

Piotr Millati: Was Bruno Schulz a Writer?

1

Why such a question? The answer to it seems simple and trivial. All we need to do is reach for any decent lexicon of 20th-century writers. Schulz's contemporary critics and readers had no doubts about this either. Even more so, a question of this kind would hardly cross the minds of those who read *The Cinnamon Shops* or *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* today.

And yet, as ridiculous as this question may sound, it is worth asking. Not for meaningless, dubious provocation, but for us to realize that if Schulz was indeed a writer, he was completely different from others. If we juxtapose him with Zofia Nałkowska, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz or Witold Gombrowicz, who at some point were part of his closest artistic circle, then in many respects there is more that divides than unites them.

The common point is, of course, the fact that Schulz wrote texts that have become a permanent part of the history of world literature. But did this automatically make him a writer like those mentioned here?

A writer is someone who writes books – this would probably be the simplest, most reasonable definition. When I use this word, I will mean this most typical case of a writer, because it is the clearest opposition to Schulz's peculiar writerly existence.

For this reason, what I am about to say will sound trivial and its pretentiousness will grind your teeth, but elementary facts are sometimes trivial and pretentious, so I will take the liberty of expressing these few clichéd "observations".

Most writers are people who cannot live without writing. For them, writing is an irresistible internal compulsion that remains strong for most of their lives. Although the process of creation itself usually requires effort, for a writer writing is as natural as breathing. You could say it is almost a physiological activity. A writer's entire existence revolves around this one most important activity, and the rest of their life is subordinated to it with cold ruthlessness, often at the expense of their loved ones. Writers feel that they were born to write and that only writing gives proper meaning to their lives. If the writer performs another profession, it is only to make a living, and, therefore, to write. The books they write are sometimes better, sometimes worse, but they are published with reasonable regularity. Labour can be long, difficult and painful, but when it happens, after some time another idea for a book appears and demands to be brought into the world.

Schulz wrote very little, started quite late and the period in which he was an actual writer was relatively short. It can be said that writing stories happened to him rather than was a permanent predisposition of his artistic existence. It was like a short-lived but blinding flash or a powerful lightning that loses all energy a mere moment after it occurs.

From the perspective of his readers, Schulz debuted with a masterpiece¹. It was not preceded by any works written at a young age, no unsuccessful writing attempts, no early underdeveloped texts published in second-rate magazines, which are usually a necessary stage on the path of a writer to achieve artistic maturity².

He belonged to a peculiar family of writers who wrote only one yet brilliant book³. Its members include Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa with his *The Leopard*, Ralph Elisson with *The Invisible Man* and Harper Lee with her *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

To achieve what other writers work hard for all their lives he needed only two modest collections of stories. One of them would suffice, though. If Schulz had published only *The Cinnamon Shops* or only *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, his position in the literary world would not have suffered much. Also, if he had managed to write the legendary *Messiah*, it would not have made him a greater writer in our eyes than he is now.

Let us now imagine Nałkowska as the author of only *Women*, or Witkacy, who would have written only *622 Downfalls of Bungo* and nothing else, or Gombrowicz, if he ended his writing adventure with *Memoir from Adolescence*. None of them would be talked about or written about today to an extent even close to what is said and written about Schulz.

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Most of his stories were written in late 1920s and early 1930s. Previously, he mostly satisfied his need to write artistic prose through intense correspondence⁴:

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- 1 Earlier, Jerzy Jarzębski drew attention to this in J. Jarzębski, *Schulz*, Wrocław 1999, p. 6.
 - 2 As this type of text could be considered the one published by Schulz at the beginning of 1922 in the biweekly of Borysław oil workers entitled *Undula*, which was recently found by Łesia Chomycz in Lviv. Although it is not as outstanding as the stories included in *Sklepy Cynamonowe (The Cinnamon Shops)*, it was undoubtedly a literary success.
 - 3 *The Cinnamon Shops* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* can basically be treated as one two-volume collection of short stories. Most of the texts included in *Sanatorium* were written before the publication of *Shops*.
 - 4 The thesis proposed by Jerzy Ficowski that all Schulz's work comes from his letters is now giving way to the belief that texts constituting his literary prose were also written in parallel to the correspondence. Later Ficowski also softened the categorical nature of his beliefs. See editorial note to: B. Schulz, *Dzieła zebrane*, vol. 2: *Sklepy cynamonowe*, edited by J. Jarzębski, critical commentary by S. Rosiek, linguistic ed. by M. Ogonowska, Gdańsk 2018, p. 151.

“I used to express myself by writing letters: it was my only literary work at that time” – he said, in a letter to Andrzej Pleśniewicz⁵.

As we know, he wrote thousands of letters, only some of which survived. It was an activity that Schulz was involved in throughout his life. Unlike actual writing, it was not very much subject to his unstable emotional states. No unfavourable objective circumstances managed to block it permanently, whereas they so easily impeded Schulz’s fiction writing. He kept up the correspondence with Anna Płockier continuously both during the Soviet and Nazi occupation, when every day meant the threat of a sudden and brutal death.

Therefore, his writing ability usually did not falter if he had a familiar recipient and a friendly reader on the other end. He seduced and enchanted her through his words as if in a hushed voice, forming hypnotizing phrases like some magical incantation. In this unique aura of mutual closeness and deep understanding, as in a favourable climate, sentences, images, ideas matured and were later used as material for stories.

This type of writing was not an end in itself. It meant establishing and deepening a unique and intimate relationship with a specific person. The text became an indispensable tool for strengthening this bond.

On the other hand, Schulz often lost sight of the recipient of his letters, pushing her deep into the background and placing her in a passive role, without her own voice. The content often detached itself from the author, becoming an almost autonomous literary work.

