

On the Need to Read German Philosophers. Witkacy on Boy

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The article discusses Witkacy’s attitude towards the amicable reviewer of his plays—Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński. Witkacy’s criticism of Boy, the esteemed author of *Flirt z Melpomeną* (Flirt with Melpomene), is primarily based on his literary credo. Witkacy demanded that when evaluating art, a strictly aesthetic perspective should be adopted, thereby not accepting Boy-Żeleński’s conviction that social passions should dominate in thinking about literature. Moreover, Witkacy did not recognise the former’s acceptance that the critic be a moderator of social life. His attack on Boy-Żeleński resulted from the belief that the shortcoming of the reviewer’s attitude was his resignation from embedding reflections on literature and theatre in metaphysics and the aesthetic concept rooted therein.

KEYWORDS: Witkacy, Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy), literary life (1918–1939), literary critical polemics

In the literature on Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, Witkacy’s attitude to the author of *Słówka* [Some Words], is most often presented through the prism of highlighting the indignation that Witkacy’s critical speech, *Wezwanie do Boya*¹ [Call to Boy²], published in “Gazeta Polska” in June 1932, received in the circles associated with Boy-Żeleński; it was viewed as an open attack on the activity and work of the amicable reviewer of Witkacy’s dramas. The reproaches directed towards Witkacy,³ also by some monographers of Boy-Żeleński’s work (perhaps notably by Józef Hen⁴) for having spoken critically about Boy, build an image of Witkacy, the originator of the concept of *Pure Form* (*Czysta Forma*), as an ingrate who, not understanding what loyalty means, betrays his friend by taking advantage of his earlier help.

This means of assessing Witkacy’s attitude towards Boy is based on bringing several facts to the fore. The most important of these is, of course,

¹ “Gazeta Polska” 1932, no. 150. Boy-Żeleński is commonly referred to as ‘Boy’.

² [All Polish works will be given an English translation and thereafter referred to in the original – t.n.]

³ [Although his real name was Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, he is referred to here by his Polish nickname Witkacy – t.n.]

⁴ See J. Hen, *Boy-Żeleński. Błazen – wielki mąż* [Clown – great statesman], Warszawa 2008, p. 230.

Witkacy, himself an artist, and his long-standing acquaintance with the artistically significant Źeleński family. It was this, in the opinion of Boy's friends and some commentators on his work, that should have prevented Witkacy from criticising his friend, especially in circumstances in which the former encountered assaults of a political nature, attacks that were often aggressive, lacking foundation and which created an atmosphere that threatened—also quite realistically—his safety. Recalling this acquaintance, we must not forget, however, that although it was indeed a long one (Witkacy lived with the Źeleńskis, first in Kraków on Krupnicza Street, then in Warsaw on Smolna Street, and for several years drew their portraits as well as those of their family and friends, which decorated the walls of the rooms of both flats), it was not a friendship in reality. Witkacy was bound to Zofia Źeleńska by friendship and affection (at least until 1923, that is, until his marriage to Jadwiga Unrug), while his relations with Boy were never the easiest.

In this regard, Karol Estreicher and Barbara Winklowa write that both of the above-mentioned, knowing each other's worth, sincerely disliked each other⁵ and although their relations on a daily basis were as correct as possible, one might even say friendly,⁶ up to a time, the spiritual bond between the two was never as sincere and close as it was between Witkacy and Chwistek, whom Witkacy, the author of *Demon intelektu* [Demon of Intellect], also came to attack.⁷

The circumstances which, in addition to the well-known close relations between Witkacy and Boy-Źeleński, caused Witkacy's critical article on Boy to be generally received as surprising and even distasteful, involved the help from the former received from the latter author. It was thanks to the intercession of his friend Teofil Trzcński that Witkacy's play *Tumor Mózgowicz*⁸ [Mr Tumour Brain] was staged at the Kraków Juliusz Słowacki Municipal Theatre in 1921. It was here that Boy who persuaded Jan Pawłowski to

⁵ K. Estreicher, *Leon Chwistek. Biografia artysty* [Leon Chwistek. A Biography of the Artist], Kraków 1971, p. 172; B. Winklowa, *Boyowie*. [The Boys. Zofia and Tadeusz Źeleński], Kraków 2001, pp. 67, 122.

⁶ Witkacy always strove for permanent contacts with both of the Źeleńskis, while Boy believed that: "it is necessary to take [Stasio] as he is, with all his childish actions and deviations", B. Winklowa, *Boyowie...*, op. cit., p. 83.

⁷ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Leon Chwistek – Demon intelektu* [Demon of Intellect], [in:] Ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne* [Literary Criticism and Press Articles], ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 2015, pp. 284–368.

⁸ In the book edition of his play, Witkacy wrote the dedication: "Dedicated to Zofia and Tadeusz Źeleński." Witkacy also dedicated to both another work *Pożegnanie jesieni* [Farewell to Autumn] and to Zofia Źeleńska *Małwa, czyli Hyrkaniczny światopogląd* [Sepiina, or the Hyrcanian Worldview] and his main philosophical work *Pojęcia i twierdzenia implikowane przez pojęcie istnienia* [Concepts and Propositions Implied by the Concept of Existence].

direct *Wścieklica* [The Peasant *Wścieklica*] and Arnold Szyfman to include the plays of the avant-garde eccentric in the repertoire of Teatr Mały. Furthermore, it was thanks to Boy-Żeleński that in 1926 Witkacy was offered the opportunity of working with “Przegląd Wieczorny” (where he published 12 columns in two months) and Boy, who finally consistently promoted Witkacy’s work, both literary and as a painter (the paintings of this “incomparably extravagant talent” by an “indisputable master” are “a stunningly rich and amazing theatre set on canvas”)⁹. In this respect, Boy was very positive about the theatrical performances of Witkacy’s plays, which were generally perceived as avant-garde oddities. The favourable reviews he wrote were published at a time when Witkacy had significantly more opponents than supporters. It should be noted that Boy belonged to the latter group, and was even an enthusiast of his work.

His fascination with Witkacy’s dramas resounds in his reviews of *Tumor Mózgowicz*, *Wścieklica*, *Nowe wyzwolenie* [New Liberation] and *Zakonnicy* [The Nuns; here the reviewer praised Witkacy’s “fantastic plays”, “humour [which] captivates” and wrote of the “brilliant improviser”: “one of the most powerful and original talents that dramatic creativity has produced - and not only in Poland.”¹⁰ Believing that Witkacy was an artist “already from birth, by race, to the marrow of his bones”,¹¹ Boy promoted his work in France (publishing an article in French in 1928 in “Pologne Littéraire”¹²), and when the actors of the Teatr Mały in Warsaw refused to accept roles in *Tumor Mózgowicz* in 1926 (because of, as they believed, the play’s nonsense), Boy-Żeleński (alongside Karol Irzykowski) defended the right to experiment in theatre.¹³ He could not have done otherwise, because new theatre is born, according to him, in only one way: “Some Wyspiański, Pirandello or Witkiewicz turns up and puts pen to paper. All other ways make little sense.”¹⁴

One can therefore understand the expectations directed towards Witkacy by the supporters of the popular columnist, his family and friends,

⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Niedyskrecje teatralne* [Indiscretions in the Theatre], “Kurier Poranny” 1924, no. 91, p. 5.

