

Bruno Schulz, His Myths and Mythemes

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At present, myth may be understood as a narrative involving gods, demi-gods, or extraordinary heroes belonging to the past of a cultural community. As a narrative coming from gods, myth aspires to a truth superior to human experience here on earth. In this sense, we could almost talk about two levels of myth: on the one hand, a narrative which cannot be taken literally, and on the other, an idea behind a story (e.g. Plato's cave). Contemporary literary criticism has coined the term "mytheme" to refer to an element or an aspect of a myth, for instance genius and rebellion in the myth of Prometheus. Certain mythemes can be found in some texts relating to antiquity in a form of rewriting. Prometheian mythemes return in Marie Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and mythemes concerning Aristotelian wisdom are found in *Monachomachia* (1778) by the Polish author, Ignacy Krasicki.

Bruno Schulz's peculiar fascination with myth is striking. Applying the principle of "the mythification of reality", he develops a theory which focuses on the whole meaning of the word. Certain essays published in the same collection, for instance "The Mythification of Reality", do not refer to a particular text, but constitute a synthesis, a sort of artistic credo. In the center of these preoccupations we can find the role of the myth creator in literature, which is the dominant theme in Schulz's oeuvre. According to him, every poet is a creator of mythology. His main task consists in recreating and reinterpreting the myths of the world, linking them in a broad sense, blurring fixed connotations (or stereotypes) with exceptional talent, and reestablishing original links between words, which have become mere derivatives. How to attain an originary language which endows things with truth? "By regression", the writer makes words meet like electric charges, which allows him better to investigate the obscure past. I believe that Schulz's artistic concept, sketched in his theoretical texts and applied in his narratives, is interesting for us, as the mythification of reality is the key to poetic creation. Because of the singular idea of myth, which underpins Schulz's work, these writings are endowed with a particular dynamic.

Before proceeding, I would like to make a few general preliminary remarks. The most important part of Schulz's prose constitutes a form of fantastic autobiography composed

around 1930 by this modest art teacher from Drohobycz, a small village in Eastern Galicia, which at that time was part of the Second Polish Republic. Only two collections of stories remain: *Cinnamon Shops* (1934) and *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hour Glass* (1937). Because of lack of critical interest, the manuscript remained unpublished for several years. The novelist Zofia Natkowska, who played a significant role in literary life in Warsaw in the inter-war period, discovered Schulz for Polish readers. He did not become widely popular, but he managed quickly to seduce the literary elite. There are two categories of writers: those whose fame fades as years go by, and those whose fame increases with time. Schulz belongs to the second category: he is the source of ever increasing fascination demonstrated by his exegetes. He is generally considered one of the greatest innovators of contemporary prose. The French press Denoël began to publish his oeuvre in France in 1974. It was prefaced enthusiastically by Maurice Nadeau who made a clear distinction between Schulz and Kafka, in order to avoid confusion. In 1991 Denoël had published all Schulz's correspondence and critical essays.

What is the place that Schulz attributes to myth and exactly which myth does he favour? In his essay for Witkiewicz, Schulz defines his work as a sort of "a spiritual genealogy, a genealogy par excellence in that it follows the spiritual family tree down to those depths where it merges into mythology, to be lost in the mutterings of mythological delirium"¹. He reveals his close affinity with Thomas Mann's biblical system.

"I have always felt that the roots of the individual spirit, traced far enough down, would be lost in some matrix of myth. This is the ultimate depth; it is impossible to reach further down. I later found an imposing artistic realization of this idea in Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, where it is carried out on a monumental scale. Mann shows that beneath all human events, even when the chaff of time and individual variation is blown away, certain primeval patterns, "stories", are found, by which these events form and re-form in great repeating pulses. For Mann, these are the biblical tales, the timeless myths of Babylon and Egypt. On my more modest scale I have attempted to uncover my own private mythology, my own "stories", my own mythic unions with gods, so I undertook to establish for myself some mythical generation of forebears, a fictitious family from which I trace my true descent"².

Certainly, an examination of the convergence of themes used by the two writers could lead to some interesting developments, but that is not the purpose of this analysis. It has been the object of several analyses (cf. Goślicki-Baur, Odachowska-Zielińska).

