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Eluding the Void: Art and Humor as Anodynes for Witkiewicz, Beckett, and Faulkner

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (or Witkacy) was educated by his renowned artist father to be what has been described as a “Nietzschean genius.”¹ As a consequence of the father’s tutelage, the son became a polymath, and evolved into a consummate creative artist and philosopher. So engaged, Witkacy was a painter, aesthete, playwright, and novelist, and evolved into the “most remarkable and versatile personality active in Poland during the first half of the twentieth century.”²

Neither the Irish writer Samuel Beckett nor the American William Faulkner, born 21 and 12 years respectively after Witkacy, can come close to laying claim to such a background with respect to paternal lineage or tutelage. Beckett’s father, William, was a successful businessman who was described as, “Easy-going, fun-loving and jovial; his was a secular outlook, rejoicing in the world as he was given it, greeting it with enthusiasm and shrewdly ac-

¹ D. Gerould: *Witkacy: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as Imaginative Writer*, University of Washington Press, 1981, p. 5.

² *Ibidem*, p. IX.

cepting its values.”³ Father and son developed a closeness, as evidenced by the two often going on walks together. This activity is often reflected in Beckett’s writing.⁴

Faulkner’s father, Murry, by contrast, was a stalwart upholder of the family tradition of paternal alcoholism (one that was passed down to his famous progeny). Essentially drifting within a succession of jobs, Murry was typed as a “mean drunk” who would have to be rescued from an assortment of freezing alleyways by wife and son.⁵ Any closeness of the two was greatly hampered by the father referring to the son as “Snake Lips.”⁶

As regards education, there is also a pronounced disparity between Witkacy being groomed by his father, and the schooling received by Beckett and Faulkner. The former thrived in academic settings, including those at the university level;⁷ the latter started being truant from elementary school in the sixth grade, and dropped out of high school in his sophomore year. Faulkner would briefly attend Ole Miss as a special student.⁸

Notwithstanding differences in background, the three men possessed a distinct predilection for solitude. A friend who knew Witkacy for twelve years characterized him in these terms: “Childlikeness, based on a nonacceptance of reality – hence the necessity of existing in a fictional reality (art, drugs). The need of friendship and the need of solitariness.”⁹

Being alone or seeking solitude was also an oft cited desire of Beckett. As stated in one of his biographies: “When he was very young, Sam, blond and pretty, was not considered exceptionally bright (also an opinion held of Faulkner), but he learned to read very quickly and was a thoughtful child. He was very fond of being alone, at his happiest when he could curl up by himself with, at first, a picture book or, later, a proper book to read.”¹⁰

Faulkner’s penchant for solitude, aloofness and privacy was legendary. Self acknowledged as, “The cat who walks alone,” and devoting countless hours to sailing by himself on his boat on Lake Sardis, he was liked by most of his schoolmates, but intimate with none. To many people of Oxford, his

³ A. Cronin: *Samuel Beckett: the Last Modernist*, Harper Collins, 1997, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁵ J. Sensibar: *Faulkner and Love*, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

⁷ J. Knowlson: *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, p. 81.

⁸ J. Parini: *One Matchless Time: A Life of William Faulkner*, Harper Collins, 2004, p. 49.

⁹ D. Gerould, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ J. Knowlson, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

costumes and behavior later in life made him a joke to a point at which they referred to him as "Count-no account."¹¹

Witkacy, Beckett, and Faulkner were solitary genius-creators. A Schopenhauerean common denominator exists in the creative outputs of all three men, and frequently translates to a sullen pessimism which suffuses their works. Serving as its backdrop, is the concept of the void, or as Brecht so aptly stated, "[We] happen to be on a small knob of stone twisting endlessly through the void round a second-rate star, just one among myriads."¹²

To the outside world as much as it paid attention to a young Witkacy, the painter-writer-philosopher became that "madman Witkacy" – a sex fiend, drug addict, and demented dilettante whose plays seemed like the wildest nonsense,¹³ reminiscent of Jarry who succumbed to overindulgence at the age of 34, and author of a series of plays categorized as, "The Triumph of Nothingness."¹⁴

In Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, he was described as one of the most brilliant figures of the European avant-garde of his time, whose importance [in 1973] was [then] being discovered outside his native Poland.¹⁵ In a quote ascribed to Witold Gombrowicz, "There were three of us; Witkiewicz, Bruno Schultz and myself- the three Polish avant-garde between the wars. Only Witkiewicz remains to be discovered."¹⁶ Philosophically, Witkacy was described as an existentialist many years before the movement appeared in France and championed by Camus and Sartre.¹⁷

The major theme in all of Witkacy's work was captured in a 1979 review of *Insatiability*, one of his two dystopian novels.¹⁸ As expressed therein, the theme is, "the growing mechanization of life, understood not as dehumanizing technology, but rather as social and psychic regimentation. In dozens of plays and three large novels, Witkacy portrays the threatened extinction of

¹¹ B. Wasson: *Count no 'Count: Flashbacks to Faulkner*, University Press of Mississippi, 1983, p. 19–20.

