

## MALINOWSKI: EDGAR, DUKE OF NEVERMORE

When Malinowski's diaries, written between 1914 and 1918 in New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands, were discovered among his papers at Yale University, two others were also found. These had been written while he was a student of Natural Sciences and Philosophy at the Jagellonian University of Cracow in 1902-6. The latter two have not, as yet, been translated or published though they would, no doubt, shed valuable light on Malinowski's formative years before he left for England in 1910. This article is an attempt to reconstruct something of Malinowski's early life and background from other sources recently published in Poland.

*Listy do Bronisława Malinowskiego* (Letters to Bronisław Malinowski) by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz<sup>1</sup> was published in February this year. This collection of letters indicates that a very important relationship existed between Malinowski and Witkiewicz (or 'Witkacy' as he is more commonly known in Poland). Other sources include the mention of Malinowski in the biographies of friends,<sup>2</sup> other correspondence<sup>3</sup> as well as his portrayal as a

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<sup>1</sup>S.I. Witkiewicz, *Listy do Bronisława Malinowskiego*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1981. This is a collection of 26 letters written to Malinowski by Witkiewicz during the period 1906-1938 discovered among 'Bronisław Malinowski's Papers' in Sterling Library, Yale University.

<sup>2</sup>Karol Estreicher, *Leon Chwistek-Biografia Artysty* (Leon Chwistek - A Biography of An Artist), Kraków 1971.

<sup>3</sup>Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Listy do Syna* (Letters to a Son), ed. B. Danek-Wojnowska and A. Micińska, Warszawa 1969. Letters written by Witkacy's father to his son (hereafter *Listy do Syna*).

character in a novel written by Witkacy in 1911-12.<sup>4</sup> I will try to show that an account of Malinowski's adolescence and early twenties - the friendships he formed and the way in which he fitted into the mainstream of cultural life encompassing Polish intellectuals, writers and artists - provides an essential link in understanding Malinowski the man. This type of biographical background is helpful in interpreting his published diaries as well as providing an insight into the environment in which his early ideas and theories were being formed.<sup>5</sup>

At the turn of the century, when Malinowski was fifteen, Poland did not exist as a political entity. He was living in Cracow, which at that time was within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with his mother (his father, who had been Professor of Linguistics at the University, had died in 1898). Cracow was an intellectual centre with the Jagellonian University at its hub. Sixty miles away in Zakopane, a small town in the Tatra Mountains, another intellectual and artistic centre was being formed. Intellectuals and artists from other parts of Poland then occupied by Russia and Austria were settling there. Zakopane was also becoming popular as a health spa resort attracting, besides others, consumptive writers and painters. On the artistic level, a movement called 'Młoda Polska'<sup>6</sup> (Young Poland) held sway.

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<sup>4</sup>S.I. Witkiewicz, *622 Upadki Bungo - Czyli Demoniczna Kobieta* (The 622 Downfalls of Bungo or the Demonic Woman), 1912. This is a novel, autobiographical in content, which deals with the moral and artistic dilemma of Bungo, the main character. It is a period piece describing Witkacy's circle of friends and the philosophical and humanistic discussions they were involved in.

<sup>5</sup>See 'The Polish Background to Malinowski's Work', by Andrzej K. Paluch, *Man*, Vol.16.No. 2, 1981. In this article, Paluch discusses the Polish influences on Malinowski's development of his model of functional anthropology. Malinowski's standpoint in his doctoral thesis entitled 'On the principle of the economy of thought' (1908), rises from and refers to positivism in its late nineteenth-century form. Two highly important questions in his anthropology come from this positivist heritage: an emphasis on functional explanations and a notion of culture as an instrumental whole.

<sup>6</sup>This was basically a philosophical and artistic movement producing new poetic and artistic forms as well as philosophical ideas frequently inspired by contemporary movements in Western Europe. It was motivated by a desire to re-establish a free Poland - reborn not only politically but also culturally. Its main features were symbolism and eroticism, allusions and metaphors.

