

# Paweł Dybel: Schulz's Masochism and the Word's Threshold of Shame

The masochist means to show [...] that the desire of the Other lays down the law.

Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*.  
*Book X*, p. 106

A certain Mme. Magda Wang, tethered by the train of her gown, declared above a modest décolletage that she frowned on manly determination and principles and that she specialized in breaking the strongest characters. [...] There were methods, she continued through clenched teeth, infallible methods she could not divulge here, referring the readers to her memoirs [...]; in them, she listed the results of her experiences in the Colonies with the “dressage” of men [...].”

Bruno Schulz, “The Book”, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, p. 9

## **Galicia as *the genius loci* of masochism in the 19th century. Sacher-Masoch and the psychiatric concepts of Krafft-Ebing and Freud**

The phenomenon of masochism is probably as old as time, but attention was paid to it, and attempts were made to conceptualize it theoretically only at the beginning of modernity. This happened in psychiatry in the second half of the 19th century; the first author who used the term “masochism” and created its first theory was the Austrian psychiatrist and sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. He was inspired by the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, an Austrian who – like Bruno Schulz – lived in Galicia, and who, in his partially autobiographical novel *Venus im Pelz* (*Venus in Furs*), showed a man who wanted to be whipped and humiliated by a beautiful woman. Krafft-Ebing presented his theory in the work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), in which he attempted to provide his own definition of masochism, identified its connections with sadism, and classified its varieties (e.g., ideal, symbolic, feminine, and embryonic masochism).

American historian Larry Wolff in a book about nineteenth-century Galicia under Habsburg rule has recently pointed out that the basis for the emergence of Sacher-Masoch's similarly perverse tendencies were the feudal social relations

prevailing in the Galician countryside. A characteristic feature of them was the particular cruelty of the Polish nobility towards peasants. This was clearly expressed in their treatment of their subjects as animals and their preference for corporal punishment in the form of whipping (with an actual whip or a stick). Sometimes the application of these punishments was associated with sexual humiliation of peasants and their wives. Following Sacher-Masoch, Wolff quotes the story of Onufry, a Ruthenian peasant. In this account, a Polish nobleman ordered their peasant women to lift their dresses and he ordered all peasants to identify their women from behind. If any of them did not recognize his wife, he received fifty lashes from their "honourable sir".

As a child, Sacher-Masoch was also an eyewitness to the anti-nobility uprising of Galician peasants led by Jakub Szela, which ended in a bloody massacre. These events were the subject of his first novel, in which the character of a young Polish noble woman Wanda appears, who rides a horse and tries to pish away with a whip the peasants who want to rape her.

According to Wolff, all these bloody events and stories about them left a lasting mark on the history of Galicia and over time, led the Austrian writer to connect sexual life with humiliation by a naked woman dressed only in fur, which he expressed directly in the above-mentioned book *Venus in Fur*. This should also explain the fact that the phenomenon of masochism was later so popular in Galician literature and art at the turn 19th and 20th centuries.

In psychiatry, however, the issue of masochism would be discussed later by Freud, who returned to it many times in his works. He was primarily intrigued by the relationship between masochism and sadism that seemed to him not only deeply ambiguous but also genealogically unclear. This is eloquently reflected in the evolution of his views on this issue. In the early days, Freud claimed that masochism was the product of the Self redirecting its sadistic inclinations (initially targeted at others) towards itself. Such an approach assumed that masochism is a derivative phenomenon and constitutes a kind of pathology of sadism, as a result of which the pursuit of destruction turns into self-destruction.

In the later period, when Freud formulated a version of his drive theory based on the opposition of Eros and Thanatos, he reversed this approach. He came to the conclusion that masochism is a phenomenon primary to sadism. Therefore, he distinguished two forms of masochism. The first is primary masochism, in which the destructive death drive combines with Eros, subordinating it to itself, and turns against the Self – hence the experience of pleasure in pain by the Self is a primary rather than secondary phenomenon. In secondary masochism, the aggression that the sadistic self directs towards others is turned against the self as such. The latter type builds itself over the former, constituting a specific inversion of it. Originating from sadism, which in this perspective constitutes a transformation of primary masochism (the aggression of the self, which it turned against

itself, directed towards others), it forces the sadistic self to turn (again) against itself. In this approach, secondary masochism is sadism turned against itself. So it has a completely different “quality” than primary masochism, although externally its symptoms may not differ much from those of the latter.

Freud’s late approach to the phenomenon of masochism is not so much a rejection as a transformation; it “supplements” the earlier approach by pointing to the primary drive basis of masochism, which is Thanatos conquering Eros and “allied” with it. This rather peculiar alliance of Thanatos and Eros in masochism, which results in pleasure drawn from humiliation and pain, is a most mysterious bond – and it seems difficult to explain in rational discourse. The only thing left is to look carefully at human masochistic behaviours and reconstruct their genealogy, which in places uses pure speculation.

