

SUBJECTIVE COURSE OF POLISH LITERATURE

Bruno Schulz – Conspirator of Imagination

Essay by Piotr Sitkiewicz

When Regina Silberner, a Polish Jew from Drohobych, arrived in the United States in November 1942, she was interrogated at the airport for several hours by FBI agents. Her luggage he was searched particularly meticulously. One thing raised suspicions of the guardians of public order – a photo of a man in the family album. They asked repeatedly and insistently: who is he? Where is he right now? Her explanations that he is just a friend, probably remaining in Poland occupied by the Nazi Germany, were of no use. Finally, she was allowed to cross the border, but the photo of the suspicious individual was kept in the archives just in case, and it might still be there today.

Who was that man, posing such a huge threat for a mighty superpower? It was Bruno Schulz – Polish-Jewish writer, painter and graphic artist, a virtuoso of the Polish language, a poet and philosopher of prose, author of subtle short stories and disturbing drawings. Considered one of the most eminent contemporary writers, even though his entire output can be placed in one, small book.

When the FBI agents were asking about Schulz's place of residence, his body had been lying for a week in an anonymous grave of the victims of the massacre of the Drohobych ghetto. The distance between the place of his birth and the place of his death is about one hundred metres. In Drohobych, a Galician town outside of Lviv, between the wars located within the borders of Poland, after the war in the Soviet Union, and today – in Ukraine, he spent almost his entire life. He was born on 12 July 1892 to a family of assimilated Polish Jews. His father Jakub, a cloth merchant, and mother Henrietta surrounded him – the youngest child, sickly, but intelligent and talented – with overprotective love. But in his youth, the safe world of Austro-Hungarian monarchy, of which he is a subject, disappears. Soon after the outbreak of the Great War, he has to escape with his family from Drohobych, when the Russian army attacks. He finds refuge in Vienna. When he returns a year later, in place of his family house on the Main Square, he sees only ruins and debris. From the windows of this house, several years earlier he witnessed bloody riots on the streets of Drohobych. The shock he experienced then aroused inside him “an urgency of writing”.



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Since his childhood, Bruno exhibits a talent for art. He wants to study painting, but convinced by his brother, he selects more practical architecture at Lviv Polytechnic. He doesn't finish his studies, but on his own he gains vast knowledge – from literature and philosophy to science. He accepts the position of a drawing teacher at the secondary school in Drohobych. He doesn't like the job, although most of his pupils have good memories of him. The only thing bearing any importance for him – is art. It is literally the only sense of his life. Before he becomes a writer, he tries out painting and graphic design. Even though he is a self-taught artist, he has some success in the latter domain. His works, presented on several exhibitions, draw critics' attention. They see in them influences of Goya and Félicien Rops, and “The Book of Idolatry” – a portfolio of prints, in which you can see his erotic fantasies – was supposedly very popular. The topic of his prints is always the same – an obsequious, misshapen man, usually with the face of Schulz himself, is trampled by cruel, domineering women with vague features and slim legs.

Schulz's literary talent develops in hiding. Only a few friends know about it, as he writes them sophisticated letters which become germs of future short stories. Even though his story “Undula” was published in a newspaper under a pseudonym already in 1922, he decides to make a debut under his own name only before turning forty. He looks for a patron who would help him publish a book. Zofia Nałkowska – a famous Polish writer – seems a good candidate, as she looks after young authors. So he takes his manuscript and goes to Warsaw to meet her without a word in advance. He manages to get an audience. He reads a fragment: „In July, my father left to take the waters; he left me with my mother and older brother at the mercy of the summer days, white from the heat and stunning. Stupefied by the light, we leafed through that great book of the holiday, in which the pages were ablaze with splendour, their sickly sweet pulp, deep within, made from golden pears”. He leaves the manuscript and awaits the verdict in a boarding house. The verdict arrives quickly: „It is the most sensational literary revelation I've ever seen!”.

On that day, his literary career gains momentum. A book entitled “The Cinnamon Shops”, with a cover designed by the author himself, is published by the end of 1933. It is a collection of fifteen stories taking place in Drohobych and in Schulz's family home. It is populated by people and places he remembered from childhood: his father Jakub working on a new theory of existence, the servant Adela holding erotic power over the entire home,



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the street of Crocodiles, which is a cheap imitation of the big city corruption and the cinnamon shops full of exotic goods. That world, the residents of which aspire to the rank of biblical figures, is enveloped by a stifling atmosphere of dreams or feverish phantoms. Schulz himself, when trying to interest foreign publishers in the book, writes that he attempted to “exhibit the history of a family, of a certain provincial house, not out of real elements, events, characters or fates, but searching for mythical content beyond them, the final meaning of that story”. While to his friend Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, a writer and painter like himself, he says that his literary and artistic works are two excerpts of the same reality, although in literature he managed to express it in the fullest. The response of the critics is extensive, but ambiguous. The majority admire it, especially the language, which discovers new, previously unknown poetic registers in Polish. It reflects echoes of the work of great European prose writers and poets: Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, and also philosophers: Henri Bergson and Arthur Schopenhauer. But not all readers are delighted. Some say the book is incomprehensible, weird, unsettling, and that the author isn't capable of writing properly in Polish. Nevertheless, in one day Schulz becomes a star of Polish literature.

