Jerzy Jarzębski: Schulz the Universal

Bruno Schulz, an inconspicuous son of a mercer from Drohobych, was born to a Polonised Jewish family on July 12, 1892. His hometown was located about a hundred kilometres south of Lviv, which, at the end of the 19th century, served as the capital of the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia. Having never moved permanently from the place of his birth, Schulz was consecutively a citizen of the Austria-Hungary Empire, interwar Poland, Soviet Ukraine, and finally the Nazi Distrikt Galizien, where he was murdered, on the street of his town, by a Gestapo officer during an unplanned pogrom against Jews on November 19, 1942. One can already see that, Schulz's life, thus condensed, becomes a symbolic biography of the 20th-century artist, a story of an individual whose works reflect the incredibly multicoloured diversity of the world at a time of great wars and revolutions, and who is yet a plaything and ultimately a victim of political forces indifferent to his fate.

Schulz did not work in any of the European literary capitals of the time (although he would visit Vienna and even attend lectures at the Academy of Fine Arts there). Drohobych was a rather provincial town, even though Ivan Franko, one of the most prominent Ukrainian writers and political activists, was born in the area, and the town itself was the birthplace of the famous Polish poet Kazimierz Wierzyński and several great Jewish painters (including the Gottlieb family). Its status did not change even with the discovery of a rich oil deposit in nearby Boryslav in the 19th century and the growing affluence of Drohobych's residents. Schulz first dabbled in painting, drawing, and printmaking; then, for many years, until the beginning of the German-Soviet War in 1941, he worked as a teacher of drawing and handicrafts in Drohobych's middle schools. His art brought him little fame, mostly confined to the Jewish artistic circles of Lviv and its environs, where his few exhibitions were noted, one (in Truskavets) even sparking a moral scandal because of the erotic subject matter of his drawings and prints. Only as a writer, author of two collections of short stories, published in the 1930s by the renowned Warsaw-based Rój publishing house, did Schulz gain recognition among Polish critics; for a few years, he participated in the capital's literary life. Although, in addition to favourable reviews, his work was met with negation, these disputes could have won the writer real long-run renown, especially since the most eminent writers and critics of the era talked about him and plans were made to translate his prose into several European languages.

Sadly, Schulz faced a political atmosphere that was exceptionally inauspicious for his work. He experienced the earnest of it in Warsaw, where he was rejected, as a Jew, by reviewers from the nationalist right newspapers, and even such prominent left-oriented critics as Kazimierz Wyka and Stefan Napierski condemned him for the lack of political commitment and alleged destruction of the image of the world. What is more, after the outbreak of the war, in Soviet Lviv, the editor of the Polish magazine *Nowe Widnokręgi* [New Horizons], the poet and critic Adam Ważyk, disqualified Schulz's works from the position of socialist realism as "formalistic". A legend has it, against Ważyk's disclaimer, that this verdict (by an outstanding expert and translator of 20th-century French literature) was encapsulated in the neat slogan "We don't need Prousts!". Schulz's reputation as an ill-fitting "formalist" in the new socialist realist literature was upheld by the political supervisors of culture in Stalinist Poland. Unrecognised even in his home country, he could not count on foreign-language translations for long. His short stories were not reissued until a year after the political changes of October 1956, in the Krakow-based Wydawnictwo Literackie publishing house, preceded by an introduction by Artur Sandauer, an influential critic and Schulz's acquaintance from before the war. The poet Jerzy Ficowski, who held Schulz in almost religious adoration, had begun his years-long efforts to find and reconstruct the canon of the artist's visual and literary works.

The year 1957 is thus the actual starting point in the history of Schulz's international fame. Published in 1961 in Yugoslavia, France, and Germany, in 1963 in England, and in 1964 in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Finland, he did not, however, immediately receive the attention he deserved, for he fell prey to what Gombrowicz warned against in his *Diary*: the audience read him as an "epigone of Kafka", based on the essentially superficial similarity of world images and motifs (such as a man transforming into a cockroach). For a critical approach to these usually exaggerated analogies to be possible, Schulz had to first be thoroughly read and interpreted in Poland, a task that has turned out to span several generations of scholars and certainly remains unfinished today.

