

Romantic Dialectics: Schulz, Gombrowicz, Witkacy

Translated by Justyna Burzyńska

1. The trio

Schulz, Gombrowicz, and Witkacy are often mentioned in one breath as the greatest representatives of the avant-garde of the interwar period – the three innovators who revolutionized Polish literature. However, the deeper we examine their works, the more differences appear, thus making it impossible to talk about them in terms of one literary school and revealing how superficial these apparent similarities really are. Naturally, this does not mean that comparative studies are ruled out. Yet, they would require much more than the narrow horizon of their personal relations and a much wider context of literary affiliations. According to Włodzimierz Bolecki, they can be studied in the natural context of European modernism¹. However, should we adopt this approach, we would also struggle to find sources of inspiration common to all of them. Schulz's works are often analysed in reference to Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, or Rainer Maria Rilke, and, notably, to a Jewish heritage², even though it has no links to even the most comprehensive description of modernism. The context for Witkacy's writing is to be found yet elsewhere, as his closest literary relatives are Miciński, Rzykowski, or Berent. Obviously, Witkacy not so much maintained, but rather parodied the interwar tradition, yet always remained in its orbit. Gombrowicz, in turn, made references to various literary forms, such as the nobility tale, the philosophical tale, the crime story, or operetta, but also to Shakespeare.

Are there any other frameworks we could use to juxtapose Gombrowicz, Schulz, and Witkacy? Jerzy Jarzębski has an interesting proposition:

"Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz – unlike their many colleagues from the avant-garde convinced audiences that their works mark a new beginning – were still directly dependent on the catastrophic ideologies of a romantic provenience"³. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

Nevertheless, Jarzębski focuses on just one aspect of their writing. Is it possible to expand the range of analysis? It would appear so, because the romantic tradition

¹ W. Bolecki, "Witkacy, Schulz, Gombrowicz", *Dialog* 1995 no. 10, p. 99.

² See: W. Panas, *Księga blasku. Traktat o kabale w prozie Brunona Schulza*, Lublin 1997; and J. Błoński, *Świat jako księga i komentarz*, [in:] *Czytanie Schulza*, Ed. J. Jarzębski, Kraków 1994.

³ J. Jarzębski, *W Polsce czyli wszędzie. Szkice o polskiej prozie współczesnej*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 10–11.

remained very much alive to all of them; it was a force to struggle with and reach for at the same time. I believe it is worth looking at their works not only from the modernist, post-modernist, or even *mythological* perspectives, but also from the romantic angle. Each of those *comparative frameworks* resembles a two-dimensional plan of a three-dimensional object. Each gives an insight into certain elements of their writing and cannot be treated as a universal key to interpretation. Yet each reveals different affinities, which often inspire further research.

2. Gombrowicz: ode to youth

The reading of Gombrowicz's *Diary* reveals that his rough treatment of Polish culture did not focus on one specific aspect. It encompasses both the romantic and the modernist tradition, as well as then current literary trends; Polish literature and criticism; the legacy of Mickiewicz and Słowacki, as much as that of Żeromski and Sienkiewicz. Actually, Gombrowicz dedicated a separate entry to Sienkiewicz, and yet at some point the analysis takes a turn in the direction of Mickiewicz. It is as if the origins of the literary and cultural phenomenon of *The Trilogy* should be traced in the romantic period. Although it is no news that the Sienkiewicz we know would not exist without the romantic tradition, what is important is that Gombrowicz's critique of Poland and Polish values scattered through the *Diary* is invariably centred around romanticism. Whenever he mentions the national flaws, the Polish temperament, our weaknesses and community life, there is usually a reference to this specific period (especially to Mickiewicz), be it in the background, in a straightforward statement, or just an allusion. We might even go so far as to conclude that Gombrowicz's reflections on Polish culture are actually just variations of one theme: "romanticism and the Polish question". Also in *Ferdydurke*, romanticism (in a more *schoolish* and clichéd version) becomes a tool that Professor Bladaczka uses to "crumple" and "harp upon" his students.

Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* is not often mentioned in the context of his critical attitude towards romanticism. However, the novel could be read as another, after *Ferdydurke*, literary battle with the romantic model of Polish nationalism. The two protagonists, Witold and Fryderyk, seek refuge from the German occupation in the countryside and find themselves tangled up in the twists and turns of the landowners' life, marked by various rituals, both agricultural and religious. The only diversion in domestic monotony is watching (and orchestrating) the trysts of a young couple, Karol and Hania. *Pornografia* does not offer many direct references to either Mickiewicz or Słowacki, yet Gombrowicz clearly parodies a cultural framework shaped and determined by romantic principles. The framework includes: living close to nature; sacrifices for the homeland; the ethos

of fighting for independence; a belief in a bond between people and the transcendent; as well as the cult of perfect love and youth. However, Gombrowicz distorts all those ideals and presents them as empty forms that people impose on each other.

The ideal of the patriotic soldier is discredited when Siemian, initially described as “a big shot in the underground movement”⁴, suddenly refuses to fight and is sentenced to death for treason. Religion in turn becomes an empty ritual, with people treating it as an interpersonal game. The romantic love in *Pornografia* is also shown as a meaningless form, since the young lovers do not really fancy one other. Their love, though forbidden in accordance with the romantic tradition and impeded by the engagement of Henia and Vaclav, has to be stage-managed by the two elderly men. Henia is actually pleased with the prospect of marriage, as she hopes it could help her stop “screwing around”, or so she tells Witold⁵. As for youth, which in romanticism should *reach beyond limits*, in the novel it becomes a spiritless crime tool (Karol murders Vaclav in the aftermath of Fryderyk’s scheme).

However, there is one scene in the novel which indicates more directly that romanticism is the basis for an interpersonal game. When Siemian arrives and the whole company gathers at the table, Witold is thinking:

“This man, then, so close to us and yet so dangerously a stranger, passed before me like a looming threat, and from now on everything bristled and became suppressed. [...] and I truly would have preferred to have anything but this as a *spoke in our wheel, at this moment our nation and all the romanticism connected with it were for me an unbearable concoction* [...]. I met ‘the leader’ when he came down to supper”⁶. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

“But at the end of the table strange things were happening, namely with Karol, yes, with our (young) Karol, who had been thrown into an intense, willing obedience and eager readiness by the newcomer’s presence – and, consumed with loyalty, his wits sharpened, suddenly he found himself close to death, a guerrilla, a soldier, a conspirator [...] He wasn’t the only one, however. I don’t know whether it was his doing, but *all the paltriness, so irritating and dreamy-eyed a moment earlier, was suddenly restored to health*, in our banding together we arrived at reality and power, and at this table we were like a squad awaiting orders, always thrown into the possibility of action and battle. Conspiracy, action, enemy... [...] Henia’s and Karol’s irksome otherness disappeared, and all began to feel like comrades”⁷. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

⁴ W. Gombrowicz, *Pornografia: A Novel*, trans. Danuta Borhardt, Grove Press, New York 2009, p. 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129–130.

Witold hints at the romantic origins of the myth of the patriotic soldier. He also stresses that the presence of Siemian creates a new form among the characters – the “comradeship” of the national community. Yet, he adds that it became “a spoke in their wheel”. What he means is that it interferes with Fryderyk’s love scheme to bring Henia and Karol together. For Siemian fascinates Karol, and Witold realizes that the young boy no longer sees himself as a lover, but as a guerrilla fighter, a soldier, and an underground activist. Karol’s zeal is picked up by the others and unites them while Fryderyk’s intricate scheme is in danger (he would have to revise his plan and use crime to bring the young people together). Therefore, we are dealing here with a peculiar variation of a romantic plot formula, where the protagonist undergoes a transformation from troubled lover to freedom fighter. We can see that the formula also constitutes the central narrative of *Pornografia*, especially if we bear in mind that everything Witold and Fryderyk do is supposed to fuel the love affair and the novel ends with Karol’s killing Vaclav. Parody is first used to ridicule romantic love and then the romantic deed.

If we consider *Ferdynand*, *Pornografia*, as well as *Trans-Atlantyk* (which I will discuss in details later) and some entries from the *Diary*, it will become clear that Gombrowicz regarded romanticism (in literary, conventional, social, and national terms) as a form of culture which should be overcome once and for all. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, it is symbolised by the Order of the Chevaliers of the Spur, which, according to Stefan Chwin, embodies not only the tradition of the Polish lancers and the legions fighting for Polish independence, but also the tradition of messianic martyrdom. Here, the “spur” is “an equivalent of the obligatory alliance with the community”⁸. Let us take a look at a characteristic quotation from *A Kind of Testament*.