There is something deeply irrational and difficult about the phenomenon of masochism if one wants to explore it and explain in a common-sensical way. It is determined by the subject’s sexual pleasure, which they can experience only when they experience the pain of humiliation and annihilation. Freud explains this phenomenon by pointing to a situation in which the death drive connects in the human psyche with Eros, subordinating it to itself. Thanks to this, Thanatos also gains power over the subject who, finding pleasure in humiliation and pain, is ready to submit to its destructive influence. Freud also suggests that these situations are nothing unusual. What constitutes human sexuality is the fact that it often happens to create highly suspicious alliances with Thanatos, unwittingly putting itself at the service of thanatic powers of destruction.

This statement of Freud, closely related to his late theory of drives, initially aroused enormous resistance in academic and bourgeois circles. It indicated something deeply disturbing in the human being itself – something to which people had tried to turn a blind eye and made taboo: the particular ease with which human sexual drives are ready to form various alliances with death drives.

When asked why this happens, Freud’s theory no longer produced answers. It only pointed to the drive basis of masochism and various additional factors that, in certain circumstances, could contribute to its formation. In some cases, it seems, the answer should be sought in the individual features of someone’s biography, the events occurring in it, the structure of family relationships, and so on. But again, we can only guess.

### **Schulz’s masochism: individual, graphic and writerly**

The same is true about Schulz’s masochism. We can guess that its sources lie in some complications of his family life, but we do not know anything certain about it. This does not mean that some facts known to us from the life of his family and from his childhood do not allow us to hypothesize on the matter. But these will only be hypotheses, not theorems based on “hard”, empirically verifiable

data. Anyway, in light of what we know about the biography of Schulz, one thing is certain: he had clear masochistic tendencies and expressed them in his drawings and stories.

When we want to write about Schulz's masochism, we immediately encounter the problem of relating his "individual" masochism to the way he presents this phenomenon in his drawings and prose. It would be quite naive and simplistic to equate these representations with the masochism of the writer himself. At the same time, however, this does not mean that they have nothing in common. When we study Schulz's drawings, which feature masochistic motifs, there is no doubt that they are an artistic presentation of his most "individual" problem. We can do something similar too about the figure of the narrator-son in his prose or the figure of the father, though here masochism takes a more veiled form. These various manifestations of masochism in Schulz's life and work are closely intertwined and it is impossible to completely separate them from each other.

By claiming this, I am probably uttering a real heresy in the eyes of many literary scholars. They will immediately accuse me of an anachronism based on the naive blurring of the boundary between the author as a living person with his own mental problems and the fictional narrator or characters of his artistic representations, created in language itself. Meanwhile, in their opinion, such an approach has already been overcome once and for all in the works of Russian formalists and structuralism. Post-structuralists have dealt with it definitively. This is done in such works as Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author", Michel Foucault's, "Who is an Author?" or Jacques Derrida's *Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger)*.

Without diminishing in any way the originality of those approaches that opened up new perspectives for the interpretation of literary or philosophical texts, I claim that in the case of Schulz's work they all fail. It is impossible to make a clear distinction between Schulz as a living person, the author of the discussed prose, and the fictional narrator or characters who appear in it. Similarly, scenes with masochistic motifs depicted in his drawings, which often feature male figures surprisingly similar to Schulz, also refer us to the very "real" problem of the author himself. All these fictional characters are obvious *porte-paroles* for Schulz, through which he reflects both his own problems and his observations and reflections about people close to him. The specificity of his work results immediately from the special closeness and deep affinity of what is presented in it with the real person of its author and the world in which he lives. If we were to read it in accordance with Barthes' thesis about the "death of the author" and take into account only the context of other texts to which it consciously or unconsciously refers, being their modified quotation, we would lose the direct way of relating to reality that characterizes it.

An additional argument in favour of this thesis is the way in which Schulz's stories were written. We also know that they were artistically transformed

accounts of various real events from family life, contained in Schulz's letters to Debora Vogel. It follows that the relationship between fictional people and events that appear in these stories, and their real counterparts were very close. The latter usually constituted a source of Schulz's writerly inspirations, which he then processed and developed in his imagination. In their genesis, they were never fictitious stories invented by the writer.

At this point, a literary scholar (or an art critic) who values more sophisticated strategies could say that this genealogy of Schulz's stories is astonishingly anachronistic, if not downright primitive and vulgar, and that it does not live up to the quality of narrative styles and conventions of modern fiction. One could respond to this argument that this anachronism is in fact close to the way literature has always been based on real events, sometimes transforming them in a brilliant, phantasmatic manner – as in Homer's *Iliad*. This is where literature takes its source, the truth of the world that it describes, and the power of its influence on the readers' imagination.

Therefore, what for some is a contemptible anachronism, for others is an archaism worthy of the highest praise. The genealogy of the literary world is rooted in its archaeology, it is born on the basis of some primary experience of reality, from which it grows organically. In a similar way, the image of past worlds grows on the basis of their ruins and remains uncovered in archaeological works. Similarly, it can be said that the author's death never fully occurs in the literary text. Something of this author as a "living" individual with specific personality traits always remains. Horace already knew this well when he addressed us with his famous message *non omnis moriar*. In this case, mechanically repeating Barthes's slogans like a mantra will be of no use.