¹² J. Rohn: *Silencing the Music of the Spheres. Galileo by Bertold Brecht*, November 12, 2006, <http://www.lablit.com/article/172>.

¹³ D. Gerould, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 207.

¹⁵ M. Esslin: *The Theatre of the Absurd: Revised Updated Edition*, The Overlook Press, 1973, p. 343.

¹⁶ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Insatiability*, trans. by L. Iribarne, Northwestern University Press, 1996, quote on dust jacket.

¹⁷ *The Madman and the Nun and Other Plays*, eds. D. Gerould, C. S. Durer, University of Washington Press, 1968, p. XLVIII.

¹⁸ Books in Review: Science Fiction Studies, 19, Vol. 6, November 1979, <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/birs/bir19.htm>.

a decadent individualism. The degenerate remnants of a once creative mankind will be replaced by a new race of invading levelers who will establish the reign of mass conformity modeled on the beehive and anthill by what Orwell calls insect-men," or Vonnegut has Diana Moon Glauampers enforce with her double-barreled ten-gauge shot gun.¹⁹

Brecht's "small knot of stone twisting endlessly through the void" was described by Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* as, *This bitch of an earth*.²⁰ From the same play he has Pozzo speak the hauntingly sombre lines referring to mothers, "They give birth astride of a grave. The light gleams for an instant, and then it's night once more."²¹ In reference to the existence of a beneficent deity answering Clov's prayer in *Endgame*, Hamm truculently interjects, "The bastard, he doesn't exist."²² From *Malone Dies*, Beckett borrows from the atomistic philosophy of Democritus when the main protagonist asserts, "Nothing is more real than nothing."²³ Only a few other writers, such as Kafka, have given voice to essential questions without the need for the sustaining illusion of meaning and values."²⁴

One of Faulkner's best allusions to such a world appeared in *Go Down Moses*, in which it is referred to as the "worthless, tideless rock cooling in the last crimson evening."²⁵ There is another toward the end of *The Mansion*, his next to last novel, where there is an exchange between Gavin Stevens and his friend, V. K. Ratliff, as they set out to deliver the escape money Linda has left for Mink.

So maybe there's a moral in it somewhere, if you jest knowed where to look.
There aren't any morals, Stevens said, People just do the best they can.
The pore sons of bitches, Ratliff said.
The pore sons of bitches, Stevens said. Drive on. Pick it up.²⁶

In his work, Faulkner constantly experimented, questing throughout for the perfect form, "a vase," like the one an old Roman so loved that "he wore

¹⁹ K. Vonnegut, Jr.: *Harrison Bergeron*, [in:] idem: *Welcome to the Monkey House*, Delacorte Press, 1968.

²⁰ S. Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*, Faber and Faber Limited, 1956, p. 37.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 89.

²² Idem: *Endgame*, Faber and Faber, 1958, p. 38.

²³ Idem: *Malone Dies*, Grove Press, 1956, p. 16.

²⁴ D. S. Burt: *The Literary 100, The Revised Edition*, Checkmark Books, p. 178.

²⁵ W. Faulkner: *Go Down Moses*, Random House, 1942, p. 284.

²⁶ Idem: *The Mansion*, Random House, 1959, p. 429.

slowly [the rim] away with kissing it.”²⁷ The implement by which he did so was language which he described as, “That Meager and fragile thread – by which the little surface corners and edges of men’s secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either.”²⁸ “Gazing unflinchingly into the abyss we all hope isn’t there,”²⁹ Faulkner has been grouped with Kafka, Sartre, Camus and Beckett whose work is unsettling precisely because it ruthlessly invades our inner privacy and inexorably lays bare man’s fears and anxieties, his bestiality and his loneliness.³⁰

