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The Concept of "Pure Form"

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Konstanty Puzyna

The Concept of “Pure Form”

1

The rank exuberance of Witkacy studies in recent years is without a doubt something over which anyone interested in Witkiewicz rejoices. It is easy to see, however, that the growing number of works in the field continues to be dominated by the generalities, and even truisms, of the essayistic, whilst the individual subjects dealt with tend to be marginally important or even downright fortuitous: one could doubtless swell the ranks of such titles as “Witkacy and Brecht” or “The Influence of Shakespeare on the Juvenilia of Witkacy” (these are genuine examples, not ones I have dreamt up!) but they do not advance matters very far, to put it mildly. Hence those recent studies that attack the central problems are all the more noteworthy: Jan Błoński’s and Daniel Gerould’s studies of the plays, Krzysztof Pomian’s work on the philosophy, the studies of the theory of culture carried out by Małgorzata Szpakowska and Marcin Król, or Janusz Degler’s researches into the theatrical reception of Witkacy during the inter-war period. They highlight all the more clearly the problems that still remain unbroached, the white spaces on the map of Witkacy studies. These still include Witkiewicz’s paintings and theory of painting; his Russian period which has not been examined from the biographical point of view; and the theory of Pure Form which continues to be a blank space—glancingly referred to in many studies, but not placed at the centre of an analysis.

It is in fact the notion of Pure Form that I would like to deal with here—or at least make an initial probe. Unfortunately

someone has to do this spadework, for without it whole swathes of issues in Witkiewicz studies would have to remain untouched, and would spawn more or less erroneous interpretations. Pure Form is a concept of key importance in Witkiewicz's aesthetics, and yet at the same time it is far from a clear one—despite the fact that the huge number of excurses upon the subject Witkacy has left us generally have the air of patient or irritable attempts to drum into the head of a dull child the reasons why $2-3=-1$.

The concept of Pure Form—as we know—diverges from the various colloquial meanings of the word “form.” Witkiewicz repeatedly stresses this:

[...] the notion of Pure Form [...] has nothing whatsoever in common with the notion of form as the receptacle for content: form as the expression of ideas or feelings or the forms of objects in paintings (*Nowe formy w malarstwie*—*New Forms in Painting*—hereafter, referred to as *Nfm*—Warszawa 1959).

This quotation introduces straightaway the first of the meanings of the word “form” that appear in Witkacy: the traditional, Aristotelean, and now well-nigh colloquial distinction between “form” and “content.” For Witkiewicz this meaning is part of what is termed “a view of life” and embraces all the phenomena of the world, and not just the sphere of art: “for in the context of the space-time of Existence wherever we go we encounter contents inside forms” (*Nfm*, p. 342). Consequently, this distinction “does not provide one with any, or rather with any subjective, criteria—for there are no objective criteria here—for distinguishing between works of art and other existing things” (*Nfm*, p. 342). It is worthwhile however paying close attention to the “form/content” distinction, since it puts a sizeable spanner in the works of Witkacy’s disquisitions upon Pure Form; to be sure, Witkiewicz is openly contemptuous of the distinction, but he is not quite sure how to extricate himself from it. Why is this? We will put this question aside until later.

The further meanings of the word “form” manifest themselves in the sphere of art. The second chapter of *Szkice estetyczne* (*Aesthetical Sketches*, 1922), entitled “On the Concept of Form,” presents us with the following sentence:

The concept of form is far more virulent than that of beauty—it does not have two meanings but four, and these also require to be differentiated (*Nfm*, p. 184).

The four new meanings of the word "form" are, firstly, (a) *outline forms* and (b) "*real*" forms. Both relate to "the forms of objects in the external world" or, strictly speaking: to the manner in which we perceive these objects. Outline forms – flat forms – occur when one looks with only one eye, and bear certain analogies to paintings that treat the canvas consistently as a two-dimensional plane; whilst we perceive multi-dimensional "real" forms when we use our normal binocular vision.