In the 1930s and 1940s, when Schulz's short stories were a literary novelty, as I have mentioned, they usually elicited extreme reactions, from delight to fundamental opposition and rejection. Why such polar responses? It can be assumed that Schulz's language played a huge role in the reception of his works: ostentatiously unlike standard literary Polish, full of original metaphors and similes, as well as words of foreign origin or belonging to the local language, characteristic of borderlands inhabited by a diverse population. This language, extremely elaborative for its saturation with poetic tropes, could appeal to the audience because of unexpected, original charms, but it could also stir repulsion and lead to rejection. The prose of the interwar period aimed at liberation from the mannerisms of Young Poland, and thus a "transparent" style was valued, like that of Maria Dąbrowska in *Noce i dnie* [Nights and Days], which Przyboś praised

for its simplicity and crystal purity. Therefore, if even the poetic avantgarde, with its worship of difficult metaphor, bowed to simplicity, Schulz's language could be considered an aberration or anachronism, and in any case, in terms of aesthetics, reading his prose meant walking on the edge.

For Schulz to reach more readers, the language and style of his prose had to travel at least part of the distance to ordinary, standard Polish. But since Schulz's stories could no longer change, the standards of "ordinariness" had to change, which simply means that it was prose style that journeyed to meet Schulz, increasing its capacity to accept linguistic excesses and experiments. It was the war and post-war events that influenced the stylistic standards of prose; the great migration was effectively like shaking a bottle with different, hitherto unmixed, liquids. This resulted in a complex concoction in which different styles, local languages, and poetics interfered and interplayed with each other. This linguistic frenzy, although paradoxically somewhat inhibited by the normative stylistics of socialist realism, was, as a social experience, ready to penetrate literature in the long run. In 1957, Schulz and his stylistics no longer offended; on the contrary, they fascinated the readers as a reach into their whole collective experience of "confused languages".

But Schulz is, on the one hand, a writer whose stories enact what happened to the language of literature after his death, and, on the other, an artist who epitomises everything that evaporated from Polish culture after the war turned the country into a virtually uniform nation state; he symbolises all that disappeared yet simultaneously remained a kind of dream about a rich but receding past. He represents Jewish culture, once inextricably tied to Polish culture, and today, despite efforts to bring it back to life, living only in memories. In addition to Jewishness, Schulz also represents the culture of the Polish Eastern Borderlands, with its diversity and accumulated foreign elements that provide context and boundaries for Polishness. The Borderlands are fascinating both because they reveal what is no longer Polish and because they make us realise that without this foreignness, Polishness cannot be conceived of or defined; for, in a multinational and multicultural state, it simply existed for centuries against the background of and in opposition to Otherness. Schulz is thus oriented as much forward, towards future (linguistic) events, as he is oriented backwards, towards the worlds that have fallen into ruin, yet remained a myth, a fantasy of Polish culture, dreaming of a bygone plurality of its formative contexts.

Having grasped one of Schulz's intriguing ambivalences, let us move on to the next one. Schulz undoubtedly emblazons the world as a meaningful Whole; he fulfils, or rather tries to fulfil, the agelong human dream about the cosmos as a realm of Order anchored in ancient mythical stories. For Schulz, the writer is a kind of steward of this heritage, equipped with a higher awareness of what it means in our lives and how it enters them as a key to understanding current events. Schulz himself utilises it again and again in constructing his stories. This

sounds proud, but does he really resemble monumental figures such as Joyce or Thomas Mann, with their terrific erudition and competence? Schulz's prose combines a holistic design and ambition with a sense of personal inferiority and inadequacy (Sandauer was surely right in extending the meaning of Schulzian masochism beyond erotic aspects). This is why, in Schulz's works, the embrace of the world as a whole is laced with the quizzical poetics of the grotesque, the fragment, the crippled and incomplete form; creation generally appears as unfinished and abortive, with defeat or (self-)compromise becoming an important element of the story: Father witnesses the pogrom of the misbegotten birds he brought into existence, Joseph has to give Bianca to Rudolph, and in "The Sanatorium under the Hourglass", instead of helping Father, he leaves him within the reach of a strange beast, the bookbinder-dog; even the great spectacle of the end of the world due to a comet colliding with Earth, which the writer seemingly sharpens his pen to describe, does not come through, for the bolide, before it hits the planet, "goes out of fashion", surpassed by some other current events.

