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Włodzimierz Bolecki

The Critical Reception of Bruno Schulz's Prose

A characteristic element of the reception of Bruno Schulz's prose before 1939 was the study of the mechanisms of that reception. Not only was Schulz's prose as such discussed, but also the opinions of critics concerning his work. *Sklepy cynamonowe* (*Cinnamon Shops*) and *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą* (*Hour-Glass Sanatorium*) revealed diverging literary tastes and introduced the problem of the reception of Schulz's books. Anyone writing about his prose was obliged to present his opinion on the extreme views (totally affirmative or negative) which had already been voiced. This fact showed that there was great variety within the literary culture of the 1930's, and it displayed the self-consciousness of literary criticism at that time. Reviews of Schulz's books were a kind of demonstration, for the critics did not address an anonymous public, neither did they just examine the texts—what they did was to present their personal feelings concerning Schulz's prose to those who were courageous enough to hold opposed views. This meant that in fact they were settling their accounts rather than writing for sake of presenting Schulz's work to the reader. It was typical to bring out what we might call personal contributions to what had now become something of a spectacle. All criticism was addressed to "the author," who was personally responsible for every element of his text. He was present behind every metaphor, every sentence or event in his novel. Even detailed studies did not refer to literary conventions or to particular problems in Schulz's prose, but concentrated on this vision of the author behind his work.

Another important personal contribution was that of the critics

who praised or condemned Schulz's prose. Their views were often quoted as examples of faulty reception and a lack of understanding of the real value of the stories, or were classed as snobbery (often referred to as "literary café snobbery").

The rejection of Schulz's prose in certain circles is more intriguing than the prose itself, and in fact instead of discussing *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą* it would be more fitting to say who praised this book, where, and why he had to do it (Wyka).

You will find some people scattered here and there who like it, it is to the taste of some Philistines [...] But on the whole his prose is not digestible, unless to those who hunger for a profuse imagination and search for "excitement." In their midst are many kindly bourgeois, a few crazy aesthetes, and a handful of importunate snobs (Napierski).

Soon the bubble of praise burst over the head of the lucky author. People devoured his books and tried hard to discover some aesthetic and intellectual values. Unfortunately our public opinion still lets itself be childishly misled by sly and highly proficient publicity (Bielatowicz).

Only a few sensitive critics (mostly those who do not write reviews) were able to appreciate *Sklepy cynamonowe*, the others only cautiously recognized it to be an interesting literary debut of a painter. The book's repercussion seems to be too small in relation to its value in contemporary Polish prose (Korabiowski).

The third vital element in every review was the critic's personal opinion, which concerned both the author and the other critics. The demonstrative underscoring of one's own attitude was a conscious, deliberate correction of other critics' opinions. It was typical at that time to write a review after quite a long space of time in order to emphasize one's dissatisfaction with what had been said on the subject. No matter what a critic's particular opinion was, there was a common denominator for them all: this was the conviction that Schulz's prose was a most singular phenomenon in the literary life of the 1930's. For some his work was original, others considered it pseudographic or even dangerous.

An interesting element of these reviews was the fact that the critics pointed out the unusual experiences provoked by Schulz's prose. Not only was the text examined, but also its individual reception which was to be proof of its extraordinary qualities. Both the negative and the positive assessments of Schulz's work drew attention to the intensive character of the reading experience, which consisted in a short-lived but very strong "fascination" or "daze." This was not only a subjective reaction of individual readers, it

pointed to a general change in the reading process. Schulz's prose required no cognitive or ethical evaluation, and instead offered an extremely intensive type of experience. Therefore as a piece of narrative it broke away from the current type of prose reception in at least two points. Firstly, it shattered the socially accepted rules of reading prose, and secondly the reactions it provoked had previously been limited to poetry only. Admitting to having experienced a "shock" when reading Schulz was proof of the "poetic" character of his prose. This mixture of elements of poetry and prose led to a revival of the experiences in reception which had accompanied the reading of Tadeusz Miciński's works before World War I.