¹⁰ T. Żeleński (Boy), *Teatr Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza* [The Theatre of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz], [in:] Ibidem, *Pisma* [Essays], vol. VI: *Szkice literackie* [Literary Sketches], ed. H. Markiewicz, Warszawa 1956, pp. 92, 90, 94.

¹¹ T. Boy, *Z Teatru. Teatr im. Słowackiego: Tumor Mózgowicz* [Let the Curtain Fall. The Słowacki Theatre: Mr Tumour Brain], a play in eight acts by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, “Czas” 1921, no. 150, p. 2 (reprint: T. Żeleński (Boy), *Pisma*, vol. XX: *Flirt z Melpomeną. Wieszór III i IV*, ed. H. Markiewicz, compiled J. Kott, Warszawa 1963, p. 68).

¹² T. Boy, *Le théâtre de Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz* [The Theatre of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz], “Pologne Littéraire” 1928, no. 15, [in:] Ibidem, *Pisma*, vol. VI, op. cit., pp. 75–94.

¹³ See T. Boy, *Sowiety w teatrze* [The Soviets in Theatre], “Kurier Poranny” 1926, no. 84.

¹⁴ Following J. Hen, *Boy...*, op. cit., p. 165.

that in expressing his opinions on Boy-Żeleński's activities and writings as a "Wiadomości Literackie" columnist, he should take into account the circumstances. This concerned both those connected with his long-standing acquaintance with the Żeleńskis and those connected with the intensified attack on Boy the publicist, theatre and literary critic in the early 1930s, resulting in demands for his liquidation."

Bearing in mind the understandable grievance that the Żeleński family and their allies had towards their family friend, it is nevertheless impossible not to reflect on Boy-Żeleński's perspective and his rationale as a literary figure. In order to do so, it is necessary to ask the following: 1) Why did there turn out to be so many critical remarks about Boy's approach to writing in Witkacy's statements? 2) What are these critical remarks based on? 3) What do they concern? 4) Where they stem from? 5) What was the purpose of the polemic he waged with Boy-Żeleński? Above all, to begin with, it is worth collecting and putting in order the accusations Witkacy directed against Boy, which one can find scattered across the various texts by the former.

One must begin with the remark that Witkacy's critical statement about Boy, published in "Gazeta Polska" in 1932, did not start the polemic that he waged with the recognised columnist Boy. Nor did it appear suddenly, since Witkacy had already reacted to the critical remarks directed in his direction earlier (in fact, immediately after Boy's first review of his play was published in the Kraków daily "Czas"¹⁵ in 1921). Although the reviewer usually spoke favourably of Witkacy on many occasions, he also made sceptical assessments regarding Witkacy's assumptions about aesthetics, as in his work *Nowe formy w malarstwie* (New forms in painting), especially the concept of *Pure Form*. For example, while reviewing the pre-premiere of Witkacy's *Tumor Mózgowicz*, praising and promoting the drama itself, Boy mentioned Witkacy's theoretical articles printed in the "Skamander" poetry monthly, persuading readers that these "obscure rather than illuminate matters of his work and harm the work itself, bringing to the fore the more than risky and unpleasant theory of meaninglessness" in literature." Here, Boy-Żeleński adds: "In this theory I see partly, in my opinion, analogies from painting falsely transferred to literature¹⁶ and in part, simply a revindication of the rights to the fantastic in theatre, which after all no one has taken away from poetry [...]"¹⁷

This fragment of Boy's review of *Tumor Mózgowicz* rooted itself deeply into Witkacy's memory, as evidenced by the fact that he would go on to refer

¹⁵ T. Boy, *Z Teatru. Teatr im. Słowackiego: Tumor Mózgowicz*, a play in eight acts by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, "Czas" 1921, no. 150, pp. 2–3.

¹⁶ T. Boy, *Z Teatru...*, following T. Żeleński (Boy) *Pisma*, vol. XX, op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁷ Idem.

to it several times at a later date. Even in the same year, 1921, he referred to it twice—in “Goniec Krakowski” in the article *Zwierzenia osobiste na temat Tumora Mózgowicza i teorii Czystej Formy na scenie*¹⁸ (Personal confessions on *Tumor Mózgowicz* and the *Pure Form* theory on stage), and in a lecture devoted to the latter, which he gave before the premiere of *Pragmatyści* [The Pragmatists].¹⁹ Distancing himself from Boy’s initial postulates towards theatre, based on the expectation that the poetics of realism would be realised, he declares firmly and unequivocally that he “disagrees with the purely life-like treatment of theatre throughout *Flirt z Melpomeną*”²⁰ and that it particularly offends him in relation to his play, “one tending towards Boy’s views as in *Pure Form*.” Witkacy would also reject Boy’s accusation of “revindication of the rights of the fantastic”, explaining in detail that he introduces in his dramas “an entirely new concept of the psychological fantastic, disclosing unknown compositional horizons.”²¹ Referring to a specific passage in the reviewer’s statement, Witkacy elaborates:

[...] the introduction of this notion is not a revindication of the rights to the fantastic” – in the old sense, as Boy accused me of doing in his critique of *Tumor Mózgowicz*. I am not talking about fantasies in the invention of new creatures, a fairy-tale fantasia, which of course I do not mean to condemn. What I am referring to is the psychological fantastic nature of the persons acting, as a result of which their actions can be, from the point of view of life, completely arbitrary [...]; the accusation that under the notion of the psychological fantastic” I conceal the notion of meaninglessness is in fact without meaning.²²

Two years later, in *Teatr* [Theatre], he would supplement his criticism of Boy’s review of *Tumor Mózgowicz* by referring to another fragment, where the reviewer accused Witkacy of using a “trivial and overly local-student dialect.” Boy therefore criticised his style, describing it as “unwashed and uncombed”, ironically commenting that the author himself probably absolves himself here of “the doctrine[s] of pure form.” In the conclusion of

¹⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Zwierzenia osobiste na temat Tumora Mózgowicza i teorii Czystej Formy na scenie* [Personal Confessions on *Tumor Mózgowicz* and the Theory of *Czysta Forma* on Stage], “Goniec Krakowski” 1921, no. 192, p. 3, no. 194, p. 3.

¹⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Odczyt o Czystej Formie w teatrze* [An Essay on *Czysta Forma* in Theatre] (Warszawa 29 12 1921), reprinted [in] *Ibidem*: “Teatr” 1923, Kraków, pp. 106–127.