Art, as defined as the creative outputs of Witkacy, Beckett, and Faulkner, was a primary *raison d’être* for each throughout their lives. As voiced by Boy-Żeliński, a critic-friend in the interwar years, “Witkiewicz is by birth, by race, to the very marrow of his bones an artist; he lives exclusively by art and for art. And his relationship to art is profoundly dramatic; he is one of those tormented spirits who in art seek the solution not to art, not to the problem of success, but to the problem of their own being.”³¹ “I live constantly on the edge of the abyss, he confessed, constructing new selves out of nothingness.”³²

In 1944, Faulkner wrote, “I’m telling the same story over and over which is myself and the world. That’s all a writer does, he tells his own biography in a thousand different terms.”³³ He also remarked in statements reminiscent of what was said about Witkacy, that the individual so engaged pursues his or her lofty objectives with the sole purpose of creating in order to, “[Scribble] ‘Kilroy was here,’ on the wall of the final and irrevocable oblivion through which he must someday pass.”³⁴ Beckett described the process as a

²⁷ *Faulkner and the Craft of Fiction*, eds. D. Fowler and A. J. Abadie, 1987, Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, University Press of Mississippi, 1989, p. IX.

²⁸ D. Kartiganer: *The Fragile Thread*, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1979, Faulkner quote from *Absalom, Absalom* (Vintage Corrected Text, p. 202), cited as epigraph.

²⁹ Observation made by Dr. Ch. Peek at the 2008 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference: *Faulkner: the Returns of the Text*.

³⁰ M. Friedman: *To Deny Our Nothingnes: Contemporary Images of Man*, Delacorte Press, 1967, p. 20.

³¹ *The Witkiewicz Reader*, ed. D. Gerould, Northwestern University Press, 1992, p. 1.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

³³ M. Cowley: *The Faulkner–Cowley File: Letters and Memories 1944–1962*, The Viking Press, 1966, p. 14.

³⁴ J. B. Meriwether, M. Millgate: *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926–1962*, Random House, 1968, p. 253.

truly ontological quest.³⁵ Both men believed the artist must work with ignorance and impotence.³⁶

The paths traveled by each man to arrive at such a station were about as disparate as could be imagined. Prodded on by his father and reinforced by a musician mother in a European culture that attached value to individuals so occupied, Witkacy's journey started with his debut as playwright at the age of 8 and spanned almost half a century. Described as an incessant Nietzschean quest to explain his own presence on earth, Witkacy's creative efforts reflected his attempts to justify his existence, to place himself, his art, his entire life and work within the critical framework of a theory that could explicate his being.³⁷

This theory was "Pure Form," which for Witkacy was an expression of the modernist ideal of an autonomous art freed of referentiality; an epiphany transcending everydayness and putting one in direct contact with the structure of the universe.³⁸ He did not feel himself to be part of any of the radical artistic movements of his time, and was regarded as a total outsider, as well as the deplorably eccentric son of a revered father.³⁹

Acknowledged as one of the greatest modernists, Faulkner grew up in the American south where artistic expression was viewed as effeminate. Being raised in Oxford, Mississippi, Faulkner has been described as, "Going off into the woods [alone] with his tablet and pencil."⁴⁰ He would often project himself as a dandy to unsympathetic, less than understanding townspeople.⁴¹ Sherwood Anderson provided the role model and advice that only an established writer could offer.⁴²

In his second novel, *Mosquitoes*, Faulkner described the creative process or art as, "Hackneyed accidents which make up this world- love and life and death and sex and sorrow brought together by chance in perfect proportions and [taking] on a kind of splendid and timeless beauty."⁴³ For him, the act of writing was, "Sacrificial and mediatory, a gradual sacrificing of the self in an attempt to attain immortality through the mediation of language."⁴⁴

³⁵ J. Calder: *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, Calder Publications, 2001, p. 76.

³⁶ *A Walk With Faulkner*, "New York Times Book Review", Jan. 30, 1955, p. 4; M. Robinson: *The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett*, Grove Press, 1969, p. 33.

³⁷ D. Gerould: *The Witkiewicz Reader*, op. cit., p. 2.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 4-5.

⁴⁰ J. Sensibar, op. cit., p. 47.

⁴¹ J. Parini: *One Matchless Time*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁴³ W. Faulkner: *Mosquitoes*, Boni and Liveright, 1927, p. 39.

⁴⁴ J. T. Irwin: *Doubling and Incest: Repetition and Revenge*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, p. 159.