“For a hundred and fifty years, literature has been clogged with the drama of losing independence and limited to local misfortunes. The greatest representative of this literature is Mickiewicz. How could I rely on Mickiewicz, a great poet indeed, but with the ideas and horizons of a child lost in mediocre mysticisms?”⁹

Gombrowicz is strikingly biased against Mickiewicz’s writing. Ryszard Przybylski once stated that the author of *Ferdynand* knew only as much about romanticism as Professor Pimko taught him. I believe this to be a witty, yet faulty remark. The biased attitude towards romanticism might stem not so much from ignorance, but rather a well-thought-out strategy of highlighting those elements of the adversary’s argument which are easy to criticise and disregarding everything else. Gombrowicz must have known (and I will come back to this subject later on) that both romanticism and Mickiewicz’s

⁸ S. Chwin, „*Trans-Atlantyk*” wobec „*Pana Tadeusza*”, „*Pamiętnik Literacki*” 1975, vol. 4, p. 119.

⁹ W. Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, transl. Alastair Hamilton, Ed. Dominique De Roux, Dalkley Archive Press 2007.

works are complex phenomena comprising many paradoxes and, as such, they cannot be treated simplistically. Yet, the Mickiewicz whom he writes about is one-dimensional:

"The greatest weakness of Mickiewicz is that he was a national poet, i.e. he was identified with the nation and spoke for the nation, and therefore he was unable to see that nation from the distance of other nations. Without a foundation in the outside world and in his own self, he could not move the nation from its grounds, and so he did what he could, given the circumstances"¹⁰. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

We could accept this description of Mickiewicz as accurate on condition that it applies only to his late period: the third part of *Dziady*, *Pan Tadeusz*, activism in the Towiański sect, and lecturing at the Collège de France. And Gombrowicz is particularly consistent in referring only to the late, already acclaimed, Mickiewicz. Indeed, it was *Pan Tadeusz* that Gombrowicz parodied in *Trans-Atlantyk*, and let us notice that in one of the previous quotations from his *Diary*, he spoke of "mediocre mysticism", pointing directly to Towiański's Circle of God's Cause. Apart from scarce mentions, Gombrowicz hardly ever refers to Mickiewicz as the author of *Oda do młodości* (Ode to Youth), *Ballady i romanse* (Ballads and Romances), or *Dziady* parts II and IV.

The above quotation is curious in one more respect. How should we understand the statement that "The greatest weakness of Mickiewicz is that he was a national poet, i.e. he was identified with the nation and spoke for the nation"? Again, it must be stressed, that it is the late period we are talking about, as Mickiewicz's writing was somewhat recognised early on, yet he became a national heritage only after his death. (Let us also not forget that the Polish intellectual elite of that time, which could name him a national poet, was rather small.) Therefore, Gombrowicz is accurate not so much about the late Mickiewicz, but actually the dead one, i.e. after 1855. Moreover, when Gombrowicz writes about the "weakness" of being "identified" with the nation, this is not something we can blame Mickiewicz for. It is true that he was hailed a national poet by his enthusiasts and had to live in the spotlight, which must have considerably constrained his artistic and intellectual freedom. However, the judgement seems to apply more to all those involved in creating his public image: emigrés, idolizers, apologists, epigones, and other Pimko-like figures. Therefore, Gombrowicz is not against Mickiewicz but rather against the legend he later became and its impact on Polish literary and intellectual activity. He repeatedly wrote in the *Diary* that his attitude towards Poland and romanticism was not as clear-cut as it might seem:

"I am terribly Polish and terribly rebellious against Poland"¹¹.

¹⁰ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, trans. Lillian Vallee, Yale University Press 2012.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

“At the same time, as it turns out, I am very anti-Polish and pro-Polish, maybe my pro-Polishness grows because of the anti-Polishness, for my Polishness manifests itself freely, without forethought and only to the extent that is necessary”¹².

According to Janion, the young Gombrowicz made himself a subject of a failed experiment in rejecting Polish identity and concentrating solely on his own best interest. She quotes the following passage from the *Diary*: “For what was this *self* I wanted to rely on? Was it not shaped by the past and the present – was I not the way I was as a consequence of the Polish progress?”¹³

As a result of this experiment, Janion states, Gombrowicz did not discredit his Polish identity, but rather incorporated it by denial¹⁴.

However, it seems that his attitude towards romanticism should be analysed not in terms of “denial” (criticism, rejection, rebellion), but a game including both irony and esteem, itself a part of the great play with form (described thoroughly by Jerzy Jarzębski in his work *Gra Gombrowicza* [Gombrowicz’s Game]). The writer sometimes impersonated a romantic prophet and at other times a virulent critic of romanticism. This dichotomy is the most conspicuous in *Trans-Atlantyck*, which was written as an expression of Gombrowicz’s personal dilemma. At the outbreak of World War II, Gombrowicz was on a journey to Argentina and suddenly had to define himself both as a Pole and as a Polish writer. These circumstances immediately put him under the influence of Mickiewicz’s form, forcing writers to identify with the misery of the nation and fight – if not as a soldier, then at least as a supporter of the “national cause” by his writing:

“I could talk about my first and hardest years in Argentina using Mickiewicz’s words:

I, in slavery born, and then swaddled with chain,

Only one such spring knew, and will not know again.

Only that he said these words in 1812, when Napoleon freed Poland, for a moment, on his way to conquer Russia. And I think of the time, when the World War broke and Poland fell, and my whole life collapsed, the whole order I lived by.

The Form relaxed.

What an opportunity! A Holy chance, one and only!”¹⁵.

The author of *Cosmos* knew that “there is no escape from the mug”, especially the romantic “mug”, which has had an enormous impact on Polish culture, and to him, it was probably the most *uncomfortable* mug of all. Therefore, he decided to “carry out both collective and individual values. To be a prophet and not to be one at the same

¹² Quoted after: M. Janion, *Forma gatyczna Gombrowicza*, [in:] op. cit., p. 483.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 483.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 484.

¹⁵ W. Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, op. cit.

time. For it is both impressive and humiliating!”¹⁶ This game of affirmation/humiliation of tradition can be clearly observed in *Trans-Atlantyk*. The scene when the Polish emigrants set Witold against an Argentinian writer is not so much a parody of Mickiewicz, but rather of an instrumental attitude towards the Prophet, i.e. the role imposed on him by his contemporaries. It is also, in a broader sense, a mockery of writers in general, also of Witold – Gombrowicz’s fictional *alter ego*. A humorous identification with the figure of Mickiewicz the Prophet is also present in Gombrowicz’s letters.

“This painful piece about a skinny horse caused general uproar and I keep receiving letters with complaints even from such distant corners of the world as Madagascar and Australia. *It has boosted my popularity within the Nation and today, I am almost an official prophet, although rather à rebours*”¹⁷. [Emphasis T.M.]

Treating these words as simple bragging would prove a lack of understanding. Gombrowicz was fully aware of the similarity between his emigrant situation and the circumstances surrounding the origins of *Pan Tadeusz*. Moreover, the analogy was supposed to refer not only to history (the November Uprising and World War II) but also to psychology, as all Polish writers after Mickiewicz had to struggle with their public role. This applied to many other figures in the Polish cultural and political scene:

“A Pole is impressed by himself in a historical dimension and nothing intimidates him more than his own greatness. Piłsudski was shy or even terrified of Piłsudski, Wyspiański could not move under the weight of Wyspiański, Norwid whined carrying the burden of Norwid, and Przybyszewski watched Przybyszewski with dread and distress”¹⁸.

Gombrowicz included himself among them:

“Today, I, my private and alive self, am a slave to the official Gombrowicz I created [...] I am a slave. Whose? Gombrowicz’s”¹⁹. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

On the one hand, Gombrowicz criticized the intellectual and psychological patterns left behind by the romanticism, and on the other he also felt under pressure and did not exclude himself from those *infected* by the romantic way of thinking. Thus, it would be only partly true that he rejected the romantic tradition and that he wrote against Mickiewicz. The opposite would also be only partly true: that he thought of himself as somebody’s heir or continuator. It is true however, that in *A Kind of Testament* he implied that his writing stands in opposition to Mickiewicz (“*Trans-Atlantyk* was somewhat born

¹⁶ S. Chwin, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁷ W. Gombrowicz, *Listy do rodziny*, collected by J. Margański, Kraków 2004, p. 38.

