

Marta A. Skwara

# What is still not Known about Witkacy's Intertextuality? An Analysis of Witkacy and Słowacki

It may seem surprising that the relationship between Słowacki and Witkacy has never been explored within Polish literary studies. It becomes even more surprising when we go over the following basic facts concerning both writers. Firstly, both Słowacki, a romantic, and Witkacy, a modernist artist have become titanic figures of Polish theatre much beyond their own epochs. Secondly, Słowacki's dramatic works were highly esteemed by Witkacy and, moreover, both artists belonged to the same tradition of "artistic theatre" (teatr artystyczny) according to Witkacy's words. The author of the theory of Pure Form in theatre put it this way: "Mówię [...] o teatrze artystycznym, który u nas zapoczątkował Słowacki, a którego w artystycznej interpretacji filarem był Wyspiański i mógłby być Miciński [...]" ("I am speaking [...] about the artistic theatre, which Słowacki began in Poland: Wyspiański was a pillar of its artistic interpretation, and Miciński could have been another one...")<sup>1</sup> Witkacy placed himself at the end of this long line of tradition

---

<sup>1</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze*, ed. by J. Degler, PIW, Warszawa 1995, p. 370.

being, in his own opinion, one of the Polish theatre artists who explored the idea of theatre as a means of experiencing the Mystery of Existence (przeżywanie Tajemnicy Istnienia).

However what exact role Słowacki played in this tradition has to be reconstructed. Witkacy did not devote any text to Słowacki's theatrical achievements, contrary to his explicit appreciation of Wyspiański's theatre.<sup>2</sup> Still there are various remarks on Słowacki in Witkacy's essays on the aesthetics of theatre which can shed some light on the issue. Contrary to the rich intertextuality connecting his plays – especially *Nowe Wyzwolenie* (*The New Deliverance*, 1920) and *Szewcy* (*Shoemakers*, 1927–1934) – with Wyspiański's works there are very few explicit intertextual devices (such as quotations, paraphrases or direct metatextual allusions) employed by Witkacy in relation to Słowacki's works. It is no wonder that it was Wyspiański who has attracted the attention of Witkacy scholars. In an excellent and still standard monograph on Witkacy published by Daniel Gerould in 1981, Słowacki is not even mentioned while Wyspiański is not only mentioned many times in the context of Witkacy, but also his dramas, especially *Wyzwolenie* (*The Deliverance*), are analyzed as subjects of Witkacy's intertextual plays.<sup>3</sup> In another, more recent, monograph by Jan Błoński, Słowacki appears incidentally and still much less frequently than Wyspiański. Once, Słowacki even seems to appear simply by mistake.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is Błoński's recognition which places Słowacki's artistic world in the context of Witkacy's theatre, even though it is mostly in the form of perceptive hints.<sup>5</sup> If we were to make an attempt to search for the presence of Słowacki in the most recent Polish publication on Witkacy (i.e. in a rich chapter devoted to Witkacy in Michał P. Markowski's book) we would find only a single reference. Namely, a remark on the sense of boredom felt by Słowacki in Paris in the 1830s. with regard to Witkacy's sense of spleen.<sup>6</sup>

The above examples might convince us that there is little to explore. Moreover, modern Polish and non-Polish readers may well be convinced that there is no connection between Słowacki and Witkacy at all. Not only does some distinctive line of tradition seem to get lost in this way, but also

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 361–367.

<sup>3</sup> D. Gerould: *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer*, University of London Press, Seattle and London 1981, p. 109–110.

<sup>4</sup> J. Błoński: *Witkacy. Sztukmistrz, filozof, estetyk*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2000, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> M. P. Markowski: *Polska literatura nowoczesna. Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy*, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. 299.

simple awareness of the fact that the world famous Witkacy<sup>7</sup> whose plays regularly appear both on world and Polish stages, has something in common with the hermetic Słowacki, a mystic Polish artist from the past, whose highly complicated symbolic dramas are hardly ever staged in the world. The whole heritage of Polish theatre tradition is misunderstood in this way, together with the manner in which we perceive Polish romantic literature as such and its importance for modernity and “postmodernity.” I should claim that it was Witkacy, perhaps as one of the first theoreticians and practitioners of the theatre, who put Słowacki’s dramas in a unique perspective, beyond national tradition yet not outside it. Thus I would like to touch upon two basic matters here: how the importance of Słowacki for Witkacy can be explored and how Witkacy’s connections with Słowacki shed light onto the meaning of both Słowacki’s and Witkacy’s heritage today.

