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Cutting the Romantic's Throat: Witkacy's Nasty Nightmare

This crucial turn in the twentieth century is not only reflected in the techniques of Modernism (e.g. a focus on the Self *qua* interiority, the mythic apparent in the everyday), but in a pervasive – and, therefore, less isolationist – world outlook. As many scholars have noted, Witkiewicz's plays in the 1920s reflect a world in which modern totalitarian regimes will reign supreme. This is not restricted to Witkiewicz's belief that the upper classes, of which he was a member, were crumbling – indeed, he believed this was a 'well-deserved catastrophe'.¹ He was interested in portraying the 'boredom and despair of modern civilization'² on an international level. It is precisely in Witkiewicz's shift in focus away from Romantic values that we discover his ability to traverse the Polish nationalist fantasy.³

Bezimiennie dzieło (1921) (translated as *The Anonymous Work: Four Acts of a Rather Nasty Nightmare*) deals with the devastating effects of revolution,

¹ D. Gerould: *Twentieth-Century Polish Avant-garde Drama: Plays, Scenarios, Critical Documents*, Cornell NY 1977, p. 35.

² *Ibidem*, p. 35.

³ This shift from Romantic values is no doubt one of the major contributors to why Witkiewicz's work was so unpopular in his own lifetime. Most critics, however, focus on the anti-realistic nature of his writing in relation to his unpopularity.

and the mode in which even the greatest causes can be mere pretenses for the power-hungry. In this play, Witkiewicz is interested in exposing the mechanisms of ideology, the hopelessness of any large-scale utopian revolution, and the inevitable loss of the individual that such social shifts ensure.

The plot focuses on Rosa van der Blaast, a famous composer who is in love with the leader of a social revolution, and Plasmonick Blodestaug, a consumptive painter who is desperately in love with Rosa. As opposed to the Woman in the final scene of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, who is interpellated by her love for Konrad into the nationalist cause, Witkiewicz gives us a cold and calculating female character who is able to manipulate men for her own pleasure. In short, Witkiewicz creates one of the original *femmes fatale*. Most significantly, in the relationship between Rosa and Plasmonick, Witkiewicz exposes both the lure and the apparatus of fantasy.

At the beginning of *The Anonymous Work*, Plasmonick, the protagonist, is about to be tried for espionage. He has recently received a large sum of money from Rosa van der Blaast, who is also to be tried as an espionageette, under mysterious terms. It is clear by the second act that Rosa is having an affair with Józef Tzingar, a social activist and leader of the faction who wishes to bring down the current monarchy. When Plasmonick discovers that Rosa will be sent to prison he also claims to be guilty of espionage, though we know he is innocent and merely wishes to share a cell with her in prison. Rosa does not contest Plasmonick's (false) admission of guilt, nor does she then try to prove her own innocence, as this allows Tzingar to freely pursue his revolutionary work.

In Act III, we are confronted with Rosa and Plasmonick sharing a prison cell, fighting about the nature of art: whether form or content is more important, painting or music, etc. We are led to believe, however, that such quarreling merely conceals a much deeper rupture in their relationship. Plasmonick does not understand why Rosa allowed him to falsely admit his guilt, and believes, rightfully, that she is protecting a lover. What repulses Rosa in this scene is not Plasmonick's outright musings on the true identity of her lover – thus exposing her desire – but rather the revelation that Plasmonick conceives of her as an espionageette. What Plasmonick fails to realize here is precisely the mode in which he has fashioned Rosa into an object of his fantasy, an object devoid of any material content; in other words, we see the exact mode in which desire is metonymic. Desire tolerates shifts from one set of contents to another (Rosa as composer, as upper-class citizen, as lover, as espionageette), as long as it remains within the boundaries of the fantasy wherein Rosa returns Plasmonick's desire. In this example we see clearly Lacan's point that desire is the desire of the other. That is to say, de-