¹⁸ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, op. cit.

¹⁹ W. Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, op. cit.

as *Pan Tadeusz* à rebours [...] I wanted to defy Mickiewicz²⁰). Yet, we must remember that the word “defy” is ambiguous, and a person defying somebody might do so for many different reasons.

Then, in what sense does Gombrowicz “defy” Mickiewicz? It is commonly believed that *Trans-Atlantyk* is a parody of *Pan Tadeusz*. Indeed, it includes numerous more or less direct references to Mickiewicz’s work. There is a duel, a hunt, a Polonaise dance, as if the characters are mimicking behavior described in the national epic, almost turning it into rituals. But these are empty rituals, as was observed by Artur Sandauer, for there is “a duel without bullets, a hunt without a hare, and a Polonaise without Poland”²¹. However, it must be stressed that all similarities between the two works are only present on the level of the plot, as when it comes to style, *Trans-Atlantyk* (unlike *Pan Tadeusz*) draws from the tradition of a tale of nobility. Therefore, it should be analysed in terms of two kinds of contexts: of *Pan Tadeusz* and the Polish Baroque, especially the *Memoirs* of Jan Chryzostom Pasek. While the elements of parody are clearly visible in the setting of the novel, this makes it the more difficult to determine why it was written using this specific non-Mickiewiczian style? Why does Gombrowicz, willing to parody *Pan Tadeusz* and write *against* Mickiewicz, use an even more outdated language and refer to an even older literary tradition? According to Jerzy Jarzębski, Gombrowicz

“embarks on a grotesque crusade against the image of the Poles and Polish identity created by Mickiewicz for our, and European, use. The author of *Trans-Atlantyk* juxtaposes it with a seventeenth-century noble nonchalance [...] towards the European culture”²².

If Jarzębski is right, then the reason for Gombrowicz’s “defiance” of Mickiewicz manifests itself in a surprising way. Gombrowicz writes *against Pan Tadeusz* not in order to replace Polishness with a different set of values or attitudes that could compete with the Polish ethos. On the contrary, he competes with Mickiewicz over Polish identity. What he really wants is to be more Polish than Mickiewicz, rather than more Mickiewiczian than Mickiewicz, and this might actually be the key to understanding *Trans-Atlantyk*. Gombrowicz is simply looking for a different formula for Polish identity, one that is more familiar to him and that could be an alternative to the already fossilised model of the Prophet. Therefore, we are dealing with a renewal rather than a destruction of tradition, with reinterpreting and reaching for hidden meanings. Indeed, this resembles the way Słowacki (in the *Beniowski* period) defied Mickiewicz. Słowacki, who polemicized and competed with Mickiewicz by means of irony, demonstrated an author’s attitude,

²⁰ Ibid, p. 68.

²¹ A. Sandauer, *Zbrane pisma krytyczne*, Warszawa 1981, vol. 1, p. 593.

²² J. Jarzębski, *Gra w Gombrowicza*, op. cit., p. 401.

while the Warsaw Positivists unequivocally rejected the ideals of romanticism altogether. In this context, Gombrowicz is not playing the role of a learned intellectual coldly reviewing the past epoch and offering a scathing critique. He is more like a younger romantic taking an individual stand towards his predecessor and trying to strengthen his position by confronting him.

In this context, it becomes clear why Gombrowicz argues only with the late Mickiewicz and why he presents the Prophet only as the author of *Pan Tadeusz*, a member of the Towiański sect of a lecturer at the Collège de France. This way he can be the only eternally young and rebellious romantic:

"Mickiewicz, a prophet both merciful and bashful, both devout and timid, preferred not to strip things. In his infinite benevolence, he was afraid of looking the truth in the eye. He was the greatest revelation of this Polish aesthetic which is reluctant to 'get dirty' or hurt somebody's feelings. [...] Without support from the outside world or from his individual self, *he could not shake the nation to its foundation* but did his best, given the circumstances"²⁵. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

The highlighted passage is a paraphrase of the *Ode to Youth*. Gombrowicz uses the quotation against Mickiewicz, here depicted as somebody who has failed to fulfil his youthful promise.

Gombrowicz's crusade against Polish identity fossilized in a romantic form could be analysed on two levels, resembling two sides of one coin. On the one hand, it could be treated as an opposite attitude to Mickiewicz's, because, according to Gombrowicz, there can be no lenience towards one's own nation, not to mention adorning it with a "romantic headdress". All his writings proved his aim was exactly the opposite. On the other hand, this crusade recalls an attempt to *shake the nation to its foundation* and consistently to continue the very same agenda Mickiewicz defined in his youth! Therefore, at the same time Gombrowicz advocates revisiting rebellious romanticism: the youthful, revolutionary, shaking the foundation of the world, and "rising above the horizon".

What is important is that the above quotation is not an isolated example. Similar imagery with references to *Ode to Youth* can be found in several other texts, for example at the end of *Operetta* with an obvious allusion to the verse "Hail! Dawn of Liberty! Long live Thou! / Thou carriest the Redeeming Sun so bright!"

"O salvation!

O hail, nudity, eternally youthful!

[...]

O nudity eternally youthful, hail!

O youth eternally nude, hail!

²⁵ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, op. cit.

- nudity youthfully nakedly youthful
- youth nakedly youthfully nude!²⁴.

To sum up Gombrowicz's *game* with romanticism, his tirades against Mickiewicz or Słowacki could be analysed in two ways. On the one hand, they were a part of his struggle with an outdated model of the Polish identity, present in all his works, making Gombrowicz an anti-romantic writer. On the other, they were an attempt to reclaim the principles of the early revolutionary and rebellious romanticism. Naturally, not by referring to its poetics or, metaphorically speaking, to its *letters*, but rather by reviving its *spirit*.

3. Schulz: romantic subconscious

"For his works were born out of solitary experiences and reflections"²⁵ – is how Schulz is described by Jerzy Ficowski. Although Schulz is sometimes compared to Kafka, Ficowski concentrates on highlighting the unique qualities of his writing, as if it were free from literary borrowings. Naturally, this is not the case and Schulz himself confessed to many sources of inspiration. Moreover, he stressed the importance of having a confidant and stated that his works are a result of intellectual exchanges with other like-minded people. At first, such was the role of Władysław Riff²⁶, and later Debora Vogel.

The subject of different contexts has been examined thoroughly by Jerzy Speina. In *Bankructwo realności* [The Bankruptcy of Reality], he mentions expressionism, surrealism, "Proustism", and modernism²⁷. However, Schulz's works have been mostly analysed in terms of a Jewish tradition (Artur Sandauer, Władysław Panas, Robert Kaśków, and Jan Błoński).

Sandauer looks for hints of biblical myths, especially the story of Abraham and Isaac²⁸, but also admits that the evidence for biblical references in the short story "August" is not conclusive. In the passage cited by Sandauer, Adela is depicted as Pomona, thus alluding to Greek and Roman mythology. This suggests that Schulz was not a writer with an "Old Testament subconscious", as is suggested by Sandauer, but rather an author moving freely between different myths.

In his work *Polska literatura nowoczesna* [Modern Polish Literature], Michał Paweł Markowski argues that what constitutes the origins of Schulz's writings is a Jewish

²⁴ W. Gombrowicz, *Operetta*, trans. Louis Iribarne, Calder and Boyard, London 1971.

²⁵ J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, translated and edited by Theodosia Robertson, W. W. Norton & Company, 2003, p. 111.

²⁶ See: J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, op. cit., pp. 76–78.

²⁷ J. Speina, *Bankructwo realności*, Warszawa 1974.

²⁸ A. Sandauer, *Interpretacja Schulza*, [w:] idem, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 70.

heritage²⁹. Włodzimierz Bolecki is even more explicit, stating that “Schulz was undoubtedly a religious writer. For all his works are centered around the mystery of genesis, the myth and symbolisms of the return of the Messiah”³⁰.

Indeed, the biblical tradition is an important context for Schulz’s works, yet we can hardly agree that all of them “center around” the motifs listed by Bolecki. For the author of *The Street of Crocodiles* was exceptionally aware of his style and well acquainted with literary tradition, including romanticism, which (judging from his letter to Witkacy) had an immense impact on his work. For instance, he confessed to being inspired, even as a child, by the archetypal imagery of the “Erlkönig”. The echoes of Goethe’s work can be found in Schulz’s *Spring*:

“During every spring night, whatever might happen in it, that story unfolds itself above the croaking of frogs and the endless working of mills. A man walks under the milky stars strewn by the handmills of night; he walks hugging a child in the folds of his cloak; he walks across the sky, constantly on his way, a perpetual wanderer through the endless spaces”³¹.

