

How to Heal a Nation using Freud? On the Treatment of National Vices according to Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz

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Abstract

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz was one of the most interesting Polish representatives of the artistic avant-garde before World War II. He was a painter, playwright, prose writer, philosopher and... a dandy. In addition to writing artistic works, he also wrote a series of journalistic texts entitled *Unwashed souls* (in Polish: *Niemyte dusze*), in which he offered specific advice and recipes for maintaining personal hygiene and appropriate moral condition. All texts in this series were written in a satirical, ironic and grotesque tone from the position of an artist and a spiritual guide.

According to Witkiewicz, the most surprising idea that was supposed to heal Polish national flaws was submitting to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. In order to be a healthy society, Poles should see their complexes: this characteristic unjustified sense of superiority, assigning great importance to historical events in which they participated, selfishness, laziness and the inability to work as a team. According to Witkiewicz, the recognition of the complexes and work on their elimination leads to civic, national and general human healing.

Keywords: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Witkacy, Sigmund Freud, *Unwashed souls*, Polish literature

Witkacy, the artist, painted his works in various conventions: starting with the colourism of landscape painting-through the avant-gardism of Formism-to the "productions" of his Portrait Company. He also wrote numerous ambitiously conceived dramas and aesthetically diversified novels. At that time, he considered himself primarily a philosopher-and created works concerning this area which he also regarded as the most mature examples of his intellectual life (Degler 215-234).

Witkacy hoped for a public discussion regarding his essays also in the case of *Niemyte dusze Unwashed Souls* subtitled psychological study of the inferiority complex (the knot of impairment) carried out according to Sigmund Freud's method with particular reference to Polish problems- which was completed in 1938. This may have been influenced by the specific reception of an earlier and similarly written book, *Narkotyki Drugs* from 1932, *Pawlak 2016* or by his eccentric approach to the Freudian discourse then tentatively recognised in Poland (Magnone). Whatever the reason, Witkacy did not really stand much of a chance of convincing readers of his reasons, because nobody intended to publish such a thematically and stylistically surprising work and perhaps the fact that four essays from the *Unwashed Souls* series were printed in Warsaw-based periodical "Skawa" (1938-1939) should be perceived as a success anyway. It was not until after the Second World War, in the 1970s, that the work and not even in its complete form straight away was published in a study by Anna Micińska (Witkiewicz). By now, *Unwashed Souls* has been the subject of many interesting commentaries in which authors have found thought inspiring contexts of meaning: Jerzy Płomieński (Płomieński 177-266), Anna Micińska (Witkiewicz 5-50), Małgorzata Szpakowska (Szpakowska 98), Grzegorz Grochowski, Janusz Degler, Małgorzata Vraźić, Wojciech Sztaba (Sztaba 63-69), Justyna Borkowska (Borkowska 117-129) czy Anna Kowalska (Kowalska 102-109 and 84-91) as well as the author of this article (Kalinowski). Despite the already existing studies, there are still issues worth looking into more closely.

The Concept of Cleanliness

The issues of hygiene, cleanliness and psychophysical health were already discussed in numerous works on European culture of the 19th and 20th centuries, which also analysed them in relation to literature (Mirek and Krzan; Płonka-Syroka and Kaźmierczak). Its presence can be discussed at length also in the case of Witkacy and his *Unwashed Souls* for, biographically, he was associated with Zakopane, which was just experiencing its sanatorium related craze. Keeping to the treatment sanatorium context, it is easier to understand why Witkiewicz showed so much interest in Jørgen

Peter Müller's system of gymnastics, considerations related to bathing, the steam bath or the descriptions of haemorrhoid problems.

Witkiewicz was not the only one to reflect on the hygiene of the body... His master and inspiration in esoteric and metaphysical subjects, Tadeusz Miciński, was an advocate of the rhythmic method in theatre, ballet and... psychophysical exercises which he became familiar with in Hellerau, near Dresden (Germany), thanks to the activity of Emil Jacques-Dalcroze (Metoda E. Jacques-Dalcroze'a 7-10). Of course, for Miciński, this system was not only related to the physical condition, but rather to the comprehensively perceived social and mental sphere of man as researchers studying the topic have already written (Sławińska 303-323; Sztaba).