The shape of ideas mattered to Beckett even if he didn't believe in them.⁴⁵ At least on the surface, his evolution as a modernist writer appeared to be much more conventional than either Witkacy's or Faulkner's, with neither parent having an interest in literature.⁴⁶ Remembered by a life-long friend as having developed an interest in poetry at boarding school, he was educated to play a traditional role in the Anglo-Anglican community and excelled in athletics.⁴⁷ It wasn't until he was 22 that he met James Joyce, and became a frequent visitor in his home.⁴⁸

Humor was pervasive throughout the works of each. Witkacy's writing has been described as parody and political satire not unlike Brecht and Mayakovsky,⁴⁹ and ahead of his time awaiting Ionesco and Beckett.⁵⁰ His theatre was appreciated by only the most intelligent critics, and described as, "Metaphysical buffoonery and supercaberet, presenting the sadness, boredom and despair of modern civilization with a spasmodic laugh,"⁵¹ and further it was depicted as a "comedy of corpses, a mocking irreverent humor and grotesque style built on parody and irony."⁵²

Beckett has been described as one of the funniest writers of the age, whose induced laughter often dies aborning, and is brought about by Chaplin-like characters who are clowns however dimly or acutely aware of the void and all its terrors.⁵³ For him, humor was the key to the buzzing confusion, an approach that gave meaning to "the mess" where no religious or philosophical system was capable of doing so.⁵⁴

"Laughter is presented by Beckett, as by Schopenhauer, as the only bearable reaction to the misery of the human condition."⁵⁵ As described in the novel *Watt* by Arsene who has been described as a "specialist in laughing matters,"⁵⁶ a laugh can be categorized as follows: "The bitter, the hollow and –

⁴⁵ S. Beckett, quoted by H. Hobsen: *Samuel Beckett: Dramatist of the Year*, "International Theatre Annual" London 1956, No. 1, p. 153.

⁴⁶ A. Cronin, op. cit., p. 37.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 47.

⁴⁸ K. and A. Hamilton: *Condemned to Life; the World of Samuel Beckett*, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, p. 19.

⁴⁹ *Twentieth Century Polish Avant-Garde Drama: Plays, Scenarios, Critical Documents*, ed. D. Gerould, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 33.

⁵⁰ D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, *The Madman and the Nun*, p. XXXVII.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ibidem, p. XXIII.

⁵³ *Samuel Beckett: I Can't Go On, I'll Go On*, ed. R. W. Seaver, Grove Press, 1976, p. IX.

⁵⁴ K. and A. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 59.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ R. Cohn: *Samuel Beckett: the Comic Gamut*, Rutgers University Press, 1962, p. 286.

Haw! Haw! – the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not True! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down in the snout – Haw! – so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy.”⁵⁷

Faulkner was the master of convoluted, complex verbosity within which his humor is multidimensional. He was acknowledged by a prominent critic as a writer of comedy whose only possible peer in the United States was Mark Twain.⁵⁸ More recently, his legacy in this regard has been tapped by Hollywood’s Coen brothers whose subtle allusions from his novels and outright modeling of a character upon him are easily recognizable.⁵⁹

Interspersed among works which were unrivalled in analyzing solitude’s desolation with a more refined cruelty,⁶⁰ this pervasiveness of humor seen in Faulkner is needed since, “Pure tragedy is not finally appropriate to [his] vision of the absurd. He saw an absurd universe peopled by absurd men whose reaction to absurdity must be automatically ironic.”⁶¹ His vast array of humor is offered as counterpoise to a vision in which, in his own words, “It is what we (groundlings, dwellers in and backbone of a small town interchangeable with and duplicate of ten thousand little dead clottings of human life about the land) saw, refined, and classified as the expert, the man who had himself seen his own and scudding shadow upon the face of a puny and remote earth.”⁶²

Providing comic relief to the black or comedy of savage extremity found in novels such as *Sanctuary* and *Pylon*,⁶³ and derived from a cosmic pessimism,⁶⁴ it is what has been described by Campbell and Foster as Southern frontier humor⁶⁵ which assumed a greater importance as he grew older.

⁵⁷ K. and A. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 60.

⁵⁸ Observation made by J. B. Carothers at the 36th Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, *Faulkner and Mystery*.

⁵⁹ William Faulkner: the Perfect Coen Brothers Hero, <http://www.moreintelligentlife.com/story/William-faulkner-perfect-coen-brothers-hero>.

⁶⁰ A. Rousseaux: *Le Litteraire*, October 19, 1946.

⁶¹ R. B. Hauck: *A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and the Absurd in American Humorous Fiction*, Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 175.

