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Galicia in the Work of Bruno Schulz

During one and a half centuries between the first partition of Poland and the end of the First World War, the artificial creation officially called the “Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria” formed a part of the Habsburg Monarchy. Within the colourful but anachronistic conglomerate of peoples, cultures, and religions known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire—a dynastic, haphazardly formed state, whose very existence on the map of modern Europe seemed to defy logic and common sense—Galicia occupied a lowly position, befitting its status as one of the poorest and most backward provinces of the whole realm.¹ Culturally oriented towards Western Europe while artificially separated from its spiritual roots in the north and in the east, Galicia was a region suffering from an acute identity crisis and divided against itself, in which two Slavic peoples—the Poles and the Ukrainians—lived side by side in a strange and tenuous love-hate relationship, and where the third most numerous community—the Jewish—subsisted in a partly enforced, partly self-imposed isolation, looking with apprehension and foreboding for portents of any adversity that might endanger its precarious existence. And yet, in spite of these strained relationships and presentiments of future misfortunes, civility and common sense seemed to prevail, and even the advent of the industrial revolution, which reached Galicia only belatedly, barely touched the timeless spell of that country that was engrossed in self-contemplation and oblivious of the rest of the world. It was this Galicia at the turn of the century, with its Ruritanian atmosphere—or rather its half-mythical counterpart—that found an unexpected but peerless bard in the person of Bruno Schulz, who, in his moving tribute to his native province, described it as a “backwater place that goes its own private, uncharted way, trying singlehandedly to constitute a world”—as “a self-contained universe, stationed . . . at the brink of eternity.”²

1. For a discussion of various aspects of life in Galicia under the Habsburg rule see Stanisław Grodziski, *W Królestwie Galicji i Lodomerii* (Cracow, 1976).

2. Bruno Schulz, “Republika marzeń,” in his *Proza* (Cracow, 1964), pp. 400-401; the author is grateful to Professor Louis Iribarne for his permission to quote his unpublished English translation. It should be noted in this connection that, although Galicia was treated with condescension by Viennese intellectuals, it

A humble, shy homunculus—a teacher of drawing and handicrafts who thoroughly hated and despised his profession—Schulz hailed from Drohobycz, a quaint town in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, dotted with exotic, pagoda-like wooden churches of an earlier era, oddly picturesque and pervaded with old-fashioned charm. To be sure, after oil had been struck in that area, the somnolent Drohobycz and the surrounding district acquired some garish, even vulgar—in Schulz’s own words, “pseudo-American”—characteristics, which he deplored but went on to depict with obvious relish and an exaggeration carried *ad absurdum* in his famous description of the Street of Crocodiles. But the staid Galician citizenry, with the help of the stringent Austrian regime, succeeded rather soon in curbing this excessive exuberance. It was in this unique city, whose peculiar *genius loci* affected even visitors and casual outsiders, where the traditions of the old Danubian Monarchy continued to coexist side-by-side with the hustle and bustle of the capital of the “Galician California,” that Schulz spent practically his whole life.

From childhood Schulz was in love with Drohobycz—the hub of his universe, the town which never ceased to amaze and fascinate him as a living anachronism—as a wondrous and mysterious “reservation of Time,”³ where “events were not ephemeral but had their roots in the essence of things,” where “things occurred only once and were endowed with finality,” and which, therefore, was pervaded with “an air of gravity, solemnity and melancholy.”⁴ At the same time, this Galician town was also the hinge on which the door to Schulz’s imaginary world turned and swung, enabling him, or rather his phantom-like *Doppelgänger*, to cross the invisible line that separated him from another dimension and to see, on a different plane, another Drohobycz—the city of his dreams, which, for him, was no less authentic than its real counterpart. In this way, Schulz’s native town became a port of embarkation for his frequent journeys into the realm of his imagination: hence his preoccupation with various means of

occupied a prominent place in the annals of Polish and Ukrainian literatures and produced a number of outstanding writers in both languages. However, the distinction of being the first native winner of the Nobel Prize for literature belongs not to a representative of these two mainstream cultures, but to an author writing in Hebrew, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, born in the town of Buczacz, who received the coveted award in 1966.

