

Ironic idolization.

Bruno Schulz beyond the veil of reality

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1.

The common understanding (but also the classic rhetorical definition) of the term “irony” centers around the stark contrast between what one believes and what one says¹. As a result, it is common to equate irony with a type of “conscious lie,” which often appears as mockery, serving as an outlet for malice. Of course, what has been stated above cannot serve as an exhaustive definition of irony because it is a complex phenomenon that takes various forms depending on the context. Nearly everyone is familiar with the idea of irony, thanks to Socrates, who pretended to be a simpleton to present philosophical arguments imbued with deeper wisdom. The phenomenon of Romantic irony is also well known, expressing the distance between the author and their work and, in practice, turning the work into a sort of game. This

¹ This exegesis was noted by Michał Paweł Markowski in a book devoted to the works of Bruno Schulz. Thus, he lay foundations for the inseparability of irony and Schulz’s language (Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna. Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy* [Polish modern literature: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy] [Kraków: Universitas, 2007], 263).

latter type of irony has likely had the greatest influence on the 20th-century understanding of literature, from the experimental works of the modern avant-garde to postmodernist playful approaches to literature. As a fundamental creative principle, the common understanding of irony seems to go no further than the first of the above definitions, thereby shaping how a work of art - whether literary, visual, or musical - is experienced. At the same time, it is said that the modern world is one in which the so-called grand narratives have been forgotten, replaced by a construct that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would describe as schizophrenic in the sense that multiplicity replaces all individuality². Instead of grand narratives, we are faced with many small narratives, which is undoubtedly also a symptom of a fragmented world ruled by relativism. It is impossible to identify an overarching narrative in this world because each narrative about the world is potentially equally important and true. Simultaneously, none of them fully captures the complexity of reality. Relying on several smaller narratives, we lose, on one hand, our cognitive abilities and, on the other, our sense of integrity, which in turn leads us to doubt the validity of the famous Cartesian phrase “I think, therefore I am,” considering it either false or at least unjustified. Therefore, the mind of the modern human being is schizophrenic, one for which any illusion can appear to be the truth.

Early modern literature – especially that defined by Michał Paweł Markowski as critical modernity, meaning literature characterized by “questioning the possibility of representing the world and expression³” – is focused rather on exploring those narratives which, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis and William James’ pragmatism (though subjectively), are taken to be true⁴. In modern literature, it is therefore difficult to find trends that aim to restore a uniform narrative of the world, apart from certain exceptions, of course. A fairly obvious example here is the work of Thomas Mann, although it seems to belong to a slightly different branch of modernity, growing out of pre-modern literary doctrines – conservative modernity.⁵ It is much more difficult to see such tendencies in literature considered avant-garde, but it is not impossible. A striking example of this seems to be Bruno Schulz, whose work is undoubtedly based on this pursuit.

2.

It is widely accepted in Schulzological circles, and not without good reason, that the prose of the Drohobych eccentric is a prime example of highly mythologized creativity. After all, in his short essay-manifesto *Mitologizacja rzeczywistości* [*Mythologization of Reality*], he clearly defined the foundations of his poetics and set a clear goal for all artists of language, including

² Indeed, in their introduction to *Tysiąca plateau* [A thousand plateaus] the authors pick up this thread, which becomes a frame for their analyses (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Tysiąc plateau*, [Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2015], 3–5).

³ Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna*, 42.

⁴ Both Freud and James question the nominal integrity of the human psyche, referring to the animalistic origin of man. Freud’s expression of this is his concept of the Unconscious, whereas James focuses on the facade of the „pragmatic theory of truth” (Sigmund Freud, *Introduction to psychoanalysis*, transl. by Salomea Kempnerówna, Witold Zaniewicki [Warszawa: De Agostini Polska & Ediciones Altaya Polska, 2001], 15–16; William James, *Pragmatism*, transl. by Władysław N. Kozłowski [Kraków: Vis-à-Vis Etiuda, 2016], 122–146).

