

Małgorzata Ogonowska: Bruno Schulz, the Man

Reconstruction of Schulz's (un)masculinity

Bruno Schulz... Artist, writer, teacher, resident of Drohobych...

If all these terms are used in the Polish language to refer to Bruno Schulz, they are always used in the masculine form. Still, though, Schulz is thought and written about as a man very rarely or not at all. If so, it is most often through motifs characteristic for his artistic work and his writings that revealed references to sexuality and masochism. There is mention of a castration dream described in a letter to Stefan Szuman¹, and there are discussions (especially recent ones) of the writer's relationships with women². Questions are rarely asked about Schulz as a man, a man seen in a specific historical and social context, and not about the men and masculinities so numerous represented in Schulz's work and so willingly subjected to various interpretations³.

Of course, my article will not fill this gap entirely, and does not have such ambitions. It has just occurred to me that in Schulz's case, being a man was a form of toil and that few people saw him as a man. Why was it the case?

Before I try to answer this question, I must make a few caveats. The portrait that I will present has nothing to do (or has little to do) with my perception of Schulz and my views on his life, work, interpretation of his work and treatment

1 See B. Schulz, *Dzieła zebrane*, t. 5: *Księga listów*, zebrał i przygotował do druku J. Ficowski, uzupełnił S. Danecki, Gdańsk 2016, p. 36–37 (KL I, 3).

2 A. Tuszyńska, *Narzeczoną Schulza. Apokryf*, Warszawa 2015; A. Kaszuba-Dębska, *Kobiety i Schulz*, Gdańsk 2016.

3 Here are a few examples: A. Lindskog, *Subwersja seksualności. Komentarz o różnicy seksualnej i męskości u Brunona Schulza w kontekście nowoczesnej heteroseksualności*, w: *Przed i po. Bruno Schulz*, red. J. Olejniczak, Kraków 2018, p. 89–103; D. Sosnowska, *Dwie kobiety i mężczyzna czyli Traktat teologiczny Brunona Schulza*, "Kresy" 1993, nr 14, p. 50–56; K. Jankowska, *Kobiety i mężczyźni czyli o dwoistej linii dziedziczenia wartości w świecie Brunona Schulza*, w: *Literatura w kręgu wartości. Materiały VI sesji z cyklu "Świat jeden ale nie jednolity"*, red. L. Wiśniewska, Bydgoszcz 2003, p. 285–294; A. Kato, *Motyw deformacji w prozie Brunona Schulza: mężczyzna, kobieta, sztuka*, "Kresy" 2004, nr 3, p. 132–139; E. Świąc, *Ciotka Agata i mężczyźni o zamglonych oczach. O „Sierpniu” Brunona Schulza*, w: *Literatura i perwersje. Szkice o literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku*, red. B. Gutkowska i A. Nęcka, Katowice 2013, p. 24–35. If you are interested in more bibliographic details, please visit <https://schulzforum.pl/pl/bibliografia/przedmiotowa>. It is probably the most complete bibliography of texts devoted to Schulz and his work.

of his biography. I focus here primarily on the reconstruction of a certain social image of this particular man set in a specific context. I try to recreate this image from fragments of other people's memories, accounts, and random references⁴, noticing a certain regularity in it that leads to general conclusions that can be abstracted from references to gender and time.

However, I return to my basic question: why could being a man be such hardship for Schulz, and what is it that questioned this part of his identity in the eyes of his contemporaries? I think there are at least six reasons – though this list could certainly be expanded – namely:

he was an ugly weakling,

he was a sickly sissy in constant depression,

and this sexuality: was he impotent? erotomaniac? pervert?

what is more, he was a wet sock and a victim of fate,

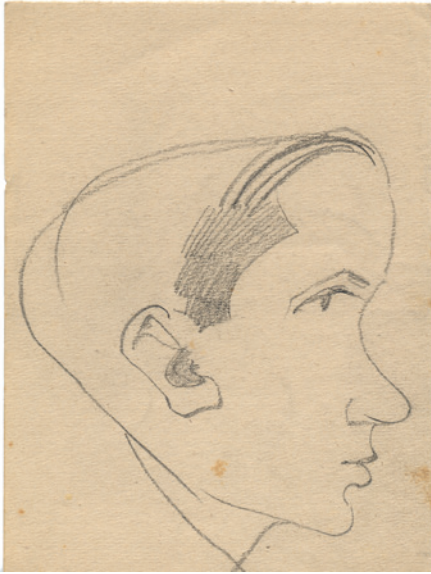
he lived in the shadow of a resourceful, connected and well-to-do brother,

he was a burden rather than support for his family.

Such an image – distorting or exaggerating Schulz's actual features and attitudes, and having its source in stereotypes of masculinity characteristic not only of his era⁵ – emerges from many memories about him. Of course, the terms I mentioned are a kind of extract drawn from stories about Schulz, from references to letters and diaries of his close friends, including Witkacy, Gombrowicz, and Nałkowska. Because even those who sincerely admired and appreciated him as an artist, an extremely talented and interesting man, had trouble with Schulz as a man.

4 Of course, I do not quote all the examples, I choose those that are the most characteristic or most representative of the six reasons I have selected for the perception of Schulz as unmanly or a non-male.