3. Izabella Czermakowa, “Bruno Schulz,” *Twórczość*, XXI, no. 10 (October 1965), p. 100.

4. Schulz, *Proza*, p. 401 (Iribarne’s translation).

transportation—cabs, streetcars and trains—which seemed to be always available for his uncounted trips leading, along uncharted routes, to unknown destinations.

The dreamlike quality of Schulz's writings makes it difficult, if not impossible, to pin down with any precision the details of his imaginary peregrinations and other quasi-somnambulistic encounters; even so, some topographic features of the real Drohobycz are readily identifiable—for one, the market square, which once adjoined Schulz's house and whose masterful sketch on the very first pages of *Cinnamon Shops*, obviously based on the author's personal experiences in his childhood, manages to evoke successfully the colours, shapes, and images of that focal point of the city.⁵ Other descriptive details are also easily recognizable, including a number of names of streets and squares, the building of the high school which Schulz attended as a boy but which appears to him from a different side, never noticed by him before, and the Holy Trinity Church, with its large baroque façade, which "like an enormous divine shift fallen from heaven, folded itself into pilasters, projections, and embrasures and puffed itself up into the pathos of volutes and archvolute before coming to rest on the ground."⁶ Indeed, the author tells us that his father actually owned an enormous wall map of Drohobycz, giving a bird's eye panorama of the whole city, on which the real Stryjska Street, mentioned on another occasion by its actual name, assumes another identity and another designation—that of the Street of Crocodiles, typical of infinite transformations and mutations through which Schulz's places, objects, and characters alter their forms, qualities, and their very nature. This half-real, half-fantastic thoroughfare, abounding in many grotesque characteristics, whimsically bizarre in its appearance and boasting of such peculiarities as cabs without coachmen, driving along unattended, and streetcars made of papier mâché, symbolizes the ostentation and tawdriness of Drohobycz at the turn of the century—a boom town, with its own "parasitical quarter . . . grafted on the old, crumbling centre of the city."⁷ However, in spite of obvious exaggerations and a series of phantasmagoric scenes, so typical of Schulz's writings, the core of reality can be ascertained, and the Street of Crocodiles,

5. See Schulz, *Sklepy cynamonowe*, in his *Proza*, pp. 48-50; *Cinnamon Shops and Other Stories*, transl. Celina Wieniewska (London, 1963), pp. 12-14.

6. Schulz, *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą*, in his *Proza*, p. 186; *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, transl. Celina Wieniewska (New York, 1978), p. 20.

7. *Proza*, pp. 122-23; *Cinnamon Shops*, p. 94.

which on the map of the city “shone with the empty whiteness that usually marks polar regions or unexplored countries of which almost nothing is known,”⁸ can be localized, at least at the point where “from the higher level one can almost see its whole length down to the distant, as yet unfinished buildings of the railway station.”⁹ Similarly, one can identify without much difficulty various landmarks on the road to the nearby resort town of Truskawiec (Schulz’s favourite place, about which he was planning to write a novel). Here, as in his description of Drohobycz, he combines authentic and fantastic elements into a fascinating collage—a seemingly incongruous assemblage of moods, colours, and images, which, joined together, acquire the attributes of transcendental magic and enchanting beauty.¹⁰ Galician seasons, the charm of the Galician night, Galicia’s rank vegetation and dreamy landscapes are also described with the unsurpassable mastery of an artist, who with equal ease traversed the country of his birth in everyday life and in his flights of fancy, effortlessly changing from one dimension to another and blending the shadowy visions of his imagination and his peculiar perception of reality into one indivisible whole.

This half-real, half-imaginary Drohobycz and the surrounding area, a curious combination of a celestial city and “some wild Klondike,”¹¹ are peopled by the “common crowd, a shapeless mob without face and individuality.”¹² Even the groups whom Schulz must have encountered almost daily throughout his life seem to get surprisingly little attention. Thus, for example, the Jews of the Drohobycz *shtetl*, with whom he must have felt at least some empathy, are mentioned only in passing:

. . . In front of the waterfalls of light fabrics stood groups of Jews in coloured gabardines and tall fur hats. These were the gentlemen of the Great Congregation, distinguished and solemn men, stroking their long well-groomed beards and holding sober and diplomatic discourse.¹³

8. *Proza*, p. 122; *Cinnamon Shops*, p. 94.

9. *Proza*, p. 127; *Cinnamon Shops*, p. 99. See also Jerzy Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji: Szkice o życiu i twórczości Brunona Schulza* (Cracow, 1967), p. 129.