### The word of prose and the threshold of shame

Taking up the topic of masochism in Schulz's work, I will try to take into account the special closeness and various connections in which the person of the author remains with the fictional narrator and the characters of his stories and the scenes shown in his drawings. A closer look at these two areas of his work allows us to look at Schulz himself through the prism of his male characters. After all, they are clearly his own *porte-paroles*. All his fascinations, problems, complexes, fears and phobias that he experienced in the everyday reality of Drohobych are centered on them. It is in them that the thread of masochism also comes to the fore as an identity drama that unfolds before our eyes in a different scenery and in various versions.

We should start with Schulz's interesting statement on this subject. When Józef Nacht said in a conversation with him: "I noticed that a long time ago you express yourself spiritually in writing and sexually in drawing", the writer allegedly replied: "That's how it is. I don't think I could write a masochistic

novel. I would be ashamed anyway, too”<sup>1</sup>. Jerzy Ficowski, who commented on this statement, is undoubtedly right when he says that it is impossible to read it literally, because “in a more subdued form, organically connected with other elements of reality, these pieces [“radical” as they seem – PD] are, of course, also present in Schulz’s prose, they surround it with an almost omnipresent fluid, but they do not dare to enter it in all its nakedness, in its dominant expression and shape”<sup>2</sup>. This statement assumes that if the difference between Schulz’s drawings and fiction is based on the fact that in the former his masochism comes to the fore in an open way, while in the latter it takes a hidden form, it is equally present in both cases.

The central importance of masochistic motifs both in the world of drawings and in the prose of the author of *The Street of Crocodiles* is hard to doubt today. As Marta Konarzewska writes: “It doesn’t take much to see masochism in the works of the Drohobych artist. It is simply there – on the surface, and also underneath. If it is not the object of representation, it is its logic. If the dominatrix (that masochistic *femme fatale* in a fur coat) is not a woman, she is the surplus matter – the sublime ‘hairiness’, which absorbs the subject, presses against it and seizes it”<sup>3</sup>. But what is such masochism, indeed? What exactly is the different way in which these two areas of Schulz’s work come to the fore? What could be the genealogy of this difference? Later in the interview, as Ficowski reports, “Schulz, having confirmed that the same reality is expressed here and there, added that only different means of expression and material decide that ‘the drawing defines tighter boundaries’ and that he believed that in fiction he could express himself more fully”<sup>4</sup>.

There is a certain contradiction here. On the one hand, Schulz states that drawing allows him to “express himself” sexually – that is, among other things, to articulate his masochism – on the other hand, however, it limits him more. It does not allow him to fully express himself and his own vision of the world. And similarly, he can express himself more fully in prose, but at the same time his shame prevents him from revealing in the act of writing all his sexual fascinations. How can fiction allow him to express himself more fully, then, if he cannot write openly about what constitutes the very core of his personality – about his masochism? And at the same time: what is so special about drawing that when

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1 J. Nacht, *Wywiad drastyczny*, “Nasza Opinia” 1939, nr 77.

2 J. Ficowski, *Kobieta – idol i władczyni*, in: B. Schulz, *Księga obrazów, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2012, p. 520.

3 M. Konarzewska, *On tylko udaje tak? Schulza i Gombrowicza zabawa w doktorowq*, in: Schulz, *Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, red. J. Majmurek, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2012, p. 91.

4 J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 520.

he takes a pencil in his hand, he does not feel any inhibitions to express this masochism openly?

An instinctive response would be to point to the European tradition of visual arts in which female and male nudes have already acquired, so to speak, the right of citizenship. Therefore, the representation of the naked human body, especially of a woman, was not treated by the vast majority of recipients as something forbidden and scandalous. After all, visual arts have made use of naked human bodies since ancient times to expose their beauty as divine or natural creations. This approach allowed artists to exhibit their own relationship to sexuality, often under the guise of mythological references, scenes from the life of the holy family, genre scenes and so on.

Moreover, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, masochistic motifs were quite openly used in paintings and drawings. In a hidden way, they came to the fore even earlier. So when Schulz drew naked women's bodies, which were objects of idolatry admired by men, his drawings were not unusual in terms of subject matter, but they fitted into the already rich tradition. Moreover, in the case of drawing we always deal with a sketched "diagram" of a naked human body, deprived of its visual literalness, as in representational painting. Naked bodies in the drawings are a metaphor for actual nudity – and that is always easier to digest for those who find any representation of nudity in art unacceptable.

Perhaps, Schulz's exhibitionism in drawings was possible thanks to one more factor. In the Jewish tradition, whose pressure Schulz must have felt, even though he grew up in an assimilated family with a secular attitude to life, a very specific attitude towards fine arts was defined by the prohibition of creating images of God. However, if such images were considered sacrilege in the religious order, then any depiction of secular people and matters in the visual arts were treated as having no major significance. It was a kind of secular idolatry, the uncritical worship of various substitute gods set up in the place of the true God.

However, presenting the naked human body in words of prose that highlighted sexuality, or even showed it in various erotic positions or poses, in the light of Orthodox Jewish tradition was treated as a serious offense.

