

Eliza Kącka: Geometry of Imagination. On Shaping Space in Schulz's Works

Jerzy Stempowski wrote to Czesław Miłosz on January 14, 1966: "I once wanted to write down the history of 15–20 literary practices – for instance, how to describe a person, scenery, action and movement. I was thinking about fiction, of course. There were formulas for each of these things, replaced by new ones every now and then. Who invented them and put them into use? This question is the most difficult to answer [...]. Anyone who intends to write something and sits in front of a piece of paper must, first of all, answer the question of how to write such a thing. Hence, formulas and procedures have persisted for centuries. The most fascinating task is to explain why and under what circumstances new formulas replace old ones"¹.

This excellent essayist is right. Creating spatial images and spaces imagined in a literary text is one of the basics of writing and is subject to historical changes. Bruno Schulz turns out to be a great, perhaps one of the greatest, renovators of these "formulas and procedures". The factor triggering his imagination was nothing else than what was then called "the need to create visions". This term, coined by Stefan Themerson², places Schulz within the avant-garde community.

Homogeneous and ambiguous spaces. Elusive and hidden, empty and overflowing, discontinuous and deceptive, transparent and riven, flickering and blinding, lasting and momentary. Shallow and uninvolved. Addictive and repulsive. Visually and internally contradictory. The stock of adjectives available in language can barely cope with the variety of Schulz's spatial evocations. The writer wants to never repeat himself and, instead, to exhaust all possibilities. Such an approach bears all the hallmarks of an experiment. While the outline of a system can be read from Schulz's concepts of time and non-linear deformations to which it is subjected in this prose – the variations of spatial situations

¹ Letter from Jerzy Stempowski to Czesław Miłosz of January 14, 1966, [in:] J. Stempowski, *Listy*, wybór i red. B. Toruńczyk, Warszawa: Zeszyty Literackie 2000, p. 117.

² S. Themerson, *O potrzebie tworzenia widzeń*, Warszawa: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski 2008, passim. Themerson published an early version of the essay under the same title in his magazine "fa" ("film artystyczny") 1937, no. 2.

and events seem spontaneous, subjected to non-discursive logic. They bring to mind “Outline of the General Systematics of the Autumn”, which is impossible to exhaust phenomenologically³.

What do Schulz’s drawings mostly depict? Partially or fully naked women. What is the most common in Schulz’s fictions? Spatial phenomena. This multitude of two non-converging manifestations, constituting the expression of one creative personality, allows us to formulate an unstraightforward hypothesis that a hidden symmetry should be found between one and the other. In the theological vision of the world, femininity is a scandal. In Euclidean geometric space, what is considered a scandal, is a phantasm. These are gaps in reality, perhaps not exactly the “iron capital of the spirit”, but its working capital, which could be called the promise of transcendence. However, not everything that is noticed can be examined – this could be an example of such an issue.

Significantly, the term *przestrzeń* [space] in *Słownik schulzowski* covers only its forms present in Schulz’s artistic *œuvre*⁴. When ten years ago, the scientific fashion for research called by Western practice geocriticism exploded⁵, the reflection on Schulz could already be found in the studies of Jerzy Jarzębski⁶, Władysław Panas⁷, Vera Meniok⁸, and before all of them – Jerzy Ficowski⁹. However, Schulzology perceives the techniques of creating imaginary spaces

3 B. Schulz, “A Second Autumn”, [in:] idem, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, translated by Celina Wieniewska, London: Penguin Books 2008, p. 219.

4 M. Kitowska-Lysiak, *Przestrzeń*, [in:] *Słownik schulzowski*, ed. W. Bolecki, J. Jarzębski, S. Rosiek, Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria 2000, p. 292–295. That is a lot anyway – the word “time” is missing in this lexicon.

5 Geocriticism is a discipline of literary studies popularized in 2007–2008 in France by Bertrand Westphal and in the USA by Robert Tally, who drew on earlier works by Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault. It mainly concerns the relations of specific fiction with real cartographic space. In European science, it has a long tradition of reflection on the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Franz Kafka. See E. Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich*, Kraków: Universitas 2014, p. 69–72.