10. See Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji*, pp. 130-31.

11. *Proza*, p. 123; *Cinnamon Shops*, p. 95.

12. *Proza*, p. 155; *Cinnamon Shops*, p. 131.

13. *Proza*, p. 154; *Cinnamon Shops*, p. 130. At the same time, however, Schulz’s drawings show an awareness of his Jewish heritage—see, for example, his

Similarly, the peasants from the villages around Drohobycz, who normally crowded its streets and marketplaces, are referred to only occasionally, as, for example, in the scene where a country bumpkin (“kmiotek”) becomes the butt of jokes and ridicule in the store owned by the narrator’s father.¹⁴ And yet, the behaviour of Schulz’s personages does reflect contemporary Galician mores, manners, and attitudes as well as social customs and conventions, which are usually scrupulously observed at one level of the narrative and almost invariably tampered with and infringed upon on another. Of course, some of the scenes and episodes allegedly taking place in the city—such as, for example, the invasion of Drohobycz by the hordes of Negroes, “running in the streets in a noisy, ragged gang, rushing into grocery shops and stealing food”¹⁵—are obviously fantastic. But even in the entirely surrealist tale like “Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass,” a modernized version of Orpheus’s journey to the underworld, which reminds one so much of Kafka’s novel *The Castle* and which takes place in a realm where the concepts of time and place are no longer operative, there are some perceptible elements of reality, such as the shabby uniform of an Austrian railwayman which the narrator is made to wear.¹⁶

Beyond Drohobycz and its immediate surroundings, there extends the melancholy Galician countryside, “distant, mournful villages under skies white as paper, hardened by the prose of daily drudgery . . . forgotten in the depth of time, peopled by creatures chained forever to their tiny destinies.”¹⁷ The dubious benefits of civilization enjoyed by these downtrodden but loyal citizens are also referred to: “the imperial-and-royal lottery for the people, Egyptian dream books, illustrated calendars, and the imperial-and-royal tobacco shops.”¹⁸ They are duly supervised and kept in line by the imperial-and-royal officialdom, “the servants of heaven, dressed . . . in symbolic blue uniforms . . . divided into ranks and divisions—angelic hordes in the shape of postmen, conductors, and tax collectors.”¹⁹ This

sketch “Żydzi” (Jews) reproduced in Bruno Schulz, *Księga listów*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski (Cracow, 1975), No. 3.

14. *Proza*, pp. 300-301; *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, p. 103.

15. *Proza*, p. 249; *Sanatorium*; pp. 66-67.

16. *Proza*, p. 341; *Sanatorium*; p. 140.

17. *Proza*, p. 167; *Sanatorium*; pp. 5-6.

18. *Proza*, p. 233; *Sanatorium*; p. 55.

19. *Ibid.*

hierarchically structured bureaucracy is presided over by a distant and yet ever-present figure—Emperor Francis Joseph, “a powerful but sad demiurge,” who “squared the world like paper, regulated its course with the help of patents, held it within procedural bounds, and insured it against derailment into things unforeseen, adventurous, or simply unpredictable.”²⁰ Francis Joseph’s oppressive presence dominates the narrator’s childhood: his likeness on each stamp and on every coin seems to confirm the stability and immutability of the world, “a world without illusion and romanticism,” in which “one could do nothing but give up all one’s aspirations and longings.”²¹ Ironically, it is an innocuous stamp album that inspires the author to rebel against the tyranny of the Emperor’s “gospel of prose,” that opens to him the splendour of the world outside Francis Joseph’s domain and, one might add, prompts him to seek in his own creative power an effective antidote against the stagnant and suffocating atmosphere of his native province and to try to construct, with the help of his imagination, an antiworld, where the rules and values of contemporary society need no longer apply.

And yet, in spite of this successful rebellion against the tyranny of dullness and banality, Schulz was undoubtedly a child of his own epoch—a product of the same culture which he, at times, seemed to ridicule and despise. Even his manner of writing—long, elaborate sentences, a sometimes convoluted style, and frequent use of foreign words—is akin to the Austro-Galician officialese, with its obscure, pretentiously wordy phrasing. It is not surprising, therefore, that some editors tried, mostly in vain, to purge Schulz’s prose of Galician provincialisms and other mannerisms, which, in spite of their occasional awkwardness, inject his writings with a unique flavour of their own.²² His letters, only a small fraction of which has survived, are also coloured not only by their author’s personality but by some mannerisms of the Austrian era as well: thus, in spite of their many artistic qualities, some of them reflect a certain conventional tone, ranging from servile flattery to distant condescension, which is somewhat grating to a modern reader’s ears. Generally, however, they firmly establish Schulz’s place as one of the greatest masters of modern Polish epistolography.