Let me start at the very beginning with the role Słowacki may have played in Witkacy’s education. Since this was not a formal education, not counting the external exams that Witkacy took at Habsburg gymnasiums where Słowacki’s works were not on reading lists, home education was especially important. Some unique evidence of Witkacy’s upbringing survived, the letters which his father, himself an artist, would write to his son in the years 1903–1913. The presence of Słowacki in the correspondence is quite characteristic and typical of the role which Stanisław Witkiewicz played in the life of his son. First of all Słowacki, together with other romantic Polish writers, creates the language of the correspondence to some extent since his texts are paraphrased and quoted. Moral values derived from the quotations are the most visible modes of referring to Słowacki by Witkacy’s father. Sometimes, quite characteristically, his interpretation concerns the value of art.<sup>8</sup> It is also worth mentioning in these preparatory remarks that some particular stage performances were evoked in the letters, especially in the context of Helena Modrzejewska, Witkacy’s godmother, who used to star in Słowacki’s dramas.<sup>9</sup> Considering that theatre was a way of experiencing the world both for father and son, one can assume that Słowacki’s art must have been in the very centre of that experience.

---

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to translations into English by Daniel Gerould and others and thanks to connections with the theatre of absurd pointed out by Martin Esslin, Witkacy made his impact on the world stage.

<sup>8</sup> S. Witkiewicz: *Listy do syna*, ed. by B. Wojnowska, A. Micińska, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1969, p. 221. (When it is not specified otherwise, translations are mine.)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

If we proceed now to the opinions voiced by Witkacy himself, as a mature artist and theoretician, we can find many remarks about Słowacki which circle around the same notion: Słowacki is always referred to as the creator of the “artistic theatre,” a theatre in which the representation of reality is the least important factor. In the main theoretical work on theatre published by Witkacy in 1923 (*Teatr*) Słowacki is described as one of “the great masters of the stage” whose works possess pure formal values to the highest degree (czysto formalne wartości w najwyższym stopniu)<sup>10</sup> similarly to the work of Shakespeare. Słowacki’s theatre – together with that of Shakespeare and Wyspiański – is often seen as an example of an excellent formal construction which enables the audience to experience the strangeness of existence in the theatre.<sup>11</sup> We are also told that the work of Słowacki (and of Wyspiański, the two artists are always mentioned in chronological order) is an example of Pure Form created without any particular life deformations: “dzieła Słowackiego lub Wyspiańskiego uznają za Czystą Formę osiągniętą bez daleko idących deformacji życiowych” (“I regard works by Słowacki or Wyspiański as Pure Form achieved without far-fetched life deformations”).<sup>12</sup> Yet, according to Witkacy, both artists of the past: Słowacki and Wyspiański (as with Shakespeare and Molière) achieved pure formal values in their theatre works only to some limited extent. Having appreciated their achievements, Witkacy saw himself as the artist who must go beyond anything they had ever done.

Some elementary assumptions on which Witkacy based his idea of theatre should be recollected here, since without them Witkacy’s remarks on Słowacki, as general as they were, would seem too vague. First of all, it was essential for Witkacy to see theatre as a complex art which originally stemmed from religious ritual. Formerly, in ancient Greece, the essence of the performance was linked with a myth so that a performance could easily evoke “metaphysical feelings” (uczucia metafizyczne). Because religion and art have long since become separate and do not coexist in such a symbiosis any more, theatre artists have to seek their own ways of evoking “metaphysical feelings.” According to Witkacy, the aim of any theatre has never been a simple representation of life, and nothing is more wrong than a realistic or naturalistic performance. It does not mean that theatre is a place for nonsense, which Witkacy would emphasize in many different ways,<sup>13</sup> but it is not a place for “life veracity” either. What is fundamental both for Witkacy’s

<sup>10</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze*, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 154–155.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194–195.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36, 39, 46.