⁵ Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna*, 42.

himself: “[...] all poetry is mythologization, it strives to recreate myths about the world⁶”. For Schulz, literature becomes an expression of longing for an orderly world, one that fits within a cohesive narrative, a tool for sealing off reality, although – as has been proven on numerous occasions – such a view can invite sharp criticism.⁷ According to Schulz, the concepts we use and the stories we tell are shadows of the original story, which we have forgotten. The old reality constantly breaches the fabric of everyday life, reminding us of the archaic “motherland” from which humanity originated (cf. P 443–445). The artist’s declaration, announced by him in *Mityzacja rzeczywistości*, must be regarded as a key text in any discussion of Schulz’s work. It is impossible to understand his prose, just as it is impossible to grasp the visual aspects of his work, without recognizing this brief statement as a signpost that offers an essential guide through Schulz’s labyrinth.

In light of the above, the issue of Schulz’s irony is a particularly sensitive one. Markowski, despite certain inaccuracies in his interpretation of the phenomenon, provides a fairly accurate introduction to it. He writes:

[...] irony divides the world into two contradictory parts: true essence (in the rhetorical sense: true meaning) and false appearance (in the rhetorical sense: apparent meaning). It can be said that the world has an ironic structure when we assume that the same categories can be applied to reality and to linguistic expressions, and vice versa. This is one of the most important premises of Schulz’s worldview.⁸

This observation can be supported by the last sentence of the aforementioned *Mityzacja rzeczywistości*, in which Schulz concludes, almost revolutionarily, that “Philosophy is actually philology, that is, a deep, creative study of words” (P 445). Therefore, if philology were to replace philosophy in its primary function, which is undoubtedly the attempt to describe and understand reality, then this reality, to be a credible subject of research, would have to be linguistic in nature. This statement does not differ too much from later 20th-century attempts to grasp the subject, whether in the context of post-war structuralism or in the rhetorical complexities of deconstruction. However, from a phenomenological perspective, such a formulation automatically implies the ironic nature of a conglomerate composed of two factors: the world of things⁹ and a certain narrative about that world¹⁰. The latter takes the form of reality, but does not necessarily reflect the truth of the world. Irony can be described

⁶ Bruno Schulz, „Mityzacja rzeczywistości” [„Mythologisation of reality”], in his: *Proza* [Prose] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1964), 444; the remaining works from this volume are indicated here with the letter „P” and page number.

⁷ Suffice to mention the notorious *Dwugłos o Schulzu* [A two-voice on Schulz] by Kazimierz Wyka and Stefan Napierski (Kazimierz Wyka, Stefan Napierski, „Dwugłos o Schulzu”, *Ateneum* 1 [1939]: 156–163). The authors accuse Schulz of epigony, claiming (justifiably so), that his literature reflects the Romantic rather than the modernist paradigm. Their assessment of Schulz’s work is negative, but those same premises can lead to different conclusions. I have discussed this issue in a text devoted to Schulz’s relationship to the texts of the Romanticism in „Schulz/Forum” (Bartosz Kowalczyk, „Zakamarki”, *Schulz/Forum* 21-22 [2023]: 143–154).

⁸ Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna*, 263.

⁹ One could go a step further and call it the world of things-in-themselves.

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard once referred to Jorge Louis Borges’ novel, in which he found such a precise image of a map, that it obscured completely the entire territory it was supposed to cover (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacrum and simulation*, transl. by Sławomir Królak (Warszawa: Sic!, 2005), 5–7). Analogically, reality can be said to be a variant of this map that we see as a replacement of truth hidden underneath.

as a tool that, in Schulz's hands, serves not so much to distance oneself from reality or the world of things, but rather to reach a mythical, primordial reality. This is probably what Schulz had in mind when he included the motif of the Book in his prose, although the resolution of this thread may seem to lead to slightly different conclusions. Markowski considers the moment when the Book, or the Authentic, turns out to be a few pages of a commercial catalog, banal in content, to be thoroughly ironic in a way that creates distance¹¹. However, it seems that this is not the purpose of the Book itself – in the story that begins Schulz's *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą* [*Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*], we find the following passage illustrating the narrator's indignation in response to his father's gesture of handing him the Bible: "You know, Father," I cried, „you know very well, don't hide it, don't make excuses! This book has betrayed you. Why are you giving me this tainted apocrypha, a thousandth copy, a clumsy forgery? Where have you put the Book?" (P 164). The theme of the Book creates an effect of distancing, but it is an expression of an organic desire to know the truth. The fact that this seems impossible to achieve does not contain a hint of irony, but rather becomes an expression of underlying despair and powerlessness.