20. *Proza*, pp. 232-33; *Sanatorium*, pp. 54-55.

21. *Proza*, p. 202; *Sanatorium*, p. 34.

22. See Schulz, *Księga listów*, pp. 167-68, for a list of examples.

The quaint, old-fashioned world of a bygone era survives also in Schulz's drawings, particularly the illustrations to his books, which provide an interesting pictorial commentary on the social history of Galicia and the moribund Austro-Hungarian Empire on the eve of the First World War. In addition, Schulz's sketches reveal some of their author's personality traits which come through only occasionally and almost furtively in his writings, namely his preoccupation with deviant sexuality. It was Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895), a second-rate Austrian writer, who introduced Galicia to the West European reading public, while Bruno Schulz mythologized and transfigured both Drohobycz and his native province in his own image and made them, through the sheer force and originality of his genius, an inalienable part of world literature. Interestingly enough, both men—born within some fifty miles of each other—shared another peculiar affinity. While Sacher-Masoch was immortalized when a term derived from his name was added to the lexicon of sexual aberrations, Schulz also gained a certain notoriety because of his addiction to masochism. This abnormality is especially conspicuous in his sketches, notably in his *Book of Idolatry*, a small edition of which was distributed to a few connoisseurs.²³ In his writings, it is quite perceptible in his depiction of the housemaid Adela and her admirers as well as in his tongue-in-cheek reference to Magda Wang, a specialist in the "dressage" of men and in breaking their characters.²⁴ Schulz's was a clinically classical type of masochism, connected, as it so often is, with foot fetishism. As Stanisław I. Witkiewicz has put it,

For Schulz, the female instrument of oppression over males is the leg. . . . With their legs Schulz's females stamp on, torture, and drive to desperate, helpless fury his dwarfish, humiliated and sex-tormented male-freaks, who find in their own degradation the highest form of agonized bliss.²⁵

Obviously, this deviation, which caused both Sacher-Masoch and Schulz many problems in their personal lives and doomed their normal

23. Schulz's *Xięga bałwochwalcza* was recently reproduced in *Twórczość*, XLI, No. 7/8 (July-August 1985), 124-52.

24. *Proza*, pp. 170-71; *Sanatorium*, p. 9.

25. Stanisław I. Witkiewicz, "Wywiad z Brunonem Schulzem," in Schulz, *Księga listów*, pp. 163-64; English translation quoted from Stanisław I. Witkiewicz, *Beelzebub Sonata: Plays, Essays and Documents*, ed. and transl. Daniel Gerould and Jadwiga Kosicka (New York, 1980), p. 144.

relationships with women, can hardly be associated exclusively with any particular place or region, yet its Galician genealogy is clearly indisputable. Thus, what is sometimes referred to as *le vice anglais*,²⁶ could be called, with more justification, the Galician vice.

Generally speaking, with Schulz reality is often merely a point of departure for what Jerzy Ficowski, the high priest of his cult in Poland, has called a “truly Columbian” voyage of discovery into the realm of his imagination²⁷—a launching pad for a trip to his own, private universe, of which he alone is the originator and creator, but which can hardly be described as utopian. Indeed, it appears sometimes even more somber, disorganized, and frightening than the real world from which Schulz attempts to escape. In addition, he often consciously tries to demystify and deride the Habsburg myth, to make sport of some of its most cherished shibboleths. As a result, some episodes in his writings dissolve into buffoonery, while the sacred “Book”—the “authentic” object of worship—turns eventually into a spurious document, a meaningless accumulation of old scraps of paper and other kitsch.