The first example we know was the completely lost correspondence with Emanuel Pilpel – a long-time fan and admirer of Schulz’s work from Drohobych. Delighted with Schulz’s letters, Pilpel read them to the then very young Regina Silberner in the early 1920s, prophesying with a solemnly raised finger: “Remember what I’m going to tell you now: Bruno will be a great writer”⁶.

The co-presence of these two elements – the real recipient and the literary text – was almost the *sine qua non* of his literary activity. Separating them, that is, going beyond correspondence and writing for writing’s sake, with an abstract reader in mind, could be considered a short-lived episode and a quantitative margin compared to what was Schulz’s most common form of literary expression.

5 B. Schulz, *Dzieła zebrane*, t. 5: *Księga listów*, collected and prepared for print by J. Ficowski, supplemented by S. Danecki, Gdańsk 2012, p. 120.

6 R. Silberner, *Strzępy wspomnień. Przyczynek do biografii zewnętrznej Brunona Schulza*, Londyn: Oficyna Poetów i Malarzy 1984, p. 12.

3

In his youth, Schulz did not think about becoming a writer. We cannot find any evidence that he linked his artistic fulfilment to literature. There is no mention of the dreams so typical of writers who want to make writing great novels their life purpose. No dreams of literary fame. No “apprenticeship” for a famous writer, which sometimes results in poor literary texts marked by the stigma of inept imitation.

A writerly (but also artistic) calling is usually born early and once it becomes conscious and accepted, a person is determined to make it come true. Like Hermann Hesse, who knew from the age of thirteen that he would be a poet or nothing.

From his early school years, Schulz’s favourite school subjects were arts and the Polish language⁷. His literary talent shone in public for the first time in one of the first grades of junior high school, when he wrote a long story about a horse. The teacher of Polish, moved by it, showed it to the headmaster, who kept it for himself as a curio. This act of headmaster’s recognition for an inconspicuous student was widely commented on at school⁸.

But Schulz saw his artistic fulfilment in a completely different field. As we all know, from an early age he was passionate about drawing: “I couldn’t speak yet when I covered all the papers and the edges of newspapers with doodles that attracted the attention of those around me...”⁹ – he wrote in an often-quoted quasi-letter to Witkacy. In *The Age of Genius* we can find a wonderful literary image of the beginnings of what is undoubtedly his greatest and most enduring artistic passion.

At school, he was well known for his drawings, which already obsessively revolved around the same disturbing motifs¹⁰. The breakthrough that was to awaken his desire to become an artist was when as a fourteen-year-old he saw art nouveau illustrations by Ephraim Moses Lilien to *Lieder des Ghetto*: “A kind of transformation took place in me then. Lilien powerfully fertilized my inner world, which manifested itself in my early, youthful, inept creativity. [...] Lilien was the first spring of my sensitivity, my mystical marriage with art [...]”¹¹ – he

⁷ J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny 2002, p. 20.

⁸ Michał Chajes – Schulz’s school friend – wrote about it in a letter to Jerzy Ficowski. See J. Kandzióra, *Poeta w labiryncie historii. Studia o pisarskich rolach Jerzego Ficowskiego*, Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria 2016, p. 221.

⁹ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 105.

¹⁰ J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 24.

¹¹ B. Schulz, *Dzieła zebrane*, vol. 7: *Szkice krytyczne*, ed. by W. Bolecki, comments and footnotes by M. Wójcik, linguistic ed. by P. Sitkiewicz, Gdańsk 2017, p. 128.

wrote many years after this event in an essay dedicated to an artist born, like him, in Drohobych.

We do not know if Schulz ever considered studying literature (the most obvious choice for those who consider writing). Instead, he wanted to study painting. Ultimately, he was stopped from doing so by his elder brother's sober advice to choose something more practical. It must have fallen on the fertile ground of his low self-esteem, because he eventually ended up in the architecture department of the Lviv University of Technology, which he never completed, though. Later, in Vienna, where he and part of his family escaped from the war ravaging Galicia, he resumed his studies for a short time, but he did it half-heartedly. He explained the reason for their final abandonment in an application to the ministry for permission to teach drawing at the Drohobych high school: "[In Vienna], under the influence of works of old art, the growing attraction to painting prompted me to give up my studies of architecture and devote myself to painting"¹². It was then that he finally became convinced that painting was the only field with which he wanted to link his future¹³.

In the early 1920s, Schulz drew and painted a lot, while working intensively on perfecting his craft. Then, the most important series of his drawings was created – *The Booke of Idolatry*. He managed to exhibit his works here and there, and sell something from time to time, but all this did not translate into financial success that would allow him to make a living. Hence, a moment later, he sadly had to look for a job at school. Before this happened, however, Schulz made one last attempt to satisfy his desire to permanently connect his life with painting – he tried to get into the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In April 1923, he appeared before the ten-person examination board. However, he was not admitted. Probably it was not because of lack of his skills, but – as Joanna Sass, who described this story, suspects¹⁴ – because he was already too well-formed as an artist, so he was not very susceptible to the impact of academic education¹⁵.

Unlike in writing, he was interested in the visual arts till the end of his days. He was no longer actively engaged in literature, but his ambition to develop himself in painting remained alive. Its last trace can be found in a letter to the painter Anna Płockier, written exactly a year before his death in Nazi-occupied Drohobych: "Would you consider it hopeless to accept me as your painting student? Could you, perhaps with Marek's help, offer me a course in painting free from the academicism? In return, I could share my writing experience with

¹² B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 227.