It can be stated that Schulz's prose integrates various myths, especially Hellenic and Biblical ones, attaching particular isolated and seemingly disjointed "stories"

¹ B.Schulz, *The Collected Work of Bruno Schulz*, ed. Jerzy Ficowski, trans. Celina Wieniewska, London 1998, p. 370.

² *Ibidem*, p. 317.

to the narrator's main story, transforming the myths into poetic figures. Calling up ancient myths, however, is not a sheer exercise of imagination inasmuch as their roots reach an archaic core of humanity showing "collective unconscious", to use Jung's concept. Out of snippets and shattered pieces of universal stories, the author constructs his own mythology which is situated at the crossroads of various legends in disguise. If we believe the narrator, like barbarians we are condemned to be "building our houses with broken pieces of sculptures and ruined statues of gods", as Schulz writes in "The Mythologizing of Reality"³. Thus several motifs, inspired by a large mythological context, are interwoven into the composition: the labyrinth, descent into Hell, the metaphor of the enigmatic book. We should add the explicit or implicit references to mythological characters such as Pomona and Pan, as well as references to numerous metamorphoses. Such narratives are found in the ancient Indian myths of India and in Latin texts (e.g. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). It is not a matter of a simple reference to an old tale but an iconoclastic version of its inspirational value. The type of writing which proceeds from detachment does not offer any resemblance, but on the contrary, offers the reader an unreal or fantastic perspective. For example, the mythological god Pan is embodied in Schulz's narrative in the form of a mysterious vagabond who celebrates his unusual practices in a garden invaded by wild grass. This grimacing and raggedy man who assumes the name "Pan without a pipe"⁴, does not exhibit any traits of vitality or voluptuousness that we could ascribe to a character from Dionysus's cortège. Deprived of traditional attributes (flute, horns, goat's hooves), in a mystifying trance, he multiplies gestures of madness and despair. His presence appeals to the reader who has the impression of meeting Hermes's illegitimate son who has nothing in common with the famous shepherd from Arcadia overseeing the dance of nymphs and representing the order of all nature. We can suppose that through the character who deflates mythological stereotype the author is replacing a comforting myth of joyous nature for his own disillusioned view of the world where a feeling of anxiety occupies an essential place.

Other allusions to mythological models have been carefully listed by specialists of Schulz's work. For instance, Jerzy Ficowski and later Bogusław Gryszkiewicz, placed the journey to the Sanatorium (made by the young Joseph), in a hellenistic context which involves the story of Hermes, Orpheus, Hades, and Minos, judge in Hell. Ficowski evokes the idea of a new Hades which symbolises a modern version of the nether world⁵.

³ Ibidem, p. 373.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 44.

⁵ B. Gryszkiewicz, *Ironia i mistycyzm*, *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1980, no. 3, pp. 84–92.

Dr Gotard, owner of the mysterious establishment, judge of the sick and the dead, an ingenious incarnation of Minos, presides over the dislocation of time and abolishes the human calendar. He has the power to rewind the lived moment in a pause that is impossible to determine. The Sanatorium is immersed in a crepuscular silence. It is a place of penitence where the patients are condemned to a relative life, limited by absurd restrictions. The doors and the windows of the establishment are shut. The reference to the mythological story is significant: in the course of his night odyssey on a phantom train, Joseph encounters a man in a torn uniform. This man, like Hermes, god of travel, represents a transitional place: a transition between the earthly world and that of Hell, between the conscious and the subconscious, the real and fantastic. He assumes the role of a messenger: "Later even he disappeared, having slipped out unobserved at some stop. He left behind him the mark of his body in the straw that lay on the floor, and a shabby black suitcase he had forgotten"⁶.

Another character encountered on the train also appeals to his distant prototype, Charon, the ferryman of Hades, who transports souls of the dead across the river Styx in his barge. The train journey resembles a crossing to the other side: "At last, I met a conductor, in the black uniform of that line. He was wrapping a thick scarf around his neck and collecting his things – a lantern, an official longbook. 'We are nearly there, sir, he said, looking at me with washed-out eyes'" (*The Collected Works* 205). For Bogusław Gryszkiewicz the expression "washed-out eyes" ("białymi oczyma") contains a prophetic element. The blind eyes of the guide bring to mind the wisdom of an illuminated man, which allows the protagonist to access a place of ultimate trial.