6 I am thinking especially about the study: “Czasoprzestrzeń mitu i marzenia w prozie Brunona Schulza”, [in:] J. Jarzębski, *Pomieszczenie jak autokreacja*, Kraków 1984, p. 170–226. From Jarzębski’s other texts, see, for example: “Prowincja centrum”, [in:] idem, *Prowincja centrum. Przypisy do Schulza*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2005, p. 109–129; and idem, *Schulzowskie miejsca i znaki*, Gdańsk 2016, p. 95–102.

7 I am thinking especially about the essay: W. Panas, *Willa Bianki. Mały przewodnik drohobycki dla przyjaciół (fragmenty)*, przyg. do druku i nota P. Próchniak, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2006.

8 I am thinking especially about the sketch: W. Meniok, “*Bezimienna i kosmiczna*” *mapa Drohobycza według Brunona Schulza*, Lublin 2009 (Meniok’s text fills almost the entire brochure published by the Hieronim Łopaciński Municipal Public Library in Lublin).

9 I am thinking especially about the chapter: *Fantomy a realność*, [in:] J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny: Fundacja “Pogranicze” 2002, pp. 65–74, and about this entire book, starting from the first edition (1967).

mainly in terms of labyrinths¹⁰. The lone pioneer of these investigations is Krzysztof Stala¹¹.

While mentioning the latter, it is worth reaching for testimony that he has not come across. The testimony was written by a scientist whom physicists considered a psychologist, psychologists considered a philosopher, and philosophers considered a physicist. I am talking about a book that Schulz probably knew because it was required reading in the spheres he aspired to¹².

"I am acquainted with all manner of sight-phantasms from my own experience. The mingling of phantasms with objects indistinctly seen, the latter being partly supplanted, is probably the most common case. [...] During miscellaneous work in physics, I witnessed analogous phenomena of 'sense-memory'. More rarely, images of things which I have never seen before, have appeared before my eyes in the daytime. Thus, years ago, on a number of successive days, a bright red capillary net (similar to a so-called enchanted net) shone out upon the book in which I was reading, or on my writing paper, although I had never been occupied with forms of this sort. The sight of bright-colored changing carpet patterns before falling asleep was very familiar to me in my youth; the phenomenon will still make its appearance if I fix my attention on it. One of my children, likewise, often used to tell me that he 'saw flowers' before falling asleep. Less often, I see in the evening, before falling asleep, various human figures, which alter without the action of my will. On a single occasion I attempted successfully to change a human face into a fleshless skull [...]. It has often happened to me that, on awaking in a dark room, the images of my latest dreams remained present in vivid colors and in abundant light"¹³.

The cases of spontaneous half-wake hallucinations, which Ernst Mach analyses here for the first time as belonging – whatever that may mean – to the "visual substance", in research practice, turn out to be an aporia. How can you see something that is not there? A physicist dealing with optics will refer at this point to physiology, a physiologist – to psychology, a psychologist – to metaphysics, Jungian perhaps. In other words, the only frame of reference for these phenomena is language. Only in speech do these intermediate states of consciousness, or rather their products, become objectified. This allows us to

¹⁰ While talking labyrinths in connection with Schulz's prose, we should also remember the text by Elżbieta Rybicka, "Błądzić w czytaniu: proza Brunona Schulza", [in:] idem, *Formy labiryntu w prozie polskiej XX wieku*, Kraków: Universitas 2000, p. 102–127.

¹¹ Cf. K. Stala, *Na marginesach rzeczywistości. O paradoksach przedstawiania w twórczości Brunona Schulz*, Warszawa: IBL 1995, p. 68 et seq.

¹² Similarly, Witkacy, Leon Chwistek, Karol Irzykowski and Tadeusz Peiper certainly knew Ernst Mach's *Die Analyse der Empfindungen* (1885).

¹³ E. Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychological*, translated from the first German edition by C.M. Williams, Chicago and London: Open Court 1914, p. 203–204.

conclude that this process can be reversed. This is, in brief, the genealogy of Schulz's "creating visions".