In so far as an outline form can be given in a single act of simple observation (we consider the notion of a simple act to be synonymous with the notion of an unchanging complex of qualities in duration), in the simultaneity of a fixed look, to the same extent a "real" form (that is, one that corresponds to a series of sense perceptions) can only be divined with the aid of binocular vision (and here we are not dealing purely with sense perceptions of sight but with a whole series of other sense perceptions: in the muscles of the eyeball, in the lens, i.e. the sensations of the eye's adjustment) (*Nfm*, p. 186).

This second form of the object "can only be examined when the object revolves upon its axes (which may be varied or fixed), or when we move around it or touch it from all sides" (*Nfm*, p. 185). That is why "the distinction between these two categories of forms is fundamental when it comes to distinguishing between the forms of painting and the forms of sculpture" (*l.c.*).

The third meaning – i.e. (c) – is what is called the capture [ujęcie] of the form, "that is, the element that can be formulated as for instance angularity or fluidity, featheriness or softness, or sharp demarcation" (*Nfm*, p. 191). This denotes the forms within a picture, not the forms of objects in the external world, and the "capture" precisely designates the stylistic peculiarities of the given artist, which manifest themselves in his handling of the simplest elements of the picture. Critics fail to distinguish adequately between this articulation of form and the depicted objects themselves, which is why

[...] deceived by the diverse articulations of form that vary so greatly from one modern master to another (e.g. Picasso, Gauguin, Matisse, Von Gogh), their disquisitions upon the objects as variously rendered confuse both the composition and the capture of the form (namely, the fixed arrangement of the tiniest elements of the painted work) with the "processing", the "deformation," the "grasping" and the "interpretation" of real objects. These elements must be detached from one another before one can say anything at all about painting, about abstraction from the hapless visual world (*Nfm*, p. 191).

This quotation, by the way, is a good illustration of the problems the “form/content” opposition causes Witkacy: he wishes to eliminate it by mentioning only one of its components—form—whilst passing over the other in silence, rather than by rejecting the whole category; and so the content he throws out by the front door creeps in at the back. Of course, Witkacy is continually impaled upon the distinction by his polemical opponents, those hated critics. But this is neither the only nor the main cause of Witkacy’s entanglements.

Finally, the fourth meaning of the word “form”—i.e. (d)—is *aesthetic form*. This is

[...] the form of a given work of art, which we must define as a certain unity in multiplicity, which possesses the quality of unity for itself. In other words, aesthetic form is a *construction* whose unity cannot be reduced to any other concepts or explained by means of anything that is alien to the form itself (*Nfm*, p. 186).

Here “construction” means “composition.” Witkacy treats these concepts interchangeably, and even prefers the latter, for the term “construction” has “almost the same meaning as its predecessor, except that it is too redolent of bridges, machines, the bodies of living creatures, and other objects” (*Nfm*, p. 191). The purpose of this amendment seems to be clear: Witkiewicz wishes to dissociate himself from any alleged links with constructivism and futurism, whilst at the same time setting the art-work in total opposition to “other objects,” as something quite distinct from them and without a matching term of comparison.

Aesthetic form is in fact Pure Form, the fundamental concept in Witkacy’s aesthetics. Witkiewicz even isolates it typographically: he usually writes the term in capital letters. Even when Form appears without the adjective “Pure,” the capital letter shows that the term is being used in this specific sense. It is this particular meaning I would like to look at more closely. The previous definitions of “form” given by Witkiewicz have probably indicated the meaning of this key term in his aesthetics; but, as we shall see, the pointers they have provided have been misleading ones. Witkacy, of course, thinks otherwise:

In speaking of “form” and failing to differentiate the concept, the theoreticians of formism lay themselves open to sterile and maddening debates about unnecessarily deformed objects. By presenting a new concept of form, which we

consider to be the only one that is adequate to the reality of artistic creation—a concept which equates it with the construction of forms upon a plane surface, i.e. with composition or Pure Form—we at once dispose of the misunderstanding (*Nfm*, p. 188).

Unfortunately, the misunderstandings are only just beginning.