During this period, Malinowski was close friends with Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz<sup>7</sup> (hereafter referred to as Witkacy), and the above-mentioned publication of letters gives an indication of the intensity and closeness as well as the tempestuousness of this relationship. It shows their emotional and intellectual inclinations and their discussions and disagreements on some basic interpretations of culture. In 1900, Witkacy was living in Zakopane and the two young boys often stayed at each other's house. One of the first indications of their friendship is in a letter written by Witkacy's father to his son (31.7.1900) in which he refers to Malinowski as Lord Douglas.<sup>8</sup> The nickname 'Lord Douglas' given to Malinowski by Witkacy is an allusion to Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the Marquis of Queensbury and a friend of Oscar Wilde. Elements of the Aesthetic Movement promulgated by Wilde had been taken over by 'Młoda Polska'. At this time, the Malinowskis were not particularly well off.

'There's poverty at Bronio's.'<sup>9</sup> (Bronio is a diminutive of Bronisław).

'I was at Bronio's. An orgy of smell and filth.'<sup>10</sup> But despite material poverty Malinowski's intellectual and emotional life during this period was rich and stimulated by his friendship with Witkacy and Leon Chwistek<sup>11</sup> who later joined them to form an inseparable three-some.

These three young men spent their time together reading plays and poetry or they wrote imaginative treatises. Their literary imagination was awakened, excited and mixed with eroticism. Dreams of success, power and fame were tied in with reveries about love and a particular madness in thinking. All three were to experience the insatiability of their erotic feelings which were not atypical of the artistic mood of the time.<sup>12</sup> Eventually

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<sup>7</sup>Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1886-1939): became a renowned painter, philosopher and dramatist and leader of what is known as 'Trzecie Pokolenie Młodej Polski' (The third stage of the 'Młoda Polska' movement) in which there was a movement towards a more realistic expression in the Arts.

<sup>8</sup>*Lysty do Syna*, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85, letter no. 38 dated 25.4.1903.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 87, letter no. 40 dated 29.4.1903.

<sup>11</sup>Leon Chwistek (1884-1944): became a famous logician, mathematician, painter and theoretician of Art. He attended primary and grammar-school with Malinowski.

<sup>12</sup>See Estreicher, *op.cit.*, pp. 27-28.

they were to split up. Malinowski, who had a diligent and systematic approach to life and eagerly joined in serious discussions, was on the other hand less eager to disclose his thoughts openly and honestly. He began to get irritated with Chwistek's openness and the way in which he boasted of his talents. Even Witkacy sometimes expressed doubts as to whether his continued association with Malinowski would serve him for the better. At times like this he would revert to seeking advice from his father. In one letter, his father replied as follows:

In one of your letters you wrote requesting me to say something about the question of Bronio. Strictly speaking, I know him very superficially. I know the outward appearance of his intelligence, easily orientated towards very diverse subjects and in accordance with a very adroit dialectic approach. He gives the impression of being a person who keeps his thoughts and what he says completely independent of outside as well as personal, emotional influences.... This is his outward appearance. Besides this, I know a few cynical letters. This cynicism, in such a person as Bronio, could only be an expression of clear dialectics, which will be a hindrance in his life....<sup>13</sup>

Malinowski's character at this time is depicted much more acutely and colourfully in Witkacy's first major work: *622 Upadki Bunga; Czyli Demoniczna Kobieta* (The 622 Downfalls of Bungo or the Demonic Woman), 1911-12. It is an autobiographical account centering on Bungo's moral, aesthetic and artistic dilemma. Bungo, the main character, is obviously modelled on Witkacy. He is trying to formulate his idea of art and is torn between deciding whether, as an Artist, he should sacrifice his life for his Art or through Art change his life in order to experience its charms - the choice, in other words, between using Art or being used by it. The story unfolds as Bungo gathers experience through discussions with friends and through romantic involvements. Malinowski appears under the pseudonym 'Duke Nevermore' and is portrayed as a decadent and perverse character. Here is a description of him at the beginning of the book:

Lighting his cigar, Nevermore looked around the room. His head was closely shaved; he insisted that this hairstyle had all the ladies falling for him, particularly those of the south. His green eyes, cold as a reptile's, piercing through seventeen-power glasses, made an uneasy contrast with the childish smile on his huge, red, beautifully painted lips....<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>*Lysty do Syna*, pp. 280-282, Letter no.192 dated 17.6.1905.