This genealogy can be recognized through a discreet stylistic indication. Here, for example, is the first of the spaces created in Schulz's work. The mother and son in the story "August" go for a walk on Saturday afternoon: "Market Square was empty and white hot, swept by hot winds like a biblical desert. The thorny acacias, growing in this emptiness, looked with their bright leaves like the trees on old tapestries. Although there was no breath of wind, they rustled their foliage in a theatrical gesture, as if wanting to display the elegance of the silver lining of their leaves that resembled the fox-fur lining of a nobleman's coat. The old houses, worn smooth by the winds of innumerable days, played tricks with the reflections of the atmosphere, with echoes and memories of colours scattered in the depth of the cloudless sky. It was as if whole generations of summer days, like patient stonemasons cleaning the mildewed plaster from old facades, had removed the deceptive varnish, revealing more and more clearly the true face of the houses, the features that fate had given them and life had shaped for them from the inside"¹⁴.

As the description of the place evolves into a description of a space governed by its own laws, as a single observation slowly turns into a synthesis of many Saturday walks in August, the characteristics of the scenery give way to the exposition of the meanings it conceals, the real expanse of the market square reveals its metaphysical essence. The stages of this metamorphosis of actual space into imaginary space are marked by the double use of the phrase "as if", which serves as a spell here. Here, I bring you, the reader of the story, from the literal to the non-literal, and from the non-literal to the phantasmagoric. It is nearly dreadful to think what would happen to the houses in the market square if the narrator cast the spell for a third time. After all, the place has already faded away, replaced by a mental space, surrounded by half-liberated miasmas of bourgeois vegetation. Who knows what could be hidden under the "deceptive varnish"?

Fortunately, as we read further, at this time of the walk, the houses are sleeping, tired of the heat, and do not impose their authority on passers-by.

This entire process results from the use of the phrase "as if", converting the description into a conditional mood. Namely: if this was not the case, the market would not provide passers-by with any special experiences. And in the conditional mood, lo and behold, everything is possible, and especially spaces in this mood can provide quite a surprise. So how can you see something that is not there? By the means of the conditional.

¹⁴ B. Schulz, "August", [in:] idem, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, translated by Celina Wieniewska, London: Penguin Books 2008, p. 4. Unless noted otherwise, highlights are made by the author of this article.

What unleashes the powers of the spell in “August” is its second, decisive paragraph: the incomparable description of the contents of the food basket scattered onto the kitchen table. The plethora of reality, the “raw material of meals”, disturbing with its accumulated excess, as an overgrown Flemish still life, disturbs the peace of the shady apartment and pushes the mother and son outside, into a world lined with, as we already know, the unreal. Thanks to Adela, an expert in these matters, there was an invasion of the outside into the inside, described almost as if the profane had invaded the sacred. The invasion was so brutal that space seemed better than the place desecrated by the “wildness”. The visit paid to the aunt is an excuse for escape and the reader learns about the purpose of the walk at the end. Unfortunately, the escape is futile – even there lurks the fleshy, autogenous, physiological reality.

However, an opposite process is also possible, when the place appropriates and defiles the space. This is what happens at the beginning of the story “The Gale”:

“During that long and empty winter, darkness in our city reaped an enormous, hundredfold harvest. The attics and storage rooms had been left cluttered up for too long, with old pots and pans stacked one on top of another, and batteries of discarded empty bottles.

There, in those charred, many-raftered forests of attics, darkness began to degenerate and ferment wildly. There began the black parliaments of saucepans, those verbose and inconclusive meetings, those gurglings of bottles, those stammerings of flagons. Until one night the regiments of saucepans and bottles rose under the empty roofs and marched in a great bulging mass against the city.

The attics, now freed from their clutter, opened up their expanses; through their echoing black aisles ran cavalcades of beams, formations of wooden trestles, kneeling on their knees of pine, now at last freed to fill the night with a clatter of rafters and the crash of purlins and crossbeams.

Then the black rivers of tubs and watercans overflowed and swept through the night. Their black, shining, noisy concourse besieged the city. In the darkness that mob of receptacles swarmed and pressed forward like an army of talkative fishes, a boundless invasion of garrulous pails and voluble buckets.