A similar approach was taken by the conservative Polish reader community who found it simply unacceptable. For example, when Żeromski tried to include a fragment in *Przedwiośnie* describing in detail the love scene between Cezary Baryka and Laura Kościeniecka, he had to give it up, offering instead an ironic comment on what he could not write about<sup>5</sup>. It is also enough to remember what problems Emil Zegadłowicz (a writer Schulz highly appreciated) had with the

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5 S. Żeromski, *Przedwiośnie*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1976, p. 102.

publication of his novels *Zmory* and *Motory*, due to the erotic themes appearing in them. However, regardless of these objective factors related to the history of the communities, there was a subjective reason why Schulz was unable to write a “masochistic novel” It was... shame. Schulz admits this directly in the above-mentioned interview. Commenting on it, Ficowski recounts Schulz's words from a letter to Romana Halpern. On her request for them to be on first-name basis, Schulz states that he would prefer to start “with a ‘you’ in conversation” because for him writing is “more embarrassing than speaking”<sup>6</sup>. This statement shows that the sources of the writer's “shame” concern not only the introduction of masochistic – or even erotic – threads in his prose, but also concern writing in general. They are therefore much more significant, related to his approach to the written word as such.

At this point, Schulz's attitude towards his own fiction is quite different from that of Żeromski and Żegadłowicz. It was also the case with Witkacy and Gombrowicz, who had no inhibitions about introducing “drastic” sexual motifs into their own work. It seems this approach stems from Schulz's strong identification with the narrator-son and the characters of his stories, especially with his father. Unlike in the drawings with their obsessive masochistic motifs, from which he has no distance as their creator (a testimony to this is the paradoxical fact that he has no qualms about introducing a male character with features similar to his), in his fiction these motifs appear in a deeply transformed and sublime way. So if in the drawings we are dealing with Schulz's exhibitionism, in his fiction there is “shame” before manifesting his own sexuality – a shame pushed to extreme limits.

Based on various biographical and autobiographical accounts, we know that the image of intrafamily relations presented by Schulz in his short stories did not differ much from reality. His father Jakub sickly and prone to daydreaming, of small stature and long hair, as he is depicted in his son's drawings, had a very secular attitude to life. He was very reminiscent of his literary *porte-parole*. It is also known that Schulz's father engaged in dreamy speculations and had a great sense of humour<sup>7</sup>.

The mother, in turn, as Ficowski writes, seemed to tread more firmly on the ground, raising children and running the house. She seems to have treated Bruno with a lot of care and tenderness and pampered him in her own way.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited after: J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 521.

<sup>7</sup> Jerzy Ficowski writes that the Schulz family belonged to “the Jewish religious community, but – far from conservatism – they were closer to secular rather than Jewish reading, more associated with shop abacuses than with the synagogue menorah, although they visited the Drohobych prayer house from time to time” – J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1975, p. 21–22.



Other reports – which Ficowski does not mention – show that she could also be very strict towards her son. In particular, she chastised him for his drawings of naked female figures, which seemed to her deeply immoral. He apparently took this criticism very seriously<sup>8</sup>.

### Oedipal family triangle and cruel nanny

Ficowski suggests that the attitude of Schulz's nanny who punished him quite strictly during the absence of his parents must have had a key impact on the development of Schulz's masochism. Due to his innate shyness, he did not have the courage to complain to parents about the nanny. Even if we accept that there is a grain of truth in this story, it seems that it could have been only one of many factors that contributed to the writer's masochistic approach towards women. He admitted to exactly that in the interview mentioned at the beginning of this article, agreeing with the journalist's suggestion that masochism determines his attitude to sexuality<sup>9</sup>.

However, if the issue of Schulz's masochism is beyond doubt, the question about its sources remains open. The answer to this question is never provided by his drawings, which are artistic articulations of masochism, rather than an exploration of its genesis. We will probably find such an answer in his prose. Although the author's masochism is not manifested directly, we do get a rich picture of the home life of the Schulz family and the social environment in which the writer grew up. Even though the people and events that appear in the stories have undergone a far-reaching transformation, on the basis of the events narrated there, we can recreate certain elements of the writer's "family romance". In particular, the specific character of the relationship he had with his parents, that is, the role played by father and mother figures in the formation of his identity.

This relationship clearly took on a form that contributed to the development of a perverse identity in the writer. It was characterized by – to use a narrative close to Lacan's psychoanalysis – a substitute staging by the writer's subject of the action of the Law, whose rule his father did not establish in him in a sufficiently convincing manner – in a manner that would give the Law the status of indisputable obviousness in the son's eyes. Therefore, the subject must invent a replacement ritual in which this Law is established, and repeat this ritual indefinitely.

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<sup>8</sup> I obtained this information from Schulz's student from Drohobych, a Polish Jew who later in the interwar period emigrated with her husband (now a retired professor of physics at the University at Buffalo) to the United States.

<sup>9</sup> We find confirmation of Schulz's masochism in the memories of people who knew him, collected and commented on by Wiesław Budzyński in the book *Schulz pod kluczem* (Warszawa: Bertelsmann 2001).