Schulz believed this to be an image of “critical importance”, one of those visions which “are like a thread in a chemical solution, with all other meanings of the world crystalizing around it”³². Again, Schulz combines both religious and literary tradition, as well as both a Jewish and a romantic tradition. He writes about an “exegesis of one verse”, thus comparing artistic creation to efforts made by an interpreter of the Torah. However, in his case, the word that needs interpretation is not the word of God, but rather the image expressed in romantic lyrics. Similar references to literary tradition and romantic ideals can be also found in many of his other works.

“The Age of Genius”: The Golden Age

One of them can be traced in the short story “The Age of Genius”, and it requires a longer quotation:

“And I sat among the piles of paper, blinded by the glare, my eyes full of explosions, rockets, and colors, and I drew wildly, feverishly, across the paper, over the printed or figure-covered pages. My colored pencils rushed [...] in masterly squiggles, in breakneck zigzags that knotted themselves suddenly into anagrams of vision, into enigmas of bright revelation, and then dissolved into empty, shiny flashes of lighting, following imaginary tracks”³³.

²⁹ M.P. Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna. Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy*, Kraków 2007.

³⁰ W. Bolecki, *Witkacy, Schulz, Gombrowicz*, op. cit., p. 96.

³¹ B. Schulz, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. Celina Wieniewska, Houghton Mifflin, New York 1997, p. 55.

³² B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, Gdańsk 2008, p. 100.

³³ B. Schulz, *Sanatorium...*, op. cit., p. 26.

We find here “bright revelation”, “dazzling questions” asked by God in a “column of fire”, which suggests a vision similar to Old Testament prophecies. Yet, on the other hand we are witnessing an eruption of creative inspiration. The act of creation is depicted as spontaneous and independent of reason. We can also see that the above passage combines two contexts: Joseph listening to the voice of God and covering paper with his “masterly squiggles” is both a prophet and an artist; he is a medium speaking for an alternate reality, just like Orcio in *The Undivine Comedy* by Zygmunt Krasiński. Indeed, an explicit religious stimulus does not give rise to prophecy or a harbinger of an alliance, but to an explosion of imagination. This recalls a passage from *Pollen* by Novalis, who believed that once there was unity of poetry and priesthood:

“In the beginning poets and priests were one, and only later times have separated them. A genuine poet, however, is always a priest, just as a genuine priest has always been a poet. And should not the future again re-establish the old state of things?”³⁴.

It seems that there is a clear analogy between Novalis’s “Golden Age”, i.e. the mythical origins of poetry or the harmony of man and nature, and Schulz’s “Age of Genius”. However, the narrator of the latter, as is pointed out by Mieczysław Dąbrowski, is not a typical romantic: an oversensitive child. He is both a child and an adult, a “child-like character with mature consciousness”³⁵. Actually, his style is almost grotesquely formal: “Several times during our account we have given warning signals, we have intimated delicately our reservations”³⁶. He also uses an impressive range of professional jargon borrowed from a number of fields: mythology, economics, esotericism, medicine, etc. He is, thus, not only an expert rhetorician but also a scholar. This complex narrative construct stems from Schulz’s personal philosophy of the creative process, advocating that childhood was not only a memory, but also his goal in writing. In a letter to Andrzej Plesiewicz, dated 1936, he wrote:

“I believe the kind of art I have in mind is actually a regression, a childhood revisited [...] My prerogative is to become *mature enough* to be a child. This would indeed be a true maturity”³⁷.

Markowski justly points out that Schulz does not want to return to childhood but rather to be adult enough to revisit it. Therefore, he is “neither nostalgic, nor prophetic”, “does not recollect past greatness but rather projects it into the future”, Markowski adds: “What is the reason for Schulz’s prophetic understanding of childhood? It seems that

³⁴ Novalis ((Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Pollen*, (in): *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, translated and edited by Frederick C. Beiser, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

³⁵ M. Dąbrowski, *Polska awangarda prozatorska*, Warszawa 1995, p. 106.

³⁶ B. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*, trans. Celina Wieniewska, Penguin Classics, 2008.

³⁷ B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, op. cit., pp. 113–114.

it is deeply rooted in romanticism, although not of Polish, but of German origin"³⁸. At this point Markowski refers to Schlegel, who in his *Dialog on Poetry* "calls for a new mythology, which was to replace the antique mythology, supposedly already dead at the end of the eighteenth century"³⁹.

Thus, the narrator of *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of Hourglass*, being both a child and an adult, regards the age of genius not only as a memory, but also a project, a claim. For Schulz shared the conviction of Friedrich Schlegel, that the aim of poetry (and literature in general) is to create a new mythology. This notion is of particular significance in the short story "The Book", where the narrator rejects the Bible handed to him by his father, regarding it as "that fake copy, that reproduction, a clumsy falsification". It is supposed to be replaced by new myths based on the surviving remains of the "Original", as he stated in *The Mythisation of Reality*.

"The Book": Mythisation of the World

"The life of the word, its development, has been switched on to new tracks, the tracks of practical life, and subjected to new notions of propriety. But when by some means the injunctions of practicality relax their structures [...] then a regression takes place within it, a backward flow, and the word strives for its former connection, for a replenishment in meaning, and this striving of the word for its nursery – its homesickness, its yearning for its lingual homeland – we call poetry. [...] All poetry, therefore, is mythologisation – it strives to create myths about the world. The mythologisation of the world has not ended"⁴⁰. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

The arguments voiced in *The Mythisation of Reality* could be summed up as follows: There is an original meaning, forgotten by human kind. Poetry is the key to reconstruct it by liberating language from the chains of mundane practicality, so that words can return to their homeland. Poetry also means mythization, i.e. reviving myths, and the process – although obstructed by technology and knowledge – must continue. For the process is not only artistic but also cognitive, as it makes the world meaningful. The resemblance of this statement to arguments made by Novalis and Schlegel is truly striking.

First of all, what Schulz calls *mythisation*, bears a striking resemblance to the famous *romantisation* defined by Novalis.

"The world must be romanticized if we are to rediscover its original sense. To romanticize is simply to potentialize qualitatively. In this operation the lower self is identified with a better self. [...] By giving a lofty sense to what is common, a mysterious aspect to the everyday, the dignity

³⁸ M.P. Markowski, op. cit., p. 251.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ B. Schulz, *The Mythisation of Reality*, transl. John Curran Davis, 2010.

of the unknown to the familiar, the appearance of infinity to the finite, I am romanticizing these things"⁴¹.

In both cases we can observe a call for change in the world by means of poetry and an insistence on the necessity of a return to the original meaning. And in both cases this is only possible if we use language in a different way from how we use it on a daily basis. According to Schulz, we should liberate words from obedience to practicality, while Novalis argues that words should no longer express the mundane, the ordinary, the familiar, and the finite, but rather seek for a deeper meaning, for the unknown, the mysterious, and the infinite.

Above all, in *The Mythisation of Reality* Schulz reiterates Schlegel's opinion that mythological thinking is destined to pass and therefore we should *mythologise* the world anew. He also shares Schlegel's conviction that the road to mythology leads through poetry (Schlegel wrote that "mythology and poetry are one and inseparable")⁴². They also share a belief that the aim of poetry is to return to its source, for that is the only way mythologisation can take place. According to Schlegel, a new mythology, unlike the old one, must rise from the depth of the spirit, it must be a most elaborate work of art encompassing all others; it must be a new *cradle* and a new vessel for the *old, eternal, ancient source of poetry*, remaining itself an infinite poem *carrying the seeds of all other poems*. Schulz calls this source "the Authentic", and also claims that it is a potential "infinite" source of all stories.

"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"⁴³.

The quotation illustrates Schulz's reading of Schlegel's dream about a new mythology, and Novalis's vision of changing the world by "romanticizing" it. Schulz agreed with both of them that poetry is the key.

"Spring": The Lining of Reality

The above belief can be best illustrated by the short story "Spring" with its recurring motif of The Book. This time it is invoked by a stamp album that his friend Rudolf shows to the narrator. Similarly as in "The Book", the discovery makes an enormous impression on the protagonist, for it is not only a source of inspiration but also a key

⁴¹ Cited after: Sabine Rossbach, "Mirroring, Abyzimization, Potentiation (Involution)", in: *Romantic Prose Fiction: A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, Eds. Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel, Bernard Dieterle, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2008, p. 479.