<sup>14</sup>*622 Upadki*, p. 64.

Nevermore, as in life Malinowski, is a close friend of Bungo's and often enters into discussions about the Artistic Ideal with him. The Duke hopes to become a man accounting for his own losses. He proposes that Bungo should construct a model of life of which the actual act of constructing would be more important than aesthetic or moral aims. Nevermore's character implies that Malinowski had already decided to abandon the notion of individuality which can be separated from the process and reality of a social context. According to him, an individual had to exist among other individuals. For Witkacy, an individual could determine an abstract individuality or 'Pure Form' that would give him self-consciousness, and in this way he could go beyond the boundary determined by ethics and the situation of other individuals and 'the mass'.

As a person skilled in preserving outward appearances and disclosing falsehood, adept at being able to cope in complicated situations and in being able to resolve them, Duke Nevermore had a strong influence on Bungo and almost led him away from the road along which he searched for an aesthetic ideal - led him straight into his arms (and his bed) - hence the name Nevermore.

At the end of the book Bungo, evaluating the advantages of such a selfish ethic as Nevermore's, sarcastically foretold Malinowski's academic future:

The Duke who, for some unheard-of wrongdoings committed in the environs of Whitechapel in the company of two lords, was deported to New Guinea where he wrote "The Golden Bough of Pleasure", Edgar Duke of Nevermore, Cambridge University Press - a genial account of the perversions of those very primitive people, the Papuans. As a result he returned to England after a few years as a member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Fellow Royal Society [sic]. His later life was set only within the range of wild, incredible triumphs.<sup>15</sup>

When Malinowski left for London in 1910, he kept up correspondence with Witkacy and when he was writing his *Wierzenia Pierwotne I Formy Ustroju Społecznego* (Primitive Religions and Forms of Social Structure) (1914) in Polish, he asked for Witkacy's critical opinion. It is now no wonder that the two differed fundamentally in their views - no less than in how they regarded totemism and religion. The crux of their disagreement was that Malinowski reduced society or culture to psycho-philosophical needs and he identified the source of religion in such feelings as fear, hunger, anger, etc. Society served to satisfy these basic needs. Witkacy, on the other hand, held that it was necessary to recognise basic human needs but that they were the concrete needs of individuals rather than constituting an abstract or 'super-organic' society or culture.

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 153.

It is obvious from their correspondence that the relationship with Witkacy meant a lot to Malinowski. Furthermore, several entries in his published diaries refer to it and I shall come to them below. In 1914, Witkacy's fiancée tragically committed suicide. From London Malinowski, concerned with his friend's own mental health, persuaded him to accompany him to Australia on the British Association trip for the Advancement of Science. They sailed together and in September 1914 reached Australia only to hear of the outbreak of the First World War. The trip to Australia, rather than taking Witkacy's mind off the death of his fiancée, made him feel it all the more. The war meant that he had the opportunity of fighting for a cause and he decided to return to Europe and join the Czar's forces. With this decision came an end to their intimate friendship. He may have asked Malinowski to give up his Austrian citizenship. This would not have been too difficult as it was easy enough to get British citizenship in Australia. Malinowski, however, seemed to think that he could make the most of the opportunity and decided to stay in order to do fieldwork. In an entry in his diary, Malinowski reflects on his broken friendship.

29.10.1914. Staś's letter deeply annoyed me .... I see almost no possibility of reconciliation. I also know that however many faults I have committed, he acted very ruthlessly towards me, all the time having gestures and airs of persecuted greatness and moralising in accents of deep, mature objective wisdom.... I am terribly dejected and dispirited by the bankruptcy of my most essential friendship.... The responsibility for the break lies primarily in his unrelenting pride, in his lack of consideration, his inability to forgive others for anything, though he can forgive himself a great deal.<sup>16</sup>

The two men were never to meet again. Correspondence was however resumed after a twenty-year silence in 1936. In his later work Witkacy had often expressed his belief that religion, philosophy and art were living out their last days, yet he found life without them worthless. On September 17, 1939, learning that the Red Army had crossed the Eastern border of Poland, he committed suicide by taking veronal and cutting his wrists.<sup>17</sup> Malinowski died of a heart attack in America two years later.