5 Although I do not disclose these readings directly in my argument (focusing on my own research goal), the projects focused on masculinity studies convinced me that it was justified to ask this particular question about Schulz as a man. The most important work in the Schulz context seems to be Wojciech Śmieja's work *Męskości dwudziestolecia międzywojennego i ich reprezentacja w literaturze (wybrane przykłady)*, published in the second volume of *Formy męskości*, pod red. Adam Dziadek (Warszawa 2018, p. 261–360). Other volumes are also important: *Formy męskości 1*, red. A. Dziadek i F. Mazurkiewicz, Warszawa 2018; *Formy męskości 3. Antologia przekładów*, red. A. Dziadek, Warszawa 2018, and a dedicated issue of "Teksty Drugie" 2015, nr 2. Other important publications worth mentioning include dissertations and collective works: T. Kaliściak, *Katastrofy odmieńców*, Katowice 2011; B. Kwaśny, *Polskie studia nad męskością*, "Zeszyty Etnologii Wrocławskiej" 2009, nr 1 (11), p. 7–28; F. La Cecla, *Szorstkim być. Antropologia mężczyzny*, przeł. H. Serkowska, Warszawa 2014; *Męskość jako kategoria kulturowa. Praktyki męskości*, red. M. Dąbrowska, A. Radomski, Lublin 2010; *(Nie)męskość w tekstach kultury XIX–XXI wieku*, red. B. Zwolińska i K. M. Tomala, Gdańsk 2019; *Stereotypy i wzorce męskości w różnych kulturach świata*, red. Bożena Płonka-Syroka, Warszawa 2008; W. Śmieja, *Hegemonia i trauma. Literatura wobec dominujących fikcji męskości*, Warszawa 2017; "Uwikłani w płęć" – od wytwarzania i reprodukcji męskości po formy przekraczania płci, "Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica" 2017, nr 18 (2).



Zenon Waśniewski, **Caricature of Bruno Schulz**, August 1935, pencil, paper, 17 × 12.5 cm, property of Florentyna Radwańska, Chełm Lubelski, photo by Jerzy Jacek Bojarski

on the right Bruno Schulz, photo from the early 1930s

Ugly weaking

Famous images of Schulz – both period photographs and self-portraits – show a short man of slight build. His face is slim and long, his forehead high, with transverse furrows, which in some images seem very deep. The whole is complemented by dark hair, dark eyes (quite deep-set, which enhances the impression of a piercing look), thick eyebrows, rather large, protruding ears, narrow lips with clearly marked, falling corners. He looks similar both as a young man – though in earlier images he looks at us more boldly – and as a mature one.

In one of the first post-war texts about Schulz, written by Ernestyna Podhorizer-Zajkin, there is the following description: “He is ugly, scrawny, his arms and legs are excessively long, his back is stooped, and his chest sunken. He has an unattractive, slim face of an unhealthy complexion”⁶. He was described similarly in Michał Chajes’s letter to Jerzy Ficowski: “By nature [...], he was skinny and physically underdeveloped, excessively thin. He had a fallen breast, a terrible pallor or yellowness of the complexion, an elongated head, sunken bony cheeks, in which large black eyes glowed with some incredible light, over which fell a lush, soft head of dark, little-groomed hair. His general slouch and the terrifying thinness of his legs and long arms created a figure that was strangely subtle, but as if predatory, somewhat reminiscent of a spider, and at the same time inconspicuous and shy”⁷.

Both of these descriptions roughly correspond to what we can see in existing images of Schulz. But there is something striking in them: the accumulation of negatively emotional and pejorative terms and comparisons: “ugly”, “physically underdeveloped”, “thin”, “skinny”, “excessively thin”, “bony”, “hunched”, “arms and legs are excessively long”, “terrifying thinness of legs and long arms”, “slouching”, “sunken chest”, “sank chest”, “unattractive slim face”, “elongated head”, “sunken bony cheeks”, “unhealthy complexion”, “appalling pallor or yellowness of the complexion”, “poorly cared for hair”, and finally the comparison to a spider.