⁴² K.K. Ruthven, *Myth*, Methuen, London, 1976, p. 55.

⁴³ B. Schulz, *Sanatorium ...*, op. cit., p. 20.

to understanding the true nature of reality. After taking a look at the album, the narrator has a sudden illumination.

"I realised in a flash why that spring had until then been so empty and dull. Not knowing why, it had been introverted and silent – retreating, melting into space, into an empty azure without meaning or definition – a questioning empty shell for the admission of an unknown content"⁴⁴.

Thanks to the album, the world seems to the narrator a living organism, and, most importantly, not a silent one. As we can see, until that moment, spring was mute and withdrawn. But once the key to understanding its language is found, it speaks to the narrator: "Only now will the nature of that spring become clear and legible to an attentive reader of the Book"⁴⁵.

The certainty that everything is a sign which could be deciphered, and nature, history, culture and men are letters and words of a book which we could explain to one another – is rooted in Jewish mysticism but was also present in the romantic worldview. "Let me, O Lord, [...] narrate the Story of Creation, the tale hid in the memory of my past lives"⁴⁶. This is how in his *Genesis of the Spirit* Stowacki read the history of the world: by reading the rocks, the shapes of plants (e.g. daisies or ferns, which according to him, contained the seeds of the future social systems!), animal bones etc. Stowacki found proof of the common unity of beings and a philosophical nature of cognition in history, visions, and everyday experiences – everything was a sign substantiating his thesis.

This attitude was common among the romantics. For instance, in *The Novices of Sais* by Novalis, young persons come to a famous temple in order to learn the secrets of nature. He speaks of meaning as being

"[...] written everywhere, in wings, eggshells, clouds and snow, in crystals and in stone formations, on ice-covered waters, on the inside and outside of mountains, of plants, beasts and men, in the lights of heaven, on scored disks of pitch or glass [...] In them we suspect a key to the magic writing, even a grammar [...]"⁴⁷.

Similarly to "Spring", Novalis's text also describes the voice of nature as something difficult to hear at first. One needs to prepare spiritually, as human eyes are not ready to see it. Therefore, the novices need a teacher, who determines whether they possess the ability to reach beyond the tangible. Thus, the only way to understand the essence of nature is first to notice its mysterious language and then to interpret it. To Schulz, all this becomes possible thanks to Rudolf's stamp album.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ J. Stowacki, *Genesis of the Spirit*, trans. K. Chodkiewicz, London, 1966.

⁴⁷ Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, trans. Ralf Manheim, Archipelago Books, 2005, p. 4.

Only after its discovery, does reality begin to mythologise (romanticise) and Franz Joseph's prose become poetry – Bianca becomes an infant, a spring dusk becomes the Acheron, and the village becomes an exotic Egypt, Barbados, Trinidad, and Jamaica. The narrator learns from the stamp album about nature, court affairs, even psychology.

"Can a stamp album serve as a textbook of psychology? What a naïve question! A *stamp album is a universal book, a compendium of knowledge about everything human*. Naturally, only by allusion, implication, and hint. You need some perspicacity, some courage at the heart, some imagination in order to find the fiery thread that runs through the pages of the book. *One thing must be avoided at all costs: narrow-mindedness, pedantry, dull pettiness. Most things are interconnected, most threads lead to the same reel*"⁴⁸. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

Let us notice that studying the stamp album requires a certain attitude. If the truth is only fragmentary, and exists in allusions and suggestions, then it needs interpretation. And according to the narrator, one must avoid literal (pedantic) understanding, but rather read the book with one's *heart* and with an open mind (with "imagination" and inspiration). The book will reveal its secrets only to such open-minded and gifted readers. This is a clearly romantic image. But how should we understand the book's revelations? What is the "reel" gathering all the threads?

"When the roots want to speak, when under the turf a great many old tales and ancient sagas have been collected [...] 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*" [...] ⁴⁹.

To Schulz, discovering the true nature of reality means seeing its hidden side. The *textile* metaphor is significant: the other side turn out to be a "lining", a "reel", a place where all the loose "threads" finally create a pattern. The belief that visible reality has a reverse, a "lining", is what connects Schulz's ontology to the romantic worldview. Similar metaphors are used to examine the nature of being by Juliusz Słowacki. He argues that the world is full of scattered signs leading to a concealed pattern.

"Our world is like one side of a rug with threads coming out and in as if they had neither destination nor purpose, while on the other side there is a pattern and flowers"⁵⁰.

Writing of "The Book", Stefan Chwin argues that Schulz's stories present a clear romantic topos of the world as a mystic organism. He distinguishes "those mysterious connections, which romantic alchemy and *Naturphilosophie* regarded as hidden

⁴⁸ B. Schulz, *Sanatorium* op. cit., p. 59.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁰ *Korespondencja Juliusza Słowackiego*, vol. 2, Ed. E. Sawrymowicz, Wrocław 1962, p. 103.

hieroglyphs, serving as spiritual guidelines for a creative individual"⁵¹. This analysis can also be applied to "Spring", where all phenomena and stories are gathered in the "Underworld":

"Ah, how it thrives on stories, on events, on chronicles, on destinies! Everything we have ever read, all the stories we have heard and those we have never heard before but have been dreaming since childhood – here and nowhere else is their home and their motherland"⁵².

Therefore, the stamp album has two functions in "Spring". On the one hand, it is a tool of cognition, a key to understanding the mysterious language of nature allowing one to enter the real, hidden sphere of reality inhabited by myths. Therefore, it is a book of nature. On the other hand, it constitutes a book of creation: it enables the narrator to follow in the footsteps of Novalis and *romanticize* reality, elevate it, and transfer from reality into imagination. In this sense, "Spring" is not only another representation of Schulz's ontology, but also a metaphorical description of the creative process behind writing poetry and realising a myth.

"Tailor's Dummies": Schulz's Ontology

"Tailor's Dummies" is a direct reference to Słowacki's analyses of genesis. Similarly as in "Genesis from the Spirit", Schulz's story uses the motif of the infinite metamorphosis of matter, and some statements made by the narrator's father are explicitly references to some of Słowacki's opinions.

"There is no evil in reducing life to other and newer forms. Homicide is not a sin. It is sometimes a necessary violence on resistant and ossified forms of existence which have ceased to be amusing"⁵³.

The above quotation summarises Słowacki's genesian ethics, which can be found e.g. in his drama *Samuel Zborowski*. It argues that the only evil is an "indolence" of the spirit (persistence in one form), and everything that leads to liberation from random shapes imposed by matter and that enables one to achieve a higher state of development is good (in this sense, even murder can be good). For Słowacki believed that the history of the spirit has a fixed direction – from lower to higher forms, from flawed to perfect ones. He indicates this view by means of metaphors referring to "chains" and "evolution".

⁵¹ S. Chwin, "Twórczość i autorytety. Bruno Schulz wobec romantycznych dylematów tworzenia", *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1985 no. 1, p. 78.

⁵² B. Schulz, *Sanatorium*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁵³ B. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*, op. cit.

Therefore, since spirits are free to take any shape and form, then evolution is not random but has a clear hierarchy. For eventually all spirits are destined to return to God. Then, the visible world will cease to exist and turn into a spiritual being (a Sun-lit Jerusalem). While for Schulz, who at this point breaks away from Słowacki, spiritual transformations of matter are governed not by the compulsion to foster the spirit, but by chance, frivolity, and whim – simple boredom with what has already been created. A hackneyed form is promptly replaced by another and so on *ad infinitum*. Thus, there is no eschatological dimension, which was the centre of Słowacki's vision. Schulz chooses a perverse love of transient matter: "‘This is’, he continued with a pained smile, ‘the proof of our love for matter as such, for its fluffiness or porosity, for its unique mystical consistency’"⁵⁴.

In "Tailor's Dummies", matter is compared to a company of actors who keep switching masks and enjoy it. Therefore, while Słowacki presents a vertical order and constant development, Schulz claims that "spirits" create imperfect, tacky forms which are only temporary and fall apart. Jacob declares, "We shall give priority to trash", and he calls the new forms "pseudovegetation" and "short-lived generations which flourished suddenly and splendidly, only to wilt and perish"⁵⁵.