¹³ J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁴ J. Sass, daily entries in *Kalendarium życia, twórczości i recepcji Brunona Schulza*.

¹⁵ See <https://schulzforum.pl/pl/kalendarz/11-kwietnia-1923> (retrieved: March 26, 2020).

you”¹⁶. However, this never happened. A few days later, Anna Płockier and Marek Zwillich were murdered by Ukrainian militia.

4

Every great writer is first a great reader. Outstanding literature always originates from prior reading of outstanding literature. Schulz always read a lot, using the free resources of the Drohobych bookstore run by the father of his close friend Emanuel Pilpel. The second important source of reading material was the rich collection of books that belonged to another friend from Drohobych – Stanisław Weingarten. It contained books from various areas – from natural sciences, sociology, history and economics to philosophy and poetry. Jerzy Ficowski would like to see Schulz’s long-term relationship with the Pilpel book collection as a stimulus, thanks to which “the writer matured in him” and “the visual artist emerged”¹⁷. That might have been the case, though fiction was not a particularly privileged genre among his readings. We know little about the writers of the so-called *belles-lettres* who were important to Schulz during this period. The only name he repeatedly mentions with almost idolatrous reverence and which often returns in the correspondence is Rilke – first a poet, then a prose writer. Later, there are Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka, too.

Jerzy Ficowski links the beginning of Schulz’s serious interest in writing with his friendship with Władysław Riff, whom he met in the early 1920s and who was an almost ten-year-younger promising prose writer. It was he who inspired Schulz to make his own literary attempts¹⁸ around 1925. According to Ficowski, the following stories were written at that time: *July Night*, *Second Autumn*, *Edzio*, *Pensioner*, *Loneliness*, *Dodo* and most likely *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, which many years later would constitute the core of the second volume of Schulz’s fiction¹⁹. They were preceded by intensive correspondence with Riff. For both sides, it quickly became a pretext for turning it into a literary work.

However, the latest discovery by a Ukrainian researcher shifts the moment of Schulz’s actual literary initiation to January 1922, when he published his previously completely unknown story in the “Świt” magazine. It was *Undula*, signed with the pseudonym Marcei Weron. Łesia Chomycz (the researcher mentioned above) dates the creation of *Undula* to the spring of 1920 or 1921 and assumes

¹⁶ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 215.

¹⁷ J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 56–58.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 58.

that it could have been a text intended by Schulz as a literary commentary to his drawings²⁰.

It is difficult to determine whether this undermines Riff's role in awakening Schulz's ambition to write on his own – we still do not know when exactly they met. Either way, Riff became a very characteristic figure for him, someone he was always looking for – a close confidant for his thoughts and a companion on distant journeys of his imagination. Riff was also supposed to be an indispensable catalyst for Schulz's literary work, allegedly partly inspired by his friend's letters. Riff died of tuberculosis in 1927. All his works, along with letters from Schulz, were burnt by the sanitary services, who wanted to prevent the spreading of the disease. Therefore, we will never know to what extent Schulz was his literary debtor, as it was suggested by Ficowski, who, as proof of this dependence, presents fragments of Riff's letters – as recalled by Adam Ważyk – very similar to Schulz's prose²¹. I would not attach much importance to this account, as it is only in the memory of Ważyk. Besides, the world we encounter in Schulz's work is so individual and unique that it is difficult to imagine it to become the subject of anyone's imitation without turning into an automatic machine, not turning into his caricature. The artistically pathetic writing by Kazimierz Truchanowski, who imitated-plagiarised Schulz's writing, is a good case in point.

Almost immediately after Riff's death, Schulz started writing letters to Stefania Juer, a seventeen-year-old girl he met in Zakopane; she became a painter later known as Dretler-Flin. He wrote hundreds of letters to her. These were several-page story-letters, sent regularly two or three times a week in the years 1927–1932. Like most of Schulz's letters, they were lost during the war²².

Schulz met the Jewish writer Deborah Vogel through Witkacy in 1930. Based on Schulz's own words, Jerzy Ficowski concluded that *The Cinnamon Shops* was ultimately written out of correspondence with Debora Vogel²³. However, this would be contradicted by the testimony of Zofia Nałkowska, who wrote in her *Diary* that when Schulz came to her at Easter 1933, the book had been ready for print for three years – even before he met the author of *Tog-Figurn* for the first time²⁴. Ficowski points out another contradiction: when, in July 1932, Schulz asked Stefan Szuman – an outstanding psychologist whose lectures

20 Ł. Chomycz, *Wokół wystawy w Borysławiu. O dwóch debiutach Brunona Schulza*, "Schulz/Forum" 14, 2019.

21 Ibidem, p. 57.

22 B. Schulz, *Sklepy cynamonowe*, p. 149.

23 "The Cinnamon Shops gradually emerged from my letters," he wrote in a letter to Romana Halpern. However, he failed to mention that he only meant his letters to Debora Vogel. Idem, *Księga listów*, s. 142.

24 Idem, *Sklepy cynamonowe*, p. 152.

he listened to in Żywiec – to read his stories, they had already been ready for print for two years²⁵.

Either way, *The Cinnamon Shops* was written relatively quickly. A similar eruption of literary creativity never happened to Schulz again. Later, he repeatedly tried to return to this wonderful state of spirit and mind in which he produced such wonderful literary works as *August* or *The Birds* one after another, as in some alchemical retort. However, with a few exceptions, he never succeeded again. As we remember, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* published in 1937 was largely an act of literary capitulation. The stories in this volume were mostly written a long time ago, in that “age of genius”.

Although it is customary to link Schulz’s birth as a writer with letters to Deborah Vogel, he himself saw this moment much earlier – if we believe the fictionalized memory of his former student, later poet and prose writer, Andrzej Chciuk.

Schulz allegedly confessed to him during one of their walks (in Drohobych there was a custom of walking favourite teachers home) that he “knew he would write” from the moment when, in June 1911, he accidentally became an eyewitness to the massacre of the inhabitants of Drohobych protesting against electoral abuse of power. More than thirty people died on the street and a hundred were injured. He was struck by “how easily the scum and vulture in a person unleash [...] It was that shock – as he was to say to Chciuk – without which a writer cannot be born”²⁶.

5

Since 1931, apart from *Spring*, *The Book*, *The Age of Genius* and *The Comet*, as well as the German short story *Die Heimkehr*, Schulz published hardly anything apart from columns in the press. However, for the next few years he would desperately struggle with the impossibility of creating his *magnum opus*, which was to be the novel *Messiah*. This literary impotence is worth further consideration. The phenomenon of “writer’s block” is well known and has often occurred even among the most prolific writers, but in the case of Schulz it may suspect something else.

We must accept the fact that *Messiah* never came to be. The rumour that it was handed over to some trusted person from outside the ghetto and the subsequent sensational information about the appearance of this book in various parts of the world is a literary myth born out of the need of imagination to repeat legends about the lost treasure.

²⁵ J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 204.

²⁶ A. Chciuk, *Ziemia księżycowa. Druga opowieść o Księżtwie Bałaku*, London 1972, p. 89.

When Schulz first decided not to write *Messiah* (and at the same time he had to confirm his position as a writer publishing a new book), he included fragments that were to be part of it in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. Those were the two stories entitled *The Book* and *The Age of Genius*. However, he did not abandon his plans to continue working on it. He wanted to write it again from scratch²⁷. Those attempts resulted in the creation of fragments which, as one can guess, were so inconsistent that they were not suitable for printing as an excerpt from a larger novel. That is why Schulz never published them in any magazine, which was common practice at that time. And it was they, not the entire *Messiah*, that were lost during the war²⁸.

It seems that writing *Messiah* was a non-starter from the very beginning, at least in the form in which Schulz had in mind.

Many factors contributed to this. One of them was the burden of impossible expectations imposed on the author. Almost immediately after his highly rated debut, Schulz entered the circles of well-known, respected and highly regarded Warsaw writers. Straight from the provincial Drohobych. In those circles, he observed strategies for designing a literary career typical of this professional group – something that was previously completely unknown to him, because it was contrary to the fundamentally intimate nature of his own artistry. His new acquaintances recognized him as a writer like themselves, pushing him onto a career path typical of professional writing. One of its basic principles is the opinion that a debut, even the most successful one, is only an introduction to taking root in the literary community. The decision to be or not to be made by a novice author is their second book, which should be at least as good as the first one. Schulz apparently succumbed to this pressure. The determination to “exceed” his debut with the next book is present, for example, in his application to the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Enlightenment for a paid leave, which would enable him to “concentrate all his strength completely on the artistic act of which he is capable [...]”, because “he is now at a point in his development where he must not stop at half-results”²⁹.

However, this was quite impossible. *The Cinnamon Shops* is an example of artistic perfection within the literary convention in which it was written. There are no better or worse texts among them, which we always encounter in the collections of stories even by the best writers. Each of them can be considered

²⁷ We know it from a letter to Romana Halpern of July 12, 1938, a letter from Witold Gombrowicz of July 19, 1938 and a letter from Artur Sandauer of the same day. See B. Schulz, *Book of Letters*, op. cit.

²⁸ Among Schulz's then-lost manuscripts, Ficowski also includes an almost finished book, which was supposed to consist of “four larger stories”. See J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 95. However, apart from fragmentary mentions of this work, in Schulz's correspondence there has been no trace that proves its existence.

²⁹ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 234–235.

a literary masterpiece. Schulz either wrote masterpieces or did not write at all. This was one of the phenomenal features of his writing.

And it must have been from the desire to write a book better than *The Cinnamon Shops* that Schulz's unfortunate idea to make *Messiah* a novel came from – a novel, that is, a form more appreciated and considered more mature than short stories associated mainly with debutantes.

However, up to that point Schulz had only written short stories, and some literary criticism. Not without a reason: these were usually texts with a rudimentary plot, but with extensive descriptive parts with a refined and detailed analysis of the world presented in them. The short story was the optimal literary form for his type of writing. The highly metaphorical poetic prose Schulz wrote, resembling a tangled thicket, was perfect for this purpose. However, it is difficult to imagine that it would be possible to write an entire novel in such language. The plot is the fundamental *raison d'être* of the novel³⁰.

Working on *Messiah* must have been like struggling with the problem of squaring the circle – it was doomed to artistic failure.

At some point, Schulz must have realized that *Messiah* could not be written in the language he had used so far. Perhaps that is why *The Book* and *The Age of Genius*, which were supposed to be fragments of this novel, and yet were stylistically no different from the stories from *The Cinnamon Shops*, were included in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*.

Therefore, he decided to change his current writing style. This is clearly indicated by Gombrowicz's comment regarding what Schulz wrote to him about *Messiah* in a previous (lost, unfortunately) letter: "As for your *Messiah*, it's hard for me to say anything [...] – if it gives you the opportunity to refresh yourself, so much the better! This postulate is important not for the sake of your art, but for yourself – mentally"³¹.

Earlier, Witkiewicz had encouraged him to fundamentally renew his writing: "[Witkacy] advises me to completely change the subject 'in order to stretch the fallopian tubes to make the final sperm ejaculation'"³² – Schulz reported his opinion in a letter to Romana Halpern.

As you can see, he also expected Schulz to deliver his life's work more outstanding than *The Cinnamon Shops*. At the same time, he expressed the belief that this could not be done by writing as before. In the eyes of this radical

30 An example of a literary failure in this field is Adam Ciompa's experimental novel entitled *Duże litery* (1933) or Andrzej Stasiuk's clearly oversized *Dukla* (1997). However, it is not certain what Schulz actually meant when he called *Messiah* a novel. In a quasi-letter to Witkacy, he calls *The Cinnamon Shops* an "autobiographical novel".

31 B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 248.

32 *Ibidem*, p. 157.

avant-gardist, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, which could be seen as a repetition of the previous book, seemed an act of self-plagiarism, and, therefore, a symptom of creative stagnation³³. By the way, Witkiewicz was a good example of how badly understood the phenomenon of Schulz's artistry was – of his organic connection with the language used in fiction. A few months after the publication of *Sanatorium*, Witkacy persuaded Schulz to do something completely natural for him, but completely impossible for Schulz – to write a “very strange theatre play”, which was a “stage synthesis of the ‘Cinnamons’”, promising to stage it in the theatre in Zakopane³⁴. This play, of course, was never written.

Schulz himself must have felt a prisoner of his own style and clearly wanted to simplify it. In a letter to Romana Halpern, he complained that he had not become a journalist because, by writing to the press every day, he would have developed “a certain casual, everyday form of writing”³⁵.

The problem was that he could only write in one, uniquely characteristic way. While most writers operated with great freedom in various registers of language, Schulz moved almost exclusively on a very narrow cornice of the style he had developed³⁶. Therefore, even his occasional reader will recognize every sentence written by Schulz, just as Leśmian's reader will recognize every line of the poet, too.

If I were to point out someone among the writers who was the most radical opposite of Schulz's linguistic “stiffening”, it would be Italo Calvino. This stylistic virtuoso wrote almost every book in a completely different manner and if it were not for his name on the covers, no one would have guessed that their author was the same person.

Let us recall here that, in Schulz's opinion, the purpose of art is not mimesis of the visible world, but the expression of the deepest and the most unique contents of the artist's spirit given to him at the dawn of his existence³⁷. The unique language with which Schulz expressed these matters had to be organically connected with his deepest self; it was the fullest and most precise expression of this “I”. One could even say that this language was Schulz himself, and Schulz

33 After the publication of *Sanatorium*, Witkiewicz did not show the same enthusiasm for it as he did for *The Cinnamon Shops*. In a letter to Schulz, the entire reaction to his reading of *Sanatorium* were these courtesy words: “some of the pages are wonderful!” – see B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 289.

34 Ibidem.

35 Ibidem, p. 172.

36 This “almost” refers to the reviews ordered from him by “Wiadomości Literackie”. Here his language is more “factual” and greatly simplified. However, in extended critical pieces about books that fascinated him (*Czudzoziemka*, *Ferdydurke*, *Granica*), or in essays (*Powstają legendy*) Schulz uses a style very similar to his prose.

37 B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 106.

was his own language³⁸. Changing it would be like changing your skin or, to use another colloquial expression, climbing into someone else's skin. Therefore, it was simply impossible.

This had significant consequences for his writing – such language could be used within a narrow range of genres and forms, and in a limited thematic field.

6

If we take a closer look at Schulz's correspondence, it turns out that his problems with writing began shortly after the publication of *The Cinnamon Shops* in December 1933³⁹. These difficulties would then be a constantly recurring motif in his letters. The writing impotence that befell him would translate into recurring complaints, grumblings and self-accusations⁴⁰. It would significantly contribute to the growth of frustration, which at some point turned into a severe clinical depression that not only disorganized his life but also required treatment. It is significant that this block affected his drawing to a lesser extent⁴¹.

For the first time, Schulz confided in Zenon Waśniewski about this long-standing condition that had been troubling him in April 1934: "I must be mentally ill. [...] I don't write anything, even the rewriting of something already written disgusts me insurmountably"⁴².

Two months later, nothing had changed in this matter: "I am in a deep decline of spirit and it seems that I can write nothing more! I console myself and convince myself that it's neurasthenia, but this aversion to the pen has been going on for over six months and it still gives me some food for thought"⁴³.

38 Schulz wrote a similar thing about Lilien, whom he admired: "He immediately found his own style, which was such an adequate expression of his interior, so fused with it, that he never felt the need to look for other ways; his inner world was crystallized and closed like few others" – B. Schulz, *Szkice krytyczne*, p. 140.

39 Stanisław Rosiek devoted a lot of space to this matter in a very insightful text on the manuscript of Schulz's *A Second Autumn*. Inevitably, when writing this article, I used the same fragments of Schulz's letters in many places, and my findings partially coincide with his comments. See S. Rosiek, *Jak pisał Bruno Schulz? Domysły na podstawie sześciu stron rękopisu jednego opowiadania*, "Schulz/Forum" 4, 2014.

40 Józef Olejniczak also presented documentation of his creative impotence based on Schulz's correspondence, but this problem became a pretext for considerations other than those presented here. See J. Olejniczak, *Udręka tekstu – tekst udręki. Bruno Schulz – pisanie/czytanie*, in: idem, *Pryncypia i marginesy Schulza. Eseje*, Gdańsk 2019.

41 B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 185.

42 Ibidem, p. 67.

43 Ibidem, p. 69.

The last mention of this topic appears in a letter to Anna Płockier of October 4, 1941: “I am not doing anything now, I am contemplating my inner wealth, my scraps and the collections collected in my life”⁴⁴.

There was a catalogue of similar confessions in his letters written between these two points in time.

Schulz repeatedly tried to understand the reasons for his creative impotence. He multiplied many, often contradictory, hypotheses on this subject. Ultimately, however, it remained an unsolvable puzzle for him. The most common reason he provided was, of course, the school he hated, which, as he claimed, took up all his time and energy that he would otherwise have devoted to writing. He lived with this illusion until the next holidays, when it turned out that despite favourable conditions and two months at his full disposal, he was unable to write anything anyway.

Therefore, he could not consider such an excuse as justified, especially since *The Cinnamon Shops* was written when he was working as a teacher at the same school, and the job was not an obstacle at that time⁴⁵.

Another reason for not writing was the inability to hide away from the ever-distracting world in some isolated place. Only there could he bring out his “inner silence” and immerse himself in the solitude that was always fertile for his writing. However, when he finally managed to find such an asylum – it was in Korostów near Skole⁴⁶, some village near Turka⁴⁷ or Boberka near Łomna – it turned out that it did not change anything either⁴⁸. And *The Cinnamon Shops* was written in conditions far from such an ideal – in his apartment in ul. Floriańska, where he shared two small rooms with a mentally ill sister, a dependent nephew, and a cousin⁴⁹.

Schulz would eventually begin to suspect that the reason for his block was located much deeper, inside himself. He would recognize that with age he had entered a sterile phase of life in which “something went wrong” in him, his childhood sensitivity had become blunted, his creative resources had been exhausted, and life-giving illusions had been dissipated, revealing the “naked skeleton of truth”⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 211.

⁴⁵ However, his hourly workload was lower at that time. Practical and technical classes have been added to drawing lessons.

⁴⁶ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 169.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 91. Letter to Zenon Waśniewski from August 4, 1937: “I had no consolation from this loneliness and I got rid of the old and rooted illusion in me that I was made for solitude”.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 147.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 139.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 90, 91, 92.

Reading literary journals irritated him at that time. He looked with envy at the productivity of others, then unattainable for him⁵¹. Comparing himself with his writing friends, he became depressed. Perhaps then he began to understand that he was not like “real” writers. He stated that what distinguished him from them was his fundamental and irremediable defect – his organic inability to work systematically on his writing⁵². *Nulla dies sine linea* – the Latin paremia has instructed enthusiasts of this profession for two millennia now.

It seems that Schulz was in fact unable to write in a constant, unchanging rhythm, which must become an essential skill for anyone who wants to become a writer⁵³. He had been frequently returning to this matter in his letters to his friends⁵⁴. He was under the illusion that maybe if he gave up teaching for journalism, he would learn such regularity⁵⁵.

Worse still, writing was “very hard work” for him⁵⁶, and in order to start doing it at all, countless preliminary conditions had to be met – such as the already mentioned free time, solitude, the presence of a close reasonable conversation partner, general life satisfaction, etc. This was usually impossible, so *Messiah* was never the thing Schulz could concentrate on⁵⁷.

All this gives quite a clear picture of his writing personality.

He was not, like most of the writers he knew, a “typewriter”, a machine that sometimes jammed, but then resumed literary production. Rather, he was like a delicate, exotic plant whose growth and functioning depended on many complex, subtle factors. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, that plant withers for no apparent reason.

7

This is why Schulz never became a man of letters, that is, someone for whom writing became a profession, even though after the publication of *The Cinnamon Shops* he wanted it very much.

A writer is a professional, a person who makes a living from writing. A professional treats the practiced ability to use words effectively as an obedient tool ready to use for any purpose. This allows them to freely write purely functional

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 136, 142.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 182–183.

⁵³ We can point to countless testimonies about the regularity of work of outstanding writers, work carried out every day and at strictly scheduled hours. I will mention here, for example, Gombrowicz, Miłosz, Singer and Hemingway.

⁵⁴ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 123, 143, 145, 182.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 172.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 149.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 90.

texts, such as reviews, columns, reports, and often also satires, translations, or advertising materials. Model examples of such literary writers in the interwar period were Julian Tuwim and Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński. The latter was famously prolific, and his works covered a wide variety of subjects. In one of the photographs published in the press at that time, he poses, holding with his outstretched hand a column made of his books taller than himself. Writers are usually proficient in this sense or, when necessary, they can become so.

Schulz's extremely elitist type of writing, combined with his low productivity, gave him no chance to make a living, despite the considerable fame he gained immediately after his debut. The publication of *The Cinnamon Shops* was financed by his affluent brother, Izydor, who earned money in the oil industry. The small royalties from the copies of this and the next book sold could not have had a major impact on the author's financial situation.

Immediately after his debut, Schulz gained access to and interest of the best literary journals. He used this opportunity only to a limited extent⁵⁸. He managed to establish regular cooperation with "Wiadomości Literackie", where he published reviews of books by foreign writers recommended to him by the editors. Even though he performed this task well, he did not feel that good about it. Collaboration with the magazine ended at the beginning of 1938, which he accepted with visible relief: "I stopped writing reviews for 'Wiadomości' because it doesn't amuse me. On the contrary, it was always a major difficulty to overcome"⁵⁹ –he confided to Romana Halpern.

I have already mentioned that Schulz was considering leaving school to work as a journalist. However, one could doubt whether he would be capable of this type of work at all. He must have realized this himself since he ultimately decided not to take this risky step. It is really difficult to imagine this neurasthenic introvert running around Warsaw from morning to evening to deliver to newspaper editors articles about, for example, a tram derailling in Śródmieście or about purchase prices of agricultural products dropping again.

This writerly inflexibility would also make itself felt during the Soviet occupation of Lviv. Schulz turned out to be incapable of writing in accordance with the doctrine applicable to writers in the Soviet Union. His story about the shoemaker's son, sent to "Nowe Widnokręgi", whose editor's Marxist expectations he clearly tried to address, turned out to be formally unacceptable⁶⁰.

However, he achieved the craftsmanship and efficiency of a genuine professional in his other role – as a painter. It was this ability that allowed him and the family he cared for to survive in circumstances that offered him little chance of

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 69.

⁵⁹ Letter to Romana Halpern from mid-February 1938, in: B. Schulz, *Księga Listów*, p. 165.

⁶⁰ J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 95–96.

survival. For “Komsomolskaya Pravda”, he made many propaganda illustrations for the holidays of the communist state⁶¹. Large-format portraits of party dignitaries he painted hung on the streets of Drohobych.

So as a visual artist he turned out to be incomparably more versatile and flexible than as a writer. While carrying out orders for the totalitarian government, he was able to almost completely annihilate his distinctive drawing style. When we look at his socialist realist drawings, it is really difficult to be sure, based only on the lines, that their author was the author of *The Booke of Idolatry*.

After Hitler’s invasion, Schulz used his painting skills, eagerly utilized and highly appreciated by the Nazis stationed in Drohobych, to obtain the status of a “needed Jew”, which protected him from deportation to an extermination camp⁶². Being Felix Landau’s “personal Jew”, he “bought” more time by making portraits or decorating child’s room with scenes from the Brothers Grimm fairy tales.

Kazimierz Hoffmann, a teacher from Drohobych and Schulz’s friend wrote to Jerzy Ficowski about Schulz’s justified, though ambiguous, pride in this respect: “Bruno seemed to be grateful for his talent. It seems that despite the criminal atmosphere in which he was creating at that time [...], his works were probably masterpieces. Bruno owed his life to them. He created, he was happy that they were satisfied with his work. The SS men enjoyed art. Bruno was as if in a trance”⁶³.

On November 19, 1942, at the corner of ul. Czackiego and ul. Mickiewicza in Drohobych, Gestapo officer Karl Günther shot the painter, not the author of stories.

8

Unlike typical writers, Schulz did not consider literature to be the most important of the arts. He wrote this about himself in his application to Lviv school board: “I am a painter by education and vocation, but, as it sometimes happens in the artistic evolution of visual artists, for some time I have been directed by an internal impulse and the need for expression, towards the path of literary trials and experiments”⁶⁴. It was two years after the publication of *The Cinnamon Shops*.

But it was thanks to literature that he achieved artistic plenitude. In his visual works, though he devoted incomparably more time and attention to them than

⁶¹ Ł. Chomycz, *Bruno Schulz podczas sowieckiej okupacji Drohobycza*, „Schulz/Forum” 10, 2017.

⁶² J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 98.

⁶³ Quoted after: J. Kandzior, op. cit., p. 225.

⁶⁴ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 236.

to literature, he never even came close to the greatness that emanates from each paragraph of his prose.

Over the course of his fifty-year life, he produced thousands of drawings, and this significant number stands in striking contrast to the little more than thirty published stories. His development as a visual artist (it is worth remembering that he was basically self-taught) reached its peak quite quickly. Years of relative stagnation or regression followed. It is thought-provoking that Schulz's greatest graphic achievement was *The Booke of Idolatry*, created at the very beginning of the 1920s.

Let us declare a simple truth – he was not an outstanding painter. The world of his drawings is flat and monotonous, not only when we compare it with his literary worlds. In more extensive contact, the themes he explored seem borin- gly narrow, which is a consequence of the fixation on basically one motif – the domination of physically magnificent women and the physical awkwardness of the men who prostrate themselves before them.

In these drawings (rather than in literature), he implements the belief expres- sed in a letter to Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz – that an artist throughout his life revolves around several fundamental images given to him at the beginning of his life, which constitute his “spiritual capital”. However, unlike in prose, Schulz did not manage to “break away from them [...] in the entire content that we acquire, carry them through the entire span of the intellect”⁶⁵. His drawings offer little new material; they remain monochromatic – not only in the visual sense of the word.

Schulz's writing is a dazzling feat of his imagination, working together with the intellect, which synthesizes previously non-existent “chemical compounds” from simple elements of our reality, thus making our world even richer. Thus, something emerged that was never made in the act of God's creation of the world, but should have been.

Nothing similar can be said about his drawings. In this respect, they are simply sterile, and at the same time they remain secondary to Goya's famous graphic cycles.

The mediocrity of Schulz's drawings, in terms of the presence of creative imagination in them, becomes particularly visible when we compare them with the drawings of Alfred Kubin, who is indeed often mentioned in contextual analyses⁶⁶. Kubin managed to achieve in drawings what seems Schulz's greatest achievement in prose – he created a previously non-existent reality, whose visual suggestiveness cannot be forgotten.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 106.

⁶⁶ K. Lipowski, *Demiurg jest dwoistością. Alfred Kubin i Bruno Schulz – próba porównania*, “Schulz/Fo- rum” 2, 2013.

It is no coincidence that Schulz did not gain significant recognition as a painter during his lifetime, even if he consistently strived for it. Although his successes in this field were substantial (about ten exhibitions, which were predominantly organised in provincial towns, and some collective exhibitions in Lviv, Vilnius and Warsaw⁶⁷), they did not make him an important artist in the country. In this respect, the failure of his trip to Paris, where he arrived in August 1938, taking with him about a hundred drawings with the hope of exhibiting them, was quite bitter. Despite the contacts he established with the help of his friends, ultimately nothing came of it. This could only partly be put down to the city's holiday rush.

Thus, his achievements as a visual artist, just like his literary ones, were, in his opinion, affected by a major flaw of incompleteness. In one of the moments of utter crisis of faith in what he had been doing all his life, he wrote to Romana Halpern: "I lost my spirit completely. I told myself that I was neither a painter, nor a writer, nor even a decent teacher. It seems to me that I have deceived the world with some brilliance, that there is nothing in me"⁶⁸.

9

Even if we admit that he did not manage to become a painter, writer, or even a teacher (at least to the extent he wanted), one thing can certainly be said about him without hesitation – he was an artist *par excellence*. He was an artist regardless of what he wrote and painted. Art was the very core of his existence, as synonymous to his personal identity as possible. You cannot become this kind of artist. You are one or you are not.

This kind of artistry, which is "so deep, so primordial and elemental, that no yearning seems to it sweeter and more worthy of tasting than that for the raptures of common-placeness"⁶⁹ is the subject matter of Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*. Its main character is a writer marked by an artistic vocation from his earliest childhood. This makes his existence unlike any other, painfully removing him from the community of the so-called normal people. For the world, he is a freak, immersed, like an insect in amber, in foreign influences to an average person in matters of art. But Tonio, living his everyday life solely of art, is at the same time hungry for contact with the banal, and considers his separation from it as

⁶⁷ See on this topic: U. Makowska, *Dziwna awersja. O wystawach Schulza*, "Schulz/Forum" 13, 2019.

⁶⁸ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 140–141.

⁶⁹ T. Mann, "Tonio Kröger". *German Classics of The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Masterpieces of German Literature Translated into English*, Vol. 19, edited by K. Francke and W. G. Howard, translated by Bayard Quincy Morgan, Project Gutenberg, p. 414. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30941>

a kind of disability. Meanwhile, his circle of friends consists of “demons, kobolds, heavy monsters” just like him⁷⁰.

It is probably no coincidence that Schulz, writing to Romana Halpern about his confinement in his own world, from which only Józefina Szelińska brought him out, almost exactly repeated the self-diagnosis presented by Tonio Kröger, using a characteristic word that is worth paying attention to: “She, my fiancée, is my share in life, through her I am a human being, not just a lemur and a kobold. She redeemed me with her love, almost lost and lost to inhuman lands, barren Hades of fantasy”⁷¹.

Schulz was, as I have mentioned, an admirer of Thomas Mann, and would be unusual if he had not read one of the most famous of Mann’s stories, in which he could find a portrait of his artistic double.

“Kobold” (a grotesque gnome from Germanic mythology) is a term for his status as outsider – which was probably a recurring motif in the correspondence of Schulz and Szelińska, since that is what she called him in a letter to Ficowski⁷². According to her, he was a kobold because: “nothing human was close to him [...] the only reality for him was the sphere of his creativity, [...] the artist absorbed the man [...], there was no *hiatus* between the man and the artist [...]”⁷³.

We must now mention here one extraordinary similarity between Schulz and the protagonist of Mann’s story in the context of Tonio’s “criminal” adventure. Kröger, after many years of absence from his hometown (which is, of course, Lübeck), stays in one of his hotels during his trip to Denmark. A very symptomatic incident occurs here – a local policeman mistakes him for a fraudster wanted on an arrest warrant. A rather unpleasant interrogation finally clarifies the case, but Tonio is not surprised that he was mistaken for a criminal by a vigilant officer. In Tonio’s opinion, the artist – like the criminal – is also a social outcast, and his “bourgeois conscience forces him [...] to see in all art [...] something deeply ambiguous, suspicious, and dubious [...]”⁷⁴.

When Schulz’s friend Regina Silberner flew with her husband from Havana to Miami in 1942, the FBI interrogated them for several hours. All their considerable luggage was thoroughly searched. Of the numerous photographs in the albums, only one aroused suspicion – that of Bruno Schulz. The FBI officers, with some incomprehensible insistence, demanded detailed explanations of the name of the man on it, who he was and where he was currently staying. It took a really long time. They were finally allowed to enter the US, but all their papers

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 49.

⁷¹ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 124.

⁷² Quoted after: idem, *Szkice krytyczne*, p. 194.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ T. Mann, op. cit., p. 57–59, 71.

were seized for further examination. When they finally came back to them after some time, there was only one thing missing – the photo of Bruno Schulz. It is probably still in police archives to this day – among photographs of individuals posing a threat to state security⁷⁵.

Szelińska wrote that Schulz's life was completely subordinated to art, but it would be more accurate to say something similar about him as has already been said here about his language – his life was an art. Therefore, we should understand his dedication to art in a broader sense than just as a complete dedication to writing or painting. Pure art was Schulz's unique way of everyday existence, as well as what constituted the content of the full richness of his inner life, which was his life proper. Writing or painting was merely their material and partial manifestation.

It was not because of contact with Schulz's stories or drawings, but with Schulz himself, that Debora Vogel was able to confess to him in a letter that “our past conversations and our contact were one of those few wonderful things that happen once in a lifetime, or maybe even once every few or a dozen hopeless, colourless lives”⁷⁶. Józefina Szelińska repeated the same with different words: “These sessions at my place [...] – and then our walks to the meadows [...] gave me a taste of wonder, unique experiences that are so rare in life. It was pure poetry [...] for Bruno, a young birch forest, a form of some touching clumsiness, served as a topic for reflection and collection of images in order to reach, as it were, the depth of the phenomenon”⁷⁷.

To be a poet to these women, he did not have to write even a single line.

⁷⁵ R. Silberner, op. cit., p. 23–24.

⁷⁶ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 265.

⁷⁷ J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 325.