Sciences.

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