However the chief factor which stirred literary consciousness was the fact that Schulz's prose ignored the criterion of comprehensibility. His books were fully accessible to only a small group of initiated readers. It was said that his works quite lacked "content," that they were elusory, and could not be understood by a "normal" reader. Most critics resorted to either commenting the difficulties in understanding or to describing Schulz's technique. Any attempts at taking his world *à la lettre* resulted in an involuntary caricature. Schulz's prose could in fact be considered an equivalent of abstract painting. It might be appreciated from the point of view of its plastic ("images") or poetic ("metaphors") qualities, but it was obviously devoid of any "themes", "leading motifs", etc. It was then an example of a work which did not adhere to the socially accepted principles of prose, being a collection of formal elements without any definite reference. All the critics agreed that Schulz's novels were ambiguous, and so they wrote about their "elusiveness," their tendency to "evade any classification," their specific kind of symbolism, metaphorical mythology, etc. The idea was to establish whether or not Schulz was a symbolist, and everywhere the accent was laid on the lack of a clear-cut meaning which presented the greatest difficulty. This ambiguity did not hinder the interpretation of particular elements (a character, event or episode), though it was the principle upon which rested the whole of Schulz's prose. In other words, Schulz's texts could be characterized in a rather negative way: it might be said that they did not have any converging lines of meaning and consisted in an interplay of wavering, flickering meanings. Some critics tried to interpret Schulz's prose by referring to the logic of

dreams, by quoting the influence of psychoanalysis, the convention of fantastic stories, the mechanisms of metaphor, and the relativity of present-day knowledge. It remained, however, an object of great controversy and was still often described as "bizarre." This issue became the centre of interest in the literary world of the 30's.

Towards the end of that period Schulz's prose was to provoke the greatest literary scandal of the interwar period. In 1939 Kazimierz Wyka and Stefan Napierski wrote an article entitled *Dwugłos o Schulzu* (*Duologue on Schulz*). Today this is considered to have been an exceptionally fierce lampoon against Schulz and a drastically mistaken evaluation of his novels, now ranked among the greatest works in Polish literature and one of the more notable achievements in the world in prose. *Dwugłos o Schulzu* is therefore hardly ever mentioned, and in Kazimierz Wyka's critical career it is treated as an inexplicable error of a brilliant critic and historian of literature.

Had these negative opinions been voiced by some other author it would not be worth while remembering them, in the same way as many of Schulz's antagonists have been forgotten. But the problem is that the most violent attack was made by such outstanding specialists in the field. This fact cannot be ignored. Wyka and Napierski's article must be seen as a document of unquestionable value in literary history and even in a sense as the "finest" opinion on Schulz's prose. From a historical point of view one cannot just note the individual, psychological/aesthetic antipathy of the critics. *Dwugłos o Schulzu* was not the only illdisposed opinion of Schulz's work but as such surely the most interesting one, particularly as it was a climax to all the previous lesser attacks which ranged from scepticism and antipathy to strong antagonism. It is a fact that in the period before the war many eminent critics held exactly the same views concerning Schulz's novels as those who had a completely different manner of thinking and a different literary culture. It is therefore important to try to fathom this fact or at least describe it in detail against the background of the 1930's.

Other negative views on Schulz's prose were pronounced by Z. Broncel, J. Bielatowicz, I. Fik, S. Baczyński, A. Grzymała-Siedlecki, W. Pietrzak, K. Troczyński, Z. Niesiołowska-Rotherowa, and others. Their critical studies disclosed a set of norms in reception and created

an exceptionally uniform and coherent paradigm of interpretations, which must be analyzed as real historical evidence.

Before reconstructing the chief theses of that paradigm, a few words should be said about Wyka and Napierski's comments on Schulz's prose. The striking thing is that their comments are all perfectly sound—providing a distinction is made between description and interpretation. No one can be shocked by those of Wyka's observations which concern: the question of time, the dominance of sensualism, symbolic clues, the lack of a plot, "denominating verbalism," the reference made to the romantic/symbolic tradition ("correspondances"), or the statement that "Schulz is only interested in marginal beings, pushed over to the confines of time; an epos of old age and eccentricity, of growths on vacant time." Similarly Napierski writes that Schulz's world is dominated by lameness, that the narrator becomes too familiar with the reader and entices him, makes him believe in a "deeper" meaning, "tries to dig down to the bottom of things," and finally that Schulz's sentences are flowery and ornate, with an over-abundance of words and pleonasm, and his stories are like "fantastic commentaries." He then compares Schulz's prose to a fancy-dress ball, says his style is full of arabesques and grotesques, and has as its only tradition secessionist modernism and expressionism. In the end Napierski writes that in Schulz's novels "the wallpaper sprouts" and "vegetation is rampant."