This second of the many ambivalences is no longer locally Polish, but universal, and perfectly corresponds with the trajectories of human thought in the 20th century. Schulz managed to accurately portray the crisis that the world was going through at the turn of the century: the optimism accompanying the great discoveries of science and socio-economic changes inevitably combined with a great disappointment, a growing sense of defeat and a mortal threat to the very foundations of civilization. The point is that Schulz finds consolation for man firstly through his belief in the universal cyclicality of the world, which makes every human defeat only a stage of existence, and on the other hand, through the conviction that the impairment of "provincials" (who constitute ninety percent of the Earth's population) is relative, for everyone, in a sense, lives "at the centre of the cosmos", communicating with the mythical heritage of humanity in their own way. Therefore, Schulz's characters are provincial in a horizontal sense, that is, when we map the distance between them and the capitals of the world; yet, if looked at vertically, they are as close to the source of the universal meaning as Parisians or Londoners.

Schulz's discovery is very close to the mood of modern-day people, who have come to understand that in the age of global information networks, they are all "close to the centre", but still on the periphery in terms of power to decide their own affairs; that is, they are governed by great, often anonymous forces that cannot be resisted (this is how modern commercialism makes for the decline of traditional trade and, consequently, the bankruptcy of old Jacob's "noble trade"). Therefore, Schulz's characters are ridiculous in their pompous roles, gestures, and intentions, but at the same time remarkably true as reflections of people of the 20th century. Their example may well be used to discuss the problems of modern artists, whose work can no longer be treated fully seriously, for all hierarchies of values enabling evaluation and aspiring to objectivity have fallen into ruin, so

they are left, at best, with something like Father's avian affair, which on the one hand reveals, almost too openly, its unintentional shoddiness, and on the other its pretextuality (for the aim of the artist delivering "A Treatise on Mannequins" is, after all, erotic and seductive). Thus, as in the case of contemporary art, psychoanalysis is necessary as a language to describe Schulz's works, and so is the language of studies on peripherality as an important factor in contemporary culture.

We can now see that the said ambivalence is perhaps the most important for Schulz as an artist and places him at the centre of contemporary literature and art. Although he is a modernist, the crisis of modernism is already clearly visible in his thinking; he (still) believes in the existence of an objective and cognizable world order, but this order falls apart for him every now and then (which comes as no surprise, since Schulz's philosophical teacher was Nietzsche, one of the "masters of suspicion"). What is more, another very important aspect of this disintegration is brought by science, primarily the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, radically remodelling the hitherto prevailing picture of matter and the cosmos, as well as by the discoveries of psychoanalysis and anthropology. Schulz took great interest in these branches of knowledge, and at the same time noticed the curse of modernist science: namely, that its efforts to build rational, experience-based structures of cognition are paid with ever-progressing destruction of the foundations of prior knowledge of the world and man. Paradoxically, then, it was the world that had to, in a way, mature enough to read Schulz, in order to notice the full relevance of the problems he presents and his precursor role.

Finally, the third ambivalence, which decided Schulz's fate and boosted his worldwide career as an artist symbolising his time. Schulz was born a member of the Jewish community and a resident the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands. With this multinational background, he did not necessarily like to be assigned to very definitive identities. This is why he was closely associated with Galicia's Jewish artistic circles as a painter and drafter, but as an author writing in Polish, he sought friends and allies in the literary circles of Warsaw and naturally nurtured close relations with such Polish writers as Zofia Nałkowska, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Tadeusz Breza, and Witold Gombrowicz. His fiancée, Józefina Szelińska, came from a converted Jewish family, and Schulz officially left the Jewish community for her, but chose not to join the Catholic Church, which would have facilitated the wedding. He had Ukrainian friends among the staff in the gymnasium where he taught; incidentally, he met Józefina through one of them.