All this was achieved in a space of few months by a man perceived as a completely introverted person, shy and helpless. In the eyes of those who meet him, Schulz seems to be a failure. A cowed provincial teacher, a frightened recluse reminding of a kobold, a freak creeping on the streets like a shadow with his eyes staring at the floor. Is it the same man whose friendship is desired by popular writers, who seduces smart, pretty and talented women, whose texts are requested by the best magazines, and who successfully strives to make his work take over the world? Is it the same man who, despite being seemingly submissive, dominates over the people surrounding him and hypnotizes them with his eyes and voice?

After the excellent debut, everybody waits for Schulz's new work. He assures them he's writing a novel – he even announces its title: “The Messiah”. But he is tormented by advancing depression and writer's block. He cannot write! Even though a translation of Franz Kafka's „The Trial” is published, signed with his name, he isn't the real translator of that work, but his fiancé, Józefina Szelińska. She's a Christian, so in order to be able to marry her, he withdraws from the Jewish community and declares himself a nonbeliever. Months



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and years pass, and his new book still isn't ready. So he decides to collect older stories published in magazines and arrange them into a volume entitled "The Sanatorium under the Hourglass", which is published in 1937. In this book, which he illustrated himself, characters known from "The Cinnamon Shops" return: narrator Józef, his father Jakub, experimenting in the "regions of great heresy", imperious and sensual servant Adele. Also the atmosphere of Drohobych from the „genius age” of childhood returns, manipulations with time and the fermentation of inanimate matter. But there are also new themes and a new tone – especially in the long story "Spring", which is a peculiar proclamation of a revolution – the revolution of love, youth and sexuality. This time the critics are unanimous – "The Sanatorium under the Hourglass" is a great work. One of the reviewers writes that: „Schulz expresses the inexpressible not only using excellent means of speech, but also multi-layered symbolics, accurate allusions of a thinker. In other words, the author not only charms, but also explains, enlightens, raises awareness". But the interest in the new book seems to be much more limited than in the previous one, which clearly bothers Schulz. What is more, both right and left-wing columnists more and more often attack him in unison for his lack of involvement in current ideological debates. As if the times to come were not good for fantastic visions of a mythologized childhood...

Regardless of the unquestionable literary success, Schulz has a feeling of being trapped. His depression, loneliness and feeling of defeat deepen. He cannot create any new work: "The Messiah lies fallow". He explains it to himself by the fact that he can devote to writing only crumbs and scraps of time dedicated to his gainful employment. But he cannot leave the hated position of the teacher. He cannot leave Drohobych, which he misses insanely each time he crosses its border. He feels burdened by the responsibility for his sister and her family, whom he supports. He breaks up with his fiancé who as a result tries to commit suicide. Finally, he once again gathers the strength to fight for his art. In 1937, he sends a story „The Return Home” written in German to Thomas Mann in hope he would publish it in a magazine he edited, and a year later he goes to France to present his drawings to Parisian art dealers. But his conquest of the world is a failure. At the same time, beyond the western border, Polish Jews die in pogroms. Synagogues are burned, cemeteries are desecrated and Jewish shops wrecked. Schulz foresees the approaching catastrophe. Looking at Drohobych, he says prophetically: "I will die here".



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The catastrophe arrives in two stages. First, with the invasion of Poland by the Soviet Union. Schulz remains in Drohobych occupied by the communists. He wants to be useful to the new authorities, but their answer to his proposal of publishing a new story is: “We don’t need any Prousts!”. But they need grand portraits of the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution and socialist realist drawings for the press, so like it or not, he painstakingly makes them. But the true catastrophe comes in 1941, with the German occupation. Schulz, together in other Jews of Drohobych, is transferred to the ghetto. Hungry, sick, in the throws of depression, he observes how his neighbours are killed every day. Because of that, he gives his drawings, engravings and manuscripts to friends on the Aryan side of the city for safekeeping, so they survive in case of his death. One of the SS men appreciates Schulz’s talent. He commissions him various artistic jobs, and so he can buy more days of life. One of Schulz’s last works are fairy-tale paintings on the walls of a child’s bedroom in the villa of his protector: dwarfs, princesses, cats...