2

"The construction of forms upon a plane surface, i.e. composition or Pure Form" suggests that one ought to employ exclusively formal categories when approaching a work of art, and bypass all its "contents," which means all reference to an extra-artistic reality. Witkacy advances this proposition at every step and repeatedly voices it *expressis verbis*. But what it means, however, is that it is possible to draw up just such formal categories, and that the construction of forms—or the composition—is governed by definite formal rules that can be examined to establish their mutual relations and interrelations. It means, in other words, that Pure Form is a definite system of relations between the elements (the forms) of a work which is either quite simple or endlessly complex, but that the work can always be broken up into its primary elements, dissected and explicated.

Indeed, all the detailed remarks on painting in *New Forms in Painting* (1918)—his first and most comprehensive exposition of the theory of Pure Form—appear to corroborate this reading of the term that interests us. Here we encounter reflections on composition and colour, on the pull of tensions marked out in the particular elements of a picture, on colour harmonies, on dissolving colour, on the links between colour and composition, on compositions with colours that clash, and, finally, on the "capture of form" mentioned above. All these categories appear to make up a fully reasoned-out—albeit arbitrary—system of criteria for both the construction (composition) and the evaluation of a picture. Witkiewicz himself reinforces this impression in his *Aesthetic Studies* where he not only states but, what is more, spells out in italics that "in our book entitled *Nowe formy w malarstwie* we introduced the concept of *Pure Form* in painting, meaning composition with outline forms within

a given closed space" (*Nfm*, p. 186). In *New Forms* we also come across a distinction between the Pure Arts, which are painting and music, for "they are able to provide us with an objectified [I would like to stress this word—my note] construction of pure qualities, independent of any utility" (*Nfm*, p. 26), and those arts that are more or less "sullied" by elements "from life," such as poetry and the theatre. Had Witkiewicz rested content with this, his theory of Pure Form might have been debatable or even erroneous, but it would at least have had a basic coherence. And in practice it would have led to both the Fauvist planes of Matisse and to various kinds of abstract, non-figurative painting, which completely sheds "blasted life" and all its real objects.

But at this point, and quite unexpectedly, statements appear that contradict all the suggestions made hitherto. They appear in the first two chapters of the self-same *New Forms in Painting*: the "Philosophical Introduction" and "On Pure Art." Here is a random example:

Paradoxical as it may sound, we declare that the precondition of profound aesthetic satisfaction is the impossibility of establishing conceptually the reason why a given combination of qualities constitutes a unity (p. 26).

In other words: not only do all the criteria for the construction of Pure Form as a planar composition break down in practice, but, what is more, they are thoroughly inadequate to the task, since the essence of Pure Form, we recall, is "a certain unity in multiplicity, which possesses the quality of unity in itself"—whilst it is impossible to define conceptually just why a particular combination of qualities constitutes a unity.

How then is this unity to be defined if concepts are ruled out? One can easily find an indirect answer to this question:

We ourselves constitute the only unity for ourselves, but certain combinations of durational or spatial qualities may by virtue of their fixed nature or regular succession become symbols for us, directly expressive of our own unity and that of the whole of Existence: they can trigger metaphysical unease. In this way it is possible for us to speak of external forms of unity in multiplicity, which arrange themselves in a manner that is uniform for their creator as a direct expression of his metaphysical sensations, which they can arouse in others (*Nfm*, p. 19).

Ah! So it is not a question of aesthetic satisfaction, as we have been inclined to assume up to this point, but of the arousal

of metaphysical feelings. They are brought about by a sense of "our own unity and that of the whole of Existence," whilst "we ourselves constitute the only unity for ourselves," and not some work of art created autonomous. The latter's "quality of unity for itself," i.e. its Pure Form, is merely "a direct expression" of our metaphysical sensations: those of the creator, and those of his audience. It is clear that such a unity of elements within the work of art cannot be defined conceptually: it is simply the unity of our selves. And so:

The metaphysical sensation itself cannot find expression in a Pure Form without the polarization beforehand of the whole psychic world of a given individual. [...] We must assume that in itself this sensation is uniform among all Individual Beings. Were it not for the further areas in which individuals differ from each other, this wave [of metaphysical sensation], as it comes into contact with the sphere of Pure Form, would invariably yield one and the same result, the same set of forms, or the same combination of qualities (*Nfm*, pp. 22–23).