theory and practice is the deep conviction concerning the artists' freedom of creation: there should be no limit to artistic imagination. However, such freedom of creation should not lead to chaos but to artistic unity, to the inner, pure construction – Pure Form (Czysta Forma). The most strongly emphasized need of modern theatre was “fantastic psychology” of characters, which was the sole way of relieving the theatre of the burden of reality and logic of life. Only the logic of fantastic characters and their actions can create “the stage form of becoming” (sceniczna forma stawania się).<sup>14</sup> In theatre, Witkacy claims, we want to be in an absolutely different world.<sup>15</sup> Having left it, we should feel like we have awoken from a strange dream, in which even the simplest things were marked by some bizarre, inscrutable charm characteristic of night dreams that cannot be compared to anything else.<sup>16</sup> In such a performance, a special role is ascribed to poetry or artistic prose, since the language of the performance is an essential factor of “the stage form of becoming” and should coincide with the actions of characters. The unity of action, language, visual effects and music aims to create absolute beauty and absolute truth of a strange-as-a-dream theatre in which one is able to experience The Eternal Mystery of Existence (Wieczna Tajemnica Istnienia).<sup>17</sup> Formal beauty is relative though. There are no objective criteria to measure it as “life usefulness” (użyteczność życiowa) does not apply to it. Yet the beauty of performance can be felt by the audience. Thus the only measure of the value of theatre is such an artistic creation that enables the audience to enter the world of fantasy and to experience the Mystery, even though Pure Form is never fully achieved being an unattainable artistic ideal.<sup>18</sup> In light of such views, it does not seem accidental that Słowacki with his admirable scenic imagination, poetic language and, as Calude Backvis put it “amazing literary cocktails”<sup>19</sup> appears to be the first Polish Pure Form artist.

However, when we read or watch Witkacy's plays they seem anything but Słowacki-like dramas. Direct allusions to Słowacki can even enforce such an impression. *Jan Maciej Karol Wścieklica* (*John Matthew Charles the Furious*), the title character of a “three-act drama without corpses” completed in 1922, wishes that he could talk like Słowacki, or at least like Słonimski but he can only “throw up every word in disgust, as if they were pieces of undi-

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 127–128.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Cz. Miłosz: *The History of Polish Literature*, The Macmillan Company, London 1969, p. 233.

gested rutabaga" ("Teraz chciałbym mówić jak Słowacki, albo niechby choć jak Słonimski, a wyrzyguję każde słowo ze wstrętem, jak kawałki nie strawionej brukwi").<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, this remark has more serious consequences for the whole drama than it may seem. To my mind, particular elements evoke Słowacki's world, namely one of his best known dramatic works *Kordian* (*Kordian*) (1833), usually placed among our "national" dramas. Czesław Miłosz believed that *Kordian* "exemplifies that type of Romantic drama which is most specifically Polish, dealing as it does with history in the making."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, it could be added that this Polish Romantic drama also deals with the hero and with his role "in the making of society."

When we see the character of Kordian on the stage for the first time, he relates the story of his life underneath a big linden tree (*lipa*) in front of a country house. Wścieklica is also put under a linden tree at the beginning of the first act of Witkacy's play. The scene was often connected with the famous symbol of the linden tree that was established by Jan Kochanowski in Renaissance Polish poetry, and interpreted simply as a parody of a traditional peaceful manor estate atmosphere.<sup>22</sup> I would insist that it is important to connect the symbol with Słowacki's drama, as it may be the first meaningful indication of Witkacy's intertextual plays. Both heroes – an adult (Wścieklica is 39), and a youth (Kordian is 15) – begin their monologues underneath a traditional Polish tree with reflections on their useless and broken lives. They both complain about lack of will:

Kordian: Jam bezsilny! (I am helpless!)<sup>23</sup>

Wścieklica: Ja swej woli ni mam. (I have no will)<sup>24</sup>

And they both come to helpless conclusions:

Kordian: Nie wyjdę z tego... Mogłem być czymś... będę niczym... (I won't come out of this...I could have been something... I will be nothing...)<sup>25</sup>

Wścieklica: Jestem tu jak lalka gumowa, z której wypuszczono powietrze... (I am like a rubber doll from which the air was let out...)<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, ed. by J. Degler, PIW, Warszawa 2004, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Cz. Miłosz: *The History of Polish Literature*, op. cit., p. 234.

<sup>22</sup> J. Błoński: *Witkacy. Sztukmistrz, filozof, estetyk*, op. cit., p. 316.

<sup>23</sup> J. Słowacki: *Kordian*, [in:] idem: *Dramaty*, vol. III, ed. by E. Sawrymowicz, Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1987, p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> J. Słowacki: *Kordian*, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 17.