At the same time, Schulz's writing was greatly impacted by authors from the German language circle, such as Goethe, Nietzsche, Rilke, Thomas Mann, or Kubin. Therefore, Schulz, as a person, thinker, and artist, embodied multiculturalism, yet totalitarian ideologues or even ordinary Polish nationalists forcibly confined him to only one national and social group: the Jews. The fact that it was as a Jew that Schulz was murdered added pathos to these efforts.

At this point, Schulz's work merges with the biographical legend, becoming, quite unexpectedly, the story of an artist who was a Holocaust victim; Schulz-the-universal disappears, leaving us with the image of a tormented Jew waiting for death. Schulz played both roles in his lifetime, but, paradoxically, it was the latter that determined his international fame to a greater extent. As an artist and thinker, he is demanding to his audience, for reading his prose requires not only attention and intellect to recognise and decipher different sign systems, but also erudition to evoke various literary and cultural contexts. Yet as a Jew condemned to death by the Nazis and harnessing his painting talent to postpone his inevitable execution, he requires mainly empathy. The same is true about the legendary novel *Messiah*, which he is said to have written and given to someone outside the ghetto for safekeeping, and which seemed to almost resurface twice (the holder of the manuscript wanted to sell it, but both of his chosen clients died prematurely, leaving no contact to identify him). *Messiah* is paradoxically easier than Schulz's existing stories, because we know almost nothing about it, so it can perform any pathos-filled function in the legend. It can even become the mythical Book of Radiance, but this radiance is unidimensional, as it were; it does not require interpretative effort, because in fact, without knowing the book, we take from this symbol exactly as much as we had put into it.

In 1973, Wojciech Has made a famous film based on Schulz's fiction, *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, which won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and the main prize at the Trieste Science+Fiction Festival. The picture is impressive due to its visual abundance and variety. The set designers even built a whole Jewish "borderland town" near Krakow and tried to recreate the noisy market square (which was most difficult because they lacked a sufficient number of Yiddish speakers). At the beginning of the film, its plot is based on the first scenes of the short story. Joseph, the young protagonist, travels to visit a town in which his father is being treated in a sanatorium. In fact, it is as though the father has already died, and the sanatorium only reverses time to revive its former patient. When it comes to interpretation, it may be assumed that it is actually Joseph who receives treatment, because the father exists only in his memory, as if in a dream. However, the father, summoned back, lives more and more intensely, which allows the director to enrich the plot with many motifs from Schulz's other stories, especially "Spring". This is how the entire film becomes a dream of the Jewish past, strange, fantastic, and beautiful at the same time, and in the end, everything is ushered into a grave in a scene truly daring as a cinematic image, in which the camera, lit by the thousands of sepulchral candles, plunges underground.

Perhaps, Has's film deserved all the rewards, for it is perfectly made, but at the same time it shows how the Holocaust theme restricts the meanings of Schulz's prose. The director makes the images of the Jewish past incredibly beautiful, yet they are also difficult to understand, as he cut the original narrative into individual scenes, which, mixed with each other, ceased to be signs in the message

of Schulz's extremely structurally precise tales, and became just an intriguing and poetic "dream of a dead world", to eventually descend into a great collective grave that the entire Jewish culture found itself in. Such approach to Schulzian writing, on the one hand, aestheticizing, on the other, emotional, and combined with ambitions to depict the Jewish past in a reconstructive manner (although, only the external forms of this world are reconstructed, not the complex and universal message of the original stories) has become a common ploy in most theatrical and cinematic adaptations of Schulz. The directors seem not to notice that all the stories were written b e f o r e the war and the extermination of the Jews, and that their function was rather consolatory, as they portray a world constantly reborn in a circle of eternal return, which meant that no death was ever ultimate in it.