What is most striking, however, is the intervention of a huge god-wolf, which looks both like an animal and a human being. A real monster of savagery, this modern equivalent of a mythical Cerberus, functions as the guardian of the Sanatorium, awakes the biggest fears in Joseph. This episode with a ferocious beast occupies an important place in the economy of the narrative and suggest a grim and tragic part of human existence. Additionally, the spatial metaphor of the night, ambient obscurity is threaded into the text with the help of a plethora of synonyms such as "blackness"⁷, "semi-darkness"⁸, "half-lit"⁹, "the dark passage"¹⁰, "almost complete darkness"¹¹, "misted over by dusk"¹²,

⁶ B. Schulz, op.cit., p. 205.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 206.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 210.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 207.

¹² Ibidem, p. 213.

“the chronic darkness”¹³ etc. The following passage, coming from the story titled “Spring”, is an example of a premeditated authorial intention:

“The miracle of dusk! Again, the power of our magic has failed and the dark element that cannot be embraced is roaring somewhere beyond it. Words are split into the components and dissolved, they return to their etymology, re-enter their depths and distant obscure roots. The process is to be taken literally. For it is getting dark, our words lose themselves among unclear associations: Archeron, Orcus, the Underworld [...] Do you feel darkness seeping out of these words, molehills crumbling, the smell of cellars, graves slowly opening?”¹⁴

Under the cover of night, Schulz’s hero loses his way in the proliferating places, multiplying in the hyperbolic number of streets, rooms, hidden lanes, as in an insoluble mystery which has to be urgently solved. It is clear that the universe thus created is close to a labyrinth, another mythological element. The image of labyrinth that Schulz employs appears to reinforce in the consciousness of his hero the idea of passing onto another level. It is related to an initiatory process accomplished in darkness and constitutes one of the most frequent aspects of a type of anxiety dream called “*pérégrination empêchée*” (“prevented peregrination”), to use Paolo Santarcangeli’s terminology¹⁵. If we believe the Italian scholar, this myth has a generating power as “he accomplishes his charismatic mission of releasing himself from darkness”¹⁶. The city described by the narrator seems to be an internal city, like a spiritual place of an itinerary. A labyrinth is a defense against the centre, against meaning. Entering a labyrinth means situating oneself in a voluntary solitude, accepting detours and the ignored rigours of fate. The theme of the labyrinth is not reserved to Schulz’s world. It appears in the prose of Borges, Cortázar, and in the French New Novel, particularly in Michel Butor’s *Second Thoughts (La modification)* where it also reinforces the motif of the *mise-en-abîme*. Other examples abound: Joyce, Kafka, Young Poland (*Młoda Polska*) writers, etc. Literature does not cease to construct its own labyrinths, which allude to the one on Crete in an indirect manner. I do not want to demonstrate that the landscape of Schulz’s narratives is of a labyrinthine type as this issue has already been thoroughly studied by Jerzy Jarzębski¹⁷. The hypothesis of the correspondence between Schulz’s texts and a labyrinthine pattern has also been emphasized by numerous quotations which reveal a real obsession of language, creating a grand metaphor of the novel. For instance, a passage in *Cinnamon Shops* we read: “the city reached out deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of winter

¹³ Ibidem, p. 219.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 139.