Fortunately this is not the case. But all of a sudden we now understand why "the element of life: the sphere of living feelings in music and 'the visual world' in painting" are "necessary when it comes to the creation of works of art" (*Nfm*, p. 24). It is as much as a *necessity*, even though its purpose is simply to promote "a combination of elements of Pure Form, and not to become the main content." But why not? What if it imbued us with a sense of "our own unity and that of the whole of Existence" and evoked metaphysical sensations in us—sensations which, after all, according to Witkacy, are not furnished by art alone? Then, all the same, Witkacy would say, the work would not be Art; for after all what interests us is how to distinguish art in particular from other phenomena.

Nevertheless, the difference proves to be only one of degree.

The difference between works of Art and other products of beauty is a difference of degree [...] and rests on the fact that whereas in the former the expression of unity in multiplicity is an end in and for itself, in the latter it is a side-effect. [On the other hand] reality and the feelings and thoughts of life can never be eliminated programmatically [because] the moment of the assimilation of compositional masses to this or that object is constituted by the entire psyche of the artist in question, by all his memories of past experiences, his whole imaginative and emotional world, all of which mean that irrespective of his ability to translate his vision into actuality he is this particular Individual Being, with this particular character and set of psychic characteristics (*Nfm*, pp. 20, 349, 270).

It may now be becoming clearer why it is that in his previous reflections on Pure Form as a system of relations of compositional elements Witkacy has continually entangled himself in the “form/content” opposition; why it does not occur to him to speak simply of composition and (raw) material; and why he himself does not practise geometric abstraction but figurative painting, always inclining rather towards painting with a literary theme, even though he treats it programmatically as painting in line with his theory, as painting with Pure Forms. One can begin to see just why he “sullies” painting with elements of “life,” even though he himself had declared it a Pure Art in which an “objectified construction of pure qualities” is possible. Possible then—but impossible for him as an artist? It turns out that this, unfortunately, is the case. Why? Because—

The uniqueness, unity and self-identity of every Individual Being, the limitations placed upon his duration and extension, mean that even for a demon we might posit as acquainted with all the connections that obtain within the whole of existence his own “I,” in the particularity of its immediate experience, would be bound to be a mystery to him (*Nfm*, p. 17).

And that, after all, is the most important thing:

This sense of the unity of our own “I” as immediately given, which we term the quality of unity and must recognise as existing “compounded with the background” of other qualities, is at the root of the sense of metaphysical unease which manifests itself among the higher Individual Beings *via* religion, philosophy and art, which have a common source but became distinct from one another in the course of society’s development. [On the other hand] art, we are trying to show, is essentially—and not in its inessential elements—an expression of this unity of each and every Individual Being, through which that Being stands opposed to all that is not itself: the whole of Being (*Nfm*, pp. 16–17).

Understood in this way, art—or Pure Form, since Witkiewicz identifies the two concepts with each other—is mediatory in nature. The Individual Being or “I” can, by virtue of its inner unity, stand opposed upon occasions to the whole of Being, i.e. the external world, the object-world, “life”: everything that can be summed up in the term “the non-I.” For “the non-I” is multiplicity. And this duality is not a sign of somebody’s subjectivism or peculiar whim: it is a feature of Being. To put it in the simplest terms: viewed from without, Being is an infinite collection of objects—Witkiewicz would prefer to say “monads”—within space, whilst when viewed from without it is a flow of qualities through time.

Because of the infinite duality of its form as Time and Space, Being is dual in nature, and every Individual Being must also be dual (*Nfm*, p. 15).

But there are times when the sudden flash of experiencing oneself as a unity enables one to overcome the duality of Individual Being. Creating and responding to works of art both yield experiences of this kind. On occasions they even overcome the opposition between the "I" and "the non-I": "expressing directly our own unity and that of the whole of Existence." At such times we achieve the rarest and most precious thing in life: we experience the general "Mystery of Being as a unity in multiplicity."