Another distinction between Schulz and Słowacki consists in different attitudes towards the role of creativity in the process of transformation. Both in Słowacki's mystical work and in "Tailor's Dummies", we can find studies on art. To a romantic poet, it is a means of breaking the old forms and creating new ones. Its function is to enhance the progress of the spirit, in accordance with the idea of Logos, present in *A Letter to Rembowski* and in *Dialog jedynolity*. According to Słowacki, a word is both the origin of creation and the destination of the world, the alpha and omega, the principle of existence. Forms created by some people through acts or words have the power to influence other spirits. Hence the responsibility for words, as a poet can either contribute to the progress or the regress of the spirit. To Schulz, creation is also a privilege of all spirits, yet there is nothing noble about it. He regards it rather as a slightly erotic fascination: "Here is the starting point of a new apologia for sadism"⁵⁶. In the words of Jacob, this creation is "open to all kinds of charlatans, dilettanti, a domain of abuses and of dubious demiurgical manipulations"⁵⁷.

The lecture given by Jacob to Poldá and Pauline resembles Słowacki's genesian theory, with at least two exceptions. While *Genesis* offers a description of a spiritual progress, Schulz advocates a random, peculiar and futile circle of creation and decomposition.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Where Słowacki attributes creation with an ethical dimension serving a greater good, Schulz sees it as crude, sinful, and shameful. According to Artur Sandauer:

"[...] an artist is depicted as Hermes circling between light and darkness [...] he is a great heresiarch, a *dangerous Casanova*, and an *illusionist*, a monk who has broken his ascetic vows; in a word, an intellectual cheating on spirit with matter"⁵⁸.

Once again, Sandauer interprets Schulz's works in a mythical-biblical context. However, "Tailor's Dummies" could be read in a different way. If we consider how Schulz both incorporates and transforms Słowacki's theory, combines pathos and the grotesque, an elevated style with mockery (the irony is conspicuous e.g. in Jacob's way of speaking, the content of his speech and the reaction to his words), then it will become clear that we are dealing with what is called by a different romantic (Friedrich Schlegel) a constant alternating of two contradictory thoughts and "an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses"⁵⁹, i.e. with romantic irony.

The Street of Crocodiles: Schulz as a (Romantic) Ironist

The entry on "irony" in *The Schulz Dictionary* points out that it originated from romantic irony and was:

"[...] a philosophical declaration of a conviction that reality as such is multi-layered, that what we can see on the surface is only a cover for that is hidden deep down and what is really true. The latter was expressed in romanticism in the topos of a being-textile"⁶⁰.

I have already quoted passages of "Spring" that illustrate how Schulz uses this topos. It is also present in *The Street of Crocodiles*.

"But then, talking all the time, he [the shop assistant] unrolled an enormous piece of cloth, fitting, folding, and draping the stream of material, forming it into imaginary jackets and trousers, that whole manipulation seemed suddenly unreal, a sham comedy, a screen *ironically placed to hide the true meaning of things*"⁶¹. [Emphasis added by T.M.]

"*Reality is thin as paper and betrays with all its cracks its imitative character*. At times one has the impression that it is only the small section immediately before us that falls into the expected pointillistic picture of a city thoroughfare [...] The tenseness of an artificial pose, the assumed earnestness of a mask, an ironical pathos tremble on this façade"⁶². [Emphasis added by T.M.]

⁵⁸ A. Sandauer, *Zebrane pisma krytyczne*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 579.

⁵⁹ Quoted after: Gerald N. Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787–1802*, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 58.

⁶⁰ Quoted after: Dieter De Bruyn, Kris van Heuckelom, eds., *Unmasking Bruno Schulz*, Vol. 54 of *Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics*, Rodopi, 2009, p. 335.

⁶¹ B. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*, op. cit.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Therefore, being is described in *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* as dual, breaking into the visible and the hidden. However, Schulz also anthropomorphizes it and describes it in terms of pretense, acting, and wearing mascara. In this sense, his reality resembles nature as it was understood by romantics, who believed that it is divided into visible matter and a creative, invisible force, a *chaotic tangle of threads*, and what was hidden underneath. Therefore, being is ironic, as it cannot be entirely understood – it hides its essence from us, replacing it with artifice, masks, and acts. In his essay devoted to irony, “On Incomprehensibility”, Schlegel writes: “Verily, it would fare badly with you, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest”⁶³.

Yet, this is only one of many aspects of Schulz’s irony. Let us come back to *The Street of Crocodiles*.

“Our hopes-were a fallacy, the suspicious appearance of the premises and of the staff were a sham, the clothes were real clothes, and the salesman had no ulterior motives. The women of the Street of Crocodiles are depraved to only a modest extent, stifled by thick layers of moral prejudice and ordinary banality. In that city of cheap human material, no instincts can flourish, no dark and unusual passions can be aroused”⁶⁴.

It turns out that all events described in the story are just a figment of the narrator’s imagination – a pure fiction. The seductive mystery of the street, its exotic and demonic nature suddenly perish, revealing the banal existence of a small town, where a shop is nothing more than a shop, and the same applies to a shop assistant and a prostitute. At this point, the narrator resembles more the “speaking self” found in romantic literature, rather than a narrator typical for realist writings. He constantly comments on his own tale, includes anecdotes, confesses to mistakes and misinterpretations. We find a similar case in “The Book”. Before Joseph explains what the “Age of Genius” really was, he pauses his narration.

“Here we must for a moment go completely esoteric, like Signor Bosco of Milan, and lower our voice to a penetrating whisper. By *meaningful smiles* we must give point to our exposition and *grind the delicate substance of imponderables between the tips of our fingers*. It won’t be our fault if sometimes we shall look like those merchants of invisible fabrics, who display their *fake goods with elaborate gestures*”⁶⁵.

This is a confession of a romantic ironist, who thinks nothing is obvious and every statement should be accompanied by quotation marks. For it is, I suppose, what the expression

⁶³ Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, translation and introduction by Peter Firchow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1971, p. 268.

⁶⁴ B. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ B. Schulz, *Sanatorium*, op. cit., p. 22.

“meaningful smiles” suggests, and what the narrator believes should be the point of his speech. This constant manoeuvring between what is real and what is an act, is achieved by seasoning each sentence with “imponderables”, i.e. “things or matters beyond measure or comprehension”.

The irony of Schulz’s narrator is his answer to the ironical nature of being, which could be described in no other manner than by mimicking its strategy. Joseph exists always on the border between truth and fiction. He presents himself as an ambiguous being – both child-like and mature, describing the world of a child’s imagination using scientific jargon. To him, pathos is always counterbalanced by comedy, as in the scene when Adela threatens to tickle Jacob, who is in the frenzy of his prophetic speech.

All the above-mentioned features of Schulz’s writing: the motif of a child-creator, mythisation of reality, a belief in the dual and ironic nature of being, references to Schlegel and Słowacki, narration rooted in “permanent parabasis” – lead to a conclusion that Schulz (to use Sandauer’s typology) was a writer with a romantic subconscious.

Witkacy: An Epitaph for a Romantic Dandy

Anna Micińska poses a curious question in her introduction to *Narkotyki* and *Niemyte dusze* – “What stops us from calling Witkacy the Last Great Romantic of Resurrected Poland? For it is only seemingly paradoxical...”⁶⁶. Indeed, it sounds like a paradox, for Witkacy was one of the fiercest critics of the romantic tradition in the interwar period. He believed that it was a source of anti-intellectual and very poor works of art, and he consistently stood by his view, e.g. in numerous analyses of the theme of the destructive impact romanticism had on Polish literature and philosophy. In *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo*, he stressed that the then contemporary artists only too often referred to hackneyed and outdated patterns.

“What is the worst, is that everybody here feels obliged to care for the fate of the nation. The most incompetent people do that. Every poet is supposed to be a prophet and babble words incomprehensible even to himself, only because there was once a time when mystic theories were made in order to survive a particular period of decay. What worked then, today is a fatal drug causing blindness of reality”⁶⁷.

“Enough – down with literature! That universal harmony; that indecent spirit of love one another and shoulder to shoulder, beneath whose skin one caught the subdued grating of a dormant hatred;

⁶⁶ A. Micińska, “Na marginesie *Narkotyków i Niemytych dusz* Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza”, [in:] S.I. Witkiewicz, *Narkotyki – Niemyte dusze*, Warszawa 1979, p. 11.

⁶⁷ S.I. Witkiewicz, *622 upadki Bungo*, Warszawa 1974. All excerpts translated by J. Burzyńska.

that orgy of praise that masked a mean-spirited jealousy; that lewd hypocrisy which saw people rolling around tearfully like dogs wallowing in their own excrement: it was sheer horror"⁶⁸.