3.

One of the most vivid examples supporting the thesis that Schulz pursues a primal, mythical reality can be found in the short story *Pan* [*Pan*], included in *Sklepy cynamonowe* [*Cinnamon shops*].

Basically, it is a story about a childhood adventure, though that is probably obvious: most of Schulz's stories are about childhood. The structure of this text confirms the existence of two levels; the story's narrative hides the real world. It is useful to start with what is hidden, meaning that which is not an appearance. Here, boys are taking apart a board in the fence that separates the yard from the unknown world beyond. Their childish curiosity pushes them to squeeze through the gap in the fence and explore. On the other side, there is a garden, very different from the plain yard. The narrator is amazed by its wildness and lushness. Among the plants, he notices a figure – a vagrant who is in the process of relieving himself. Immediately after doing so, he hurriedly walks away with his pants still down. And that is it. This scene could be summed up in one sentence: a boy climbs through a hole in the fence into a garden, where he sees a man defecating. This more succinct description of events seems even more fitting, considering that nothing much happens, or at least nothing significant. However, Schulz often presents a kind of dualism: nothing happens, and yet, everything happens; nothing special occurs, but simultaneously, fundamental things unfold, which Schulz describes in his own unique way.

In the corner between the rear walls of the sheds and outbuildings was a backyard alley, the furthest, last branch, enclosed between a chamber, an outhouse, and the rear wall of the chicken coop - a deaf bay beyond which there was no way out.

¹¹Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna*, 246–250.

It was the furthest cape, the Gibraltar of this courtyard, desperately banging its head against a blind fence of horizontal boards, the closing and final wall of this world (P 100).

From the outset, Schulz intensifies successive circles of dualisms, or rather, there is but one dualism, but the author brings its hidden levels to light. The laconic description of the courtyard at the beginning of the story is, in fact, a description of a familiar reality – structured, with clearly defined boundaries, creating an impression of completeness. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of the fence marking the boundary of this world. Behind the fence lies the unknown, which we are about to enter together with the narrator.

[...] we made a breach, we opened a window to the sun. Standing with one foot on a plank thrown like a bridge across a puddle, the prisoner of the courtyard could squeeze through the gap in a horizontal position, which released him into a new, airy, and vast world (P 100).

One can sense the excitement accompanying this discovery. Here, the fence becomes a symbol comparable to a theosophical “veil” separating the known world from the hidden world, accessible only to a few adepts. Crossing this boundary results in enlightenment (“we opened a window to the sun,” P 100) and the realization of the dream of freedom (“the prisoner of the courtyard [...] could squeeze through [...] into a new, airy and vast world,” P 100). Things are exactly the same here as in one of Arthur Machen’s most famous stories, which begins with a description of an experiment aimed precisely at tearing away the veil of reality¹².

The world beyond the fence is indeed different from the world the boys know in their backyard. The “large, wild, old garden” (P 100) that appears before the narrator’s eyes seems to exceed his wildest expectations of what reality could be like. The wildness of nature contrasts sharply with the orderliness of the backyard. Admittedly, even within the latter’s confines, there is an element beyond control – a trickle of water whose source is on the other side of the fence, and in fact, it is partly responsible for the boys’ later crossing of the border. It is as if this foreign, wild reality literally seeps through the boundaries into the known world and proves that these boundaries are not as tight as they might seem. It is also significant that, however black and smelly (P 100), it is water, a substance essential for life. Perhaps this association is all the more significant because real life also consists of elements that elude order, which Schulz uses to create an evocative characterization of this trickle. The world on the other side of the fence only confirms these observations. To say that the vegetation of the old garden is teeming with life is to say nothing – it is, in fact, life itself. In considering the nature of the category of “holy human being” (*homo sacer*), Giorgio Agamben examines two concepts used by the ancient Greeks to describe life. The first of these, *bios*, meant socially conditioned life – a life proper to a human being who is by nature embedded in a socio-civilizational framework. The second, *dzoē*, was used to denote a characteristic inherent in all living beings – life in itself or, as Agamben would have it, bare life¹³. The latter concept perfectly describes the nature of this vegetation. The garden strikes visitors with its lushness, wildness, and endless, swelling fertility:

¹²Arthur Machen, „The great god Pan”, in his: *Other worlds*, transl. by Tomasz S. Gałązka (Białystok: C&T, 2007), 11–69.