Not one of the above remarks is "trumped-up," inadequate or mistaken. No: Wyka and Napierski had read Schulz's prose exceedingly carefully and had pointed out its most characteristic features. But that is not all. If we take a closer look at the style in which *Dwuglos o Schulzu* has been written, it becomes clear that both critics are using much of the vocabulary, comparisons and metaphors to be found in Schulz's prose. Wyka:

It is full of infatuation with the passing of hours reflected on the surface of externality [...] confines of hours, days and seasons, their mysterious transience [...] colourful spheres dispersed by the flow of clouds, lights and shadows; an exotic torpidness.

And Napierski:

This marks the end of all speculative philosophizing, sprung up amidst the banality of the props, replete with images from the magic lantern, scattered by the confusion of the lumber-room.

These expressions which mimic the characteristic features of the world of Schulz's novels also imitate his style of writing. It is as if the critics were trying to annihilate Schulz's work by using the very tools which had forged it. In actual fact Schulz's partisans were doing the same. This reveals the strong axiological character of certain words, images, metaphors and themes in the 1930's. In short, it shows that the real object of attack of critics at that time was a certain kind of style recognized by everyone. This is particularly visible in those opinions which seem to support the view that Schulz's prose is just "ravings in high fever."

"Fever": this idea keeps reoccurring in titles of reviews, e.g. *Feverish Literature* and *Literature in Fever*, and in such expressions as "feverish dreams," "hallucinations," "vagaries," "ravings", etc. The following is a fragment of a review:

It appears that everyone has his own constant vision in fever. When the quicksilver in the thermometer reaches 39°C, a person enters a state of semi-consciousness [...] That precisely is the climate of Schulz's book. His imagination is like that of a child who insists on lying and twisting the truth, and cannot help exaggerating. The author has noted down these fleeting delirious states which we experience during a heat-wave or when our nerves are highly strung, when we sense the electricity of the oncoming thunderstorm [...] When Schulz reproduces the summer heat, he gives a morbid, hysterical, distorted vision of the world, yet this picture is authentic, strong and plastic.

Anyone reading this might think it is an indiscriminate attack which aims at an utter depreciation of Schulz's work. If something is described as "ravings" and "delirious muttering," this implies that its author was not fully aware of what he was putting across, and so his work cannot be taken seriously. Yet even in this drastic case the critics had almost directly quoted Schulz's own words: "On these last few pages, which have visibly turned to wanderings and downright nonsense [...]" (*Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą*); "We have come to the finale of our writing, which has become unpredictable, like ravings" (*ibid.*) "Ravings," "delirious dreams," "fever," "insanity," etc., are all words used by the narrator when he is describing the heat in summer. Schulz's critics had not only read his prose carefully, but in using his expressions they had struck the very core of the poetic licence exercised by Schulz. The expression "delirious muttering" corresponded exactly with his strategy which consisted

in a deluge of words, semantic fluidity, ambiguity, suggestion, making words fit a particular meaning. From a historical point of view, the appearance of these kinds of expressions does not pose any real problem, for they are well motivated by the subject-matter of *Sklepy cynamonowe* and *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą*. In this sense all those who were unable to find the "content" of those books and were irritated by their "flickering meanings" and semantic "vagueness" were right. Schulz's prose was indeed meant to be "distorted," "delirious," "obsessive." What then were the arguments in favour of rejecting such a narrative strategy in which Schulz had achieved a harmonious association of symbolic and avant-garde motifs?

The chief norm at the time concerned the way of presenting characters in prose. There was in fact only one rule: a character had to be a "live" person with truly human features and should be quite separate from the world of animals, plants and objects. Schulz was attacked for presenting people as marionettes, for the dominance of biological/psychoanalytical motifs over "spiritual" or ethical ones, for attributing the same status to nature, objects and men:

For Mr. Schulz the human world is the most distant of worlds. Quite probably, if we could make out an antelope's impression on meeting a human being, it would resemble Mr. Schulz's visions of men. They are like shadows, like some freakish creatures ensnared by frantic observation, there is not a single real person to be found. Man is for him the most obscure part of reality [...] We want to know the meaning of these wanderings across the arabesques of the artist's imagination. This meaning can only be provided by an individualism which stresses the precedence of mankind over objects, of personality over ideas [...] The father, the mother, Adela, etc.—these are dummies, marionettes, fetishes which have slipped out of a wax-works museum [...] And the people are mostly wax dolls in the great theatre of the world, moved by the force of instinct—figures which are indifferent to anything human [...] Men are treated as objects, they play the same role of substratum as trees and houses exposed to the rays of the setting sun: passive onlookers who only watch the colours which pass over them. This leads to antiliterary, antihuman results.