It is not accidental that the words “demiurge” and “demiurgic,” which in Platonic philosophy were applied to the artificer of the world, occur so frequently in Schulz’s writings—and yet, paradoxically, even this unique craftsman of the word and of his own microcosm would have been unable to fashion his universe without being firmly rooted in his homeland. Like the mythical Antaeus, whose strength depended upon his continuous contact with his mother Earth, Schulz felt instinctively that his art would become sterile without the invigorating and vitalizing influence of his native soil, to which his whole being was inextricably bound and from which alone his creative juices flowed. In spite of several half-hearted attempts to leave Drohobycz and to settle in Warsaw or some other city where he would be closer to his fiancée and to the fashionable literary circles of the capital, Schulz realized that the infinitely rich world of his imagination would collapse and vanish if he were to deprive it of its Galician foundation. Thus, his brief stay in Warsaw in 1936 succeeded only in producing an overwhelming outburst of nostalgia, reflected so well in his “Republic of Dreams,” while his three-week trip to Paris in 1938, in spite of some stimulating and exhilarating moments, was basically a shocking

26. See Allan Clifford, *A Textbook of Psychosexual Disorders*, 2d ed. (London, 1969), p. 163.

27. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji*, p. 55.

and disappointing experience, from which he returned to Drohobycz to nurse his wounds.²⁸

And yet the real world, which Schulz tried to escape, was eventually to catch up with him, and his Galician Arcadia was to be transformed into an apocalyptic nightmare.²⁹ Early in 1938, after the Austrian *Anschluss*, he mentioned in a letter “depressing historical events,” which he found particularly disheartening—indeed, he confessed to being at times almost desperate, as if in the face of an imminent disaster.³⁰ The situation inside Poland, with militant anti-Semitism on a rampage, was also hardly encouraging.³¹ Ironically, at that time he was apparently working on his *magnum opus*, the novel *Messiah*, which was to culminate in the appearance of the saviour in Eastern Galicia, just a few miles from Drohobycz.³²

The historical cataclysm, whose coming Schulz anticipated and dreaded, did arrive, and its waves engulfed and submerged his beloved Drohobycz, under whose “protective” skies he always sought refuge from the dangers and uncertainties of the outside world.³³ Paradoxically, however, while the old Galicia with its distinctive lifestyle has disappeared from view, its counterpart in Schulz’s works, transformed by his imagination and impressed with the indelible stamp of his personality, remains robustly and remarkably alive, and his strong influence is perceptible in the works of the “Galician school” of postwar Polish writers.³⁴ Moreover, Schulz’s dream to reach the reading public in other languages has

28. Bruno Schulz to Romana Halpern, 29 August 1938, *Księga listów*, pp. 111-12.

29. The phrases “Galicia jako Arkadia” and “Galicia jako apokalipsa” have been used by Ewa Wiegandt in her excellent article “Mit Galicji w polskiej prozie współczesnej (rekonesans tematologiczny),” *Teksty*, 1979, No. 5(47), pp. 52-62.

30. Bruno Schulz to Romana Halpern, 20 March 1938, *Księga listów*, p. 105.

31. Bruno Schulz to Romana Halpern, 31 March 1938, *ibid.*, p. 106.

32. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji*, p. 240.

33. Czermakowa, “Bruno Schulz,” p. 101; see also Bruno Schulz to Ludwik Lille, 2 September 1938, in Bruno Schulz, *Listy, fragmenty. Wspomnienia o pisarzu*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski (Cracow-Wrocław, 1984), p. 22.

34. In this connection one should mention such names as Leopold Buczkowski, Andrzej Kuśniewicz, Andrzej Stojowski, and Julian Strykowski. For a discussion of Galician motifs in Polish literature see Włodzimierz Paźniewski, “Literacka kariera Galicji,” *Polityka*, 11 March 1978, p. 9; Anna Tatarkiewicz, “Dwuznaczny urok Galicji,” *ibid.*, 29 April 1978, pp. 8-9; and Wiegandt, “Mit Galicji w polskiej prozie współczesnej.”

been posthumously fulfilled even though he himself became one of the uncounted victims of the Holocaust, buried in an unmarked grave somewhere within his native city. The “enormous, magnificent, colourful blasphemy”³⁵ of his works lives on, the pages of his writings continue to “shed their treasures, one after another, ever more glaring and more frightening,” and, as a result of his truly “Copernican deed,” we can see in the image of his Galicia the whole world that is indeed “vast, infinite and immeasurable in its variety.”³⁶

35. *Proza*, p. 202; *Sanatorium*, p. 34.

36. *Proza*, p. 201; *Sanatorium*, p. 33.