At this point, it should be pointed out that at the extreme end of Miciński's esoteric approach there were his exoteric initiatives of publishing periodicals such as "Sport" and "Dodatek Sportu" (1888-1891) with the motto *Mens sana in corpore sano*, *Przewodnik Ginnastyczny Sokół* (1890-1894), *Przegląd Ginnastyczny* (Gymnastic Review) (1897-1901) and "Ruch, a biweekly devoted to matters of physical education and normal body development in general" (1906-1914), which consistently promoted the idea of physical exercise for every member of Polish society.

After these publications specialising in physical culture in the broadest sense of the term it is necessary to remind ourselves of the fact that Witkacy's *Unwashed Souls* is a text which metaphorically reaches out to the idea of hygiene, in which the author simply starts from the issues of physical exercise or the use of medicines to reach issues of a different category: social, political, historical or even cultural ones. And it is at this point that Ernst Kretschmer and Sigmund Freud appear in Witkacy's writings.

Today's reader might find such a juxtaposition of names somewhat surprising. While Freud, in the context of health and mental "cleanliness", has been widely accepted today (even if his therapeutic approach provokes disputes), Kretschmer's theory, although really popular in the 1920s (the researcher was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1929), was no longer constructive in the years after the Second World War. For Witkacy, however, the work of Ernst Kretschmer and

his 1921 work *Körperbau und Charakter* were important enough for him to call the author of the work “a brilliant psychologist and psychiatrist” (ND 154), while his theory of personality types is summarised in a separate chapter of *Unwashed Souls*. This is a matter which has already been discussed (Kłonkowska 177-190).

In Witkacy’s *Unwashed Souls*, Sigmund Freud became another type of authority in the field of healing activities. This intellectual relationship was initially discussed in the research tradition in the private biographical and textual artistic context (Dobroczyński and Dybel; Magnone; Marcinowski 107-122; Nowakowska 107-122). As for *Unwashed Souls*, Witkacy admits with disarming frankness - that so far in his literature he had referred to the Viennese psychiatrist “mostly in a somewhat ironic way” (ND 154), and when discussing his theory, he had not even finished reading his flagship work (i.e., *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*) (ND 174). Objections of this kind certainly mean that, from the point of view of psychotherapy, Witkacy can be regarded as an author who spins simplified opinions or abbreviated characterisations. On the other hand, however, one has to admit that the essayist’s understanding of Freud’s writings stood out in the Polish reception of the time, and the critic artist was able to appreciate the psychoanalyst’s theses regarding the fact that artistic creativity “comes from entangled knots and dies with their disentanglement” (ND 153) or that he legitimately understood “eroticism as a permanent, latent, potential hidden in the inner bodily sensations foundation of all ‘experiences’ of even the most primitive living creature” (ND 183). For Witkacy Freud became “the Great Confessor of Humanity” (ND 189) through his ability to typify, generalise and invent techniques of treatment. The most important aspect of the theory of psychoanalysis will be the inferiority complex discussed in *Unwashed Souls* on the example of Polish culture.

Apart from Kretschmer and Freud, two psychiatrists are mentioned in Witkacy’s essay: Alexander Moret and Georges Davy in the context of their work entitled *from clans to empires* (in French: *Des clans aux empires*) (Moret and Davy) who, mixing in elements of historiosophical and political thought, co-create the specific methodological synthesis of Witkacy’s journalism. The names

and theories of Kretschmer and Freud, which are constantly mentioned in *Unwashed Souls*, seem to prove very useful in the process of cleansing, washing and healing the Polish soul.

Psychoanalysis of the Polish Society

Witkacy, as a journalist analysing social and “health” issues, regarded national megalomania which he called “putting on airs and graces” as the greatest Polish complex. He pursued his criticism ruthlessly, firmly, and sometimes insolently, believing that, by virtue of his status as an artist, he was at the same time predisposed to make remarks regarding every sphere of public life. He did not feel like, for example, Stanisław Przybyszewski a completely separate artistic-like entity or some kind of genius standing above society. Witkacy desired to explain, propagate, and speak to an audience with whom he felt an emotional connection. He believed in the causative power of his remarks, he emphasized it many times when writing sentences in which he used the forms: “we”, “our” or “for us” (Degler 8-15; Tomassucci 85-100).