The difference lies not only in the tone of their monologues – while Wścieklica says: “Popsuło mi się we łbie” (“I’ve lost my mind”), Kordian declares: “Otom ja sam jak drzewo zwarzone od kiści, / sto we mnie żądz, sto uczuć, sto uwiędłych liści” (“Here I am alone as a tree deteriorated to the roots, a hundred cravings in me, a hundred feelings, a hundred withered leaves”) – but also in their situations, ironically inverted. The young hero begins his adult life (while there is autumn outside), the adult hero ends his life-career (while there is spring outside). It does not seem to be just a matter of chance that Wścieklica used to pasture pigs till he was 15 (“do piętnastego roku życia gonił za świniami po polach”)<sup>27</sup> and points to that age as the turning point in his life, while Kordian is 15 when Słowacki’s drama begins. Both heroes search for great ideals, Kordian tries to find the answer to a question somehow resembling the famous Hamletian dilemma: “żyć? albowi nie żyć?” (“to live or not to live?”)<sup>28</sup> Wścieklica has to find an answer to a more pragmatic question: to be or not to be... the president of the republic. They both find themselves on a symbolic “pass of life” (przełęcz życia), and the expression denotes commonplace repertoire of both artists. Witkacy alludes to a romantic monologue based on a passage taken from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, a text read by Kordian on a white cliff in Dover; this reading ends with Kordian’s gesture of resignation in confrontation with reality. Wścieklica’s monologue, mimetically follows the romantic language but paradoxically ends with a declaration of action, which proves to be a fake one in the end.

Kordian: ...Zakręci się w głowie, / Gdy rzucisz wzrok w przepaści ubiegłe spod nogi... / [...] O! nie patrzę dłużej, / Bo myśl skrzycona głową w otchłań mnie zanurzy... (You’ll feel dizzy / when looking down into the precipice running out from below your feet / [...] Oh! I don’t look anymore / as my thoughts twisted with head push me into the abyss...)<sup>29</sup>

Wścieklica: Ale dziś stoję na przełęczy życia i to jest to, co lubię tak bardzo: nieodgadniona przyszłość piętrzy się przede mną, jak tajemnicza forteca, którą muszę zdobyć. (But today I stand on the pass of life and this is what I like so much: the inscrutable future piles up in front of me as a mysterious fortress which I must conquer.)<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> J. Słowacki: *Kordian*, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 124–125.

<sup>30</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 29.

In another scene Witkacy's character wants to reconcile himself with God and write a testament which is meant to be a confession by "the most contradictory spirit which has ever existed in the world" to future generations. Yet he cannot produce a word. Since Wścieklica's testament may be interpreted as an allusion to Słowacki's famous poem *Testament Mój* both romantic language and poetic rituals are put into an ironic context. Wścieklica's visit to a cloister and his temporary joining of an order enforce the impression of the evocation of widely recognized romantic rites. The role of two women in each hero's biography might be pointed out as one more allusive device. Laura, the object of Kordian's romantic love is transformed into Rozalia, Wścieklica's wife. Both female characters cannot understand the heroes' inner suffering and they manifest their lack of understanding in much the same way, though in a different tone.

Laura to Kordian: Źle, jeśli się pan będzie marzeniem zapalał. (It will be bad, if you fire up with a dream, Sir.)<sup>31</sup>

Rozalia to Wścieklica: Ty chyba masz gorączkę. (You must have a fever.)<sup>32</sup>

The second pair of women: Wioletta and Wanda represent carnal love in each text respectively. In view of the fact that the first pair of lovers (Kordian – Wioletta) are supposed to be Romantic and the second (Wścieklica – Wanda) just grotesque, one is struck to observe how similarly the lovers speak to each other:

Kordian: moja droga. Ty mię kochasz... (my dear. You love me...)

Wioletta: Nad życie! (More than life!)<sup>33</sup>

Wścieklica: Czy kochasz mnie? (Do you love me?)