²⁰ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Zwierzenia osobiste na temat...”, following *ibidem*, *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze*, compiled J. Degler, Warszawa 1995, p. 86.

²¹ *Idem*.

²² S.I. Witkiewicz, “Odczyt...”, following *ibidem*, *Teatr i inne pisma o teatrze* [Theatre and Other Essays on Theatre], *op. cit.*, p. 124.

his remarks about Witkacy's style, Boy-Żeleński added, with humour: "in this respect, I wish pure form "become much purer."²³

Witkacy was not amused by this joke. He expected greater precision, for "it is not clear whether it is the careless construction of my sentences or the quality of the words themselves and the coarseness of certain statements."²⁴ The specific remark addressed to Boy, moreover, turned out to be a pretext for Witkacy, the creator of general judgements on criticism, to comment—specifically on the desirable criteria for value judgements. Generally speaking, Boy's rejection of the *Pure Form* perspective as legitimate, or even necessary, for the evaluation of theatrical works became the main reason for Witkacy's protests, accusing Boy of adopting a realist-psychological perspective that is unauthorised in the reception of contemporary art. According to Witkacy, Boy practised such criticism not only because (although also) he reviews mainly realist plays or those that are staged and performed realistically, but above all because he does not have a system of concepts for practising formal criticism!²⁵ Witkacy openly accused Boy of not being sufficiently competent to understand and evaluate modern art, questioning as early as 1923 his way of writing about theatre, which is not based on a (formal) analysis of a performance, but, as he pointedly writes, on "rooting oneself in the epicentre of creativity and its mystery" and referring to the notion of "talent."

The confrontation with Boy was further strengthened by Witkacy's involvement in the discussion that had in this period on the influence of the chosen theme of a theatrical performance on its innovativeness.²⁶ Boy argued in several statements that the theme does not play a primary role in theatre,²⁷ referring to talent as a principle of creativity and to intuition as

²³ T. Boy, "Z Teatru...", following *ibidem*, *Pisma*, vol. XX, op. cit., pp. 73–74.

²⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Kwestia języka w sztukach scenicznych" [The Issue of Language in Stage Works], following *ibidem*, *Teatr i inne pisma o Teatrze*, op. cit., p. 100.

²⁵ See S.I. Witkiewicz, "Parę słów w kwestiach »tematów« sztuk teatralnych (À propos dyskusji Boya z Winawerem)" [A Few Words on the Subject of Theatrical "Themes" (À Propos Boy's Discussion with Winawer)], [in:] *Ibidem*, *Teatr i inne pisma o Teatrze*, op. cit., p. 96.

²⁶ This concerns Boy's polemic with Brunon Winawer. After the premiere of the latter's work *Promienie FF...* [FF Rays], Boy published a critical review (*Z teatru*) [Let the Curtain Fall], "Czas" 1921, no. 239, to which Winawer responded with *Legenda o Serafinie* [The Legend of Seraphim], (*Biuletyn z kuchni teatralnej*), "Goniec Krakowski" 1921, no. 275), which in turn spurred Boy to reply with the text "'Sędziwy humorysta' do autora w sile wieku" [A 'most venerable 'humourist' to an author in his prime], ("Czas" 1921, no. 233). The polemic concerned theatrical themes; the playwright argued that his work was innovative due to the originality of its subject matter, which he boasted, went beyond banal theatrical motifs. Boy in turn ridiculed this view, arguing that for "true talents" the question of banality in respect to motifs did not exist.

²⁷ He writes, among other things: "[...] novelty lies in something other than content; what is new, eternally and mysteriously new is the living blood the creator pours into his

a tool of critical-literary evaluation. In Witkacy's opinion, such an attitude to the matter proved that Boy did not accept strictly aesthetic criteria in the evaluation of art. He therefore decided to define his and Boy's meta-theatrical assumptions unequivocally and clearly in the language of polemic already by the early 1920s and it is in fact their common initial conviction (on the "irrelevance" of the subject) that lent itself to this polemic. Raising the rationale of the aesthetic, one ignored by Boy in regard to the criteria for evaluating art, Witkacy writes:

Boy is wrong to say that the subject is nothing, because this judgement, purportedly correct, Boy bases *au fond* on a realist view of theatre by replacing the absence of a system of concepts for formal criticism by speaking of the 'living blood' that is a mystery. The solution to this mystery lies in the path I have indicated.²⁸

Neither is Boy's splendid writing style (whom Witkacy calls "one of the best Polish stylists"²⁹) enough for this columnist to earn his respect, for "Edmund Husserl, for example, writes badly in German and Bergson wonderfully in French. Nevertheless, the former is a great philosopher and the latter only a 'blagger' of great cleverness."³⁰

Witkacy's position towards Boy, presented here on the basis of only three statements from the years 1921-1923, shows the way he conducted a dialogue with Boy, the famous reviewer of his dramas, which Witkacy would consistently use in his later statements addressed to his reviewer. How then can this be characterised ?

Firstly, as a pedantic reference to the specific accusations that Boy formulates against his plays and a demand for more precision in the comments he makes in his reviews, which are as brilliant as they are imprecise. As a result, Witkacy expects a reviewer to engage in multi-part and multi-threaded polemics, the culmination of which can by no means constitute a reviewer's assessment.

Secondly, by constructing on the basis of specific issues taken up by Boy-Żeleński in the reviews, generalising and formulating theoretical-literary reflections that place them both in opposition. Thus, the central and recurring nucleus of this polemic will be Witkacy's concept of *Pure Form*, which he consistently defended, though rejected by Boy.

work. You can bring neighbourhood gossips onto the stage and be new; you can bring tailed undertakers from Mars and two-headed courtesans from Sirius onto the stage and speak in clichés' (T. Boy, "Sędziwy humorysta'...", op.cit, following idem, *Pisma*, vol. XX, op. cit., p. 118).

²⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Parę słów w kwestiach »tematów« sztuk teatralnych...", op. cit., p. 98.

²⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Parę słów o krytyce artystycznej u nas", [in] *Teatr i inne pisma o Teatrze...*, op. cit., p. 206.

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 206–207.

Thirdly, an appeal for a methodological and meta-critical discourse and a demand by Witkacy that Boy thematise the accepted assumptions of practising literary criticism and formulate arguments for their defence.

Bearing in mind Witkacy's argumentation towards Boy-Żeleński in the 1920s, as well as the awareness of the confrontational means of conducting a discourse with the reviewer of his texts that he adopts from the very beginning, one is persuaded to treat the later arguments Witkacy outlined in *Pure Form* in a slightly different light than they are usually presented in the literature devoted to Boy. These, it is argued, are not ones of surprising and unexpected acts, but as continuations of the polemic Witkacy had conducted with Boy hitherto.