In the light of the preceding biographical information, Malinowski the man may be reappraised. The publication in 1968 of his

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<sup>16</sup>Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1967.

<sup>17</sup>Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1953.

*Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* shocked many people. The diaries were originally written in Polish and lose a certain amount in their English translation, which does not render their true spirit; subtle nuances are lost. As Karol Estreicher, Leon Chwistek's biographer, who read the diaries in the original, recalls:

Malinowski's journal neither irritates nor amazes us Poles. Read in Polish, it betrays its "Młodopolska" origins.<sup>18</sup>

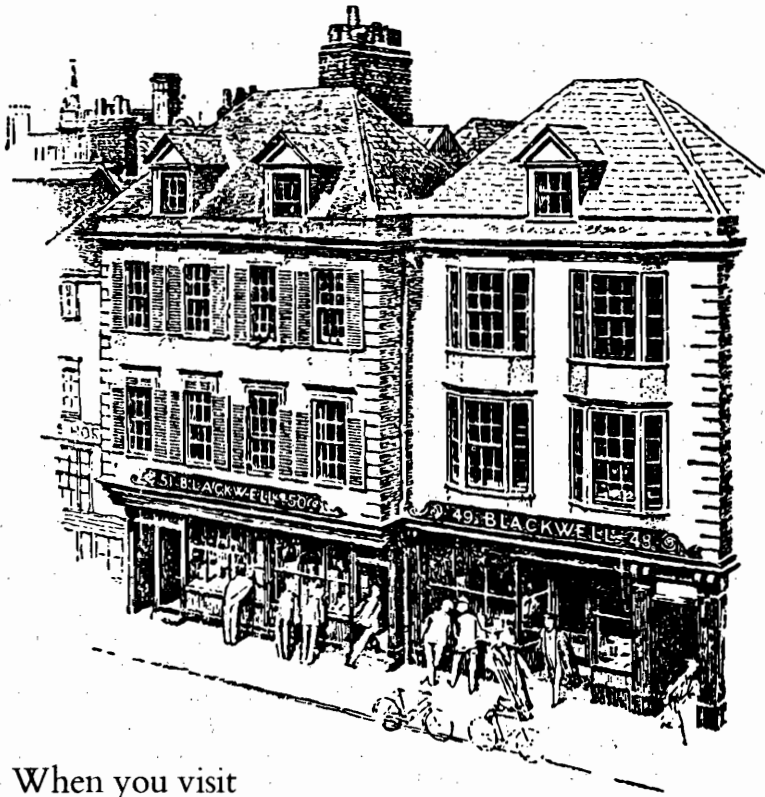
The diaries are in the same style and concerned with the same inner problems as Chwistek and Witkacy. Erotic feelings and even their insatiability, far from being suppressed, are to be recognised and lived out as, à la 'Młodopolska', they are one type of emotion that makes one conscious of one's self. Malinowski, as Duke Nevermore, was forever attracting the attentions of young women as he did in real life. Heavy editing of the diaries by Valetta Malinowska also meant that the style is cramped and the content has gaps which do not help to make the English reader understand Malinowski's flow of thoughts and feelings.

The value and importance of Malinowski's relationship with Witkacy cannot be underestimated and should be regarded as one of the most important in his life. For about twenty years they were the closest of friends and each acted as a springboard for the formation and development of each other's ideas through constant discussion and, to some extent, rivalry. Suggestions have been made hinting at (indeed there are some insinuations in their letters to this effect) a homosexual liaison between the two. Allusions exist - Malinowski's nickname 'Lord Douglas' as also in *622 Upadki Bunga...*, with the seduction of Bungo by Duke Nevermore. There is no uncertainty about their rivalry in love affairs with women. On several occasions they were both in love with the same woman resulting in difficult and painful 'triangles'. Nonetheless Witkacy was probably the only person in Poland who knew and possessed all Malinowski's main works which were comparatively unknown in his native country until the seventies of this century.

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<sup>18</sup>Estreicher, *op. cit.*, p. 27.



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