⁶² J. Blotner: *Faulkner, a Biography*, Random House, 1974, p. 862.

⁶³ J. L. Langley, Jr.: *The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner’s Heroes*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1963, p. 102.

⁶⁴ H. M. Campbell and E. F. Ruel: *William Faulkner: a Critical Appraisal*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1951, p. 139.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

Examples of this genre include the tall tale, dialectal variations, hyperbole, understatement, obscenity, Aesopian animal humor, trick situations, Negro humor, and so on.

Establishing a case for art and humor as anodynes or ameliorative for Witkacy, Beckett and Faulkner is speculative at best. Given the commonality of their respective visions, the rather trite "tormented genius" moniker definitely seems to apply to all three. Even so, overt manifestations of "tormented" was manifested under different guises.

Considerable controversy exists among Beckett's biographers as to exactly how he projected himself to the outside world. The spectrum ranges from, "Surprisingly the most balanced and serene of men" and "Thoroughly charming and witty," to, "A ghostly specter of a man," "Gloomy and depressed – an eccentric controlled by an inner torment," and "[Someone who] spent long periods of time curled upon the bed in a fetal position, searching for the happiness, perfection, and immobility he remembered from the womb." Weighing in on the side of the more positive attributes, Gordon collated details from a wide assemblage of Beckett scholarship and proposed that Beckett, "Was a gentle but heroic man with a reservoir of toughness and strength that enabled him to pursue both an altruistic bent and the need for artistic fulfillment." She concludes by asserting that his life was inspiring.⁶⁶

An element that appears to be an undercurrent for the duration of Beckett's creative life was that of control. Although he periodically discussed suicide with his friends throughout his adult life, this was done in the context of an abstraction, and ultimately his life span underscores his view that, "Existence, to which we are condemned without our permission, was something to be endured."⁶⁷ Similarly, his history of heavy drinking was done after 5:00 pm, and was marked by behavior which, "Was never boisterous or over talkative, if anything, more remote."⁶⁸ His one period of psychoanalysis occurred relatively early in his life.⁶⁹

Resilience, courage, and the need to endure also come to mind with Faulkner, particularly in the sense that he was able to provide support to what amounted to an extended family and eventually become the largest landowner in Oxford.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the element of control observed

⁶⁶ L. Gordon: *The World of Samuel Beckett: 1906–1946*, Yale University Press, 1996, p. 2–3.

⁶⁷ A. Cronin: op. cit., p. 58.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 517.

⁶⁹ L. Gordon, op. cit., p. 113.

⁷⁰ F. R. Karl: *William Faulkner; American Writer*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989, p. 584–585.

with Beckett is already seen slipping with behavior wherein he, "Sought hopelessly and ritualistically to drink himself into oblivion."⁷¹ Such behavior was taken to such extremes that one biographer of note observed that it, coupled with other self destructive behavior, ultimately led to his "breaking of the pencil" and a passive sort of suicide which led to his sudden and unexpected death when taken to Byhalia to "dry out" after his last alcoholic binge close to his 65th birthday.⁷²

Faulkner was a profoundly unhappy man as attested to by such an adroit observer of human nature, as Tennessee Williams who received a glimpse into the Faulknerian soul in 1955. After a chance encounter with the Nobel laureate, the playwright remarked to Hemingway that, "Faulkner's terrible distraught eyes had moved him to tears."⁷³ A biographer who also happened to be a personal friend remarked, "He didn't have a happy day in his life."⁷⁴

He also was described as a man, "Beset by demons [whose] commerce with the past (and the tumult within) was something fierce and unhinging, so powerful that the only two ways it could be withstood was via writing and drink."⁷⁵ He underwent electroshock therapy and psychotherapy relatively late in his life in the early 1950s.⁷⁶

Perhaps it was Faulkner himself who provided the greatest insight into his inner most thoughts when he penned the following: "All of a sudden it's over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after awhile they don't even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell and it doesn't matter."⁷⁷

And, finally, we are left with the Cassandra-like "Nietzschean genius" whose much deserved recognition is the subject of this publication. Witkacy's world was a tragedy acted out as farce, a cosmic amusement park, designed by Dali and Magritte, where Strindberg sells peanuts and popcorn, while Spengler performs a cooch dance, Heidegger and Sartre turn somer-

⁷¹ P. Weinstein: *The Land's Turn*, [in:] *Faulkner and The Ecology of the South*, eds. J. R. Urgo and A. J. Abadie, University Press of Mississippi, 2005, p. 27.