Witkacy, despite his confession that in the 1930s he “shrivelled”, ceased to be impulsive and abandoned the aggressive struggle for his ideas he still wanted to change his own and other people’s everyday life. In order to do this, he began his reflections with observations of himself his own feelings of discomfort and existential unease (Bocheński 31-38; Kałowska). And so, when it came to describing the details of the mental atmosphere of Polish cities, he was particularly wry while describing the capital of Poland, Warsaw: adopting the attitude of both a sensitive artist and an ordinary citizen. The strategy was similar in other cases when Witkacy showed a number of details which could cleanse human bodies and souls of physiological and mental dirt. For example, with no restraint whatsoever, he wrote about “haemorrhoidal novalia” (ND 314-315), which he discussed not only on the level of a rhetorical sounding advertisement, but rather as a record of his own experiences in using various remedies for this ailment. Or, in a different case, he provided advice on the use of saliva (ND 338-339) in various types of cuts or skin problems.

The directness of the sentences written by this critic-moralist may surprise and even disturb with its style, but Witkacy was of the opinion that the effect of influencing the consciousness and

hygienic practice of the reader is more important than issues of appropriate literary decorum. Therefore, he did not hesitate to use colloquialisms, hyperboles, paradoxes, brutalism, accusations and even insults (Nowotny-Szybistowa 304-317). He would weave in phrases straight from a scientific dissertation, and a moment later he introduced rhymes; one moment he reached for philosophical and sociological authorities, and in the next he would refer to an event observed in a café or at a dancing club. The stylistic structure of the chapters of *Unwashed Souls*, like many other Witkacy's statements, is thoroughly personal, self-created and hybrid-like in terms of genre (Grochowski 169-214).

The stylistic eccentricity of Witkacy's persuasive texts can be seen very clearly on the example of his "advice" on powder and lipstick, which cannot be regarded as a literary example of a balanced style of health advice but rather as giving orders and hurling invectives at listeners who are excessively indolent.

In his advice and recommendations, Witkacy constantly attempted to build above his individual experiences a broader platform, the interpersonal level, on which problems had to be solved on an almost global scale. Hence, in *Unwashed Souls* there are such chapters as *Who is Who* (ND 319-322), *The Problem of Radio* (ND 333-337) or *Chain Dogs* (ND 337). In them, Witkacy investigated the mechanism of attracting people to publications which, by definition, are supposed to present outstanding personalities, but end up including biographies of average people. He also complains about the quality of music presented on the airwaves, which does not develop but rather flatters the tastes of listeners. Or, finally, he rails against all dog owners who treat their dogs badly. Everywhere, he broadens his private feelings onto the phenomena of community life and it is only from this perspective that he makes his final assessment.

In his desire to heal Polish society, Witkacy did not only deal with the present, but in accordance with Freud's recommendations he sought the causes of the disease of national megalomania in the near and distant past. And so, he wrote:

Let us stop inflating this fictitious grandeur of our past and trying to convince ourselves that we had everything art, science, respectable heretics, philosophy, technology and the devil knows what else, because in fact we had it all mostly arranged, or at any rate initiated by foreign influences. And as for the notorious Polish individualism, the development of which (in the case of nobility) was not hindered by anything, and the (supposedly...) “lofty” institutions devoted to freedom such as liberum veto... it is exactly all those institutions and this premature and at the same time belated individualism, or rather: its inadequate distribution among the various cultural strata of the nobility, which were the cause of all our past misfortunes and of the current low level of our country in almost every dimension (ND 224).

The criticism of individualism and the libero veto so strongly emphasized in the above quotation is not, of course, an original argument, and yet again we can find in such an approach trace of Witkacy’s readings and fascinations, of which the rooting in historiographical discourses conducted in the works of Cracow historians such as Walerian Kalinka, Józef Szujski or Stanisław Smolk seems quite obvious (Osypiuk and Symotiuk 225-234).