What appears as the best material for writers, filmmakers and theatre directors to base their plots about Schulz is exactly that which, for obvious reasons, did not enter his stories at all, namely the last, war-torn years of his life, the Soviet and Nazi terror, and finally the bizarre relationship between the artist and his "patron" Gestapo officer, Felix Landau. Combined with psychomachy, this drama was perfectly understandable and had only one flaw: all the roles were dealt out and punchlines written by life itself. Therefore, the authors who decided to go with it were condemned to incurable imitativeness and never-ending repetition of the same themes and solutions. The most interesting productions based on Schulz's biography or short stories are those whose authors decided to move away from "genre paintings", staging his fiction or Drohobych or Jewish life itself.

Even these last few sentences show that Schulz plays a special role in today's literary, cinematic, and theatrical world; he provides literary material but above all becomes the protagonist of new works. This is one example of his worldwide fame. The preliminary assumption here is to perceive Schulz's work as unfinished and mutilated, although leaning towards closed form clealy enough to make the idea of filling in the empty spaces and completing this creation immensely attractive for artists around the globe. The unfinished work, abandoned by the author at a time when he was just gaining full creative awareness and "sturdiness of hand" as a painter and writer, is a kind of a symbol of the era of great wars, when higher values had to give way to conflicts of material or ideological interests on a world scale. At the same time, Schulz was particularly well- suited to fulfil such a function because he, as a person, was sympathetic to the world and people (Gombrowicz called him "Bruno the angel"), and all of his work was a great celebration of existence in all its shapes and forms.

Let us note how the accents shift here: Schulz becomes a global symbol not as an artist, but as a human being, a victim of his times. This is what lay at the root of the great scandal around the mural paintings from Felix Landau's Drohobych apartment, a scandal that occupied the world media for some time. The paintings were found by the German filmmaker Benjamin Geissler, who

went to Drohobych with his father to make a film about Schulz. The father was a prominent activist in the German expiatory movement, whose members wanted to at least partially redeem the crime of the Holocaust, so at the beginning of the whole story Schulz was important to the filmmakers mainly as a victim of the Shoah. They searched for the mural paintings that Schulz was known to have drawn up on the walls of the children's room in Landau's apartment, and having set to work quite artfully, they found them. It was early 2001. The paintings had to be uncovered from under the layers of paint that allowed them to survive, removed from the walls of the small pantry, which, as it turned out, had served as the children's room during the war, and then given a place to be exhibited. All these actions required activity on the part of diplomats and agents of the Polish and Ukrainian Ministries of Culture, who acted on the matter at a snail's pace indeed. A few months after the paintings were found, news broke that Yad Vashem's representatives from Jerusalem had come to Drohobych, removed the paintings and transported them to Israel, probably in quiet agreement with the local authorities, who saw no reason to deal with the legacy of a Polish-Jewish artist they did not understand.

Only then did a worldwide quarrel start, with the Polish emphasising Schulz's Polishness as a member of the pantheon of national art and literature and the Israelis highlighting his Jewishness and symbolic role as an artist-victim of the Holocaust. Schulz made his way to the headlines of the world's newspapers in the latter role, as the paintings were certainly not great works of art; not a masterpiece stolen for its outstanding aesthetic qualities, but rather a memento from the times of the great crime, a symbol of the artist's fate in a totalitarian system. Yet the media hype stirred around the author eventually played a positive role and brought the figure of Schulz-the-artist to the attention of critics and readers. The decade following the discovery of the paintings was a period in which Schulz and his artworks triumphantly marched through exhibition halls, and his prose through the university auditoriums of many countries around the globe. Perhaps today it is Schulz, and not Gombrowicz or even Miłosz, who is the most widely known and appreciated Polish writer of the 20th century, and the number of articles written on his work in various parts of the world runs over hundreds. If we add the aforementioned peculiar reception of his works and biography by literature, theatre, and cinema, we see a picture of an artist who, more than seventy years after his death, is still winning over new minds with youthful energy. But those who read him now no longer reach for his books as the works of a Holocaust victim (as was probably the case with the first generation of the reading boom in the early 21st century). As a remarkable artist of word and thought, a first-rate intellectual and an author of deep, multifaceted reflection on the world, Schulz offers his audience a much more extraordinary adventure.