"Love one another" is an obvious reference to *Pan Tadeusz*, while "shoulder to shoulder" alludes to *Ode to Youth*. Quotations from two works by Mickiewicz stressing the idea of a community (a community of youth, a national community) are references to romantic ideals, but they are shown as distorted and instrumental when used to impose unity on the nation in times of peril. Naturally, this statement should be interpreted in the context of the whole novel, where everything – not only the romantic ideals, but also art, politics and human relations – is devaluated. However, Witkacy's diagnosis seems devastating: in an "extreme" situation, these ideals turn out to be fiction and do not stand the test of time. Moreover, they act as a veil, concealing cruelty, misunderstandings, and lies.

We are dealing here with two important aspects of Witkacy's criticism of romanticism. First of all, Polish romanticism created a culture, the aim of which was to provide *collective consolation* and where an individual was subordinated to the community, which could not be further from Witkacy's personal understanding of art. Secondly, *romanticism produced artifice*: artificial feeling, artificial community, and artificial thoughts. Although romantic manifestos and programs advocated reaching to the depths of human soul, although the spiritual and emotional dimension was so thoroughly analysed, according to Witkacy it was all a lie. He believed romanticism embellished instead of revealing reality. Therefore, familiar with the unmasking quality of Nietzsche's philosophy and Freud's psychology, he decided to unmask romantic illusions. Let us consider a fragment of *Niemyte dusze* [Unwashed Souls]:

"Those phenomena, which seemingly have nothing in common, such as *messianism of our so called prophets* and getting too close with friends, the Jewish theory of a 'Chosen Nation', and mean old ladies, and some Christian principles – are actually all based on a poor take on an inferiority complex"⁶⁹.

The unmasking tool used by Witkacy throughout his literary work was *parody*. It perfectly illustrates poststructuralist definitions of a text as a mosaic of quotations. Witkacy operated with ready-made forms, constantly played around with tradition by borrowing characters (often from different literary genres), plot structures, styles, and vocabulary. That is why Jan Błóński called his plays and novels "parasitic".

"Both readers and critics quickly realised that Witkacy's theatre often resorts to parody. Maybe even to something stronger and deeper than parody? His dramas are like mistletoe: they feed on the juices of an oak, i.e. old art. Therefore, they are clearly parasitic"⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, trans. Louis Iribarne, Northwestern University Press, 1996, p. 109.

⁶⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Narkotyki – Niemyte dusze*, op. cit.; excerpt translated by J. Burzyńska.

⁷⁰ J. Błóński, *Witkacy. Sztukmistrz, filozof, estetyk*, Kraków 2000, p. 110.

In his plays, Witkacy drew from Shakespeare, Ibsen, Wyspiański, Rittner, and Mickiewicz (*Janulka, the Daughter of Fizdejko*). In the novels, he referred to the realist tradition, the novel-treatise, the philosophical fable, romance (love affairs, action, travel), Sterne-like poetics (extensive metanarrative functions), as well as modernist questions concerning artistic creation⁷¹. We could also mention Patuba and modernist novels about artists – Berent, Przybyszewski, Brzozowski, and Miciński⁷². According to Włodzimierz Bolecki,

“[...] the main motifs in Witkacy’s novels: an individual versus the world and other people; art versus society; existential loneliness; questions of the ontology of social life, of man’s place in the universe, of psycho-physical experiences in terms of defining one’s identity, of a model of society emerging from social transformations, and above all, of one’s self-knowledge – all constitute basic modernist problems, questions and investigations”⁷³.

Bolecki supplements this wide range of Witkacy’s inspirations with the *Bildungsroman* tradition⁷⁴, especially Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. The *Bildungsroman* has been immensely popular since the romantic period. It was also a source of inspiration to some realist writers: Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and Żeromski. The characteristic structure of the genre can be found in all Witkacy’s novels: they describe the personal and social development of characters, their different stages of life, their erotic experiences, family, love, religion, and politics. And what is important from the point of view of the genre, is that they present the character’s *initiation*, i.e. first life-changing experiences.

“Just like Goethe’s characters, Witkacy’s protagonist reaches maturity, lives up to his social role as a man by going through various experiences – love, moral, intellectual – which somewhat constitute a journey across an unknown world”⁷⁵.

In each novel, sexual initiation is an important stage in the character’s development (an affair with Acne in *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo*, and with Princess Irina in *Insatiability*, love for Hela Bertz, and a homoerotic affair with Łohojski in *Pożegnanie jesieni* [Farewell to Autumn]). They also experience other kinds of rites of passage, such as narcotics and politics (e.g. Atanazy led astray by Łohojski and Sajetan Tempe), as well as artistic initiations (for instance Bungo’s journey to an exhibition by Fagass in Paris and Tangier’s teaching Genezyp the joys of music). All three protagonists are depicted in a crucial moment of transition from youth to maturity⁷⁶. As is pointed out by Jan Błoński,

⁷¹ See: W. Bolecki, “Szaleństwo ludzi zdrowych czyli ładne samobójstwo” [in:] S.I. Witkiewicz, *Pożegnanie jesieni*, Kraków 1997, p. 34.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72–73.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁷⁶ I exclude the unfinished *Jedyny wyjście* [The Only Way Out].

"They [Witkacy's novels] are all in fact (and two of them also formally) divided into two parts. In the first part, Witkacy describes an awakening or initiation: the protagonists unravel the mystery of philosophy, art and religion, at the same time feeling that they will never reach the highest forms of those spheres [...]. The second part focuses on destruction, insanity and – if we could guess the ending of *Jedynе wyjście* – failure: in the discovery of eroticism, drugs, the risk of fight and revolution"⁷⁷.

This can be clearly seen in *Insatiability*, which has two parts: "The Awakening" and "Insanity". In the former, we can observe the domestic life of the protagonist, his first infatuations, and heartbreaks. In the latter part, we accompany him on his journey in the world. According to his father's last will, Genezip is supposed to enrol in an Officers' Training Academy and become Kocmołuchowicz's adjutant. Therefore, his biography is divided in two parts – the first one is dominated by the love plot (the affair with the Princess), while the second focuses on joining the army and defending the country. Although such a comparison might seem risky, we can notice a general romantic framework of a character's biography in its most hackneyed, parody-like form. Genezip follows the footsteps of e.g. Mickiewicz, Gustav-Konrad, Kordian, and many other romantic characters. In all those cases there is a clear initiation point: youthful infatuation, disappointment, disillusionment, and the consequent *leap into the world* or a *patriotic zeal*. Genezip's case is similar; however, the said structure is only an outline, equipped with a non-romantic content.

The romantic mind-set was based on a dialectics of the mundane versus the elevated, the physical versus the spiritual, "eye and a looking glass" versus the "mind's eye". Naturally, the latter members of those pairs were favored. Thus, real art was supposed to rise above literalness and mundaneness; real love was an ideal feeling, a communion of souls rather than bodies; and, finally, real cognition was only possible on the intuitive level. In Witkacy's novels, all those ideals are exposed as lies. The romantic-modernist phraseology, *sincere* confessions of *lovers*, and *in-depth* reflections of the characters – they are all just a veil concealing sexual perversions, sadomasochist desires and clichés⁷⁸. What romantics regarded as the greater truth, turns out to be an artifice, a mask put on during cruel human games. Acne assures Bungo of her love and at the same time realizes her perverse desires with Stanisław Ignacy Żdyb. In *Insatiability*, Genezip

⁷⁷ J. Błoński, op. cit., p. 250.

⁷⁸ According to Jan Błoński, Witkacy's novels contain a language which "clearly parodies romantic or modernist phraseology of mental states and psychological distress" (J. Błoński, *Witkacy zawsze*, Kraków 2003, p. 234). For instance, in *Insatiability*, the narrator describes Genezip's dilemmas as "persistent solitude – even when he was among people, even in the raucous din of his off-duty hours – produced a frenzy of mental self-indulgence [...]" (*Insatiability*, p. 246).

announces to his father that he does not intend to take over the family business because he has bigger ambitions.

"Right away Genezip had announced that he would not make a career of beer; that he was not going to enter the institute of technology but that, instead, in September, provided that war had not broken out in the meantime, he was going to enrol at the university and study in the Department of Western Literature, for which he had already begun preparing during the last semester. Literature was to be the ideal substitute for life's nagging multiplicity [...]"⁷⁹.