¹³Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, transl. by Mateusz Salwa (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2008), 9.

There was no longer an orchard there, but a paroxysm of madness, an explosion of rage, cynical shamelessness, and debauchery. There, unbridled, empty, feral burdock cabbages, giving vent to their passion, ran rampant – huge witches, tearing themselves out of their wide skirts in broad daylight, throwing them off, skirt after skirt, until their bloated, rustling, holey rags buried the quarrelsome tribe of bastards beneath them with their frenzied patches. And the voracious skirts swelled and pushed each other apart, piling up on top of each other, bursting and covering each other, growing together into a bloated mass of leafy metal, until they reached the low eaves of the barn (P 102).

No wonder that in the face of vibrant, naked life, on a scorching hot day, the narrator notices something that cannot be seen in other circumstances.

There it was, where I had only seen it once, at noon, unconscious from the heat. It was a moment when time, mad and wild, breaks free from the grind of events and, like an escaped vagrant, rushes screaming across the fields (P 102).

[...] Deeply shaken, I saw how he, roaring with laughter from his powerful chest, slowly rose from his crouch and, hunched over like a gorilla, with his hands in the drooping rags of his trousers, ran away, shuffling through the fluttering burdock leaves, with great leaps – a human being without a flute; retreating in panic to his native forests (P 102–103).

The mythical ancestry of the creature he saw should come as no surprise to anyone. Suffice it to say that the narrator's discovery was an inevitable consequence of crossing the boundary marking the edge of known reality. Like in Machen's aforementioned story, the result of this action was an experience unlike any other. "The ancients knew what it meant to lift this veil. They said that, then one saw the god Pan.¹⁴"

However, this does not resolve a certain important issue arising from Schulz's dualism. After all, there is nothing divine about the god present in the story – he is, as we remember, a defecating vagrant:

It was the face of a vagrant or a drunkard. A tuft of dirty hair ruffled above his forehead, which was high and convex like a stone loaf, worn down by the river. But that forehead was twisted into deep furrows. It is unclear whether pain, the scorching heat of the sun, or the superhuman intensity had twisted that face and stretched its features to the point of breaking. [...] And suddenly, from these features, [...] a terrible grimace, broken by suffering, emerged, and this grimace grew, taking in that madness and inspiration, swelling with it, becoming more and more forgiving, until it broke out in a roaring, wheezing cough of laughter. Deeply shaken, I saw how he, roaring with laughter from his powerful chest, slowly rose from his crouch and, hunched over like a gorilla, with his hands in the drooping rags of his trousers, ran away, shuffling through the fluttering burdock leaves, with great leaps – Pan without his flute; retreating in panic to his native forests (P 103).

We are dealing here with a special kind of deification: a degenerate human being becomes a deity. Perhaps it would be better to use the term "degraded" in this context, as we are talking

¹⁴Machen, 13.

about a person who, perhaps of his own volition, has opted out of civilization, and managed to escape the Apollonian order – to use Nietzsche’s terminology – and chosen the Dionysian path. Such deification is ironic at its core, but the nature of this irony does not have to be mocking. The effect of its action brings to mind more contemporary findings regarding the principles of its functioning.

4.