We cannot be sure how the last day of Bruno Schulz’s life looked like. According to one version of events of 19 November 1942, he went out to get bread in the afternoon. On this day, he was to escape Drohobych with false documents in order to hide in Warsaw with the help of his friends. But on the same day, the SS men organized in Drohobych a retaliatory action on Jews in response to one of them allegedly injuring a German. They killed people fleeing the streets and hiding in houses. Schulz died in the street shot in the back of his head. Perhaps the trigger was pulled by an SS man in conflict with his protector. The body of Bruno Schulz was thrown into an anonymous grave of the victims of the “black Thursday”. What could he have thought a moment before his death? Only that all is lost. A friend of Schulz’s from Drohobych remembers his words: „Only in art can we survive our own death, and last beyond it, only art can overcome the passing of everything”. And so all his effort to save his art was squandered. His entire world, the Drohobych he loved and to which he devoted a large part of his work, was dying with him, his family and friends in ghettos and concentration camps, destroyed by an unthinkable barbaric power, sentenced to oblivion.

But not all was lost. Even though the characters living in the literary world of Schulz are doomed to fail, death doesn’t have a final dimension in it – it is replaced with the rule of eternal metamorphosis. After the war and occupation ends, at first Schulz is placed in a literary limbo. His oeuvre – by cultural functionaries working on the literary front



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perceived as a manifestation of bourgeois corruption – doesn't fit the decreed rules of socialist realism. There will be no manifestation of worker activists in the street of Crocodiles, and the cinnamon shops will not implement a five-year plan. It is not a world ruled by the laws of Marxist dialectics – it is a Republic of Dreams.

With the political thaw arriving in 1956 after the death of Joseph Stalin, the attitude of Polish authorities towards the work of Bruno Schulz changes. A young poet Jerzy Ficowski publishes an extensive article remembering the forgotten writer. For the following several dozen years, he painstakingly reconstructs his biography, searches for lost letters, he rescues him from oblivion. He collects the pieces of the broken mirror of his life. He even searches for the allegedly finished, but lost novel "The Messiah". Unfortunately with no result, although the history of the search itself could become a script for a thriller. Finally Schulz triumphantly returns to Poland on the donkey of fashion for Jewish literature, existentialism and the work of Franz Kafka. New editions of his prose appear in bookshops, foreign publishers and readers become interested in the work and life of Schulz. As "Polish Kafka", he becomes more and more popular in France, Germany, Great Britain, the United States and Italy. Even though some worry that the comparison to Kafka – false in itself – could become a disadvantage for Schulz, as it points out to the derivative nature of his work, in the end it becomes rather helpful. Eminent Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who was a friend of Schulz, prophesized: "he could enter imaginations swimmingly, already formed by Kafka and his family... and then the connoisseurs' ecstasies will push him up".

And this is what happens. Bruno Schulz and his prose – by now translated into over twenty languages – is enthusiastically commented by Isaac Bashevis Singer, John Updike, Bohumil Hrabal, Cynthia Ozick, Michel Faber and John Maxwell Coetzee. Philip Roth places "The Cinnamon Shops" on the list of fifteen most important books in his life. We can see the influence of Schulz in the oeuvre of Polish writers as well – Olga Tokarczuk, Stefan Chwin and Andrzej Stasiuk. But let us not be misled by this litany of eminent names who unanimously proclaim his prominent place on the firmament of world literature. Schulz isn't and never was a popular writer, neither in Poland nor even more abroad. His books were never published in bestselling numbers, no crowds of readers were delighted by them. He wrote with the awareness that his work will reach only a handful of connoisseurs, that it will allow him to find partners of imagination, partners to talk with. And so Schulz's stories



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are for a small circle of those who search in literature for a refuge from the real world, for those who see in it a salvation from the destructive influence of history and politics, but most of all for creative people, having artistic sensitivity, able to appreciate his peculiar attitude towards the world and writing.

That is why Schulz is read extensively by writers, painters, film directors and theatre creators. And that is why we can call him one of the most influential contemporary prose writers. Because he is a patron of creators who search for new worlds in language, who save dying worlds in their books and those, for whom literature is a tool to study labyrinths of memory. For that reason, many times Schulz's prose was food for other artists. Wojciech Jerzy Has based on it a feature film "The Hourglass Sanatorium", a moving image of the dying Jewish culture, and the Quay brothers made an animated film "The Street of the Crocodiles", translating Schulz's experiments with the matter into images. Inspired by his prose, Tadeusz Kantor created several of his most important theatre plays, including "Dead Class". And Jonathan Safran Foer used the text of "The Cinnamon Shops" as a material for his own artistic-literary collage entitled "Tree of Codes". Several decades after his death, Schulz remains a living creator, inspiring, undergoing constant transformations.