Wanda: Tak. Bardzo... (Yes, very much...)<sup>34</sup>

Evidently, the language of both scenes mimetically follows a hackneyed language of a romance and both heroines have their very own pragmatic aims: they endeavor to manipulate the hero in order to bring him down to earth. Yet it is not in the plot where we find the most striking and meaningful

<sup>31</sup> J. Słowacki: *Kordian*, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> J. Słowacki: *Kordian*, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 29.

intertextual plays but it is in the language which sometimes can be provocatively different in tone, but can become mimetically similar, and may even denote seemingly similar situations which nonetheless result in totally different denouements. Let us examine the most crucial example. Towards the end of the unproductive period of our heroes' lives, which was similarly filled with doubts and marked by the impossibility of commissioning any important undertaking, Słowacki's hero says: "w powietrza błękitie kąpałem się... i ożyłem..." ("I bathed in the blue of the sky'... and I came alive...")<sup>35</sup> Witkacy's hero seems to echo: "Płynę spokojnie na falach nie wiadomego. Odpoczywam" ("I am calmly swimming on the waves of the unknown. I am resting.")<sup>36</sup> Their floating state leads to understanding and recognition of their faith, both heroes feel unbound and capable of achieving any imaginable great aim. Yet Kordian's famous utterance was changed significantly in Wikacy's play. While Słowacki's hero declares on the top of Mont Blanc: "Jam jest posąg człowieka na posągu świata" ("I am a statue of a man on a statue of the world"),<sup>37</sup> Wścieklica announces in his room: "Patrzę na siebie jak na obraz w muzeum" ("I look at myself like at a picture in a museum").<sup>38</sup> The romantic monumental sublimation is replaced with the grotesque objectification. The titanic omnipotent romantic figure set in nature is turned into an object set in an artificial space: in a museum where art objects or just relicts of the past are kept.

The irony lies in the fact that, contrary to romantic heroes, Witkacy's character is a life success. All Wścieklica's ambitions have been fulfilled and he has possessed power over the world which his romantic predecessor could not achieve. At the end of the play Wścieklica does become the President but paradoxically this makes him suffer since his "psychological core" is broken. His inability to renew heroic rites corresponds with the lost beauty of the play. Its "grotesque macabre style," described in the author's stage notes, culminates at the end in the roars of the crowds which enthusiastically greet "a flabby hero" (sflaczałego bohatera) who is literarily "dragged out of his house" by his political allies.<sup>39</sup> The scene can be interpreted as the last inverted allusion to the romantic hero who – as the Polish audience of all generations must remember due to school readings – was carried away by a cloud while crying out the name of his compatriots: *Polacy!!! (Poles!!!)*. The romantic hero goes up, the grotesque character goes down, Poles are the

<sup>35</sup> J. Słowacki: *Kordian*, op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>36</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>37</sup> J. Słowacki: *Kordian*, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>38</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

objects of their undertakings. In the romantic drama we cannot see them – Poles are the romantic hero's idealized construction. In the grotesque play they do appear on the stage, yet as “crowds,” which is significant. Wścieklica's inability to speak like Słowacki and to write a poetic testament to future generations marks the failure of art which is not needed any more; crowds are happy with the “flabby hero” they are delivered. We should not forget here that Witkacy's struggle for Pure Form in theatre was the last attempt to renew art before it disappeared forever. His dark philosophy of history, according to which humanity, after a series of bloody revolutions, will come to apathy and prosperity with no metaphysical needs whatsoever, stood in sharp contrast with the romantic vision of history and art. According to Słowacki's *Testament Mój*, let us recollect another famous quotation – that art was believed to change ordinary human beings into angels: “zostanie po mnie ta siła fatalna [...] aż was, zjadacze chleba – w aniołów przerobi” (“And yet, what will remain after me is this powerful destiny [...] until it will transform you – bread-eaters – into angels”). Romantic heroes would lose their struggle for power over reality, yet would achieve individuality and beauty – the third act of Słowacki's drama develops this idea – art was saved. Witkacy's hero possesses all the needed political power, yet loses beauty and individuality. Art is lost and the epoch of grayness is approaching.

Witkacy's language sardonically emphasizes the modern shift in the meaning of individuality and sense of art. The only piece of poetry we find in the play reads:

Witaj nam prezydencie.  
 Masz godne siebie zajecie.  
 Królujże nam wśród chwały,  
 Złącz, co porwane w kawały [...]