Drawing on the metamodernist paradigm¹⁵, Lee Konstantinou, discussing the transformation of irony in 20th-century literature in his book *Cool Characters*, points to the key moment of World War I and its consequences for interwar literary trends:

[...] irony became dominant in Western societies after the end of World War I. The Great War, writes Fussell, “was more ironic than any before or since.” It was “a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing myth of meliorism that had dominated public consciousness for a century.”¹⁶

Indeed, it is impossible to treat the literature (and art) of the 1920s and 1930s as anything other than that which, through the newly created avant-garde paradigm, sanctioned the widespread use of irony. From a psychological point of view, it can be noted that this resulted, on the one hand, from profound social changes (leading, for example, in Great Britain, to a weakening of the influence of the aristocracy and reforming the existing social hierarchy), but above all from the need to distance oneself from reality. On a much larger scale, this process, especially after the apocalyptic experience of World War II and the emergence of a new world order that followed, manifested itself in postmodernism. The growing importance of irony caused the need to re-establish human beings in a non-detached reality.

The paintings of Odd Nerdrum, a contemporary Norwegian creator of kitsch who consciously renounces ironic distance, fit into the above classification. After decades of being an outcast in the art world, in the 1990s, the Norwegian decided to reformulate the aesthetic categories in which he operated. This gave rise to the Kitsch Movement – a trend in painting (but also in philosophy, literature, and music), sometimes mentioned among the variants of the metamodernist phenomenon of New Sincerity¹⁷. In his essay *Four Faces of Postirony*, Konstantinou cites several definitions of this phenomenon:

D. Jameson described New Sincerity as a set of “common [literary] devices and patterns of devices” (including “a plethora of autobiographies,” “minimal punctuation,” and “self-revision”), which

¹⁵The concept of „metamodernism” refers to an aesthetic paradigm proposed in 2010 by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as a response to postmodernism (Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, „Notes on metamodernism”, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2 [2010]). Metamodernism oscillates between contradictory concepts and stances like, e.g. honesty and irony, Romanticism and modernity.

¹⁶Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters. Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 13] “...irony became the dominant of Western societies after World War I. The Great War, Fussell writes, «was more ironic than any before or since.» It was «a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century»” [author’s translation].

¹⁷This similarity is pointed out by the authors of the Wikipedia entry „New Sincerity” („Wikipedia: New Sincerity”, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified 19.02.2023, 23:19 [UTC]).

is “so transparent and direct and unpretentious that human beings have failed to notice these devices at work.” Kelly defines New Sincerity as a method of dealing with a situation in which “the anticipation of receiving external behavior by others begins to take precedence for the actor, so that internal states lose their original contingent status and become instead the effects of this anticipatory logic.”¹⁸

Konstantinou also points out that New Sincerity should not be equated with post-irony

because, in his words, the latter does not answer the question: “What comes after irony?”¹⁹ Admittedly, Nerdrum’s painting should not be considered within the framework of post-ironic conditions, since the Kitsch Movement provides a clear answer to the question: “For Nerdrum, the concept of kitsch represents a new superstructure for sincere and narrative figurative painting.”²⁰

It is worth mentioning one of the Norwegian’s paintings, mainly because of its main motif, which closely resembles Schulz’s formula in its detail. In his canvas titled *Ecce Homo*, we see the motif from *Pan* in reverse – it is not a human being that is deified, but a deity being “humanised.” In the painting, stylistically reminiscent of Caravaggio or Rembrandt, we see a figure crouching inside a room that looks like a prison cell. This figure is Christ, and he is entirely focused on defecation. The figure is positioned so that we can see his back, which also clearly shows the result of his activity. Only upon closer inspection do we notice the face turned toward us, hidden in shadows, with blood dripping down his face, and drawn by the crown of thorns.

5.

At this point, it is necessary to dispel a certain doubt and properly outline the framework that allows Schulz’s prose and Nerdrum’s canvas to be viewed on the same interpretative plane. This is not a matter of the incompatibility of creative media – Schulz’s prose is very vivid, and the author himself is often regarded primarily as a cartoonist, graphic artist, and painter, which is consistent with his own pronouncements. In response to a letter from Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, he wrote: “The beginnings of my drawing are lost in the mists of mythology. I could not yet speak when I was already covering all my papers and the margins of newspapers with scribbles that attracted the attention of those around me” (P 679). The core of the issue is much more subtle.