In Schulz's case, this ritual is a staging of his own humiliation by women whom he also adores in an idolatrous way as ideal enforcers of the Law. However, since this realization of the Law by women was staged by the author himself, this Law is merely an appearance – the effect of a game devised by the male masochistic subject – a game in which the woman is merely a tool in his fantasies. Therefore, the scene of male humiliation must be re-enacted over and over again. No wonder that in Schulz's drawings there are scenes with men kneeling in front of naked women and getting whipped. These images come back obsessively with a tiresome monotony.

These scenes are a kind of “additional” strategy for Schulz by which he seeks to save the authority of the Law in his own eyes. At the same time, he wants to save his own love for his father by showing him as a fallen patriarch who, indulging in his fetishist fantasies, desperately tries to regain his lost domestic kingdom. That is why scenes with the father are pervaded by the attitude of “loving criticism” on the part of the narrator-son<sup>10</sup>. Although the father indeed failed as a representative of the Law, he is not at all a character that can be taken seriously. At the same time, however, in his grotesque madness, he is a deeply tragic figure with whom the narrator-son has a deep emotional connection. The basis of this relationship is the father's fetishism – it constitutes a deep spiritual kinship of father and son.

This interpretation is supported in Schulz's prose not only by the constant absence of the father at home, caused by his illness, as a result of which the narrator-son remains under the sole care of his mother (and Adela). His withdrawal from all household matters also plays an important role – in the text as much as in reality. The father is mainly occupied with running the shop, which isolates him from family life, limiting his contacts with his son to a minimum. He only lives in the world of his own fetishist fantasies, which is a closed world. Nobody has access to it. There is something like a pane of glass between him and his son, even when the son visits him in the sanatorium, he only lives his own life, he has no time to sit down and talk to him longer. In fact, while the narrator-son is interested in contact with his father, the father dismisses him rather easily.

This withdrawal of the father from family matters and his degradation as the domestic Patriarch is contrasted with the attitude of the mother running the household, treating her husband with a tinge of irony and mockery. In various

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<sup>10</sup> This term was used by Juliusz Kleiner, describing Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and its approach to nobility who were unable to rise above internal quarrels and stand together against the Russian invader. Also in this case, the sense of the law failed, and instead it was decided to bring justice to the Soplica family through forceful possession. Cf. J. Kleiner, *Zarys dziejów literatury polskiej*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Ossolineum 1963.

ways, the mother undermines the father's authority in her son's eyes, gives him a knowing look when the father does something strange: exclaims some words, complains about salespeople and the whole world. A strange alliance of those who "know" then develops between mother and son. In an even more drastic and cruel way, the father's authority is undermined by Adela, who constantly "castrates" his flamboyant masculinity, destroying his bird kingdom in the attic with a broom, hitting the weak point of his fetishism, when at a crucial moment during his pathetic speech, she suddenly bares her leg and presents her foot in a snake-like shoe.

The "family romance" of the Schulz house, which takes place in accordance with a similar logic, fits into the pattern of the Oedipal triangle in the form that leads to the development of a perverse form of identity in the son<sup>11</sup>. Even if, as Ficowski suggests, in the formation of the writer's masochism, the nanny (Adela?) who punished him as a child played some role, it could by no means have been the only factor. The writer's traumatic experiences, which were the result of the punishments used by that nanny, must have fallen on a fertile ground, which in this case was the specific Oedipal arrangement of father and mother roles at home. Only then could these punishments lead to the consolidation of the writer's masochistic tendencies. This peculiar Oedipal arrangement is well demonstrated by various scenes from family life presented in Schulz's stories.

### Masochism and the model of courtly love

The masochistic motifs appearing in Schulz's drawings and – in a camouflaged way – in his prose can also be viewed as a perverse version of the "courtly love" model. In it, the adoration of a woman by a man was also associated with elevating her to the rank of a semi-divine, beautiful object to which homage should be paid and whose all attributes should be adored. Here, the woman occupied the position of a romantic partner, who it, is inaccessible, but thanks to this, the love relationship gains spiritual durability<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, as in Schulz's drawings,

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce Fink shows the development of this drama in a very clear way, starting from Lacan's approach to perverse orientation in a child. He points to a specific type of Oedipal relationship, which serves as a very its basis: "In cases in which there is a very close bond between mother and son, a father – in order to bring about a separation – has to be quite forceful in his threats and /or quite convincing in his promises of esteem and recognition. But the very fact that such a close bond has been able to form suggests that the father either is incapable of fulfilling the paternal function or does not care to interfere. [...] And even if he does try to do so, he may be undermined by the boy's mother, who, the moment the father's back is turned, winks at the boy, letting him know that their special relationship will secretly remain unperturbed" – B. Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Theory and Technique* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> The term object a (objet petit a), in Lacan's terms, means a beautiful object that, like beauty, blows away set on precious stones, the box gives rise to the subject's desire to open it, in the

in the tradition of courtly love, the elevation of a woman was the product of male fantasy. The woman was only a passive object of these fantasies, which should obediently take the place assigned to it.