Therefore, it is apt at this juncture to trace the most important and emotionally charged threads of the polemics with Boy as outlined by Witkacy in his texts from the 1930s. These are above all articles from late 1932 and early 1933, printed in the press: "Gazeta Polska", "Zet" and "Pion."

The first of these is the famous proclamation *Wezwanie do Boya*, which is the final fragment of the dissertation "Tchórze, niedołęgi czy przemilczacze" [Cowards, wimps and the "tongue-tied"], (Słonimski, Winawer et al.), published in several issues of "Gazeta Polska" in 1932. In its main part, this dissertation is another (third) instalment of Witkacy's polemics with Bruno Winawer's ostentatiously and provocatively expressed views on the harmfulness of philosophy, which hampers the development of science.³¹ The attack on philosophy in Poland's most widely read literary periodical is described by Witkacy as a "downright monstrous phenomenon" and "criminal activity."³² Hence, the polemic with Winawer, derived from a negative emotion ("I am overwhelmed with rage"³³), is transformed into an indictment of the dominant model of contemporary culture, represented by an opinion-forming Warsaw weekly. He treats Winawer's attitude as a symptom of the decline of culture, resulting from the disappearance of metaphysical feelings, conformism, materialism in life and common-sense

³¹ See: B. Winawer, *Najście na filozofię* [An incursion on Philosophy], "Wiadomości Literackie" 1931, no. 5, p. 3; S.I. Witkiewicz, *O znaczeniu intelektualizmu w literaturze* [On the Meaning of Intellectualism in Literature], ("Gazeta Polska" 1932, nos. 26, 28, 29); Idem., *Z powodu najazdu na filozofię* [Due to the Invasion of Philosophy] (*Odpowiedź Brunonowi Winawerowi*) ("Gazeta Polska" 1932 nos. 42, 43; article not accepted for publication by editors of *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*); B. Winawer, *Drugi sąd nad Sokratesem* [The Second Trial of Socrates], "Wiadomości Literackie" 1932, no. 12; S.I. Witkiewicz, *Tchórze, niedołęgi czy "przemilczacze"* (Słonimski, Winawer et al.), "Gazeta Polska" 1932, nos. 147, 149, 150.

³² S.I. Witkiewicz, "O znaczeniu intelektualizmu w literaturze", following ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne...*, op. cit., p. 183.

³³ S.I. Witkiewicz, "Z powodu najazdu na filozofię...", following ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne...*, op. cit., p. 195.

rationalism, manifested in art by realism and in criticism by the lack of merit and rejection of intellectual values in favour of artistic intuition.

Boy-Żeleński is attacked by Witkacy in the last, very short section of this article, as the third representative—after Winawer and Antoni Słonimski—of a milieu that co-constructs false or apparent cultural and intellectual models, gaining importance due to their popularisation by people endowed with authority. Their authority, however, is based on an ambivalent value—the ability to present important issues in an attractive form because they are entertaining. This, however, has its exacting price, because, as Witkacy sneers, “Thought plucked up by the balloon of humour becomes light – light, lighter and lighter, until it finally perishes.”³⁴ Thus, the avant-gardist diagnoses, in the mode of a virulent accusation, that the aspiration of the entire “Wiadomości Literackie” milieu to gain popularity among the broad masses, requiring adaptation to the laws of the market and the public’s expectations, results in the trivialisation of serious problems, the disappearance of deep and difficult reflection and a drastic lowering of substance in discussion (not only) on culture.

Witkacy’s voice is a testimony to, and a result of, the frustration and irritation he felt, an expression of a growing conviction of the need for immediate action (“the situation is dangerous”, “the efforts of individuals will not help, we need to organise ourselves and set up some kind of league for the defence and propaganda of the intellect”³⁵) and, at the same time, an act of desperation (“nothing will come of it, and it would be good if it did”³⁶). It is also, indirectly, an admission of failure, for six months earlier Witkacy had written explicitly about the ideal of criticism, which he does not realise here: “economical in expression”, shying away from personal allusions, based on maximum differentiation of the apparatus of concepts and “elegant social forms.”³⁷

This is probably why, at the end of his essay, Witkacy admits to the discomfort he feels (“I have a distaste after writing all this and I think I will never write something like this again”³⁸), making it clear that the short proclamation addressed to Boy is a formulated text instead of the polemic

³⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Tchórze, niedołęgi...”, following *ibidem*, *Pisma krytyczne...*, op. cit., p. 223.

³⁵ S.I. Witkiewicz, “O znaczeniu intelektualizmu w literaturze”, following *ibidem*, *Pisma krytyczne...*, op. cit., p. 184.

³⁶ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Tchórze, niedołęgi...”, following *ibidem*, *Pisma krytyczne...*, op. cit., p. 235.

³⁷ See S.I. Witkiewicz, “O znaczeniu intelektualizmu w literaturze”, following *ibidem*, *Pisma krytyczne...*, op. cit., p. 192.

³⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, “Tchórze, niedołęgi...”, following *ibidem*, *Pisma krytyczne...*, op. cit., p. 235.

he would have liked to conduct (a substantive, detailed, nuanced, though uncompromising and critical one). It is thus (only) an attempt to provoke such a polemic by forcing the addressee of his comment to react when confronted with thorny issues set out clearly and emphatically. With all his reservations, however, Witkacy directs unequivocal accusations towards Boy, choosing a very expressive, not to say brutal, form. He writes:

And now listen to me, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, who promoted my plays, but never wanted to discuss the troublesome *Pure Form* with me in the newspapers: come out of your uterus for once, out of Pirożyński's, down from dethroning our national bards, out of divorce and marriage laws and even out of old French literature - deal more with the literature of today, our literature and its problems [...]. Say something about the relation of the intellect to literature, say it in such a way as to make it ring out as in the past and delve into the essential literary problems, [...] and then be prepared for a hellish attack on my part.³⁹

As can be seen, Witkacy's proclamation, the strength of which lies in its rhetorical suggestiveness, not in its argumentative solidity, is aimed at Boy, in an uncompromising and unnuanced intellectual and writing attitude. This relates on the part of the latter to a lack of seriousness towards intellectual issues, ignoring philosophical and aesthetic issues and infantilising valuable literary thinking. Its central motif is a disagreement with the model of literary criticism adopted by Boy, which should not be a social intervention, but a literary conversation immersed in strictly aesthetic issues. Appealing to emotion, *Wezwanie do Boya*, a text modest in dimension, is intended to act as a missile, to evoke emotions and perhaps even, to some extent, to shock the protagonist and his fellow supporters. It also heralds the accusations formulated by Witkacy in subsequent months in an attempt to focus attention on them and mobilise the adversary to enter into a polemic.