Drumming on their sides, the barrels, buckets, and watercans rose in stacks, the earthenware jars gaddled about, the old bowlers and opera hats climbed one on top of another, growing toward the sky in pillars only to collapse at last.

And all the while their wooden tongues rattled clumsily, while they ground out curses from their wooden mouths, and spread blasphemies of mud over the whole area of the night, until at last these blasphemies achieved their object.

Summoned by the creaking of utensils, by their fulsome chatter, there arrived the powerful caravans of wind and dominated the night. An enormous black moving amphitheater formed high above the city and began to descend in powerful spirals. The darkness exploded in a great stormy gale and raged for three days and three nights...”¹⁵.

There is so much going on in this formidable and grotesque legend that we must begin with a single word. The tone of the conditional mood is introduced in the second sentence of this passage by the word “śnadź” [which has no equivalent in Wieniewska’s translation – translator’s note] oscillating around the modern meaning of “it seems likely” or “apparently”. This word is often used to talk about rumours, and quite aptly so, because the genesis of catastrophic events is not so much the visual manifestation, but the vocalization of dead objects – the visuals and the auditory are mutually amplifying. Therefore, this is the fragment (in Schulz’s entire work) most clearly permeated with syllable instrumentation – all these “gurglings of bottles”, “stammerings of flagons”, “garrulous pails and voluble buckets”, “blasphemies of mud”, and finally the inconceivable “attics, now freed from their clutter” [Polish “strychy wystrychnięte ze strychów”], worthy of Białoszewski’s *Obroty rzeczy*, make the impression of true autogenesis of a vision born in unarticulated, deaf clamour. This is the case of linguistic-based spatial creation. This happens not without certain violations of the logic of everyday life – the place of empty barrels is not in the attic, but in the basement, and the water jars are not made of clay, but they contain it.

“Śnadź” therefore refers to economic carelessness, the result of stagnation of long winter. Tidy attics prevent the anarchy of clutter – a maxim worth remembering. But what actually happened? The legend interweaves two actions with two separate collective protagonists: pots and attics. For the first one, it is clear that as the winter lasted longer and longer, more empty dishes and burnt pots were moved from the pantry to the attic. They all had empty bellies and wide throats – this is what revealed that Schulz’s entire apocalyptic vision stems from the saying: “the pot calling the kettle black”. What did the pot mean? That the kettle was even more sooted. And since it is dark in the attic, this accusation is undecidable. Having filled the attic darkness to the core, quarrelling and rattling, the pots, filled with anger – we read – boiled out of the attics to pour out their rage on the city. But this fuss, this flood of dark emotions is implicit: a shoal of pots swims over the city like “talkative fishes”, and fish are, of course, mute.

¹⁵ Bruno Schulz, “The Gale”, [in:] idem, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, translated by Celina Wieniewska, London: Penguin Books 2008, p. 77.

At this point the partita of wooden instruments begins, so to speak. Empty attics reveal their architecture, filled with echoes of the great dispute, and after the vessels have defected, the attics contain nothing but darkness, the essence of emptiness. Eventually, even this darkness, contaminated by the wickedness of the pots, begins to ferment until it undergoes a howling transition. The wooden structures of the attics distort, turn inside out and, without ruining the building, break free to spread turmoil in the clouds of concentrated darkness, amid the creaks and groans of tired-out wood. And that is the last straw. Like any provoking neighbouring powers, the chaos brings in an army, ready to intervene. One morning, the political and atmospheric situation, under the occupational power of the winds, completely changed. It is bright, a newly introduced, rigour-based order reigns: "The sky was swept lengthwise by the gusts of the wind. Vast and silvery white, it was cut into lines of energy tensed to breaking point, into awesome furrows like strata of tin and lead. Divided into magnetic fields and trembling with discharges, it was full of concealed electricity. The diagrams of the gale were traced on it which, itself unseen and elusive, loaded the landscape with its power"¹⁶. In the evening it turns out that there is a curfew, and you cannot leave your house. This is how the gale fought the garboil.