¹⁸Lee Konstantinou, „Four Faces of Postirony”, in: *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 89; „A. D. Jameson has described New Sincerity as a set of «shared [literary] devices and patterns of device» (including «[l]ots of autobiography», «[m]inimal punctuation» and «[s]elf-revision») that is «so transparent and unmediated and unaffected that human beings have failed to see the devices at work» (2012). Kelly defines New Sincerity as a method for dealing with a situation in which «the anticipation of others» reception of one’s outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating casual status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic (2010, 136)”.

¹⁹Konstantinou, „Four Faces of Postirony”, 89.

²⁰„The Kitsch Movement”, Odd Nerdrum Official Website, <https://nerdrum.com/kitsch/>: „To Nerdrum, the concept of kitsch represents a new superstructure for sincere and narrative figurative painting”.

While the appearance of the figure of Pan in Schulz's imagination is not particularly surprising, the figure of Christ is much more problematic. Neither of his collections of short stories contains a single reference to the Christian Messiah (P 49). Even the formula of "messianism," characteristic of his prose, derives rather from the Judaic tradition and should certainly not be associated with the Christian Messiah incarnated in the figure of Christ. Moreover, knowing Schulz's lukewarm attitude towards religion (at least in its exoteric form), we can assume that he was not particularly interested in the religious context. What is more, there are grounds for believing that the author of *Sklepy cynamonowe* treated the Bible and the stories it contains in the same way that we treat the religious tales of the ancient Greeks today. The Old Testament, and probably the New Testament as well, were for him a collection of myths – myths that no longer had the power to explain the world. The proof can be found in a fragment of the already mentioned short story *Księga* [*The Book*]:

My father kept shoving towards me one of them, a thick and heavy volume, with timid encouragement. I opened it. It was the Bible. I saw on its pages a great migration of animals, flowing along highways, branching out in processions across a distant land. I saw the sky in keys and fluttering, a huge inverted pyramid, whose distant peak touched the Ark.

I looked up at my father, my eyes full of reproach: "You know, Father," I cried, "you know very well, don't hide, don't make excuses! Why are you giving me this tainted apocrypha, a thousandth copy, a clumsy forgery? Where have you put the Book?" (P 164)

"Contaminated apocrypha," "a thousandth copy," "clumsy forgery"! And further: "The original word was a delusion, revolving around the meaning of light; it was a great universal whole. These days, the word in its common meaning is only a fragment, a remnant of some ancient, all-encompassing, integral mythology" (P 443). Both the Bible and the stories of the ancient Greek gods are essentially the same: texts that are fragments, remnants of the original narrative that binds the universe together. Schulz would not consider the figures of God and Christ in any context other than the mythological one. Even despite its Old Testament origins, the very concept of the Messiah does not have purely religious connotations for Schulz (although it refers directly to the category of the sacred). Still, it derives from the personal philosophy expressed in the *Mythification of reality*, while also constituting an important trope explaining the ontological structure of Schulz's universe. Paweł Dybel rightly argues that through the figure of the Messiah, "the experience of the sacred [takes on – B.K.] a universal form."²¹ Markowski makes a similar observation: "Incarnation is the entry of God – by definition existing beyond the body and time, beyond language and history – into the human being order, which would be impossible without the mediating function of the logos."²² In Schulz's universe, the logos is identical with the structures of that original mythology, which is the object of the author's longing in *Księga*. In Markowski's interpretation, "logos is the boundary between what is human and what is non-human, with the most non-human being called God"²³.

²¹Paweł Dybel, *Mesjasz, który odszedł. Bruno Schulz i psychoanaliza* [The Messiah who left. Bruno Schulz and psychoanalysis] (Kraków: Universitas, 2017), 37.

²²Michał Paweł Markowski, *Powszechna rozwiąźność. Schulz, egzystencja, literatura* [Common debauchery. Schulz, existence, literature] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012), 150.

²³Markowski, *Powszechna rozwiąźność*, 150.

A deeper meaning of this perspective is conveyed through the story of a tightrope walker – probably the most famous Nietzschean parable. It presents an enlightening idea: “Human being is a rope stretched between the animal and the superman²⁴.” It is a mistake to equate the human being with the tightrope walker – humans are, in fact, the rope. In other words, human is a kind of transitional project, connecting both the animal aspects of non-human existence and the divine. Following from this, the entire truth about the human being is that it is a biological entity, influenced by irrational instincts (because they are beyond reason, in the Enlightenment sense), yet with a spark of divinity. Paradoxically, following from Agamben’s philosophy, both animals and saints share the characteristic of bare life (*dzoē*). This means that a human being attains divinity through their own animality.