Six months later (in December 1932), Witkacy published, in several issues of the periodical "Zet" (where an acrimonious campaign was in progress at the time against Boy-Żeleński, an article entitled "Dlaczego powieść nie jest dziełem sztuki czystej"⁴⁰ [Why a Novel is Not a Work of Pure Art]). Here, he again expressed his resentment connected with the way in which Boy had reviewed his aesthetic views. This time it was a treatise entitled "Drogi i ścieżki literatury" [Roads and Paths of Literature],⁴¹ in which Boy-Żeleński touched upon the problematic nature of classifying works into

³⁹ Idem.

⁴⁰ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dlaczego powieść jest dziełem Sztuki Czystej*, "Zet" 1932, no. 15, p. 1; no. 16, p. 3; no. 17, p. 4; no. 18, p. 4.

⁴¹ T. Boy-Żeleński, *Drogi i ścieżki literatury*, "Kurier Literacko-Naukowy" 1932, no. 33, pp. 6–7.

certain literary genres, opposing Witkacy's views⁴² on the novel. He wrote, among other things, that "Witkiewicz's ostracism towards the novel comes at a time when, for a hundred years, the novel has reigned almost omnipotently in prose and, if not supplanted, then pushed other forms of prose into a corner",⁴³ adding that "in one of his statements, in which the whim of the artist means he often clads himself in the toga of a codifier of the arts, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz declares that while poetry and drama are works of art, the novel is not."⁴⁴ In turn, Witkacy reacted hysterically; twisting Boy's words and hyperbolising his accusations, he complains that the wise man in "Kurierek" (Boy-Żeleński's article, published in the "Kurier Codzienny" daily) called all his intellectual work "the whim of an artist dressed in the toga of a codifier."

While in "Gazeta Polska" he took aim at Boy-Żeleński, identifying Winawer and Słonimski as the main culprits behind the decline of culture, now inversely, in *Roads and Paths of Literature* he points to Boy-Żeleński as the one who, more than any other, represents the "diabolical actions of the clique" and the "intellectual ersatz" of the [Polish] capital. Without mincing words and pushing the boundaries of good taste, he thunders indignantly: "I prefer the "tongue-tied" Słonimski – there is consistency in that. I prefer even Winawer's stinking, gaseous, rear-mounted attacks – there is even some greatness in that - than such blatant betrayal under the guise of friendship."⁴⁵ Then striking at the columnist's position, legend and writing method, Witkacy adds bitterly:

A hyper-popular gentleman, one adored to the point of idolatry, crucifies his so-called friend in the eyes of his millions of admirers with a single little sentence in the full knowledge that he is at the very least committing recklessness. In view of this, the prior praise and even promotion of my plays takes on the character of which they have been accused: a perverse mockery of the public audience.⁴⁶

Apart from expressions of regret and resentment, however, Witkacy also formulates pertinent and factual arguments in this article. For example, he rightly points out that in his arguments about genres, Boy does not use precise terminology and does not propose theoretical-literary criteria that could serve to analyse the question posed. He replaces an analytical ap-

⁴² From the article "Wniebowstąpienie" [Assumption] by J.M. Rytard, "Skamander" 1925, folio. 3, pp. 50–59.

⁴³ T. Boy-Żeleński, *Drogi i ścieżki literatury...*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁴⁴ Idem.

⁴⁵ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dlaczego powieść jest dziełem Sztuki Czystej*, following ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*, p. 258.

⁴⁶ Idem.

proach with that of playing on the reader's emotions, resorting to demagogic arguments and using the stratagem of ridiculing his adversary. Wishing to criticise Witkacy's proposal in *Teatr* (that the novel not be counted as art understood as *Pure Form*), Boy asks emphatically in his article:

[...] what then to do with Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Prus, Proust, Conrad and so many others banished by this verdict from the paradise of art. Should we create an "abyss" for them, as created for those righteous who know not the light of true faith - Socrates, Plato and Marcus Aurelius - who cannot reach heaven, but who it was a pity to send into the fires of eternal torment?⁴⁷

Commenting on this fragment of Boy's text, Witkacy suggestively and with justification argues that the reviewer of his aesthetic concepts, with his literarily persuasive arguments, did not substantively oppose his argumentation (which, after all, were presented in an elaborate and detailed manner in many theoretical articles), but in fact circumvented it. He evades the issue, gaining the audience's sympathy by appealing to their instincts to treat the one who carries out this "crime of exile" as a "blackguard or fool." Witkacy demonstrates accurately that Boy-Żeleński seduces the reader, does not convince him by way of argument; in fact, Boy ridicules his adversary in discussion, rather than defeats. In addition, as if by the way, Witkacy also points to a certain emerging ambiguity in the way Boy functions in the literary sphere. The contradiction in question is that Boy, the author of *Brązownicy* [Bards in Bronze on Pedestals], while making a career out of "unmasking sainthood", himself began to assume the mantle of an authority, an arbiter, cleverly and neatly casting himself as a progressive national saint", "by dethroning Mickiewicz cast in bronze, he has soiled himself in this very bronze – he has simply himself cast himself on a pedestal",⁴⁸ Witkacy concludes.

The evaluation of Witkacy's statements about Boy-Żeleński, published in the magazine "Zet", is one of ambivalence. No doubt, are the exaggeration and radicalism of the accusations he formulates count against the author, especially if we consider the fact that Boy-Żeleński's comment on Witkacy's views on the novel was edited less than three months after Witkacy's pamphlet-like proclamation published in "Głos Polski." In this context, Boy's commentary can be seen to be delicate, which Witkacy, the proponent of *Pure Form*, ignores, biasedly only recalling his elegant appeals for substantive criticism, the rules of which Witkacy himself does not always observe. Thus, it is the case that with his text Witkacy seeks to justify his

⁴⁷ T. Boy-Żeleński, *Drogi i ścieżki literatury...*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dlaczego powieść jest dziełem Sztuki Czystej*, following ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne...*, p. 264.

earlier radical statement and demonstrate its legitimacy. Such a justification is apparent, for example, in the remark about the “promotion” of his plays by Boy, who, in Witkacy’s opinion, only donned a cloak for dishonest (perfunctory) methods of polemic. The mention of these positive reviews by Boy (albeit “double-edged” ones) refers indirectly to the accusations levelled against him (which he thus seeks to deflect from himself) that, by attacking the columnist, Witkacy did not accordingly repay him with kindness. There is also an element of justification in the accusation directed towards Boy that he betrayed Witkacy “under the guise of friendship.” This remark cleverly plays a double role: it is a symmetrical reflection of the grievances formulated against Witkacy six months earlier and, at the same time, an attempt to unmask the false blackmail of using this argument (friendship turns out to be “alleged”).

It must be admitted, however, that apart from so-called dirty or ambivalent tricks, Witkacy’s article also contains some accusations that are both insightful and to the point, which accurately hit at the weaknesses of Boy-Żeleński’s writing. Apart from this, what speaks in Witkacy’s favour is the fact that, given the circumstances surrounding the publication of his text, he seeks to dissociate himself from the anti-Boy campaign organised and conducted ruthlessly by the magazine’s editors at the time, thereby not wishing for his voice to become an instrument in the political and literary circles internecine struggle. Indeed, the editors of the “Zet” magazine preceded the printing of Witkacy’s treatise with a short introduction, announcing “an attack against the ramparts of organised philistines and intellectual parasites.” It declared in the language of propaganda:

We will begin to exterminate those whom we consider to be the pests of contemporary Polish culture, whether they be writers or critics, professors or publicists. We will let the air out of the artificially bloated greatness like from bladders. Radicalism and backwardness, ignorance and pseudo-literacy, lofty phraseology and cynical trading in spiritual qualities [...] we will penetrate and unmask it all without pardon [...]. The attack begins with an article by S.I. Witkiewicz, who [...] dissects the philistine nature and mental decline of our cultural life.⁴⁹

Witkacy reacted quickly. Deciding to disentangle himself from being annexed to the campaign organised by the magazine, which was personalised and directed mainly against Boy,⁵⁰ he placed an explanation in the next issue:

⁴⁹ *Zamiast artykułu wstępnego* [In Place of an Introductory Article], “Zet” 1932, no. 15, p. 1.

⁵⁰ This issue features a text on the front page with the unambiguous title: *Atakujemy Boya* [Draw the Bow String Wither Boy], “Zet” 1932, no. 16, p. 1.

When I was transcribing, reworking and submitting for publication in “Zet” a reading of the novel written back in June for my faithful Varsovians, I was unaware of the intended change in tactics of the editors of “Zet” and that my article was to be the first in an announced series. I don’t like promises and I only recognise the work itself - then you can take stock of it. I point out that this is by no means something like *Kazania Sejmowe* (Sejm Sermons) by Piotr Skarga, but simply my usual barking at my so-called enemies.⁵¹

By distancing himself from the magazine’s editorial policy, it could be said he was doing the right thing, all the more so as the anti-Boy campaign of “Zet” was only just gaining momentum. Witkacy, in these circumstances, strove to have his voice treated individually and sought ways of persuading the reader not to link the critical arguments he had formulated towards Boy-Żeleński with those alien to him (Witkacy). Most likely at his request, in the next issue, the magazine’s editor-in-chief placed a disambiguation under his article “Boy - pogromca Wyspiańskiego” (Boy - Vanquisher of Wyspiański):

In order to remove once and for all any misunderstandings, we would like to point out once again that S.I. Witkiewicz writes in “Zet” as a guest, having his own views, ones separate from ours - and has nothing to do with the ideological assumptions and militant tactics of the editorial board. Among other things, the coincidence of the allegations made by him against Boy with the campaign we have undertaken is entirely coincidental.⁵²

Moreover, although it is quite common for Witkacy to be painted with the brush of a “Braun-affiliated liquidator” of Boy-Żeleński, treating his texts as part of an anti-Boy campaign organised by the magazine’s editor-in-chief is an exaggeration. The truth is that Witkacy, aware of the danger of his statements being appropriated for anti-Boy slogans with political overtones, did much to mark his distance from the “liquidation” campaign conducted in the magazine with a philosophical profile which was, after all, definitely alien to him (messianism, Hoene-Wroński’s philosophy). A careful reading of his several-part article published in “Zet”, taking into account the genesis of his arguments (earlier than Braun’s organised campaign)

⁵¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dlaczego powieść...*, “Zet” 1932, no. 16, p. 3.

⁵² Footnote to Jerzy Braun’s article, *Boy – pogromca Wyspiańskiego*, “Zet” 1932, no. 17, p. 5; cf. also earlier published texts in “Zet”, indicating ideological differences between the magazine’s editorial staff and Witkiewicz: J. Braun, *My a Witkiewicz* [Witkiewicz and Us], “Zet” 1932, no. 4, p. 2; T. Kudliński, *Jeszcze o Witkiewiczu* [More on Witkiewicz], “Zet” 1932, no. 5, p. 2.

and their substantive content, allows one to see this easily (in part only overlapping with the editorial board's accusations, but essentially set in an independently developed aesthetic system).

In an extensive column published in "Zet" concentrating on Boy-Żeleński, and a short one in "Gazeta Polska", Witkacy thus presented a vehement and pointed catalogue of accusations against Boy. Echoes and continuations of these attacks would be found in several more of his later texts, in which Boy-Żeleński would not be indicated as the main addressee of the attack, but would appear in digressive remarks, in the margin of polemics Witkacy waged with other protagonists of the literary scene, where critical (and rarely favourable⁵³) references to Boy-Żeleński and "Boyism" would become an element that strengthens his argumentation. An example of such "use" of Boy would be the highly pointed remarks in Witkacy's pamphlet speech against Chwistek. Witkacy would accuse his former friend and distinguished logician of having "spoken like Boy [...] in the language of empty postulates, puffed-up sterile relativism"⁵⁴ and that some of his postulates are as dull and irrelevant as is the demand for lightness and wit by Boy and the humourists from "Wiadomości Literackie."⁵⁵

He would also accuse him of "fawning over" Boy, because this is how he read Chwistek's expression of solidarity with the former after Irzykowski had published *Beniaminek* (The Pet).⁵⁶ For in Irzykowski's dispute with Boy, Witkacy would discreetly but clearly side with the former, above all because: "Instead of responding in kind to Irzykowski's accusations, Boy passed them over in silence or responded with barbed comments."⁵⁷ He would also rightly accuse Boy of the "disorderly" reduction of his adversaries' arguments to one of personal motives,⁵⁸ which he frequently used. For this is how Boy-Żeleński dealt with *Beniaminek* in his reply to Irzyko-

⁵³ In his polemic with Irzykowski, he refers, with joy and satisfaction, to the direct influence of form on T. Boy's reception of *Kurka wodna* [Water Hen], which as a result – and for that reason – appealed to him [cf. S.I. Witkiewicz, "Beznadziejne porachunki z niepowrotnej przeszłości"] [An Impossible Settling Of Scores with the Irrecoverable Past] (Introduction to *Walki o treść Karola Irzykowskiego*) [The Battles Over Karol Irzykowski's Work], reprint in *Ibidem*, "Teatr" i inne pisma..., p. 356.

⁵⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Leon Chwistek – Demon intelektu*, following *ibidem*, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*, p. 365.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 335.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 365 (in regard to the article by Chwistek: *Obrońca myśli wyzwolonej* [Defender of Liberated Thought], "Wiadomości Literackie" 1933, no. 45).

⁵⁷ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Znowu to samo aż do znużenia, czyli o roli światopoglądu w literaturze* [The Same Again Ad Nauseam – the Role of Worldview in Literature], "Pion" 1934, no. 5, pp. 1–2; no. 6, pp. 3–4, following *ibidem*, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne...*, p. 397.