President, we welcome you  
 And the noble deeds you do.  
 Be our king in glory,  
 Unite this for what we are sorry [...] <sup>40</sup>

The crisis of artistic language is experienced and commented on by most of Witkacy's heroes. Sajetan, the character from Witkacy's last play *Szewcy* (*Shoemakers*, 1934) should also be recollecting in the context of the character's relationship with Słowacki's tradition. At some point of his absurd activities, he announces proudly: “Jak Wernyhora jaki będę gadał jeszcze

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 58.

długo dość” (“As some Wernyhora I will speak for quite a long time”);<sup>41</sup> only in order to correct himself: “Ale gdzie ta” (“But what”). His words follow a statement by another character (Puczymorda) on “reality in prophetic dimensions” which comes “after Wyspiański” and which is manipulated in reality and in art alike.<sup>42</sup> The character lies bare both the workshop of Pure Form in theatre (constructed out of pieces of other literary works) and the contemporary misuses of the romantic tradition. Wernyhora, a folk Ukrainian prophet, would significantly appear in Polish romantic art, also in Słowacki’s drama *Sen srebrny Salomei* (*Salomea’s Silver Dream*), which makes Witkacy’s audience evoke the literary tradition “before Wyspiański.” For Witkacy any (mis)interpretation of literature, especially high patriotic literature based on romantic patterns, is valuable only when it becomes an element of artistic construction. It was not in prophesizing (always mentioned in ironic quotes: “wieszczanie”) that Witkacy saw the crucial value of Polish romantic literature and its meaning for modernity, but in fantasy bordering on surrealism. This is where Witkacy found his inspiration. That is where I see his point of departure, the basis of his own artistic construction built up – amongst others – on components of Słowacki’s artistic imagination. In the second part of my paper I should like to demonstrate how Witkacy exploits and transforms Słowacki’s plot and stage effects. Thus we leave the world of Witkacy’s inter-textual relationships with Słowacki’s dramas and enter the world of “artistic theatre” they both share.

Scenes of violence seem to connect the two artists in a unique way. Let us recollect how violence is presented by Słowacki in *Sen srebrny Salomei*, the only one of Słowacki’s dramas which Witkacy recalls in his theatre polemics<sup>43</sup> in connection with a controversial performance by Teofil Trzcziński, the same director who also staged Witkacy’s play *Tumor Mózgowicz* (1923). In Słowacki’s drama, the bloody crime committed on Gruszczyński’s family, whose members were slaughtered without mercy (*bez litości w pień wymordowana*), is depicted in vivid pictures based on contrasts. For instance, there is the fairytale-like “quiet and pious house” (“cichy i pobożny domek”)<sup>44</sup> of the good family which is turned into a massacre scene: everything inside it is splattered with blood and everybody there is dead. Corpses are left naked on the floor and beds, kids are “chopped severely” (“porąbane srodze”) like objects. Their dead mother still clings to their bodies which are

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 390.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>43</sup> Idem: *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze*, op. cit., p. 408.

<sup>44</sup> J. Słowacki: *Sen srebrny Salomei*, [in:] *Dramaty*, vol. V, ed. by E. Sawrymowicz, Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1987, p. 140.

beheaded and green-legged. Her own body has been cut with knives and her bosom has been turned into "a dog's grave" ("psia mogiła").<sup>45</sup> The dehumanization of human beings could not go further it seems. Yet that inhuman massacre acquires its symbolic meaning in the course of the play. It is put into the historical and mythical sphere where the bloodiest crimes – not shown on the stage like in ancient dramas – may serve future generations. Eventually, the crime brings about the self-understanding of the heroes and leads to rebirth.

Witkacy's bloody crimes should not seem shocking in comparison to the slaughter described by Sawa, Słowacki's character. However, Witkacy makes us see them on stage and confronts us with them repeatedly, as if the surrealistic potential of disintegrated body parts is an aim in itself, not a means by which understanding can be acquired. The manner in which he creates massacres of all sorts is not any more appalling than Słowacki's descriptions. I would even say that Słowacki is his unattainable Master in this respect, but Witkacy makes the scenes of bloody violence more surrealistic. They are not incorporated into meaningful wholes, disintegrated human body parts mark disintegration of art and of life. Let us look closer at a group of 12 characters called Bojarzy (Boyars) from a play entitled *Janulka córka Fizdejki* (*Janulka, daughter of Fizdejko*, 1923). They are portrayed as wild peasants (dzikie chłopstwo w kozuchach i czapkach) and their description, typical of Witkacy's syncretic intertextuality which often simultaneously alludes to many works, ironically evokes another Polish romantic text, namely one of Mickiewicz's well-known ballads.<sup>46</sup> Yet what Witkacy's Boyars do is exactly what Słowacki's peasants do in *Sen srebrny Salomei* - they perform a wild thoughtless slaughter, multiplied in a grotesque vein. First, following the order of their Master, they form a line and chop each other up: the first one hacks to death the second one, the third one, the fourth and so on. Next, another shorter line is formed and the first Boyar chops away the third, etc. The last two fight a duel but when the winner attempts to seize power he is shot to death by the Master. However, the Boyars come back to life (and to the stage) in the fourth act, as the two main characters, Fizdejko and his wife Elza, are enjoying their perfect lives in their little house (mały domek). It should be noted that the description of the house has a lot in common with the idyllic Polish manor estate (dworek), as well as with particular realizations of the motif of "dworek," e. g. Gruszczyński's house in Słowacki's drama. As soon as Fizdejko declares his happiness due to the fact that the awful

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 141.