The mediatory function of art makes it possible to cast aside—even if only for a moment—

[...] the fundamentally monstrous solitude and uniqueness the Individual Being feels in the midst of the endless totality of Being. Artistic creation directly confirms the rule of solitude as the price paid for the possibility of existence in general: it does not confirm this for itself alone, but also for other Individual Beings, as lonely as itself. It represents a confirmation of Being in all its metaphysical horror; though it does not justify this horror by creating a system of palliative concepts, as occurs in religion, or a system of concepts that demonstrates conceptually the necessity of such a state of affairs obtaining in the Totality of Being, as occurs in philosophy. The same applies to those who comprehend the unity of Being and their own solitude within it through the unity of form, which constitutes the art-work. Thus we see that the form of a work of art is its only essential content. Form and content do not exist separately within it but comprise an absolute unity (*Nfm*, pp. 20–21).

"Form and content do not exist separately within it." Here at last Witkacy succeeds for once in overcoming the "form versus content" opposition that has ensnared him up to this point, and will continue to do so for years to come in the course of his unceasing artistic polemics. But the theory of art we encounter here has a completely different foundation from that we began with. Whereas the former was concerned with aesthetic values, what matters for this one are—metaphysical sensations. The former suggested that the thing at stake was a work that is autonomous, independent of its creator, and obeys certain formal rules that can be defined and arranged in a system of rules. The latter speaks of the work as the projection of a personality whose unity determines that of the work itself; a work that cannot be detached from the artist, and whose general unity cannot be formulated in terms of any rules. Whereas the former was a theory of the work

as form, the latter is a theory of the work as expression. Where the former theory was formalistic, the latter is blatantly expressionist.

We are well aware today of the contradictory nature of the assumptions these two theories rest upon. There are moments when even Witkacy himself senses this.

On the one hand, the artist must be entirely as he is; and on the other, there must be Pure Form; on the one hand is what we have termed the metaphysical sensation, and on the other—pure qualities connected by a single idea that transforms chaos into an indissoluble unity. What happens between these two moments is the secret of the artists (*Nfm*, p. 58).

But not that of all artists, let us add. For the work as composition of forms is an autonomous object, susceptible of examination from without: it is “the non-I”; whilst I for my part can only understand the work that expresses the unity of a personality by inwardly identifying with it to the extent that it becomes myself: the “I”. One has to bear this opposition between the “I” and “the non-I” within oneself as a fundamental split in order to be able to do as Witkacy did and spend one’s whole life suspended between the two, gravitating neither to the one nor the other pole. In order to be able not to choose to the very last.

3

Could it be, however, that Witkacy is simply incapable of choosing one or the other of the two opposed aesthetic theories, which thus perpetually thwart one another within him? No. He is also unwilling to choose. For the two contradictory theories he propounds and combines seem to constitute for him simply two aspects of the self-same work of art. After all, the work of art is equally bi-form: both an aesthetic object and an expression of the unity of a personality. It can mediate between the “I” and “the non-I” because it participates in both their worlds. What is more, the fundamental duality that is common to Being as a whole, each Individual Being, and, finally, the art-work—can only conclude in a dualism that is both methodological and ontological. Witkiewicz is keenly aware of this very consequence.

Conceptual systems that take account of only one aspect of the duality of existence and then attempt to describe existence as a whole purely on the basis of that one aspect are bound to be fallacious; whilst systems which define the frontiers of the mystery more or less precisely, taking account of the duality of existence, will express the Absolute Truth, which is one (*Nfm*, p. 16).

That is why the theory of Pure Form is no less dualistic than Witkiewicz's ontology. It is dualistic *in just the same way*. In an excellent study of Witkacy's philosophy, published in the *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, Krzysztof Pomian has clearly defined the ontological and methodological dualism of this philosophy. An analysis of the concept of Pure Form yields analogous results in the area of Witkacy's aesthetics. Witkiewicz was surely profoundly justified in emphasizing at every step the interconnectedness of his aesthetic and his more general philosophical views. His theories really do appear to be very homogeneous – particularly with respect to their antinomies. They doggedly solve and resolve a single irrepressible contradiction in a succession of fields. Pure Form is merely the “something” within the art-work that dispels the contradictions for a moment. That is all it does. Perhaps one should say it does *that much*.

Transl. by *Paul Coates*