

# Identities and Biographies. Us

*Third person singular would be misleading. And it would distance (us) from Bruno Schulz and his life. Thinking (and writing) about identity and biography, woven into one anthropological knot, requires us to travel many paths and find numerous dispersed points in someone else's life. The categorical nature of the singular form ("identity", "biography") strengthens in vain our hope that there might perhaps be such a thing as one (full, complete, comprehensive) biography of Bruno Schulz and one of his identities that underlies and effectively unites this biography. Instead, though, it is impossible to determine the singular identity that would encompass all events stretching from the birth of Bruno, son of the Drohobych cloth merchant Jakub, to his tragic death in 1942. During his life, Schulz had (created) many partial identities; in this multiplication and dispersion of himself, in this division of his personhood into multiple identities, he was no exception. This multitude of formulas for the existence of "each of us" is required by the course of life – as long as it lasts long enough to be internally differentiated. Therefore, any project of creating one biography based on some overarching principle of identity that would cover Schulz's entire life seems impossible to rely on. In biographical discourse, the coherent stream of life spreads and divides into numerous branches, while identity diversifies. It can hardly be otherwise. If the biographer does not reduce the concept of identity to its "passport function" (name, surname, date of birth – and finally death) and boldly goes beyond the presentation of events in time, they will not find a formula that connects the beginning with the end of their protagonist's life, because – in multiple acts of being – the protagonist more or less radically and consciously transcends himself and the previously achieved states of his own existence.*

*Today, we are generally quite happy that a person's life can be presented in so many ways. We assume that the failure to build a biographical whole (based on one or another identity formula riskily adopted by the biographer) is inevitable. In such approximations, "Bruno Schulz" (from one biography or another) will always turn out to be only a construct, more or less arbitrary. But these arbitrary and risky constructs make up "multiple portraits" (to use an adequate phrase from an old publishing series) which presents from different points of view a protagonist who eluded each of his biographers. However, fundamental questions remain unanswered.*

*Who is he? Who was he (for himself, for others)? Who is this Schulz to us? And who is the "Schulz" who was seen and talked about so differently by others – his contemporaries? He comes (to us) suddenly and unexpectedly, out of nowhere. After all, he has been dead for a long time. He stands before us in silence, he gives us some signs – but what do they mean? He wants something, but his demands fall on deaf ears. Eventually, he moves away, leaving traces of his existence that fade away over time, becoming less and less legible and understandable.*

*The great goal of traditional biography has been (and continues to be) the search for the hidden centre of identity of its protagonist. Finding a formula that integrates the*

history of the “I” transforming over time would allow us to answer the fundamental question of who Schulz was. It is futile, though, to look for a satisfactory answer to this question (that is, one encompassing life in toto) in hundreds, thousands of Schulzological studies. Most likely, such an answer cannot be given – because it does not exist. Therefore, there is no alternative but to limit ourselves to creating one-off formulas that cover only a part of Schulz’s life, and never reveal the hidden meanings of some events, of which trace remains (in biographical documents).

Schulz’s identities are intransitive. Anchored in subsequent periods of his life, in the “here and now”, they do not explain earlier and later existential conditions. “Brunio”, a student of the Drohobych junior high school, is not the same as Schulz, a teacher of drawing and handicraft at the same school – though the two would have probably liked each other very much if they had met during a lesson. However, none of them would identify with Schulz the war refugee. If asked, they would probably answer “It’s not me anymore” or “It’s not me yet”. The teacher would probably be closer to the artist who revealed the secrets of his sexuality in his drawings from the early 1920s, as well as in the then-created *Booke of Idolatry*. And there are still more identities: the writer making his debut with *The Cinnamon Shops*, a friend of Witkacy and Gombrowicz, Nałkowska’s lover, Szelińska’s fiancé – and at the same time: the author of insightful self-portraits and schematic icons of himself... This multiplication (and later fragmentation) of “Schulz” seems endless. Because, in addition, Schulz himself suggested such powerful identity tropes as self-castration from the dream described in a letter to Stefan Schuman or masochism, which – in a letter to the American psychiatrist Henryk Wegrocki – he saw as the centre of his worldview. The matter is not made easier by contemporary critics of Schulz, and later also by numerous Schulzologists, who, when asked who he was, answered, for example, as follows: a demonologist, a poseur (for one doctor’s wife from Wilcza), another Kafka, a masochist, Bruno the Great, a sage (of Kabbalah), a victim of the Holocaust.

The authors of the essays included in this volume try to determine the central points of Schulz’s identity/biography – each on their own. As a result, these points resemble a map of the islands in the Cyclades archipelago (and each island is a nymph transformed by angry Neptune). The essays were written in the last decade and were published in the first sixteen issues of *Schulz/Forum*, a journal published by Schulz Research Lab at the University of Gdańsk.

What’s next? Which of the identity formulas presented below should Schulz’s biography be based on? This will be decided, perhaps, by the rhetorical effectiveness of the authors who stand their ground here. But you can also accept them all at once, with all the benefits of the multitude. Because “Schulz” – to whom we keep returning, and whom we keep creating again and again – is precisely this multitude. The truth of his life (and therefore also of his biography) does not belong to “me”, to each of us, readers and Schulzologists individually, but “to us”, to all those who failed (or will still fail) in confrontation with Schulz if they absolutize their point of view. The truth of biography is collective and cumulative, eternally unready and elusive – like the truth of a story.