Wyka developed these objections by pointing to the inhumane function of time:

The disintegration of personality in the waves of time is adverse to the purposeful organization of our experiences [...] Time has been banned from mental life [...] it is a function of inanimate objects which take man's place [...] In Schulz's prose there exists only still life suspended in time.

The category of time as a norm of reception was exceedingly important in the 1930's and was closely linked with literary conceptions of man.

All this led to Schulz being described as "a magician," "a juggler," "an egotist" who subjugates all his characters. It became clear that his mistake had been to abolish the status which characters had enjoyed in 19th-century prose. Schulz's prose was opposed to the realistic model of the last century, and also to the specific model of the world which consisted in a panoramic presentation of man's destiny. The implicit norm for epic prose was a mimetic presentation of the human world—of individuals and of groups of people. When this norm was not observed, the very foundations of prose had been shaken.

It appears that the novel *Sklepy cynamonowe*—wrote Troczyński—lacks (though this was intended) that which gives a novel an epic character: a complete and integral social milieu.

Schulz's prose also ignores the basic principle of composition and meaning required in those years. This principle stated that the elements and ideas contained in a piece of prose should be arranged in some kind of hierarchy. Only a few critics, such as H. Vogler, considered the world of Schulz's novels to be "organic, centralized and well-ordered," though even here the presence of a hierarchy was the condition for acceptance, otherwise the text would be considered inhumane. The coordinates of that hierarchy were the "form," the "rule," "intentional structuring," "an ordered construction," "a smooth sequence of events," "the purposeful organization of our experiences" (Wyka). The paradox lies in the fact that some ten years earlier the Cracow avant-garde had formulated similar expressions to describe the construction norms for a new type of poetry. In the 1930's these requirements became ethically binding, and could be used as a reference when describing the writer's ideology, the spiritual portrait of the characters in his novels, or the "ethical vision" pervading the world presented in the novel. They were opposed to such ideas as "biologism," "sensualism," "mysticism," etc., which together were classed as "chaos." Accusations of this sort were made by almost everybody—Fik, Napierski, Baczyński, Troczyński, Siedlecki, Bielatowicz, Broncel. Wyka even wrote:

These facts do not allow us to include *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą* in the vital achievements of these last few years [...] the novel is an affirmation of chaos.

The tradition which was accused of spreading these negative values was modernism, abusively referred to as "hyper-romanticism," "impressionism," "secession," "decadentism," etc. Admittedly there was a great deal of truth in this. Schulz was thought "irresponsible," "infantile," "indifferent to morality." Promiński concludes that "Schulz's world does not express any truth or transcendental reality, or any moral ideas". Of course these accusations touched the heart of the problem which Schulz had formulated *expressis verbis*. However the point is that for the literary critics of the 30's such a conception was inadmissible.

It has been said that this book is destructive. Perhaps from the point of view of certain fixed values, this is so. But art operates in the depths of premorality, at the point where value is only *in statu nascendi*. Art as a spontaneous testimony on life sets problems for ethics—not the other way round.

The feeling of hostility towards the subject-matter and the axiological determinants of Schulz's prose was also present in the stylistic evaluation of his work. The norm for prose mentioned earlier also concerned the language of *Sklepy cynamonowe* and *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą*. The reception of Schulz's novels displayed the demand for a text which might be "easily understood." Such elements as metaphors, similes, circumlocutions, imitations of various styles or of scientific terminology, ambiguity and suggestion—all this was considered "unintelligible." Very few critics (Witkacy, Krassowska, Sandauer) tried to evaluate and interpret Schulz's figures of speech, most of them held very adverse views. It should be emphasized once again that Schulz's critics were perfectly aware of the features which stopped them from accepting his writings. They were, however, quite unable to face up to the fact that Schulz had broken away from the traditional model of prose. On the semantic level Schulz did not adhere to the semantic conventions of realistic prose. His critics rejected his methods of treating words and meanings: Schulz often used words in unexpected contexts, gave them much broader meanings, worked out long series of metaphors, preferred to engage in extended descriptions rather than to look for precise terms, and finally avoided anything which might even vaguely resemble a theme or a general purpose or idea of the novel. Schulz's prose was in its reception denied any fantastic qualities.