sire is never direct, but caught in a self-reflective trap that is inherent to the (barred-by-language) subject's relationship to the symbolic network. To put it simply, Plasmonick's desire for Rosa is not straight but curved – it does not directly seek its target but requires a curvature of space; in short, his desire requires Rosa as a fantasy object rather than as a subject – it does *not* indicate a desire to simply be near her in the prison cell. If this were the case then Plasmonick *would* be troubled by Rosa's espionage. The fact that this revelation has no effect on his desire whatsoever does not indicate flexibility and compassion in Plasmonick's love for Rosa, quite the contrary. Once Rosa divulges her secret – the reason why she did not defend herself after Plasmonick's confession was because *she actually loves* Tzingar – she renders Plasmonick's desire for her impossible:

Plasmonick: (*Inwardly shaken*) Don't talk that way... I'm not reproaching you because you took spy money for your music, only because you could love *him* so much that to save him you'd go to prison and deceive me for such a long time. When I loved you so...

Rosa: That wasn't love; that was just weakness. [...]

Plasmonick: But how are we going to go on living? Fourteen years! No – I've got to get out of here. I simply can't – I can't love you anymore [...] It's all a stupid hideous dream. It's got to come to an end.⁴

Rosa functions as a *femme fatale*⁵ not because she is aware that Plasmonick's fantasy will lose its consistency and dissipate with the divulgence of her secret, but rather because she is the means by which Plasmonick experiences 'subjective destitution.'⁶ Plasmonick alludes to his state of subjective destitution as a result of Rosa's revelation when he says to his father, 'I'm in

⁴ S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Anonymous Work: Four Acts of a Rather Nasty Nightmare*, trans. D. Gerould, [in:] *Twentieth-Century Polish Avant-Garde Drama*, London 1977, p. 134–135.

⁵ Rosa's status as a *femme fatale* is solidified at the conclusion of the scene when in response to Plasmonick's plea, 'You don't know how monstrously you're torturing me,' Rosa declares, 'I do know – I know perfectly well [...] Torture is the absolute essence of love' (142). Is this declaration not *stricto sensu* one of the key features of *film noir's femme fatale*?

⁶ Plasmonick, however, puts Rosa into an impossible position, and this is why we see her eruptive response. What Rosa acknowledges is that as an object of Plasmonick's fantasy, she is loved for everything except the one substance that gives her subjectivity its consistency, that is her love for Jozef Tzingar – the man for whom she was willing to sacrifice her life and go to prison.

a state of great inner transformation, Father. For me the world has turned round a hundred and eighty degrees at least.⁷ It is at this point in the play that we should recall Lacan's formula 'woman is a symptom of man.' This is not a misogynist notion that implies a woman has no ontological consistency unto herself; instead, Rosa functions as a symptom for Plasmonick without whom 'reality' as such would have no positive uniformity. Rosa subtracting herself from Plasmonick's fantasy is the equivalent to Plasmonick losing his symptom. And if we take into account Lacan's later writing on symptom, no longer as an attribute that will simply dissolve when it is appropriately symbolized, but as the feature which endows the subject with their very ontological consistency, then we can make sense of Plasmonick's outburst, 'I'm destroyed;' an outburst *which should be taken literally*:

If [...] we conceive of the symptom as [...] a particular signifying formation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship to *enjoyment (jouissance)*, then the entire relationship is reversed: if the symptom is dissolved, the subject itself loses the ground under its feet, disintegrates.⁸

Here we should detect the seeds of the conclusion, the point at which Plasmonick overcomes his love for Rosa, and feels as if he has 'woken from a dreadful nightmare.'⁹ It is precisely in Plasmonick's ability to traverse his fantasy, that is to overcome Rosa – quite literally, in fact, for he cuts her throat with a razorblade – that we see Witkiewicz has really left behind the Romantic universe, that is, the symbolic network that refused to renounce the desire *for desire* – the very form of drive – that could not surpass the fantasy for its own aim (that is, autonomous 'nation') without renouncing the desire for this desire. In doing so, does Witkiewicz not expose the paradox of Polish Romanticism? In other words, freedom and desire are indeed exclusive; the metonymic nature of desire (versus the repeated staging of loss we encounter in drive) is always-already related directly to the subject's fundamental fantasy, that inaccessible fantasy which anchors the subject to his social field. Which Romantic character is able to attain freedom from their symbolic networks to such a radical degree as Plasmonick accomplishes? When Plasmonick cuts Rosa's throat he accomplishes an *act* in the strict Lacanian sense. The act is that which resounds outside of the Symbolic, which cannot be incorporated or sutured into it. Just before committing

⁷ S. I. Witkiewicz, op. cit., p. 137.

⁸ S. Žižek: *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, New York, London 2001, p. 155.

⁹ S. I. Witkiewicz, op. cit., p. 150.

the act, Plasmonick says, 'I'm going back to prison. And in order not to be tempted out again' – in other words, in order to renounce the 'new world' that will come about as a result of Tzingar's *coup d'état*, in order to renounce the symbolic field that constitutes his identity – 'I've got to do something appropriately monstrous.'¹⁰ The act is always monstrous insofar as it disturbs the laws of the symbolic network – it literally has to *break the law* in order to undermine the law from within. For a moment, the onlookers believe Plasmonick will kill himself; instead he kills the object of his fantasy – Rosa – the symptom which endowed his notion of 'reality' with some consistency. From this point on, Plasmonick has confirmed his life-long prison system, cut off from the 'terror' of Tzingar and Lopek's revolutions that preclude all (metaphysical) individuality, a revolution that will see the individual reduced to the grey mass of unidentifiable workers.

Should this *act* not be directly contrasted with Konrad's (false) act at the conclusion of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, the point at which Konrad transcends the earth on a golden chariot – an act that not only fails to renounce the symbolic field but, in a process of sublimation, confers consistency on Polish nationalist identity? What's more, do we not encounter an important cut here between Mickiewicz and Witkiewicz, surrounding not just the object of desire, but the 'object of negative magnitude,' the object which gives consistency to our reality? At the end of *Dziady*, the Woman misrecognises Konrad's glance, and believes that it is intended solely for her. Of course Mickiewicz's real intention is for the entire audience to perceive this glance as intended *solely for them*. It is here we see the paradox of interpellation, when one moment of radical contingency changes the entire field of subjectivity. Konrad's glance is both intended for everyone and for each individual in particular. How is this possible? The only satisfying answer concerns the nature of *objet petit a*. As Žižek explains in *The Plague of Fantasies*, 'the object which functions as the "cause of desire" must be in itself a metonymy of lack – that is to say, an object which is not simply lacking but, in its very positivity, gives body to lack.'¹¹ In other words, the lack itself, the gap which constitutes subjectivity, is unbearable because it provides no consistent model of selfhood. This is why we have Konrad, the Romantic hero, as the Thing (*das Ding*), the 'negative magnitude:' 'if our experience of reality is to maintain its consistency, the positive field of reality has to be 'sutured' with a supplement which the subject (mis)perceives as a positive entity, but is effectively a negative magnitude.'¹²

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 151.

¹¹ S. Žižek: *Plague of Fantasies*, London 2009, p. 81.

¹² Ibidem.

Rather than carrying on this process of nationalist interpellation, attempting to supply the supplement that secures meaning for a nation that is 'nationless,' as in the Mickiewicz example, Witkiewicz is here revealing the very nature of this relationship to desire, subjectivity and the role of the Thing. It does not matter to Plasmonick that Rosa might be an espionageette, because the nation-as-cause is not the supplement that secures Plasmonick's life with meaning and consistency as it does for the Romantic subject. Rather than favoring love as a cause worthy for this position, the position of the Thing, Witkiewicz exposes the very negative dimension of any object which functions in this role; in short, he shows that this object (Konrad, Poland, Rosa) is simply the embodiment of a lack. It is for this reason that Plasmonick is so devastated when Rosa reveals that she is not only Tzingar's mistress, but that she never loved Plasmonick in the first place. Despite Plasmonick's earlier protestations that nothing could stop him from loving Rosa – this is the primary reason he gives to coerce Rosa into confessing her secret – his whole subjective field is thrown into turmoil: 'Plasmonick: Aaaah! What monstrous swinishness! I've plunged down from the loftiest heights to the very bottom. I'm completely destroyed.'¹³ The 'I' Plasmonick uses here is the subject of the enunciated, the subject around which 'being desired by Rosa' ensured consistency. This self-reflecting mechanism of desire that compounds subjectivity – and forms the fundamental fantasy – is the same mode that categorizes the abstract relationship between Mickiewicz's Konrad (and Wyspiański in his assimilation of the character in *The Deliverance*) and the spectator. Mickiewicz's project is only successful insofar as the audience believes *Poland desires them* (a desire which is summed up in the nationalist slogan 'Poland Needs You!'), desires that they join the nationalist cause on its behalf. This is an example *par excellence* of a belief in the big Other founding symbolic identity, wherein Poland is conceived of as a material value, *as an object capable of desiring its citizens*.

It is also here that we must problematize Konrad as a Christian 'call to action' for the Polish to take up arms against their oppressors. The moment that Konrad is put onto the stage is there not an injunction to sit back and enjoy Romanticism nostalgically? In other words, in understanding the difference between Wyspiański, who 'realized' Konrad, and Witkiewicz, who parodies him, do we not have to take into account the role of 'primordial substitution'? Žižek often speaks of the role of canned laughter in television sitcoms as the subject who laughs for you, and points out that the very virtual nature of this laughter – although you as the viewer may never directly

¹³ S. I. Witkiewicz, op. cit., p. 133.

laugh out loud – in no way hinders its efficacy. In other words, when after a long day at the office you sit down to watch television, the canned laughter actually relaxes you, *as if you yourself have been laughing*. The crucial point Žižek makes in relation to this process is the more primordial substitution that takes place with the signifying structure – that a signifier acts on behalf of the signified: ‘a *signifier* is precisely an object-thing which substitutes for me, acts in my place.’¹⁴ In the same mode that canned laughter laughs on your behalf – you can literally laugh through another – the signifier *acts* on your behalf. This is the status of Konrad for Wyspiański, who successfully conjoined modernist trends with Romantic themes, in his legendary 1901 production of *Dziady* at the Teatr Miejski in Krakow. By surrendering one’s innermost content, fears and anxieties to Konrad, by applauding his speeches from the audience, one is relieved of one’s duty to directly participate in revolutionary activity: ‘when the Other is sacrificed instead of me, I am free to go on living with the awareness that I did atone for my guilt.’¹⁵ The pacifying element in seeing one’s nationalist fantasy staged – wherein the practice of emancipation happens on one’s behalf; ‘spectating’ is sufficient action, it ‘atones for our guilt’ – is the very distinguishing characteristic of ‘primordial substitution.’¹⁶

If one was still stuck in the Romantic universe, the play would conclude with Plasmonick’s endless longing, similar to Gustaw who has lost his love in Part II of *Dziady* and wanders the earth in utter despair. But Witkiewicz is able to break the Romantic deadlock. Plasmonick will indeed be sent to prison, but this should be understood as an act of liberation rather than confinement *qua* desire. My point is that Plasmonick’s prison sentence is the counterpoint to Konrad’s ascension (sublimation) to heaven. And this moment of liberation is characterized by Plasmonick’s refusal to accept a ‘forced choice’ as such, but rather to experience the forced social choice as a real choice, thus opening up the possibility of free will.

Plasmonick’s father suggests that his son come home and enjoy some ‘coffee and nice fresh rolls.’¹⁷ Instead of taking this option, a forced choice – an option that appears to be a choice, but whose acceptance is the mandate of any social bond – Plasmonick commits the ‘monstrous’ act and murders Rosa. This is the moment he awakes from the nightmare, when he successfully traverses his fantasy. He actually treats his father’s invitation as some-

¹⁴ S. Žižek: *Plague of Fantasies*, op. cit., p. 109.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Is not the fear of just such a ‘primordial substitution’ lodged directly in the rejection of Romanticism that drives Słowacki’s *Fantazy*?

¹⁷ S. I. Witkiewicz, op. cit., p. 151.

thing to be accepted or declined – when, in reality, rejection was always prohibited. Plasmonick's act is subversive because he treats his father's choice (to go home with his father and take up his position as the Head of the National Gallery under the new totalitarian regime) *as a real choice*, and 'in accomplishing this act, the subject suspends the phantasmatic frame of unwritten rules which tell him how to choose freely.'¹⁸ As Žižek points out, it is no wonder that such an act has catastrophic consequences; it breaks down the social contract that sustains our symbolic field. In *The Anonymous Work*, one can say that the social rules are *literally* 'unwritten', which is why Plasmonick remarks, 'I assume that even in a new state [...] such crimes will have to be punished.'¹⁹ Although a new 'constitution' has not been written, our behavior must already presuppose its existence and we must act accordingly...

Witkiewicz's genius stroke is that the characters do not react to Plasmonick's act. In order for the symbolic field to remain intact his act must be completely ignored. The last lines of the play have Plasmonick's father repeating the 'forced choice' of restored order in which everyone will carry on as if nothing has changed. 'That Plazy really is a madman,' the father says, and then repeats his invitation to all those left onstage, 'I'm inviting all of you for coffee and nice fresh rolls.'²⁰ It is this repetition of – and the characters' implicit agreement to conceal – the 'forced choice' that recreates their social solidarity, which marks the counterpoint to Plasmonick's choice of freedom; freedom rendered here, with irony, as a prison.

Witkiewicz's fundamental achievement in this text rests with his acknowledgement that fantasy not only sustains desire and social roles, but that the very mechanism of authority is a semblance. The crucial warning of *The Anonymous Work* resides in the perverse nature of confusing the leader with the locus of power, precisely the confusion that leads to totalitarianism. As Claude Lefort (1988) points out, democracy reminds one the place of power is an opening that can never fully be assumed. This is why, in a democracy, every leader remains a usurper, in direct opposition to the figure of the monarch who appears to fit the role 'naturally.' This is the danger for such totalitarian leaders as Stalin, who believe in the direct equivalence between their person and their position. This is also the role of the pervert for Lacan, the one who directly acts as an instrument for the big Other. 'A madman is not only a beggar who thinks he is a king, but also a king who thinks he is a king – that is, who directly grounds his mandate in his immediate

¹⁸ S. Žižek: *Plague of Fantasies*, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁹ S. I. Witkiewicz, op. cit., p. 151.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 152.

natural properties.'²¹ This is the mistake Tzingar makes as he edges towards power; the day before his revolution, he confuses the 'greatness' of his position directly with his own physical 'greatness.' Tzingar becomes a 'pervert' in that he 'wishes to work for the Other's enjoyment, to become an object-instrument of it',²² which embeds him in the totalitarian universe. While in prison, Tzingar and Plasmonick argue about Tzingar's position:

Plasmonick: [...] I've got to admit you're a monstrous scoundrel, Mr. Tzingar.

Tzingar: You're wrong. The position I now occupy has ennobled me. Napoleon was an ordinary crook at the start of his career. But leading France to glory made him truly great – the way he was at Waterloo. Now I would be utterly incapable of being a spy.

Plasmonick: What megalomania! Rosa, can't you see he's a disgusting clown, that darling Tzingar of yours?

Rosa: Can't *you* see what a clown *you* are? No, Plazy, he has true greatness in him. We can't begin to evaluate him properly; we're seeing him too close up. Only history can judge him.²³

It is no coincidence that Tzingar calls on Napoleon as an example here, the textbook example of one who believes himself to fully personify the place of power as the embodiment of the Will of History, *the one who crowns himself* emperor. It is testimony to Tzingar's own ignorance that he should evoke Waterloo, the precise moment of Napoleon's defeat – Witkiewicz incorporates some Romantic irony, for the very evening in question will prove to be Tzingar's Waterloo, when Lopak overtakes his theocratic revolution with a 'communist' one.

Rosa's reaction is equally insightful, as she explains to Plasmonick, 'we're seeing him [Tzingar] too close up' to judge. This position – which is fully founded on a belief in the mystique of power, that power should not be seen too close up or it will disintegrate; a position which clearly disavows the fact that power is merely a semblance, whose efficacy can be destroyed by viewing it 'too close' – is the opposite of Giers, president of the military tribunal that is investigating Rosa's espionage. In Act I, Lopak tries to convince Giers to join the revolutionary faction. Giers resists at first, saying that he might

²¹ S. Žižek: *Plague of Fantasies*, op. cit., p. 142.

²² Idem: *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As A Political Factor*, London 2002, p. 271.

²³ S. I. Witkiewicz, op. cit., p. 141.

'become [Lopak's] worst enemy.'²⁴ However, Tzingar convinces Giers that there the revolution will be successful, and Giers changes sides, admitting that 'power is power'. This last acknowledgment is not a mere tautology, but should be read as 'power is (the semblance of) power.'

Tzingar, in Act I, is able to convince Giers of his plans because he has not yet assumed the perverted position in which he confuses himself with his position of power. In the beginning, Tzingar is fully prepared to manipulate 'power as a semblance', as a means whose efficacy is dependent on faith.

Tzingar: [...] the only thing that's needed is to create a new type of state ruled by priests. What other churches weren't successful in doing because of their real faith and the concessions they had to make for the sake of that faith, we'll be able to do quite consciously as a pragmatic, systematic swindle [...] Believe me, people today are far more inclined to adopt any old belief than the totem worshippers in New Guinea. There must be belief – even if we have to make use of spiritualism and table-tipping.²⁵

Tzingar's defeat coincides with his perception that power is no longer an element to be manipulated by means of faith – in other words, the point at which Tzingar treats power as a semblance – and begins to treat *himself* as the direct embodiment of authority. In this way he can be related to the capitalist in commodity fetishism: although Tzingar knows there is a gap between the locus of power, its universal position, and the particular content that seeks to fill this space, the Leader, he *acts* as if there is a magical element that renders the particular immediately universal. And it is precisely this confusion that leads to totalitarianism. Witkiewicz's work not only breaks the deadlock of desire *qua* symbolic identification in Romanticism, insofar as it presents us with the true choice of freedom by treating the 'empty gesture' as a genuine choice, he also warns us, in an Orwellian move, against the lure of totalitarian power.

Abstract

This text, based on Witkacy's *The Anonymous Work*, explores the devastating effects of revolution and the mode in which altruistic causes function as pretenses for power mongering. Witkacy exposes the mechanisms of ideology, the hopelessness of a large-scale utopian revolution. It is in Plasmonick's ability to traverse his fantasy to overcome his love for Rosa, whose ideological interpellation is strictly contained within the coordinates

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 114.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 115.

of Romantic ideals, that Witkacy leaves behind the Romantic universe, the symbolic network that refuses to renounce the desire *for desire*. In so doing, Witkacy exposes the paradox of Romanticism: freedom and desire are exclusive; the metonymic nature of desire is always-already related directly to the subject's fundamental fantasy, that inaccessible kernel which anchors the subject to his social field.

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