The spatial structure of the legend is therefore concentric. The attics are in the centre, undercut by the revolt, surrounded by the "sururban" area hanging over the city, soon to be besieged by the externality, formed into a black bank of clouds. These three subsequent spaces therefore are the place, the afterplace and the non-place¹⁷. Accordingly, three states of darkness can be distinguished: the one wired by the riots, yet domesticated, the tame but infected "sururban", and the wild, untamed urban darkness. The spatial movement, which in Schulz's works is always penetrative, leads from one space to another, as in the story "August".

The sceptics shall be reminded of the fate of Pensioner.

Admittedly, still spaces also exist. One of them can be found in the story "Dead Season". It is an impenetrable space, an anti-space: "The night behind the door was leaden—close, without a breeze. After a few steps it became impassable. One walked without moving forward as in a dream, and while one's feet stuck to the ground, one's thoughts continued to run forward endlessly, incessantly questioning, led astray by the dialectical byways of the night. The differential calculus of the night continued. At last, one's feet stopped moving, and one stood riveted to the spot, at the darkest, most intimate corner of the night, as in front of a privy,

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 78.

¹⁷ See M. Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, transl. John Howe, London: Verso 1995. See also D. Czaja, "Nie-miejsca. Przybliżenia i rewizje", [in:] *Inne przestrzenie, inne miejsca. Mapy i terytoria*, wybór i wstęp D. Czaja, Wołowiec: Czarne 2013, p. 7–26.

in dead silence, for long hours, with a feeling of blissful shame. Only thought, left to itself, slowly made an about-turn [...]”¹⁸.

This is one of purely male experiences: the urinal wall is the ultimate *limes*. It is impossible to enter this space – I mean the night of the dead season – not only physically, but even through intuition. Schulz did not care to indicate whether the night of the dead season stretched beyond the threshold of the store or the apartment – because, as we know from the text, to open the store door, one had to leave the house. Both spaces are separated by a threshold as radically liminal as the one between the illuminated vestibule of the cinema and the labyrinth of a night in July in the story of the same title – only much less friendly. Also, in *A Night in July*¹⁹ comes a moment when “night lowers the curtain on what is happening in its depth”²⁰, but beforehand it sets up a stunning performance.

As we know, “no one has ever charted the topography of a July night”²¹. Therefore, Schulz’s bold intention is put through the acid test of four questions: “A night in July! What can be likened to it? How can one describe it?” And further: “Shall I compare it to the core of an enormous black rose, covering us with the dreams of hundreds of velvety petals?”. And further: “Shall I compare it to the black firmament under our half closed eyelids [...]?”. And further: “Or perhaps to a night train, long as the world [...]?”. More questions could be asked because July night is a phenomenon extending far beyond the question mark. Why is that? The introduction to the description explains it precisely: “It remains unrecorded in the geography of one’s inner cosmos”. Therefore, it is a space created by sight, as misled by darkness as the one trapped behind eyelids; a heterotopia, in which the distinction between exterior and interior loses its meaning – a ground prepared for the work of imagination. The narrator falls into its depths directly from the cinema, not at all by accident; everything brought by the audience, the scenarios of romantic dreams of a schoolboy, is thrown on the screen – this time a dark screen of desires. Under the question mark, the space of a July night can suddenly condense into a furtive kiss, into someone’s umbrella strewn with fallen stars and meteors, into a glimpse of an assassin’s hand holding a cane with a hidden skewer. A similar, questioning, triggering secret temptations, space with uncertain identity, is the Street of Crocodiles, resembling film decorations; the forgotten room where the father admires the lush flora straight from Art Nouveau prints, known from the continuation of “Treatise on Tailor’s Dummies”

¹⁸ B. Schulz, “Dead Season”, [in:] idem, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, translated by Celina Wieniewska, London: Penguin Books 2008,

¹⁹ See P. Bursztyka, “Szczeliny w nieskończoność... Brunona Schulza metafizyka śladu”, [in:] Schulz. *Miedzy mitem a filozofia*, pod red. J. Michalik i P. Bursztyki, Gdańsk 2014, p. 143.

²⁰ B. Schulz, “A Night in July”, [in:] idem, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, translated by Celina Wieniewska, London: Penguin Books 2008, p. 210.