<sup>46</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 97.

Boyers have been “rubbed out utterly” (“doszczętnie ukatrupieni”), they pop up like puppets and begin another slaughter. This time everybody, except the new ruler, are hacked to death and the blood floods the scene while the heroes of the future Joël Kranz and Amalia look at the slaughter “with a smile.” There is no rebirth, except a grotesque one (represented by the Boyars’ return to life), and there is no profound understanding. We should not be deluged by the cabaret language of the scenes, since the language has lost its connection with art irreversibly as we have observed above. By repeating political bloody crimes, committed by “wild peasants” known from Słowacki’s drama but devoid of the meaning Słowacki ascribed to them, Witkacy deconstructs national myths and pushes romantic imagination to the limits. It was not by chance that Wernyhora was evoked as a figure of the past by Witkacy – the prophecy of rebirth simply cannot be uttered any more.

In the surrealistic disintegration of human bodies and human rites, theatrical endeavors around a dead body play a special role and they can also be seen as an amplification of Słowacki’s stage effects. The scene from Słowacki drama in which the corpse of Gruszczyński is put in a chair by Regimentarz who asks the dead for forgiveness, does not exceed a realistic convention, though it is experienced as strange by witnesses in the play and most probably by the audience as well. The corpse is removed from the stage as soon as the forgiveness is given. The potential surrealistic effect of the corpse put on display and spoken to was used by Witkacy in two of his dramas *Sonata Belzebuba* (*The Belzebub Sonata*, 1925) and *Matka* (*The Mother*, 1924). While in the former corpses put in chairs symbolize the dark faith of the main hero (Istvan, an artist) who becomes a mannequin, a doll in the devil’s hand, a modern Faust, in the latter the scene is handled more surrealistically. Leon, the hero of Witkacy’s play, is – just like Słowacki’s Leon from *Sen srebrny Salomei* – a bad immoral son who undergoes a spiritual change (yet it would be counterproductive to point out more similarities between the two characters). He places his mother’s corpse on a pedestal and speaks to it. In the meantime, a younger version of his mother appears and talks to Leon. Moreover, she calls the corpse a “humbug” and dissects it into pieces: a wooden head, old clothes and the straw with which “the mother” was stuffed are scattered all over the stage. Leon loses the only sense of his life, and soon he himself is dissected by workers. The dead body and the live character become one and the same and then disappear. No forgiveness is granted to anybody. Once again we are confronted with emptiness; the empty black stage emphasizes the symbolic emptiness of the world.

One more motif – which can be seen as common to Słowacki and Witkacy, and pushed to the limits by the latter – is the dream understood both as a prophetic state and as a fantastic world of its own; a dream in which everything can happen. Such dreams are characteristic of Słowacki's *Salomea*. In one of them she can see “a red stain,” the symbol of a bloody crime (reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's famous vision) which acquires a deeper meaning in the play. The dreams of Witkacy's characters, often called “bad dreams” are deprived of symbolic explanations and are repeated time after time, bearing more and more absurd meanings. Such are the dreams of Elza and of Fizdejko. Perhaps just one scene, in which a ghost kills another ghost with “a real Winchester,” can render a sense of overwhelming absurdity. Especially since this scene is followed by “a strange coincidence:” the meeting of four identical dreams sometimes called “a miracle.”<sup>47</sup> The “miracle” was built up on a long theatre tradition, in which Shakespeare, Calderon de la Barca and Słowacki, who rendered one of Calderon's dramas into Polish, play eminent roles; Witkacy's version of *la vida es sueno* lays the motif bare for the audience and once again opens the scene for the absurd.