⁵⁸ See *Idem*.

wski, entitled *Brzydka książka* (An Ugly Book),⁵⁹ and this is how he took advantage in his polemic with Jerzy Braun.⁶⁰

In Witkacy's texts, however, apart from the dominant criticism, one can also discern efforts to indicate those achievements, accomplishments and qualities of Boy-Żeleński which he appreciates. For example, he attributes nobility to him,⁶¹ praises his texts on Słowacki, recognising Boy as one of the few who can say something new⁶² about the literature of yore, emphasising his contributions in the field of translation studies and services to the community. Witkacy is annoyed, however, that Boy's achievements in certain fields, which he in any case regards as less respected, allow Boy to speak authoritatively on matters on which, as Witkacy maintains, Boy himself is not knowledgeable:

By no means do I mean to diminish Boy's contributions to *Zielony Balonik*⁶³, a valiant figure on various subjects, from aborting a foetus to that of literary poisoning in relation to Mickiewicz and the devil knows what else [...] but [...] why someone who has not thought through given problems should be an authority in relation to them, because he is this authority at least ten floors down in the intellectual tiers - I do not understand this...⁶⁴

Thus wrote Witkacy in 1932, only to repeat the meaning of these words two years later, adding an assessment concerning the fundamental lack of spiritual condition of one among the "flatteners" of the metaphysical dramas in human destiny:

I recognise Boy in his proper context, but I cannot recognise him as the greatest Polish writer, the only sage and philosopher. I do not recognise him when he apodictically speaks on matters on which he does not understand himself, which he has not thought through and about which he does not have a definite system of

⁵⁹ T. Boy-Żeleński, *Brzydka książka*, "Wiadomości Literackie" 1933, no. 29, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Cf. T. Boy-Żeleński, *Sekrety niektórych walk "ideowych"* [The Secrets of Some 'Ideological' Struggles], "Wiadomości Literackie" 1933, no. 27, p. 3. In this article, Boy argues that the main reason for Braun's attack on him is the negative review he wrote of his play *Europa*.

⁶¹ Cf. S.I. Witkiewicz, "Beznadziejne porachunki z niepowrotnej przeszłości" (*Wstęp do krytyki Walki o treść Karola Irzykowskiego*), reprinted in Ibidem, *Teatr i inne pisma...*, op. cit., p. 348.

⁶² See S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dalszy ciąg o wstrętnym pojęciu niezrozumialstwa* [A Further Episode on the Repulsive Concept of Incomprehensibility], reprint in Ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne...*, op. cit., p. 96.

⁶³ [Literary cabaret founded by Kraków poets— t.n.]

⁶⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dlaczego powieść...*, following ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne...*, op. cit., p. 264.

concepts - then he is certainly and unwittingly a pest, because he is devoid of the demonic elements of the soul.⁶⁵

Several conclusions therefore emerge from a review of Witkacy's statements about Boy here.

1. According to the assumptions adopted by Witkacy concerning the desirable mechanisms of the functioning of literary criticism, which he applied consistently to various writers and critics, political, social and social circumstances ought not to prevent a polemic if substantive matters require it. This is probably how one should explain Witkacy's decision to radically criticise Boy-Żeleński, whom he knew, also at a time when the latter was facing an attack that was partly unjust and destructive. On many occasions, Witkacy thematised his conviction that polemical confrontation which abstracts from "pragmatic" and "life" contexts is right: "[...] my ideal would be personal friendship combined with even the most virulent and unabashedly witty ideological struggle..."⁶⁶ he wrote in 1932, earlier confiding:

I dream of such a picture [...] I see Boy with Grzymała-Siedlecki, Słonimski with Lorentowicz (or someone else from the National Theatre), Grubiński among other Skamandrites, myself, let's say (with a slight exaggeration) with Breiter [...] discoursing on the highest intellectual dilemmas and even noble venom, about beautiful things, and the never-to-be-reached Truth, far from politics, state and personal finances.⁶⁷

It was this dream that Witkacy sought to initiate, promote and develop, also with his statements addressed to Boy.

2. It is worth remembering that Boy-Żeleński's texts were not only an expression of acceptance of Witkacy's work, but also provided an opportunity for (and even compelled) a polemic. It would be too harsh to say, as Roman Zimand did, that Boy was a "dyed-in-the-wool conservative", and that the problems of Witkacy's theatre were "completely" alien to him.⁶⁸ It was, how-

⁶⁵ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Znowu to samo aż do znudzenia, czyli o roli światopoglądu w literaturze...*, following ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne...*, op. cit., p. 397.

⁶⁶ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Tchórze, niedołęgi czy "przemilczacze"...*, following ibidem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne...*, op. cit., p. 222 (1st edition, "Gazeta Polska" 1932, no. 147).

⁶⁷ S.I. Witkiewicz, *O polemice i wrogach. Uwagi ogólne* [On Polemics and Enemies. General Remarks], in idem, *Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne...*, op. cit., p. 63 (1st edition, "Przegląd Wieczorny" 1927, no. 116). Cf. also the comment by Jadwiga Witkiewicz, who commented on life issues, including those related to Boy-Żeleński, on aspects of Witkacy's attitude: "He was so fanatical in his convictions that he was capable of breaking off a long-standing friendship if he came to believe that his friend was making some kind of 'lousy compromise'", (following B. Winklowska, *Boyowie...*, op. cit., p. 133).

⁶⁸ See R. Zimand, *Trzy studia o Boyu* [Three Studies on Boy], Warszawa 1961, pp. 338–339.

ever, as Lech Sokół wrote, a “half-hearted ‘Witkacology’, as it captured half of the work without amputating the theory.”⁶⁹ Witkacy reacted to the rejection or silence on his aesthetic proposals from a reviewer who was generally sympathetic to him, and he had no trouble finding in Boy-Żeleński’s work some criticism of his own works that were neither explicit nor ambivalent references (allusions, silences), situating Witkacy in the invidious role of an artist gifted with talent who needs support. This role obviously did not sit well with Witkacy and even proved to be an irritation—one that he wanted to fight against in his literary discourse.

3. The reception of Witkacy’s comments towards Boy-Żeleński in the 1930s focused on emphasising his betrayal, disloyalty and support for the attacks on Boy from right-wing circles. Such a style of reception, understandable and with its own rationale, can function as a stereotype, allowing one to ignore the arguments formulated by Witkacy, which are not easy to repel and yet, at the same time, are important and accurate. In order to perceive them, it is first of all necessary to note that Witkacy directly expressed his opposition to being dragged into the system of political topography, consistently conducting his own dispute with Boy, which he at most included in the polemic he had initiated earlier with other participants of literary life (e.g. with Winawer and Słonimski).