²¹ Here and further: *ibid*, p. 208.

is no different. Nevertheless, there is always something in that space, reminding us about reality: passers-by in the dark, the tawdry tinsel of run-down shops, and even a mouldy wall.

However, it would be impossible to ignore the stunning vision of a completely improbable space, the atopy introduced by the famous chapter 17 of "Spring". It is the culmination of Schulz's creationism, the pinnacle of insinuating strategies of which he was capable, and a masterpiece of narrative treachery. The narrator plays the part of both a guide and mystagogue, Virgil and Mephistopheles, and holds the readers' hand and leads them right to the gist. And he monologues as if he is trying to address the fear of those under his care: "Have we now reached the crux of the matter, and is this the end of the road? [...] For it is getting dark, our words lose themselves among unclear associations: Acheron, Orcus, the Underworld... Do you feel darkness seeping out of these words, molehills crumbling, the smell of cellars, of graves slowly opening? [...] You dip your face into that fluffy fur of dusk, and everything becomes impenetrable and airless like under the lid of a coffin. Then you must screw up your eyes and bully them, squeeze your sight through the impenetrable, push across the dull humus—and suddenly you are at your goal, on the other side; you are in the Deep, in the Underworld. [...] But we have not finished yet; we can go deeper. There is nothing to fear. Give me your hand, take another step: we are at the roots now, and at once everything becomes dark, spicy, and tangled like in the depth of a forest. [...] We are on the nether side, at the lining of things, in gloom stitched with phosphorescence. [...] We are here at the very bottom, in the dark foundations, among the Mothers"²².

The guide's persuasions and explanations, which soon turn into a lecture, precisely because they constitute instruction and encouragement, build a narrative situation that develops in the future imperfect. When a mountain guide says: "Oh, you have to grab hold of it here, put your foot here, don't look down" – it does not mean that the tourist has already grabbed the buckle, put his foot on the step, and obediently looked where they told him to. He will, hopefully, do it. Similarly, "we" – conventional people delegated to go deeper into the plot – are guided by the one who knows how to complete the route. But it still is to be completed. Thanks to the trick in question, the internalized reader explores the depths of Schulz's mythology step by step, feeling an appropriate sense of dizziness, an impression that replaces vision. He notices – or thinks he does – what the guide prompts him to notice, and thus the entire expanse of the Underworld takes place in the sphere of suggestion. In this strategy, "our" guide is no different from the sly Edgar, who in the sixth scene of the fourth act of *King Lear*, on a flat

²² B. Schulz, "Spring", [in:] idem, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, translated by Celina Wieniewska, London: Penguin Books 2008, p. 162.

stage, convinces the blind Gloucester, who would like to jump into the abyss, that they are on the edge of the dizzying cliff of Dover. Even if Schulz did not remember Shakespeare, he had to remember Słowacki, like everyone else at that time:

Come! this is the top, stand still... It will make you dizzy,
When you look into the abyss below your feet...
Crows flying in the middle of the abyss
Little bigger than beetles...²³

“It will make you dizzy” – this is the imperfect future tense, or rather the insinuated future tense, capable of creating the deepest abysses, borderless spaces. It is a hallucination made up of suggestion and mystification. Which finally calls for drawing a certain classic thread out of the “misty boughs of stories”. In the XXIII chapter of the second volume of *Don Quixote*, a sad-faced knight, hanging on a rope, penetrates the bottomless cave of Montesinos, and when he returns to the surface, he talks about the wonders he witnessed there. In chapter XLI, Sancho Panza talks about the things that he saw in heaven when he flew there on a wooden horse. When the master and servant are left alone in the evening, Don Quixote whispers in Sancho’s ear: “Sancho, as you would have us believe what you saw in heaven, I require you to believe me as to what I saw in the cave of Montesinos; I say no more.”²⁴.

This rule applies to all imaginary spaces.

Translated from Polish by Language Extreme

²³ J. Słowacki, *Kordian: część pierwsza trylogii. Spisek koronacyjny*, red. M. Inglot, Wrocław: Ossolineum 1986, p. 55.

²⁴ M. de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, chapter XLI.