¹⁵ P. Santarcangeli, *Le livre des labyrinthes. Histoire d’un mythe et d’un symbole*, Paris 1974, p. 195.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ J. Jarzębski, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Opowiadania, wybór esejów i listów Brunona Schulza*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 53–57.

nights"¹⁸; in "A Night in July": "From the labyrinth of night two wanderers emerge"¹⁹; and finally, in "The Night of the Great Season": "the hangings of the enormous, labyrinthine, wind-shaken night"²⁰. As Jarzębski states, "The space of labyrinth does not respect any natural or ontological boundary its corridors extend just as easily in the real world as in dreams"²¹. It is unknown if Ariadne will compensate the efforts of Joseph-Theseus. Having undergone a profound change, he attempts to intensify the mystery of the pre-existing order, which has always constituted the unity of the world and the spirit. Joseph's great task is essentially his quest of the lost Book, the authentic Book which goes back to the beginning of time. The Book permits one to bring together a certain number of themes which are related to art, creation, and the philosophy of being. It is the source of the first conflict between father and son. For Jacob (father) books are the whole world. The Book (the only one) is a myth, which cannot be taken seriously by an adult. Joseph is of a different opinion: for him the books are an imperative, a duty. What is this myth? A long history of the metaphor of the Book, from Plato to Mallarmé, reveals an old metaphysical preoccupation. The Book to which Joseph aspires is not an object-fetish, nor is it the Book of Saints from Christianity and Judaism of the Orient and Egypt, as Schulz is not a believer (even if he remains immersed in the Jewish cabalistic tradition). The premodel, which Joseph seeks, is a way of seeing the world, of devising reality on the horizon of writing and reading. Schulz's book bears some affinity with Mallarmé's absolute Book, as it attempts to explain the universe by means of poetic language. In the modernist optics of the poet from Drohobycz, the world was initially "written" by the hand of the Demiurge, only to be abandoned, devoid of sense, deprived of the key. It is, thus, a question of accessing logos, "imitatio dei", the absolute truth, which opens on transcendence: "The exegetes of The Book maintain that all books aim at being Authentic. That they live only a borrowed life, which at the moment of inspiration returns to its ancient source. This means that as the number of books decreases, the Authentic must increase"²².

The idea of the Great Book comes to the father, Jacob. However, Joseph rejects the Bible given to him by his father, "that fake copy, that reproduction, a clumsy falsification"²³, and sets out on a quest to find the so-called sacred original, which he finally identifies in the form of the advertising leaflet, a book which is the result of extreme

¹⁸ B. Schulz, op.cit., p. 47.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 179.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 76.

²¹ J. Jarzębski, op.cit., p. 54.

²² B. Schulz, op.cit., p. 109.

²³ Ibidem, p. 101.

debasement and degradation. From the story titled "The Book" we learn that in the eyes of the artist, Joseph's true genius lies essentially "in its crippled and fragmentary incarnations"²⁴. It is an insignificant event that can open an inner perspective that is endless and flamboyant. The Authentic Book belongs to the past. The reverence associated with a sacred text, provoking thousands of commentaries, may sanctify any text. The odyssey of the bearded errants with their barrel organs, Anna Csillag's story about finding an ideal formula for the fertility of her hairy skin, or that of Magda Wang who succeeds in training and subjugating men – all these recent stories aspire to a mythical dimension. In a way Schulz preceded Lévi-Strauss, who associated all narration with potential myth. In his case, it is not a matter of ancient myth, but one that is formed in front of our eyes, leaving a taste of strange exhilaration, a blend of hunger and excitement of the soul. Joseph experiences the same type of extasis when he roams the streets of Crocodiles, which represents in the town of Drohobycz the ambivalent reign of junk and modern commerce. Jacob refuses to accept this parasitic district as a legitimate part of the city, and he simply suppresses it from the town plan. It is exactly by means of this disagreement that his father opposes, turned to the nineteenth century, and the son, seduced by the desirable Evil of corrupted progress, that we approach again the myth of Jacob-the prophet. The relation between Jacob and Joseph uncovers the spirit-matter duality. The world appears in the quasi-scientific discourse of Jacob ("Treatise on Tailors' Dummies, or The Second Book of Genesis", "Treatise on Tailors' Dummies, Continuation", "Treatise on Tailors' Dummies, Conclusion") as a heretical travesty of the Book, that of Holy Scripture (the second heterodox creation which would be opposed to the order of existing things). However, all the great theories that he reveals as a poet of science are cancelled before the finger of Adele, who personifies eroticism and femininity. This contradiction is at the source of Schulz's irony. The narrator's attitude at the same time manifests a refusal to renounce a discourse, stretching towards telos, and the impossibility of assuming it entirely. Here we can see to what extent the universe of Schulz is marked by gnosis: the notion of an ineffable god (Demiurge) who came into being by the emanation of the world; pure spirit mixed with matter, the body, the principle of evil. Undoubtedly, the father's failure in the war that he wages against the body serves as a lesson to Joseph. As for Jacob, he insists, despite everything, on embodying the message of the Old Testament. At the same time, he is the owner of a cloth shop; he represents a Hebrew patriarch, a creator of the Israeli tribes. In Schulz's text, biblical myth abolishes spatial and temporal constraints. Jacob assumes the habit of talking to God. In the chapter titled "Visitation", he appears as the Titan who won the battle against an unknown angel²⁵.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 111.