It must be clear by now that there was above all a demand

for simplicity. Writing about uncomplicated matters "in a simple way easy to understand" was to guarantee the existence of a hierarchy. Schulz's prose, instead of being simple, "lacked a clear construction," "was full of neuraigic torpidity," of "dreams and fancies, memory comebacks, connotations and complexes." Further, it was made up of "stylistic and lexical intricacies" which were "foreign to the Polish language." Schulz's texts were therefore "complicated" from a formal point of view. The same opposition: simple—complicated was applied to other levels of analysis. For instance the "complicated" aspect was to be found in the "individualism" of the author which made him over-emphasize autobiographical facts. In order to be classed as simple, a piece of prose had to be objective, and it had to subordinate the narrator to the "main issue" or idea of the text. Most critics shared the same attitude: they did not really discuss the world presented in Schulz's novels, but wrote on his language, his imagination, his mental health, his social and ethical standpoint, etc. According to his critics, Schulz's prose was devoid of "content" and "meaning" precisely because of its individual, subjective approach (main part played by the narrator, an unconventional style) and lack of an objective approach where some "ideas" might be discussed. In this sense the conflict was centred on the evaluation of the role played by the narrator in the novel. It might be said that the prose of Schulz, like that of Gombrowicz, Witkacy or earlier of Miciński, had its own norms. This means that particular segments of the text were more deeply rooted in the lexical, stylistic or compositional idiolect of a given work, than in literary tradition. The "objective" approach of course corresponded with the socially accepted ways of receiving a given type of narration and as such did not require that the reader should penetrate the new, individual idiolect of the narrator. It allowed him to consider straight away the subject-matter of the novel, its ideology. Schulz's readers were then forced to change their reading habits, for they now had to learn to overcome the stylistic barrier of the narration before reaching the actual world of the novel—and even then a surprise awaited them. This world was not tangible, there was only a suggestion of its existence.

The opposition between what was "simple" and "complicated" drew attention to one more important issue. It concerned the evaluation of the "experimental," "innovatory" character of Schulz's work.

For some critics, there was no doubt about the fact that his novels were original. For others, however, and that included Wyka and Napierski, this "originality" was only a camouflaged epigonism or an effort at producing affected literary impressions at all costs. This second viewpoint becomes of particular importance when we refer to the traditional norms. It shows that a piece of prose should not be original, which means that it should not be a literary experiment, and particularly not an experiment in language.

We have reached the crucial question: What are the limits of a literary experiment? [...] Literature is for the whole of society, not only for snobs and small circles of people on the look-out for new forms. We must draw attention to the disturbing abundance of individualism of form.

According to traditional norms, the function of prose consisted in describing and explaining the reality surrounding the participants of social life. The word was to play a communicative role, and prose was to be the platform for communication and not experiments in the sphere of meanings, conventions, language and rules of literary communication. One might easily notice that the accusations concerning Schulz's style had as an antecedent the reception of the works of Miciński, Witkacy, Żeromski, Berent.

As has been shown, Schulz's texts were not acceptable by the traditional standards of prose. Yet when they were compared to poetry, the resulting judgment was surprisingly positive, even in reviews which otherwise voiced many reservations. The "poetic" aspect was appreciated on three levels: stylistics (metaphors), antirealism (fantastic happenings), composition (loosely connected "images", "fragments", etc.). It was said that Schulz's prose, as prose, had entered a blind alley." The opposition between prose and poetry was of an axiological type. Prose was subjected to the pressure of strong demands and restrictions, whereas poetry enjoyed more liberty in judgment on the part of the critics. Poetry was "pure fantasy," "visions," "imagination," and these were values in themselves, they did not need to become crystallized in any particular subject-matter. As a poet, Schulz was praised or at least recognized, but as a writer of prose he was condemned to banishment.

The conflict provoked by Bruno Schulz's prose in the 1930's confirmed that since the time of Young Poland prose has always

been forced into a system of reception made up of such ideas as “incomprehensibility,” “unintelligibility,” and “prose of a poetic character.” Were these ideas really banished from the literary awareness of Polish readers after 1939—or rather after 1956?

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulka*