

Summary

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The style of being an artist – the style of being human. Stanisław Witkiewicz's letters to his son
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This dissertation offers the first systematic attempt to interpret the collection of Stanisław Witkiewicz's letters to his son, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, published in 1969 by Bożena Danek-Wojnowska and Anna Micińska as *Listy do syna* [Letters to his Son]. It also anticipates an editorial project to publish a selection of Witkiewicz's unedited letters. One hundred years after Witkiewicz the father's death, his inedited and unpublished letters still outnumber the published. While *Listy do syna* also omits some of the letters known to exist in manuscript, those already published (515 in total) constitute a majority of the letters between these two correspondents and sufficient material for study.

Research has shown that it is desirable to focus primarily on two interpretive contexts: one deals with the later period and concerns Stanisław Ignacy's letters to his wife, Jadwiga Unrug. The other deals with the earlier period focusing on a number of the young Stanisław Witkiewicz's letters to his mother, Elwira Szemioth (mostly unpublished, or published only in fragments; an 'Annex' to the dissertation offers a critical edition).

Listy do syna is a unique example in Polish literature of an epistolary exchange between two people who were both each other's closest relatives and artists of extraordinary stature. Responding to the classic theory presented by Stefania Skwarczyńska in *Teoria listu* [Theory of the Letter], and supported by the conviction that any work by a writer of the rank of the author of *Na przełęczy* [On the Mountain Pass] deserves such an approach, the analysis of the letters uses the means and methods usually applied to describe fiction. This method is especially valid if we wish to acknowledge both aspects revealed by the style and structure of every text regardless of the author's intention, and content resulting from his conscious decisions. Authors of this rank remained artists aware of the importance of every stylistic detail, even if they did not have in mind the publication of the text.

The interpretation of *Listy do syna* leads to several conclusions: first, that in his letters, Witkiewicz advances a claim (consistent with the epoch's tendencies, albeit formulated independently) that a maturing or already mature artist should subordinate all aspects of his life (including relationships with other people) to the building of his personality as an artist, as well as to the realization of the tasks demanded from him by the creative vocation (an aspect especially relevant in the Polish context). Secondly, it becomes apparent that Witkiewicz shaped the program of carrying out his proposal along a dozen or so years in a long series of indications

addressed to his son – about life and also dedicated to the professional life as a painter – which both followed his earlier decision to raise the son to become an artist (whose oeuvre would annihilate the shortcomings of his father's work) and dynamically addressed the changing circumstances of Stanisław Ignacy's life. Thirdly, one can recognize under a rhetorical veil of respect for the autonomy of the recipient of the letters and his moral obligations toward other people an insistent, ruthless, and authoritative character of these indications (despite undoubtedly honorable intentions of the father). Their nature corresponds with the personal traits of their author, documented in the accounts of his contemporaries, especially by Stefan Żeromski in his letters).

The stylistic qualities of *Listy do syna*, including the overly frequent use of the verbs of demand, desire, necessity, and duty ('I want you to', 'I desire you to', 'you have to'), as well as the consistency in observing the *decorum* of the elevated style, allow the contention that Witkiewicz the father sometimes adopts the role of the preacher trying to break the resistance of his listener-pupil. At the same time, he considers himself to be the main point of reference and the causative force behind the potential change in his son.

That listener was fifteen years old when his father began to write him letters, and thirty when the correspondence eventually broke off at the sender's death. The father-educator intended to achieve the highest possible level of maturity and self-reliance in his son as a man and as an artist. The analysis of Witkiewicz the son's later letters to his wife, the facts of his biography, and the marital-family history of his parents leads to the conclusion that the upbringing strategy adopted and pursued by his father in the letters yielded results contrary to the educator's stated desires. It consolidated or awakened in the pupil an attitude of immaturity, pessimism, and egoism, which ultimately led him to the decision to kill his own unborn children.

The juxtaposition with Norwid, in whom Witkiewicz the father discovered an ingenious precursor of his own views, especially those on art, and Sienkiewicz, a personal acquaintance and a father himself realizing a distinctive program for raising children, uncovers a fundamental difference between them and Witkiewicz. The latter, admittedly, urges his son to adopt 'a guiding principle of life' in his actions and judgments, 'which would help gather and create in his soul a constant point of reference, as well as protect against depression and falls', but unlike Norwid and Sienkiewicz, in practice he rejects Christianity as such guiding principle.

The polemical character of the dissertation's dialogue with the existing body of scholarship about Witkiewicz the father and Witkiewicz the son, that otherwise commands a great deal of respect, aims to demonstrate that the tradition of silently overlooking the Christian context in the study of the two artists and their respective oeuvres can lead to fundamental omissions and misunderstandings.

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