Witkacy’s historical “allusions” with full consciousness written as loose remarks and not as balanced scientific opinions in the dimension of their content also have certain features in common with the criticism of Occidentalism, which in Polish culture was consistently conducted by, for example, Michał Bobrzyński (Filipowicz and Kaute). It is worth stressing here that, following Polish critics of the West, Witkiewicz believed that the first and most serious cultural error that eventually caused the civilisational disease of the Poles was the adoption of Christianity by the founders of the Polish state from the side of the Western Church and not from Byzantium. The second great civilisational failure of the Polish ethnic element was the creation of a noblemen-based democracy, in which Witkacy did not see anything positive just the cult of privatism, materialism, obscurantism, the inability to work as a team, the narrowness of intellectual horizons and a false sense of civilisational mission (Sokołowski 125-167).

As a result, the Polish culture has created a deceased, conflicted society, with individuals “dirty” from their own complexes, bland or pretentious people. It is with such individuals that Witkacy, the critic, and anyone wishing to maintain the “hygiene” of the soul, is forced to live in the modernity, in which:

Wherever you see that a perfectly good fellow has turned out to be cruel, cold, ruthless and unhelpful, wherever a usually gentle person (...) suddenly hurls some mean, brutish insult that is extremely unpleasant for the receiver, if someone as good-natured as a ram all of a sudden lets out a stinking maliciousness, etc. (...), look for their complex, and above all a badly developed inferiority complex: a true knot of backwardness (ND 268).

Thus, Witkacy seemed to see the contemporary Polish culture as a “breeding ground for charmers” (ND 271-276), i.e., people who are well-dressed, know many languages, but who are in fact superficial, empty and prone to imitating other, richer members of society. Devoid of any depth of their own, they are condemned to mindless repetition. However, in order to conceal this fact, they push it to the depths of their personality and produce a mechanism which drives them to seek more and more new elements which supposedly prove their uniqueness and greatness and which drive them into the self-puffery so often mocked by Witkacy:

This eternal dissatisfaction and self-puffery beyond one's limits, as well as living beyond one's means physically and, to some extent, spiritually, in terms of a sense of importance and power became the basic psychological trait of almost every Pole. In this way, material goods, which could have been used for a significant increase in the field of production and culture, were used to increase the so-called “glitter”, to compete with others... nothing connected with essential values, just pure appearances. As a result, the country's wealth was wasted in a way that was uncreative and contributing nothing for the future (ND 236).

Epilogue

In *Unwashed Souls*, Witkacy attempted to heal Polish society, to purge it of national vices and bad hygienic habits. Brought up by an authoritarian father and an art model Stanisław Wyspiański, fascinated by Freud and Kretschmer, a practitioner of Müller's gymnastic exercises, he wrote his journalistic pieces convinced that his intentions made sense. He did it in an irreverent and apodictic manner, like an inspired speaker, agitator even an ideologist or leader. This can be seen as a manifestation of Witkacy's originality, but also as an artistic and intellectual reaction to Józef Piłsudski's statements overflowing with state-oriented thinking (Dudek) or the national themes in the writings of Zygmunt Wasilewski (Wasilewski). In Witkacy's mockery of "the so-called intelligentsia, the semi-intellectuals and the strata below them" (ND 132) one could even detect something similar to the style of the political proclamations of the fascist circles of Italy and Germany (Bocheński 31 and Pytko 27-41).

The author of *Unwashed Souls* failed to promote his views among a wider circle of readers. Nor did this promotion happen in the first decades of the post-war years. In today's cultural situation, Witkacy's articles on preventive health care has a completely different status. The whole sphere of bodily cleanliness is no longer a major social problem. On the other hand, the remarks made about the Polish mentality still seem to be valid, 'charmners' are constantly bred, while true 'fellows' are still lacking, and Poles are continuously more eager to seek "self-puffery" than opportunities for actual physical or intellectual work.

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