4. Witkacy’s criticism of Boy just as much concerned specific matters found in his reviews as the Boy’s writing philosophy. Witkacy’s intention was to put to the sword those tendencies in literary criticism that Boy-Żeleński represented, which he regarded as negative. He attacked the tactic of simplifying literary, theatrical and philosophical issues in the name of their accessibility of presentation—a method of writing based too little on a pedantic analysis of the theatrical performance and too much on the desire to captivate the reader. Expecting substantive and detailed criticism, which delved in detail into every issue raised in a critical literary discussion, what Witkacy found lacking were the brilliant but ambiguous and general formulae that were the strength of the popular columnist Boy’s style. He also demanded that a strictly aesthetic perspective be activated when valuing art, since he did not accept that Boy’s thinking about literature was dominated by social passions (and not aesthetic values). He did not therefore recognise his acceptance of the critic’s role as a moderator of social life. Furthermore, the attack on Boy stemmed from the conviction that his literary shortcomings amounted to his abandoning the situating of reflections on literature and theatre in the very eye of metaphysics and the aesthetic concept rooted therein.

⁶⁹ L. Sokół, *Boy i Witkacy* [Boy and Witkacy], “Przegląd Humanistyczny” 1975, no. 3, p. 64.

Witkacy's dispute with Boy was not based on personal dissatisfaction; nor was it, at its core, the result of ill will or as lack of sensitivity on the part of Witkacy, the uncompromising avant-gardist. Nor can it be regarded as an accidental dispute, because, despite the vehemence of the attacks, it was based on factual grounds. The very model of criticism Boy adopted (oriented towards the popularisation of cultural and social content) stood in stark contrast to the hierarchy of aims and tasks of literary and theatre criticism approved by Witkacy.

It is also significant that both participants in the artistic milieu of the interwar period assumed a totally different addressee of the theatre review. For Boy, it was the reader of a high-circulation press who, regardless of whether they had seen a theatre performance or not, should benefit from reading a review, which should therefore function as a self-contained and self-sufficient text.

This self-sufficiency was ensured by the reviewer summarising the plot of the performance in their text,⁷⁰ by the intelligent and witty form of the argument and by placing a psychological or social problem of life as we know it at the centre of a text related to the performance. According to Witkacy, on the other hand, as can be seen from the claims he directs at Boy, a review in its optimal realisation should be a detailed and factually based polemic with the author of a given drama presented on stage. What Witkacy really wanted was for Boy's commentaries on the performances of his dramas to be addressed primarily to Witkacy himself, to become a detailed polemic waged with him as the author of the text before an audience in common; one educated on his theoretical articles. Thus, it could be said Witkacy ignored not only the assumptions of Boy's writing but also the laws of the theatre-going market and the expectations of the audience.

Moreover, Witkacy's dispute with Boy was based on radically different expectations of theatre. Boy's understanding of theatre as an art combining word, gesture, image and music into a unified whole was alien to Witkacy; he did not treat it as a phenomenon superior and autonomous in relation to the dramatic text. For him, theatre was first and foremost literature presented on stage by actors, which in the eyes of the audience should function as an artistic reality confronted with life, and which constituted an intelligent commentary on it. It was a vision radically different from the one propounded by Witkacy, who advocated building the concepts of *Pure Form* with a theatrical performance by treating meanings as formal ele-

⁷⁰ See E. Kalembe-Kasprzak, *Streszczenie jako recenzja* [Summary as Review] (*O recenzjach teatralnych Tadeusza Boya-Żeleńskiego*) [On Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's Theater Reviews], in *Szkice o krytyce teatralnej* [Sketches on Theatre Criticism], ed. E. Udalska, Katowice 1981, pp. 118–134.

ments, combining a multiplicity of elements into a unity in order to evoke metaphysical experiences. Witkacy's critical appraisal of Boy was therefore as much a consequence of disagreement on specific issues as a defence of the rationale of his own aesthetic system and its metaphysical background. In speaking out against Boy-Żeleński, Witkacy was therefore acting, in his opinion, in the name of defending higher values, namely, the necessity of articulating the tragedy of existence and idealism in art.

It was not without good reason that Józef Hen wrote in his monograph on Boy that Witkacy and Boy-Żeleński had nothing in common.⁷¹ While sympathising with the protagonist of his study, it can be seen that he assessed this difference in value terms, ignoring the underlying assumptions of Witkacy's polemic and their consequences. Furthermore, although—as Jan Gondowicz pointedly observed⁷²—Boy himself was in much of his behaviour a character as if taken out of Witkacy's works and the model of literary criticism he chose (with time, probably all the more strongly aware of its limitations) struck at the foundations of Witkacy's concept of theatre and life. This was one that the author of *Tumor Mózgowicz* could not help but notice, and which he understandably wanted to counteract.

In this context, Witkacy appreciated Boy's intelligence and writing style, as well as the generosity and his grace towards his enemies, among whom Witkacy counted himself.⁷³ However, it is difficult to hold it against him that he generally wished literary criticism (and culture more broadly) to develop in a different direction (than that advocated by Boy). In what direction one might ask? In one of his texts, Witkacy wrote about the activities on which the contemporary intelligentsia wastes time outside work—dancing, bridge, sport, talking in cafés to a deafening jazz band, and finally, reading novels as well as poetry all mean that they no longer have time for matters of substance. That is, one may ask for what? Above all, to read something

⁷¹ J. Hen, *Boy-Żeleński...*, op. cit., p. 230.

⁷² “[...] only someone like Witkacy could, in the interbellum, casually as if nothing, announce a document attesting to his arrest at night in the Kraków Planty for irrational, wordless cries. Or begin a column with a confession that when his heart rate slows down at public events, he has an irresistible urge to punch his nearest neighbour in the head. Or sue in two courts to have the word “whore” deleted from his column. Or complain in print that influential circles “don’t want him as a Freemason”. Or describe how he simulated insanity, with some inventiveness and expertise, before a military medical commission. Or recall how, while on guard duty in Płaszów, he succumbed to the temptation to definitively defile the guardhouse. (J. Gondowicz, “Boyem a prawdą” [Between Boy and Truth], [in] T. Boy-Żeleński, *Mity i zgrzyty* [Myths and Biffs], selection and foreword J. Gondowicz, Warszawa 2016, p. 6).

⁷³ See S.I. Witkiewicz, *Beznadziejne porachunki z niepowrotnej przeszłości* [An Impossible Settling of Scores with an Irretrievable Past], [in:] Ibidem, *Teatr...*, op. cit., p. 348 (1st edition, “Zet” 1934, no. 18).

weighty, such as Cornelius and Husserl, before bed or just after breakfast. Thus, Witkacy would never suspect Boy of reading German philosophers. Consequently, if the intelligentsia does not read Husserl before bed, then, as the catastrophist Witkacy wrote with complete conviction, all of literature and literary criticism, and even the world as one, will go completely “to the dogs.”⁷⁴

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