⁷² F. R. Karl, op. cit., p. 995, 1038.

⁷³ S. B. Oates: *William Faulkner: the Man and the Artist*, Harper and Row, 1987, p. 287.

⁷⁴ Observation made by Dr. D. Kartiganer in reference to J. Blotner at the 35th Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, *The Returns of the Text*.

⁷⁵ A. Weinstein: *Recovering Your Story: Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison*, Random House, 2006, p. 406.

⁷⁶ P. Weinstein: *Becoming Faulkner: the Art and Life of William Faulkner*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 218.

⁷⁷ W. Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom*, Random House, 1936, p. 131.

saults, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche sling custard pies at one another,⁷⁸ and, at the risk of sounding presumptuous, Beckett and Faulkner alternate in shooting one another out of a cannon.

Little about how he comported himself throughout his life connoted "control." The aforementioned quote attributed to him about living on the abyss, certainly bears this out, as does a quote cited by Professor Gerould, "Better to end in beautiful madness than in gray, boring banality and stagnation."⁷⁹ Often walking through streets, as a harlequin, Witkacy enjoyed provocation every bit as much as Oscar Wilde.⁸⁰ Then there was his practice of experimenting with alcohol, and a variety of other drugs with such regularity that he authored a book about the experience.⁸¹ It was another facet of Witkacy's make-up, however, that provided the greatest insight as to his emotional lability – his chronic fixation on suicide, contrasted with either Beckett or Faulkner.

"From an early age, he experienced a curious detachment toward himself and regarded his own life and especially his inevitable death as an object of endless study as though his existence and ultimate extinction were a work of art to be savored."⁸² As a theme, suicide was mentioned throughout his work, and actually represents the driving force of his art as exemplified by the last group of his surviving plays written between 1922–1925. These were prophetic in a sense of what was to come in 1939 in that they are concerned with the cost of the artist and creative personality of achieving his goals and realizing his calling.⁸³

For the man who was a consummate artist and well ahead of his time in so many ways, this entailed a series of "preliminary suicides," warm-ups if you will, in which self-destruction was necessary in order to create in the modern world. In other words, "mastery means shattering the very matrix of creation." "Such artists-creators achieve recognition only after they have destroyed themselves, and success comes when it is too late to be anything but pure mockery."⁸⁴

⁷⁸ B. Dukore: *Who Was Witkacy*, "Theatre Quarterly" 1975–1976, nr 5–6, p. 65.

⁷⁹ *Czysta Forma w teatrze*, ed. J. Degler, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1977, p. 91, The date of the composition is 1919.

⁸⁰ D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, op. cit., p. IX.

⁸¹ Cz. Miłosz: *Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision*, University of California Press, 1977, p. 34.

⁸² D. Gerould, *Witkacy*, op. cit. p. 4.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 208–209.

It has been said that, "Until the outbreak of the Second World War, [Witkiewicz] was understood only by a few- maybe because [everyone] was all still *before*, while he was already *after*."⁸⁵ At the onset of the Second World War when Poland was caught between the *Scylla* and *Charybdis* of invading armies, Witkacy, "Took sleeping pills in a forest, woke up and cut his wrists with a razor, against a magnificent natural background as in *Farewell to Autumn*."⁸⁶

His last words, spoken to a woman who was with him at the end were in Russian, "I won't go on living as less than myself."⁸⁷ He could no longer cope. Art and humor had run their respective courses and had been exhausted to a point where they provided fuel to his desire for self destruction and annihilation. At that instant the world lost a truly unique and amazingly talented individual. For him this would have been a richly deserved accolade.

Abstract

The author considers the extent to which the literary work of these writers was driven by a response to the apparent vacuousness of existence. A brief overview of their lives traces the interplay of eschatological questions and the forces of creativity. Impressions gleaned from such varied backgrounds were often interwoven into their creative outputs which often share a Schopenhauerean common denominator. This often translates to a sullen pessimism which suffuses their respective works and emanates from the concept of the void. Establishing a case for the degree to which art and humor acted as anodynes is speculative; there is no question concerning the importance of both in their lives. Art, or engagement in the creative process, occupied the mainstay of their intellectual lives. Moreover, humor, particularly of the black or mordant variety, is a hallmark of the trio's entire oeuvre.

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⁸⁵ D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, op. cit., p. XVII.

⁸⁶ Cz. Miłosz, op. cit., p. 153.

⁸⁷ D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, op. cit., p. LI.