²⁵ See : Genesis 32, 25.

In "The Night of the Great Season", the Drohobycz merchant becomes agitated, filled by rage, while the walls of the shop suddenly transform into a landscape of the Promised Land, full of lakes and misty landscapes: "Against that backdrop my father wandered among the folds and valleys of a fantastic Canaan. He strode about, his hands spread out prophetically to touch the clouds, and shaped the land with strokes of inspiration. And down below, at the bottom of that Sinai which rose from my father's anger, stood the gesticulating crowd, cursing, worshipping Baal, and bargaining"²⁶.

This passage is followed by a scene of debauchery, which unfolds behind the father-prophet's back. Shop assistants lead Adela to a small balcony, engaging in an unrestrained joyfulness. Is this an allusion to the rape on Jacob's daughter, Dina?²⁷ Whatever it is, the body-matter opposition, typical for Judaism, is invariably at the centre. Beyond the Old Testament story, Jacob embodies certain existential situations. This transposition of the Bible, according to Ewa Odachowska-Zielinska, consists of "transparent times". "When Jacob reprimands his assistants, he continues to remain himself, simultaneously assuming the role of Jacob, Noah, or Abraham"²⁸. Yet Jacob's discourse appears at the same time *sub specie ironiae* to the extent that it provokes an ambiguous attitude in Schulz, an attitude of respect and mockery, admiration and suspicion.

However, this prose contains an even more disturbing characteristic, which reveals a profound link with the mythical universe, namely, the metamorphosis, or rather the successive metamorphoses of Jacob: fox, father-condor, and, finally, father-cockroach. Illustrating the idea of fading away, the metaphor yields to the metamorphosis (from "Cockroaches"): "His resemblance to a cockroach became daily more pronounced – he was being transformed into one [...] We ceased to recognize him; he merged completely with that black, uncanny tribe"²⁹.

It is through the metamorphosis that Jacob gradually detaches himself from his relatives until the bonds, which linked him to human community, disappear. We may also notice a tendency to an odd split, which causes loss of contact with reality and a withdrawal to an inner world. We may also imagine that following the example of mythological gods, Jacob decides to change into another being in order better to avert the laws of fortune and stay in control of his own fate.

²⁶ B. Schulz, op.cit., p. 78.

²⁷ See : Genesis, 34, 5.

²⁸ E. Odachowska-Zielińska, "Biblijny mit Jakubowy w ujęciu Tomasza Manna i Brunona Schulza", *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 7–8 (1982): 73–81, p. 81.

²⁹ B. Schulz, op.cit., p. 67.