Slavoj Žižek, pointing out in *Metastases of Enjoyment* the key role that the model of courtly love played in the formation of ideas about women and love in the European tradition, claims that this role becomes fully understandable only when we take into account its close connection with masochism. In his opinion, this is due to the fact that courtly love is only a matter of courtesy and etiquette, and not a primary passion that involves men's "sincere" feelings aimed at the chosen one. Žižek took this view of courtly love from Jacques Lacan, who wrote a short statement on this subject in his early *Écrits*<sup>13</sup>. According to Žižek, in the case of courtly love, "we are dealing with a strict fictional formula, with a social game of 'as if', where a man pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady. And it is precisely this feature which enables us to establish a link between courtly love and a phenomenon which, at first, seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with it: namely, masochism, as a specific form of perversion articulated for the first time in the middle of the last century in the literary works and life-practice of Sacher-Masoch"<sup>14</sup>.

Later in his essay, Žižek, referring to Gilles Deleuze's well-known book on masochism<sup>15</sup>, states that unlike sadism, in which inflicting pain and tormenting others is treated more seriously, "in masochism negation assumes the form of disavowal – that is, of feigning, of an 'as if' which suspends reality"<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, according to Žižek, both in the case of courtly love and masochism, we are dealing with the behaviour dominated by convention, which consists in "faking" love or humiliation in accordance with a specific, pre-arranged ritual. In other words, it is just a game that cannot be played seriously, because from start to finish it was arranged by those who participate in it.

This deep affinity between the model of courtly love and male arrangement of masochism, according to Žižek, is that in this first case, the Lady praised by the knight "has nothing whatsoever to do with the opposition of woman submitted to phallic signifier and woman qua bearer of the Other enjoyment". The Lady is the projection of man's narcissistic Ideal, her figure emerges as the result of the

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hope that the real treasure is hidden there. Meanwhile, after opening it, it turns out to be empty - which forces the subject to transfer his desire to another object, similarly seducing him with its inner beauty.

<sup>13</sup> J. Lacan, *Propos directifs pour un Congrès sur la sexualité féminine*, in: idem, *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil 1966.

<sup>14</sup> S. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment. Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London, New York: Verso 1994, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> G. Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, in: idem, *Masochism*, New York: Zone Books 1991.

<sup>16</sup> S. Žižek, op. cit., p. 91.

masochistic pact by way of which woman accepts the role of dominatrix in the theatre staged by man”<sup>17</sup>.

In other words, the Lady is neither an ordinary “tamed” woman – wife, lover, etc. – with whom a man can have sexual intercourse, nor a mystic devoted to the Other-God. The Lady is solely a product of a male fantasy in which she was raised to the rank of an inaccessible Thing. And it is this inaccessibility that makes her particularly attractive in a man’s eyes. He can then worship her as his Lady, whose commands he should obey without objection.

In the light of this approach, the masochistic motifs appearing in Schulz’s drawings and prose fit very well into the model of courtly love conceived in this way: everything depends on the man’s arrangement of the scene in which the woman occupies the key position of the Lady and Ruler. This identification is possible because, in Žižek’s eyes, the position of the male subject in the model of courtly love is always that of a masochist.

However, such a view seems to be quite an exaggeration. To justify his own position, Žižek mentions, following Lacan, the example of a poem in which its author complains that his Lady makes him lick her ass<sup>18</sup>. However, this is an extreme case and – in the rich tradition of courtly love – constitutes an exception rather than a rule. In addition, even this example could hardly be considered as evidence of a masochistic attitude. After all the author of the poem complains about the strange demand of his Lady, and, therefore, clearly draws no pleasure from her humiliating acts. In fact, she is the director of this entire scene, not him!

In typical representations of courtly love, men who praise the virtues of their chosen ones do not demean themselves and do not feel the need to do so. On the contrary, by making them the perfect object of their lyrical tirades and sighs and by following their orders, they confirm their masculinity<sup>19</sup>. Knights do not appear to Ladies as miserable creatures whom they can despise, whom they can beat with a whip, and so on. On the contrary, as their subjects and servants they are elevated in their masculine dignity, and the tasks they obediently perform are merely a necessary test.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 130.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek further states: “The knight’s relationship to the Lady is thus the relationship of the subject-bondsman, vassal, to his feudal Master-Sovereign who subjects him to senseless, outrageous, impossible, arbitrary, capricious ordeals” – ibidem. A question remains, however: what historical sources allow one to make such claims? It seems that, as in many other opinions of this author, it is just an impressive statement hastily formulated to support the hypothesis, without thoroughly checking its credibility. In addition, it is worth recalling that both Lacan and Foucault saw the medieval relationship between the knight and the Sovereign as a case of subjectification rather than humiliating for the former. In other words, thanks to this relationship the knight became a subject (*sujet*) rather than the object of power.