The comparison with Kafka may serve a distinctive function here. While in the 1960s or 70s the world spoke of Schulz as an "epigone of Kafka", at the turn

of 2010–2011 in Stockholm there was already an exhibition juxtaposing the two as equivalent personalities: the darker one (Kafka) and the luminous one, full of hope (Schulz).

Finally, a few words about Ukraine, where for many post-war years Schulz played no role whatsoever, seemingly bizarre and alien to the local literary tradition. But the publicity that he has gained since the discovery of the paintings has led to the initiative of Schulz Festivals in Drohobych, hitherto indifferent to Schulz, which, from year to year, play an increasingly important role in the local cultural movement. Wiera Meniok, who initiated these events (along with her prematurely deceased husband Igor), has done so much for Schulz's cause over the past decade that she may be the best proof of how wrong the Israeli side was when its representatives deported the paintings and explained it with the Ukrainians' negligible interest in Schulz. The situation is now changing – thanks to festivals and new translations (Schulz has been retranslated by the prominent contemporary Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych), and Drohobych's residents, while reading Schulz's descriptions of the town's market square, streets, and urban folklore from years ago, have a chance to see their home anew, from a different perspective, and to identify with it again, even more deeply.

In Poland, Bruno Schulz has been waiting for a critical edition of his works for a really long time, given that proxies of such editions already exist in other languages: German and Japanese. I write "proxies" not to diminish the work of foreign editors, who deserve admiration and gratitude, but to emphasise that in principle, these editions, regardless of the amount of work and effort put into them, will have a *raison d'ètre* only when a reliable critical edition of the writer's works in the original language is created. This is the basis for all foreign equivalents. Yet, to date, there has been no such complete and canonical edition in Poland, as the volume of Schulz's prose I edited, published twice in the "Biblioteka Narodowa" series, intended mainly for students, could not play this role due to being incomplete and lacking a full critical apparatus. It is hard to believe that, since 1989 to the present day, that volume has been the most serious attempt to edit Schulz's prose in Poland.

The fact that słowo/obraz terytoria publishing house has gathered a group of experienced Schulzian scholars, supported by young adepts of editing trained by Professor Stanislaw Rosiek at the University of Gdańsk, to work on a critical edition of Schulz literary and art works is thus a repayment of the tremendous debt that Polish literature and culture have incurred from the humble drawing teacher from the Galician town of Drohobych. Experts in Schulz's work who are collaborating on this critical edition must, above all, take into account all the dramatic aspects of his the extraordinary career of his work, much of it simply uncovered from the ashes. The project requires them to be incredibly responsible and critical. Schulz and his work underwent a trial by fire during the war, which increases the difficulty of establishing the definitive text. There is

also a second dimension to this responsibility. Schulz succeeded in something unusual: while remaining a private man and building the world depicted in his prose from elements of everyday reality in a borderland town, close to ordinary experience, he was at the same time able to construct a cosmogony relating to mankind's universal myths; his characters both reflected his relatives and friends and tried to fulfil their vocation to the roles of mythical heroes. This forces the editors to pay special attention to creating a system of footnotes and references explaining the meanings of the various words used in the texts and the events that constitute each story.

Yet the work of editing Schulz also brings a unique satisfaction – not only was he an outstanding artist, but also a man of great heart, who served the Good in a dimension that is as metaphysical as it is purely practical; it is difficult to imagine Schulz's fan as an aggressive chauvinist or terrorist acting in the name of religious or any other fanaticism. Therefore, his editors may rest assured that their efforts are honourable and that by dedicating their time to the author of *Cinnamon Shops* they certainly serve a good cause[1].

Translated from Polish by Marta Kurek

1 This text heavily relies on my article "Schulzomania?" (*Radar* 2012, no. 6, pp. 3-7).