But what did the FBI agents see in Bruno Schulz's look captured in a photograph that they trembled about the safety of the world they were meant to protect? Maybe his complex relationship with Eros, marked by fetishism and masochism, pursuit of pleasure in suffering and humiliation inflicted by a beautiful, lofty and disdainful woman? Or maybe the true suffering he experienced in life: war, displacement, antisemitism, poverty, family tragedies – and that which was his biggest misery: "not living life", not living it in its fullness? Maybe they noticed the terror of the future awaiting him, which he anticipated for a long time before the first symptoms appeared on the event horizon – "the feeling of the inevitable defeat, irretrievable loss", "a vague conviction about the pathetic end of it all", as he spoke frequently to his friends? And maybe the loneliness of a man searching for a cure for his inability to love, who most of all desired "closeness of a similar human", "a partner for innovative pursuits"? Many years after his death, Józefina Szelińska said: „Nothing sorrowful in human life was spared him". Loneliness, despair and other dark secrets can be seen not only in Schulz's eyes, but also in his art, which is at the same time a testimony of an even ecstatic perception of the sensuality of the world.



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One of Schulz's female friends said: „There was unearthliness and extraordinariness emanating from him, some strange, vague aura, which made every interlocutor ... feel the absolute superiority of his intellect. That caressing voice and eyes flashing from under bushy eyebrows enhanced that feeling of a certain reverence – even fear of him”. Bruno Schulz seemed dangerous to the vigilant guardians of the law, because they also perceived him as a conspirator – a man capable of fierce, grand and risky gestures. A destroyer of order and a creator of a new one. A revolutionary and a father of a new dynasty. They weren't wrong. Only they didn't suppose he did all this in the field of literature and imagination.

The fragment of “The Cinnamon Shops” translated by John Curran Davies



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Appendix

A short dictionary of terms essential for understanding the imaginary world of Bruno Schulz

THE AGE OF GENIUS – a term coined by Bruno Schulz in a short story of the same title to describe the age of childhood, when a man experiences spontaneous need to create. The description of that age, during which we gather our “fundamental capital of the spirit” and which ends with arousing the erotic sphere in a child, is one of the key tasks of Schulz’s writing;

THE BOOK – one of the most important themes in the literary oeuvre of Bruno Schulz. The book in his understanding contains the entire knowledge on the order of the universe, and can have the form of both the Bible and a picture book on his father’s desk, an illustrated magazine and even a stamp album. It remains in the sphere of memories from childhood and myth, at the same time being an object of worship and incessant search;

COCKROACH – one of the most important creatures in Bruno Schulz’s bestiary. The “black swarm” of cockroaches symbolizes the night, dark urges, degradation to lower forms of being, fall into chaos and feverish delusions. One of the main characters in Schulz’s world turns into a cockroach – Jakub, the narrator Józef’s father;

DROHOBYCH – a town outside of Lviv, in which Bruno Schulz was born, where he spent his entire life and where he died. A source of inspiration and a haven protecting him from the dangerous, big world. The mythical town in which most of his stories take place was based on Drohobych;

IDOLATRY – a term defining Bruno Schulz’s attitude towards eroticism. His drawings, and especially engravings from the portfolio entitled “The Book of Idolatry” often present ugly, misshapen and submissive men kicked around by domineering, imperious and cruel women. That sadomasochistic relationship is true not only for artistic and literary work of Schulz, but also his personal attitude towards women;

MANNEQUIN – one of the pillars of a new theory of existence created by Jakub in “A Treatise on Mannequins”. The “secondary demiurgy” postulated by him is to create beings in the shape of a mannequin – makeshift, shoddy and awkward. Those “heretic experiments” are stopped by the imperious servant Adela, although their influence can be seen in the world of Schulz’s stories;

THE MYTHOLOGIZATION OF REALITY – a term coined by Bruno Schulz to describe his own concept of literature in a text under the same title. According to that concept, the task of the writer is the search for his own “spiritual genealogy” in the sphere of myth and “regeneration of primordial myths” in a poetic word, and in this way – reaching the meaning of the world;



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THE REPUBLIC OF DREAMS – refuge for people who want to live in the world of literature and fantasy, adventure and surprises, “partly a fortress, partly a theatre, partly a visional laboratory” – “a sovereign territory of poetry”. The idea of the Republic of Dreams, a sanctuary from the dangers and terror of real life, was described by Bruno Schulz in a story under the same title;

THE SANATORIUM UNDER THE HOURGLASS – in Schulz’s literary world you can turn back time or look at its side branches. Therefore nothing is certain and final, even death. Just like in the Sanatorium under the Hourglass, described in a short story of the same title, whose death is postponed thanks to manipulations with time;

THE STREET OF CROCODILES – one of the key elements of the fantastic topography of Schulz’s short stories. The street, a substitute for modernity and big city corruption, seduces with an erotic and sinful atmosphere to which the young protagonist of “The Cinnamon Shops” surrenders;



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