Therefore, if Žižek rightly points out that in the case of both courtly love and women's masochistic idolatry, we are usually dealing with male arrangements that assign women the position of rulers in advance, he is wrong if he identifies two versions of this arrangement on this basis. The arrangement that is the basis for courtly love differs fundamentally from the masochistic arrangement. In the first one, the man idealizes the Lady, elevating her to the status of a spiritual, ethereal ideal, turning the woman – as Žižek writes – into a mirror on which he “projects his narcissistic ideal”, strengthens himself in his subjectivity. In this way, although he hides the traumatic quality of the Lady, he displaces her as an unimaginable Thing situated at the level of the Real. Nevertheless, contrary to what the Slovenian philosopher claims, this imaginative strategy on the part of the man is by no means secondary. The point is for the man to confirm his masculinity in the glow of this feminine ideal.

In the context of Lacan's teaching, the model of courtly love seems to be merely a radicalization of how men tend to relate to women within the so-called patriarchal culture. Within this tradition, the position of a woman towards a male subject is that of an ideal “beautiful object” created by the imagination of this subject. It is the result of an imaginary “game” between them, the rules of which are determined by the man<sup>20</sup>. This imaginary “game”, however, is not only a matter of the man's domination over the woman, or even of a specific convention that took shape in the Middle Ages. It is an essential starting point in all relationships between men and women. If a woman does not take on the role prescribed for her by the man's fantasy, there will be no “spark” between them. This assumes not only that the “sexual relationship” (*rapport sexuelle*) between them has a purely phantasmal basis, but also that it requires one of the partners to take the position of the subject and the other of the object the other person adores.

However, in a masochistic relationship, a man's adoration of a woman is inextricably linked to his expectation that he will be humiliated by her, and the manner of this humiliation he arranges himself from start to finish. Therefore, masochistic motifs appearing in Schulz's drawings and his stories should be considered a degraded, pathological version of the model of courtly love. They are a kind of parody in which the male subject can establish a “sexual relationship” with a woman only by making her humiliate him. And if so, what should be the source of the subject's tendency to such self-abasement? And is Schulz's idolatrous attitude towards women exactly the same as the adoration of them in the model of courtly love?

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<sup>20</sup> In this sense, as Lacan says, the sexual relationship (and with it the woman) “does not exist” because nothing real corresponds to it; it is the result of appearances, a male fantasy about a woman.

## Troubadour and masochist

The durability of the masochistic attitude as the dominant tendency in mental life is related to the fact that the subject, not being able to submit his sexual drive to the Law enforced by his father, and thus confirm himself in his own eyes, associates the satisfaction related to this drive with the pursuit of self-humiliation and destruction<sup>21</sup>. The lack of a sense of the presence of this Law in his life, and at the same time desperate efforts to establish it at least as a substitute, make Schulz feel shame whenever he takes up erotic motifs in his prose. This, in turn, has its source in his feeling of being guilty due to his masculine (that is, masochistic) nature. In other words, he is a guilty person for whom there is no redemption.

This feeling of guilt is intensified by the fact that the women whom - in the absence of any Law of the father - he makes substitute subjects of that Law, who behave cruelly towards him, at the same time are treated (by himself) as the object - and reason - of his own sexual desires. Thus, they are also the actual or potential object of his transgression. Therefore, while openly idolising them, he secretly despises them, too. His attitude towards women - and towards himself - is deeply ambivalent. It resembles a trap from which there is no escape.

Therefore, if Schulz the narrator, idolatrously worshiping women's figures, vicariously stages the operation of the Law, it has little in common with the Father's Law. Father's law was to be the basis for his confirmation as a subject in the eyes of himself and others. The law of women worshipped in an idolatrous way destroys his self-established male subjectivity. It is a quasi-law that replaces the authoritative obviousness of the father's Law with cruelty that destroys the male subject. Its consequences are tragic for the subject.

The Woman's Law, which appears in place of the Father's Law, is an apparent Law. It is a Law that only pretends to be a Law. But not because this law is made by women, but because it was given to them, or even imposed by force, by a masochistic male subject. Women themselves know nothing about this Law and their own role in it. No wonder their attitude towards this Law is characterised by a haughty, even royal indifference. In fact, they care little about the Law or the male subject itself. They are even irritated and angered by his idolatrous attitude towards them.

Women intuitively sense that they are only objects in this game, which is really only supposed to give satisfaction to the male subject. An eloquent testimony

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<sup>21</sup> This Law is expressed in the unconditional recognition of separation from the mother and the feeling associated with it that there are certain rules within sexual "games" that must not be violated. The subject then finds support for all questions and doubts in its own sense of Law.

to this female irritation is the cruel behaviour of the young seamstresses and Adela towards her father, who preaches his sublime tirades about ideal shapes of the female body.