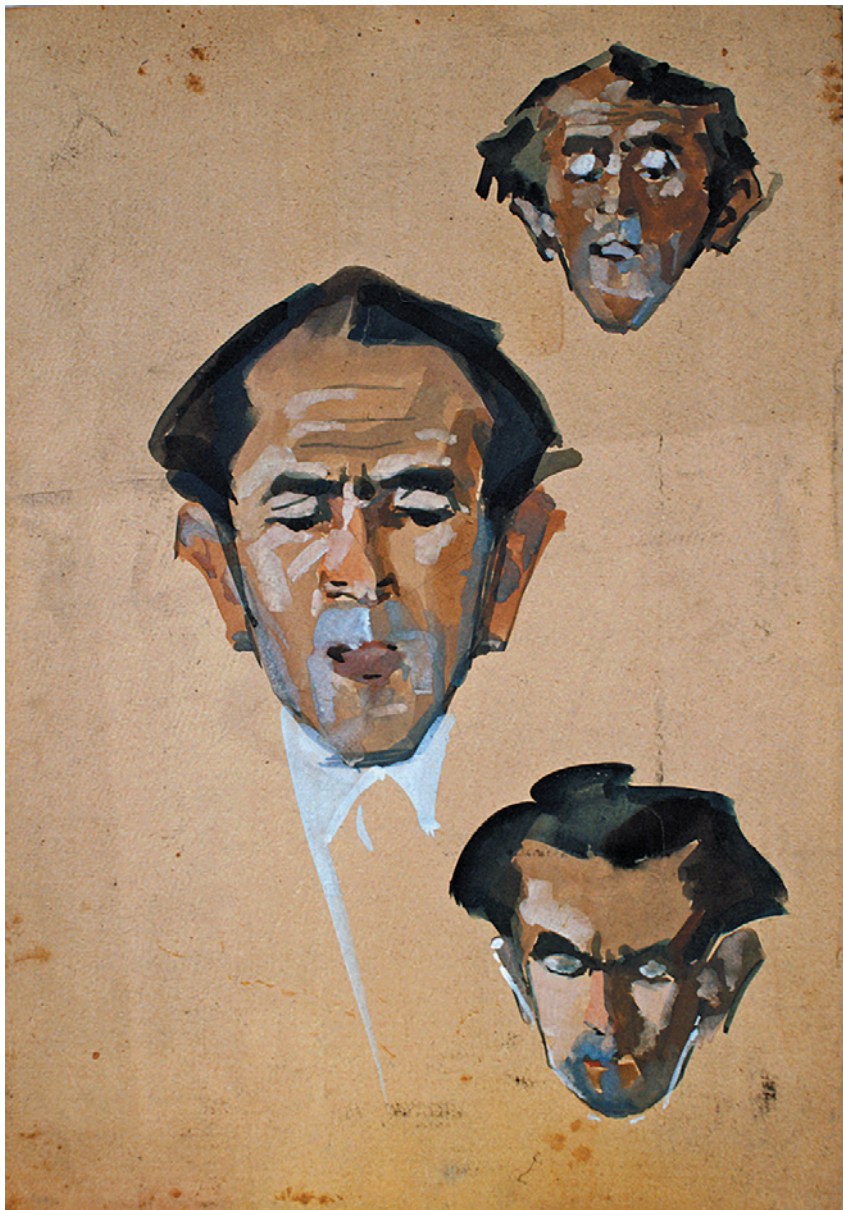
This image is almost a caricature. The quoted descriptions attempt to capture elements in Schulz’s appearance that slightly nuance and break down this portrait of the ugly man. So Schulz has – as Chajes describes – “black eyes [that] glowed with some incredible light”. Podhorizer echoes him: “There is so much captivating charm and depth in his dark, intelligent eyes and discreet

⁶ E. Podhorizer-Zajkin, *Pamięci Brunona Schulza, literata i artysty malarza*, “Opinia” 1949, nr 50, p. 20.

⁷ Attachment to the letter from Michał Chajes to Jerzy Ficowski of June 7, 1948 (*Bruno Schulz w oczach świadków*. Listy, wspomnienia i relacje, oprac. J. Kandziora, Gdańsk 2022).



Bruno Schulz, photographs from the 1930s



Zenon Waśniewski, **Triple Portrait of Bruno Schulz**, August 1935, tempera, cardboard, 51 × 36 cm, property of Florentyna Radwańska, Chełm Lubelski, photo by Jerzy Jacek Bojarski

statements that his peers always listen to him carefully and none of them dare to get to know this extraordinary boy”.

Schulz’s physicality is also defined by his hands. Podhorizer writes: “Schulz had incredibly beautiful hands, with long bony fingers that lovingly wrapped a pencil or a pen. From these spiritual hands flowed as if the entire extraordinary soul of this fascinating man and artist”. Chajes also believes that after getting to know Schulz more closely, what captivated him was “apart from the depth and mysterious glow of his eyes – his delicate, thin hands, with long thin fingers, yet strangely soft, as if caressingly holding and guiding a pen or a brush. There was so much charm, so much beauty and energy in these fingers that they stimulated even the most prosaic observer to think and analyse the mystery they concealed”.

It is worth noting that in these fragments the focus shifts from the description of the man to the description of the artist and writer (“discreet statements”, “a man radiant with knowledge and artistic flair”), which is additionally emphasized in Chajes’s words: “Among his group of colleagues, this man of a minor body and a major knowledge and artistic flair seemed to always get lost”. Eyes, hands, expression – these are the attributes of the soul, creativity, the quintessence of an artist.

So what was Schulz like? Beautiful as an artist, ugly, even repulsive as a man... Being an artist allows him to be an unattractive man, justifies this unfortunate condition and makes it easier for others to accept it. Talent makes society ready to forgive ugliness and fragility – however understood, depending on the times and canons. Ultimately, we do not eliminate all the monstrous ones – we can spare the ones who are “beautiful in spirit”?

Sickly sissy

Schulz was the youngest child of his parents, the apple of his mother’s eye. “While living in this house – writes Chajes – I always felt a lot of this specific motherly warmth and kindness, especially when it came to the youngest Brunio. [...] This woman devoted most of her life to Samaritan duties, first towards her husband and later towards Bruno, whose fragile health required constant care and precaution. – She never raised her hand or even her voice to him, tolerating only a few and quite innocent antics or the whims of her spoiled little son. And further about Schulz: “Constant colds, a runny nose and other ailments were constantly bothering him, making him even more shy because, by contrast, he suffered twice because of his physical deficiency, seeing himself handicapped in front of his rosy-cheeked friends, bursting with health and vitality”.

Other memories, as well as source materials and mentions by Schulz in his preserved letters, also emphasize the writer's poor health⁸. What is more, Jerzy Ficowski imposed an emphasis on Schulz through the prism of weakness and illness. This is how Ficowski's narrative about Schulz begins: "On July 12, 1892, the youngest son was born in the Schulz merchant family, the third and last child, the frailest of the siblings".⁹

On the basis of Bruno Schulz's personal files, documenting his work as a teacher at a secondary school in Drohobych, it is possible to quite precisely create a catalogue of ailments and diseases that bothered the writer. These include frequent colds, flu (with complications), angina, inflammation and catarrh of the trachea, pleurisy, periostitis, various stomach problems, gastric fever, heart neurosis and other ailments of this organ, mysterious stinging in the side, chronic inflammation of the bladder, renal pelvis and prostate gland, depression¹⁰.

He was ill from an early age, so he was perceived as frail, physically and mentally weak. This sickness – recalled by Schulz's friends and repeated constantly, not without the participation of Schulz himself, who often refers to his poor health in his preserved correspondence¹¹ – becomes the main factor that determined his life and his being a man. Mentions of this sickness do not sound compassionate or understanding, but rather lenient and paternalistic. Sometimes you can see in them an unasked question about whether it was fake and not real – and whether it was not a handy excuse and justification for a kind of desertion in the face of life's challenges and inconveniences, which Schulz is sometimes accused of¹².

Or maybe this question should be asked in a different way? Maybe we should assume that Schulz was so sickly or subjectively felt that way, and measure this weakness by how he lived and worked despite everything?

8 I devoted a paper to Schulz's diseases during the conference "Schulz – Słownik mówiony" [Schulz – Spoken Dictionary], which took place on November 18–19, 2016. For the needs of the "Calendar of the life, work and reception of Bruno Schulz" (<https://schulzforum.pl/pl/>), I have prepared a series of daily entries re constructing this aspect of the writer's biography.

9 J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny 2002, p. 17. Unless otherwise noted, the highlight in quotes here and thereafter comes from me – MO.

10 Central State Historical Archives of Ukraine in Lviv, Lviv Board of Trustees Lviv, years 1921–1939, F 179, O 7, volume XIII, folders 29376 and 29379. Cf. also G. Józefczuk, *Sambójczyni, lekarz i pisarz. Paradoxy opowieści z "półtora miasta"*, in: *Bruno Schulz: teksty i konteksty. Materiały VI Międzynarodowego Festiwalu Brunona Schulza w Drohobyczu*, red. W. Meniok, Drohobycz 2016, p. 510–515.

11 Cf. for example KL I 12, 20, 28, 31, 97, 113, 114, 115, 119, 130, 134.

12 This question also returns in relation to other aspects of Schulz's life. Cf. P. Sitkiewicz, "Jednakowoż bez pieniędzy". *Sytuacja materialna Brunona Schulza*, "Schulz/Forum" 12, 2018, p. 127–135; M. Ogonowska, "Byłem już w myśli pozbawiony posady i w ostatniej nędzy". *Nie tylko o finansach Schulza głos drugi*, "Schulz/Forum" 12, 2018, p. 136–152. In the text quoted here, I also attempted to provide a nuanced assessment of Schulz's life and financial situation and his attitude towards the challenges this situation presented him with.

But can a real man get sick? And if he is already sick, should he admit his illnesses? Especially since – what is worse – some of the ailments that plagued Schulz, such as chronic cystitis, could affect sexual performance, and therefore also the stereotypically and superficially understood masculinity.

Impotent? Erotomaniac? Pervert?

Schulz's sexuality – both the one manifested in his visual and literary works, as well as that practiced (or not practiced) by him in his life – has been investigated on many levels both during the artist's life and today (and many answers were given, which do not necessarily close the matter)¹³. In the light of Schulz's drawings and, for example, *Wywiad drastyczny*¹⁴, this interest is not surprising. It is also not surprising that sometimes it is essentially gossipy in nature. Because the imagination was often ignited not so much by his individual corporeality, sexuality, and eroticism, but the corporeality, sexuality, and eroticism of somebody else.

And Schulz was different indeed. If only because he was defined by his – unmanly? – morbid shyness. Those who remember the writer, frequently connect this shyness to his appearance. Of course, it was manifested in Schulz's behaviour in general, but it is particularly eagerly recalled and interpreted in the context of his relationships with women. It becomes more important when it is observed in connection to Schulz's drawings that are full of masochistic and fetishist motifs.

I will quote Podhorizer-Zajkin again: “The artist likes to place his figure among the pack of [...] stunted individuals. [...] That [masochism] was close to him is evidenced by one of his self-portraits, where we see Schulz at the easel in his atelier full of this type of works. Perhaps it was related to the artist's physically unattractive appearance, which had a rather repulsive effect on women.

Chajes puts it even more explicitly: “All [Schulz's youthful loves], emerging here and there, emphasized the servility of his gaze¹⁵, a touch that, lacking the strength and spirit of masculinity, made them feel rather afraid. These fresh feelings for the women were quite lasting, more than fleeting, and Schulz made his living, painting, and drawing them in various forms, mostly as tamers of gangs of male servants. And then Chajes adds: “There were unsubstantiated rumours about his sexual impotence among his colleagues, but no certainty – or personal admissions – can be spoken of in this regard”.

13 In order not to multiply the footnotes excessively, I refer only to the “masochistic” issue of “Schulz/Forum” 7, 2016.

14 J. Nacht, *Wywiad drastyczny* (Rozmowa z Brunonem Schulzem), “*Nasza Opinia*” 1937, nr 77, p. 5.

15 This definition seems to contradict other descriptions of Schulz's eyes given by Chajes.



Zenon Waśniewski, **Caricature of Bruno Schulz**, August 1935, pencil, paper, 21 × 17 cm, Museum of Literature in Warsaw

These and similar fragments of memories¹⁶ ambiguously suggest that Schulz's sexuality found an outlet mainly in his fantasies (which manifested themselves in his art) and that it could not be realized in relationships with women, because his appearance "had a rather repulsive effect on women" and "caused fear in them". In others, we find references to the fact that he found fulfilment only thanks to the services of prostitutes¹⁷.

In any case, Schulz's complicated sexuality seems, somewhat troubling¹⁸. It certainly was like that for Jerzy Ficowski, who (quite willingly?) passed over some aspects in silence, while he subjected others to over-interpretations¹⁹. Tadeusz Lubowiecki did not avoid a strange tone – somewhat tinged with sensationalism, despite reservations and requests for discretion and sensitive use of information. Describing in a letter to Ficowski – as he put it – Schulz's *vita sexualis*, he wrote the following: "It's an old, ugly story, interesting only because it concerns an outstanding artist"²⁰.

During Schulz's lifetime, his sexuality was also the object of crude jokes. This seems to be confirmed by an anecdote provided by Jerzy Pomianowski and corroborated in the correspondence of its main character, Alicja Dryszkiewicz²¹:

Alicja said that Witkiewicz took her to Drohobych, because Mr Schulz's second book, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* had just been published. Already on the train, Witkiewicz told her:

'Alicja, when we get to Mr. Bruno Schulz's house, I will knock at the door and then step back. When he opens the door and sees you, you are to slap him in the face as a greeting.'

16 Cf. "He once told me that when he's overcome with lust, instead of going to a girl, he draws, and finds sexual satisfaction in it. I have the impression that this was the rule due to extreme shyness. [...] He was awkward and shy around society women. When he made friends and became more familiar, he allowed himself to say joking things like: 'Hit me at the mouth' or 'Kick me hard'. Of course, he was blamed for this. However, it was not suspected that he was a pervert of any kind; instead, it was attributed to his originality" (*Trzy listy Tadeusza Lubowieckiego (Izydora Friedmana) do Jerzego Ficowskiego z 1948 roku*, "Schulz/Forum" 7, 2016, p. 210).

17 Cf. for example A. Chciuk, *Ziemia księżycowa. Druga opowieść o Księżtwie Bałaku*, Warszawa 1989, p. 78–79; W. Budzyński, *Schulz pod kluczem*, Warszawa 2013, p. 376; S. Rosiek, *Odcięcie. Siedem fragmentów*, "Schulz/Forum" 7, 2016, p. 61 (letter of Alicja Dryszkiewicz to Tadeusz Bereza of 24 December 1992).

18 I will take up certain threads of this topic – taking as a starting point, among others, the memories of Irena Kejlin-Mitelman and Joanna Kulmowa – in the article I am currently preparing *Komin albo niezadane pytania*.

19 This is interpreted in detail by Marcin Romanowski in the text *Masochizm Schulza w ujęciu Ficowskiego* ("Schulz/Forum" 7, 2016, p. 99–120).

20 *Trzy listy Tadeusza Lubowieckiego (Izydora Friedmana...)*, p. 209.

21 Both accounts are analysed by Stanisław Rosiek, op. cit., p. 56–58.

‘I’ll never do that’, said Alicja, who was by no means a shy girl. She had read Schulz’s books and was already intimately close to, or expert at, literature.

‘If you don’t agree, you will get off this train and never get to the station’, said Witkiewicz.

So she agreed and they went to the famous house and the famous annex where Schulz lived and which was described so beautifully by Jerzy Ficowski, the best specialist in the world on Schulz’s work. They knocked on the door, Witkiewicz took two steps back and pushed Alicja forward. The door opened, and a small man stood there, leaning forward, looking under his eyebrows, under his bowed head. He didn’t even have time to speak when Alicja obeyed Witkiewicz’s orders like an automaton and slapped Bruno Schulz in the face. He fell at her feet, shouting: ‘Queen!’²²

So even Witkacy and Witold Gombrowicz²³, who both undoubtedly sympathized with Schulz²⁴, treated this sphere of Schulz’s life with a certain indelicate ridicule, even if such an approach, of course, must be perceived as part of the totality of their personality, values and attitudes.

But Schulz’s sexuality seemed strange or provoked jokes not (or not primarily) because it was overtly masochistic and fetishist. It was something strange, because compared to Schulz’s appearance, perceived as unattractive, the writer’s sickness and introverted character traits, seemed an impossible aberration – and would probably seem so regardless of how it was manifested and realized. Yet sexuality is a natural and basic function of the human body. In addition, it was unmanly, because Schulz was perceived as unmanly. However, he had no influence on the criteria of this unmanliness.

A wet sock and a victim of fate

Perhaps it would be possible to take Schulz’s sexuality seriously if he fulfilled himself as a husband and breadwinner. But no, Schulz – though he had numerous

22 *To proste. Opowieści Jerzego Pomianowskiego nagrane przez Joannę Szwedowską dla Programu II Polskiego radia*, red. E. Jogała, Kraków–Budapeszt 2015, p. 216.

23 He writes, among other things: “Yesterday I came up with the idea of a certain doctor’s wife, whom I met accidentally at number eighteen. ‘Bruno Schulz’, she said, ‘is either a sick pervert or a poseur; but most likely a poseur’. [...] Or maybe, by giving free rein to your masochistic tendencies, you will humiliate yourself and fall at the feet of the doctor’s well-fed wife” (W. Gombrowicz, *Do Brunona Schulza*, “Studio” 1936, nr 7, p. 217–218).

24 It is impossible not to recall at this point a fragment from Schulz’s letter to Romana Halpern: “Witkacy advises me to completely change the topic ‘in order to tighten the fallopian tubes and to have the final sperm ejaculation’. But don’t quote me with him, because he will accuse me of indiscretion, even though it’s about my potency, not his” (KL I, 92) – even if it is not at all about male potency, but creative one.

erotic and friendly relationships with women – never started a family. There is a recurring theme of Schulz's indecisiveness, inability to make binding decisions, procrastination and the constant looking for excuses. We should add that similar threads also appear in the preserved letters of Schulz himself.

The writer was troubled not only by fundamental issues affecting his entire life, but also by smaller, immediate ones. In various life matters, he asked for help from acquaintances and friends, seeking their support and protection. This was the case, with his trip to Paris and the issue of registering his residence in Katowice, which was to enable him to marry Józefina Szelińska.

But even when he took decisive action, he was sometimes seen as strange and ridiculous. Special mention is made of Schulz, who in 1933 came to Warsaw with the manuscript of *The Cinnamon Shops*²⁵. He showed up at the guesthouse of Magdalena Gross, a sculptor visited by Warsaw intellectuals. The author of this account reports:

On Easter Sunday, at noon, between my place at the table and Magdalena's, I found a little man sitting, almost Chaplin-esque, who quietly uttered his name, which meant nothing to me or Magda. Magda, a bit ironically, asked him about the purpose of his visit.

'I am a drawing teacher in Drohobych and I came to the capital by the Dancing, Skiing, Bridge train.'

'Are you a dancer, a sportsman or a bridge player?', continued Magda, amused by the little man.

'No, ma'am. I have come to this guesthouse because I was informed that writers and critics would be found here.'

'And why does a drawing teacher need writers and critics?'

'Because I brought with me a book that I wrote and I would like to read it to someone so that he can give me his opinion about it.'

To Magdalena Gross's next mocking comment, "the little man looked [her] straight in the eye and said in a decisive tone: "The fate of my book depends on you. I know that you are a friend of Zofia Nałkowska and if you call her and ask her to accept me, she will not refuse".

This whole story, as we know, had a happy ending: Nałkowska's opinion was enthusiastic, and Schulz's stories were soon published. However, it is not the

25 Alicja Giangrande's account in a letter to Jerzy Ficowski of April 16, 1985 (*Bruno Schulz w oczach świadków*). Also published in the book *Gombrowicz w Argentynie. Świadectwa i dokumenty 1939–1963*, przeł. Z. Chądzyńska, A. Husarska, Kraków 2004. See also J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 59–60. I recall this memory, seeing in it traces of a certain stereotypical perception of Schulz as a man, and I completely ignore the issue of factual inaccuracies hidden here.

facts that are interesting in Giangrande's account, but the way in which Schulz was described, and the feelings he generated – in this case in women, but the reactions were similar among men, too. He was met with jokes, mockery, and disregard. He was treated this way only because of his appearance, shyness and the first impression he made on those gathered.

Magdalena Gross's joke referring to the name of the train on which Schulz arrived in Warsaw from Drohobych unintentionally reveals the power of the stereotype. Well, Schulz did not have the appearance and manners of a dancer, sportsman or casino goer, he did not look like a cavalryman, a lover, or a diplomat, nor did he fit into the popular image of poets, writers and artists²⁶. If it were not for the book he had under his arm, if it were not for the request – why was it even answered? – for Nałkowska's support, he would remain only a “man”, someone who does not fit into the canons of masculinity, perhaps defenceless in the face of ridicule. There is a poignant trace of unrealized cruelty towards otherness in this memory.

But the later perception of this story is equally interesting. Well, in the context of publishing *The Cinnamon Shops*, Nałkowska's role is always mentioned, but never, or at least I have not found such a relationship, the energy and determination with which Schulz fought for his debut. This event would rather motivate one to ask whether Schulz – with all the complexity of his character, evident shyness, depressive tendencies and introvert nature – was in fact such a failure in life as he was sometimes perceived or wanted to be perceived²⁷.

In the shadow of his older brother

The personality and achievements of his older brother Izydor undoubtedly cast a shadow over Schulz. The brother was appreciated by Schulz himself, who wrote about him as follows just after his death: “He was an extraordinary man, beloved by all who came in contact with him, with truly evangelical kindness, young, elegant, full of success and at the peak of a brilliant career – he was one of the main figures of the Polish oil industry. [...] My brother maintained my household, i.e. sister and nephew, he was the breadwinner for a whole series of families that now found themselves in trouble. It's going to be hard now – I don't know what I'll do”²⁸. And

26 See also W. Śmieja, *Męskości dwudziestolecia międzywojennego i ich reprezentacja w literaturze (wybrane przykłady)*, p. 261–360.

27 Piotr Sitkiewicz's “*Jednakowoż bez pieniędzy*” is an exception. Although I disagree with the author on many issues, a fragment of the conclusion of his article seems to me very important: “A popular biographical trait – which, in my opinion, should be opposed because it simplifies Schulz's personality and work in a harmful way – says that he was a somewhat forgotten, helpless, shy, poor, overworked, provincial teacher who produced some genius works in the comfort of his modest Drohobych home” (p. 134).

28 KL I 39, p. 83.

in another letter from the same period: “He died not only to his family, whom he left behind, but also to me and his sister and nephew, all of whom he supported. He was a man whom everyone smiled at and talked about with admiration. Elegant, beautiful, and refined, he charmed and attracted people”²⁹.

This description is consistent with the image evoked by people from outside the family world. In the memoirs of Michał Chajes, we read: “On the other hand, his brother, Engineer Szulc is a very ambitious and talented man who, on his own, rose to the influential and lucrative position of director of the Galicja oil joint stock company. He was always connected with his brother by bonds of sincere devotion and friendship. Therefore, Bruno was very attached to his brother, who always supported him with advice and – not once – materially”. But there is something else in this account – elements that question Bruno Schulz’s agency in life: “When after graduating from high school in 1911, and following his inclination and talent, Bruno went to Vienna to study at the local Academy of Fine Arts, his brother did not allow him to continue studies in painting as they did not seem to promise enough of a financial success, and after only one year the brother influenced him to change his mind, after which Bruno enrolled at the Lviv polytechnic’s Faculty of Architecture. But he also gave up these studies after 2 or 3 years due to lack of funds and poor health.

And again: the memory does not entirely stand up to confrontation with sources and documents – the stay in Vienna and the studies there were different³⁰ – but it is its tone and message. Because what does this memory mean? Namely, Schulz did not decide about anything, he submitted to the will of others or capitulated in the face of hardships and external circumstances.

Chajes’s mention of Schulz’s financial problems is also significant: “Apart from the ordeals related to the illness and death of his father and the suicide of his brother-in-law, Szulc’s childhood was peaceful and relatively prosperous. Only the subsequent impoverishment after the death of his father affected the growing boy³¹ unpleasantly, and this deficit has impact on him until the very end. The thread of Schulz’s financial problems appears in many other accounts, and is confirmed by his correspondence³². While Izydor was alive, which is clear from the extracts from Bruno’s letters just quoted, the writer could count on his support.

The theme of Izydor’s successes and Bruno’s failures, which appears many times in the memories of friends and family, puts the two brothers in opposition.

²⁹ KL I 40, p. 84.

³⁰ Cf. calendar entries prepared by Joanna Sass: <https://schulzforum.pl/pl/autorzy/joan-na-sass> (accessed: 25/01/2020).

³¹ The year his father died, Bruno Schulz was twenty-three years old, so he was certainly no longer an “adolescent boy”.

³² See among others, KL I 29, p. 70; 42, p. 86; 43, p. 87; 66, p. 112; 81, p. 139 – 140; 86, p. 147; 87, p. 148; 90, p. 153; 101, p. 169.

There was Izydor – resourceful, well-off, helping others, not only his own family, showing his brother the right life choices and supporting him in various situations, in short: a man who fits the stereotype of the head of the family. And there was Bruno, too – always complaining about the lack of money, torn between his reluctance to work as a teacher and the need to earn a living, financing his debut with his brother’s money. Brother-winner and brother-loser.

Although everyone emphasizes the bonds between the brothers, they also emphasize the contrast of their competences and life attitudes. This is frequent juxtaposition deprecates (more or less intentionally, consciously) Schulz as a man – and despite, as I once tried to show, testimonies that could be interpreted “as a kind of sacrifice and responsibility for loved ones, which grew from rational premises and life experience”³³.

A burden to the family

If it really were as it is quite commonly suggested by the sources and memories about Schulz, he would not be a support for the family, but a burden: a sick loser in constant depression, an unfulfilled artist who abandoned artistic work in favour of writing and managed to publish only two small volumes of stories, a drawing teacher who hated his job and manual work, unable to break away from this treadmill that weighed heavily on him.