Conclusion

In his letter to Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Schulz tries to justify his main esthetic choices. He states that the reality of *Cinnamon Shops* highlights a principle of a “universal masquerade”³⁰: “Reality takes on certain shapes merely for the sake of appearance, as a joke or form of play. One person is a human, another is a cockroach, but shape does not penetrate essence, is only a role adopted for the moment, an outer skin soon to be shed”³¹. According to him, matter emits an “all-pervading aura of irony”³². Employing a demythifying technique, Schulz constructs his own mythological system, which consists of re-investing in the reality of sense of which it was deprived. According to the author, man disposes of mythology which is “transformed, mutilated, denatured”³³. It is evident that the most primitive function of spirit is the creation of narratives, of “stories”. On the other hand, however, science has always tried to find the meaning of the world at the top of its conceptual scaffolding. It has not been complete success as, according to Schulz, the elements that it uses were already used for: “forgotten, fragmented tales or ‘histories’”³⁴. It is only poetry that is able to reestablish the lost sense, to return words to their place, to recuperate the true source of their meanings, and to reestablish their wholeness. Thus Schulz’s irony appears as a “metatropological consciousness”, to use Fernand Hallyn’s term, inasmuch as it requires a critical attitude towards discourse and its relation to reality and it introduces a potential between words and things”³⁵. Having said that, it is necessary to state that Schulz – at least in his theoretical writings – yields to an anagogical temptation, given that his project finally leads him towards an idea of a preexisting order, towards the Superior Principle understood as the ultimate mode of being, even if the hylozoistic perspective prevails over belief in Demiurge (matter presents everywhere a necessary existence, blessed with life). In his prose, these two projects thus do not seem to be completely antithetical. Poetic activity is assimilated in the creation of mythology inasmuch as it reworks ancient myths, contributing at any moment to the creation of new myths. The subversive diversion of the meaning of words and, by extension, the meaning of narratives, has the sole objective to assemble the pieces of the original puzzle, because language is perceived *omni modo* as the depositary of the first authentic meaning, condensed in latent mythology. Additionally, all the activities of the spirit, including science, are born, in Schulz’s eyes

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 369.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 372.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ F. Hallyn, *La structure poétique du monde*, Paris 1987, p. 22.

out of the same desire of totalisation, out of the same will to reconstitute the primordial myths, as he writes in "The Mythologizing of Reality": "Poetry reaches the meaning of the world intuitively, deductively, with large, daring short cuts and approximations. Knowledge seeks the same meaning inductively, methodically, taking into account all the materials of experience. Fundamentally, one and the other are bound for the same goal"³⁶.

In Schulz's optics, the myths generate the true sens of reality. As for the word, it is only a rudiment of the whole mythology. His role is to connect through writing to an ancient but an entirely new story. It is open onto thousands of combinations, "like the cut-up snake in the legend whose pieces search for each other in the dark"³⁷.

If we put irony and masquerade aside, we may ask what is the main message that Schulz communicates through his prose. For Jarzębski, it is a tendency to global, or even holistic, cohesion, which is affirmed in the face of the threat of a disintegrating world³⁸. It does not mean that the disciple of the new gnosis shows fanaticism with regard to theory. Henri Lewi struggles to associate Schulz's texts with Judaistic and Christian mythology where he sees particularly "concern with its own perpetuation"³⁹. Yet we cannot forget that a taste for parody and mockery prevents Schulz from constructing his system of thought modelled on an absolute certainty. His reference to myth allows him to preserve the most essential element of his aspirations without falling into a trap of religious orthodoxy. Maurice Blanchot once highlighted the unifying role of myth. Much as symbol is the expression of the shattering of the world (surpassing all truth and all meaning), myth calls back its cohesion and unity.

"Myth behind the meaning it makes appear, endlessly reconstitutes itself. It is like the manifestation of a primitive state in which man would not know of the ability to think apart from things, would reflect only by incarnating as objects the very movement of his thoughts and thus, far from impoverishing what he thinks would penetrate into the richest, most important thought, the one most worthy of being thought"⁴⁰.

This is why literature, through myth, can constitute an experience that is a means of discovery and an effort not to express what we know, but rather experience what we do not know. I think that the cited words by Blanchot define perfectly the basis of Bruno Schulz's poetic activity, an author who, in his task of a creator of reality, confers to a freed myth the sense of approaching the truth.

³⁶ B. Schulz, op.cit., p. 372.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ J. Jarzębski, "Schulz: spojrzenie w przyszłość". *Czytanie Schulza*, Kraków 1994, p. 319.

³⁹ H. Lewi, *Bruno Schulz ou les stratégies messianiques*, Paris 1989, p. 172.

⁴⁰ M. Blanchot, "The Language of Fiction" [in:] *The Work of Fire*, trans. Ch. Mandell, Stanford 1995, pp. 78-9.