Witkacy's multiplied fantasy, based on well-known motifs which connect him not only with Słowacki, but often, through Słowacki, with broader theatre tradition, especially with Shakespeare, is not aimed at ridiculing the tradition of fantasy in the theatre. Jan Błoński poses the following question with regard to the surrealist devices in Witkacy's play *Nowe Wyzwolenie*: “What is the difference between a cloud which speaks with a human voice in Słowacki's *Kordian* and Richard the third (English king and Shakespeare's hero and Witkacy's hero) put together with an soldering iron in a salon of an oldish tigress?”<sup>48</sup> To answer this question, I would say that the difference does not lie in the presence of fantastic devices themselves, but in the frequency with which they are applied and in their emphasized surrealism. The more their meaning becomes vague and bitterly ironic, the wider a scene opens up for the absurd. Since the time when human life was embedded in myth and history has inevitably passed, which paradoxically only a madman – such as Walpurg – can see clearly nowadays:

Dawniej nie było [...] perwersji w sztuce. A życie nie było bezcelowym poruszaniem się bezdusznych automatów. Społeczeństwo jako maszyna nie istniało. (Before, art wasn't perverted [...] Life wasn't the aimless movement of soulless automatons. Society was not a machine.)<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 166.

<sup>48</sup> J. Błoński: *Witkacy. Sztukmistrz, filozof, estetyk*, op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 68.

Witkacy's nostalgia for the art of the past and his irony towards modernity is expressed, among other means, by his evoking of Słowacki, both in the theory of Pure Form and in his plays. It is through intertextual relationships and by developing the world of fantasy and multiplying the world of grotesque characters – for whom Śláz, a figure from one more Słowacki's symbolic drama *Lilla Weneda*, or Grabiec, a character from his fairy-tale like drama *Balladyna*, could be perfect prototypes – that Witkacy creates a theatre which becomes not only fantastic but also grotesquely surrealistic. Martin Esslin was right when he said that Witkacy “takes up and continues the vein of dream and grotesque fantasy.”<sup>50</sup> Yet with Strindberg and Wedekind on the one side and Artaud, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet on the other, Słowacki should also be remembered. In particular, when we bear in mind that Witkacy's Polish predecessor took up and masterly continued Shakespeare's motif of the “play within a play,” playing “theatre” with his audience. It was Słowacki who made his characters speak with other literary texts and who began to use the words “theatre” and “wings,” or expressions such as “to go behind the scenes” and “to play comedy” in their double meaning, especially in his late drama *Fantazy* (1844). Such a play on words and on conventions might have been one more attraction for Witkacy who liked nothing more than playing with his audience, of which his drama *Szalona lokomotywa* (*The Crazy Locomotive*, 1923) is perhaps the best example. While Słowacki's character comments on all too romantic a behavior of a young hero: “Ot i teatry!” (“Just theatres!”)<sup>51</sup> Witkacy makes the character of his *Szalona lokomotywa* shout angrily: “To nie jest przedstawienie w teatrze!” (“This is not a theatre performance!”)<sup>52</sup> Thus it could be said that both Słowacki and Witkacy have opened the door of the theatre to postmodernity. Undoubtedly, the latter without the former cannot be profoundly understood.<sup>53</sup>

## Abstract

The author addresses the extent to which Witkacy's work should be seen in relation to Romantic playwright Juliusz Słowacki who began the Artistic Theater in Poland according to Witkacy's own words. While subsequent creators of Artistic Theatre, especially Sta-

<sup>50</sup> M. Esslin: *Introduction*, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> J. Słowacki, Juliusz: *Fantazy (Nowa Dejanira)*, [in:] idem: *Dramaty*, vol. IV, ed. by E. Sawrymowicz, Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1987, p. 431.

<sup>52</sup> S. I. Witkiewicz: *Dramaty*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 586.

<sup>53</sup> For more detailed analysis of this topic, please see my monograph: *Wśród Witkacoidów: W świecie tekstów, w świecie mitów*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2012.

niśław Wyspiański, the author of symbolic national dramas, attracted much attention among Witkacy scholars, Słowacki has been barely mentioned in the context of Witkacy theatre. The author compares Słowacki's *Kordian* with Witkacy's *John Mathew Charles the Furious* and concludes that both the protagonists' dilemmas and their self-referential statements are profoundly connected. In addition, the author presents an analysis of both Słowacki's and Witkacy's treatment of the motifs of 'Violence' 'A Corpse' 'A Dream' and 'A Ghost.' It is argued that Witkacy deconstructs national myths and pushes romantic imagination to the limits, developing elements of romantic fantasy bordering on surrealism typical of Słowacki into modern surrealistic theatre.

Prof. Marta Skwara  
University of Szczecin