Yet instead of focusing on his studies, he gets involved in a complicated affair with Princess Irina – the parody of a romantic lover – who locks him up in the toilet during a tryst with his cousin Toldzio. Then, apparently for no reason, Genezip kills Michael Sump and his newly-wed wife Eliza. Therefore, Genezip's explicit initiation bears no resemblance to the platonic love of the young romantics.

However in *Pożegnanie jesieni*, Zosia – named after a character from *Pan Tadeusz* who embodies the ideal of romantic innocence – kisses Atanazy in the forehead, instead of giving in to the desire of biting his lips.

In all those cases, Witkacy reverses the principles of romantic literature. In his novels, romantic behavior and terminology constitute only a "cuticle" of real motivations and aims of the characters, concealing underneath all that the romantics considered primal and artificial, i.e. mainly the sexual drive. Yet, was Marcin Król right saying that Witkacy did not "defy" (like Gombrowicz) the romantic tradition, but rather rejected it altogether? According to Król, Witkacy

"rejected any forms of continuing the romantic-national theme, since he decided that the artificial ideas cannot be the source of intellect and inspiration, therefore rejecting this possibility once and for all, never analysing it thoroughly. Yet later, having experienced acute downfalls, the lonely browser raking through culture in search of something of value he could maximize, he began to see this rejection as the only chance for spiritual rehabilitation in his own eyes. His zeal and persistence made it impossible to follow the footsteps of Gombrowicz and draw inspiration from a defiance of the national past, the national stereotype, and the democracy of the nobility"⁸⁰.

However, by writing about the national stereotype, Witkacy himself falls into a stereotype. The way his works, letters, and critical essays address romanticism is probably even more simplistic than in Gombrowicz's case. For instance, we can come across statements advocating that the only function of Polish literature was to fight for independence, and once that was achieved, its days are numbered. Witkacy reduces

⁷⁹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, trans. Louis Iribarne, Northwestern University Press, 1996, p. 18.

⁸⁰ M. Król, *Polska w twórczości S. I. Witkiewicza*, [in:] *Studia o Stanisławie Ignacym Witkiewiczu*, Eds. M. Głowiński and J. Stawiński, Wrocław 1972, p. 313.

romanticism to a messianic utopia, naïve sentimentalism, and tendencies to submit individual desires to the community's will.

However, he did so from the perspective of a romantic individual convinced that such subjugation of both individuals and culture to a nation or a class (a general *degeneration*) would lead to a crisis of art and an annihilation of the metaphysical. Therefore, he believed that an individual should not blend into any kind of community, be it national, religious, or social. One of the main themes in his works is the conflict of artist and society. In his play *They*, a secret government destroys the paintings of Kalist Bałandaszek in the name of the automation of society and a comprehensive unification of art (the motif of destroying works made by an unrecognised painter is also present in *The Cuttlefish*). In *The Mother*, Leon dies from a bullet fired by a group of workers. In *The Beelzebub Sonata*, art is the last resort for protecting individuality from an organized and mechanized society. In *The Anonymous Work*, Plasmonic states that in the face of revolution, "metaphysical individuals" end up either in prison or in a mental institution. At the same time, the mob is screaming "Off with the individual! Off with personality!". Also his characters are defeated by their society. In *Pożegnanie Jesieni*, Atanazy is killed by an officer of the border guard of the new government, which is made up of "Russified natives", while in *Insatiability*, Genzip finally submits himself to the unifying religion of Murti Bing.

Additionally, Witkacy portrays his characters as dandies, modelled after the romantic-modernist artists of life (known from works by Byron, Słowacki, Baudelaire, Wilde, and Przybyszewski), who treat art as a refuge from reality or who play-act their life as if it were an elaborate work of art. Bungo is one of them and, at some point, he announces that life is either a masterpiece or a farce created by each of us from our own selves, complete with the subtleties of the conscience and the suppleness of our thighs. Bungo is aptly described by Markowski thus:

"An ongoing change of masks and *arranging the situations* are two sides of an aesthetic existence. In a world where everyone wears a mask (so nobody is honest), Bungo is looking for a mask that would be his real face (he wants to understand himself and the world), but he knows that he is bound to fail. He is an artist of life, the *conductor of situations* but all of them are separate, with no connections, so Bungo also *longs for a unity of life*. The aesthetic existence is a set of roles which are not connected and therefore they leave no room for the real Self [...]. This *remaining in one's role* and staging of life is what constituted the basis of aesthetical existence, although it is in constant danger of becoming too *particular*"⁸¹.

Bazakbal is also a dandy. At the end of the first chapter, Atanazy thinks of the events of his day as a "harmonious unity"; he is pleased with the "composition of the day".

⁸¹ M.P. Markowski, op. cit., p. 343.

He thought to himself, that life “composes itself” in an unpredictable way and concluded with a praise to the great “composition” of the past few days⁸². In *Insatiability*, the artist Sturfan Abnol is the dandy, and he tells Genezip about “man’s absolute (!) alienation from existence”⁸³.

It seems that Abnol touches upon the essence of the dandy philosophy. Extravagant clothes and love of art are only the visible signs of this philosophy: an expression of alienation from the roles imposed by the society. This conviction, in turn, lead to ostentatious performances of other roles apart from those in the imposed repertoire: provocative and eccentric roles, which were focused on all impractical spheres of life, art in particular.

Witkacy was a dandy himself and staged his life as much as the lives of his characters. In 1923, he wrote to his wife Jadwiga: “Nothing makes life worth living, but artistic creation”⁸⁴. According to Błoński, the author of *Insatiability* was the last romantic dandy in Polish literature.

“Does it not look familiar? A metaphysical dandy born in late romanticism and introduced to the stage by Baudelaire... . Oh, to escape from life! To become a work of art! But to become an aesthetic object would mean – to die. How does one dissolve into the void, into everlasting beauty? In Witkacy’s works, the metaphysical dandy ends his international career with paroxysm and self-destruction”⁸⁵.

Witkacy’s works are, on the one hand a dispute with old literature, i.e. with the whole literature of the nineteenth century, as he parodied romanticism as much as realist novels and modernist works. Yet, on the other hand his books are a swansong of late romanticism, which created the characters of eccentric and maladjusted artists of life.

Conclusion: Anti-romantic Romantics

Marta Piwińska, in her study *Legenda romantyczna i szydery* (Romantic Legend and Scoffers), stresses that romanticism is characterised by a “fatal force”, which means that “all attempts of revising romanticism somehow become a part of an extra-historical sign of romantic rebellion”⁸⁶. For it was a cultural movement with the main principle of rebelling against the established forms of culture. Therefore, naturally everyone who argued with the romantic heritage, parodied or criticised it, in some sense played the role of a romantic.

Were Gombrowicz, Schulz, and Witkacy in the orbit of this “fatal force”? Should we consider their meta-literary utterances in letters, dairies or memoirs, then in the case

⁸² S.I. Witkiewicz, *Pożegnanie jesieni*, Wrocław 1996, pp. 475, 501.

⁸³ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, op. cit., p. 31.

⁸⁴ Idem, *Listy do żony 1923-1927*, Ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 2005, p. 21.

⁸⁵ J. Błoński, *Witkacy na zawsze*, op. cit., p. 196.

⁸⁶ M. Piwińska, *Legenda romantyczna i szydery*, Warszawa 1973, p. 33.

of Gombrowicz we would have to agree, as he constantly challenged romanticism and Polish identity. This is less true of Witkacy, yet he also (as we can see in *Niemyte Dusze*) had much criticism (not always substantiated) towards romanticism and its heritage (in artistic, psychological, and sociological terms). Out of the three, Schulz was the least prone to comment either on his own or somebody else's works, and dwell on their aesthetic, sociological or historical properties. There is simply not enough data to draw any substantial conclusions.

However, if we take into consideration their works, we will come across some dialectically interesting analogies. All three (paradoxically) disagreed with some romantic principles, yet they did so in the name of other romantic principles. Mocking the legendary Mickiewicz and Słowacki and writing *Pan Tadeusz à rebours*, Gombrowicz is the romantic advocator of youth: that eternal revolutionist. Schulz, in turn, focussed his *romantic* treatises (in *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of Hourglass*) on being, nature, and poetry, with an ironic upbeat. Finally, Witkacy, who expressed the utmost dislike for messianic ideals and for Mickiewicz's call to "love one another", as well as attacking the romantic worship of homeland – was a romantic dandy and valued, above all, individuality and art: the last shelter of metaphysics.



The cover of the German translation of *Nienasycenie* (Munich 1966)