6.

By deliberately dismantling irony, Nerdrum revealed that astonishing truth about the human being as an entity that combines animalistic and divine aspects. In a similar spirit, Schulz uses ironic poetics not to ridicule the concept of divinity or to underscore his distance from a reality suffused with dualism (partly Gnostic in nature). The aim of Schulz’s irony is, in fact, its own overcoming. At the same time, we can discern a clear difference between the short story *Pan* and the painting *Ecce Homo*, and this difference does not concern the aforementioned reversal of the process of deification. For Nerdrum, sincerity is what ought to follow the age of irony, while at the same time serving as a weapon against the ironic gaze cast upon reality. Schulz does not suggest an answer as polarising as this. By tearing up the veil of reality, he attempts to look at what lies at its foundations. By penetrating its fabric, he attempts to reconstruct (and is remarkably successful at this) its mythical substratum, upon which what we recognize as reality has been built for millennia. For Schulz, irony constitutes a tool through which we may also reach the essence of humanity. It gets disarmed, because its internal contradictions are neutralized. Schulz, therefore, is not concerned with irony as such, but with a mythical, pre-linguistic, proto-real truth. His organic need seems to be a “thirst for totality, a hunger for such a teleological structure that would elucidate the meaning of the Universe²⁵.” This conclusion calls into question assertions about the modern character of the author’s works, because in consequence of neutralising its ironic potential, literature ceases to be a game and becomes a necessity. This aspect is best conveyed by the final sentence of *Mitologizacja rzeczywistości*: “Philosophy is, in essence, philology, that is, a profound, creative study of the word” (P 103). Such an approach, along with justified doubts regarding the affiliation of Schulz’s creative project with the modern formation, makes possible attempts at understanding this oeuvre through the prism of the metamodernist proposition, based on which the phenomenon of New Sincerity arises. According to Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, metamodernism breaks with the doctrine of modernity – something that even postmodernism did not manage to achieve. Among its constitutive features, the

²⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, transl. by Sława Lisiecka, Zdzisław Jaskuła (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1999).

²⁵Michał Piętiewicz, Bruno Schulz. *Między mitem a kiczem* [Bruno Schulz. *Between myth and kitsch*] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2020), 15.

scholars point to the phenomenon of oscillation²⁶, which stretches the metamodernist experience between extremes and – in a manner that may be compared to the alchemical principle of the balancing of opposites – introduces a long-unseen order²⁷. Among these pairs of opposites, one can easily include the opposition between irony and sincerity. Returning to Schulz, ultimately, it is perhaps impossible to classify his poetics as applying the categories of New Sincerity²⁸; nevertheless, one may certainly risk a certain generalization that Schulz reveals some post-ironic tendencies, within which myth and mythologization would serve as an antidote to the omnipresence of irony²⁹. This, in turn, opens entirely new possibilities for scholarly assessment of Schulz's achievement, while also creating an opportunity to revise the discourse on early modernist literature, which once more proves to be a thoroughly heterogeneous phenomenon.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

²⁶Vermeulen, van den Akker.

²⁷In a way, metamodernism brings back the melioristic perspective, overturned by World War I, and follows William Jones' understanding of the term, for whom the most important issue was balancing two opposing views.

²⁸That is apart from the fact that we would need to retroactively classify Schulz's prose as postmodernist.

²⁹Nerdrum believes naturalistic honesty to be an antidote to this.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The article attempts to reconsider Bruno Schulz's use of irony. The basis for analysis here is the short story *Pan*, included in his *Sklepy cynamonowe*. The ironic device of deification employed by Schulz appears to exceed standard conceptions of irony and suggests an outcome different from the expected one. Ultimately, Schulz's writing seems, in a sense, to inscribe itself within a post-ironic discourse, which prompts a re-evaluation of established judgments concerning this distinctive prose.

NEW SINCERITY

myth

BRUNO SCHULZ

post-irony

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