And yet he managed to cope, although it was not easy and without sacrifices. Moreover, as a family guardian, he probably proved himself several times: this was the case in Vienna during World War I, and this was also the case after the death of his mother, when, as Michał Chajes reports, “in order to obtain the means of living which [...] it was increasingly difficult for him to get, he decided to publish a dozen or so of his best drawings, multiplied using *the cliché-verre* technique, in the so-called *The Booke of Idolatry*, luxuriously bound in cloth. The artist himself provided each individual copy with decorative inscriptions and vignettes. It was sold, I think, for PLN 100 a piece, and was apparently in big demand in Warsaw”.

About his efforts and situation, Schulz wrote, among others, to Romana Halpern in 1936: “I don’t want to complain, but I live in very tight and embarrassing conditions. I live in two rooms with my widowed sister, a very nice person, but sick and sad, with an older cousin who runs our farm, and with my nephew, a 26-year-old young man who is something of a melancholic. That’s why I think marriage will be a change for the better for me. I just don’t know if I can maintain two houses because my family has no income”³⁴. About a year later:

³³ This is one of the conclusions of my article “*Byłem już w myśli pozbawiony posady i w ostatniej nę-dzy*” (p. 147).

³⁴ KL I, 81, p. 139–140.

“Don’t be angry that I rewarded your efforts and concerns with a refusal. If you consider my situation more closely, you will realize that I could not accept this offer. I have already told you that I have three dependents (a sister, a cousin, a nephew) whom I cannot completely abandon to the mercy of fate. I now earn about PLN 300 a month. If I were given a job in Warsaw under similar conditions, I would leave because I could live there for PLN 200 and send PLN 100 to my family. At Mr. Ramberg, however, I would have 2 to 6 hours of work – I would make PLN 100 at most. I cannot leave my government job (7th level) for these few hours because that job provides me with a pension. I don’t have enough courage, sufficient impulse or desire to take such a risky step”³⁵.

Schulz took the obligation to take care of his loved ones very seriously, although this aspect of his life is sometimes interpreted as an escapist excuse from taking risks and making final, binding life decisions.

Or maybe this was the binding decision, even though Schulz – as he himself wrote – endured the hardships resulting from the fulfilment of this obligation in an “unmanly” manner. In 1934, he confided to Zenon Waśniewski: “I am ashamed in front of you of my tearful unmanliness, the notoriousness of doubt – you are so much braver than me and you endure your fate so much more manfully!”. And in 1937 he wrote to him: “It’s rude to complain all the time and not in a manly way, but I must say that something is broken in me”³⁶.

Social castration

It is time to reach a conclusion, but before I do, I will mention two more quotes. One has already been used here, but I need to come back to it. Chajes wrote about Schulz: “Apart from the illness and death of his father and the suicide of his brother-in-law, Szulc’s childhood was peaceful and relatively prosperous”. If one remembers about the death of Schulz father, and the experience of suicide in Schulz’s family, such words about a peaceful and relatively prosperous life sound false. This falsehood will be even more obvious if we realize that Schulz, as a very young man, was, among other things, a witness of the bloody elections in Drohobych, then was a war refugee, and experienced the Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Russian wars in 1918–1921. In later years, his life attitude and decisions could have been influenced by national tensions (Polish-Ukrainian, Polish-Jewish and Jewish-Ukrainian), uncertainty related to the years of crisis, and the increasingly clear rumblings of the coming war³⁷.

³⁵ KL I, 90, p. 153.

³⁶ KL I, 36, p. 78, and 47, pp. 91.

³⁷ I am briefly returning to the topic that I discussed in more detail in the article “*Byłem już w myśli pozbawiony posady i w ostatniej nędzy*” (p. 141–147).

The second quote comes from Emil Górski's memoir: "Schulz, sickly and tired of monotonous work, surrounded by ill and mentally deranged members of his family, was aware of his miserable existence [...] In addition, there were constant adventures with starting his own family, which was not an easy matter considering his specific attitude towards women [...] Above all this loomed the threat of war and genocide – Schulz felt it with his sensitive artist intuition"³⁸.

Yes, with the sensitivity of an artist, but not of a man...

Paradoxically, what in a sense made Schulz an artist: his talent, his sensitivity (or even hypersensitivity), fragility, shyness, a specific, perhaps apparent detachment from reality, as well as a deeper view of this reality, somehow deprived him of his masculinity – of course, the one defined and imposed by society – and pushed him into unmanliness. At the same time, however, this unmanliness – perceived from the perspective of the outside world – served as an explanation, a cover and an alibi. This meant that, at least sometimes and at least by some, Schulz was forgiven. Because he was an artist.

What if he was not an artist, but, for example, a shoemaker or, to put it bluntly, a textile merchant? I suspect that then he would have to cope to an even greater extent with these – sometimes unconscious and not directly based on bad intentions – paracastrative reflexes of society, which decide that everything that does not fit into the stereotype of masculinity applicable in a given place and time becomes unmanly. And if it is not masculine, what is it? Maybe spiderly, or maybe cockroachy?

38 Emil Górski's letter to Jerzy Ficowski from November 1982 – "Wspomnienie o Brunonie Schulzu (w 40. rocznicę śmierci)", in: *Bruno Schulz w oczach świadków*, op. cit.