Ultimately, the tragedy of the masochistic male subject comes from the fact that, by placing women where the father had previously been as the “subject of the Law”, he linked women’s enforcement of this Law with their own humiliation. He is negated in his existence by the women he idolatrously adores, he is reduced to nothingness<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, this annihilation is a necessary condition for him to stimulate his own sexuality. As a result, only by putting his libido at the service of the destructive powers of Thanatos – that is, by being humiliated by a woman – is he able to achieve sexual pleasure and at the same time recognize (her) Law. In the masochistic male subject, both of these moments – sexual ecstasy as a result of humiliation by a woman and submission to the Law – are closely intertwined. And because this whole “game” of idolatrous worship of women and self-humiliation was arranged by the man himself, his recognition of the Law is only apparent and must be repeated again and again. From now on, he can only continue this game of appearances indefinitely, pursuing his own strategy of filling the empty place left by his father (Law) with female characters he admires, without even asking them what their opinion on the matter is. This is how he would like to see them, it is his only chance to save himself and the world without the Father, in which he has not lived up to his role as a subject of the Law assigned to him by tradition.

This is also where Schulz the masochist differs from the medieval troubadour, who, while worshipping his Mistress and following her orders, did not in any way restore the father’s Law in a substitute way. He accepted this Law as the Law of the Sovereign to which he was subject, as something obvious, and was therefore certain of his own subjectivity. Thus, by worshipping a woman, he already dominated her in the symbolic space, thus additionally sealing his own phantasmal power over her. By making her a sublime, unattainable, small object in his own fantasies, he imposed on the woman an image of her created by his own fantasy, to which she had to adjust herself.

In this way, he set a rigid phantasmal framework for the femininity she manifests. At the same time, this elevation of the woman and making her sexually unavailable was only fuel for the fantasies surrounding her. In these fantasies, he engaged in an endless pursuit of a female object inaccessible to him, thus obtaining for himself a kind of infinite phantasmal satisfaction. As a result, he

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**22** Gombrowicz captured this perfectly in his characterization of Schulz’s personality: ‘Bruno was a man who denied himself. I was a man who was looking for himself. He wanted destruction. I wanted realization. He was born a slave. I was born a master’ (*W. Gombrowicz, Dziennik*, t. 3: 1961–1969, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2004, p. 11).



became somehow additionally convinced about his own masculinity. In short, the medieval troubadour had no problem accepting the father's Law and did not have to arrange it vicariously. His submissive knightly attitude towards women was not a substitute for this Law, but only a phantasmal complement.

Schulz, on the other hand, as the author of the drawings from *The Booke of Idolatry* and the narrator-son of his stories, worships women in a completely different way. The masculine attitude of knightly service typical of the tradition of courtly love, in which the woman occupies an exalted place in the marriage of a man, she turns into an attitude of slavish idolatry. Ladies who were objects of male cult in courtly love appeared – such as Oleńka in Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Potop* – as spiritual beings, fervently religious, wearing exquisite clothes. Their bodies seemed to have no meaning to the male subject. The beauty of their faces, breasts, hands, or legs mattered to the man only insofar as they were emanations of the beauty of their souls, though naturally in this way the man only sublimated his own sexual drive, unconsciously desiring them. However, the women who appear in Schulz's drawings flaunt the nakedness of their bodies, sometimes even intrusive sexuality, which shocks the men kneeling before them. But, at the same time, they act like a soulless effigies, tailor's mannequins, devoid of any emotions and feelings. Their faces show nothing more than sublime indifference and contempt. They are like limp golden calves, stretched out lazily on their beds and looking with some curiosity and irony at the men kneeling before them. They are cold goddesses with statuesque faces unimpressed by the men's loyal obedience.

The masochistic subject experiences this situation as a profound existential drama of self-negation, which is very real for him. It is true that he himself arranged this drama, imposing on the woman an attitude of self-humiliation and inflicting pain with a whip, but what is most real in this scene is the very need for this type of arrangement on his part. The real "problem" of the masochistic subject is located somewhere here: of the subject who can come to terms with himself only through brutal negation of himself by a woman, through his own humiliation and experience of pain.

At the same time, the moment of experiencing what is real is also recognizable on the side of the female "tormentor", in whom the masochistic subject tries to arouse fear. This fear is born in the tormentor as a result of her fear of what the masochist wants her to do. This is also the specific "revenge" of the masochistic subject – he feels his peculiar satisfaction and delight, seeing a female tormentor become fearful of what she is doing<sup>23</sup>.

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**23** In the book mentioned above, Bruce Fink writes: "Often a partner must be pushed to the breaking point, to a point of intense anxiety, before he explosively expresses his will in the form of commands ('Stop!' for example). [...] And the Other must often first be made extremely anxious before he agrees to enunciate the law" – Fink, op. cit., p. 187. This description of a masochistic

But Schulz's drawings and short stories can also be looked at from a more extensive perspective, going beyond the individual dimension of the masochistic theatre that takes place there openly and covertly. This is the perspective of the irretrievable past, based on the father's Law of male Western culture, which has so far been supported by the gods of Judaism and Christianity. Male masochism is a convulsive act of this culture, and female law, which emerges at its ruins, is a temporary and apparent solution. A real alternative has not appeared just yet. It lies outside the traditional divisions into what is masculine and what is feminine.



performance clearly suggests that it is not just about pure conventional arrangement in which no one takes their role seriously. This gives us no answer to the question why exactly the masochist wants to make the Other afraid. It seems that, from the perspective of a masochist, it is about a kind of revenge, getting back at the Other – the tormentor.